

Chicago

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Chicago

by [Bavitz](#)

Summary

Chicago's hundred Magical Girls, united under a theocratic Empress, plan to expand their territory. Except Laila, Chicago's bookkeeper. Cushy job, couldn't care less about conquest—until she's assigned to Chicago's invasion of St. Louis. Yeah, maybe this "Empire" thing's not so hot. Maybe it's time to get out. But the bigger an empire gets, the harder it is to escape...

Make Taut Their Slack Minds and Bodies

FIRST ARC: ST. LOUIS

A coyote darted between the orange groves. Clownmuffle only saw it a moment, its eyes went white in the moonlight. "Doggie," she called, but it did not come back. Too bad, she had a bag of bones to feed it.

She dragged the corpse to the center and planted her shovel. In summer the sun baked the soil solid, but in lukewarm December it churned beneath her spade. The pit deepened. Worms and roots wriggled. She climbed out the hole, shoved the corpse inside, and buried it. She patted down the dirt, stomped her feet, and swung the shovel over her shoulder.

Before her sat Kyubey. *You're in trouble, Miss Vizcarra.*

"Maybe I am, maybe I'm not."

Two Magical Girls have arrived. They intend to kill you.

Clownmuffle scooped Kyubey onto her shoulder and surveyed all directions down the orange groves. Four immense radio antennae blinked beyond.

She plucked a ripe fruit and bounced it on her palm. "They know me?"

Miss Leyva and Miss Vo. You mentored both. I apologize for this inconvenience, as under normal conditions I would have terminated their contracts before their grievances reached this severity, but I have recently relocated one of my specialists to Minneapolis—

"Blup blup, blup." Nobody used their real names, but Kyubey insisted on it, so Clownmuffle never knew who he talked about.

I prefer to avoid fatalities outside of proper termination protocol, so please flee before there's a confrontation.

"There won't be fatalities."

I do not trust your assessment.

Clownmuffle stroked his head with two fingers. He had velvety fur, like a real bunny rabbit. "Gootchie-goo, you're a cutie." She stuck her tongue at him. "I'm no murderer. We'll talk and resolve things like real Magical Girls, you'll see."

Sigh...

This "sigh," who knew what meant it. Kyubey felt no emotion, he feigned even disappointment for tactical purpose. Ah well, it didn't matter. Her once and future friends had arrived.

One, already transformed, emerged seven rows ahead. The newest girl in the area. She had a witch hat with a buckle and a bend at the tip. Her fellow, more veteran, appeared seven rows behind Clownmuffle in an elegant old gown. Silver bells jingled from her fichu and the puffy cuffs that bound her otherwise skintight sleeves. The costumes of other girls fascinated Clownmuffle, she digested for hours images online, the unique personalization each added to familiar archetypes. The rookie girl a prime example of exactly this point: A cliché witch costume, no? Several similar girls existed, Clownmuffle could rattle five or six off her head. Yet only this rookie girl's hat had the little bend at the tip. Why the bend? Why'd her subconscious desires, when they designed her uniform the moment she extracted her soul from her heart, why'd they give her this bend downward?

"Why the little bend?" Clownmuffle pointed.

"Eh?" said the witch. "Fuck your non sequiturs Bernie. Kyubey say why we're here yeah?"

Miss Leyva. If you don't abandon your irrational course of action, I have no choice but to terminate your contract.

"Shut it Kyubey. You're complicit in this bullshit ya know? That girl murders people you don't say shit. But the moment someone even *thinks* about killing a Magical Girl—"

Calm down, said the veteran girl with the bells.

"—Suddenly it's a huge fucking kerfuffle, crank the air raid sirens, fire the artillery, call the thought police—"

Clownmuffle pondered the orange in her hand. "You want to kill me because I killed humans?"

"Humans she says—*Humans*, like a different *species*. Unbelievable, mindboggling, fucking unfathomable. This is why, Kyubey, this is why we're here. Your whole Magical Girl system is fucked beyond repair. It manufactures maniacs—psychopaths!"

Calm down, said the girl with bells. *How many times did you promise you wouldn't freak out?*

"This isn't about one girl Kyubey." The witch gesticulated so emphatically the little bend on her hat flopped up and down. "This is a *statement*. A statement against your fucked-up system. Hemet and I agree—"

"If you want to kill me." Clownmuffle bounced the orange. "Do it because you want to kill me." Nonetheless, she liked these stupid girls. They were funny and passionate. She'd trounce them, then lecture them until their brains bent like the tip of the witch's hat.

The witch opened her mouth to spout more vitriol but before she uttered a single scratchy-throat syllable Clownmuffle dropped the orange and slammed her foot against it. It shot between the groves and exploded in pulp against the witch's face. She fell, *ker-thump*.

Clownmuffle turned to Hemet the bells girl. She could never remember these geography names Magical Girls gave themselves. "You two made a poor decision."

Hemet, unamused, swung her hands together, her clap resounded with a metallic twang. On either side of Clownmuffle manifested the halves of an iron maiden; they slammed shut, she bounced forward on a heel, nothing touched her.

"I won't even transform to demolish you," said Clownmuffle. "Then you'll abandon this goofy vigilante scheme and never bother me again."

Hemet swung down her hand and an iron maiden half appeared above. Its spikes crashed down, Clownmuffle ducked her head a smidge and stepped out of the descent. Against slow moving wraiths Hemet's attack never failed. But Clownmuffle? Kwekwekwe. Another maiden and another maiden, Clownmuffle sidestepped. The groves rustled, the soil sifted, two more maiden halves manifested longwise beside her to constrict her maneuverability. So Clownmuffle kicked up her legs and landed atop them after they shut beneath her. She slid off the maiden's sleek side and propelled herself toward Hemet like an Olympian long jumper, dipped to the ground as another spikecage swung at her face, struck the soil at a crouch and kicked a spray of dust into Hemet's eyes. Hemet recoiled, Clownmuffle bounced up and slammed the shovel against her skull.

A ribbon of blood flashed from the split in Hemet's scalp. She ricocheted off an orange-laden branch and swayed in a lazy diagonal. Clownmuffle's second blow clanged against her stomach and doubled her into a kick in the teeth. Magical Girls could dampen the pain their bodies experienced, so you always had to rough them pretty hard. Speaking of which! She glanced over her shoulder at the witch, who should have been sneaking up by then, but she was still facedown in the dirt many rows away. Unconscious from a single fruit to the face.

Overconfidence led to irony, but cautiousness led to overestimation.

This moment of distraction allowed Hemet to manifest another iron maiden; Clownmuffle stepped aside to avoid it as easily as all the others and clobbered her with a third shovel strike. Hemet had a much harder head than her friend, but the blow brought her to her knees and she spat blood on the leaves.

"Enough yet?" Clownmuffle propped the dripping shovel on her shoulder. It was the same shoulder Kyubey sat on—she had forgotten about him actually—so he hopped off to avoid a shaft to the face.

"Kkkhhhh," said Hemet.

"You seem relatively reasonable. Your comrade drag you in? That's okay, I'm not mad. This has been a creative expression of your feelings, I think that's super fun."

You're so full of shit, said Hemet. *Everything about you disgusts me. I planned this, not Murrie.*

It's true, said Kyubey. *And quite irresponsible. Miss Leyva is an impressionable young Magical Girl that you've irrevocably tainted, Miss Vo. I'm disappointed, although unsurprised.*

"Kyubey, you said exactly what I was thinking." Clownmuffle made some practice swings with the shovel that whooshed over Hemet's head. "Minus the irrevocable part. We're Magical Girls, empathy is what we do. So let's sort things out, starting with the big elephant. You accused me of murder. Bold claim, hey?"

Despite her ragged breathing, despite the hand pressed to her lips to stanch the blood, Hemet emitted a glare. *Don't act innocent. Murrie tracks magic, we tailed you for days. We know what you do for money.*

"Well now, let's be empathetic. I must pay rent somehow. Don't you live with your parents?"

Hemet's eyes blazed.

There are over seven billion humans on this planet, said Kyubey. And those Miss Vizcarra eliminates are often detrimental to your society. Her actions being even mildly controversial makes no sense to me.

A deluge of blood slopped from Hemet's mouth as she slammed a maiden onto a Kyubey unfortunately less nimble than Clownmuffle. His soft, fluffy alien body flattened beneath the slab of spiked metal, only a semicircle of gore remained.

"Ah." Clownmuffle shook her head and pointed a finger at Hemet's face. "You have to relax. Allow things to happen naturally, ebb and flow with the pulse of life. We Magical Girls are instruments of fate, and fate annihilates those who struggle against it—"

Hemet clamped her teeth around Clownmuffle's extended finger.

The teeth did not dig into her skin, did not tear against the bone, did not even register as a physical sensation. Because Hemet did not bite Clownmuffle's finger. She bit the finger's small metal ring. The ring that contained Clownmuffle's soul.

The radio antennae in the distance blinked.

Hemet's jaw locked against the metal band. An unbearable pain encompassed Clownmuffle's body like it was her whole being in the pinfold grip of Hemet's lips, like some Satan chewed her endlessly, she screamed, she resisted the urge to pull back, if she pulled back the ring would come off in Hemet's mouth and then—and then—and then—and then—

All the while Hemet's mind spouted: *You murder human beings and don't even consider it wrong in fact you laugh about it and no police will find you no court will try you there's only one way for you to pay for your crimes and that is—*

Hemet's Soul Gem hung from her neck, embedded in the largest silver bell of her jangly uniform. The teeth dug deeper, Clownmuffle's ring cracked, her insides started to disintegrate and a white lava poured over her vision—

—She raised the shovel and slashed. Hemet's eyes turned to blank glass and her jaw dropped and Clownmuffle fell onto her back and kicked at Hemet whose body entangled with her. She extricated herself and staggered through the silt to an upright position while her bones burned

with the same sharp agony and she said FUCK a thousand times in five seconds. She considered the ring, bent and twisted around her finger, deep gouges in the metal, a white aura emanating from the splinters.

And facedown in the dirt lay Hemet. Clownmuffle had not shattered the gem, her shovel had struck Hemet's skull and knocked her senseless, that was what happened. She fell to her knees and crawled to Hemet and turned her face from the dirt and it was a dead face with dead eyes and Clownmuffle recoiled and didn't know what to do. She didn't—didn't mean to—It wasn't her fault, you know, it wasn't what she wanted or intended, it was—it was—her heart throbbed, the pain coursed. All the iron maidens vanished, only crushed fruit and the Incubator's flattened corpse remained, and the witch girl far away.

"No, I didn't, no."

But.

A mound grew in the ground two rows past Hemet's body. The grave where Clownmuffle buried her bag of bones.

It rose, inexplicably. A bigger and bigger bubble in the dirt that cascaded lines of soil in sifting patterns. The roots uprooted. The trees bent away.

The air grew stale and gray and cold. Flakes of skin on Clownmuffle's arms came off as ash, she rose using the shovel as a prop and stepped back. Oranges rotted on their branches, dark mist filtered through the decaying leaves. Clownmuffle recognized this, knew well enough what was happening, but here? Now? In this empty grove where nobody went? It made no sense, it—

From the mound sprouted a thick stalk that rose above the groves. It split into two thin long legs and they slammed back into the dirt. The spindly legs strained against the ground and from the soil rose the body of a monstrous, mammoth spider.

Its remaining legs skittered frenziedly to break out the ground. Clownmuffle backed away, at first slowly, then quickly. The spider had the head of a human, but part of its skull had disintegrated into pixels. A wraith, a greater wraith, one of the largest Clownmuffle had seen in six years as a Magical Girl.

But—but that didn't matter, she *had* seen larger, she had even killed them and when she was much newer, less experienced. She backpedaled anyway. The spider, still half submerged, funneled messily the corpse of Hemet into its infinite-fanged maw. An arm came off and flopped into the dirt.

Clownmuffle tripped over something and landed hard on her ass. The witch girl, whose face leaked blood. She was no longer transformed, no little bend anymore, nothing but dismal jeans and jacket, which meant she had definitely lost consciousness—but when Clownmuffle fell over her she started to rouse. One eye opened and the girl groaned. "Wh... eh?"

The spider scrambled forward on its eight legs. Its bulbous abdomen dredged a trench through the soil, the witch had time to scream and clutch Clownmuffle's sweater before the

spider seized her legs in its jaw. Its fangs gnashed, the shins snapped.

Clownmuffle, Clownmuffle, she was a *Magical Girl*, she had to protect—

This thought galvanized her, whatever mental block had formed this unknown emotion of fear dispersed, she extended her hand with the ring and transformed.

Or tried to transform. The moment she activated her magic, utter and ineffable agony seared her body. She shut down at once, nothing happened, she remained without miracle vestments and whimsical armaments, only a shovel still bloodsmirched. The spider's fangs drove into the witch's stomach, the blood splattered across Clownmuffle's body.

No magic. Okay. Okay.

Clownmuffle planted the shovel into the spider's face, into the hollow of its skull from which the pixelated distortion spread. She drew back her palm to strike the handle and dig the spade deep into its brain, but before she connected the spider reared back. The witch's body flapped from its open mouth as its barbed front legs swiped at Clownmuffle. She rolled away from the first but the second snagged her sweater and ripped through her skin.

Blood rushed from Clownmuffle's gash. The spider brought down its forelegs to gore her through the skull, but not all her senses had departed and she somersaulted forward, leapt out of the roll, seized the witch's dangling hands, and tried to pull her down. But the spider's maw was too strong, it tilted back its head and slurped.

The shovel remained embedded in its face. Clownmuffle knew her opportunity, she held onto the witch's hands and shot upward as more and more of the witch disappeared into the creature. At the highest point, when only head and arms remained uneaten, Clownmuffle swung. The upward momentum carried her, she passed between the clawing forelegs, she bent one leg and sent the knee into the handle of the shovel.

The shovel went in. Deep. The spider's eldritch form seized up, its legs ossified, the abdomen sagged. The entire spade passed through the sickly gray static of its skull, only the handle jutted out.

The spider-wraith remained frozen in this position. Then it dissolved.

Clownmuffle, the witch, the mangled remains of Hemet, and the corpse of the man she had buried spilled to the ground. Plus, as a glittery prize, a pile of grief cubes.

The witch, although a bloody husk with a head and arms, thrashed amid the soot toward Hemet's body. *Steph Steph oh fuck oh my fucking god Steph Steph, Steph Steph Steph.* Then she looked at Clownmuffle, a terrible glint in a maddened eyeball that roved within a deep-set socket. *You I'll kill you I'll kill you you'll die, I'll kill you to fucking hell you'll fucking DIE!*

Hooked fingers dug into the ground, she dragged herself Clownmuffle's way and seized her foot. Clownmuffle had no capacity to deal with her, her entire body shook and would not stop, she brought the shovel down on the witch's head and knocked her senseless in a single

blow. Then she dropped onto her back and stared at a murky sky for many minutes until she mustered the will to move again.

She deposited the witch on the porch of a local Magical Girl who could heal. The witch would live, she would be fine, she would live, Clownmuffle saved her life. Clownmuffle was a good Magical Girl, she always had been, Kyubey never complained about her unlike the other Magical Girls, who were lazy. Six years—six years! Kyubey said less than one percent of Magical Girls survive that long. Clownmuffle was special, she was good, and she was special. She saved far more people than she killed, tally them up, count the people she killed and weigh it against the people she saved, the scales shifted, they clanged against the ground resoundingly in her favor.

Hemet—Stephanie Vo, Clownmuffle remembered her name now—

Clownmuffle ran home to her garage and locked herself inside. All her favorite things rose to meet her, from all walls hung a thick paste of posters, they showed everything: Magical Girl anime, children's cartoons, talking animated animals, cool optical illusions, M.C. Escher homes, fluorescent stickers, cubist artwork. Pretty pastel colors and stark black and white, many smiling faces, many warm images. Clownmuffle went straight to the bathroom and vomited.

Afterward, she felt better. She calmed down. She rolled on the hard stone floor (even the floor had posters, but beneath them was still hard stone) and her senses returned one by one. The pain lingered in her body, but dull now, forgettable if she thought of anything else. She pried the mangled ring from her finger and suffered a sharp pang to shift its form to Fabergé egg shape.

She crawled onto her mattress, placed the egg beside her, and burrowed deep into her blankets. She took out her phone, she needed a distraction, she went to MagNet.

MagNet was a forum for Magical Girls. Rumor claimed it would upgrade soon to a chatroom/social media interface, but back in 2008 when it went live free template message boards were popular and easy to administrate. Clownmuffle had been there from the getgo. Now it had a thousand users, fifty different boards. Boards for news, advice, romance, memes. Clownmuffle needed only one board, the one where Magical Girls posted pictures of themselves.

Six new threads. Four were more recent images of girls she had reviewed before (including a team shot of the Seattle girls—always a treat!), two were newcomers. Clownmuffle liked to build suspense, so she critiqued the veterans first. It was impossible for Magical Girls to change how their outfits looked, but sometimes better lighting or a more mature figure helped. Tradeoffs, though. Older girls gained sharpness, definition, angularity. But they also lost that joyous charm, that buoyant innocence, that *cuteness*. Overall, Clownmuffle appreciated Magical Girls of all shapes, sizes, ages, forms. She never made a critique such as,

"I'm not fond of the 'White Mage' archetype as a concept." Always something more constructive, such as too much uniformity in design, too much fear to deviate.

It appears your Soul Gem has been damaged, said a somewhere Kyubey.

"Mm." Clownmuffle tapped her phone: *While I find the palette a bold deviation from the traditional pastels of the 'Cotton Candy' archetype, what you gain in originality you sacrifice in legibility. This costume—*

With this much damage, Miss Vizcarra, it'll be extremely painful for you to transform. In addition, even if you do transform, you risk damaging the gem—perhaps to a fatal extent. I don't recommend transforming for more than a few minutes per day.

—In addition, while the costume itself is a solid 5 out of 10, I have concerns about how well it fits your physique and complexion. Your sharp, arched cheekbones clash against the puffy, friendly arrangement, and your—

I'm trying to help you, Miss Vizcarra. If you don't formulate a strategy to deal with this handicap, you'll die.

Clownmuffle flung up her blankets and hurled her phone at Kyubey. She missed, it struck the floor beside him and bounced into oblivion. "I'll deal with it the way I always have!"

Sigh...

Her phone had landed in the corner. She crawled across the room to retrieve it. "If you're so concerned, tell me a Magical Girl who can fix it. There's gotta be someone somewhere who can heal a soul."

It's rare for a Soul Gem to be significantly damaged without breaking altogether, so it's also rare for a Magical Girl to have that kind of ability.

"Rare—but it exists. Someone."

There is one Magical Girl currently stationed in North America with the power to repair damaged Soul Gems. While it's not my policy to freely provide information about other Magical Girls, given your long record of model performance I would be willing to make an exception. However...

The however made Clownmuffle slump, she let the coldness of her hard stone posters seep into her face.

...The Magical Girl in question is also a veteran in good standing. I would jeopardize my relationship with her if I provided her information to a stranger.

"I assure you. You're jeopardizing. Your relationship with me. If you don't. Tell me."

Miss Vizcarra, you're highly likely to die soon, especially with your current attitude. It's illogical to sacrifice my ability to cooperate with a healthy and valuable Magical Girl over a damaged one.

Clownmuffle curled up.

Additionally, there's no guarantee this Magical Girl—who is something of a misanthrope—would agree to help even if I did tell you her location. And you've far surpassed the average life expectancy of a Magical Girl, so it's uncertain how much longer you would last even if you did repair your Soul Gem. No, the risks simply outweigh the benefits...

He talked more. He exhorted her to develop strategies for combat either untransformed or that only required her to transform a short time. He offered suggestions and described how Magical Girls in the past had dealt with such injuries. He was detailed, helpful, and totally useless.

Eventually he went away.

She deleted the fashion critique she had left half-finished on the cracked screen of her cellphone. Somewhere in North America existed a Magical Girl who could save her. Might this mystery girl frequent MagNet? Had Clownmuffle ever met her online? If she was a "misanthrope," maybe not. But maybe yes.

She left the Selfie board and for the first time ever opened the Help board. Even if the girl herself wasn't online, maybe someone who knew her was. She glanced over the existing topics. The most recent was by the main girl in Minneapolis, who had a 1 out of 10 hyper bland outfit, among the worst Clownmuffle had ever critiqued. Guh! Forget it, bad idea to post here. Besides, vultures circled this board. San Bernardino was crap territory but it *was* territory and girls not so fortunate would pique their ears if they heard a whispered cry for help.

And the witch girl. With the bend in her hat. She used MagNet too. Best not to broadcast weakness.

Clownmuffle had friends. People like her who liked to talk about costumes and the nice things Magical Girls did. She had a whole cadre, people she met on MagNet, all with beautiful outfits. She loved her friends, they were bright and passionate people, but could she trust them not to spread rumors?

After she stared paralyzed at the cracked screen an indeterminate period, she shook her head. Fear again. Who cared if vultures dropped, who cared if the bent-hat witch appeared in the shadow of her mirror? Clownmuffle was a spectacular Magical Girl. She didn't need to transform to trounce them all.

But every tendon under her skin had stretched to the point of snapping.

She said "Fuck it" out loud and almost opened a new topic on the Help board before she realized one other person she could ask, one person who knew everyone and what they did and where they lived.

Denver.

The girl in Denver owned and administrated MagNet. She had a dull costume but not the worst. She made announcement posts Clownmuffle never read and everyone apparently liked her. But come on. She ran a site with a thousand Magical Girls chatting about Magical Girl stuff, where they lived, what powers they had. No way benevolent Denver didn't Big Brother that intel into a spreadsheet somewhere. No way.

Clownmuffle sent Denver a simple message. She explained her situation and asked if Denver knew any Magical Girls who could repair a Soul Gem. The moment she hit Send, everything inside her erased and she felt as though the problem was already resolved. She had utmost faith in Denver. They rarely spoke, granted, but they knew each other's reputations. The veteran Magical Girls would help one another out. At their core, despite everything, Magical Girls were good people. Even the ones who did bad things—they had a harsh hand dealt. Clownmuffle had faith.

She critiqued the remaining new images and went to sleep.

Denver responded five days later, the day after Christmas. Clownmuffle made it through the days alive, the witch girl never showed up. Maybe Kyubey had terminated her, but he never confirmed it.

The message read: *Dear San Bernardino, I may be able to find the girl you need, but for security reasons I would prefer to discuss in person. If it's not too inconvenient, would you visit me this weekend? I'll pay for transportation and provide grief cubes if necessary.*

The river of providence speaking. She answered affirmative.

But when Denver sent her a plane ticket, the ticket didn't go to Denver. It went to St. Louis.

An Accumulated Pile of Usefulness

"Fuck!" It was a very little fuck. Junior Administrator Hegewisch (not sure how to pronounce that? Neither was she) whispered the little fuck into the fuck bag she kept under her desk. Language, drugs, alcohol, blasphemy, insubordination, "lack of zeal," carelessness, sloth, video games, social media, sexual conduct (het or otherwise), onanism, "indecent self-photography," gambling, stock trading: Prohibited. Hegewisch could survive without the other stuff, but sometimes she had to say "fuck" or die. Luckily this shit paid and it paid a price to slit throats for, that being grief cubes. Hegewisch hadn't prowled the streets seven months running and as long as this city held she wouldn't again.

However! However.

The message that prompted her surreptitious expletive, received on her officially-sanctioned BlackBerry (remember BlackBerries? No? You weren't alone), gave cause for concern in the limited but comfortable life of the girl now known as the sound a cat makes choking on a hairball. Hegewisch read and reread her boss's simple message and sagged deeper into despair.

"Um..." Girl on the other side of her desk—A welcome distraction. "Miss Junior Administrator? Did I do something wrong?"

"Sorry, lost focus. Where were we? Name, date of birth, date of contract..."

Still missing the fun stuff, wish and powers and whatnot. In a city of one hundred and six Magical Girls—with the addition of this runty chick, one hundred and seven—you gotta have bookkeeping. As Junior Administrator, Hegewisch took vital statistics for all inductees, assigned them a platoon, and kicked them into military life. She scrutinized her current specimen: Too meek. At thirteen meekness can be beaten out of you, and in Chicago beating was what you got, but chips flipped against a month's survival.

After the relevant questions, Hegewisch tossed her a portfolio with Imperial dogma and living quarters. "Next head across the sidewalk to the Medical building. You a virgin?"

The girl blinked. "Uh... what's a...?"

"Good answer. Expect to be asked again."

The girl nodded, took a timid step toward the exit, reconsidered and stooped her head in a half-bow. Eyes shut, arms straight down her front with the portfolio clutched. "Th-thank you, Miss Hegewisch. I was so scared... There was a Magical Girl in the city I came from, she said I better leave or she'd..."

"Submit your praises to our Munificent Empress, from whom issues the cornucopia of your salvation."

Hegewisch extended a sharp and straight arm that terminated with a clean snap of the fingers toward an office wall consumed by a neoclassical portrait of the Holy and Exalted Empress of Greater Chicago, a sheer and austere woman, swept in opulent robes with ermine trim, posed midstep, eyes raised toward a penitent heaven. In one upturned palm a golden bowl and the other a luminous mirror within which was reflected her own serious eyes now turned toward the viewer. She presided upon a vibrant sunrise backdrop, enflamed with a yellow luster.

This image hung, by mandate, in every office and living quarters under the Empire's jurisdiction, Peoria to Sheboygan. Hegewisch, one of the few girls who had met the Empress in person, found the portrait disconcertingly realistic.

The newcomer bowed toward it. "Thank you—Y-Your Munificence." Then she departed toward Medical.

The office lay stagnant, Hegewisch stagnant within it. A whoosh deflated her lungs, her legs slid deeper under her desk as her head dragged down the back of her chair and she bubbled around the floor like a vat of goo. Her hand fell upon her BlackBerry. She reread the message.

THE EMPRESS SUMMONS YOU TO COUNCIL WITH CENTURIONS DUPAGE AND CICERO.

Fuck.

FUCK.

To a layperson it doesn't sound so bad. Office jockeys attend stupid meetings all the time. Fact of life, suck it up. But nobody except Hegewisch had to attend meetings with *these* fucking bozos. She loved their dumb title: "Centurions." What Latinate bullshit. Cicero—Cicero was acceptable. She could *abide* Cicero, whose rigid self-seriousness rarely extended beyond her own definite boundaries. But DuPage! Let's talk about DuPage, Hegewisch gesticulated in her empty office to an absent audience, there's only one thing anyone needs to know about DuPage. It's a county, you see, a weird little square smack in the center of the herpes blister slowly swelling on the lower lip of Lake Michigan, a banal second-level federal subdivision of little note. Everyone in Chicago pronounces this county exactly the way it looks: Due-Page. Simple no?

But *Centurion* DuPage insisted—insisted—upon an alternate pronunciation. "Duh-pahj." Like it was French.

Hegewisch wished she could give her own name an alternate pronunciation. This whole city was stuffed with stupid things. Dumb dumb dumb, stupid stupid dumb, dumb stupid dumb, fuck fuck fuck.

Fuck.

The choler expelled out her mouth. This is why everyone should have a fuck bag. It really makes you feel better when you can go apeshit over the dumbest things and nobody has to

listen. Don't foist your problems on other people. As long as you do that, nobody can hate you.

Moments later, Cicero's lieutenant called: they'd arrived. Fuck! Hegewisch sprinted out the office, out the front door, into the howling gale and down the slippery sidewalk to the roundabout. Her feet went out from under her, she landed on her ass and bounced halfway down the walkway until she lurched back upright.

It wasn't just one car in the roundabout, it was five. Doors opened and an entire platoon of Magical Girls shivered into the snow. They wore white suits. Hegewisch wore a white suit under her jacket. White suits were the thing to wear, because they were formally mandated by decree of the Empress. Hegewisch hated white suits, they made her want to barf. Like this: BLEUUUGH.

"Centurion Cicero!" From the height of the walkway she saluted. She had to toe her way downhill to avoid an embarrassment. "Glory be to God for your safe return! Was your mission a success?"

"Unequivocal," said Centurion Cicero, who towered. Aided by her lieutenant, she rose from the backseat of the foremost car. Four days prior she and her goon squad of nineteen Magical Girls embarked on a top secret objective above even Hegewisch's clearance.

"And will all of your subordinates attend this assembly? My apologies, Lady Cicero, but I do not believe they will fit in the council chamber."

Cicero allowed her lieutenant to drape a fur coat over her shoulders as she strode up the walkway toward the Administration building. Hegewisch, who had already gained downward momentum on the slippery slope, nearly fell trying to redirect herself and wound up following several steps behind. "During the mission," Cicero said, "we encountered bizarre magical phenomena. I believe it prudent for the Puella Magi under my command to receive a full medical examination before they resume ordinary duties."

"Astute judgment, Lady Cicero." Hegewisch felt sorry for the girls under Cicero's command.

When they reached the top of the walkway, Cicero turned on a sharp heel and pointed at her goons shambling below. "Lombard, organize five Puella Magi at your discretion and transport the spoils into the Administration building. Elmhurst, shepherd all others to the Medical building and inform the Physician of our purpose."

The signified goons barked smart yes miladys.

"Spoils, Lady Cicero?" said Hegewisch. "Shall I open Storage for you?"

"Yes. Have the others arrived?"

Others... plural? The Centurions often forced one to surmise what they meant. "According to my information, the Second and Fourth Centurions will not attend this meeting. It will be only you and Centurion DuPage, who has not yet arrived."

"Typical," said Cicero.

Although Hegewisch had only been told she was "summoned" to the meeting, as Junior Administrator she essentially doubled as hostess. She showed Cicero and her lieutenant to the council chamber and bid them make themselves comfortable, then ran to the basement and scanned her keycard for the goons who filed downstairs carting heavy-looking crates. Hegewisch figured they were munitions. But Cicero's goons corrected her: "It's grief cubes."

Grief cubes. Holy shit. Grief cubes were the size of a six-sided die. There had to be thousands, possibly tens of thousands in the crates, more than the city of Chicago harvested in six months.

After she dismissed the goons and locked up, she went upstairs and heard shouting from the council chamber.

"You hobgoblin, I *ordered* you to pick me up, but did you? *Noooooo...* You deliberately ignored me! My lieutenant had to scrape ice off the windows before we could drive. This is an affront—an *affront*—to my dignity as one of the Holy Order of Greater Chicago's Four Centurions—and may I remind you, the *greatest* of those four, which makes it an affront to Our Glory the Empress herself, which may I remind you is *blasphemous*, and ought to be disciplined instantaneously, my dear Cicero, do you hear me?"

Oh God. Hegewisch braced herself and opened the door. Cicero had taken a seat near the monitor, her lieutenant stood behind her. Over the opposite end of the table leaned DuhPaaaahj, hands splayed, her sallow gray face as close to Cicero's as possible.

"I apologize." Not a hint of perturbation in Cicero. "I was under strict orders to bring my spoils as swiftly as possible. I could not spare the detour. You may ask the Empress if you disagree with my conduct."

DuPage's gaunt body trembled. Her brittle black bangs cascaded over her eyes and she blew them back with a harsh exhalation of air.

She whirled on Hegewisch. "And you—! Where were you when I arrived? Because my dear colleague Cicero brought so many clodwalloping vehicles and clogged the whole roundabout, I had to park especially far away with no escort! Have you shirked your duties, Junior Administrator?"

Hegewisch smiled, eyes wide, certain of impending death.

But Cicero said: "I ordered her to open Storage for my soldiers, Due-Page. The security of the tribute I have brought to Chicago far outweighs—"

"You are *below* me in rank, Cicero, and you *will* act as such. Just because you got yourself a promotion to Third Centurion doesn't make you an iota more significant than the sniveling recruit I used to pummel to submission, do you comprehend?"

Can one vomit so much they die?

Cicero rose. "You may outrank me, but not so much to treat me as your stooge—"

The respective lieutenants of each Centurion rushed forward, murmured miladys, and sought to mollify. Cicero retook her seat and DuPage turned away with crossed arms and a grimace.

"And the other two?" DuPage said to Hegewisch. "How long must I wait for my fellows to join?"

"By decree of Her Munificence the Empress, the Second and Fourth Centurions will not attend this meeting." She had anticipated this exact question (after Cicero asked it first), so while she waited for Cicero's goons to ferry the grief cubes she had messaged her boss for more intel. "Lady Cook has an important mission and Lady Joliet must study for an academic examination."

The entire right side of DuPage's face twitched, her dark eyes burned. She kneaded her necktie, ruffling her already-ruffled white suit, which clung to her two-dimensional physique at odd points. She whispered: "So I've been summoned into the cold at this mubdoubling hour, forced to dress for a formal engagement, while Lady Joliet remains warm and comfortable as she studies for an examination... The day after Christmas... When *nobody* is in school..."

"Milady," said DuPage's lieutenant. "You know the Empress prioritizes Lady Joliet's studies highly. Please avoid another fiasco."

DuPage shot a hooked claw toward her lieutenant's face and for a moment Hegewisch expected her to take the whole head off. But her fingers stopped inches from the eyes and her lieutenant did not even blink, like this was an everyday occurrence, which it probably was. The trembling fingers remained bared for some time before DuPage lowered her arm and took her seat and all the pent-up air in Hegewisch's lungs whooshed out.

She had survived the easy part. Now the meeting began.

Hegewisch raised a remote. The dual monitors at the end of the council chamber activated and a call patched to the Empress's estate. Everyone fell silent. Five seconds passed, ten. DuPage's lieutenant brushed snowflakes off her superior's shoulder. Hegewisch took a new breath and held it.

The call connected. The screen displayed a woman's face.

"Good evening, mesdames," said the Chief Handmaiden of the Empress. "Your appointment will proceed as scheduled pending a shift in humor in Her Munificence. I will contact Her Munificence now."

"Thank you, Chief Handmaiden."

The Chief Handmaiden typed into a keyboard. Everyone waited until she said: "Her Munificence has reaffirmed her offer of appointment, mesdames. I shall transmit you to her shortly."

"Thank you, Chief Handmaiden."

The screen went black. It symbolized the void of despair one tumbled into when one had no choice but to commune with Her Munificence the Holy Empress of Greater Chicago, Milwaukee, and Affiliated Territorial Acquisitions. Hegewisch sought inner peace.

The screen displayed a chamber. A study in a mansion, lined with tall bookshelves between which antique paintings hung, pious Renaissance scenes. A solitary candle illumined a tall-backed velvet chair turned away from the camera. Only an arm on the rest denoted the presence of Her Munificence.

The arm raised, its hand turned the page of a book. A grandfather clock ticked.

"Welcome, DuPage. Cicero."

"Thank you for the honor of this communication, Your Munificence," DuPage and Cicero said in uncharacteristic but mandated tandem.

"Cicero," said the Empress. "Didst thou complete thine assigned text?" Hear that? *Didst thou*. Didst thou didst thou didst thou.

Cicero bowed her head. "I have completed the chapters on Reason from De Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, as you requested, Your Munificence."

"What are thine opinions?"

"Opinions, Your Munificence?" said Cicero.

Leave it to the Empress to waste everyone's time with literary comprehension tests and leave it to Cicero to give such a dumbfounded answer as though she had not expected it.

"Indeed. I prefer my subjects to develop opinions upon the works I assign; I little need those who absorb information without metastasizing it within their psyche."

Metastasizing. Like cancer...?

"My opinion," Cicero said. "My opinion is that. Reason. Reason is—"

"Thou lackst eloquence."

"My opinion is that Reason is the foundation of a... flawed society?"

The hand on the screen turned a page in its book. Cicero had no idea, not the slightest, everyone could tell. That's what happens when you give a girl who dropped out of school at thirteen a tome five centuries old and ask their opinion on it.

"Is that truly thine opinion, Cicero? Or didst thou simply parrot the edification I bestowed upon thee in our prior correspondence? For De Pizan herself believed Reason to be the cornerstone virtue of society, and the virtue by which she could convince the male elite of her time of woman's worth. But it's to be expected of one whose sources stemmed primarily from

the Pagan and polytheistic. The author's comprehension of Reason was informed by some of mankind's greatest philosophers, and upon it she had the strongest grasp. Thus, she chose it as the allegorical foundation for her utopian female society. But this error allowed a venom into her city of ladies."

Hegewisch had read the book they gabbed about. The Empress forced her. An obscure Renaissance text by a female writer. The book was little more than a collection of episodes from mythology, history, and religion that exemplified the value of women. The virtues of Reason, Rectitude, and Justice upon which the Empress harped so much were no more than the titles of chapters. The whole thing was drivel, a treatise that strove only to prove that women were at least subhuman in a time when men treated them as chattel. A useless work five hundred years later, which was why nobody but the Empress had ever heard of it. A drivel text for a drivel philosophy.

"Then it is Rectitude," said Cicero. "If not Reason, it must be Rectitude upon which we must found our society. Rectitude—the virtue that defines the actions of God."

Tch. God.

"In essence, thou art correct," said the Empress. "There is only one absolute truth in this world, and neither Reason—the empirical—nor Justice—the retributive—are truly absolute; they are founded upon the flawed perceptions of human beings. God's perception is infallible. However, one cannot simply found a society on Rectitude. They first must comprehend Rectitude. And because Rectitude is based upon an understanding beyond our ken, this becomes the critical challenge of philosophy. After all, how can human understanding even seek to understand that which God understands?"

The question stagnated in the silent air, uttered with a twinge of the rhetorical but with enough verbosity that nobody could be quite sure. DuPage glared at the tabletop with a murderous glint, the lieutenants did their best to remain composed.

The Empress mercy-killed the silence: "We shall converse more on this topic in private, Cicero. For now, we shall progress to the next order of business. Cicero, hast thou completed thy mission?"

All befuddlement vanished from Cicero. It was clear she had hoped for this question from the start. "Yes, Your Munificence. I have retrieved the tribute without a single casualty."

The book flipped shut. The grandfather clock ticked. The Empress did not rise from her chair or turn. "You have done well, Cicero." Her voice was sedate but she was clearly excited, considering she forgot the "thou."

She continued: "As the mission was a success, its purpose need no longer be concealed. I sent Cicero and her soldiers to Minneapolis. They were to conquer the city and acquire a large trove of energy located within its bounds. And despite some unforeseen complications, they have ultimately prevailed. The trove shall become the Holy Order of Greater Chicago's reserve, and with it we shall wage war on those who refute the Rectitude of our law."

War.

Whoawhoawhoa, who said anything about war, what was this war. Before Hegewisch had a chance to consider the grand idiocy of the word "war," Centurion DuPage erupted from her long placidity and swept a rigid arm its full range of motion in a salute vaguely Hitleresque. Her mouth curled into a grin and she spoke:

"Yes! Verily, forsooth! Your Munificence, long have I awaited this day, this day that we, the great and infallible Empire of Chicago, strike back against those foolish and idle Puella Magi who infest the cities of the American nation! Your judgment and rationality—ineffable, inexorable!" She ratcheted upright, her chair toppled back, her arms lurched this way and that with operatic animation, her tie flapped against her shoulder as her body twisted and emoted. "Which city shall we crush first, Your Munificence, which city shall bear witness to our power and our glory? Indianapolis? Detroit? Those heathens—"

"Next, we shall conquer St. Louis," said the Empress.

"St. Louis, St. Louis, beautiful, a magnificent decision, Your Munificence—Your Munificence *and* Your Magnificence! That wretched slum, that hive of depravity, that sink of moral putrefaction!" She staggered toward the screen, spittle flared from her lips. "We shall grind their noses to powder beneath our bootsoles!"

"Thine initiative, as always, pleases me."

But DuPage was not done. Not even close. "I'll assemble my platoon instantaneously—I plead, plead of Your Munificence, you simply *must* assign this task to me, I crave it, I starve for the glory, I salivate!"

And no mere theatrics. Beneath DuPage's idiocy lurked a strain of intelligence, either intended or instinctual, like a dumb animal that intuits the correct route to migrate for winter. Given those present, DuPage was likely already the Empress's choice for the task, since Cicero had just returned from a dangerous assignment. Her jingoism undercut the Empress's authority but in a way perfectly conducive to the corporate culture. DuPage now seemed the mastermind, the Empress merely in agreement with her demands—Hegewisch loved moments like these, these subtle usurpations, they fed her a little life.

And sure enough: "I have already decided that thou shalt endeavor this mission, DuPage. St. Louis is weakened; their chief Puella Magi intends to relocate and will travel to Denver two days from now. Our opportunity presents itself. We must act."

"Pah!" DuPage swirled in a dervish, she teetered but did not fall. "I'd rather slaughter the lot of them *with* their leader, not defang a headless snake. Is our Empire so cowardly to rely on such so-called opportunities? Is our might not such that we cannot create our own opportunities?"

Uh oh. DuPage pushing her limits tonight.

"DuPage. Still thy tongue. Overconfidence leads to irony; our might is no excuse to forgo intelligent tactics. Assemble thy platoon. March at once upon St. Louis. Convert those thou canst, cast aside those thou cannot."

"Apologies, apologies, Your Munificence." DuPage settled at the rebuke, her body swiveled to a halt, she knelt and bowed her head. "I of course would never question your judgment. However, allow me one question: St. Louis is the prologue to a much larger conflict, is it not?"

"Our Holy Order shall not cease until all Puella Magi are united under our banner and code. Not until we have brought our light to all."

"Yes, correct, well spoken Your Munificence. Well spoken indeed. Now with that in mind—and I make this next statement only because you told Cicero earlier that you prize subjects who develop their own opinions—Do you not consider it wise to minimize the force we use against St. Louis?"

"What do you mean?" said the Empress.

"I mean, and I'm merely thinking *tactically* here, in particular the tactics of resource management—essential to any armed conflict—I'm thinking that, although Cicero has indeed brought us a great surfeit of energy, and we can profit from that energy greatly, it would be best not to expend too much against such a *low-hanging fruit* as St. Louis, when much more challenging foes loom in our future. Cicero's entire platoon was dispatched four days on her mission, and in that time our soldiers at home struggled to harvest the full amount of energy our bountiful city provides... If I can guarantee success with far fewer soldiers than Cicero, it would aid our efforts in future engagements."

This smug little bitch! But now Hegewisch loved it, her smug bitchiness had turned against the only person worse than DuPage in the whole Empire.

"How many soldiers?" said the Empress.

"Myself and my lieutenant shall suffice." DuPage remained bowed the entire time, the most humble posture of supplication. "Against six—or is it seven—leaderless suburban girls in St. Louis? Surely, you have faith enough in my abilities? And, given my particular powers, sometimes a larger force is only a detriment to me..."

Hegewisch didn't know what DuPage's "particular powers" entailed (she was only the *Junior Administrator*—such stuff was classified), but the Empress thought for some time. "Very well. Failure shall mean thy death, DuPage."

"Oh verily, verily." DuPage grinned.

"I insist only that one other accompany you. To ensure our Holy Order's code is adhered to at all times and that proper care is taken to avoid unneeded casualties."

The grin diminished. Which was fine, because when DuPage grinned she looked like a serial killer.

"If you insist, I must agree."

"Hegewisch, thou shalt attend DuPage in her efforts against St. Louis."

Hegewisch plummeted.

She landed on one knee, her head bowed, her eyes wide as they stared at the flat gray carpet.
"Your will is my command, Your Munificence."

Kill her. Kill her now. Flay her ruined corpse until the skin comes off then turn it into a tablecloth.

"Hast thou more tactical suggestions, DuPage? Consider it only my unparalleled munificence that allowed your arguments such weight at all."

DuPage glanced Hegewisch over, eyes slanted, lower lip bitten, a dubious tilt of her head.
"None further, Your Munificence."

"Then I have spoken. Cicero, remain in Chicago and await further orders."

"Yes, Your Munificence."

"Hegewisch, serve DuPage as your superior. Obey her commands."

"Yes, Your Munificence."

"Nothing further. Disperse."

The five people in the room pounded a fist against their chest and intoned together the standard farewell: "Praise to Your Munificence!" Except Hegewisch kind of whispered it—the zeal of her compatriots more than swallowed her tepidity.

The screen turned off. Cicero and her lieutenant exited without a word to DuPage. DuPage's lieutenant rushed to her superior's side and whispered harsh statements in her ear, DuPage waved her away with an expelled breath and a note of mockery.

"Our orders are clear. I simply hope this worthless Junior Administrator is no undue burden. We depart tomorrow."

"Yes, Lady DuPage," said Hegewisch. She rose in a daze, a fog of horror, a swollen growth in her stomach lining. Kill her! Eat her liver for dessert. "May God grant us good fortune in this endeavor."

The wind howled outside, the windows rattled. Hegewisch looked up at the clouds, then past them, into the dark storm air to the heavens where lurked a God she knew existed and wished didn't. But that God could do nothing to save her now.

The Twenty-Seventh City

Someone slept in. Late. That someone, by the way, was Centurion DuPage. Hegewisch, ready 8 AM sharp, stood outside DuPage's apartment the next four hours tapping her foot and shivering. When she knocked the door opened and DuPage's lieutenant stuck out her head.

"Sh. The lady is asleep."

"We have a mission."

"And Lady DuPage is the executrix of that mission, is she not? We operate upon her timetable." The door shut in Hegewisch's face.

Noon, DuPage finally shambled zombielike from her abode, wrapped in a quilt, supported by her lieutenant's shoulder. If Hegewisch didn't know alcohol was strictly prohibited by Her Munificence's decree, and that Chicago's top brass never *ever* abused rank to flout such prohibitions, she might have suspected DuPage was hungover.

In the car DuPage immediately sprawled in the backseat, clutched her blanket, and conked out. She didn't snore but she groaned enough. DuPage's lieutenant—named Aurora—drove. Hegewisch rode shotgun.

Five hours of rural Illinois commenced. Aurora never spoke. A staunch "Yes Milady" type, devoid of original thought. Nonetheless five silent hours plays on anyone's nerves and by the time they passed a sign that read ST. LOUIS 22 MILES Hegewisch fidgeted and rubbed her hands against her thighs. DuPage still slept. A florid orange swelled the sky.

She asked Aurora: "Will we kill people?"

Aurora said nothing. She stared ahead, a field sprawled past her face. They braked to let a car change lanes in front of them, they accelerated again.

A minute passed. Hegewisch returned to staring at her twisting hands.

"You won't," Aurora said.

They arrived in St. Louis. Sunset glazed the vast profusion of post-industrial fringe. Pipes and empty ironworks blanketed in ferrous silt, shards of shattered windows and the chug of a smokestack. Factories, walkways, rails, electrical wires heaped in three-point perspective over an uncertain vanishing point until they plunged so deep into its agglomeration that only a snatch of sky remained. Dead lights thrummed and tried to turn back on. Men shambled, disappeared. Dark tubes ran across every surface.

Then they reached the river that divided Illinois from Missouri and a theatrical set of spotlights shot upward at a six hundred-foot stainless steel archway and the cluster of elegant skyscrapers it dwarfed at its back. They rumbled onto a bridge, the dead industry peeled away behind them.

Between Hegewisch's seat and Aurora's, DuPage stuck her head, suddenly awake. "The fuh—fuddgubbler is that?" She pointed.

"The Gateway Arch, milady," said Aurora.

"That's a thing? That's a real thing?"

"It's the most famous landmark of St. Louis, milady."

"Take me there. We gotta go there."

They went. Doors clicked open and DuPage lurched into the cold toward the tremendous metal archway. Her untied necktie flapped around her collar alongside her oily black hair. The Gateway Arch was located in a thin park that clung to the bank of the Mississippi River. At this hour, in this cold, few were present.

DuPage made for the arch at a tilting gait, Aurora at her back. Hegewisch tottered along. The last sunlight ebbed behind the western skyscrapers.

"Amazing. Amazing! Humankind conceived this." DuPage sprawled her arms at her sides and stared up at the glittering arch. "We must go inside. Simply must."

"Yes, milady."

But when they arrived at the base of one of the arch's broad steel legs, where a ramp led to an underground entrance, a portly security guard stopped them. "Just closed ladies. Come back 9 AM bright-and-shiny."

DuPage harrumphed and dragged Aurora aside. Hegewisch was close enough to hear. "This place is the best. We must do it here."

"I don't believe this location suits your powers well. Perhaps that tenement?" She pointed to one of the nearest skyscrapers. "An enclosed space can be better manipulated by your magic. There will be fewer exits for our enemy."

"Nonono, too boring. Way too boring—yawn. I didn't drive fifty hours to fight in an ugly apartment. Now this arch, this is something truly unique. So many cities in this country are exactly the same, you have to take advantage of the flashes of originality. Excuse me, excuse me sir—what's the purpose of this arch?"

"Well now! Glad you asked young lady," said the security guard. "This Gateway Arch is a symbol of the United States of America's westward expansion from sea to shining sea. It's a monument to the hard work, tenacity, and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps mentality of all the brave men and women pioneers who set forth from this very city on a long and perilous expedition to the unexplored and uninhabited wilderness that laid beyond. Designed as part of a competition in 1947 by Finnish architect—"

"Okay okay okay!" DuPage unlatched from the archway entrance and galloped into the long stretch of greensward. "This is stupendous, splendiferous—is splendiferous a word, Aurora?"

"I believe so."

"We have to do it here. We have to, think of the symbolism. One must live for these kinds of moments."

Her reedy, unimpressive voice railed beneath the grand arch as Aurora and Hegewisch trudged after her. She twirled, twisted, lurched, her almost skeleton body adept at trenchant and acute angles that managed to emerge clearly from under the folds of her poorly-tailored suit. This weirdly childish side of DuPage unnerved Hegewisch, especially since this entire scenario unnerved her. She was utterly uncertain of her role in this expedition, she had no idea what the Empress expected of her. She was useless in combat against other Magical Girls—not "bad," literally useless—and her one relevant skillset was mediocre healing. The only hint to her purpose was that her presence would supposedly diminish casualties. Well, she had something to say about that now. She didn't really want to say anything, she preferred to obliterate her presence as much as possible and allow DuPage to rave however she wanted, but the concern gnawed at her so finally she raised her hand halfheartedly and called to DuPage with a stage whisper.

"Uh yes um, Lady DuPage? My apologies, but this is a rather public place, so if we were to fight here, it would be dangerous for civilians, the authorities might get involved..."

DuPage tumbled out of her reverie. She swirled at such a topsy-turvy angle it looked like she might drop, but as though she had a hidden center of mass in her feet she snapped back upright and stared across the knoll.

"You," she said. It became immediately apparent DuPage had forgotten Hegewisch's existence until then. "I dislike you."

Oh. Thank you ma'am. I'll keep that in mind next time.

But DuPage wasn't done. She glided across the grass until she and Aurora coalesced around Hegewisch directly under the center of the arch. She pointed a gun-finger at Hegewisch's nose and jerked the hand up and down, up and down. "Her. Why is she here, Aurora?"

"The Empress commanded it."

"Useless. Good at fighting?"

"No," said Hegewisch. "I can heal."

"You'll just die," said DuPage. "My powers kill everyone. I fight better with fewer allies."

Oh! Is that so? Thank you DuPage, thank you for rising from your ancient sarcophagus to oogabooga your mummy curse upon her. Thank you! "My powers kill everyone," wow, it didn't even surprise Hegewisch, it seemed very in character, in fact DuPage was adept at killing everyone even without her fucking powers, Hegewisch felt the despair swell in her Soul Gem right now just being in her malefic presence. Nonetheless Hegewisch had not anticipated this development, she had expected something strong, but now she wondered—

"Perhaps that was the Empress's intention in assigning her to us," said Aurora.

A light blipped in DuPage's chalk gray eyeballs. She made the same erratic finger motion at her lieutenant. "Yesyesyes, now that's an idea, that's an idea... Junior Administrator, is there any reason why our munificent Empress would want you dead?"

Hegewisch said, "No."

"Really." DuPage slinked closer, winded around her in a barely-balanced semicircle. "You did come out of nowhere and land a rather posh gig as Junior Administrator. Hard position to get. No hunting duty, not part of the standard chain-of-command... I recall wondering why we filled that slot with a nobody. Now I wonder, might you have something unique about you that may have placed you in the Empress's favor... and now taken you out of it?"

She swirled, her tie swished. She strode away, bent her spine backward, cracked a disc and then rolled her head around on her neck. She continued: "I've known our dear munificent Empress a long while, Junior Administrator. Many long years. I know how she operates. I know how she thinks. Now I wonder—Say, what'd you wish for?"

The immense brightness of the spotlights that rose around them flushed the faces in vivid gleam. Aurora's glance remained sidelong, DuPage revolved and revolved. Hegewisch scratched her dry throat and swayed in the overwhelming sensation of this white-blasted stretch of lawn. "My wish. My wish, Lady DuPage, is classified. Even for you."

DuPage smirked. An ugly, twisted coil of her threadbare lips. Her head tilted back, her whole body tilted back, she raised onto the heel of one foot. She erupted into cackles, forced out her mouth like a series of shotgun blasts. Hideous hag laughter that went on and on while Aurora stood stoic and Hegewisch twisted her thumb to relieve the knot building in her heart. Her wish—

The laughter snapped closed and DuPage straightened, only for her marionette head to tilt onto her shoulder again. *Incubator*, she said telepathically, *you're here, hmmmm?*

I make it a habit to always remain near Magical Girls, even those who deny my assistance.

He crawled from a tuft of tall grass and trailed a shadow ten times his length behind him. His tail flicked and his eyes looked at all of them and none of them.

Do me a favor, Kyubey. Contact all Magical Girls in the area. Inform them this city is now under the jurisdiction of the Empire Chicago, as claimed by I, First Centurion DuPage. Explain that they must vacate the city as quickly as possible to avoid a confrontation. If they wish to discuss this city's change in management they may do so at the big arch place.

Kyubey's tail swished back, forth. *I suspect this is a pretense to fight, Miss Esfahani.*

Prrrproblem?

Considering your particular powers I suppose not. Very well, I shall communicate your message.

He skulked from whence he came and a sudden sullenness descended upon DuPage. She hissed an irrelevant order for Hegewisch and Aurora to maintain position and paced between the spotlights. Her hands kneaded together and a scowl undulated across her face. Hegewisch had her own worries, of course.

"If I'm not needed, perhaps I should remain at the car," she said to Aurora.

Aurora, stalwart, stonefaced: "That would violate the Empress's direct order to oversee this campaign."

At least DuPage questioned her no further about her relationship to the Empress or her wish, because Hegewisch was not a steelspined individual and it wouldn't take much duress for her to blab everything no matter how classified. It was stupid anyway—her wish had zip to do with zilch, the Empress only cared about it the way she cared about her crusty ass Renaissance feminist literature. Maybe DuPage and Aurora had been joking. Despite Aurora's stiffness her relationship with her superior felt a little more casual than the standard Centurion-Lieutenant chain-of-command. Were they hazing the newbie? Surely they wouldn't actually kill her if they didn't have explicit orders, right? Right?

Right?

She better fucking hope so. Her innards crawled like something alive. If DuPage's powers killed allies and enemies alike, it had to be some kind of area of effect, a big inferno blast, a sphere of ice, electroshock wonder emporium, that kinda shit. But why was Aurora so calm? What were Aurora's powers?

"I hate this city," said DuPage.

They milled an hour more until out the solemnity of deepening night a pair of vehicles rumbled to a stop by the riverbank. It dawned only gradually on Hegewisch that someone had come. Despite her anxiety, she hadn't expected it. She had operated under a baseline sense of security that no matter how unpleasant things got, everything would on the whole be okay. Most of her life had gone that way. The bits that hadn't—even those had ended okay, at least for her.

So as the doors of the vehicles opened and one, three four, seven eight, nine ten girls emerged, Hegewisch still considered it unreal. She had sat here for an hour doing nothing after driving for six hours doing nothing after waiting in front of DuPage's apartment four hours doing nothing, and despite all that nothingness nothing had built, no sense that the nothing would come to anything except that same annoyance that plagued her day-to-day, the feeling she saved her fuck bag for.

But this was beyond the fuck bag. Hegewisch realized this was a problem expletives could not correct.

Loathing, horror crawled inside her. She stepped behind Aurora, although she was too uncertain to cling. "That's ten, ten Magical Girls, there are only supposed to be seven."

"Six." Not a twinge of nervousness appeared on Aurora's face. "The main girl was supposed to be in Denver. But it appears Denver has come here instead."

Oh God. It was true. It was really true. Hegewisch had not always lived in Chicago, where internet was banned. She once frequented MagNet, Denver's forum. There she was, at the head of a fanning formation as the Magical Girls trudged up the embankment and across the lawn toward the arch and toward Hegewisch: the Magical Girl from Denver, Colorado. Thin, trim, her hair tied into a whorl by crisscrossed obsidian sticks, a pair of rimless glasses to give her severe eyes a librarian quality. Hegewisch had only seen her in costume in the pictures she shared on MagNet, but even in a double-breasted velvet coat that swished around pretty ankles she recognized her.

The slatternly and disheveled DuPage slouched forward, swayed like a drunkard, sizzled with the spark of a sickly smile. She extended her arms wide at the thirty-odd meters that divided them from Denver's cadre. "Ohohohoho, ohohohohoho! God's benison bursts upon me, what fortune! The lovely Lady of Denver has clicked her ruby slippers into my wicked presence. Charmed, charmed, charmed." She rolled her body forward in an illustrious bow until her forehead touched the grass, then she immediately drew back.

Denver stopped. She motioned a sharp hand for her nine followers to stop. A hodgepodge assortment of Magical Girls, tall and short and young and old, in sweaters and puffy jackets and one girl in a white tuxedo with a shovel perched on her shoulder, a girl who looked vaguely familiar but Hegewisch couldn't place her. If seven were the girls who lived in St. Louis, then Denver had scrounged two more out the woodwork somewhere, and Hegewisch would place bets on tuxedo shovel for one of those two. Nobody else stood out.

"So you're Centurion DuPage." Denver's voice contained a practiced clarity. It traveled far and distinct.

"My reputation swells! Several states from home, no?"

From one of the arch's legs, the security guard watched with a bemused expression. Guy if you know what's good for you.

"I've been aware of your aims here some time," said Denver. "Your pseudo-Roman cult has grown too megalomaniacal for my tastes. I was willing to abide its draconian ways while it contained itself to its own city. I was even willing to empathize. A large metropolis, a den of wraiths, one hundred Magical Girls—maybe, I thought, maybe your measures, your prohibitions, your punishments were necessary."

Was this... Was this a speech? It sounded prewritten. DuPage tried to speak before Denver cut her off and continued:

"But your sham Empress isn't satisfied with mere Chicago, is she? First, she gobbled Milwaukee. Swallowed the whole city, the girls there existed one day and disappeared the next. I knew those girls, they—"

"I did that!" DuPage flourished. "I captured Milwaukee, all by myself I might add. I—"

"—were my friends, I sent word to your Empress, and she told me: Milwaukee is very close to Chicago, it makes sense to unify our governments, it'll be more efficient. And because I—"

"—didn't take more than a day, waltzed right in and let loose my powers and poof! You'll see how I did it soon enough—"

"—*because I did not have the means*—"

"Will you shut up and fight already?"

"BECAUSE I DID NOT HAVE THE MEANS TO CONTEST, I allowed your Empress her prize of Milwaukee. And she assured me she would conquer no more, and for months she kept her promise."

DuPage gave up trying to interject, she rolled her eyes and made yap-yap hand motions.

"But then, last week, I learned that the girls in Minneapolis have all gone missing. And who is behind it? None other than the so-called Empire of Chicago. Well, Miss DuPage, I know my history. I learned what England and France and the other Allies did to Germany in the years before the second World War. I know what appeasement means. Well, I've decided I won't stand for it, and so I'm taking a stand here, me and the girls you see gathered with me. We—"

"Okay! Okay okay okay." DuPage stomped her feet and shook her fists. "I *get* it, I get it Miss Winston Churchill, you wanna bring down the big bad empire. Alright alright alright, now can we get to the killing each other part?"

"—We have decided to form a united front against your tyranny in order to protect the liberty of Magical Girls throughout North America. The small group you see before you consists of girls from three different cities, and after we repel you here there will be even more cities that join—"

"Hogwash, tripe." DuPage raised a spindly arm overhead and snapped her fingers. A swirl of sparkling light enveloped her and she emerged transformed.

All Chicago Magical Girls have the same outfit when transformed: golden plate armor with a matching helmet. Like white suits, Hegewisch hated golden armor. But DuPage, as a Centurion, got a different costume. Still black gold, but instead of plate armor she wore a long cloak, shaped oddly, draped from her shoulders like a cylindrical tent that tapered outward at the base. It looked dumb, that was Hegewisch's pronouncement, especially the outrageous oversized collar and the translucent veil that fluttered from a pointed headdress. Very little of DuPage's actual body was visible. Only a bit of her chin and its smug smirk.

Of course, this transformation caused Denver and all her goons—except shovel girl in the tuxedo—to transform. Aurora transformed too, into the standard Chicago armor. The security guard's expression switched to utter shock, Hegewisch gaped back as if to say same here pal. Major faux pas for Magical Girls to reveal themselves in the open. Of course, over the centuries plenty of normal humans had stumbled upon Magical Girls *in the act*, and although

he never said so explicitly everyone knew Kyubey wiped their memories because no Magical Girl-related conspiracy theories floated the web.

Speaking of which. Hegewisch, crouched behind Aurora, turned to a Kyubey lounging carefree in the grass nearby. *Aren't you gonna stop this? Magical Girls aren't supposed to fight each other, isn't that a rule?*

Under ordinary circumstances, correct. It's quite inefficient for Magical Girls to waste energy killing one another instead of killing wraiths. Kyubey rolled over and batted his paws in the air. *But Miss Esfahani's unique skillset flips that dynamic on its head.*

The FUCK did that mean?

"Better transform, Junior Administrator," said Aurora. "No talking your way out."

Shitshitshit. This was real. She glanced past Aurora at the ten Magical Girls arranged at the other end of the lawn, spread between two of the larger spotlights and their skyward beams, an eclectic mix of colors and costumes, sleek and beautiful and cool and deadly, their vast array of impractical but awesome weapons brandished and aimed. Aimed at her, Hegewisch, who never did anything. Well. Mostly aimed at DuPage. But Hegewisch was close enough for the crossfire.

She tapped her ring. It transformed into her Soul Gem, and without pomp or circumstance she manifested her golden armor. It clamped upon her body—arms, shoulders, torso, thighs, shins, plus a cumbersome helmet to narrow her vision. Not like this armor increased her defenses more than a smidge, not like if a magical turbo bullet fired from an enchanted arquebus plowed into her head she wasn't kissing that head goodbye. The armor had one practical purpose: it concealed her Soul Gem. Hegewisch wore hers just above her left knee. An odd spot, knees were optional, they could be shed like lizard tails, but in a fight against sentient beings she suspected they'd more likely aim for her heart than otherwise.

She hoped. Oh fuck she hoped, oh fuck.

Please God. Hegewisch knew God was there and could hear her. Please God, don't let me die here, in this stupid place in this stupid way.

"You're outnumbered," said Denver, now an awkward cosplayer in a sleeveless platinum vest and matching miniskirt. "I understand you consider yourself a hotshot, DuPage, but—"

"Even now you wanna talk?" From the sides of DuPage's cloak, as though its fabric were liquid, emerged her arms. Her elongated digits terminated in pointed fingertips, one hand balancing an open tome, the other a crystal ball in which darkness swirled. "I'm. So bored. Let's all die already."

Then she started to speak in tongues.

Like a demonic possession. A deluge of nonsense words filled with ominous gutturals and hardstopped consonants, words upon words that echoed in the stale night air and seemed to stem from some ancient civilization that died inside DuPage's lungs. Hegewisch's hands were

numb from trembling as they clutched her "weapon" (a staff with a heart-shaped tip) and she slowly stepped backward ready to bolt. The incantation deepened as from DuPage's crystal ball streamed wispy shadows that poured to the grass and seeped across the ground.

"Let's attack," said tuxedo shovel girl.

"No, everyone stay back, we don't know what she's doing," said Denver. "And spread out, it's going to be area of effect!"

DuPage's voice deepened, it no longer sounded like her at all, a swollen, submerged sound issued from her throat, unrecognizable even as language real or invented, the sounds became cries, shrieks, reverberating pulses of fury and anguish, distorted unearthly noise. More and more black shadow fell from her crystal ball, it coagulated into a burgeoning vortex, and where it touched the grass curled and darkened and died. Area of effect attack, some kind of antimatter smoke? Acidic or envenomed? But it moved so slowly, grew at such a tepid and arduous if steady pace... Hegewisch stepped further back, DuPage's voice was now only a single thunderous murmur.

The security guard's eyes had gone blank. He stared toward the plume without seeing. Transfixed, hypnotized. But nobody else was. If it only affected ordinary humans then what use was—

Oh God.

Oh God she knew. She knew what it was. What DuPage was creating.

From the black vortex rose figures. At first two or three. Enshrouded in a crackle of static. The undefined outlines of heads and shoulders. But then more emerged, ten, twenty, thirty, more and more, packed tightly together in the dimensions of the ever-widening gyre. Denver and her squad started to realize too. But by now the shadow streaming from the crystal ball increased exponentially, as though the darkness already spawned beget its own darkness. What had been a concentrated swirl in the empty space directly in front of DuPage now swept outward in all directions like a liquid wave, past Hegewisch's ankles and beyond, past the expanse under the arch, into Denver and her group. In an instant the entire green turned to black and all the spotlights went out. The distant lights of the skyscrapers dulled. The leafless trees stretched their branches into a briar patch. Hegewisch fell on her ass. She gripped her staff and twitched in paralysis as all around her—left, right, forward, backward—all around her rose the same staticky figures, some small, some big, some in the distance uncertain mammoths.

Wraiths.

A wraith miasma.

DuPage ceased her sound. She snapped her tome closed and retracted her arms into the liquid gold of her robes and started to laugh.

"Now," she said. "Now die."

Tankery Armors a Maiden's Heart

About five seconds Hegewisch still thought things would be alright and that despite DuPage's statement to the contrary her wraiths would not attack her allies, a thought dispelled the instant the first wraith turned its scritch-scratch face her way and flashed a hideous grin.

Composure? What's that?

She sprinted full tilt in a direction while on either side sprouted head upon head and hands upon hands all twisting their fingers to catch her. She swung her staff in a harsh horizontal arc but couldn't tell if she hit anything because her fucking helmet constricted her periphery. Stumbling backward still on the tail end of a swing she clutched at her head and wrenched off the helmet only for her next step to land on a sudden sharp decline. She freefell, bounced at an angle, and rolled into a tree with her legs bent above her and her eyes reeling. A puff of breath blew her hair out her eyes and she squirmed her hips and torso until they realigned and she could kick herself back to standing.

The incline she fell down stretched above, twice her height, nothing like that had existed in the park before. The Gateway Arch blazed gold above and a sharp shriek split the air only to linger a full two seconds before it ended with a heavy thwack. The sound seemed a mile away.

Fuck she fucked it, lost her head and ran and now where was she, everywhere the sharp winter trees groped for her and the shadows covered most the ground. She backed against a trunk and clutched her staff to chest and watched this way, that way, oh fuck.

And the shouts from above—Denver's voice: "RETREAT! Back, back, back—" Something exploded and cut her off. The wraiths would focus on those girls, there were more of them, if Hegewisch kept quiet and kept in one direction. Kept in one direction and ran. That direction, as good as any other direction, you know—away from the screaming.

The ground moved. Short drifts of soil sifted as four giant gray fingers rose and then subsided back into the dirt. Deeper into the park emerged the shoulders of a colossus and the scrambled face of a giantess whose thick strings of hair streamed trails of dust. Her—its—chest swelled above the ground and descended back. Didn't see Hegewisch right? Its face stared skyward.

A fingertip rose under Hegewisch's foot and she stumbled back. Fingers sprouted on every side of her and started to close. The palm was rising under her. She batted the smallest finger with her staff to negative effect and leapt onto the trunk of the tree beside her. Her hands scrambled against the rough bark and her knees scraped its sides as she fought upward. Up and up and up and up and the fingers squeezed toward her thighs then her shins then her ankles and finally two closed around her left foot with enough force to crumple it instantaneously. Her shoe swelled with blood then a seam broke and blood splashed out and she screamed even though the pain was ten times damper than it should have been.

It started to drag her down. The skin came off her palms. She coiled one arm around the trunk and angled her staff with the other. The heart-shaped tip lit up a bright pink and fired a heart-shaped beam just broad enough to cover the monster's cracked fingernail. To Magical Girls, her attacks healed them. To wraiths, it did almost negligible damage. This abomination didn't even flinch, but it did slow its downward pull and with the slickness of her blood she yanked her foot from its grasp. The hand continued to pull down as if unaware she'd escaped and she didn't give a shit about that she climbed the tree as quick as she could until she reached a branch not too brittle to break beneath her.

She propped her back in the crook between trunk and branch and shoved her foot in front of her. Desolated, it didn't exist as a foot. More like a, more like a broken bag of glass. She bit her lip and aimed her staff and the same dumb heart beam streamed out with a psychedelic video game sound effect. One, two, three seconds of concentrated healing. Four, five. The misshapen lump slowly coalesced back into its original form. She leaned her head back against the trunk.

Her eyes settled on the green where the fight began. DuPage and Aurora stood in the center. They couldn't let her die. They couldn't. She was on their team. She tried to scream to them but her hoarse voice caught and only a gag came out. In two halves near them was one of the St. Louis Magical Girls. Hegewisch said "In two halves" but she could only see one half. A pair of legs and a crescent swipe of blood extending from it. A few other girls were still fighting, including the girl in a tuxedo with a shovel, who was going absolutely apeshit, dancing around like a fucking nutcase and cutting wraiths to pieces with the spade like it was a goddam ninja sword. Denver though, Denver was gone, same with half her crew. Or else the wraith swarm was clustered so thick she couldn't see—

The tree lurched to the side. Hegewisch nearly fell off. Actually she did fall but her hands shot out and caught the branch so she dangled with a half-healed foot. She dropped her staff and it stuck in the churned ground and wriggled as the tail of a snake coiled around the trunk and bent it. She couldn't see its head—its front half was burrowed underground. The roots came up.

She clapped her feet around the tip of her staff. In her head she visualized what she was going to do, and it was going to end with her far from the snake and with a clear path to flee. In a desk all day sorting spreadsheets she could forget that offensive abilities or not her body's raw physical ability outstripped what she had been as a human by far.

So. Let's do this.

She swung from the branch. Her legs kicked up and launched her staff in the air and she released herself seconds later. Two backflips and she shot out her hand to catch the staff. Problem: The staff wasn't where she thought it was so her hand clutched the air, threw off her balance, and landed her face first into the ground. She rolled up spitting and rubbing her face and realizing that all seven months sorting spreadsheets had done for her was make her forget she should never ever try to do cool things because it never ever worked.

But the general act of hurling herself from the tree did work. She sighted her staff stuck a few feet away, snatched it, then dove aside as the snake tore down the tree toward her. She barely cleared it but she did clear it but clearing it caused a new problem because she dove toward

the incline she originally fell down, not the way she wanted to go. The snake uncoiled and swept its tail toward her. Her still limp foot dragged as she grabbed at dead grass and dug her way up the slope.

At halfway a body lurched over the edge above. She tucked her head and hugged the side but it hit her anyway and knocked her onto her back. A Magical Girl—with no face—only a bloody cavity head. Hegewisch shoved it and rolled aside as five gray crows descended on the corpse and drilled their beaks in unison into the place where the brain once was. Their heads were just bird heads, they didn't have static human heads like most wraiths, but something was wrong with their eyes, Hegewisch didn't want to look long enough to find out what. They tore up fleshy bits as she crawled on her elbows along the undulating side of the snake's tail.

Of course the moment she glanced to make sure the birds weren't looking at her all five were looking at her. Their eyes were balls of yarn, of course that made sense. Why she expected wraiths to make sense who knew. She didn't move, they didn't move, even the wriggling snake tail fell still, and Hegewisch entertained an illusion that as long as she held her breath the world would remain in this state of suspended tranquility.

It didn't.

Not because the birds alighted over her face or because the snake ensnared her or because the underground lady from before resurfaced. But because another Magical Girl dropped from over the incline—tuxedo shovel girl. And unlike the last one she still had a face. Before her feet touched the ground she slashed her shovel sideways and took off the heads of three crows. The others cawed and took flight, one made it out, the other became paste. All four bodies dissolved into grief cubes as tuxedo girl knelt beside the faceless one. She touched a choker disheveled on the girl's neck, where a few speckled shards were what remained of a Soul Gem.

"Blast," she said like an imaginary character from a comic book and not a real person inspecting a mutilated corpse. She turned to Hegewisch. "You're one of the villains."

"Nono, no I'm a good guy now please help me."

"Hm. Reformation is an admirable outcome."

A total kook. Up close she looked even more familiar than before, but Hegewisch still couldn't place her. And she had little time to ponder her long-term prospects with Shovelle because the dirt shifted under her as the giant snake arose. She fought to pull herself to her feet to avoid being buried, her arms struggled frantically, meanwhile shovel girl elegantly and gracefully stepped like she was ascending stairs and kept on top of the ground the whole time. When the snake finished only Hegewisch's arms and head were still above, but she didn't have to stay like that for long because her new friend hooked a finger under the lip of her gold breastplate and yanked her up.

"I'm Clownmuffle," she said despite the monstrous wraith staring them down. The absurdity of her name didn't register on Hegewisch because like a normal person she was far more concerned with other matters. The snake wasn't a snake. Well, half of it was. Its upper half

belonged to colossal woman she had seen earlier. It leaned in repose upon one elbow as its other hand fanned its ringed rows of fangs in a distorted, gravelly yawn. Then it moved an outstretched finger toward Hegewisch and Clown... "Clownmuffle" like it was about to pick up a toy.

One schwing of Clownmuffle's shovel severed the finger. Dust streamed from the wound as the lamia rolled over and shrieked.

"Together we'll defeat it. You handle the tail, I'll deal with the face." And Clownmuffle bounced upward. "Bounced" was the best word to describe it, her legs barely bent, all the force seemed generated in the bottoms of her feet.

Handle the tail. Funny joke! Hegewisch ran.

God fuck it her foot was still shit. She swung it like a club in a rickety semicircle as she wobbled along the base of the incline. No longer sure where she planned to go exactly. Parallel to her Clownmuffle sprinted across the upturned belly of the snake lady over its bare gray dugs and onto its bobbing throat where she lifted the shovel over her head and received a swipe of the lamia's tail that launched her almost into Hegewisch. Hegewisch fell on her ass in the time it took Clownmuffle to flip back to her feet.

"I said the tail. *I* will handle the head."

"Yeah yeah yeah I'll do that." She crawled in the opposite direction.

Clownmuffle bounced up, kicked the incline, and ricocheted herself over the tail. The lamia lolled its massive head and yawned as Clownmuffle held out her shovel and an instant later held it on the complete other end of her arm's axis. The lamia's cheek opened and dust streamed out but even this did not seem to shake its ineffable boredom. Clownmuffle hit its half-eroded chin with the heel of one foot and completely redirected her momentum with zero loss of speed into its forehead where she drove her spade deep. By then Hegewisch lifted herself into a waddling crouch and didn't bother to watch the rest.

She couldn't get distracted, her mind had a tendency to wander, rant about random things, behind a desk that was fine but now she needed to focus. Should she run on her own or stay by Clownmuffle? The girl hurled herself into danger willy-nilly. But she did fight well and she pulled attention from Hegewisch. If she had more time to consider maybe, but hell her head was all alarms right now she couldn't think—

A scaly side slammed her into the incline and knocked blood out her mouth. Something in her body broke but thankfully not her spine. She thought first she was under attack and looked where to dodge, but it wasn't an attack. The snake's tail thrashed as Clownmuffle went dumb on its face, cut after cut after cut until even the monster's casual wrist movements and reposed languor broke and its face sparkled even more static than before. The whole immense body sank into the soil. No scream or anything—just retreat. Clownmuffle didn't slow. Sand poured out the lamia's many open wounds as she bounded between trees and maintained a brisk aerial pace.

Hegewisch threw herself onto the ground to avoid the tail's spasms. It slammed so close to her it made her hair flutter. With her eyes pressed down she could only hear a mingled buzz, a gravelly churn, and the constant clean metal swishes of the shovel.

Finally the ground rumbled and went still. Hegewisch lifted her head and the lamia was gone. Clownmuffle landed beside her.

"Disappointing. Couldn't finish her. And your name...?" She proffered a hand that Hegewisch felt weird about taking.

"I'm uh, I'm." She couldn't just say "Hegewisch," especially because she couldn't pronounce it. "Laila."

"Oh, a cute name. Too bad your costume's atrocious."

"Great awesome, I don't even disagree but, let's focus on getting out alive yeah?"

"Definitely." Clownmuffle span the shovel around her neck and slid back and forth with pointlessly limber motions, apparently because she was just too bored otherwise. "Together we'll defeat Centurion DuPage."

"No that's the opposite, that's, that's not the thing I said. Escape. *Escape*."

Clownmuffle shook her head and wagged her finger. "Centurion DuPage summoned this miasma, so the fastest way to stop it is to defeat her." The way she said "Centurion DuPage"—Blah! The same measured casualness the most indoctrinated Chicago toadies used. And with DuPage's preferred pronunciation. Like it wasn't utter absurdity, them standing here in the United States year 2013 (almost 2014) and someone saying "Centurion DuPage" like it could really be someone's name. Even that Denver. Even if she claimed to stand against Chicago and all it stood for, she tromped up and shouted "Centurion DuPage" too.

Every time made her a little more real. Five times facing the mirror in a darkened bathroom

She and Clownmuffle launched upward, not because a wraith ambushed them, not because an attack sailed into them. No. Because Clownmuffle *jumped*, and she held Hegewisch by the wrist. Jumped right up the incline, dug a foot in three-quarters up, kicked off and ascended again until they both plopped right in the knoll under the arch with ten thousand shambling wraiths grinning to meet them.

The shovel rolled around from its perch in the crook of Clownmuffle's neck and before Hegewisch saw a thing three wraiths were dead and Clownmuffle charged into the horde. It actually baffled Hegewisch. Baffled her how Clownmuffle could 1) Swing her shovel in one hand like a fucking lawnmower and 2) Still drag Hegewisch along behind. As per her barely-formulated plan, Clownmuffle didn't attempt to exterminate the entire horde. She cut a path inward to the little glint of gold visible above the bobbing heads: DuPage. And though they had ten million enemies on all sides they moved fast enough that not one attack even came close.

That wasn't going to last. Hegewisch knew it, she knew it. Clownmuffle couldn't beat DuPage that was fucking stupid to even think. Because—because—

"Wait her armor, her armor is!"

It didn't fucking matter, Clownmuffle couldn't hear her, so much flickery distorted sound crackled all around them, screams and chuckles and shrieks. And they moved so fast no way could Hegewisch say what she needed in time—maybe if they hashed a plan beforehand—

Clownmuffle cut a slice of wraiths and there DuPage and Aurora stood in a small clean circle clear of miasma. DuPage had her head leaned back as she muttered the tail end of a sentence to Aurora, something like: "—should check out the top." She apparently did not realize Clownmuffle had been coming, although Aurora's eyes were turned to her the moment she cut through. Then her eyes fell on Hegewisch and Hegewisch wrested free from Clownmuffle and held up her hands in as much supplication she could muster.

"No no don't worry, not with her just mixed up—"

"Magical Girls fight wraiths," said Clownmuffle. "One who instead creates them isn't fit to be called a Magical Girl, no?"

"Someone actually made it to me!" DuPage clapped her hands. "I'm so excited, oh this is fantastic. I can't wait, can't wait."

Aurora started: "I'll—"

"—Do absolutely nothing. It's mine."

In a real fight with sane people, all that talking? Never would've happened. That was just a movie thing, everyone getting in their pithy quips. But obviously none of these people were sane. While they gabbed Hegewisch fell to her knees and crawled toward her superiors, but the moment she passed through the surprisingly stark division between miasma and the perfect cylinder of ordinary space DuPage and Aurora inhabited, a small yellow sphere zipped toward her. Where it came from, what it was, Hegewisch had zero fucking clue. And before it sailed into her face, Aurora flicked a finger and it stopped movement instantly. While Hegewisch found it reassuring to know at least one of her dubious colleagues would expend at least a finger flick not to inflict whatever pain that yellow sphere would have inflicted on her, her instinctual impulses caused her to rear back anyway and she landed against a wraith that wrapped its robes around her arms and constricted her past the point of breathing.

Meanwhile Clownmuffle flung her shovel twenty feet airborne, let it spin there a moment, then jumped up, caught it, and brought it down on DuPage's head. And what was always going to happen happened...

The spade bounced off DuPage's headdress. The clang resounded even through the miasma's denuded sense of sound. First the shovel, then Clownmuffle's arm, and finally Clownmuffle shook beyond control. Not a scratch or tear appeared on the translucent veil that covered DuPage's eyes.

Even if Hegewisch didn't know their powers, all four Centurions had something known to everyone in Chicago: the Empress's Blessing. That was the theocratic state-sanctioned name for it, something meant to elevate the Empress to a nigh-popish state, if not demideity, but it was only an enchantment. A stupid, overpowered, insane enchantment but an enchantment nonetheless, like how a Magical Girl might enchant her bicycle to make it faster or her hair to make it cuter. The Empress's Blessing didn't quite do either of those things. What it did was make armor invincible.

Invincible. AKA invulnerable, immune to damage, cannot-be-touched. All four Centurions had it. Of course they fucking did, would the Empress have ever let DuPage waltz into St. Louis essentially on her own without some shit like that?

"Never gets old!" DuPage swiveled and laughed. "Every time it happens it never gets old!" From her gold sage's robes her arm with its giant book extended and she slammed the book into Clownmuffle's bewildered face.

Her book had no windup, just a wrist flick, but Clownmuffle snapped back and an arc of blood whipped out either her mouth or nose. Which was the last thing Hegewisch saw before the wraith that grasped her forced her head into its maw.

She kicked her feet against its body, she had been doing that the whole time, it did fucking nothing. A ring of fangs closed around her cheeks like it intended only to bite off half her head. Well, it was succeeding. Her mouth split open Glasgow-style and her own blood splashed down her tongue to strangle her. The thing had a mouth like a lamprey and only a bit more pressure would sever her cerebellum. Her kicks became thrashes, she transmitted a telepathic *Save me!*

Hegewisch expected nothing. Why should she? But somehow someone answered. The wraith unlatched and dissolved around her, she staggered forward disoriented and slushing blood as her first words came out a gurgly bubble. Clownmuffle, face also bloody, pulled her away from more wraiths clustering closer between them and DuPage.

"Oh this what I live for Aurora, hear me? Why wake up in the morning otherwise?"

"You barely woke up this morning anyway, milady."

"Exactly exactly. Now to the top of the arch."

The cylinder free of miasma drifted away from them at the pace of two people walking. Aurora's yellow ball swirled around its circumference and remained visible even as the pair vanished beneath the circle of wraith faces. Their heads bobbed so close together they became one unbroken band of static that fucked with Hegewisch's eyes. She clung to Clownmuffle's rumpled tuxedo. It was useless to fill her head with expletives and oaths now, yet it was all she could think.

Clownmuffle's hand fell atop her head and stroked her hair which was creepy but not the worst thing. She said: "Don't worry. I'll get us out. I'll just—just transform. Yes."

Yes yeah do that. Get them out, Hegewisch would take anything other than this swelling swelling swelling horde of *faces*—wait transform?! She wasn't already—

A white-sleeved wrist flicked out and pinned between two fingers was Clownmuffle's Soul Gem. Something looked wrong with it but before Hegewisch figured out what a flash enveloped them and Clownmuffle started to scream, not like a "HYAA HERE'S MY SPECIAL MOVE" scream a mind-searing agony scream that made Hegewisch scream too. Clownmuffle's body buckled and Hegewisch was no longer clinging to her for fear but to keep her from toppling over. In an instant the transformation occurred. Clownmuffle's white tuxedo turned into...

...A white... tuxedo.

Obviously a lot nicer, less ruffled than her old one. And with snazzy purple trim, a higher-quality cut, better tailoring to conform to her (short, flat) body. Its cuffs bigger, its frills bigger, a line of ruffles descending from her buoyant oversized bowtie. But it was a white tuxedo. She wore a white tuxedo as a person and a white tuxedo as a Magical Girl.

Magical Girls were a mistake.

She got one other fun new accoutrement, that being a top hat with a purple band just above the brim, and set into that band a gleaming opal Hegewisch assumed was her Soul Gem, especially because the weird thing she noticed before now became obvious: the gem was cracked.

Palette swap Willy Wonka was still doubled over when the transformation ceased. As the sparkly cutesy flash subsided she opened her mouth and vomited a glutinous paste over her and Hegewisch's feet, actually most of it landed on Hegewisch's bent knee and seeped between her armor plating to throb against her leg. It also drained down Clownmuffle's cute big bowtie and fancy ruffles the moment they appeared on her body.

Had Hegewisch time to think she'd think how turbo mega fucked they were now that Clownmuffle turbo mega fucked herself but she had no time to think it because soon as the vomiting ceased Clownmuffle ratcheted herself to full standing position. A graceful, almost casual motion of her arm pressed her shovel into Hegewisch's hand. Ten playing cards appeared on Clownmuffle's now-free fingertips and she flicked them into the skulls of the wave of wraiths that crashed onto them. Each card went through a wraith like the wraith didn't exist, and sure enough they didn't as they dissolved into dust and grief cubes.

She coughed a dollop of blood as a second wave shambled at them, then held her arms up and out her sleeves came flying an entire flock of pure white doves. The doves sailed between the listless flicker of the faces and coalesced further away, flapping back together into a big white ball of wings, and there they were—Clownmuffle, Hegewisch—where the birds had been. Teleportation? She'd seen others with it but never done it herself, and holy shit did it fuck her senses. The surroundings were different, the wraiths had their backs to them, they stood at one base of the giant silver arch, on a sloped walkway that led to an underground souvenir shop or museum or something, protected by a bunch of metal detectors and the hypnotized security guard from before. DuPage and Aurora probably went down

there, right? There didn't look like any entrances directly on the arch itself, so that was probably where you went to go to the top.

Clownmuffle swayed. She had done it a lot previously, her motions in combat were all liquid, but this time was far less steady. Her feet pattered left, pattered right, her head lolled. She lifted shaky arms as the color drained out and while all the wraiths turned their heads toward them and chattered, the monkish robed ones and the ones with animal bodies, she fired from her sleeves a full fifty-two card pickup spray of diamonds, hearts, clubs, and spades.

Then she staggered, the cards stopped coming, and her heart exploded.

Straight out her chest. A black circle appeared where her heart was, dark enough to show even against the blood she'd already barfed, and then it spurted open a horrible spray that launched across the dead grass. Clownmuffle slumped to her knees with a second smaller spurt then fell face down and detransformed into her uglier, somehow less bloody tuxedo. Her body went epileptic.

Her final attack had fired enough cards—and each card hit a mark—that the absolute congestion of wraiths swarming them thinned to a loose conglomeration, but it was only a thinning, they were still coming and now Hegewisch had no friend to help her. A jackal, hyena, some kind of plague dog with a human face lunged and sank its teeth into the leg she rose to kick it away—the leg with her Soul Gem, although its fangs were much lower down. It dragged her to the ground and shook her until she beaned it with the shovel two, three times and disfigured its face into putty. It only relinquished her after it dispersed into cubes. She flopped onto her belly and stumbled upright as more came after her. The underground area though, it had a narrow entrance and probably no other exits, it'd bottleneck them, she could do something. And since it was a downslope she only had to tumble to reach it.

She tumbled halfway down when she remembered Clownmuffle still shaking. No fuck it, girl was meat now, half her innards had departed her body. But she was strong, fast—also a braindead moron who got them into this mess. No what the fuck was she thinking, she couldn't let someone die—Useful, she was still useful. She used the shovel as a crutch and hobbled back up thinking what the fuck was she thinking.

Another demon dog had Clownmuffle's head in its jaws. Hegewisch swung the spade so the sharp part cleaved through. She grabbed Clownmuffle's spastic ankle and pulled. She was perched at the very top of the incline, she only needed to get Clownmuffle rolling down it—only a little more force—wraiths all around FUCKING HURRY.

One more heave and Hegewisch's ankles left the incline, she tilted backward and dropped and gravity did the hard work. The two bodies bounced, rolled, entangled, and slid to the base of the embankment.

It took two seconds before wraith faces appeared at the top of the incline. Hegewisch thrashed until her leg got unstuck from Clownmuffle's and dropped the shovel. She half-crawled half-staggered to the only other person down there with them: Mr. Security Guard. Wraiths tended not to eat humans, not the normal way at least, they let them wander around dazed and drained their... soul energy? Who knew. Hegewisch skidded to one knee and

searched his utility belt. Come on, we're talking a major American landmark here, 9/11 still happened once, the guy had to have a—GOTCHA. Gun.

Underground after hours her scant light sources coupled with her scant gun knowledge made it impossible to tell whether she held a Glock, a Sauer, some other make. She slid out the handgun's mag and the shinier rounds inside were easier to make out, she approximated fifteen or twenty before she slammed the mag back in, disengaged the safety, cocked the chamber. She searched Paul Blart's belt for more mags and scrounged two before she became aware of the wraiths ebbing into the underground area.

Hoo. Okay. Standard training for Chicago girls with poor or nonexistent combat included marksmanship and firearms handling. On top of that Hegewisch knew a trick. She tapped her gun with her hand and a pink glaze enveloped it, it became smoother, glintier, less heavy.

An enchantment. Enchantments were the number one most underrated form of magic a Magical Girl could employ. People liked their big flashy weapons they summoned out thin air, the kind that never ran out of ammo so long as the girl had energy. But shit like that expended energy fast because the girl used her own soul to both create the weapon and create its payload. An enchantment piggybacked off the work a real, physical object already did. Hegewisch's gun still shot bullets which still did the kind of damage a bullet did, and all because of some powder igniting and launching said bullet supersonic into someone's brain. None of that chemical reaction drained an iota of Hegewisch's power. But for a little extra kick all Hegewisch needed to do was imbue it with the ittiest, bittiest fleck of her own magic and bam. Now it was that much more powerful. And she barely had to waste anything to accomplish it.

Given she might not get out of this jam so fast, resource management—essential. Essential.

She fixed her stance, aimed at the foremost oogly-boogly, and pulled the trigger. A big round hole appeared clean in the wraith's head and the wraith disintegrated. Normal bullet wouldn't do that much. Yeah, bullets hurt wraiths, but not as much as they hurt humans. That enchantment, that extra kick, that's what put it over.

Bam bam, bam. She positioned herself behind the security checkpoint at the museum's entrance and leaned over the bag check conveyer belt to better absorb recoil. Her hands shook like fuck but her aim wasn't so bad regardless. She kept mental note of the bullets she fired. Seven, eight. Just like a zombie movie.

Here was something you wouldn't see in a zombie movie though. At a lull in the first wraith wave she pulled herself up, pointed at Clownmuffle, and shot her in the heart. Clownmuffle's body spasmed, fell still. It'd take time given how diddled she'd gotten, but it ought to make a difference.

Again, her enchantment at work. Hegewisch's power hurt wraiths (a little), but against anything else—humans, animals, Magical Girls—it healed. The bullet Hegewisch sent into Clownmuffle was an adrenaline shot of pure regeneration. Better work soon because at this rate she'd run out of ammo fast.

The wraiths coming down were getting bigger. She shot one and needed a second shot to kill it. Did they send the baby goons first to test her firepower? Were wraiths intelligent? Different Magical Girls had different theories, some swore wraiths acted in ways that belied strategic thought, others claimed they shambled mindlessly, Hegewisch never cared one way or the other. But she couldn't stay here until she ran out of ammo and got swarmed. She scrambled to Clownmuffle and tried to kick her back into consciousness, then fired two more bullets into her to do it faster. Clownmuffle gasped eyes wide and barfed more blood but it became clear her wounds were healing so Hegewisch tried to hoist her upright but only managed to tilt her upper body off the ground before she noticed deeper in the museum bubbling forms between the cardboard cutouts of pioneers and Native Americans that composed the vague interior.

Shit, a second entrance after all? On the other side of the arch? Fuck fuck fuck. Between those coming down the entrance and those already inside she got sectioned into a dwindling receptionist corner. Was there an elevator? There had to be an elevator up the arch, right? People went to the top of the arch? She saw a door. A little inside the museum, nestled behind a replica Oregon Trail wagon with a mannequin man and his mannequin wife. Elevator!

Shuffling backward with her head whipping between the museum and the entrance she dragged a mumbly Clownmuffle toward the door and left a red smear in her wake. She adjusted her grip and fired a bullet behind her that missed as out of the deepest depths of the museum something big and fast started sprinting and toppling over the cardboard cowboys and map placards with an air raid siren blaring out its mouth and the slop of its froth smack-smacking the tile. Screech skitter went its paws or claws as it barreled around a bunch of crates and rolled into the opposite wall to upend a case of old farm equipment. Hegewisch fired at the thing and its whipping knife-edged tail once, twice, and then click the gun did nothing.

"Rrrrrrrhhhhh..." said Clownmuffle.

Hegewisch's back slammed against the door and she fumbled for the knob as whatever it was lifted itself from the crashed display and glass shards cascaded on all sides of it.

The door opened and Hegewisch and Clownmuffle tumbled into it. It wasn't the elevator. It was never going to *be* the elevator. It was a maintenance closet.

The creature charged.

Hegewisch dumped the magazine and fumbled for the second. It wouldn't go in, it clicked against the butt, the monstrous jaw of the whatever-it-was forced through the doorway and clamped on Hegewisch's arm. She lost that arm. It went away. Goodbye, arm.

The wraith reared back and shook the limb. She dropped the handgun, she had dropped the clip the moment the face swelled her vision. She flopped against a bunch of mops and let her blood run down her side. The wraith got tired of her arm and came snarling back at them.

Sh... shit. Hegewisch sank.

But the moment its head forced its way through, a blast of sound slapped Hegewisch in the face. The wraith lurched back with a dial tone noise and Clownmuffle in a swirl of gunsmoke kicked the door shut.

"Where's my shovel?"

"Uh I, dropped...?"

"Hm okay. Not a problem." She picked up a mop. "This'll work."

"It won't work it's a mop!"

"The magic comes from your heart, not the—"

"WHAT? WHAAAAT?"

"Enchant this for me, like you did the gun."

The dial tone yowl on the other side of the door quieted. Another assault was imminent. Hegewisch placed her hand on the mop, turned it bright pink from handle to... moppy part, and prayed Clownmuffle actually had a plan and not some power of love bullshit.

She slapped the mop against the door and started to mop it.

Hegewisch slid onto her ass as much as the tiny closet allowed and sobbed.

Shloop shlop went the mop.

And it kept doing that. No wraith burst through the door to maul them. Hegewisch glanced up and wiped her eyes except her missing arm didn't move when she told it so she only wiped one. Every time Clownmuffle swiped the mop across the door it expunged a gloopy gush of hot pink liquid that shimmered even in the total darkness. Almost the entire door was covered with the stuff and Clownmuffle started to apply it to the other walls.

"This'll keep them from coming in."

An entire door covered in Hegewisch's magic. One might call it a magical barrier. The closet soon reeked of magnified lemon-lime soap.

"Or at least it'll mask our scent." Clownmuffle propped herself on the mop, clapped her hands, and surveyed her work. Then she expelled a breath and slid to a seated position beside Hegewisch.

"So Laila, why's your costume so hideous?"

Laila. Yes, that was her real name.

"More constructively, why does your costume mismatch your personality? And why's it identical to that Magical Girl near Centurion DuPage?"

In a dazed fog, Hegewisch stupidly said, "Lieutenant Aurora?" She only realized after the fact that Clownmuffle would henceforth append the "lieutenant" to every utterance of the name.

"Yes. You two did not appear to be twins, but even in the rare instance of twins who both become Magical Girls—identical costumes are even rarer. Is she your close friend and one of you based your costume on the—"

"No no you're all wrong, it's Chicago. Chicago. We uh, uh." She placed her hand over her eyes and tried to think how to phrase this, tried not to think how absurd the conversation was. "Everyone in Chicago—except the big bosses—they all wear the same, same uh costume. There's this lady, we call her the Handmaiden, she can change the way people look, faces, clothes—"

"You choose to let her do this?"

"No way, I hate this fucking shit, you think I like this shit? They make everyone do it."

Clownmuffle jolted upright. In the pink glaze of Hegewisch's soapy barrier the determination grafted her face. "We must slay her."

"W... what."

"The Handmaiden. Her actions are an affront to what it means to be a Magical Girl. Where is she."

"She's not here. She's just a lackey anyway. It's the Empress who..."

"The Empress." Clownmuffle nodded. Some of the severity drained from her face. She nodded, relaxed, and turned to Hegewisch. "Let's take a look at your arm."

So they took a look at Hegewisch's arm.

Vomit Full of Bookes and Papers

To the miasma expunged from Centurion DuPage's crystal ball and the myriad horrors emerging within it Sage Rhys flung her arm and said, "You can't do that! You can't *do* that!"

"She did it." San Bernardino tapped the enchanted shovel against her upturned sole. "Wraiths are a Magical Girl's natural foe, no? I fail to see the problem." Then she shoved the spade into the dirt and vaulted into the field of monstrosities before Sage could scream for her to not do that, nonetheless she screamed it anyway:

"Get back, get back dammit! We—*obviously*—need to retreat. Retreat, everyone retreat!"

Nobody listened. Seven girls from St. Louis, one from San Bernardino, and two from Denver (herself included)—a claw with no body burst out the ground and gored somebody, several others ran screaming in stupid directions. The lead girl in St. Louis, whom one might hope to showcase a shred of authority and rally her lesser associates, howled a warlock cry and hurled herself into the fray much as San Bernardino had. Sage pulled her hair but had to stop and catch her glasses when they slid off her nose, she festered as the wraiths clustered: "This is unrealistic! Shouldn't even be thermodynamically feasible...!"

"Ohhhhh, it's dangerous, isn't it?" The other girl Sage brought from Denver, named Aurora, tugged her sleeve. "Did you want us to flee?"

Aurora—barely twelve—and the obnoxious golden curls that teemed down her body drove Sage to frenzy despite her knowing perfectly well the irrationality of that frenzy. "That's *what I already said!*"

"Is it? Ohhhhh..." Aurora wound a long string of hair around her finger and gnawed it like spaghetti. "I don't think people can hear you... Miasma, you know."

Ffffuck! Miasmas distorted sound. Sage tossed up her arms. Forgive her for refusing to believe in a miasma that defied all logic. Five years running MagNet—hundreds, thousands of Magical Girls she'd met—not one, not one with such a plaintively ridiculous power.

Hey everyone, said Aurora telepathically, *Denver wants us to run... so let's do that okay?*

Two nearby St. Louis girls received the communique. The other five were no longer in sight—Sage had stupidly ordered everyone to spread out *in case of an area-of-effect attack*. She jabbed her arm overhead to indicate the riverbank. The St. Louis girls, whose names she forgot—or she remembered the names, she did not remember the faces—blinked and only shuffled closer to Sage. Since nobody had the brain to do a thing unless she did it first, she led by example and dashed across the knoll toward their parked rental minivans.

DuPage's miasma spread to the river and cascaded into it with billowy smoke puffs, what kind of reach did her power have? However, because the miasma began near DuPage, wraiths had less time to spawn farther from her, and only started to emerge as liquid heads from the

mist near the cars. Once Aurora and the St. Louis girls got moving, Sage dipped behind them and faced the swarming horde at their back.

Alright. Hah. Hadn't fought anything of this caliber in a minute. Still, no need to go all out yet.

Sage clapped one hand atop the other and held them out crisscross. The star-shaped emerald set in the palm of her long white glove broadcast a dazzling array of light. Out her gem emerged her powerful Star Rod—twelve inches of candy cane hilt bedecked with a glorious five-pointed star, razor sharp. As soon as the last of it left her gem she caught it in her other hand and held it aloft.

"This cosmic effervescence shall illuminate the heavens and guide mankind on their inexorable journey to the stars! Phase 1, ACTIVATE!"

Rainbow glimmers manifested across her body and formed into armor: bracers for her wrists, plates above her shins, a thick belt around her midriff. Her glasses morphed into a solid sheet of visor and an array of bogus star fleet medals jingled down her chest. She posed (*it was necessary!*) as a glint of light flashed at her back and caused everything to twinkle.

With that crap out of the way she brought down her Star Rod and the skies opened to cascade five fiery comets upon her foes. Her comets did not move particularly fast, they fell slower than the speed of gravity to—*she assumed*—simulate the suspended descents of atmospheric objects to naked-eye observers—and they also made an obnoxious "weo weo weo weo weo" noise. None of that mattered too much because they covered a massive swath of terrain. Fireworks burst everywhere, sparks flung up in torrential sheets and shifted color mid-flight, wraiths like the Buddhist monks they imitated were immolated, their forms and faces elongated until their outlines broke apart and nothing remained.

The two St. Louis girls clutched the handle of a minivan's sliding door and shouted for her to open it. Tucking the Star Road under her armpit she fished her costume for the keys and clicked the button. The minivan chirruped and the St. Louis girls tried to force the door open even though it was an automatic door and eased open along its track no matter the force applied. By the time it was a quarter open they squeezed in one after another and fought with it in a similar matter to close.

Sage had one foot through the open driver's door when she remembered someone. "Aurora, where the hell are you!"

At the bank of the Mississippi River, Aurora regarded the water and the distant bridge that blinked with lights. She turned to Sage and shrugged. "Ohhhhh... I thought I saw something in the water."

"Nobody cares, get in!"

Aurora moseyed on over cowpoke style. One of the St. Louis girls said: "What about everyone else?"

They had descended a slight incline, so it was impossible to see where they came from or if anyone were even alive up there. Sage cut her teeth together and tilted her head. "Don't worry. Just a strategic retreat. We'll come back with the situation reassessed..."

Six girls lost.

Finally Aurora got in the passenger side and buckled her seatbelt and the backseat girls said GO GO GO. A wall of wraiths came at them as the minivan lurched forward, lurched backward, lazed around an arduous semicircle to aim the right direction. The minivan handled unlike her car back home and she fiddled with knobs and levers and made it several feet before a skrrrrrrrrccch informed her she forgot to disengage the parking brake and the St. Louis girls leaned their faces into her face and howled for her to hurry up.

The back window broke and the wailing undying racket blistered Sage's eardrums until she whipped her wand over her shoulder and shot a sparkly star to blast the ghouls away.

"You three are Magical Girls too," she said. "Keep them off while I—"

Midsentence she turned her head around to see where she was going and where she was going was directly into a gargantuan tentacle that crashed onto and obliterated the hood. The minivan jolted and Sage's face slammed against the steering wheel and her blood flashed everywhere. One of the St. Louis girls flipped between the seats and out the shattered windshield and onto what remained of the hood as the tentacle reeled them toward the Mississippi River. The St. Louis girl thrashed against shattered glass as her lower body got sucked beneath the coiling tentacle into the mess of metal that was the engine. Sage seized her flailing hand and pulled until a wretched face disappeared amid the wreckage and the arm gave a limp shudder. The vehicle twisted and tipped onto its side into the ruddy banks. Water whipped around them and gave Sage a lungful. She floundered in the constricted space but her body had somehow fused to the steering wheel.

In these moments one must maintain clarity.

The front of the vehicle was nothing anymore. That left two exits, the back and the passenger side, the passenger side now being the ceiling. Sage gripped Aurora's seat that at some point became devoid of Aurora and tried to hoist herself. But—her FUCKING—foot! The car slid deeper, the water rose to her hips and then her chest. She reached up and could even cut her palm on the shards that remained of the passenger window, if only her foot—

A shadow fell on her. Water droplets trickled onto her face. A second tentacle loomed above.

The tentacle came down, she had less than a second to act—her wand. Stuck in the dashboard by the point of its star. She ripped it out and brought it down to cut off her foot but her elbow hit one of the million random things that clog a car and bounced in a different direction. At the same time the first tentacle lurched the car into open water and the second tentacle crashed down on the back half of the car.

Because of the mismatched action between the two tentacles she did not become pulp instantaneously, but her Star Rod ricocheted into the soft flesh of her throat.

And cleaved off her head.

All senses except a vague touch blacked out. Sight, sound, et cetera. She perceived only the thump of her head falling backward and tearing whatever loose cord of skin kept it connected to her body, then the slosh of water as it submerged her. The twisting, bending, screeching, ripping metal went silent. The undulating underwater whale roar of whatever monster gripped the car went silent. The miasma's antijoy malaise remained. It became the only thing she felt as she and the car sank into the Mississippi River, with no further priorities for escape or survival in her husk of a lich body she had time...

To think...

Au ror a.

Not... not the Aurora she had now. That young ditz, she had only existed for less than a week. Sage barely knew her, had in fact only recruited her—or brought her to St. Louis, while she left her other girls safe back home—because her particular power could overcome invulnerability. Strictly business Aurora.

But there was another Aurora—older, more composed, stable and certain, quiet and dark, who spoke rarely but made utmost use of the words she spoke, an Aurora who had existed until a week prior, an Aurora whose name Sage liked to whisper, that sensuous name that purred in a throat under the covers of a wave-motion quilt in a darkness similar to the one that swallowed her now except their darkness had a sound and the sound was her whisper—

Au ror a.

Dead, dead, dead, dead, dead.

She only needed a way... A way to escape the bathroom in which she locked herself... two full days after Collins called with the words "Aurora is dead"... so she could watch her Soul Gem darken on the closed lid of the toilet smidge by smidge... but not as fast as she liked... until Collins knocked with the words "Minneapolis is dead maybe"... and she stood up and opened the door.

Au ror—

Ohhhhh, there you are. Got so wound up you "lost your head," hhheh-heh?

Wrong one. From now on, it would always be the wrong Aurora.

Sage said nothing as a pair of chubby arms wound under her shoulders and heaved her body upward. Even without a head she could probably communicate telepathically, since despite the prefix that function was rooted in the soul and not the brain, but she had nothing to say.

Her body lifted until it surfaced and the dingy swampwater oozed off her. Aurora busied around her body and hummed telepathically.

Minutes passed. They didn't seem to be attacked by new wraiths or the tentacle abomination, but Sage had no head.

So who knew. The holy war continued.

Like a lightbulb screwed into a socket when the switch is on, sight returned the instant Aurora plopped her head back on her body. They floated in the center of the river on a disc of ice that bobbed and rocked. Sage, controlling her limbs again, touched her fingers to her neck and discovered a thick choker of ice that affixed her severed head to her stump. She could not turn her head without shifting her entire upper body.

"Sorry," Aurora said. "I don't have healing magic... But I can piece Humpy Dumpty back together in a pinch, hehhh?"

Sage blinked and rubbed her eyes. She noticed her Star Rod embedded in the ice and pulled it out. "The St. Louis girls...?"

"Ohhhhh, I couldn't..." Her voice trailed and her smile dwindled. She coiled a thick lock of hair around her wrist and bit into it.

They floated midway between one bank and the other. Sage thought at least the river would stop DuPage's miasma, but it only slowed it. Five minutes and they'd need to move. Ridiculous.

"Is it the first time you've seen someone die?" Sage asked. "I know it can be hard."

"Nnnnno. Not the first... Don't worry about it, boss. I'm okay." But she turned and didn't show her face.

They remained in silence, Sage sitting, Aurora standing, some seconds. Then Sage fished her phone out her pocket. When she pressed the button it did nothing.

"Ah, ahhh, I can fix that." Aurora snatched Sage's phone and licked its back with a drawn-out slurping noise. Water burst from the device's every crevice and smacked against the ice. Then Aurora slapped her palm against it and a flash of porcelain sheeting enveloped it. "I enchanted it, so now it'll be waterproof... I think."

Sage inspected the phone. The magic coating did not inhibit her from fiddling with the screen. When she tapped it again it functioned as normal.

"Who you calling?"

"Collins."

"Ohhhhh."

After the old Aurora died, Collins became the most senior member of the Denver crew and Sage's de facto lieutenant. Unfortunately. Despite the high amount of skill Collins exhibited, she lacked punctuality and punctiliousness, attributes Sage required. Especially since she needed Collins to shoulder some of the burden of running MagNet. Sage left her in Denver with everyone else to ensure the city staved off despair in her absence.

And. She hated to admit it, but. But she also left her behind because she didn't want her friends to have happen to them what happened to the St. Louis girls.

"Collins."

"Howzit Sage my mage, kicking Chicago's collective uh, ass yet?" The voice came through fuzzy but comprehensible. The voice itself less so, somehow simultaneously fluid jive and raspy smoker. What was she doing currently? In the house watching the football game? Was it football time? Collins wouldn't sit either way. She'd pace behind the couch, occasionally clap her hands onto the back cushion, rub them together with the phone pressed between shoulder and jawbone.

"Things went wrong. Aurora and I are fine, but we've lost a lot of girls—"

"Oh holy wow you uh, you uh need me to like come down there or what huh? Take a few hours, but anything you need boss I'm uh, right here for you yeah—"

"Please listen. Centurion DuPage's power is to create a wraith miasma. It's already consumed part of the city and it's growing. Potentially the entire human population of St. Louis is in danger."

Aurora spat a coil of hair from her teeth. "Ohhhhh, you're worried about the townspeople... I get it now."

Sage held a finger to shut her up. When lots of people talked at once it disoriented her. Collins said: "That's really her power? Wow."

"I know, it makes no sense, thermodynamically shouldn't be possible—"

"—Thought Magical Girls spread uh, hope and love? Isn't that it? Where's little uh, little rat Kyubey guy..."

"You're getting lost here Collins I need you to focus." The miasma was spreading closer. Aurora pushed their ice floe away to buy more time. "Even if you came with every girl in Denver I don't know if it could handle this threat. It's not even clear if killing DuPage would end it, the wraiths seem to operate on their own just like any other wraith. What we need here is—"

"—An army, an army, yeahyeahyeah I gotcha, an army."

"Look Collins. Very simple here, very simple instructions I am about to give you. I want you to remember them. If you don't think you can, get a paper and pen and write them down."

"Oh no I got it I got it you can count on me."

"Collins. I know you. I know how your brain works. Get a paper and pen."

"Yeahyeahyeah I got a paper, I got a, uh, I got a pen."

"You don't have a fucking paper Collins, you're standing there lying to me, *get a fucking paper!*"

"Fifififine. Getting your paper, getting it right now, hear that?" A sound of a cabinet wrenched open. "Paper, pen, got it, what is it?"

Sage exhaled a full deflation of her lungs. "Go on MagNet. Post a message that explains that Chicago has attacked St. Louis by unleashing a massive wraith miasma. Explain that I, Denver, am calling on any Magical Girl who doesn't want to see their own city suffer the same fate to come here and fight this outbreak. Tell them that they will also be rewarded with as many grief cubes as they can carry. Do you got that, Collins? Be sure to tell them I, me, Denver, said this."

"Got it boss."

"Read it back to me."

"MagNet... wraith miasma, uh, St. Louis—calling on any Magical Girl... Grief cubes. I got it I got it."

"Do this right now. Don't waste any time, don't wait for a commercial break in your football game—"

"Oh no no, it's no football right now."

"Now."

"I gotcha I gotcha boss. Don't worry I never let ya down."

The fucking bitch to say those words to her after—after...! No, no, Collins didn't mean it, it was Collins being her careless self and saying something because it was the thing that flowed off her tongue, Sage couldn't get mad at her—but Sage was fucking mad. Collins who had been paired with Aurora when Aurora died, Collins who was the only one who could have helped her—*DON'T WORRY I NEVER LET YA DOWN...!*

"Thank you, Collins."

"Doing it right now. Riiiiight now. Only be a, be a jiffy. Talk to you in a few."

The call ended. Sage leaned back on the icy disc and tried to hold the scream in her lungs. Tried and succeeded. Sage had always found it easy to control herself if she only thought what she wanted to do. The problem was always wanting it.

"Mm-mmmh-mmph." Aurora had a particularly huge clump of hair in her mouth and it took Sage a few moments to realize she had put it there as a gag in response to Sage's previous signal to shut up. So Sage made another signal for her to un-shut which wasn't necessary because Aurora's gesticulations directed her eyes to her phone, which indicated one missed call minutes prior—during her chat with Collins.

From San Bernardino. Pfft. Why not? Did Sage not seize the opportunity to lug along her crippled corpse because of her wealth of combat experience? Even incapable of transformation the girl had a weaselesque ability to evade death, one had to respect someone who survived six years a Magical Girl. Even someone as unrespectable as San Bernardino. Everyone on MagNet knew: she killed people for money. And she held the entire Selfie board hostage, one couldn't post a pic without a five-paragraph essay that weighed the merits of their costume's composition and assigned it a score on a 1 to 10 rating scale. People clamored for a permanent ban all the time even if she never broke any rules.

That didn't mean Sage wanted to *speak* with the lunatic. "Good, you've made it out. Keep away from the miasma and reconvene with me. We're at the—"

"This Denver?" The voice did not belong to San Bernardino. Gruffer and more frantic, strained through a worried whisper incongruous with San Bernardino's detached comportment. "My name is—Laila. I'm trapped with Clownmuffle in a—"

"First, don't indulge her with that idiotic name. Second, *who* are you?"

"Laila."

This stupid girl knew what Sage was asking so Sage didn't bother to reply. She let her cold silence dictate the conversation and sure enough eventually "Laila" clarified:

"...I'm with Chicago okay? But, but, I'm not a bad guy, I'm just a lackey, I just work for them okay? DuPage left me to die, I just want out okay?"

San Bernardino meandered in the background: "No Magical Girl is a lackey. Your individuality strengthens you. Must you demean yourself?"

"Look we're stuck in a closet under the arch. Please, if you're there, please help us. This girl, this Clownmuffle, she's bonkers, she wants to just run out there, I had to beg for her phone to call you. Please, please, please..."

In distasteful agreement with San Bernardino, Sage found this Laila rather pathetic. Nonetheless, the pathetic were those the strong had to protect... She had failed that already. She did have questions though. Cell phone signals fizzled in miasmas—although that could be explained with an enchantment that counteracted the miasma's effects. More pressing was the obvious suspicion that the whole charade was a trap. But San Bernardino's voice in the background failed to contradict her. If they had San Bernardino under duress why not force her to make the call herself? It didn't matter either way. Sage at present had no way to reach them under the arch.

"Laila, I'm sorry. I can't—"

"We can though."

Said... Aurora. Aurora? A statement of any certainty from her felt infeasible, Sage had to turn and look to make sure some entirely different Magical Girl hadn't snuck up on them. But only Aurora remained on the floating disc, which had drifted to the Illinois side of the river.

"It's easy. With my power, it'll be easy to reach them."

Sage pressed her phone facedown against her shoulder. "I know you're strong. I'm strong too. But you saw it. We can't fight our way through numbers like that. My comets fall too slow, it'll never work."

"Not too many of them could fly, I don't think." Her finger wound her hair, unwound it. Wound, unwound.

"You can't fly either."

Aurora stuck out a tiny pink tongue and wagged it with inhuman dexterity. She swept her foot through the water and kicked up a significant spray that crystalized into ice before it splashed back into the river. The ice extended, upward and forward, further and further, until it formed a bridge across half the river, then the entire river, then onward until it drove so deep into the miasma Sage no longer saw its end. Aurora said nothing but bestowed a dull curtsy.

"That doesn't—doesn't change anything." Sage ignored a tepid "Hello...?" that reverberated against her shoulder. "It's easily a trap. Centurion DuPage—lying in wait—"

"Ohhhhh, true... Then we could fight her and beat her... And save the city."

"*What are you guys mumbling about?*" tittered a muffled Laila. "*You can't beat DuPage! Her armor's invulnerable!*"

Tell Sage more shit she already knew, yeah? She had sources in Chicago, it was how she knew to be in St. Louis ahead of time. She knew about the Empress's Blessing. That's why she had Aurora. What mattered invulnerability if encased in solid ice? When Collins showed her the finalists for Aurora's position Sage knew who she needed in one glance.

"I dunno," said Aurora. "This miasma's spreading... the whole city's in danger. Let's save it, yeah!"

"Who's that," said an even more muffled San Bernardino (*clown*muffled, someone with a horrible sense of humor might say). "They're a friend."

"Ohhhhh, I like new friends."

This conversation had devolved past the point of Sage's control. Too many people talking at once, too many idiotic ideas to track. Her head simmered, the vague stuffiness that prophesied a migraine. *Obviously*. Obviously the best plan was to wait. Let Collins post the cry for help and wait for every opportunist in search of a grief cube treasure trove to stream into the city. No doubt in Sage's mind. That plan made the most rational sense.

The miasma reached the riverbank. It spread up the sand and swept past her ankles into the industrial amalgam beyond. A decision, fight or flight, needed swift deciding. In an hour, how much of the city would be consumed? How many humans dropped into despair, bent toward suicide or else withered by instant illness? Thousands in the tenements. And who

knew what spatial distortions DuPage's magic might introduce given time. One had to quash a miasma swift as possible.

(Martyrs make good flags.)

Au ror a...

Plunged into the Jamb of the Chapel Door

You know how Hegewisch knew Clownmuffle? The lingering sense of familiarity frayed her until finally, curled in the closet with a washrag tourniquet for her missing arm, one big duh flashed in her face: MagNet. The chick from MagNet who bitched about everyone's costumes. And who looked infuriatingly adorable in her own costume so nobody could bitch back (Hegewisch once tried anyway only to receive a warning). The MagNet connection explained, kinda, why she wound up with Denver.

Clownmuffle slopped another coat of pink soap onto the door. "Low on water. Let's leave soon."

"Yeeeeeah let's... not do that. Denver's on her way."

After ten seconds of silence: "The girl from Denver's no good. Not what I expected. Besides, Magical Girls should rely on themselves. Clearly something's wrong with your head, but that's alright."

"My head!"

"Yes. This 'Chicago,' whatever it is, I don't believe in it. I'll straighten you later, but now's not the time." She paused, then perhaps considered it was indeed the time. "Conformity. In a Magical Girl! That's the sin. The whole value—the whole purpose... It's to divide oneself from society. You and I are special, Laila. We create miracles humans cannot conceive. Why strip that from yourself?"

"Chicago pays me cubes. I don't die."

"Neither do I," said Clownmuffle.

"No offense, your Soul Gem's a mess."

That comment forced a spasm through Clownmuffle, a perceptible ripple along Hegewisch's skin. The whole, whaddya call it, the whole *aura* of their space shifted. Any trickle of vulnerability from Clownmuffle put Hegewisch an ounce more at ease.

"It's nothing, it'll be fixed soon."

"Mhmm."

"Once I help the girl from Denver defeat Centurion DuPage, she'll tell me someone who can repair it."

Ahh. Hegewisch held out a palm. "Lemme see it?"

She expected resistance, a reflexive withdrawal as far as the closet confines allowed, maybe a hiss. But Clownmuffle plopped the egg-shaped gem onto Hegewisch's palm as soon as

asked. *Definitely* a loon. How had nobody taken advantage of her yet?

The gem exuded a pale glow. Hegewisch turned it over, careful to touch only the metal base with her fingers, and even that caused Clownmuffle to writhe. The gem had long cracks across it, which explained why her fucking heart exploded after ten seconds of transformation. Worse yet, it had gotten dangerously dark, way darker than she expected given Clownmuffle's outward demeanor, because usually girls on the verge got turbo loony. Well, Clownmuffle was already a loon, so maybe the normal looniness covered the despair looniness.

Bah. Why had she asked to look at this. Now she had a decision: Did she return the Soul Gem as is and let Clownmuffle probably die in a few days, if not hours—or did she do the thing. The thing to help her.

Her own Soul Gem was close to perfect condition. She had not used much magic—a short spurt of healing, an occasional attack, and the enchantment of the security guard's handgun. It made sense to conserve magic... At the same time, a not dead Clownmuffle killed things a lot better than Hegewisch did. If you looked at it like a magical investment...

Fuck it. Awkward due to her lack of a second arm, Hegewisch tapped the ring that contained her own Soul Gem and turned it into an egg. Next, Hegewisch activated her magic. Thought crappy healing and lousy attacks were Hegewisch's whole bag of tricks? Nope, she also had the awesome, fantastic, never-ever-bad power of transferring despair from another Soul Gem to her own. Tiny beads of darkness oozed out the cracks of Clownmuffle's gem and sailed into hers. She only kept the magic activated a few seconds, enough to clear a little whiteness in what had otherwise been dark gray.

"That'll keep you out the danger zone a bit. Don't fucking transform anytime soon unless you wanna die."

Clownmuffle took her Soul Gem, inspected it, and turned it into its ring form with a painful twitch. Her teeth clicked together in her closed mouth, she looked everywhere except at Hegewisch. Yeah yeah, don't thank her. Nobody else did either.

"G, good. Now I can..." Clownmuffle shot upright. Several brooms toppled over. "Now I'll cut us a path to Centurion DuPage."

"Ah shit." Hegewisch stood too. Despite Clownmuffle being something like twenty years old, she was tiny and Hegewisch towered a full head higher than her. "Stop stop stop. We're not —"

"I am—"

Outside tore a cataclysm of some kind, not an explosion, maybe one rung down from explosion. Enough to spook Hegewisch into Clownmuffle and almost take them both to the ground if Clownmuffle didn't somehow sidestep and let her fall by herself. The door kicked open and Clownmuffle armed with only a mop charged into the abyss.

By the time Hegewisch got back up and wrangled herself around the door to shut it, it didn't matter—Denver and one of her goons had arrived. Smoldering star-shaped rocks littered the museum, no sign of wraiths save a few piles of grief cubes. Denver's goon, a tiny blonde chick, waved her arm and sealed the entrance with a wall of ice. Impressive considering the entrance's size, but the presence of a mere single goon less reassuring.

Clownmuffle wandered between the steaming stars, looking disappointed and whipping the mop around until it slipped out of her hands and sailed into a diorama of an Indian village. Her foot came down on the spade of the shovel she dropped before they retreated into the closet and its handle flipped into her palm.

"Glad to see you're both alive," said Denver, although she looked at neither of them and instead scanned the area.

"There's another entrance," said Hegewisch. "On the other side." If she acted helpful, maybe they'd forget her city of origin.

"Aurora, please restrain Miss Laila."

Hegewisch was so confused why Denver called out the name of DuPage's lieutenant that she didn't react when a block of ice formed around her hand, so thick she could not even twitch her finger against her gun's trigger.

Alright. *Fair*. Hegewisch understood the mistrust. She had no problem when people reasonably fucked her over. The idea was that, if people acted in rational self-interest, they would only hurt her if she gave them a reason, and since she never gave anyone a reason for anything she could have faith in her continued survival. Only when you got fucks like DuPage and the Empress who fucked her over because... they felt like it? Thought it was funny? Then your own actions had nothing to do with it.

"San Bernardino, you're covered in blood. Are you still able to fight?"

"I refuse to respond to a name that terrible."

"You really think *Clownmuffle* is better?" Denver's costume had transformed, it sprouted more whizbangs and doodads. None looked useful. In fact they looked stupid as Denver hopped onto a covered wagon and surveyed the museum with an imperious glint. "I'll take it as a yes, though. Good. Centurion DuPage surprised me; I'll be the first to admit it. But we know her game now and I doubt she has much more than she's already shown."

"Can't make a miasma inside a miasma," said Clownmuffle.

"Exactly. I thought the girls they sent with her would have powers to compensate her weakness, but we captured one already. We still outnumber them."

"We have the advantage," said Clownmuffle.

"You're nuts!" The weight of the ice block combined with her lack of a counterbalancing arm made Hegewisch lurch with each step. "If this is everyone left, DuPage wiped you out in one

attack. What we need to do is get out, fast as we can—"

"You. Laila. Your name is Laila right, I'm not misremembering? I don't want to be one of those people who get someone's name wrong all the time." Denver flicked her wrist and a wayward star obliterated a wraith at the opposite end of the museum. "Your perspective is valuable to me, Laila, but I don't care to hear it right now."

"Centurion DuPage said she would go atop the arch," said Clownmuffle.

"She's actually an idiot." Denver hopped from her perch. "Fewer wraiths can reach us up there. She's limiting herself whether she knows or not. The more I think about it, the more possible it becomes."

DuPage was an idiot but Denver was an idiot too. You had to be an idiot or suicidal to see what DuPage did and think ayup, time to fight her again. The last girl, Aurora 2.0, was her final hope. Hegewisch gave her most hapless gee-look-at-these-idiots-am-I-right expression, but Aurora had such a huge chunk of her own hair shoved in her mouth that all hope died.

"Okay I know you guys don't want my opinion, but at least let me tell you, DuPage doesn't just make miasmas. Her armor, she's—"

"—Invulnerable. I know," said Denver.

She knew. She knew? "Clownmuffle sure didn't know."

The visor over Denver's eyes concealed most of her expression, but her mouth sure twisted in an interesting way. "Really. Because I briefed her about that. Twice."

"Had to make sure," Clownmuffle said with a casual practice swing.

"Doesn't matter anyway if you know or not," said Hegewisch, "you can't beat someone who is literally invulnerable."

"I bet Centurion DuPage thinks the exact same," said Denver. "I haven't spoken with her for long, but I have the distinct impression—correct me if I'm wrong—that she's somewhat egotistical. But an invulnerable enemy is not an unbeatable one."

"Nobody cannot be beaten," said Clownmuffle. "If I fight her long enough, I will find a weakness."

Ultimately, Hegewisch's perspective mattered jack dick. Denver and Clownmuffle both wanted to go up the arch so up the arch they went. First they tried the elevators, which still worked, only for Denver to get nervous and say they shouldn't trust electronics in a miasma. Shortly thereafter they discovered a maintenance staircase. Narrow, low-roofed. They trudged up it single file. Clownmuffle led, Aurora in back behind Hegewisch.

Only a single dim light every few steps illuminated the path. Hegewisch was panting after a few minutes. No more than the occasional wraith blocked their path, no threat at all to experienced Magical Girls. More started to follow from behind, a jumbling mess of faces that

lurked only at the deepest reaches still visible. They never drew closer but they never fell away completely.

Hegewisch considered herself a hostage. That was the best status for her: a hostage. Captured and held unwillingly by the enemy forces. Centurion DuPage couldn't get mad at a hostage. Okay she easily could get mad, but she couldn't consider a hostage *treasonous*. Couldn't accuse her of abetting the enemy. A useless hostage with her hand frozen to prove it. Perfect. Perfect. Totally perfect position.

Every step upward made her tremble more until Denver became a wobbly blur ahead of her.

"It's better like this anyway," said Clownmuffle halfway up. "Ten is too many."

"Ten what?"

"Magical Girls. The more you have, the weaker they become. The magic is diluted."

"That's not how magic works," said Denver. "Each Magical Girl draws on her own soul's energy, the extent of which depends on her potential and the character of her wish—"

"Exactly. A Magical Girl's strength is her self. Her individuality and creativity. The more you have, the more difficult to stand out..."

"This is not high school, San Bernardino. It's not about who has the quirkiest personality. This is a game of tactics and preparation."

"Some preparation," said Hegewisch. "Lost seven girls in two minutes."

"Others might say, given our current position, I had the perfect amount of preparation."

Whatever that meant. Uppity Magical Girls dropping mysterious mumbo-jumbo was Hegewisch's typical domain, so she had the perfect response: Ignoring it entirely.

"Four is still too many." Clownmuffle was trapped in her own little conversation with herself. "Bad number. Orderly. Three's much better."

"I'm not part of your thing," said Hegewisch, "so you can say you have three, fine by me."

They fell back to silence. Save the crunch crunch crunch of Aurora chewing her hair. She had not spoken the whole time. Did she even perceive the danger? Could three different Magical Girls suffer from the same communal insanity? Of course, Hegewisch was from Chicago. The communal insanity ratcheted much higher than three.

Then they reached the top. The maintenance shaft ended with a door on which was written the words OBSERVATION AREA. They stopped and Hegewisch was the only one breathless. The hair crunched.

"We go in fast," Denver whispered. "San Bernardino and I make an opening and deal with her lieutenant. Then it's up to you, Aurora."

Aurora flashed a thumbs-up.

"I'll count. One—"

Clownmuffle kicked open the door and strode inside. Hissing under her breath, Denver slipped on the final step, caught herself, and charged after.

Nothing was inside, which the lack of explosions or swishing shovels confirmed well before Hegewisch worked up the nerve to peek. The observation area was inside the arch's apex, a curved floor and ceiling studded by windows mostly black.

"I thought you said she went up here," said Denver.

Clownmuffle only pointed with her shovel at a tiny square in the far corner of the observation area, where a series of unobtrusive rungs led up to a misaligned roof panel.

Frantic hand signals from Denver corralled everyone into a huddle, except Clownmuffle, who did whatever she liked. Denver's hot whisper puffed against Hegewisch's cheek and fluttered Aurora's hair everywhere. "Okay same plan—"

"Come on up." DuPage's voice from above. Clearer in the miasma than real life. Denver jolted so hard she nearly knocked Hegewisch to the ground but Clownmuffle was already climbing the ladder. Denver tried to grab her ankles but missed and Clownmuffle disappeared above.

"Damn it damn it damn it can you listen to the plan!" Denver clamped her wand between her teeth and ascended. Aurora followed and nobody cared one bit about Hegewisch.

Which was how she liked it. Except right now she had nowhere to go. And the crackle of static slithered closer from the stairway. She slammed her iceblock wrist against the ground four, five times to crack and then shatter it, then went for the ladder too.

Ascending a ladder with one hand proved difficult. She fell on her ass twice before she devised a climbing motion mostly leaping and made it the rest of way.

She emerged upon a sliver of silver awash in a sea of black mist. Any sense of stars or skyscrapers no longer existed. No visibility to the ground below. A bend of a metal sea dragon elsewhere submerged under a stormy ocean. She cleaved close to the nearest body, Denver, and whipped her head around expecting a wraith albatross scoop her in its talons. At the far end of the strip DuPage sat upon a wooden chair probably stolen from the museum underground, legs crossed and back tilted and a neck of uncorked liquor clasped in one hand. A surplus box with several more bottles twinkled at her tapping foot. Her veil rustled in the lack of wind.

Aurora—the other Aurora—the *Chicago* Aurora—attended at her back. DuPage paid no attention to Hegewisch or anyone, swigged her bottle and spat a burgundy arc into the mist, but Aurora's eyes settled on Hegewisch and remained there. The barest tilt of a smile curved the left side of her lip.

"I'm not—I didn't—they captured—"

Denver stepped forward and Hegewisch, who clutched her waist for support, flopped onto the metal. "Centurion DuPage."

"You've uncovered my weakness, Denver." DuPage rocked back and forth. "Speeches. Talk at me long enough I implode."

The next syllable caught in Denver's throat as though she had intended to start another speech despite her previous plan of rushing in quick (which Clownmuffle followed and nobody else, making Denver's hissy fit especially stupid) until DuPage slammed the legs of her chair onto the ground and swayed upright, the ripples of robe straightening around her negligible body, at which point *DuPage* opened her mouth like *she* would give a speech instead, or hopefully only another acerbic barb, but DuPage didn't speak either. Because by that time a weird noise pierced the distortion of the miasma. It seemed to come from above. A drawn-out vowel sound: "eeeeeeeeee". A shriek or cry. Hegewisch knew it, she knew all along a giant bird wraith would swoop in, soon more wraiths would follow from below, this had been such a bad idea—

But both DuPage and Aurora looked up like they didn't understand the source of the sound either and Hegewisch didn't know if that was less scary or more. The "eeeeee" whipped and whirled in the skies above twanging gradually into a single defined point as whatever uttered it drew closer and the force of the miasma's distortion upon it weakened. Everyone stared, everyone except Clownmuffle who strode toward DuPage as though she either didn't hear the sound or didn't give a shit.

At which point the sound became:

"eeeeeeeeeeIT'S ME BITCH!"

The miasma split and through the tear shot—a girl. A girl on a broomstick with a stupid witch hat. A girl en route to the one person not paying attention to her.

The witch plowed into Clownmuffle. Clownmuffle's shovel shot upward and span into oblivion. Clownmuffle and the witch became a tangled flail of limbs that skidded the thin breadth of the arch, skipped off, and shot downward.

As the rip in the mist closed where she came from, a new rip opened where they went. Clownmuffle and the witch plunged into the darkness and disappeared. Gone. Outta there. Atop the arch, where once had been six, there was now Hegewisch, Denver, DuPage, and the dual Auroras.

Everyone blinked, silent.

DuPage flung back her head and cackled. "I didn't—didn't even—!" She swirled on one toe into a lazy half-revolution and bent back so far her spine looked like the arch they fucking stood on. "Didn't even!" A foot hooked under the leg of her chair and she kicked it at Denver only for Denver to bat it away with her wand. "Didn't even plan that! I have no idea who that witch was. None!"

"Aurora, fuck her up," said Denver.

"Aurora, stay out of it," said DuPage.

Despite the identical names both Auroras did their expected actions. Denver's Aurora spat the hair out her mouth and snapped both fingers to form two walls of ice that coiled out from the arch and then back around to converge on DuPage. At the same time, DuPage slammed her bottle against her own face and doused herself in alcohol. Her robes bubbled and an arm holding a lighter extended.

Click.

Flames engulfed DuPage. Aurora's ice peeled back. DuPage laughed: "Ice. Paaaaathetic. I know a wench with ice powers ten times your strength—twenty." Her arm retreated into her robes and returned with a cigarette she lit against her forehead, although after the first exhalation the cigarette fell to cinders. "If something so generic, so common could stop me. Think I'd be here today?"

She rushed with the broken bottleneck and plunged it at Aurora. Aurora dove to the side, onto her wall of ice, and sprinted up it. Denver meanwhile had wasted the whole time chanting some pseudo-poetic gobbledygook that ended with "Phase 2, ACTIVATE!" and her costume transformed. Her visor extended into a full helmet and sharp jetplane wings sprouted out her back. Flames burst from the wings and she lifted upward. Hegewisch shielded her eyes, drew back, and stepped into the hole back to the observation area. Her hand and a leg caught the edges and kept her from dropping all the way. Good thing too, because when she glanced down a few friendly wraith faces rose to meet her.

Despite the jetpack, Denver either could not or chose not to fly more than a few feet above the arch, more like hovering than actual flight. She whipped her wand over her head and split the miasma with a stretch of cascading stars. DuPage let them hit her. The ones close to Chicago's Aurora blipped out of existence, others smashed through Denver's Aurora's ice or hit the top of the arch. The ground quaked and Hegewisch lost her already tenuous hold, the back of her head hit a ladder rung and bounced her forward so she landed on her face. Five gray claws shot toward her, she raised her hand and prayed she still held her handgun and pulled the trigger whether it was there or not. It was there.

Blam blam. Blam! Blam blam blam.

The wraiths crumpled away. She rolled over and kicked until her back pressed against a wall and prepared to shoot whatever else moved but nothing blinked except the grief cubes.

Grief cubes. A dull part of her realized those might be useful. Any excuse to keep out of the fight above. She stuck the butt of her handgun in her mouth and scooped the cubes into a satchel that came complementary with her costume. Something exploded topside and a reflexive flinch caused her to glance through the displaced panel. From her vantage she saw only blackness, upon which danced occasional orange flares.

Hard enough to grab cubes with two hands. Her fingers knocked them when they tried to grasp. That idiot Denver. Wasn't she supposed to be smart? Oh well. Let DuPage deal with

her or—

Someone watched her.

A face in the doorway back to the staircase. A little girl's face with round cheeks and black eyes. A bob of neat hair tied in a white ribbon. A small smile.

Hegewisch yanked the gun out her mouth and flipped it around only at the last moment to think that if it were a wraith it'd have static.

"Who're you? From St. Louis?"

From the doorway sprouted ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred insect legs. She fired twice and the second shot struck the face between the eyes only for the face to sprout wings and antennae and every window in the observation deck to shatter and more legs to skitter inside.

Hegewisch grabbed a rung and scrambled up as the legs or feelers or whatever the fuck they were converged on her. One leg kicked a rung and one kicked the floor and she shot up at a stupid angle and hit her head as two feelers impaled her through the side and snapped off inside her. She hooked her heel into a rung and wedged herself with her other leg to stop from falling back but she could feel the legs writhe inside her. Her hand dropped her gun, she caught it between her thighs and was about to manifest a new version of her heart staff because its dinky heart beam might actually be more useful against a horde of fragile enemies than a gun with finite ammo but before she did a shard of ice cleaved through the ceiling, came close to taking off her ear, and crashed down on enough feelers to give Hegewisch space enough to seize a rung and pull herself up.

It took an instant after the ice came down for the thick bramble of feelers to chickchickchick their way around it and come after her. By then she made it through the hole and they had to funnel through it. Her gun slipped from her thighs and clattered against the metal, she clattered against the metal too.

Everything had gone to fucking hell topside too. Curved sheets of ice formed intricate spiral patterns upon which Aurora sprinted and forged more sheets of ice. Structurally unsound pieces broke off and plunged downward.

The other Aurora stood in the same spot as before and nothing touched her.

DuPage, still aflame and now with two broken bottlenecks instead of one, tackled Denver to the ground and plunged the glass into her stomach. Both bottlenecks shattered because apparently Denver's astronaut armor actually armored her. DuPage, undeterred, opened her mouth and spat out a jet of liquor that turned to flame straight into Denver's face. The flame parted upon Denver's visor and whether it did damage Hegewisch couldn't tell because the feelers inside her body drilled deeper and caused her to double up in agony despite the pain-dampening powers of her Soul Gem. Fuck Jesus fuck fuck fuck—

And out the hole shot fifty more legs that skittered scraggly-raggly all over the place. She kicked at them and crawled away, her gun had fallen not far and she grabbed it, what she planned to do she didn't know but it was hard to fucking think okay?

She shoved the gun's barrel into the wound in her stomach and fired. Her body jolted as the bullet curatively tore her flesh and she distinctly felt one feeler die inside her.

Just in time for the other fifty to descend. Ah shit—

A sliver of ice shot from the sky and threshed the teeming bushel. Hegewisch's head rolled back and she spotted Hairora posed on a distant coil. She gave Hegewisch a thumbs up and went back to whatever she was doing.

Which wasn't helping Denver, apparently. But Denver had her own plan. After DuPage ran out of flaming alcohol breath, Denver flung her arms around the flowing golden robes and locked them around DuPage's back in a ridiculous hug that nonetheless, assuming DuPage's body under her robes was like a normal body (and who fucking knew), pinned DuPage's arms and restricted her capacity to move.

But DuPage's body was not like a normal body. She melted into golden goop, splashed out of Denver's arms, resolved into a puddle on the ground, ebbed with remarkable speed back a few feet, and then reformed into an ordinary DuPage.

It surprised Denver less than it surprised Hegewisch. The jetpacks on her wings flared and righted her as she whipped out her star-tipped rod for another go. But Aurora acted faster. When DuPage did whatever she did it extinguished the flames that had engulfed her. Instantly two cylinders of ice wrapped around her torso from above.

Before DuPage had a chance to act the ice swept over her head and down her front. It piled on thick and DuPage became an increasingly distorted geometry deep within. Not that for one instant Hegewisch expected this to be the end of her. Any moment she'd break out. It only took Hegewisch a few whaps to break the block off her fist and Hegewisch frankly sucked. Of course the physics might get wonky when you don't have the space to wind up an action. And the ice got thicker and thicker. It covered her from below so she could not even liquefy again.

Denver pulled up her visor and exhaled. Aurora twisted her hands and manipulated more ice, she took zero chances. At least they were smart enough to know they had to overkill the fuck out of DuPage.

The ice finally stopped building. It was like an entire glacier had formed atop the tiny stretch of Gateway Arch. The metal creaked and groaned beneath it. Something inside bent.

"Fuck. Fuck," said Denver. "I don't believe—"

"Don't say it," said Hegewisch. "Don't say you don't believe it, don't say it's over, don't say you've won."

And it wasn't over. Nobody had won.

The second Aurora, who had stood on the far end of the arch the entire time, and who was only a gold amalgam of shapes past the glassy ice, shook her head and sighed. A small yellow object floated beside her—the same circle Hegewisch noticed when Clownmuffle

dragged her into that horde of wraiths. Without any ceremonious handwagging, no incantations or even a whistle, the yellow circle zipped forward and touched the ice.

The ice disappeared. All of it. It didn't shatter, it didn't fall as a bunch of shards into the smoke. It ceased to exist. The glut that had coagulated around DuPage as well as the tendrils that spread through the air—gone.

DuPage staggered back, free. Denver's Aurora plummeted, freefall. Her goldilocks ringlets whipped around her as she twisted in midair and tried to form new ice to catch herself. It spread from the side of the arch but her downward momentum carried her past before it reached her. The miasma parted and she disappeared.

"Byyyye." DuPage waved. She swayed back to her case of alcohol, uncorked a new bottle, and swigged. "So now it's just you two."

Hegewisch staggered away from Denver and held up her hand. "No I told you, I told you—milady—"

A sharp pain wriggled in her gut and she tipped at a sheer diagonal until her forehead banged the metal. Her next sounds rose to no more than agonized wincing. The feeler still inside her...!

"Y'know. Way less fun than I expected." DuPage swallowed, wiped her lips. "After that initial rush. It's all about the surprise. I think I just like to surprise people. I think I don't know what I like. I like to sleep." She stretched her arms and yawned. "What would you do if I just sprawled out and went to sleep right now?"

Denver said nothing.

"Fitting response, that's exactly what you'd do. You're not even good enough to beat my lieutenant."

"She definitely could not defeat me at this point."

"Exactly. Exactly! Hedwig, why would you betray the Empire for someone like her?"

"I—I—eeeeaaaagh—"

"She did not betray your Empire," said Denver. "I captured her and held her hostage against her will. Now stand up and prepare to fight. The power of the stars surges through me—"

At which point a Magical Girl dropped out of the sky and landed in the center of the arch.

Followed by a second. A third. A fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh. An eighth—it became impossible to count. Magical Girls rained from the sky and each stuck the landing with a perfect little clop of her heeled boots or more eccentric footwear. They had no unifying pattern in their uniforms, all variety of themes and weapons. But they were undeniably Magical Girls.

Somewhere around thirty or forty landed on the arch, although none landed anywhere near Aurora or her revolving yellow ball. The arch, gouged in several places and bent in others, groaned treacherously. Denver almost dropped to a knee.

"Collins," she said. "Collins got the message out. You're here to help... I don't believe it. What city are you from? Memphis? Kansas City?"

DuPage drew back, a note of legitimate concern tinged in what little of her face remained visible under her veil. "How—?"

"It doesn't matter where you're from," said Denver. "It's just her, right there. Take her out and we save the city. You'll have all the grief cubes you can imagine."

The first Magical Girl who dropped, and who had landed in the centermost position, glanced from DuPage to Denver to Aurora to Hegewisch. Her impassive face betrayed no emotion. She retrieved a parchment from a pocket, unraveled it, and showed it first to the side of Denver and second to the side of DuPage.

"Hello fellow Magical Girls. Have you seen this Magical Girl."

The picture on the parchment showed a girl in a witch hat. A broomstick leaned against her shoulder.

Nobody responded for some time. The girl repeated her query in exactly the same inflection. Finally, Aurora extended a hand and pointed into the miasma where Clownmuffle and her attacker had gone flying.

"Thank you for your cooperation Magical Girl. Farewell."

All thirty Magical Girls leapt off the arch and vanished into the mist.

Silence reigned several seconds afterward as everyone shared a stunned blink of incomprehension and a communal thought of the possibility of communal hallucination.

The thought didn't last long, because the next moment the strained and pockmarked structure of the arch crumpled inward at its apex. A jagged split opened—Hegewisch fell.

The Pequod Meets the Bachelor

A storm came down on Denver, it cast the sky in white smoke, it howled along the streets, it rattled the houses, it knocked the doors. Thronged by a fence with each iron rod topped by a spike, a mansion more medieval than modern stood as an inviolable bulwark against the gale. Its domed entryway, supported by white columns that stretched to the third story and between which a tall window glowed with yellow light, remained an alcove of relative safety from the bluster and in it stood a lone figure, stooped, her long ponytail flickering behind her, a gloveless hand cupped around her mouth and another pressed to her ear.

She was talking.

"Yeahyeahyeah. Yeah. I know. Yeah. I know, I got it. Look I—yeah. I know. Yeah. I *know*. Hey. Hey. Hey. Listen to me. Hey. Yes. Look—no—I said look—yes. Let's just—let's just—ah yeah. Let's just consider this from my—my perspective. Yeah? I'm doing uh, doing uh, doing uh everything I can here. Look I'm not—yeahyeahyeahyeah. I'm doing everything uh I—I've done that. I've done *that*. Yeahyeahyeah. Yeahyeahyeah. I got it. Yeahyeahyeah. Yeahyeah—hold up a sec someone's coming."

From the mist walked a figure. The girl with the ponytail took her hand from her ear and her other hand from her mouth. She exhaled with a casual shrug as she leaned against one of the entryway's columns.

The figure who approach burst out the white and shivered. She wore a witch's hat with a little bend at the tip and held a broomstick on her shoulder.

"Howzit," said ponytail girl.

"Where is Clownmuffle?" said witch hat girl.

"Hm, well hey that's a question innit? Say it's not so polite to walk onto someone's property asking questions. What say we introduce ourselves. I'm Collins, and you?"

"Murrieta-Temecula."

They shook hands, the shake initiated by Collins.

"Mouthful. Mind if I uh, shorten...?"

"My friends call me Murrie."

"Grrrreat. Love it. Cute name. Now let me be frank with you Murrie I know exactly who you are—"

"I know you too. You're a moderator on MagNet."

"Rightchoo are there Murrie which I gotta say and don't take this personally, I uh gotta say I'm a little concerned you showed up here because we did you know kinda ban you from the site. No offense of course it was a matter of policy y'know rules and such not a personal slight against you of course."

Few days back, Murrieta-Temecula came onto the forums and kicked up a fuss about the girl in San Bernardino, known to everyone else as "Clownmuffle" or "That Bitch Who Gave My Costume a Three out of Ten." Murrie claimed Clownmuffle murdered a Magical Girl, which initially moderation took quite seriously, even talked of banning Miss Muffle. But as the discussion continued, details of Murrie's story became questionable. First it was revealed she was unconscious when Clownmuffle supposedly killed her friend Hemet. Then it came to light that Hemet's body was found inside the body of a wraith. Even though everyone usually hated Clownmuffle, the tide of public opinion shifted. What hadn't happened in five years suddenly happened: People *defended* her.

Murrie got angry. Angry people say mean things. In a few minutes she stacked enough verbal abuse violations to merit the ban.

The present, non-cyber Murrie rubbed her hands and checked over her shoulder. "Look I don't fucking care. I'm looking for Clownmuffle and I know she came here."

"Hm wow that's pretty weird you know that considering she's not uh, not actually here? No sirree. No clowns or muffles." Collins lifted a foot and inspected the sole.

At which Murrie seized Collins by the collar and slammed her into the column. "I hacked her MagNet account. She spoke with Denver, Denver sent her a ticket—"

With little more than a wrist flick, Collins broke Murrie's hold, staggered forward, and bent over laughing. She held her stomach and let her scarf flap in the wind as snowflakes brushed through her ponytail. "Hacked—hacked! Hacked her! You *hacked* her? You're a hacker? Computer whiz? Jumpstarted the hard drive? Triangulated the uh, the uh microchip?"

"Look I broke into her garage and found her password okay? Okay? I was watching her closely and then she vanished—Stop laughing. Stop laughing I'm serious! I know she came here, where is she!"

It took Collins several minutes to stop laughing. Then she started laughing again. Then she stopped for about a second before laughing again, at which point Murrie, frantically watching over her shoulder, levied a kick into Collin's gut that knocked Collins over but did not stop her laughing.

"I am in a hurry here!" Every word expelled a white puff of breath.

"Aaaaand why's that friend? Ha—ha ha—because Kyubey sent a, a whatsit, a dominatrix after you? That it? Ha ha ha ha!"

Murrie crouched beside Collins. She clapped her hands together like a prayer and shook the fingertips back and forth close to her lips. Her eyes were wide. "Please just tell me. Tell me where's Clownmuffle."

"Righty." Collins pushed herself off the ground in a single ninety-degree motion based entirely in the tips of her toes. "Y'know. Probably not the best idea to tell you that thing. Really I'm surprised you expected me to just say. Pretty audacious. Love it. I'm pretty stressed right now and this just made my day. You're the best Murrie, I know I laughed but you're my fave right now."

She pinched two fingers together. Her other hand's four fingers bent like they held something while her thumb flicked up and down. Then she held one hand to the other and pressed the two pinched fingers to her lips. Murrie watched, baffled, fidgeting and kneading her hands around her broomstick. Collins pulled her fingers away and exhaled. White smoke billowed out.

"So I'll let you in on a secret. Clownmuffle never came here."

"I don't believe you."

"Why not? How'd you uh—what I mean is, uh. Even if you knew to come to Denver. How'd you find this house? We don't post our address anywhere so..."

"I can sense the location of other Magical Girls—"

Collins clapped. "Thought so. So you flew into Denver, picked me up on radar..."

"I know Clownmuffle isn't here *right now*. I know that. But where did she go. Where did she go!"

"I'm telling you she never came here."

"THEN WHERE?"

"Chill, chill." Collins exhaled another puff. She flicked her fingers and then smooshed her heel against the ground. "St. Louis."

"St. Louis. The city."

"I know no others."

Murrie hung her head. She pulled back the front flap of her floppy hat and strained her hair through her fingers. Her bloodshot eyes stared and bits of frost flicked off her as she trembled. "That's far." She blinked and looked back at Collins. "You could be lying."

"Could be." Collins shrugged. "But how would you ever know?"

The wind whistled. Murrie drilled her fingertips into her temples and tilted back her head. The broomstick rattled in the crook of her neck.

"Got a coupla friends of my own in St. Louis right now," said Collins. "Maybe you can lend em a hand yeah? Or maybe the person following you can..."

At that, Murrie whipped her head around and stared into the snowdrifts as though she expected someone to emerge that instant behind her. But nobody emerged and she said: "Cubes. I need grief cubes. I just flew here, it took hours, I can't fly more without them. Please miss. I know I don't deserve anything but—I'll pay you—" She rifled through her cloak and withdrew a quivering wallet.

"No need no need. Come on I'm not gonna let a poor girl in the cold go without cubes. Sit tight a sec I'll be right back no payment necessary."

A flick of her wrist signaled a temporary farewell as Collins dipped through the front door of the mansion and let it click closed behind her.

Murrie remained in the entryway. She looked over her shoulder at the location of mountains that would have existed if not for the storm. She rubbed her neck and then her jaw, she ran her fingers through her hair and brushed snowflakes from her shoulders. She held her stomach and after two minutes she started to pace. Her shoes kicked the snow that sifted under the dome. She wrapped her arms around herself and unwrapped them. She took off her hat with the little bend and flipped it upside down, rightside up. She stuck her hand in it as deep as it would go and tried to straighten the little bend but it flopped back over every time.

She placed her hands over her face and almost slipped on the slush but managed to catch herself on one of the columns. She rolled her broomstick around an outstretched arm and tried to catch it but it slipped out her fingers and clattered to the floor. She stooped immediately to pick it up but her numb fingers failed to close around it. Instead they batted it into the gale and she had to clutch her hand to her hat and scoop it back. She slapped the broom part against the ground to knock the snow out and pulled her phone out of her pocket to check the time.

Every five seconds her eyes shifted toward the smoky white beyond.

"Shit!" she said. She stormed into the snow, positioned herself astride her broomstick, hunched on her knees, and prepared to take off.

At that moment the door slammed open and Collins came out waving a hand that glittered with black cubes over her head. "Yo!"

"What took you so long! Gimme those." Murrie waddled back to her with the broom still between her thighs and snatched the cubes from Collins the moment they entered snatching distance. The cubes vanished into the folds of her cloak.

"Ah don't mention it. It's what we do in Denver. We're friends to all Magical Girls yanno?"

But Murrie already reassumed liftoff position. She scanned one frantic eye into the white and kicked her feet to jerk airborne. Her toes no longer touched the ground and the wind cast her leftward before she stabilized and hovered.

She glanced over her shoulder at Collins. "Thank you."

Collins stuck out her tongue and waved. Murrie shot into the sky.

Steph Vo, the girl from Hemet, taught Murrieta-Temecula everything she knew about being a Magical Girl. Since San Bernardino or Clownmuffle or whatever stupid name she called herself was too busy murdering people to string any advice beyond "Hit the enemy until they die," and Murrie's hitting things potential sucked, it was a rough two weeks before she met Hemet.

It was Hemet who explained this crucial tidbit: "Grief cubes are a Magical Girl's energy. But you still have to take care of your body's energy needs with food and drink. If you don't, it'll cause your Soul Gem to darken more rapidly."

Well... she didn't phrase it exactly that way. In fact she was prone to silence. When she did speak, even if they were alone, she used telepathy. But it wasn't from disdain for Murrie, unlike Clownmuffle's silence. Hemet just disliked talking. Nonetheless, she made an effort and Murrie eagerly pieced her fragments into coherent policy.

The cubes Collins gave her helped a lot. But she had to cross two whole states to reach St. Louis, and she needed energy to fight Clownmuffle afterward. With the entity she sensed from time to time drawing ever nearer, Murrie lacked time to harvest more cubes. She burnt through her stockpile on the trek from San Bernardino to Denver. But if she lacked cubes she could at least stem the hemorrhage with some food.

She touched down in a smidge of prairie town her battered road map identified as Burlington, near the Colorado-Kansas border. She had escaped the storm, but darkness covered her as she dropped into an alley behind a fast food joint.

"Well look at that," said the old lady behind the register. "That's an unusual costume."

Murrie, aboard a broomstick for hours, had time to consider her cover story if she approached a muggle while transformed. "I'm in a school play, we're performing *Macbeth*. You know with the witches?"

"Ohh! Love that play. DOUBLE, DOUBLE, TOIL AND TROUBLE—"

"That's the line. But rehearsal's running late so they need me to snag some food, what's the biggest order of uh—chicken nuggets—what's the biggest order of chicken nuggets you got? Fries, drink too..."

A lot of food, but she figured these kind of places had chicken nuggets and fries already in the fryer waiting to get dumped into a box. Cheap, immediate caloric content to sustain her across tornado country. Things got too close in Denver while she waited for Collins, but since then she managed to put space between herself and her pursuer.

She had to calm down anyway. Kyubey had sent a so-called "specialist" to dispose of her, but for the past week Murrie managed to elude her. She had a special power: In a ten mile radius,

Murrie could sense the signature of any magical presence and determine its approximate position relative to her. For instance, as she tapped her foot and waited while the old woman teller shambled in to the kitchen, she sensed a lone Magical Girl a few miles south, probably a drifter who wandered from small town to small town for scraps. The signature of her pursuer would appear to the west in a minute; she could never get too far ahead of her. But Murrie expected to be long gone before she fell into any real danger. She just had to not panic like she did in Denver. Her pursuer had never gotten within five miles, so she got a frazzled when the distance closed, but five miles was still a reasonable buffer. Few if any girls could attack from five miles away, and at top speed Murrie outpaced her.

Yet this old woman took her sweet time putting nuggets into a container. As her pursuer appeared on the radar ten miles away, Murrie poured herself an extra large soda. She had to swallow in several gulps because her parched throat flinched reflexively. High in the air, wind buffeting your face, you got dehydrated fast. Her lips were chapped and her eyes stung.

Nine miles, eight miles. She leaned over the counter and searched for the old woman in the kitchen. Old folks had a hard time: aches, arthritis, senility. She didn't want to be one of those people who complained about the slowness of old people on the highway or in an airport. However, she needed to leave fast.

"Is it almost ready?" She tried to sound more genuinely curious than impatient, but she sounded impatient.

"A moment ma'am."

"You don't gotta call me ma'am."

Her pursuer closed to six miles. The location of the kitchen meant the restaurant had no good westward windows. That was an oversight on her part, she should have considered what her view would be from inside before she went in. She went to the closest window, slurped her straw, and pressed her face to the glass to try and see. Nothing but dark sky.

Five miles.

"Here's your order ma'am." The old woman trudged toward the counter with a big brown bag that displayed the restaurant's logo.

In some ways the old woman could not have had worse timing. If she took any longer, Murrie would have left with the drink and made due. But she returned the exact moment before Murrie would have panicked and fled. She still wanted to bolt but another part of her reasoned: Five miles is a good buffer still. She had time to grab the bag and scam.

It was four miles now but the point stood. She scrambled to the counter and reached over as the old woman approached with ponderous, maddening slowness. It felt like a scene in a movie when the camera slows down to show a bullet whiz past the hero's face. Her hand reached and the fingers closed as the barest tip of the bag entered her range. It was heavier than she expected and she almost dropped it, but she managed to reel it in and turn away.

The fast food restaurant was no longer empty. In fact, it had suddenly become crowded. Every seat, from the booths to the tables, held a person. Every single one of those people was a Magical Girl in full costume.

Her mental radar still indicated only two magical presences: the vagrant to the south and her pursuer three miles west. Her pursuer had stopped closing. Her signature remained fixed.

Murrie immediately decided the thirty or so Magical Girls in the room with her were an illusion, a projection meant to distract or disturb her, so she strode toward the exit and made it four steps before two girls rose out the crowd, grabbed an arm each, and pushed her against the counter.

"Oh, are these your fellow thespians?" said the old woman.

They were physical, capable of holding her, but that only meant they were better illusions than normal. (Not that Murrie met any illusions before...) They had a hodgepodge of costumes styled after all kinds of time periods and themes, but something that unified them was that not one had a Soul Gem. They all had obvious places where a Soul Gem should be but no actual gem. That was Hemet's advice: *The first time you meet a Magical Girl, no matter if you think they're friends or not, make sure you know where their Soul Gem is.* Well, these girls had none and did not appear on her magical radar.

"It's okay," said one of the girls who grabbed her. "We won't hurt you."

"It'll be better if you don't flee anymore," said another.

"Our Lady is forgiving and benevolent," said a third who emerged out the crowd with her hands clasped and eyes tilted skyward. "She believes in the redemption of even the irredeemable."

Some of the crowd murmured in assent, others rolled their eyes or flicked their wrists. Nonetheless, the priest-looking girl continued:

"Each of us was once like you, wayward and prodigal in our excesses, prone to violent thoughts and actions..."

"Somebody shut her up before she goes on forever," said someone in the crowd. They turned to Murrie and held out hands for supplication. "Sorry, sorry, I swear we're not a cult. Only some of us are."

"Nobody will want to join us if we talk like this."

"She doesn't have a choice whether to join us. We'll redeem her either way and then she'll see."

"Call the Lady then. We have her subdued."

Nobody called anyone, but at that moment the blip on Murrie's radar moved again. She didn't have time to puzzle exactly what the hell was happening, whether these girls were real or projections or what. The big fish, the specialist, was coming. Cold crept up her neck. The two

girls who held her held tight, but she had managed to maintain her drink and bag in her hands. Her broomstick was tucked under her arm.

More advice from Hemet: *If you enter a room, especially at night, make sure you know all the exits.*

A tidbit given in regard to wraith attacks, because they could appear anywhere. But it was something Murrie always *took to heart*, she knew the restaurant's exits even before the appearance of the thirty Magical Girls: the entire sheet of windows that covered the façade, the back door at the end of the kitchen, and a sunroof that arched upward.

Murrie squeezed her XL sized cup. The cap popped off and the soda gushed out all over her and her left arm's captor's face. Her captor did not relinquish her, but it gave her enough arc of movement to lift her arm and drop her broomstick to the floor.

The crowd terminated their argument instantaneously and all thirty faux Magical Girls dove for her in unison. Some manifested swords, some bows, some guns, some chains, some gauntlets. The old woman yelped and ran into the kitchen far faster than when she prepared Murrie's order.

Two miles and closing, she had to think fast and luckily she had a plan. She held her hands as well as she could in supplication to avoid being instantly gored. Her captors thronged closer around her and eyed her with suspicion, weapons bared. The one she doused with soda wiped her face and hissed about how her hair would get all sticky and one of the others told her to shut the fuck up.

In clustering closer, they had actually obscured their vision of her, because there were so many of them in such a small space. Realistically, only a few could attack at once. And none of them would be able to see the floor, where her broom had fallen.

"Sorry, my hand slipped," she said. "I'm a little nervous." She had no idea if her delivery were convincing, she never considered herself a strong liar (Hemet's Advice: *If you need to, do not hesitate to lie*). Most of the enemies did not relax. Someone climbed onto a table in the back to see over everyone else's bobbing head. Between their feet, unknown to them, her broomstick slid, turned, and angled itself.

According to Hemet, because a girl's magic is part of their soul, all Magical Girls have a telekinetic relationship with the objects they manifest. Many don't realize it, others never hone it and so maintain only a tenuous psychic grasp over their weapons. Hemet's power, with her iron maidens she closed by clapping her hands, obviously required telekinetic control, so she had placed (what Murrie considered) somewhat undue emphasis on the topic.

One mile. Her pursuer was likely near attack range if she had a projectile weapon. Murrie had to act now and her whole body shook. Hands still held up like she meant no harm, she tried to shake the girls gripping her arms from her with a shake meant to look casual. "It's okay," she said. "You caught me, I won't resist. You don't need to hold onto me."

She expected little but amazingly the girl she had sprayed with coke relinquished her to wipe her face with both hands. Maybe Murrie's statement had nothing to do with it. Either way, her

opportunity arose.

The broomstick shot off the ground and hooked her robes on its thick wooden end. It rocketed her upward, into the sunroof that shattered against her back. The closest Magical Girls lunged with their swords but by the time they reacted she already left their reach. Guns fired, but fewer than the total. Five needles shot into her leg from the knee to her ankle and they numbed her with some kind of instant venom, but given the circumstances that was a fortunate outcome. She spiraled into the dark night sky and the only threat she still faced was the Magical Girl who still held her arm and revolved under her as the fast food restaurant dwindled, bullets and projectiles shot all around them and Murrie slammed her bag of chicken nuggets into her attacker's head when—

Zero miles.

She twisted her neck and behind her a black shape swelled. Only a shape, a blackness upon a blackness with no definitive end or beginning, something like broad wings spread while in the center opened a pure white circle.

The broomstick jerked to the side. She swung the girl clinging to her at the abominable darkness. Two claws with endless fingers opened on either side of her and no advice of Hemet's flared into her mind, no strategic plan of action, only a horrified bestial notion to flee. The broomstick shot forward and the claws snapped closed and Murrie squeezed her eyes shut and did not die. The claws missed her foot by inches. They closed around the girl who had grabbed her and swallowed her into the dark murk. The girl's arms flailed until they too finally sank.

And Murrie, bag of junk food in hand, soared into the darkness as the black shape grew smaller behind her.

—

In St. Louis she finally found Clownmuffle. Together they veered into oblivion.

The sheer drop from the top of the Gateway Arch lasted a second. Murrie lost control of her broomstick and they whirled cyclonic into the darkness until a thicket of bare branches flew up in her face and a thousand tiny sticks stabbed her entire body. She pulled up hard and prevented smearing herself against the ground but momentum spiraled her through several more branches into the trunk of a tree. Crack, went several ribs as her body peeled off and flopped to the dirt.

She spat blood and pushed herself up as fast as her body allowed. A second's horror made her consider that Clownmuffle would already face her, unharmed, having pirouetted to a graceful landing upon one dainty heel, but it seemed even Clownmuffle could sustain a beating. She sagged, halfway a drunkard in position to vomit, and swayed upon an ankle that looked unhinged until she found a trunk to support herself. Blood drenched her tuxedo, a lot of it dried, although she like Murrie had twigs spearing her face. One eye was shut. She raised her fists like a boxer.

When Murrie broke into Clownmuffle's apartment and got into her account, she learned Clownmuffle had a problem. Something with her Soul Gem, something that stopped her from transforming. That gave Murrie an edge. From her robes she whipped a stark, smooth wand and sprouted a ribbon of coiling purple Clownmuffle's way. A twinge of ignobility about the affair streaked through Murrie's muddled conscience, the idea that since her cause was correct she ought to champion it without resorting to kicking a girl when she was down, but on the other hand Hemet was the one who cracked her gem to begin with so this fight was less an ambush and more a continuation of the confrontation in the orange grove. At least she had plenty of time, Kyubey's specialist had fallen at least five minutes behind—

Clownmuffle's swaying body swayed in the exact perfect way, with the absolute minimum of wasted motion, to dip between Murrie's magic coils and close the distance between them. She came at Murrie with a raised fist that stopped short an inch from her nose as her closed eye opened and she said:

"Oh. It's only you."

"*Only* me?!"

"I thought you were the Handmaiden."

"The *who?*!"

A shoe slammed into Murrie's throat and pinned her against the tree. Clownmuffle held her there with only her foot but did not press any further despite Murrie's windpipe being close to the pressure needed to collapse.

"I'm glad you're here," said Clownmuffle. "We'll need many Magical Girls to eradicate this threat."

Murrie tried to speak and found herself incapable. Her hands gripped at Clownmuffle's shoe. An unnamable pit of despair burst in her innards. Even with her Soul Gem—even with those injuries—*still?*

Still. Clownmuffle tilted back her head to survey the surroundings. The moment she did so, the dark reaches between the ashen trees lit up with a smorgasbord of fanfare and lights, calliope music warbled through the strained airwaves of the miasma, plaster horses painted with fiery eyes bobbed up and down along the lazy rotation of a merry-go-round, on the other side the painted face of a gigantic clown lit up with carnival bulbs, bumper cars lurched and bumped deeper in. Faded burgundy tent canvas streamed in long lines between the branches. Murrie had to squint to make sense of everything and even then it made no sense.

"The miasma's had time to alter the topography," said Clownmuffle. Throughout the carnival rides, the flickering heads of wraiths ebbed into existence. "Alright, Hemet. I clear the merry-go-round. You handle the bumper cars."

She pulled her foot from Murrie's throat, ripped a branch from overhead, and pranced amid the prancing ponies. Before Murrie even had to time to gasp air back into her lungs she had already killed two—three—wraiths. Meanwhile Murrie seethed, apoplectic, a word she

always loved because it sounded like apocalyptic, and right now both words quaked together in her mind. She snatched her wand, which she had dropped when Clownmuffle kicked her, and immediately loosed a bolt at Clownmuffle's back. And yet Clownmuffle dove forward at that moment to spear another wraith and Murrie's attack fizzled in sparks against the mirrored central column of the merry-go-round.

"Eeerrrh," her entire body bristling as she fired magical burst upon magical burst at Clownmuffle who, despite not even looking at Murrie, not even *acknowledging* her—completely engaged in combat with the wraiths—still escaped every, single, attack, every single one, nothing Murrie did had the slightest potency, it was as though she did not exist as a tangible entity, she was a gust of wind that sometimes whistled but did nothing more than muss one's hair and she wanted to sag to her knees and choke on her own horrid laughter because she had come all this way, flown through four or five states, begged for grief cubes, scraped out of an encounter with one of Kyubey's specialists, it didn't fucking matter, it never mattered.

In a distant world she and Hemet had imagined a guerilla movement, something underground, hopping state to state like Che Guevara on his motorcycle. With Murrie's broomstick and radar they could do it. Dispensing justice to cruel Magical Girls who did terrible things for their own gain... People would hear about them online, supporters would join. In the real world, the world in which humans lived and from which Magical Girls were excluded, the revolutions had already happened. The terrible forms of government had fallen and better—not perfect, but better—forms had risen, mechanisms emerged for regular people to protest and petition for change. Always changing, always slowly getting better, eradicating fleck by fleck injustice and inequity. Yet how had the world of Magical Girls progressed since the dawn of time? Had the lives of Magical Girls improved one iota? Nope. Same garbage since the beginning... MagNet claimed to help Magical Girls, but it was all bullshit. If nobody took risks, if nobody sacrificed...

So she had to strike down that fucking psychopath even if it destroyed her. She reared up, jumped between two oozing wraiths, and rolled onto the spinning floor of the merry-go-round. Where'd the bitch go? On the opposite end of the ride, kicking a plaster pony to bend and then break the pole that pinned it in place, which she then divested of its horse by smashing it against the ground. The pole caved wraith skulls far better than the branch, although Murrie wondered how it was possible to fight wielding what ought to be an abstraction or hallucination formed by the miasma, it made her wonder how she could be standing and spinning on a merry-go-round that didn't exist, and while the metaphysical implications halted her a moment they ultimately did not stop her tiptoe toward Clownmuffle. She figured she needed to draw close, while the wraiths preoccupied her, attack at a range where she could not possibly miss (although it wasn't like a single attack from her dinky wand would finish Clownmuffle off—it'd at least be a start, the slightest victory, something to restore a scrap of her sanity), and somehow it worked, she managed two, three steps closer. Four steps. Her hand shook and she had to grip it by the wrist not to go nuts and attack too early, the wraiths and Clownmuffle consumed their respective attentions and the only thing Murrie had to fear was that Clownmuffle would capriciously gallivant somewhere else at the last moment.

Soon, cleaved to the mirrored center, Murrie stood at Clownmuffle's back. She raised the wand and—

"I said the bumper cars, Hemet. *I* will handle the merry-go-round."

Murrie went nuts. "*You killed Hemet!*"

Her magic flashed out, Clownmuffle sidestepped, a wraith burst into cubes. "But," said Clownmuffle, "I saved you."

Although her pursuer paused briefly a short distance back, probably atop the arch, Murrie knew she had little time remaining. But she could barely see anymore, her eyes stuffed with tears. She chucked the worthless wand and went at Clownmuffle with her fists.

Which hit nothing as Clownmuffle ducked under and scooped her up by the waist. She kicked and flailed as her body was hefted onto Clownmuffle's shoulder and Clownmuffle continued fighting the wraiths as before, bouncing around as though Murrie weighed nothing and swinging her giant pole with one arm like it weighed nothing too.

"Wraiths are the true monsters," said Clownmuffle, as though it resolved everything.

Murrie emitted a noise that belied description. It was not enough to lose. She had to be transformed into a joke. The kind of gag in a half rate comedy movie.

After a few seconds, Clownmuffle cleared the immediate area of wraiths. By which point new figures appeared in the shadows. Brighter, prettier, more colorful figures still little more than a blur in Murrie's eyes. She guessed easily enough who they were. As before, they created no signal on her radar.

"Fellow Magical Girl!" said one. "Please step away from that Magical Girl you have on your shoulder. She is a dangerous criminal!"

"Certainly not dangerous," said Clownmuffle.

"Rttthhrrrrghh," said Murrie.

"We mean it," said a second. "That chick's slated by Kyubey for termination. Hand her over."

"She reformed," said Clownmuffle. "No need for all that."

"Fellow Magical Girl, we are not authorized to terminate you. However we will take physical action if you persist in defying us!"

Murrie gave up struggling against Clownmuffle's hold. She sagged and sobbed as Clownmuffle pointed her pole at several of the foremost girls one after another.

"Shameful. A miasma this large and so many of you. Yet you'd rather hunt this cute witch than fulfill your duty as Magical Girls. Trash. I must bend you into shape."

"You seriously wanna fight? There's thirty-two of us, dumbass, that ain't even counting the Lady who's strong as all us combined."

"Burn her."

Force heaved into the pit of Murrie's stomach as Clownmuffle bounced off the merry-go-round and swung her pole at the closest of the specialist's projections. The dismal sink of despair swelled in Murrie's Soul Gem, she was too depressed to even watch and entertained thoughts of collapsing into the Law of Cycles rather than endure this humiliation. What a worthless way to die, though. Wouldn't she rather be a martyr? A martyr to what and why grew increasingly abstracted, blurred with simpler thoughts of vengeance, but it wasn't until the first of the specialist's girls managed a hit on Clownmuffle—glancing, yes, but a hit—that she perked up her head and blinked her eyes clear and considered the ways to turn the situation to her advantage.

Inner Organs of Beasts and Fowls

From a technical standpoint, yes, Sage's Phase 2 costume included wings and jet thrusters, but to consider these effective means of flight would be total error; the engines were too weak. They had practical purposes, evasion of difficult terrain key among them, but in the current situation—hurtling headlong into an abyss—they proved frustratingly useless. First problem: she needed to right herself so the thrusters actually had a chance to slow her descent rather than propel her deeper into it—

"Yaaah!" DuPage like a bathysphere jellyfish shot out the darkness, tome raised overhead. Sage twisted her body and fired her Star Rod. It nailed DuPage but did nothing; more importantly, the recoil lurched Sage out of DuPage's trajectory. Mostly. She hit Sage's legs, they entangled, twisted, disentangled, and launched in diverse directions. Hag cackling trailed DuPage into the mist.

"Yaaah!" said the other idiot, Laila, who plummeted near parallel to Sage; once DuPage diverted Sage's trajectory they collided. Laila's arm latched around Sage's body, knees clamped against her hips—inextricable.

The miasma obscured the ground, she would not see it until the instant prior.

The howler monkey had benefits, namely ballast. Sage revolved upward slowly and once she started, strategic bursts of her thrusters quickened the process. Soon her feet pointed groundward and the thrusters started to slow her. They crackled like fireworks and spurted variegated sparks that fizzled in the mist.

Her null visibility denied her frame of reference, but she imagined she slowed. She hoped she slowed.

At what proved about fifty percent velocity they landed in a ferris wheel car. They hit it hard and it swayed violently, until Sage disengaged her thrusters. Metal creaked.

Laila unlatched and slipped into the seat beside her. Her first impression proved correct: It really was a ferris wheel car, ascending. The miasma obscured most of the view. If she squinted, she perceived the outline of the car ahead as it crested the top; it appeared occupied.

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God," Laila said ad infinitum. She sagged as far as the scant legroom allowed, then straightened and threw her arm around Sage. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." Her new mantra.

Sage deactivated Phase 2. The wings telescoped into the pack on her back, the helmet opened and became a visor. She exhaled. They reached the apex of the ferris wheel.

"—thought I was dead for sure, fall like that'd even kill us right? Doesn't matter where's your Soul Gem if you splat that HHAAARGHHH—"

Her body thrashed spasmodically. She gripped her stomach. In a small hole under her breastplate wriggled a thin, omnijointed creature, like a plant that lived on the ocean floor and filtered microscopic nutrients through its endless appendage. Weird—Under ordinary circumstances perhaps fascinating. Usually miasmas remain too contained for truly terrifying monstrosities to emerge, but on MagNet she heard tales. Cyclopean jackanapes, horsehead amalgamations, constructs beyond physical probability or even possibility. Girls who hunted on the outskirts of Los Angeles had the best encounters. The city chewed girls to pieces. Two, no three, years ago Sage attempted an exhaustive bestiary of wraith forms. She envisioned an online encyclopedia editable by anyone, a databank of knowledge and a guide, a root to grow past her own demise.

A lot of files in a folder somewhere.

She plucked the tapeworm out Laila's stomach and flung it over the side. Welcome to overtime, the part that should never exist. Collins would appreciate the football metaphor. Sage rubbed her temples and tried to. Tried to cohere.

"Anh, uwk," said Laila. "Jesus, fuck, shit." And so on. And so on, and so on. The pass had been interfered. Pass interference. No completion. The game continued.

They declined the ferris wheel.

"Why the hell's there a ferris wheel," Laila finally said after she stopped swearing.

"How long have you been a Magical Girl?"

"Seven or eight months. Seven months actually."

"Miasma corrupt the environment. They create things that don't exist, even things that shouldn't exist. It's normal." Check it out in the *Encyclopedia Magicis*, if only it existed. Maybe they'd find one in the miasma, eheh-heh.

"We gotta get out then, right? Right? We can't stay. Please tell me you're more sane than Clownmuffle. Please please please."

Sage said nothing a long time. As they drew groundward, surroundings became visible. A long carnival fairway, lined with tents and shoppes, games and rides, none staffed but all active.

Honestly—honestly. She could beat DuPage. DuPage was not so great. For all the hype of the Four Centurions, their best was nothing special. Invulnerability was her most pernicious aspect, but not insurmountable. Even minus Aurora—Sage's Phase 3 could overcome damage negation. Even her terminally sad head considered it a distinct possibility and the foolish, traitorous hope had kept her stupid Soul Gem aflame since the getgo. It became so easy to imagine outcomes. Overtime might be a stultified, elongated, past-its-prime game, the spectators might all check their watches in unison, half or three-quarters might stand and leave... but one team won. Victory still existed, in fact drew closer than ever before. The flame of ambition had not died utterly within her. Of course not. She'd have vanished in that bathroom otherwise, long before Collins came with the news about Minneapolis.

"No. No. I see that fucking glint in your eye, no. Please let's leave, please let's escape. Please."

Yeah.

She fumbled her brain out of her skull and twenty massive men in helmets dogpiled atop it. That frustrating, idiotic hope, the one thing that stopped her from just dying already.

"Yeah... You're right. Girls in search of grief cubes will come in droves soon enough. If Collins doesn't make it happen, Kyubey will. He's got a bit of an efficiency bent, doesn't he?"

She forced a smile. Poking fun at Kyubey always broke tension with unfamiliar girls. She used the technique on MagNet. Girls from all lifestyles, rich girls, poor girls, girls who weren't even interested in the whole Magical Girl aesthetic, girls who hadn't seen a Magical Girl anime and who had only the barest conception of a "Sailor Moon". Even those girls grinned when someone else acknowledged the inhumanity of their mutual employer, which normally unnerved them so.

"Ha, yeah," said Laila. Laila, Sage decided, didn't deserve to die.

"Alright, we're almost to the bottom. Prepare to fight. Do you have a weapon?"

Laila patted her body, scooped over and bent her back to see her hip. She pulled from under an armored panel a handgun. "I forget how many bullets I have."

"Enchanted?"

"Yeah. If I shoot you with it, it'll heal you."

Whether Laila deserved to die or not, Sage didn't know to trust that particular statement. If she saw the pistol aimed her way, unless circumstance compelled her to accept, she would evade.

"I'll take the lead. Stay close."

"Yeah."

The jingling of small metal components signaled the final arc of their descent as the landing area became visible. Sage raised her Star Rod, but while plenty of figures had gathered at the base of the ferris wheel, she detected no more than a handful of wraiths.

The figures were human. Men, women, children, elders, their faces reposed into that same blankness, mouths half-agape as they gently swayed in their respective spaces. The cart reached the bottom and the door opened. Sage and Laila stepped out, still braced for an attack, but the only figures that moved were a young man and woman who, holding hands, climbed into the now-vacant cart. The few wraiths present did not rear up to strike; instead, they lurked behind the human bodies and opened what served as their mouths to suck a transient quintessence from the senseless brains.

"Shit!" Sage rushed into the crowd. She would hurt people if she used her meteors, but she could still cut with the five-pointed star. The wraiths, cognizant of her attack, turned from their prey, but her agility proved more than enough to overwhelm. Soon the area was clear. Two new humans stepped into the next cart.

"This many people were in the park this late?" said Laila.

Sage seized Laila's wrist and dragged her into the main thoroughfare. Calliope music crinkled, played upon a gramophone in some unseen enclosure, while lights blazed on either side of the path in two directions unto the end of their field of vision. Both ways meandered more people, more glassy eyes, more faceless expressions, more mothers and fathers herding progeny, more nightcrawlers caught on streetcorners by the encroaching mist and hypnotized deeper along, more nine-to-fivers woken in the night and compelled to wander downstairs—white faces and black faces both, faces from both sides of the river, the gentrified downtown and the industrial Illinois-side fringe.

"No," she said. "It's spread far beyond the park."

More faces drew out of the mist. This was insane. She had never seen a miasma like this, they would appear in small, localized areas, usually based around a cadre of four or five wraiths, maybe one stronger wraith. A floor of a housing tenement, a wing of a hospital, an alley behind a brothel. This was... cataclysmic. This was the whole fucking city swallowed. How would the human world frame the aftermath? Unprecedented mass suicide? Neurochemical terrorist weapon? Or would Kyubey simply erase the memories of the whole world? Could he do that. Everyone knew he erased human memories when they noticed something inconvenient. But on that scale... Would it even be logistically feasible? Even taking only her own geography of familiarity into consideration—the United States and Canada—if one assumed a number of Kyubey bodies equivalent to the number of active Magical Girls (well, sometimes Kyubey bodies died, so he must have backups... assuming *twice* the number of Kyubey bodies as the number of active Magical Girls, her last estimate being somewhere around three thousand [failing to include vagrants, who drifted between tiny towns and were notoriously uncountable—so let's assume six thousand active Magical Girls and twelve thousand Kyubey bodies, these being very rough estimates, even with that in mind you're looking at something like... Let's say four hundred million ordinary humans, divide by the number of Kyubey bodies and it looks like... thirty thousand or so humans per Kyubey {but consider also that the geographic distribution of Kyubey bodies is uneven, and what of the innumerable small towns, did Kyubey have a body in every farming outpost in North Dakota...}])—the problem became too complex for her to figure, but she assumed it an impossible undertaking for Kyubey to erase the memories of every human on a scale this large in this mass media sensationalism era, but why she allowed herself to fall into such a pit thinking about it she did not know.

"I can see it. On your face," said Laila. "You're gonna stay and try to save them."

Whatever had been on Sage's face that certainly wasn't it, but once the suggestion arose she found any alternative impossible. "Yes. I'm sorry. I won't pressure you to follow me. In fact, I'll even escort you to the exit—it'll be good for me to see how far it's spread anyway."

Visible relief appeared on Laila's face. And, as though it was something she had been thinking about all along but only decided to bring up once she knew it wouldn't affect her: "What about the quiet chick?"

"Quiet chick?"

"Y'know. Haireater?"

Aurora. But quiet chick? Aurora wasn't a chatterbox like Collins, but she wasn't shy either. Had she given Laila that impression? Weird, but it didn't matter. "She's strong and has a cool head in a crisis. I'm sure she survived the fall. The wraiths are more docile now that they have food, so she must still be alive." Sage also still had the necklace of ice that kept her severed head on her shoulders. Her natural regeneration had healed her by now, so she no longer needed it and paused in conversation to cut it off with her Star Road, taking especially care to make the minimum number of cuts necessary. After she dropped the ice to the ground she continued. "I'll find her. But let's get you out first."

"Yeah... yeah. Yeah."

They traveled down the thoroughfare in the best approximation of "toward the exit" Sage could reckon based on vague trajectories, relative positioning of the arch (which remained visible despite impaired visibility), and guesswork. They kept on guard but Sage only had to deal with a smattering of wraiths here and there; the tide of people shielded them from direct assault. Roller coasters, entertainers in animal costumes with sickly mange fur, signs in expressive old timey typeface and a language Sage figured as German. Posters with odd imagery: they saw one of a small boy chased by a swarm of bees and a rabid dog in a pumpkin patch.

And all these people. Shit. Sage's own despair became a fleck in the face of what she saw, a seething sense of loathing filled her gut, aimed toward her melodrama, her inability to cope with a single death, her constant tug of wayward emotions. Spiteful sobriety settled upon her. As they walked, her anger spread, it bubbled over the brim of her too-small goblet and flowed to the next available target—Laila—whose cowardice suddenly peeved her beyond compare, such was the capriciousness of Sage's moods, she could witness her own petulance in real time almost as a disembodied observer who hovered over her body's shoulder and yet she was powerless to stop it, she opened her mouth to snap at Laila, demand to know how she dared flee rather than help a single person, but before she had the chance to speak Laila said

"You maybe wouldn't be such a bad boss."

She meant it, too. Granted her initial assessment of Denver had been starkly negative, the girl wanted to take on literally invincible DuPage—but shit, it almost worked. And now she would not only let Laila leave, but help her escape? Had humanity still a few saints left?

Forgive the melodrama, but only her omnipresent terror of the miasma kept her from a wellspring of tears. She dwelled upon the maddened mix of moments from the past, however long it'd been, thirty minutes or three hours, the times where certainty of impending demise appeared irrevocable. Then this. This generous, kind, loving woman, this Denver, every bit the idol her stupid forum presented her.

In a froth of DuPages, Clownmuffles, and of course Auroras, she glimmered—*fucking glimmered*—a beacon of sanity and compassion, God she fucking loved her. Fuck.

Denver's pause, stilted, like compliments came foreign to her, finally ended. "You think...?"

"Yeah. You have a fucking brain. You have a bit of a soul."

A laugh. "You're saying that because I'm helping you escape."

"You're nicer to me than my ostensible allies. You say you'll do something nuts but you actually have a plan. I dunno. Always figured based on your online persona you'd be a total bitch. Jesus don't listen to me babble right now I'm fucking giddy."

She figured she ought to shut up before the emotions bubbled up so strong inside she lost all sense of herself, she had to remember she was not safe yet, the miasma still surrounded her. Sure the wraiths had thinned, had a lot of braindead cattle to feast on, sure Denver seemed more than apt enough to take down what remnants they encountered—at that exact moment darting between the lines to kill a quick couple with her wand—but Hegewisch had to remain focused. Yes. Had to keep it together. How stupid and yet how classic would it be for her to die at that exact moment, so close to safety? In a movie she'd be the unlikable side character, the loser who would rather run than help anyone, she had no delusions of her dubious position on the moral compass, to some extent she had to believe in karma (after all, she had absolute certainty of God's existence), but it always made her mad—watching some horror movie, seeing some coward make the rational decision to run like hell and not simply die but get gleefully, spitefully eviscerated. As though the monster were the hero and the coward the true villain.

Denver returned, wand on shoulder. "I'm not a great leader."

"We're all a bunch of teenage girls, none of us are George Washington. That's where everyone's going wrong. They get these pretensions of grandeur. I mean, maybe you're like that too. But the people I know..."

Denver started to tremble, her arms bent at slight but rigid angles, and Hegewisch's voice trailed off as she became sensible to some sort of nerve struck. Damn, how many times did she need to tell herself to cool down and not muck things up? The more words she spoke, the higher chance one of them offended her benefactor. She struggled to twist herself back into that Chicago mindset, silence around certain people, deferential head bows only—

"I've made some errors," said Denver.

And who knew what monologue that might have segued into, what deluge of pent-up mistakes spilled from the mouth of a veteran five or so years running, had not a lacquered

glint spread at the furthest reach of their vision, a glassy sheen only perceptible thanks to the rows of lightbulbs in the carnival stands. It looked like ice.

Denver wasn't looking anywhere toward it, she opened her mouth and stumbled on her first word—coincidentally that word being "Aurora," with undue pause between each syllable and issued in a raspy whisper—so for an instant Hegewisch wondered whether to alert her, perhaps if she said nothing they would continue unhindered until they reached the exit. But she remembered the horror movie coward obliterated on the end of the killer's machete. She pointed over Denver's shoulder.

"It's her."

Denver swallowed her whisper and looked. "That's close," she said, then dashed off the thoroughfare and past the tents into the rows of barren trees toward the shimmer of ice. Hegewisch lacked options but to follow.

The lip of ice was further from the road than she first thought, they ran through black wood interspersed with flaps of circus tent, at one point the tent ruffled and a marching band of clowns tumbled out, literally tumbling, rolling and bouncing between the trees with their tubas and trombones. They did not seem dangerous, they were not wraiths, Denver threaded between them and Hegewisch tried to, one sprung into her and knocked her over, a moment's panic resolved when she kicked herself away and the clowns kept marching harmlessly.

Aurora, Denver broadcast telepathically. Aurora, where are you?

They followed a trail of crystallized bark. Aurora's ice thawed in long ribbons from the branches. Hegewisch's stellar mood hadn't yet died but as she glanced over her shoulder and no longer saw the thoroughfare, the strips of tent canvas grew grayer and tattered, indistinct forms moved within, shuffling creatures upon supine bodies. The traces of dirty white hands, some fingers twitching while others remained still. Darker bodies disappeared entirely.

When Hegewisch held up her own hand she could barely see it. Denver glimmered ahead, though, something effervescent. So Hegewisch followed.

"Oh God, there you are," said Denver at one point.

They entered a clearing, or less a clearing, more an area cleared for some Wiccan ritual, with deliberate assortments of stones and sticks. What canvas remained was half-buried, as was an overturned steeplechase pony. A human-sized statue of a mascot squirrel character with a wide toothless grin lingered at the fringe.

In the center, on a flat rock, sat Denver's Aurora, one finger tapped ponderously against her forehead while her other spooled hair into her mouth.

"You're okay. That's good. I won't have to waste time looking for you," said Denver upon approach. Hegewisch, winded from the jog, leaned against a tree on the rim of the clearing and scratched at her stump, which started to itch. Chicago had plenty of healers strong enough to make her a new arm—then again, Denver probably did too.

Of course, in Denver they would expect her to fight wraiths on a daily basis. But maybe they had a system like in Chicago, where they paired girls up for safety and expediency... Not that the girl Denver had extended an invitation. No need to get ahead of herself. But Hegewisch had to consider her future plans. Who knew why the Empress sent Hegewisch to St. Louis, but to do so knowing full well DuPage's power meant she surely esteemed Hegewisch's life little. If she crawled back on her belly would they even accept her? Would the Empress say, "Well, so much for the informal execution. Guess we'll do it the old fashioned way?" (inject liberal thees, thous, and –eths). At the same time she had zero idea why the Empress would want her dead, the Empress frankly drooled over her stupid classified wish that wasn't even that interesting, was in fact a point of utter embarrassment, like if she signed away her soul to White Rabbit Satan sure, but doing it for a reason so Godawful as hers... Regardless. She needed to consider where she wanted to go after this mess. Now that she actually had the luxury to think of an after.

"Did you see DuPage anywhere?" Denver asked.

Aurora shrugged. Hegewisch wondered, vaguely but with little interest, why the ice had led *away* from the lights and thoroughfare. Before she dwelled on that point, objects amid the deeper trees caught her eye: five dark men, hanged.

"Yeah, well, reunion complete, can we get back to the mission of getting me out of here?"

Denver acted as though she hadn't heard and pressed Aurora further. "Hello? Aurora, are you there? Can you speak? Answer me, did you see DuPage?"

She moved up to Aurora and waved her hands around. Aurora only chewed her hair and flitted her eyes between Denver and Hegewisch. Was she so committed to silence? Hegewisch thought she heard her talk once, over the phone, but she was distant and muffled, maybe it had been someone else. Hegewisch became aware of the sudden gap between her and Denver, Denver in the center of the circle, Hegewisch still at its outskirts, and braved her unease of the voodoo cult witchcraft to step inside.

Which, like clockwork, of course, like it was nothing but her presence that spurred it, like nothing in this world mattered save the infinite and eternal fucking over of Laila Chatterjee, the ground parted and she slid along a chute of dirt toward the face of a mammoth wraith. She recognized it as the lamia wraith from which Clownmuffle previously saved her. Lurking underground all this time, maybe it knew her scent or the particular tremor of her footsteps. Despite the ineffable horror locked in her throat she failed to scream, despite the belated realization that Denver and Aurora might remain trapped in their fifty-percent-dumbshow and not even realize the ground swallowed her up, she made no noise. The soil funneled her toward the maw.

A hand clapped her wrist and wrenched her back as the flytrap tendrils snapped shut close enough to shear the sole off her shoe. A Denver with better reflexes than Hegewisch anticipated (but fuck did she appreciate them) flung her from the center of the widening pit and danced back herself as the entire clearing stirred in a vortex of ashen dirt. The tail uncoiled from the clearing's edge and rose in a gargantuan twist.

Hegewisch landed on her back and crabwalked backward fast as she could. Denver whipped her wand about and summoned a bunch of meteors from the sky that rained down with unbelievable slowness, the slowest meteors in fucking history, they were so slow *Hegewisch* could dodge them. Not that she had a chance, because around her curled the lamia's fingers, likewise slow, but when she tried to push herself up and jump away from them she found herself pushing with her arm that did not exist.

The fingers clamped around her body and she lost all capacity for breath. Her back bent inward and her legs writhed in what space remained as a futile instinct initiated to defend the gem just above her knee, she shuffled every inch of moveable body to make even the tiniest pocket of free space for it, and even then it wasn't enough. She managed to tuck the knee into the back of her other one, so at least her gem pressed only against her (not quite rock-solid) bicep, but the fingers continued to constrain and constrain and constrain and constrain until the blood dribbled down her nose and lip and her eyes reeled and her vision swam. She became dimly cognizant of Denver whacking the fingers with her wand as around her burst explosion upon explosion of space rock against pseudo-reptile scales.

Denver beat the fingers hard enough for them to loosen and then tried to drag Hegewisch out by gripping her head, which only achieved the impression that Hegewisch's head would come off. It didn't, though. Denver's hands fell away.

"SHIT! FUCK!"

Dangling above, trapped in the coil of the snake tail's tip, was Aurora. Her arms were bound while her legs kicked uselessly. Fucking hell, only Hegewisch was allowed to be the useless bitch of the group, if everyone did it then they all fucking died now didn't they? She sought Denver's expression, tried to figure it in these crucial instants between the posing of a problem and the attempt to solve it. Logically the best decision would be to kill the fucking wraith and free them both when it died but given apparently a full barrage of meteors did squat to it maybe not. In that case the best option became to free Aurora first because Aurora could actually do things—but in the time it took what, would become of Hegewisch? How did Aurora even get captured when she could make giant fucking ice walls, the pressure on Hegewisch's body mounted.

That karmic cycle, hm? That horror movie coward crushed with extreme prejudice? Denver stood still milliseconds longer than she should have, she glanced from one helpless idiot to the next, and then she—

Swung her star wand into the lamia's finger. It didn't sever it, the lamia was too big and bulky, but it cut a decent chunk, and then she swung again and again lumberjack-style until the finger dangled by a thread of gray—not exactly skin—*material*, and Hegewisch could heave a massive breath.

"FuckfuckFUCKfuck," streamed from Denver's mouth as she went to work on the second finger. Halfway through she gave up or got indecisive and seized Hegewisch's torso to tug and tug and kick against what fingers remained, which clamped even harder in retribution of those lost. She squeeEEEEEEzed through—

—And out with a pop on top of Denver as they rolled back. Denver kicked Hegewisch off her as fast as possible and searched the sky to see where Aurora had gone. Any semblance of the clearing was eradicated, everywhere around them were churning coils. Hegewisch looked for an exit and found none, so instead she got as close to Denver as possible only for Denver to leap onto a bend in the tail and run along its scaly spine toward the dangling, dancing Aurora. The lamia's hand swept toward Hegewisch and she jumped after Denver to avoid it.

Along the undulating surface of tail she wobbled, hobbled, and tried desperately not to fall. The coils chafed together in thick rings and it looked like if someone fell they would get sucked between and not come back. The moment Denver got close to Aurora the tail flicked, the coils reassembled, and Aurora was somewhere completely different. Denver kicked a scale and whipped her wand again. More comets burst from a split sky, but instead of waiting for them to fall she jumped between them, her foot never more than an instant against their flaming surfaces, and Hegewisch knew she had no hope to follow.

The snake shuffled beneath her and she tripped. She gripped the spine with both legs and prayed not to fall off or get crushed.

IDIOT! screamed her dumb head. Should have made a break for the exit when she had the chance. The moment they left the thoroughfare she should have known. Why had her instincts, which she considered so good, failed her? That was the whole damn problem with leaders. They promise what you want and lead you into the fuck realm—

A tree branch slapped her face and knocked her back. She fought to hold onto something as the snake's body slithered from under her, but she failed to fall. The branches snagged the shirt under her armor and held her suspended.

Across what once was the clearing Denver reached Aurora. She landed on the snake's tail and pummeled it with her wand. Sand streamed from the gashes, a gush nearly swept her away, but she held firm and hit harder. Aurora meanwhile betrayed no terror whatsoever at her predicament. Girl looked twelve and she wasn't bawling. Hegewisch never understood anyone other than herself.

The coils of snake parted. From their midst rose the head and torso of the lamia, head tilted back and streaming strands of dry cracked hair. The constant shuffle of scales against scales, a sound of which Hegewisch had not been aware before, stopped. Everything fell still and silent and she beheld it all, the mammoth serpent, the immense torso, the endless flicker where the eyes should be and a sullen sadness in the wormwood husk of Hegewisch's insides—a fear projected into her—what a horrid world? The kind of feeling that plunged her into the depths of wristcutter poetry, an idea that all living beings were inherently depraved and barbaric, a cannibalistic society clung together by a veneer of ragged smiles, all that shit. The kind of shit she never thought twice about, because she could smile same as any other and knew when to scurry sideways, it all became a hardboiled growth inside her. And who better than her knew?

Who better than the sole person alive aware of God's existence, not merely an object of faith or words scrawled in a text, an actual witness to Her glories, who could even place a name to her face—Madoka Kaname—even that awareness only deepened this pang of despair. Because God existed and was good and wanted only good but even she lacked the power to

instill good as a fixture of humanity, and despite her best effort, her most powerful gambit to eradicate evil had only managed to swap one form of evil for one other.

God was weak. What were they ants?

The lamia opened her mouth, dangled the tip of her tail above it, and released Aurora.

Denver swept a hand to catch her but either she missed or she slipped or Aurora flailed her own hand in the wrong direction—the hands did not connect. Aurora plunged into the lamia's open mouth, her gold hair flashed against the non-light, and she disappeared. The mouth closed.

The comets Denver summoned earlier hit the snake's body in one microcosmic apocalypse. All Hegewisch's vision swelled with flame and the force snapped the branch that suspended her. By the time she hit the ground the flare subsided and the snake had already, howling and hissing, halfway sunk back into the soil. Denver's second barrage had scalded it, scorches spread across its scales, and although Denver herself landed on its forehead and pounded her wand against it nothing she did roused its attention away from its intended goal of sinking.

It had its morsel, it lacked a reason to stick around. Or it calculated its odds of survival against a bloodlusted Denver lower than normal... It appeared one of the comets had struck its throat, for a particularly insidious burn spread there. Whatever the reason, it descended, and fast, and soon all its tail disappeared, and only its head remained, and finally its forehead sank and Denver had to stop striking and leap off to avoid being sucked down too.

The soil closed and the wraith was gone.

So was Aurora.

Hegewisch tried to hold herself in. She barely knew Aurora. Who even was she? A duplicate. Hegewisch had to forget it, not think about it, pretend it didn't happen, someone had to remain sane because if she verged so close to hysterical how would Denver feel...? But Denver's expression was unreadable. She stared at the spot a long time and held her wand limp at her side. She wiped grime off her face.

That stupid sense of sorrow remained. Mingled with the omnipresent plotting, scheming, wondering... What would Denver's mindset be now, how would she react, would she go ballistic, would Hegewisch need to console her, she was fucking bad at that, the prime goal had to remain: escape the miasma. She had to somehow goad Denver that way—fuck, and if Denver wanted revenge? To hunt down the snake? What then?

But Denver swiveled, strode, and passed Hegewisch. She muttered:

"That's who I am as a leader."

"We—"

"Aurora," she whispered.

DuPage?

A banner strung over the thoroughfare read: *Louisiana Purchase Exposition*. Most text in miasmas, if anyone ever stopped to read it, ranged from German to cryptolinguistic. The terrain had morphed. Far fewer humans populated the roads, most confined now within giant cages advertised like exhibits or curiosities—the Indigenous Savage, Man and Woman Shorn of Society, Freakshow Phantasmagoria—and the tents, ferris wheels, merry-go-rounds fell further back, or were compressed between pillars of Greco-Roman constructions, domed and rectangular buildings from which more contemporary national flags fluttered. Those not in cages ascended the steps to the dark interiors of these buildings, where eyeballs lurked.

One by one died the lightbulbs that once illuminated everything in myriad color. The darkness crept from behind. Sage and Laila funneled the direction they could still see.

Sage knew, maybe not Laila, the miasma fought to keep them contained; the previous notion of relative safety deceived them, it exercised control the entire time, complete mastery of geography, more dangerous than a banal horde that would exhaust the resources of both parties, mist and Magical Girl. It contradicted Sage's understanding of a typical miasma. Supposedly, even large miasmas failed to affect much the existing spatial properties of an area as long as a contradictory magical presence—i.e., a Magical Girl—remained inside it, which meant this degree of distortion pushed the boundaries of known properties. On one hand, attribution of said special properties might fall on DuPage, as the miasma originated not from typical sources but from her, or perhaps at moments of...

Moments of...

Moments of...

Of...

Disregarded the new Aurora as anything but pure function. As a person, who cared? Wasn't the old Aurora so...

Moments of spatial separation, when the magical presences within the miasma neared its fringe, for instance when they all gathered atop the arch. Or perhaps the spatial properties of the miasma only appeared to distort, confused by the... arrangement...

Sage clutched her face and emitted a sheer cry. "I can't *think!*"

"Understandable," muttered a dour Laila who had never quite stopped shaking. Sage failed to read her blank expression. Did she too realize they would not so easily escape? Did she understand, in mounting terror, that Sage led her only deeper inside, not from malice but because she too could not discern the direction of the exit?

Seven girls from St. Louis: dead. Two Auroras: dead. Laila placed her faith in a bankrupt commander, one too foolish or frightened or stupid to lie down and die herself, her stupid Soul Gem refused to even darken, a taunt to her utter apathy toward the lives she fucked up.

The swirl of a realization that tarnished her self-visualization as a learned, empathetic, understanding leader, an antithesis to that Empress—

Heh-heh, heh-heh-heh. Who cared who killed whom? In the battle of moral purity, who ascended? They say the victors write history, but Sage wagered she could perish in such Dying Gaul repose that all would wipe a tear and say, "She struggled." Heh-heh-heh ha-ha heh.

"No," said Laila. Sage, so enmeshed in her thoughts, at first thought it was a response, but Laila stared at something else. Between a pair of ancient temples down a winding path between balloon-strewn trees: the riverside. The mist constrained all view of the opposite bank, so it looked less river and more black lake, but the immense bridge that stretched from one end into the outer perimeter of visibility eliminated any doubt.

"Hah. I thought we moved in the opposite direction..." It was all Sage thought to say. The sight of the river stirred no emotion in her.

Laila, of course, sagged to her knees and floundered. "No. We're back at the beginning. This is where we started. Everything and we're not even close..."

"Don't worry. The miasma couldn't cross the river. Once we pass the bridge we'll be safe." No idea why she lied. She didn't even remember whether she previously mentioned that the miasma had already crossed the river.

But Laila swallowed the whole hook. She straightened and embarked immediately, without a word, down the path toward the bridge, and now it was Sage who followed.

A few steps Laila stopped. She cleaved to the nearest tree and pointed, still wordless, at the beginning of the bridge. Sage strained her eyes and expected some wraith. But when she saw it she too hid behind a tree.

Centurion DuPage, flanked by her loyal lieutenant, strolled along the bank toward the bridge. DuPage muttered something unintelligible either to herself or her companion; either way, the companion said nothing. The distinct discrepancies in their respective postures gave the impression of a comedy duo, straight man and bent man, the kind found in a black and white skit or an absurdist play.

Sage's thoughts turned to Phase 3.

If Sage Rhys only ever had one way to defeat an invincible foe, she never would have entered the arena. Always she had a backup strategy, a hidden trick, wily fox status, one that relied only upon herself, like a true leader right? Her costume, after all, had a third phase, what other girls called a "finisher," big and fancy with an effect deleterious to her allies (of which zero remained) as well as anyone unfortunate enough to exist in her sphere of influence...

"Your look," said Laila. "I don't like your look."

That obvious? Well, Sage had always been better at dissembling her thoughts via text than in situ. Better to approach with a strategy. Or at least a backup for her inevitable failure. The

weight of history dropped upon her and she suspected Laurel & Hardy upon the bridge might await their Godot forever which, then, should be the way the world ended. The gaudiest, most cataclysmic bang it deserved... Heh-heh-heh. But she ought to retain her sanity a shred. Consider the world that revolved regardless of her existence upon it.

The Empire must be stopped. Now more than ever. Although Centurion DuPage's power, thermodynamically infeasible, turned on its head the natural order of the universe, Sage Rhys as the Magical Girl Denver had to consider her position in the hierarchy of history. Inexorable forward momentum... The Empire looked, felt, smelled of such capacity now that she had seen the barest sliver of its might firsthand. But she had to make necessary preparations still. If she failed, someone had to claim her mantle.

So she retrieved her cell phone and held it to Laila. "You enchanted San Bernardino's phone so it would function within the miasma. Please do the same for mine."

"Uh. Sure." A pink flash enveloped it; it returned to Denver's palm.

Her first instinct demanded she inform Collins. But her trust in Collins diminished every passing minute no reinforcements arrived; either Collins sent no message or girls didn't want grief cubes anymore. And the former felt more feasible.

Not Collins.

She sent someone else a message.

As she slid the phone back into her pocket, Laila pointed and said, "What's with the plastic?"

Denver examined her phone. Not plastic, but porcelain coated it. She remembered: Aurora's waterproofing.

Enchantments ended upon death. Invariably. Once a girl's soul shook off its mortal foil, their magic no longer existed. Was Aurora still alive? An unexpected wave of relief swept so strongly into her heart that her head had to scold it with a slap of a yardstick; possibly she lived on a technical level but in a process of... digestion that rendered any hope of salvation negligible. (Of course if she hunted down and slew the lamia in time, salvaged the Soul Gem and the remnants of half-dissolved flesh, even that could be restored.) Or Aurora managed to find a way to escape, her stupid vacant face gnawing her hair as she meandered hands-in-pockets and uttered an elongated "Uh"—

Sage hoped for it. She wanted it, visualized it, imagined it, a scrounge of success salvaged from this vortex of failure. Her mind wandered—Forget DuPage, she had to find Aurora. She stepped onto the path and her head oscillated one route to another; her hands kneaded. She had zero way of locating Aurora... her cell phone? She called; straight to voicemail. Shit. She adjusted her visor, then got sick of it and pushed it up her forehead to see better.

No no no. Aurora was strong. She could defend herself. She would carve a path out the serpent's belly with her shards of ice. Sage's faith in Aurora had to match Aurora's faith in her. Her role was commander: instrument of fate. This battle, its boundless historical significance—Yes. A wide smirk broke upon her face. Yes! Everything became so unclouded

all at once, so many irrelevant things washed off her body in one rapid torrent. How had she become snagged on such stupid components? How had she ever doubted herself?

"You okay?" Laila's voice an entrancement into the corporeal. "I vote for no fighting. Please."

"Aurora is alive."

"Yeah she's right there." Hegewisch indicated Laurel (or was it Hardy) at the edge of the bridge. "Even if you pin DuPage, she'll—"

"The other Aurora."

"Oh. Good for her. Um—"

"I apologize for my failure to deliver you safely from the miasma."

"Not liking this vocabulary you've got going here, sounds pretty unnatural—"

"I intend to renew my assault on Centurion DuPage and her lieutenant, the other Aurora. I do not require your assistance. In fact. I release you from captivity and encourage you to return to your commander."

Laila, her face idiotic, clung only to her shred of withered tree.

"Alternatively," Denver continued, "You may attempt to flee the miasma on your own. If this direction of the thoroughfare only took us deeper into it, the other direction possibly will lead out."

"I can't—I can't... I won't make it..."

The empathy Denver once felt eroded into disgust. In a world with so much on the line, with the freedom of Magical Girls across the country called into question, and Laila herself a screw in the clanking mechanism, aware enough of what it entailed, yet resolved to do nothing but remain in her harmless place and uphold the cog that twisted the others—Inaction. Laziness or fear. That's *what they all felt!* Those stupid silly girls on MagNet who claimed they would support Denver, who whined incessantly about Chicago, yet when it came time to stand up and defend against them remained safe and quiet in their homes. Those fuckers, those cowards, those shriveled limp cocks, and everyone behind *Denver's* back had the gall to accuse her of being "only talk!" PAH. She recalled in wonder the message she sent only moments prior. What moment of enfeeblement caused her to contact *those two* in particular... the laziest of the lot...

She slapped Laila and knocked her over. "Trash."

Laila rubbed her cheek and hissed. "Oh, I see. Next you'll say that line. Cowards die a thousand deaths... Ha. I know you will."

But no further words needed to be said, and even had she intended to say any they would have been interrupted by the trenchant quiver that pierced the miasma:

"Ah will you come out already. I've known you're in those trees the whole time."

The only creature whose voice came out clearer in the murk than outside: Centurion DuPage. Good, honestly. Better to bring this farce to its conclusion as swiftly as possible. A swell of positive emotion buoyed Denver with each step she took down the cobblestone amid the trees to the banks of the river. Her own Aurora (*Au ror a*) lived. Her previous setbacks only arranged the stage onto which she now stepped.

She whispered: "Phase 2, activate." And without posing, dancing, twirling, or chanting, her costume shifted form. The wings emerged from her back and her visor formed into a helmet.

Before she activated Phase 3, she had to eliminate the other Aurora, whose power, depending on how it worked (and best not to take chances), might counteract her own. It made sense. That Aurora was the forgery. Hers lived.

(Possibly not for long—)

Hers lived.

(Running on sheer serotonin now?)

It didn't even sound like her own voice in her head. She refused to hear it. Everyone had doubts, only moronic boors lacked them, and only moronic boors became so trapped in them they gave up trying. Doubts were nothing more than a spur to urge one toward rational action. And as a Magical Girl, nothing was less rational than plunging herself into despair. Her only doubts now must be geared toward the battle ahead, the tactics to employ.

She reached the first upward incline where the road became the bridge. Centurion DuPage glowered from the top of the incline. "Isn't this so boring now? We *did* the whole fight thing. Lie down and die already so I can go back to bed."

Denver opened with an ordinary attack. She manifested five comets. Their arrangement tilted toward DuPage, with at least three approaching her alone, so the attack looked like those Denver used on the arch. But this time her focus remained on the lieutenant, the Reverse Aurora. While DuPage laughed and let the molten rocks bounce off her, Aurora made no movements whatsoever. However, something orbited around her; a yellow sphere, of material inconclusive (possibly gold, possibly light). It hovered about two meters from her head and remained at that radius as it swiveled around her and struck one of the comets. The moment it did, the comet vanished. The other comet headed her way approached from the opposite direction. The orb zipped over Aurora in a dome, touched that comet, and eliminated it from existence as well.

"Yaaaaaawn." DuPage patted her mouth.

Obviously many variables remained untested, unlimited questions remained: Did the orb only devour matter, could it also delete living things—if she stood around several minutes pondering them her enemies would react. For her purposes she had to assume the worst, that the orb could annihilate her even during Phase 3. She must eliminate Aurora to ensure success.

She stormed the bridge onramp—broad enough for several lanes of vehicles coming and going, hemmed by suspension arches and steel cables—and drew close to DuPage in hand-to-hand. She swung her Star Rod at the unveiled chin but behind her visor kept her eyes on Aurora. The orb moved fast, but it did not move instantaneously. To bypass its defenses would require multiple fast attacks—

A hand holding a tome emerged from DuPage's robes and swung at Denver. She backpedaled to avoid and the force of the wind from the strike tilted her off balance. She hit the ground, rolled, flipped up, all in the time DuPage liquefied into a pool of gold, ebbed to Denver's new position, and emerged beside her for another hit. Her speed outstripped Denver's by a significant margin. A bag of seven bricks crashed against Denver's jaw and launched her airborne, across the breadth of the bridge, into the rows of wires, some of which snapped. To avoid hurtling into the river she seized a remaining cable and sliced her hand through the glove down to the bone—thankfully not the hand with her Soul Gem.

The cable drew back like a bow and shot her down to the bridge. DuPage already waited in her projected landing zone. When did the lazy bitch get so fast and strong—Christ! Still midair she swept her Star Rod crosswise and split the air in front of her with a row of five comets. She landed on the back of one, kicked it, angled herself fast against the ground, and rolled out of the landing quicker than DuPage had a chance to reach her. Without stopping to reassess she bounded as far as she could down the bridge and when she landed she had to bound again to keep ahead of DuPage. She managed, between leaps, to whip her wand two more times and summon five more comets each. The arena glowed a dull orange as comets fell weo-weo-weo from three directions, several converging upon Aurora.

Aurora's yellow orb bounced between one, two, three comets at once. Denver flicked her Star Rod and fired a single, fast star.

The yellow orb hovered near the apex of its dome above Aurora, mid-arc toward the opposite side of Denver's attack. She had positioned her comets and herself to ensure this arrangement, she had not simply gotten lucky (of course). As expected, the orb had too much distance to travel and Denver's star traveled too fast. It passed the radial threshold of Aurora's defense and cleaved her stomach. Her mask of blasé servitude cracked, a wild and astonished gleam colored her features, and she dropped to her knees hemorrhaging from half her torso.

Failed to kill her, though. Denver expected that too, and respected her enemy's intelligence enough to discard any notion of repeating her trick. Instead, she—

DuPage brought her book onto Denver's skull. One temple possibly caved, or else her brain turned to mush within the bone, or else it only felt like those things. She did not fall, or fly, or crash into the ground so much as immediately inhabit the ground, teleported there by the blow of the book, cracked concrete in jagged shards around her body, several limbs locked in place by asphalt confines, and a sharp sensation of pain her Soul Gem failed to dull.

Honeymoon ended.

Ah, never had a chance anyway? A futile final stand, more assisted suicide than serious struggle? At least that was what she could always tell herself to avoid the sting of defeat. Like how she could pretend an afterlife to promote final thoughts of a reunion with the

person she loved... Over her, DuPage drew back the book and prepared to slam. Aimed, Denver imagined, for her Soul Gem.

"You—floozy! You can't hurt my lieutenant like that."

"Uennhh," said Denver.

Feet pattered across the bridge. "Wait, wait—Lady DuPage! Please hold your attack!"

An even angrier glint swallowed DuPage's eye as she wheeled on the approaching Laila. "And YOU tell ME—"

Laila's voice had changed. No waver. Nor informality. She stopped just outside DuPage's striking range and shot to full attention with military salute, comical due to her missing arm. "Her Munificence the Empress assigned me to this expedition to ensure minimal casualties. As such, I am compelled to inform you that you have beaten your enemy into submission and a subsequent coup de grace would violate Her Munificence's strict orders as to your expected conduct..."

"Aurora." DuPage's ivory arm signaled with aggressive dexterity of her digits. "Kill this little skank."

Aurora, on her side, vomited blood. "Y, yesssh, m-m-m-m—"

Visible tremors shook Laila's body but she remained upright, maintained her salute. "M, milady. Although superiors are permitted and even encouraged to employ physical punishment upon unruly subordinates at their discretion, the murder of a subordinate for any reason other than treason is prohibited even among the Centurions... The, the loyal soldiers of the Empire... must have faith that... their leaders mean only for their wellbeing and development..."

Whatever frigidity she had enacted upon her liquid spine sizzled. Did she have faith in bureaucracy to protect her? Against DuPage? The stupid girl, why run in? The last thing Denver did to her was slap her, and it wasn't like Laila was the kind of person to self-sacrifice. Sage knew her long enough to know that.

Dammit. Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, fuck. FUCK. Why, why, why, why, why? Who would do such a stupid thing? For her, for Sage Rhys? The people who would die for her had already died, this stupid Laila—augh. The stupid slap. The slap did it. Sage slapped her and called her a coward so she decided to prove she wasn't the first chance she got, no matter how bad a chance it was.

Or was that not it either? Ehh—irrelevant. What mattered was she had DuPage distracted. As Denver gradually extricated herself from the asphalt, she flicked her Star Rod an almost imperceptible amount, not that its perceptibility mattered, as DuPage's entire attention fell on Laila. The sky above remained placid, unbroken. No meteors, stars, or space debris. In fact, nothing appeared to happen.

Laila ironed her stuttering: "Additionally, with Denver incapacitated and her forces annihilated, you have fulfilled your mission and done so, somehow, with no casualties on our side. Flawless victory—far superior to the accomplishment of Centurion Cicero in Minneapolis."

"Cicero, hohh?" DuPage's body slackened; she swayed inward, tilted sideways, arched her back at an angle assuredly impossible if any kind of bone structure existed under her golden robes. She sprouted an arm from her side to tap her cheekbone. "Perhaps I misjudged you, Junior Administrator. Your dick-sucking skills are top notch. Oh phoo, is 'dick' too crass?"

"It's among the list of prohibited words," said Laila. "But I have zero intention of reporting —"

"Laila, jump," Sage shouted.

She had no idea why she shouted it. She *knew* Laila lacked the reaction speed or physical acumen to make sense of the command. She knew DuPage would benefit from it far more than Laila. Nonetheless something compelled her to say it before she wrenched herself out the ground and launched herself airborne at the same moment her comets crashed through the ground from below and exploded.

Gravity lacked effect on her comets. They fell slower than gravity. She could send them in any direction—only rarely did a direction other than down matter. But on a bridge, empty space between the water and the ground, opportunities arose. Holes burst across the terrain and billowed shoots of fire through which Denver swept until she landed upon a cable and clung to it. Laila failed to jump, so she went flying. But Denver made a conscious decision not to place a comet directly under her. On the other hand, the ground under DuPage and Aurora simply ceased to exist. Flame geysers flung up asphalt chunks and twisted upward steel beams gooey with melted edges. DuPage kicked her feet and landed onto the top of one such beam, no other solid ground nearby, while the full brunt of the attack ripped through Aurora, scalded her face, set the clothes under her armor afire, and dropped her through the void where once existed ground.

DuPage flowed across the remains of her beam, reformed as a solid figure gripping its underbelly, and seized Aurora by the collar before she dropped far. Blood sluiced out the slice in Aurora's belly and cascaded to a splatter against the black water below. The waves flitted and the form of some plesiosaur skidded against the inky surface.

One heave of her arm tossed Aurora onto the solid part of the bridge, where she lay still and burning and in a growing pool of blood. DuPage flowed along the beam until she reached the opposite edge of the hole near where Laila slapped her hands against her legs to stop the smoldering.

"Ooh. Ooh! Phssshaaw." DuPage spat. "Obviously unless I kill her she won't let me sleep."

"Owowowow," said Laila.

"Quit crying and heal my poor lieutenant."

Aurora detransformed. The fire flickered along her civilian white suit. Dubiously dead, but no longer a factor. And some sliver of Sage Rhys buried deep inside a Denver thought this fight hopeless—ehh-heh. The low chortle gurgled in her throat. If she lured DuPage away from Laila she had no fear of her third phase's failure. One swing of her Star Rod sliced the bridge cable and she swung from it to generate an initial burst of momentum toward the end of the bridge. DuPage ebbed after her although no motion within her robes indicated legs. In a few seconds she would overtake Denver, so she hoped the grassy riverbank served an open enough area for her attack. Due to Phase 3's devastating properties, she rarely resorted to it, and as such had little empirical understanding of its exact nature.

(Funny how under ordinary circumstances, Phase 3's many ambiguities would undermine any faith Sage placed within it, yet now she believed in its success with one hundred percent certainty...) She hit the downslope and allowed her built velocity and gravity's tug to carry her at a slide to the road. Her wings flared their jets to stabilize her and she immediately ducked to avoid DuPage's attack, her position ascertainable on account of her scent, not so much foul as ashy, like a shirt stained by tobacco smoke.

But Denver realized prodigiously slowly that to activate Phase 3 it would prove essential for her to chant the poem. She managed to activate Phase 2 earlier without—but that was a fluke—plus she *knew* Phase 2... Ah hell. DuPage's second attack was already en route to her face and she hadn't even completed the arc of her evasive maneuver for the first. Panicked, she drew her Star Rod and formed a meteor in front of her to absorb the blow. It partially succeeded; shattered space rock pounded against her too hard for her armor to absorb and she danced back on tilt with the state of her balance uncertain until she finally reined herself upright. She ended several steps from the base of the bridge. For some reason she imagined the street on which she now stood eventually became the carnival thoroughfare, but she wasn't sure and had no right to think such an irrelevant thought. She had a problem to solve, she needed at least ten—no, seven if she talked fast—seconds to transform to Phase 3. But with DuPage upon her and fast and her head racing and the sweat seeping down the inside of her visor; shit she'd fucked up and she was only barely quick enough to summon comet after comet to block DuPage's onslaught.

Until DuPage's onslaught abruptly ceased and Denver had to wait for her most recent space rock to crack against DuPage's invincibility before she saw that DuPage stared at something over Denver's shoulder. At first Denver was reluctant to look, thinking it the kind of childish trick DuPage would somehow pull, the "look over there!" segued into sneak attack, but the dull thud of footsteps at her back convinced her something tangible existed and she took the barest glimpse behind.

ClownmufSAN BERNARDINO lobbed a body at her and, too stunned, she failed to do anything but catch it like a cradled baby, except instead she cradled a teenage girl in a Halloween witch costume. "Hold that," San Bernardino said before she ratcheted her upper body one hundred and eighty degrees to swipe at another girl in luxurious azure furs who dodged back and hurled one of her dual tomahawks. San Bernardino sidestepped and Denver sidestepped and the tomahawk bounced against DuPage's face, at which point it promptly exploded. The girl in azure furs replenished it with a new tomahawk by the time she landed. From the dense mist behind her emerged three more Magical Girls who assaulted San Bernardino with thrusts, slices, and slams likewise ineffectual. A fifth skidded to a halt

behind them, turned halfway back the way she came, and shouted through cupped hands: "She's over here! At the base of the bridge!" When her voice carried nowhere, she repeated the call telepathically.

The astonished armistice between Denver and DuPage ended with a hissing, strained-teeth chortle from the latter. She brushed some hair mussed by the combustive tomahawk back into position and twirled her hands overhead. "I'm too exhausted for this malarkey."

"Put me down!" The witch kicked Denver's elbow. "Hurry, they're whittling her bit by bit. Eventually she'll fall apart. I can do it—I have an idea."

"Murrieta-Temecula...?" The longer and stupider the name, the easier for Denver to remember it. From recollection, she had powers of flight and magic detection. Coupled with her calumny on MagNet, her appearance here made logical sense.

The delayed realization came amid the stultifying slurry of voices caught in the miasma's net as the azure tomahawk girl and her companions encircled San Bernardino five versus one. One of the gaggle broke away and rushed at Denver. Or, more accurately, Murrieta-Temecula. Yeah... That made sense too. Murrieta-Temecula wanted San Bernardino dead. Kyubey discouraged such melodrama between Magical Girls, and hired so-called "specialists," also known as Terminatrixes, to eradicate troublemakers.

She blocked a slashing claw with her Star Rod. Doing so required she drop Murrieta-Temecula, who hit the ground on her rear. It became so difficult to think with so many damn *people* in her head, but her combat reflexes remained sharp. Truthfully she thought nothing of the horde of Magical Girls who dropped atop the arch, so baffled and so enmeshed in the blood boil of battle. But if they were Terminatrixes—or rather one Terminatrix with the power to project multiple forms at once, something her rumor mill had brought to her attention previously—if they worked for Kyubey...

Then they or she couldn't be here by accident?

IF ONLY SHE COULD THINK. Instead she kicked the claw girl hard across the road. Murrieta-Temecula scurried from under her feet while more Magical Girls emerged from the mist to compound upon San Bernardino. They each called with new voices, fought with new powers, flashed with new colors. Sage stumbled back, disoriented, as several swept past her toward Murrieta-Temecula, who dashed around the road in a bizarre semicircle that wheeled onto the onramp, dove between the first two supports of the bridge's left side, and passed along the banks until she hurtled full tilt at both the brunt of the Terminatrix's forces—and San Bernardino. Nobody cared about Denver anymore, least of all DuPage, who rolled back and forth on the ramp and lolled out her tongue. The entire pulse of the battle surged toward Murrieta-Temecula, thirty or so figures converging upon her from every angle, her arm held high and a wand clutched within it while she hollered in animalistic fury. That was her "idea"? To sprint into thirty trained killers and—

Denver's molasses brain built enough sugary matter upon the roof that it caved and poured the sludge inside. Those scratchy, distorted, half-audible voices that drove her mad ceased when she whipped her wand and spawned a wall of comets around Murrieta-Temecula that absorbed several ranged attacks. Before they landed and exploded, she weaved between

them, grabbed Murrieta-Temecula, and bounced up a summoned staircase of more comets until she stood two stories above the ground and everyone except San Bernardino stared up at her.

"Wait," said Denver. "This is not the girl Kyubey sent you here to kill."

"Yes I am!" To avoid the comet's flaming tail, Murrieta-Temecula leapt back into Denver's arms rockabye baby style but nonetheless struggled against her petulantly. (Denver's own special boots protected her from the fire.)

"Yeah, pretty sure she is," said a girl below. "Drop her or you're caught in the crossfire." Guns, bows, bolas, and boomerangs pointed at her.

Denver cleared her throat. She observed the crowd and knew she better speak soon or become swiss cheese. Among the bobbing heads she noticed San Bernardino, who gave a silent thumbs up.

A speech. She spoke:

DuPage became a Magical Girl in a bathtub of her own blood.

What a stark, awesome image. She loved to think about her own wrists slit. Not in a boohoo depressed way, ew gross. Sad people disgusted her and sadness remained a foreign emotion. Mmnnn. Hatred, yeah. She felt a lot of that at the time. But her current titillation at a distanced and objective revisiting of the favorite moment of her life stemmed from a sort of fascination with her mortality, the physicality of her flesh and especially blood. Her body never felt real when it remained in one piece. More like plastic or playdough. But when she opened herself up?

And she'd never slit her wrists solely for thrill. That aforementioned rage, hoo. Dragged her deep. Had oodles to do with her wish. But she was glad she did slit her wrists and survive to remember it because at moments like these, dreadful boring moments—was murderducking Denver giving a speech? Did she leap up those rocks to TALK at all these Magical Girls? Hrrk—she could replay the sensation in her head, envelop it, almost relive it. These thoughts helped her fall asleep at night and she still prayed she might manage to sleep even though the thirty or so girls gathered around her blathered so much stupid noise she knew it to be impossible. But she tried anyway:

The master bathroom, invaded one weekend while her parents went to a classical music concert as part of their unending struggle to become white people, a speckless space speckled only by the blot of her clay body resolving into dew within the hottest water the mixture managed. She used a kitchen knife instead of a pussycat baby razor blade. Her primary oversight being that it became difficult to slice the second wrist after the first stopped moving

exactly how she liked, but her ingenuity prevailed when she pressed the knife against the lip of the tub blade up and ran the second wrist across it.

That moment especially—ooh. She rolled against the bridge ramp and let her hair get mussier than usual. Denver's dumb speech voice droned into a nothing hum, like an air conditioning unit. That big vein in her wrist, she loved to poke and prod it, shuffle it out of position and back into it, and when cut it burst like a crushed cockroach. The tubwater became so red so fast she soon could no longer see or sense her body below the line. Head, shoulders, arms, and wrists: In that moment only those components of Yasmin Esfahani existed.

In that moment, the red waves of the bath parted and the blood-streaked face of the white rabbit surfaced. Its soulless eyes peered from matted fur and it said:

"Society has rejected you, human or otherwise. You are the castaways of this world." Her hand motioned upward, fingers splayed, as her grip around Murrieta-Temecula tightened. "Criminals perhaps, psychopaths—I've heard it. I've never believed it. What kind of psychopaths would accept the full brunt of society's ire yet perform its most critical, its most dangerous, its most grotesque function?"

"It's a job," said one below.

"Let her talk," said another.

"She'll just blab long enough for the mark to zip off on her fucking broom again."

"Nah she dropped the broom, I have it." A girl in World War I officer's regalia held it up.

"She'll make another."

"That's not how her power works."

"How do you know!"

"We *have* intel reports, dipshit! Did you not pay attention to even the basics?"

The argument swelled and dragged other girls into it. Denver attempted several times to shout loud enough to overcome the noise but each time terminated with a gurgled, unclear syllable that died inches from her lips. Her comet slowly descended toward the small round pyre her lower comets had already created; eventually she would lose her position and fail to unify anyone. Just like on MagNet, where sure, the Seattle sisters and San Francisco and Calgary could powwow and protest their hatred of Chicago, describe action hero scenarios in which they punted Chicago's collective ass into Lake Michigan, but when Chicago actually invaded somewhere? And Denver asked each of them personally, "Will you help me save St. Louis?" Then they all had a convenient excuse to stay home.

Her words failed then. And that was via text, her specialty. She knew those girls. These girls, these projections of a Terminatrix unseen, what did she expect? The scene in the movie where the protagonist gives a speech that glues everyone together against the true villain? Was that her fantasy? Even now, even this late in the game? When she knew the only reason she shambled into this honorary Rust Belt city was to expedite the suicide she feared too much to achieve literally? Eheh-heh. Eheh-heh. Eheh-heh. Could've saved the plane tickets if only she had the courage to slit her wrists in a bathtub and wait for her gem's energy to run out trying to resupply her blood. Let the Law of the Cycles swallow her...

"The Lady," said a newcomer girl who stumbled out the mist, and at the word "Lady" all argument ceased. "The Lady would like to hear what Miss Rhys says."

Nobody spoke a single word after that. They merely turned each set of eyes toward Sage.

Fuck. Where had she even paused in her speech? Oh yeah—she continued:

"I want to make everyone feel what I feel right now."

If that is your wish, I would prefer if you prefaced it with the phrase 'I wish' and also more clearly defined the exact emotion you mean. Also, please hurry, as you will lose consciousness in approximately nineteen seconds.

It was correct. Her vision bleared and the parts of her body that still existed swayed. She bit her tongue and blinked.

"I wish... to make people feel this, this..." And how would she describe this emotion? Fury? Before she cut herself open, that's the word she would've used. Something had shifted. "This despair."

That is a powerful wish! The size of your Soul Gem will be quite large. The thermodynamic ramifications fascinate me. I'll be interested in observing your career as a Magical Girl... If you could even, by definition, be called one.

His face faded away as from the bloody lagoon rose a ball of gray light.

"You are not rejects of society, no. You are its lawkeepers. You don't do what you do because Kyubey told you. No..." She considered her scant knowledge of these projections. That they seemed to have distinct personalities and egos, yet beholden to their Lady. "You serve another, one whose own sense of justice guides you. Correct? You are not the Incubator's slaves. You follow your leader and her cause. For you, it is not simply a job."

She feared a rebuttal. But if what she imagined she knew about this Terminatrix's power proved true, there should not be one. These thirty-odd Magical Girls gathered around her must be the souls of those the Terminatrix terminated. And for such souls, plucked from degenerates, maniacs, people even Kyubey deemed undesirable, to serve the one who effectively killed them—then either some cause united them or their Lady had brainwashed them to believe so.

None rebutted her. She inhaled. Her comet had descended half its initial height.

The true challenge was pretending to convince the projections to whom she ostensibly spoke while actually convincing the Lady who ostensibly listened.

"There is a girl in our midst the Incubator will never tell you to terminate. She's useful to him. And yet, she is an existential affront to the fabric of Magical Girl society. This Magical Girl—if you could even, by definition, call her one—murdered seven Magical Girls this past night. Seven. How many Magical Girls did this this one I hold in my arms murder? This one you're all so intent on striking down with the full fury of your retribution?"

Eyes narrowed, others averted. "Zero," a few tepid voices imparted. Someone attempted a justification: "She intends to kill this short chick." A few fingers aimed at San Bernardino, who became increasingly indistinguishable from eclectic mob of Terminatrix girls.

"Ah, the girl who was fighting to protect her. Truly this girl, Murrieta-Temecula, is a threat worthy of your immense power and wide array of talents. Yet that girl behind me on the ramp, Centurion DuPage, not only slaughters Magical Girls willy-nilly and would gleefully do so again, but does so in a way contrary to the very essence of Magical Girlhood: She creates wraiths. They flow out her Soul Gem."

Cries of "Bullshit!" Et cetera.

Originally, at this inevitable juncture, Denver planned to call on San Bernardino for verification, but she discovered someone better: Laila, emerging at the top of the bridge's onramp, a weak and semi-conscious Aurora supported by her remaining arm. Denver's finger shot toward her with such rigidity that Laila flinched despite being some distance away. "Tell them!" Her forceful shout piercing the miasma. "Laila, tell them the power of Centurion DuPage."

Laila tried to step back as thirty-odd pairs of eyes directed toward her together but the weight of Aurora prevented such sudden movements so she only managed to sway in essentially the same position. She also apparently lacked confidence in her ability to project because her response came telepathically:

Her last moments as a human were mostly liquid, so as a Magical Girl her corpse flowed like it too. Being a Magical Girl disappointed her. The others she met quivered with a fatal fear.

Of wraiths, of their own emotions, of everything. But she had nothing to fear. Wraiths ignored her. She walked among them unmolested. If she killed them, they allowed it. If she grew desolate or furious or bored and her Soul Gem darkened, when she used her power the despair flowed out and became innocuous wraiths. Kyubey inspected, prodded, measured her. When she slept, or pretended to sleep—eventually he shed all pretense of concealing himself—he harvested hair fragments, skin flakes, saliva.

She became incapable of death and because of her ability to eject her negative emotions like steam no longer even wanted to die.

Everything simply became dull.

You can't... But it wasn't Laila's voice. Denver didn't recognize it, but she assumed it was the Aurora supported on Laila's shoulder. *Classified. Revealing Centurion DuPage's powers to... anyone without proper clearance... is a treasonous offense.*

And Laila, dolt she was, buckled beneath this idiotic statement. She froze; her face went blank. The words "classified" and "treasonous" constricted her as inviolable barriers.

"Shed your ties to this sham Empire, Laila," said Denver. "Their failure here is assured and will prove the first of many failures to follow. Leave them and join me, Laila. Tell everyone the truth of what has transpired here. Unmask the unnatural perversion of a Magical Girl who generates wraiths rather than destroy them."

Wasted words. Laila was always a coward, and a true coward, the most insidious, worthless kind, locked herself in the closet of a sinking ocean liner because she was too afraid to go outside. Or perhaps. Or perhaps she saw what Denver pretended she didn't, that her ship sailed ever onward, unsinkable, and that the winning side in this conflict had been clear since the onset. Eheh-heh? Like a coin flip where seven millennia of butterfly effects had predetermined the outcome. The comet nearly touched the ground now and Murrieta-Temecula grew restless and started to squirm. She hissed: "Hurry and say something else, you're not making progress here!"

But it was San Bernardino who spoke next. "It's true. Centurion DuPage inverts miracles to curses." She stood proudly as though her totally ambiguous line proved everything, but it mostly made the Terminatrix girls glance between each other with dubious expressions.

So Denver swept her hand. "Look around you if you don't believe me! This miasma is not natural. Have you ever seen one so large? Have you seen the sheer number of people it's ensnared? A conglomerated lump of despair and hatred and sadness and evil this large could never appear without a source. And that source is the girl there on the ramp, Centurion DuPage!"

She finally had to hop off the comet before it hit the ground and exploded. Chunks of rock zipped past or plinked against her wings. She sought another way to prove that DuPage created the miasma, somehow the key seemed rooted in it—as though if she only proved it, the Terminatrix would have no choice but to join her side—was that the logic of desperation? Or did she legitimately read a kind of interest in their faces? They listened as long as they had, hadn't they? Maybe she should ask DuPage herself what her power was. For some reason she suspected DuPage would have no qualms about blurting it as long as she could laugh at everyone's incredulous faces.

It proved unnecessary. From the mist ran a Magical Girl, the same one who had brought a message from the "Lady" previously. Everyone turned to her before she even slowed to speak, and those nearby stepped away to form a neat circle around her.

"The Lady," said the messenger, "says that Miss Rhys tells the truth."

Next came the sting that it didn't matter. That it changed nothing. That the Terminatrix was Kyubey's slave and would continue along her assigned course and do nothing about the obvious greater threat.

Sure enough: "However." Predictable, really. Sage was stupid to ever expect this to work. "However, the Lady dislikes the smell of Miss Esfahani's soul. She says she does not believe Miss Esfahani can be redeemed."

Centurion DuPage, all flicker of recognition lost, had rolled on her slope the entire speech without comment, interjection, or protest, despite Denver's blatant machinations against her. At this word from the Lady, however, she wrenched upright although crooked from the approximate location of her hips to the approximate location of her neck.

"Can't be redeemed? Me! Uncalled for."

The messenger girl glanced at DuPage but continued as though she otherwise lacked corporeality. "By contrast, the Lady would very much enjoy the soul of Miss Leyva..."

Miss Leyva. Meaning Murrieta-Temecula. Tch. Had Denver had a chance to notice the Terminatrix's Kyubey-mimicking insistence on using the real names of Magical Girls, she would have had a better concept of her odds of success.

She tossed Murrieta-Temecula toward San Bernardino and left the girl's fate in somehow better hands. The Lady's final word served the end of all diplomacy and the gaggle of girls shifted again to eradicate their mark. Bodies surged around a solitary Denver who in the end at least had herself to follow her. The sound, the motion served as the perfect cover.

"The unlimited darkness of the universe folds inward upon itself. Man ascends ever higher toward celestial heaven but finds instead of stars only the stygian hunger of the void."

She spoke it as a whisper although it carried louder than her speech. Whether DuPage heard or not hardly mattered, because she did nothing to stop it, either too blocked by bodies or too overconfident in her invincibility.

"Phase 3, activate."

Denver's armor shimmered black and stars, galaxies, aurorae danced across her body. The miasma had already darkened everything but it yet grew darker in a sphere around her as she held aloft her Star Rod. The five-pointed star at its tip pulsed, trembled, cracked; its points split from the body and turned inward to pierce it. The yellow center unpeeled like a blooming bud until all gleam of gold became only an orb of total black.

In Phase 3, Denver had no capacity for movement.

The ground beneath her shattered in a circle and the chunks of earth and girls too close hovered upward uncontrollable. Toward her collapsed Star Rod.

"The fuck is this!" "Help me!" One had the perspicacity of thought to cry: "Black hole!"

The chunks of dirt fell into Denver's vortex. They swirled and swirled and no matter how large they were they passed through the eye of her Rod. Not the Terminatrix girls—the moment the danger surfaced, a force like they were all tied to invisible string wrenched them out of the pull and into the miasma's darkness beyond, in the direction where their Lady waited. It must be part of her power to recall her projections at any moment, which was fine. Denver had no real desire to destroy the Terminatrix, despite her worthlessness. She had no real desire to destroy San Bernardino and Murrieta-Temecula, either, but they were unfortunate enough to be caught in her pull. San Bernardino bought herself time by planting her pole in the ground and clinging tight to it, even as she clung Murrieta-Temecula tight to her chest like an infant sister, but Denver knew from experience: her field only grew.

The cracked circle around her hollowed into a bowl or inverted dome of dirt as everything, rock or road or root, crumpled into the black hole. San Bernardino's pole bent and her fingers slowly slipped. The closest supports of the bridge snapped and the cables twisted toward her. Laila tripped as she, at the edge of its reach, tried to backpedal from the field, and the dropped Aurora slid down the slope.

Oh God Denver what are you doing!

Run, Laila. I'll be fine—you will too if you stay away.

Her black hole even devoured the miasma, and in a sphere around her the air became clear, cold, and free of malaise. It felt as though the force was strong enough to suck the despair from her Soul Gem, a fantastic feeling filled her—God! It seemed so clear. Why would she have ever hesitated about using this ability? Why did she schlepp out nine trash Magical Girls when she only ever needed herself? Keeping them around had inhibited her own strength. The vanity that cultivated a self-image of "leader"... And to think most of the time she forgot Phase 3 existed. As though she sealed it away in her mind, never to open.

No need for St. Louis. No need for San Bernardino. No need for Aurora. Neither of them, new or old. Sage Rhys devoured the world.

While San Bernardino dug herself and Murrieta-Temecula deeper into the soil for safety, DuPage had never had a hope. She had positioned herself on a slope in the center of a flat

road, with nothing but solid concrete on any side of her. Her progression toward the growing black hole was—irreversible. Incontrovertible. She had managed to remain standing, she hadn't fallen and slid on her side like most. Her entire body whipped like gelatin or even liquid, her robes flutter and flecks flying off to mix a little gold into the darkness, her face distorted and stretched, her veil merging with it, a look of stupefied—dare she describe it such?—*fear* etched in what solidity remained, that was it! That brashness, the entire conflict crushed in one idiotic instant that Denver knew she would forever kick herself for not entertaining sooner, and this CLARITY. God, what a feeling, the hopelessness as DuPage ebbed closer and closer, quicker and quicker every inch she neared the source of the pull, nothing to save her, her own Aurora face down and not even transformed (and good too, Denver still had to be mindful of the possible effects swallowing Aurora's own sphere of unlimited destruction might cause)—Die. Die. Die. Die. Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die! Spin in space for eternity, let the center of nothingness be your personal Tartarus!

Save us, said Murrieta-Temecula. But nobody could save anyone. Only Sage Rhys balanced the fates of—

A sphere of ice surrounded her.

Her black hole ate the ice away instantly, but more ice replenished it just as quickly. The ice entangled all the characters arranged: DuPage, Aurora, San Bernardino, Murrieta-Temecula. Only Laila, escaped from the black hole's tug, was too far away to become encased.

Uhhhhh... it's okay, boss. We have them trapped now...? You'll hurt the innocent if you keep it up like that.

That voice.

Sage knew she never died. And... she was right. San Bernardino, Murrieta-Temecula. What, what the fuck had she been thinking? She instantly deactivated Phase 3.

That voice, said DuPage.

That voice, said DuPage's Aurora.

That voice, said Laila.

How did they—

An arrow more ballista bolt than arrow tore through the circle of ice that surrounded her and pierced her body. But the arrow was not made of solid material and it did not pierce her body. It was made of water; it splashed against her, doused her entirely.

The water scalded with a heat she had never felt before.

Its sizzling hiss corroded her armor and soon her skin. She only felt it happen because it ate through her visor and eyeballs just as fast. Her unshaping body oozed onto the goo that was her knees as she pressed her hand with her Soul Gem against the nearest wall of ice to protect

it. Her arm, eaten through at the elbow, fell off. Parts of her body sank into parts of her body, she became liquid herself.

Sight, sound, smell, sensation ceased. She soon failed to become aware of a body at all, liquid or otherwise, only that same blackness as when she lost her head in the river.

Ah. It was finally quiet. All those voices, all those people talking at once... It had really rattled her, hadn't it? No wonder she had become so nutty at the end. Noise, noise, noise. Only those moments of clarity when the Lady made the others fall silent... That was the kind of power she wanted to wield, to make everything quiet. Everything else revolved around that central tenet, no?

Aurora had such a soft voice. It stilled all the buzz. It made sense Aurora would be the one. When she spoke, there was nothing else...

Nothing else.

Stumbling down the slope from the bridge to the enormous cluster of ice that had swallowed everyone else, Hegewisch had to bite the back of her hand to stop herself from swearing. In her head it echoed anyway: fuckfuckfuckfuck. She lost her balance, hit the base at a half-tilted fall, and rolled up to circle the mound of ice to the entrance carved by the arrow of water.

At the sight of what was left of Denver she lurched aside and may have vomited if she had anything left in her deflated stomach. "Fuck," she said.

"Uhhhhh... I don't think that's appropriate, Junior Administrator?"

Two almost silent footsteps stopped at her back. Hegewisch turned, and as she expected there stood Denver's Aurora, the Goldilocks girl with her hair wound around her finger rather than stuffed in her mouth.

Of course, the moment Hegewisch finally heard her speak, she understood everything. Her voice, or vocal patterns, whatever you called it, were unmistakable. The elongated "uh," the spacey pause between clauses, the pitched interrogative. The tiny blonde girl looked nothing like the person the voice usually belonged to, but did it have to? The Empire had ways of changing one's appearance via magic. Anyone, if the Empress willed it, could look like anyone.

Hegewisch exhaled, closed her eyes, and mustered her resolve to exist as a real human being in the world still.

She bolted upright and saluted at smart attention. "Centurion Cook! I am fully aware of my verbal transgression. To rectify my error and ensure I avoid similar transgressions in the

future, I implore you to dole upon me whatever punishment you see fit." This line tended to placate superior officers (assuming their mood was good) into only moderate punishment, which was about the best Hegewisch could hope for after dropping one of the cruder words in the lexicon. But she blurted the whole spiel on autopilot, barely even conscious of a need for her usual anxiety: All the while the sight of Denver's remains lingered in her head.

"Given the circumstances... yeahhhhh, I think we can let this one slide." Aurora, or Centurion Cook, motioned for Hegewisch to stand at ease as she passed by her into the dome of ice.

Centurion Cook, what are you doing? shouted the other Aurora, although the lengthy pause before she started indicated she had been waiting for DuPage to shout it first. *If you do not release Centurion DuPage and me from this ice, we'll have no choice to construe your actions as treasonous. Correct, milady?*

DuPage remained silent.

"Nahhhhh... I'm doing exactly what our munificent Empress asked." Cook crouched by Denver's arm, which had separated from the rest of the mess. It had maintained far more of its form than any other element of Denver's body, with palm and fingers distinct and visible, so when Hegewisch glanced at it in the corner of her eye she could overpower her nausea. From the palm, Cook plucked Denver's Soul Gem.

Someone shoved Hegewisch aside. Clownmuffle, somehow freed from Cook's ice, and who Hegewisch had just started to think had been unusually quiet during the proceedings. How did she escape? Her typical meme magic at play again? Well, she had half-buried herself to escape Denver's black hole, so she had probably only been partially covered in ice...

Not that it mattered. She had a bent pole in one hand and advanced upon Cook as though nothing meant anything, which to her it probably didn't.

"Give me her Soul Gem. Now."

"Nnnnno," said Cook.

"Laila, support me."

Did... did she not hear Laila blather excuses to Cook in the most deferential mode possible? Did she completely fail to read the situation? Did she truly expect Laila to drop everything and turn against yet another Centurion? And how did Clownmuffle herself expect to beat Cook when she walked straight into a dome of her ice and had the hissing remnants of Denver on the hollowed-out ground beside her? Blood stained every inch of her tuxedo, most of it ripped to tatters, most of her skin also ripped to tatters. One foot dragged, one shoe AWOL entirely. A row of needles lined her thigh, a small dagger was lodged between two ribs on her back. She lacked two fingertips and one eye drooped.

"Okay," Laila said. She drew her pistol, pointed it at the back of Clownmuffle's head, and undid the enchantment the instant before she pulled the trigger.

Even with so little warning, even at this range, Clownmuffle managed to turn halfway before the ordinary bullet took off a sheer plate of forehead and splattered half her frontal lobe across the ice. Clownmuffle sagged to one knee, then incredibly gripped her pole tighter and used it as leverage to begin to rise, shaky and slow.

Cook waved her hand once and a sheet of ice enveloped Clownmuffle before she got far. "Thanks, Junior Administrator... That fight coulda gone on a bit." She slid past Clownsicle and strolled out the dome, bending her back to stretch her arms and expel a yawn.

"Still good condition, whoa." Cook inspected Denver's Soul Gem. "She used her finisher and everything... Yeah, I'm impressed. It'd definitely be real bad if I, uhhhhh... You know. Smashed it. Something bad would happen. So I hoped she'd be weak enough I could hold on to it a bit and let her go natural-like... Law of the Cycles? You know anything about that, Junior Administrator?"

She knew everything about it. She could embark on a lengthy discussion, the kind the Empress demanded sometimes, but she figured Cook's question as rhetorical.

No, she had to speak: "I believe, that something good happens to girls to die from the Law of the Cycles, while girls who just die... just die. That's all I'm allowed to say, milady."

"Yeahhhh... I know. What do you think, Junior Administrator? Does Denver deserve to have something good happen to her?" She turned her face to Hegewisch and smiled. "I think she does...?"

"Y-yes, milady."

Cook cradled the gem in her hands and stared into the miasma. "You made things difficult for me, Junior Administrator. Didn't expect you to even be here... Didn't expect you to get captured. If I spoke, you'd know it was me right away... So I had to pull that little stunt with that big snake girl. You know? No hard feelings."

Hard feelings? For faking her own death? Why would Hegewisch give a shit about that? Or did she mean luring Hegewisch into a dangerous situation with the lamia wraith?

(Or—and this was maybe Hegewisch's paranoid side speaking, spurred by a night subject to DuPage's whims—was Cook's original plan for *Hegewisch* to die to the wraith and she only switched things up when Denver saved her?)

She decided not to think about it. She was too damn tired to think about it.

"Yes, milady."

Cook drew back her hand and tossed Denver's Soul Gem into the darkness. A pang of unhappiness cut inside Hegewisch, sure Denver got bonkers near the end, but to throw her to the wraiths like that...

But the gem did not disappear into the night. It stopped in the middle of the black wall and hovered, a clear gleam in the otherwise murky park. No—not hovering. Something held it. A

long black claw almost indistinguishable from the black behind it held the gem between two immense curved fingernails. The barest traces of a slight increase in the darkness formed the base outline of a massive shape, like a human silhouette magnified from its original form, except here the silhouette had form and corporeality as the seven-foot body opened vertically along its midsection to briefly unfold two batlike wings and place Denver's Soul Gem inside.

On either side of the figure appeared more vibrant, more defined, more real figures: about thirty total.

"The Lady accepts your offering," said a spokeswoman. "Miss Rhys will be a valued addition."

"Who are you?" Hegewisch said. When beside a superior officer, it was bad form to make oneself too relevant, but she wanted to know that Denver would be safe. "What will you do to her?"

"Her soul shall be redeemed," a different spokeswoman said unhelpfully.

If by redemption they meant Law of the Cycles—Hegewisch could live with that. She guessed. She knew God cared for all she could. This rotten death-wreaked world had no better end than actual, honest-to-God heaven. Denver, Rhys, whatever her name was. She deserved a little happiness.

"There's another here the Lady desires." Every time a different girl spoke. Nobody emerged as a particular mouthpiece for the shape in the middle. "Isabel Leyva—Murrieta-Temecula—the girl with the witch hat. You have her encased in ice. Hand her over and we'll go."

Cook kicked a clod of dirt with her foot. It broke apart and settled as powder on her sneaker. "Lots of you... But Clownmuffle gave you trouble? Maybe she's right, and Magical Girls get weaker the more you put in one spot? And you retreated from that black hole lickety-split sooooo... that means you can die right? Even if you're only projections or whatever?"

"We don't want to fight you. We only ask for a girl who has nothing to do with you."

"Uhhhhh... But she has a lot to do with me? I captured her and Clownmuffle both. They're gonna be my new friends now? Or the Empress's friends at least. I wasn't in your meeting, Junior Administrator, but wasn't that the order to DuPage—Convert those you can?" She tilted her head in appeal to Hegewisch.

"Milady, I regret to inform you I am in no condition to fight..."

"But I am? Yeahhhhh. I feel powerful right now. And my magic's great for wiping out lots of wimps in one go. Couldn't let DuPage beat me there. Sooooo I think I got this?"

The line of Magical Girls on the fringe of darkness stretched past the road on both sides. Deep pangs of migraine settled into Hegewisch's skull even to contemplate another battle heaped onto the fifty she already fought that night, more corpses piled. At least the Cycles left no corpse... Maybe she could pray to God for Denver's soul. And everyone else who died. It seemed unfair that girls who had their gems shattered could never go to heaven. Not even a

morality merit system. Dumb luck. Only more evidence of God's weakness—a flawed system limited by lack of true omnipotence.

"You won't give her to us?"

"I guarantee you guys don't wanna fight me..."

The line of Magical Girls faced the lone Cook for several silent seconds afterward, their faces dull in each a unique way, Cook's dullest of all.

Then, they apparently agreed that they did not want to fight Centurion Cook, because without another word the thirty Magical Girls faded away and the black shape disintegrated into the miasma.

"Awesome...!" Cook shot double thumbs-up Hegewisch's way. "The Empire'll have two new recruits. I'm excited. I guess you got that sourpuss face cuz you gotta do the paperwork?"

"Yes, milady."

"Ha ha, I know you're lying. Now for the real thing the Empress sent me to do..."

She circumnavigated her ice dome at a lazy pace that Hegewisch matched with rigid, stringent strides in slow motion. Her ice was so clear that it was possible to see all the figures inside it, even despite the miasma—or maybe the ice kept the miasma out. They passed Aurora, who had transformed back into her armor but apparently had no space to summon her ball. Occasionally over the past few minutes Aurora had interjected limpwristed protests about Cook's treatment of her superior, but they had fallen to background noise and she only seemed to say them for posterity. Cook stopped before the bulk of ice that contained Centurion DuPage.

You braindead lackey, DuPage said, these words apparently so well-chosen she had spent the last few minutes pondering them before speaking. *So the Empress wants me gone, huh?*

"The fact that you've already jumped to that conclusion says a little about how justified she might be...? Maybe I just wanted to keep you safe for a bit."

It's so easy to see what the Empress is doing. She wants to eliminate anyone who knows who she really is. She's kept it a pretty small list until now anyway. You, me, the Handmaiden. So yeah, you're an idiot, Cook. She used you to get rid of me and then she'll get rid of you next.

"I doubt it? You're a bad girl, DuPage... really dangerous too. If you wanted, you could use your power in Chicago and wipe out half our ranks like BWAH...! So we had to get you out of the city and make sure you didn't suspect a thing until the very end. And she couldn't remove her blessing without you suspecting something, sooooo kinda tricky?"

Hegewisch, exhausted and slow on the uptake, only now started to piece together the situation and understand its ramifications. The Empress wanted DuPage gone. Fucking whoa. The Empress actually made a rational decision for once. Truly amazing.

"Really, only one person could have pulled it off... Meeeee, of course."

Cook reached into her ice. Where her hand pressed against it, the ice became liquid. It formed a watery cave just wide enough for Cook to slide her arm inside. She pressed her hand against the folds of DuPage's cloak at her midsection, carefully pulled the fabric apart, and reached deeper, into DuPage's body. She had her arm inside up to the shoulder and her face pressed to the ice and her tongue pressed against her upper lip and she shuffled around while DuPage remained immobile inside the ice.

Then Cook's face lit up and she smiled as she pulled from out of DuPage her crystal ball—the one she used to summon the miasma. The cave in the ice widened to let it pass, and the moment Cook plucked it out and held it in both hands the ice sealed back up and left DuPage locked inside.

You idiot. You numbskull. You braindead pawn. You self-effaced goon. You nincompoop. You... you, you horseradish! You're making a mistake, Cook. A big, fuddgubbling mistake.

"I like the cute words you make up when you try not to swear." Cook turned the crystal ball around in her hands and stared into its milky whiteness, which glowed with a faint effervescence.

If you break it, you'll regret it. Scratch that—you're already going to regret everything, it's just that if you break it you'll regret it a lot, lot, lot faster.

"Yeahhhhh... I know. Thanks to Junior Administrator here, the Empress has an idea of how things work? That breaking your Soul Gem could create something truly evil? So don't worry, I'm not gonna break it." She tucked the crystal ball under her arm. "The Empress wants it for something anyway. Who knows what? But she asked to make sure I got the gem for her. Otherwise I woulda let Denver suck you into space..."

No matter what you'll regret it. Kill me you'll regret it. Don't kill me you'll regret it. Unless you give me BACK MY GEM RIGHT NOW YOU WILL DEFINITELY REGRET IT.

"I'm sorry, DuPage. Even after everything, I consider you a friend? Yeah. I like you. And I don't think what the Terminatrix said was true. I think you can be redeemed. You're not *so* bad... But I gotta do what the Empress says? Yeahhhhh... uhhhhh... So I'm really sorry..."

She started to walk away from DuPage's body.

*OH DON'T YOU DARE PULL THE "NOTHING PERSONAL" CARD ON ME YOU LITTLE KAH—KAH—KAH—COCKSUCKER! COCKSUCKER! IF THE EMPRESS WANTS ME GONE BECAUSE I LIKE TO GET DRUNK FROM TIME TO TIME THEN YOU SURE BETTER WATCH YOUR BACK—IF YOU'RE NOT TOO BUSY GETTING FUCKED FROM BACK THERE ALREADY! YOU THINK SHE GIVES A SINGLE SOLITARY **SHIT** ABOUT WHAT I DO COMPARED TO WHAT YOU DO? WHORE! WHORE! WHOOOOOORE!*

As Cook walked, and Hegewisch walked behind her with occasional glances over her shoulder, the ice dome broke apart. Smaller chunks split from the main, while other parts liquefied into a flowing stream. The bits of ice that encased Clownmuffle, Aurora, and the

witch girl—who had apparently passed out—bobbed along the growing stream and followed Cook, even travelling up the slope onto the bridge.

HUGE FUCKING MISTAKE COOK. I WILL BE BACK. YOU CAN'T GET RID OF ME LIKE THAT. I WILL COME BACK AND OBLITERATE YOU. AURORA—AURORA. YOUR POWER, USE YOUR POWER AND BREAK OUT. I KNOW YOU CAN.

"Aurora won't help you," said Cook. "She's realized by now that if there's a vacancy in the Four Centurions she's one of the most likely to fill it...?"

WHAT. WHAT. WHAT. WHAT.

I. I'm sorry, milady, said Aurora. I'm sorry. If the Empress demanded it, then what can I do? I'm so sorry. I'm so—

CRUSH YOU. EAT YOU. I'LL EAT YOU ALL. YOU'LL ALL DIE. I WON'T FORGET. I WON'T DIE AND I WON'T FORGET. I'LL COME BACK. YOU'LL SEE. I KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T. I'LL COME BACK. I'LL KILL YOU. I'LL RUIN EVERY ONE OF YOU. I'LL COME BACK. I'LL—

Cook progressed far enough along the bridge with DuPage's Soul Gem under her arm that the tether between it and DuPage's body severed. DuPage fell silent. Her body fell dead. Cook stopped midstep, lowered her head, and sighed.

Silence. Silence was best right now. Nothing for Hegewisch to say.

"What about the people trapped in the miasma?" Hegewisch said. Although DuPage died, it remained.

"A squad of Chicago's strongest is already on its way to disperse this evil... Bahhhhh. When you think about it, DuPage really did have a bad power. Maybe if she had a different wish, things would've gone better for her?"

"Nobody's wish made them happier," said Hegewisch.

"It's true. So very true..."

Together, ankle-deep in a brook of water that swept along the bridge, they crossed to the other side.

END FIRST ARC

You Never Did the Kenosha Kid

SECOND ARC: CHICAGO

Sage Rhys inhabited a manor rarely graced by the spectral family whose corporate entanglements financed its existence. On the rare occasions Mrs. Rhys (father deceased) jetted back from the New York or Paris or Tokyo penthouses she more aptly called home, little attention fell to Sage or her assortment of friends, so overall Sage had free reign within the house. Its endless profusion of bedrooms permanently housed the city's magical denizens; when one really analyzed the situation, this excess of free housing formed the root of Denver's high Magical Girl quality of life. The girls Aurora, Collins, Arvada, Westminster, and so forth had few earthly concerns to trouble them, bankrolled as they were by Mrs. Rhys's endless, apathetic coffers.

Now, Sage Rhys no longer existed as a tangible entity. Aurora, in the sense of the short girl with curly blonde hair, never existed. And all others save one had been carefully incapacitated.

The one sat on her knees in Sage's office, awash in a sea of documents, sorting them rapidfire into ramshackle piles based on relevance. The locks on all the filing cabinets had been shimmed, the desk broken open, the computer "hacked" much the same way Murrieta-Temecula hacked Clownmuffle's MagNet account. Essential online files were already downloaded onto a USB, so only the physical stuff remained. And for some reason—maybe encoded into her by her mother the Fortune 500 executive—an exasperating quantity of data had been printed, labeled, filed, and stored.

Collins already had sixteen paper cuts on her fingertips. She licked them to stop the stinging and flipped through more. Tons of useless files about the nitty-gritty of MagNet site management, expenditures on the domain and server maintenance, that kind of bureaucratic crap, but lots were files on MagNet users, Magical Girls across the continent, their appearance, age, powers, et cetera, all leaked from the horse's mouth so to speak over the forums. If Sage used a system of organization even one ounce intuitive Collins could've been out of this city ten hours previous, but the way things worked in Sage's brain made sense only to her and even after two years her dedicated lackey Collins made neither heads nor butts of it.

Like, was she nuts? Wouldn't it be most obvious to put all the website management crap into one cabinet by itself, then all the Magical Girl info in another cabinet? Sort the website management files by date and the Magical Girl data alphabetically by city?

No.

Can't do that.

Let's instead—Denver the Sage speaking here, enthroned upon an allegorical mule named Wisdom—let's instead sort everything by date. Mix it all together by whenever it happened.

Site traffic metrics from January 2009 right alongside the file on a Shreveport three years croaked. Insufferable. Did she ever even plan on using these files again ever? If Collins knew her less well she'd assume laziness, like Denver shoved files into the cabinet as she got them and put zero thought to their arrangement, but no, this whole setup must have been a conscious decision, to her one that made perfect sense, reached by a monologue of anxious, jittery thought where circuitous and specious logic ultimately conspired to conceive the worst solution imaginable and disguise it as the best.

Okay, okay, so to solve Collins's problem, because she had far too many files here to bring them all back with her, and needed to sort the important ones from the junk before she could leave, the thought would be to start from the most recent. Right? Because the Magical Girls who had files added most recently were the ones most likely to still be alive. But corollary—the most important Magical Girls on which to have intel were the strongest, and the strongest tended to live longer. Clownmuffle's file, for instance, devoid of real information as it was (no name listed, occupation contract killer), was in the folder for MagNet's first month of operation. So a thorough exhaustion of every file became paramount.

Sage. Collins loved her, but Sage. Why. Whyyyyy. She rubbed her throbbing eyes and got dust in them. She wanted another smoke but she no longer had time for breaks. A whole night passed, the storm cleared, not quite sun but gray phosphorescence filtered through the blinds. She still had half of 2009 to parse. She felt like she had nodded off in a seated position multiple times during the night but couldn't be sure. Everything mingled as a blur. She wanted out. She wanted—

A door opened.

Downstairs.

Imagined, yeah? A creak within the beams, a stupid rat under the floorboards. An auditory hallucination brought upon a brain not exactly stranger to them stressed by the mental and physical weight of its current situation.

Voices.

"Nice place."

"Clean."

"Knew she was rich."

"Nice TV."

Collins crept across the stacks of papers and leaned closer to her open second-story door. She did not recognize the voices. Were they friends of Mother Rhys? Business associates invited on some pretense? The voices had a rough, adult character, female but not feminine. If they were friends of the mother Collins could easily play off her presence there. If they were a pair of cat burglars things got even more hilarious.

After a few minutes wandering downstairs, the voices ascended the stairwell. Collins turned and tried to look natural, like she had not heard them coming, but realized a little late how suspicious she would look surrounded by documents that seemed official. Under normal circumstances she did deserve to be in the house, however.

Until the voices rounded the corner and two blank and identical faces stared her down from the hallway and Collins realized she made a mistake.

She lurched up. "Holy wow, it's uh, it's you two!"

The pair cocked their faces in opposite directions. "You're Aurora?"

"Collins, Collins." She extended a vigorous hand to shake each twin's in turn. "Long way from uh, from—Seattle."

"Yeah."

"Denver texted us."

"Weird message."

"Nice papers."

"Something about things going a little oof out in St. Louis."

"Nice papers." Twin 2, distinguished in long-sleeved flannel, stooped and scooped a handful.

"Say Collins." Twin 1 in a knitted Rudolph sweater with the red nose an actual light that shined periodically. "How come you never post your selfie? On the Selfie Board."

"Nice papers." Twin 2 leaned to show Twin 1 a couple.

Twin 1 nodded. "Nice papers."

"Ah yanno how it goes look at me—" (These two dangerous. What exactly did Denver tell them? What did Denver find out?) "—I ain't the uh, the prettiest thing on market, rather'd save myself the heartache of a Clownmuffle two outta—" (They asked if she was Aurora but they probably knew Aurora was in St. Louis too. Fishing for a lie?) "Outta ten yanno? And uh, and uh, yanno, lotsa papers to run the site. Gotta bookkeep or you lose track of it all. Say —" (These clowns wouldn't come if Denver asked for help. And even if they did, why come to Colorado, not St. Louis? The only thing in this manor of interest were the nice papers.) "Wanna bite to eat? Musta flown in right? Bet you're uh, hungry."

"Where are the other girls."

"Why are the cabinets broken open."

Collins swayed back and stroked the back of her head. Her ponytail swished as she laughed. "Lost the uh, lost the keys yanno?"

"Where are the other girls."

"Lose them too?"

A flash enveloped Collins as she transformed in the same motion she extended her arm thumb up forefinger aimed and then jerked the hand back sharply three times in rapid succession. Rudolph twin shoved herself and Flannel twin down as the wall behind where their heads had been opened with three smoking round holes. They both transformed in a similar flash by which time Collins held both her hands together as though she clutched an invisible tommy gun and brakka-brakka-brakka'd the imaginary barrel left and right and back left across the entire room. The walls ate away, the papers swirled and shredded, the sisters cleaved behind one's gigantic medieval shield until they darted together through the door and into the hall for cover.

Collins took one hand away from the pantomimed gun but kept the other extended, shaking it a little more wildly to simulate the reduced support and added strain. With the now free hand cupped around an unseen lemon-sized object she pressed the approximate location of said object's edge to her clenched teeth and tore her mouth away to pull the nonreal pin of a nonreal grenade she then lobbed into the hall.

She swept the stack of relevant papers plus two or three of the remaining unsorted manila folders under one arm and backflipped through the window as the grenade exploded and the walls bent and dissolving flecks of confetti buffeted her onto her way down into the snow.

Papers swirled out of her grasp as she hopped her legs up and down in of the knee-high powder toward the driveway. Glass and other debris rained from above. Two steps later she spotted one twin in the next window over, hips balanced upon the sill and she, below a coxcomb and behind a nine-foot scoped rifle, took aim at Collins's back.

Best as she could with one arm pinning so many papers to her side, Collins pressed her palms straight forward and slid them across a straight surface tall and broad enough to cover her completely as the rifle burst with a heavy pillar of smoke and a bullet big enough to kill a blue whale cracked against the invisible wall, bounced back, and exploded. The flames whipped around the sides of Collins's wall but by the time they would have curled to reach her she had bounded the remaining stretch to the driveway. She mimed clicking a key and then opening a door before she tossed her papers onto a passenger seat that despite not existing caused the papers to hover in a mostly solid stack two or three feet off the ground. By the time she climbed onto a seat herself, legs forward and bent at the knees, one hand held out to grip a wheel, one jittering as it scraped a key against an ignition before it finally slid in —by that time a juggernaut in full metal armor barreled out the front door and charged her.

Collins yanked an imaginary gearshift into drive and stomped her foot. She and the floating stack of papers beside her spurred forward as the armored twin leapt and slammed against the rear of the fake vehicle, its dimensions defined by the distance between driver and passenger seat, had Collins thrown her papers a little less far she might have formed a minicar instead of a pickup and the twin might have missed entirely. As it stood, though, with the thousand sharp implements across her armor, so studded with spikes and angles it seemed impossible to touch her without impalement, the knight twin had basically stuck herself to the rear of the

car like a sea urchin and kept exactly five feet behind Collins as she plowed through the manor's front gate and onto the open road.

Her hands pumped the wheel back and forth and she swerved across the frosty road but no amount of reckless driving shook the twin from the rear. She tossed one hand behind her finger-pistol style and fired, but the bullets only rang off the armor and sprayed sparks while the knight hefted overhead a laser beam mace that flashed down with a tail of rainbow neon. Collins dove into the passenger seat, grabbed her papers, and rolled out the window. Before she hit the street she pedaled her legs in a cyclical motion and hit the pavement not with her shoes but the invisible wheel of an invisible unicycle. The car crumpled inward and the knight faceplanted at ninety miles per hour only to bounce twice with a spray of sparks, right herself, and hit the ground the third time at a run barely even behind Collins.

The unicycle was stupid, sure, slow too, but its distinct advantage lied in its hands-free nature. She swirled her free hand overhead, like twirling a lasso, and probably looked like a lasso to any non-gauchos out there, but what Collins actually lobbed were bolas that, despite the knight's attempt to defend herself with a lateral slice, skidded against the ground under the blade before wrapping around her ankles.

The knight dropped hard and Collins blitzed onward around a corner and left her long before she had a chance to rise again.

Holy wow. Holy wow indeed. Collins consulted the papers she managed to retain and estimated she'd lost at least a quarter, plus one of the folders that slipped out when she flung the bolas. Who cared so much about a coupla sheets and a folder? Well, her bosses of course. They'd give her—

Something infinitely distant cracked and she had only half a second to react to the cannonball bullet that rounded the corner and hurtled at her face. She reacted by kicking her unicycle out from under herself and nearly breaking her butt on the ground, but the bullet whizzed overhead and only stirred her ponytail. Sniper twin in the jester getup. Neither twin had powers too much like those they described on MagNet.

Since she was on the ground anyway, she undid imaginary latches on an imaginary briefcase, opened it, and placed her papers inside. With the latches closed again the papers jostled but did not escape the confines of the two by one foot rectangle her hands devised for them. She fastened the briefcase to her hip by a cable and mimed another vehicle. Practice made her fast and she managed the whole thing in a matter of five seconds, during which the knight did not round the corner and the sniper did not fire another bullet.

Collins rode in the direction of the Denver airport. Sound trouncing they'd give her. Two years undercover and what a welcoming committee. The crap she put up with, yanno? Devious.

Only after she reached the airport and got her ticket (had to carry her papers the old fashioned way then), only when she sat in the terminal and watched the planes descend and ascend through the white glow, with the mountain peaks a couple brush strokes in the distance, only then did she get a touch sentimental about the whole affair, the city, Denver the Sage herself. She knew all along what she was in for, so her own feelings had a feel of disingenuousness

about them, or maybe the artificial part was the logic she used to decry herself, either way a dim melancholy settled and she wondered if Cook really wound up killing Sage, knowing Cook as both a good person but a loyal adjunct to the Empire—unless in two years, as things do, things changed—but on the plane itself she got lucky and sat between a couple of high school basketball players en route to a tournament, so she chatted absentmindedly the whole flight back to what she supposed she had to call home again.

Four hours physical preparation, from arm regeneration in Medical to stringent cleaning, cleansing, tailoring, brushing, combing, tweezing, plucking, powdering, and straightening with the Handmaiden, then two minutes inside the Empress's study Hegewisch had sweat pouring down her forehead. Not solely a product of anxiety, cut her some slack. Granted the memory of DuPage wondering whether the Empress wanted Hegewisch dead lingered, granted the Empress daunted even in optimal circumstances, but by now—almost a day after her rescue from St. Louis—Hegewisch imagined they wouldn't kill her. How much of that imagining was imagination, how much a rational assessment of the Empress's character, who knew. Either way, Hegewisch found it hard for a social setting to try her nerves more than the wraith wonder emporium in St. Louis.

No, she sweated because the study was a fucking sauna. Jesus dick. Holy fuck was it hot in this room, despite the room's cavernous size, despite the high roof that ought to have trapped all heat at its unseeable apex, despite the lack of an audible heater. A fireplace flickered with flames at the midpoint between Hegewisch and the Empress, nothing more. For starters, the fireplace made no sense. The study itself made no sense. It laid near the back of the Empress's private yacht, docked not far from the Administration and Medical buildings. And while the yacht was big, by Hegewisch's estimation the study had to be twice its height, and she also wondered how a fireplace operated on a yacht, since she saw no chimney or even a smokestack from the outside, only a sleek modern form from bowsprit to whatever you called the back of the boat, the rudder, hell she didn't know. She was willing to assume the size discrepancy stemmed from a trick of clever interior design or feng shui, but she defaulted to an assessment of the fireplace as "bullshit"—or would have if not for the tropical jungle heat. Magic, maybe? Several girls in Chicago had fire powers.

Hegewisch had time to ponder all this crap because, upon the Handmaiden ushering her inside, Her Munificence said: "We shall speak once we have completed this chapter." She sat, like in online correspondence, in a chair that faced away from Hegewisch, so all she saw was an arm in red silk and pages propped against the armrest.

Paintings, mingled between the bookshelves, glowered at her with Renaissance agony.

On a pedestal beside the Empress's chair sat DuPage's Soul Gem, a crystal ball that swirled with a feather of darkness.

The Empress shut her book.

"Thy safe return doth please us, Junior Administrator."

"I have God to thank for my safekeeping, Your Munificence." Head bowed, deference exuded.

"Yes. It dismayed us to learn of the grave danger that befell thee. Although Aurora possesses an otherwise inviolable record of service, her inability to defend you adequately doth manifest as a frightful blemish."

A spark of anger flashed in Hegewisch she suppressed instantly, although her thoughts raced—She diverted her anger toward the person she had full license, now at least, to denounce.

"The former Centurion DuPage interpreted your orders regarding me as an unspoken call for execution. She believed the only purpose of your sending me on that mission was so that I may die. It was her command that Lieutenant Aurora not use her power to protect me. The lieutenant only followed orders; by our code, I vouch for her innocence."

While Hegewisch figured her little bit of eloquence a clever self-positioning, and silently applauded herself for keeping under control when she had so much license to go apeshit, the Empress shot upright with a rigid singular movement.

"That vile, baseborn, sullied, insidious wretch. That DuPage! I was utterly correct to— Only *she* would interpret my orders in such a way. Poisoned as she was by odious notions, empathic only to evil, in her black mind she could only visualize betrayal, abuse, and murder. I, we, *knew* she had fallen far, but to think this far!"

Hegewisch wiped her forehead. She took a reflexive step backward although her posture, by protocol, needed to remain solid. She had never seen the Empress angry before, never, sure she assumed the Empress had real emotions, but she never thought she would reveal them, to Hegewisch no less, what would a person with the Empress's power do when pissed the fuck off? What would she take it out on.

"Y. Your Munificence. Clearly your decision to remove former Centurion DuPage from power was wise—justified..."

The Empress turned.

Her face was smooth, bright, almost glassy, like a doll's. Her hair a conservative but immaculately-coiffured bob with one eye framed by long bangs. Her makeup was noticeable but in a way that called attention to its modesty, like a clear accentuation of natural beauty rather than a total replacement of it. She was the prettiest fucking woman Hegewisch ever saw and she was one hundred percent certain the Handmaiden had a hand in it because 1) Duh and 2) The Empress's daughter, Centurion Joliet, wasn't half so attractive.

But the half-manic gaze lanced Hegewisch through the gut so hard she stifled a grunt audible despite the omnipresent tick of a grandfather clock (sorry, "chronometer" in Imperial parlance) from the study's corner. The Empress said:

"You believe so, Junior Administrator? That is your assessment? DuPage needed to be eliminated?"

"I—I—"

The Empress's demeanor calmed. She straightened her bowtie, expelled a sigh, and allowed her eyes to close. "We have sought an end to DuPage for a long time. When the fate of Chicago still hung in the balance, when many rival factions vied for power, DuPage's amazing strength—and controllable supply of energy—proved an invaluable asset. She and Cook served me with utter loyalty. But we always feared a devil inside DuPage's heart, a lack of faith and... a lack of rectitude."

And she went on. She listed DuPage's innumerable sins in excruciating detail. Sins that ranged from the venial to the blasphemous, culminating in the concept of Centurion DuPage at its core: a Magical Girl who created wraiths.

"And I. I betrayed her. Although she had shown me unflagging loyalty, although in truth I were indebted to her seventy times over. For her wickedness, for the despicable affront that was her very nature, I betrayed one who trusted and placed faith in me. I. I."

A hoarse sob cracked her throat. Hegewisch's mind reeled, who was this Empress? Go back to being an unmovable object of idiocy, a spouter of thee and thy, someone Hegewisch could ridicule to salvage a little sanity. Was she not supposed to look? Was it rude to see Her Divine Munificence cry? Hegewisch turned her head but the harsh cry rang out: "Do not avert your eyes. See me! Witness me!"

The Empress seized the back of her chair with both hands and leaned over it. Tears ran down her face.

"This sin, if it be sin, was one of the gravest, one for which Dante consigned souls to the deepest, iciest fringes of Hell. And I am also a hypocrite—yes, even so! Even so I am a hypocrite. Because for long, for many years I made use of the power I now repudiate, I used it for my own benefit, I used it to shape this very Empire, I murdered hundreds with it, and it was only in a position of security I could find the leisure to strike against it. Ha, ha! That's all empires, isn't it? Built on the backs of genocide only to turn, once established unto posterity, and condemn other incipient cultures for the selfsame offense."

Holy fuck, of all the conversations Hegewisch imagined in this room, the one she was now having was somehow the worst.

"Those deaths cannot be undone, I can repent of them but the only true contrition I can achieve is in wielding the Empire that annihilated them to do good for thousands, tens of thousands, millions more than the total crushed—the scales weighed, one half souls my Empire ruined, one half those it saved, with the rightmost side crashing against the ground with a tremendous, holy clamor...!"

"Yes. Yes. Your Munificence—"

"I know the fault in every life sacrificed. In Denver too, I pray for her soul even as I order its destruction. I do not need your comment on that. It is only this one element, this betrayal of DuPage, my friend, my servant, for which I demand your judgment, Junior Administrator."

"*My* judgment."

"Yours, Junior Administrator. You are the priestess of God, are you not? You know Her, have seen Her, understand Her thoughts. You are that perfect link, the translator via which we can decode the cipher of Her rectitude. Tell me now, use all your wisdom, all your knowledge of Her—Was my betrayal of DuPage justified? Did she need to be eliminated? Was there no way, none at all, by which to redeem her?"

Redeem.

The silence fell and the twenty thousand eyes that were the Empress's two eyes dropped upon her.

Hegewisch thought about Madoka Kaname.

Would Madoka Kaname believe that DuPage could not be redeemed?

The answer was obvious. Hegewisch barely had to consider it. In another world, a worse world, DuPage wasn't even a rarity. In that world, all Magical Girls created the evil they fought against. Not wraiths then, but witches.

And Madoka Kaname redeemed them all. Even the worst, most monstrous witches, even those that would consume the world. Would Madoka Kaname believe that DuPage could not be redeemed? To Her, DuPage would not even be worthy of exceptional thought. She, like all others, would be saved.

DuPage's Soul Gem glowed on its pedestal not far from the Empress.

"Former Centurion DuPage," said Hegewisch after a deep breath, "violated God's order. Her elimination was just."

The Empress sagged. Her forehead pressed against the back of her chair. "I know not whether to be relieved or disappointed. Much gratitude, Junior Administrator."

"I live to serve Your Munificence." She failed to muster the necessary inflection, the words came out hilariously hollow, although the Empress didn't notice.

"Now." The Empress stood again. "Now we pray thou understand the purpose of our order. It is of course of great necessity that Centurion DuPage be known among the citizenry as a martyr to our cause; a hero struck down in war not by treachery but by the machinations of Denver. Her memory shall be extolled and celebrated. The memories of those who know otherwise of the circumstances surrounding her elimination—excepting thyself—shall be altered. Especially at this time."

Yes. Hegewisch saw. A martyr before a long campaign, what boosted morale more. What did it matter to her, who sat behind a table and pushed pencils all day...

She remembered Denver and had to bite her lip.

"Thou art of utmost importance to us, Junior Administrator Hegewisch. Thy role is more vital than even our strongest soldiers. Thou provide the moral soul of this Empire. Thus, it was necessary for thee to witness both Centurion DuPage and my betrayal of her. Thy judgment means all to me. We forever seek thy counsel and thy honest heart. Thou art dismissed."

A power seen as blasphemous, but used anyway. A betrayal fretted over, but committed anyway. A priestess most vital, but flung headlong into a miasma of despair anyway.

And all that was why they sent her to St. Louis?

As the Handmaiden led Hegewisch off the yacht, Hegewisch reminded herself over and over that she didn't mean shit to the Empress. That the Empress didn't care whether she lived or died. Maybe, on some level, even preferred the latter. Hegewisch had to maintain that mentality. Otherwise she would let this deathtrap clamp around her throat. She should have flung Madoka Kaname in the Empress's face... But she knew she would never have the spine for that.

And anyway, she knew Madoka Kaname would even think the Empress could be redeemed...

— *Three Alternative Meditations on the Death of DuPage* —

1. Lieutenant Aurora: Reposed in wooden chair in her stark bedchamber, tilted and her head tilted too, blood slowly pooling in the inverted basin of her skull, forming for herself a migraine, lips congealed into a ceaseless mumble.
2. Third Centurion Cicero: Nothing much differently than normal, the same austere orders barked to her underlings, the same official pomp and circumstance for orders delegated, tasks undergone, but in the back of her mind a sheer frustration that after their shared history, after the abuse Cicero suffered as a new recruit under DuPage's iron wing, after the wanton disregard and seething hatred shared between superior and subordinate, at the point when Cicero had dragged herself up the ranks and come so close to usurpation of that withered, sickly wretch—the face went dim, the body disintegrated, and Cicero had no hand in it. They last spoke at the meeting when DuPage received her orders. Good riddance, Cicero wanted to say, and think no more on it. She could not.
3. Second Centurion Cook: The Handmaiden returned her to her original appearance. So first chance she got to slink away after debriefing, a dolled-up twenty-something with cocoa complexion sat cross-legged on a barstool, hem of her chiffon skirt draped carefully carelessly upon her mid-thigh, heeled gladiator sandal tap-tap-tapping against the counter as she nursed a fruity concoction. Some handsome man approached, asked her name, and she replied with a, "Uhhhhh, you can call me Valerie?" that lured him deeper with the promise of affable idiocy and she spent the night in someone else's bed.

As the Empress intimated, a grand funeral was held for Centurion DuPage. All citizens of Greater Chicago and Milwaukee attended. They gathered on the deck of the Empress's yacht, broad enough to fit them all, arranged by platoon. The three remaining Centurions stood foremost, behind them each lieutenant, with a fourth column arranged behind Aurora and a fifth column behind the Governor of Milwaukee. All very officious, all details hammered until the hammer dented the wood. Bureaucratic folk, including the Administrators Junior and Senior, the Handmaiden, and the Physician, were arranged below a massive mounted screen upon which was projected the painted propaganda image of the Empress in all her glory. Everyone wore, what the fuck else? White suits. White suits front to back.

In the center of the deck, between the projector screen and the five columns, a likewise white casket lay closed. No body was in it, of course, but it was all about the *symbolism*, the illusion of corporeality. Atop the casket was a painting of DuPage that flattered her far more than any speech in her memory, of which there were infinity. The ceremony lasted at least three hours in the midday murk of never-sunny Lake Michigan, abob on gentle waves that nonetheless had Hegewisch ill in minutes. First, of course, the Empress's portrait gave a speech, possibly prerecorded, which outlined DuPage's historical significance to the Empire, the tireless service she performed, et cetera. That shit done, Cook gave a speech that framed DuPage as a committed and concerned ally and equal, even a companion in the most Platonic sense, and afterward Cicero spoke of DuPage as a loving mentor and wise commander. All in all a tripartite construction of the creature known as DuPage (pronounced Duh-Pahj every single time, although Hegewisch hoped Cicero would slip a Due-Page somewhere): Servant, comrade, leader.

The yacht had by then sailed deep into the lake. The pall bearers—Cook, Cicero, Aurora, Fourth Centurion Joliet, the Handmaiden, and for some reason Hegewisch's boss the Senior Administrator—hefted the casket overboard and let it plop into the depths. A retinue of Magical Girls who used guns for weapons fired a salute. Somebody, possibly a plant, sobbed in stoic semi-silence.

Then the shit everyone cared about began.

First: promotions. The Empire had to have Four Centurions, duh. They were a generation of girls raised on Pokemon, they knew the number that proceeded "Elite." The official announcement let Hegewisch down: As everyone expected, DuPage's lieutenant, Aurora, assumed the position of Fourth Centurion, while the three existing Centurions all bumped up a number.

Tasteless, colorless yes-ma'am Aurora. The obvious choice, sure. As DuPage's lieutenant, she had de facto command over DuPage's platoon already. She had a long record of loyalty, had been with the Empire three years. And it continued the Empress's tradition of appointing sycophants devoid of emotion to the highest offices, a tradition begun with Cicero and Joliet.

Other promotions spiced the pot a little more. For starters, as the Empress explained, Minneapolis and St. Louis had fallen under Imperial dominion and required Governors. Cook's lieutenant gained Minneapolis; Cook's highest-ranked sergeant gained St. Louis.

If not for the stringent obedience beaten into every girl in Chicago, a murmur of genuine surprise might have swept the columns. Cook's lieutenant, sure. But to skip the chain of command, which would have placed Cicero's lieutenant as next in line, and go straight to Cook's *sergeant*—the snub was obvious. (Everyone knew why Joliet's lieutenant got skipped.) Nobody gasped, but at least every pair of eyes flicked toward Cicero's lieutenant, a loyal but by Chicago standards eccentric girl named Berwyn, to detect some palpable emotion on her face—she was smart enough to betray none, although it made the whole affair way more boring.

The whole thing was boring. Fuck. Politics of a made-up Empire full of made-up people. Who got promoted, who got snubbed, lieutenants and sergeants and Centurions, only someone with infinite time on their hands could even plunge into such a world. While the anticipation had sustained her, the result only jaded Hegewisch more. She barely noticed when the vacancy of Cook's lieutenant went to a girl with a long ponytail Hegewisch had never seen before, although the Empress explained she had spent several years undercover in Denver with the name Collins. Her new name was to be Kenosha.

Collins, Kenosha, God. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, who *fucking* cared, who cared about these stupid names and these stupid ranks and these stupid promotions and stupid DuPage. Smirking no longer satisfied. The names weren't funny anymore. People had fucking died. The death of DuPage didn't absolve shit, everyone could cry all they wanted about how she created wraiths and how that perverted the natural order, but if the Empress didn't order her otherwise all DuPage would have done that day was sleep like a koala.

These thoughts served the fanfare for the Empress's final announcement. Once the mandated buzz about the new promotions settled, her Delphic portrait spoke once more:

"Now. Centurion DuPage's death brings not an end to the dream for which she strove. The Empire she helped form thrives yet on and we as a united force turn our eyes outward. Our borders to the north. To the west. To the south are now secure. The center of this grand continent belongs to us. Now the trumpet of our benefactor Lord God hearkens us to grander heights—heights our destiny it is to attain. For Centurion DuPage's dying thrust cleaved quick to the heart of that intolerable Denver, and so the pernicious silvertongued voice that lured our fellow Puella Magi across this nation to deviant practices hath finally been silenced. Where that voice falls aquiver in the limp wind, our voice must bellow and cow all who hear.

"Thus, we shall sweep to the east. Our prior undue care shall cease; with Denver deposed, we fear no force that would stand against us. Our next campaign shall be a long one; many cities shall fall to us, many Puella Magi shall see our light and swell our ranks.

"Our war of conquest shall begin on the morrow. No further preparations are necessary; we have trained our entire lives as sisters of this Empire for this strife.

"Centurion Cook!"

"Your Munificence?" A stately bow.

"I task thee, our most illustrious Centurion, and thy renowned platoon, with a route most deserving of thy capabilities. Take Detroit. Cleveland. Pittsburgh. Philadelphia."

"And may I ask? If I be not too impudent? What shall I do about the smaller cities between those greater ones, ahhhhh?"

"Leave them. Our war shall not be one of historical convention, where even small patches of untaken territory serve as inviolable bulwarks against supply lines and proper movement. Once the stronger cities fall, we shall have full license to reap the littler."

"Ohhhhh, I understand. Your will be done."

"Centurion Cicero!"

"Your Munificence." A bow more rigid than her predecessor's.

"Although thy hot-blooded youth hath once strained against our spur, thy loyalty stands now resolute. Take Indianapolis. Cincinnati. Columbus. Baltimore."

"Your will be done."

"Centurion Aurora!"

"Your Munificence." Her bow mimicked Cicero's in every way.

"The days of thy newfound rank hath only now begun. But thou hast long-developed familiarity with the platoon over which thou were once lieutenant—We expect thy command to match your more veteran peers. Take Louisville. Nashville. Charlotte. Richmond."

"Your will be done, Your Munificence."

"Centurion Joliet."

"Hkk—Hh! Yes, Your Munificence!" No bow. She saluted, like in the army.

"Thou and thy platoon shall remain in Chicago and continue to harvest its energy to supply our soldiers abroad."

Joliet's body bent in the middle like someone pumped a shotgun into her. Her head twisted at a ninety-degree tilt and she emitted another "Hrrk" sound in her throat as her salute remained glued to her forehead. Shorter than everyone around her, dwarfed by the lieutenant that stood behind her, Joliet had the posture and mien of a fifty-year-old near-retiree, despite at fourteen being the youngest Magical Girl of any rank in the entire Empire (Hegewisch, fifteen, a close second). She looked far older than her mother, although to be fair the Empress cheated. The biggest thing was the hair, which had a salt-and-pepper hue with dark strands mixed with gray in a kind of pattern you might see on a dog. The main thing Joliet had in her favor was unstoppable acne, which at least reminded people she was not, in fact, a victim of menopause.

"Hkkk, hah..."

The lack of a prompt "Your will be done" turned all eyes toward her. The first true faux pas of the entire event, and it had proceeded so swimmingly until then. Unlike the other Centurions, Hegewisch never got happy to see Joliet stumble. Only secondhand embarrassment.

But before the Empress could respond in a way far more lax than she would have to anyone else, an unlikely source bailed Joliet out.

I would recommend you avoid this current course of action.

Everyone knew that voice, although nobody knew where it came from. Everyone's eyes jolted left and right until someone pointed to the gunwale left of the screen and shouted "There!"

Several girls transformed but the quickest was one of Cicero's soldiers, who lunged forward and cleaved Kyubey in twain from halfway across the deck with the help of a gigantic buster sword. All communication with Kyubey (mostly disposal of spent grief cubes) was done via specifically-appointed members of each platoon; if Kyubey ever approached unauthorized personnel, the doctrine went something like "shoot on sight."

Before the halves of Kyubey splashed overboard, another appeared on the right.

It's quite easy to see exactly what you're planning.

That Kyubey was wrecked as quickly. But the third appeared on the top of the giant screen that displayed the portrait of the Empress, balanced upon its narrow edge with his four paws. By the time someone with a ranged attack took aim, he had strolled down the side of the screen, gravity a nonfactor, and curled into a ball at exactly the location of the Empress's face. Because the portrait was a projection, it layered on top of his body and created a swirl of mingled features.

The cities you've ordered your subordinates to conquer all lead in the same direction. There's one place in particular you intend to encircle with your entire army. That's just basic geography, really. But knowing your predispositions, Miss Luce, I have no difficulty at all guessing why you'd target that city in particular.

Nobody knew what to do. Should they blast him? And in doing so assault the image of the Empress herself? It was severe punishment to maim a portrait of Her Munificence. Nobody displayed any leadership and the Empress herself remained silent.

It's unlikely you'll listen to me, but I'll give you my warning nonetheless. Stay out of Washington, Miss Luce. Right now I like the state of human affairs—it's the affairs of Magical Girls that have been so troublesome of late.

"Someone shut him up," said Centurion Cicero. "Does nobody have a precise weapon?"

Several did, but who wanted to take the risk? Meanwhile, Cook had more than enough skill to pluck Kyubey off the screen without a mote of damage, but she seemed a little amused by the events.

I find your "empire" useful. It's remarkably efficient, it extends the life expectancies of Magical Girls, and it collects several powerful specimens that have provided many important services to me. But if I find the detriments of your "empire" to outweigh its benefits, Miss Luce, I will not hesitate to terminate it. Try not to shake the status quo too much, alright?

Kyubey uncurled, dashed up the top of the screen, and disappeared behind it.

Cicero shot out a hand. "Find and destroy him!"

But before anyone made it far, the Empress finally spoke:

"Leave him. The Incubator means nothing to our Empire. We are stronger than him; in his foolish avarice he allowed us to prosper beyond his means to curtail us. Soon, we shall have no use for him at all; soon, no Puella Magi shall have use for him at all. We do not fear the Incubator. We do not fear the Incubator!"

Cook, always skilled at these sorts of things, caught on to a catchy bit of propagandistic rhetoric when she heard it. She raised her arms and mimicked: "We do not fear the Incubator! We do not fear the Incubator!"

Others joined in. Soon, all chanted it; they had to. Even Hegewisch had to, it would look bad if she was the only one who didn't.

"We do not fear the Incubator! We do not fear the Incubator!"

And so, even though nobody had thought too much about him before that moment anyway, nobody feared the Incubator.

Eating Dead Birds

This pretty picture impressed before all else. Latin lacked a spark: Who had not pillaged the Romans? Anyone could create something ugly. Billions did.

"How do you feel? You had, um, standard memory alteration—on the Empress's behest. You may sense something uncanny."

"Who painted it?"

During day, Magical Girls looked different. Laila adjusted reading glasses and drummed the edge of her desk. "Her Munificence's portrait? That'd be the Handmaiden. Her magic works on more than clothes. You'll meet her. She'll give you the standard gold armor. You okay?" said Laila.

Clownmuffle squinted, squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them everything felt right again. She nodded and Laila exhaled.

"Okay. Great. You'll also need to meet the Physician for an examination. It's especially pertinent in your case due to the condition of your Soul Gem. Before that, I'll ask you some questions for our files. Alright?"

"Yes." She disliked how Laila spoke now. She had far less character. Nothing unique existed. She became anyone behind a desk. She performed a task. But it felt pleasant enough to stand in the presence of this painting.

"Question one. Your real name."

Clownmuffle waited for Laila to ask a question. But she stared at Clownmuffle silently. After several seconds, Clownmuffle turned to the painting, which had finer details upon scrutiny.

"Hello. Your name. What is your real name?"

"Miss Vizcarra."

"Spell it."

"M-I-S-S space V-I-Z-C-A-R-R-A."

Laila's fingers rummaged across her keyboard. She squinted at what she typed. "...Your first name isn't Miss."

"It's not."

Another stare. These stares, why bother? If someone wanted to converse, they ought to do so with clarity. But Laila interjected these elongating silences.

"So what is your real first name?"

"I forget."

"No you don't."

"Type Clownmuffle."

"I can't do that."

"You can."

"I have to put the real name."

"Clown space Muffle."

"Okay stop." Laila slapped her desk and made herself jolt but not Clownmuffle. Nonetheless she straightened her tie and puffed air. "If you act like this around anyone in the Empire except me, you will get hurt. Bad."

"I won't."

"They can hurt even you." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I want to help you. In St. Louis it was a situation you could beat and I couldn't, and you helped me. I'd have died otherwise. So let me help you in a situation I can beat and you can't. You have to moderate your behavior—are you listening."

Of course Clownmuffle listened. Sight and sound were separate senses, no? So while Laila prattled nothing prevented her to attend to both the voice and the portrait.

"Look at me," said Laila. "You have to *moderate* your behavior here. When someone asks you a question, answer it straight. Do what people tell you. Especially your superiors. You've lived in society to some extent before now. Right? How did you make money? What was your job?"

"Contract killer."

Laila typed it into her computer. "Aha. Got one. Didn't you have to act normal so nobody would catch you?" Unlike everyone else, Laila made a refreshing lack of hullabaloo over the occupation itself. "It's like that. The Empire is your new society. You have to observe certain customs or it'll reject you. Got it?"

Yes. Clownmuffle understood. The concept of societal obligation never confused her. Her eyes tilted again toward the portrait. That woman—the Empress. Even if Laila's blood turned turnip, the image frothed with passion. If the head displayed ingenuity enough to both commission and inspire such an image, then perhaps this society had a scrap of merit. She scratched her scalp and her eyelid.

"Charlie. Vizcarra."

"Thank you. Short for Charlene? Charlotte? Spelled with an I-E or E-Y?"

Clownmuffle shrugged.

"Good enough I guess." Laila typed. "Next question..."

When she contracted: Early 2008. Places she lived as a Magical Girl: West Covina, California for a month; San Bernardino, California for the rest. Description of her power: Magic.

"You. Have to be. More specific than *magic*."

"You saw," said Clownmuffle. "I do magic."

Laila groaned through clenched teeth. "Damaging card tricks and stage magic-based teleportation. These people want specifics, and in a practical capacity. Okay?"

"Magic works outside rationalism. If you quantify it, it diminishes."

"That's fake. You made that up. It's not real. *I* can describe my power fine. I have a staff that fires a pink laser. The laser heals humans and Magical Girls. It hurts wraiths. Simple, yeah?"

"Your power's weak."

Hands flew up. "Okay sure! Sure. But Centurion Cook's power: She can make walls of ice. I also think she can make water hot, which is how she melted—"

"Her power's weak."

"It wrecked you."

"You shot me first. In the back of the head." A statement of fact. No reproach intended.

"I'm sorry," said Laila. "I wanted to protect you. You had no hope against Centurion Cook."

"Untrue."

"Okay okay. Whatever you want. I can cobble a description of your power based on what I saw. Next question, little personal—are you a virgin?"

Clownmuffle scratched in front of her ear.

"Yeah I know," said Laila. "Odd question. The Empress requires it. She believes in, ahem, 'upholding the purity of Puella Magi.'"

"A noble goal."

"So denizens of the Empire are expected to follow certain prohibitions: sex, drugs, swearing. I'll provide a full list shortly." She paused, pushed her fingertips under her glasses and kneaded the corners of her eyeballs. She sighed. "Anyway. Because many, ah, Puella Magi lose their virginal status prior to joining the Empire... Uck. This'll be awkward no matter how we slice it. Let's get a simple yes or no and go to the next awkward question."

Purity of "Puella Magi." Well yes. They ought to adhere to certain standards of behavior, as status set them apart and above the human gaggle. Scratch—scratch. But ah. But ah. What did this have to do with purity? It ah. It ah. Nothing. Or uh. An indescribable sense of filth... an ugliness of spirit? She wiped her forehead.

"I—I don't remember."

"Oh wow. I totally expected you *would* be a virgin. Guess I'll put down 'no'..."

"Stop. Stop. I did not say—That's not what I—"

Laila had already typed. "Don't worry, you won't be punished for behavior before you joined the Empire. The Empress believes in rectification and redemption. But no sex from now on, with men or women."

"Ah—wait—"

"Next question: Have you ever been employed as a sex worker? Meaning, a prostitute, exotic dancer, et cetera—"

"I don't remember."

"Meaning yes. We're moving along swimmingly now."

"Laila, please—"

"Anh! Not Laila." She leaned over her desk and tapped an embossed name plate: Hegewisch. "Titles only. Speaking of which, you have a new title. From now on, your name is Flossmoor."

"Hideous."

"Agreed. Sounds like an ad at the dentist. Take it as incentive to follow the rules and rise up the ranks, because you can get a better name upon promotion."

Flossmoor. She scratched her head.

"I'm also assigning you to the platoon of Centurion Joliet—Do you remember Centurion Joliet?"

The name. Nhhh... "No," she had to say. Scratch, scratch, scratch.

"Good, you shouldn't. Anyway, her platoon's where most new recruits go—"

"Wait." It was as though Clownmuffle remembered something long forgotten. She leaned over Laila's desk. "My Soul Gem."

"Cracked, yes. That also went into my decision. The other three Centurions will depart on campaign soon, so although you're strong you might—"

"How many girls live here?"

"Minus Centurion DuPage, plus you and your witch friend—one hundred and eight."

"One of them can repair my soul."

"Unfortunately, no. Unless someone with classified powers has that ability. But anyone whose records I can access does not."

"Are there records on girls outside the Empire?" There had to be. Much like Denver. Those who form societies keep an outward eye on the other.

"My boss, the Senior Administrator, handles that information."

"Take me to her."

"No. But I will contact her on your behalf, as it's in the Empire's interest to keep its subjects healthy."

Clownmuffle closed her eyes.

Laila continued: "Next: a few more questions, then some regulations..."

When they finally finished, Clownmuffle glanced one more time at the portrait and exited Laila's office. Crosslegged on a chair outside waited Murrieta-Temecula. She glared at Clownmuffle but said nothing, and while Clownmuffle shuffled the instructional material Laila gave her about the Empire, she rose and entered Laila's office.

Clownmuffle's next destination, per Laila's directive, was the building adjacent Laila's named Medical. A Physician awaited her, or so she was told, because upon entry an unanimated secretary with white hair and blank red eyes told her to take a seat in the lobby. The lobby had a single light, above the secretary, so Clownmuffle sat in shadow and squinted to read the text of the pamphlets. One pamphlet described the chain of command. It discussed the Empress, mentioned the all-important Handmaiden, and described the Four Centurions: DuPage, Cook, Cicero, Joliet. Except someone crossed out DuPage's section in black marker and wrote Aurora.

The next pamphlet listed prohibited activity and contraband. Everything was prohibited. Everything was contraband.

She placed the pamphlets on her lap and leaned back while the automaton secretary typed to stop silence. Her soul had ached ever since she transformed in St. Louis. A constant dullness imbued her body that upon random intervals flared to the extent of buckling her. The prior night, which she spent in "Temporary Housing"—a square—her nose bled and so did something else. Her brittle fingernails yellowed. They flaked when she nibbled them. So did her skin. Strands of hair came out whenever she scratched her scalp.

The physicality of her existence unnerved her.

The secretary, without looking up, told her to enter the door and meet the Physician. The door led to a diploma-lined hallway as dim-lit as the lobby and at the end another closed door wore a plaque that read: DR. SI YU CHO.

Dr. Si Yu Cho opened the door before Clownmuffle had a chance to knock. Her aesthetic chafed against everyone Clownmuffle had seen in the Empire. While some vestige of a white suit remained, most of her form disappeared beneath an oilcloth smock and matching heavy-duty gloves, both smeared with white paste. A liquid red-white crescent dribbled from one cheek and the stringy dark hair that cascaded around her face had several strands clumped together by the same uncertain mixture. The low light provided an extremity of paleness in her features, like her skin glowed in the dark. She wiped her gloves on her stomach.

"Oh hello." Her accent equal parts Chinese and British. "My name is Dr. Cho, you must be Miss... Flossmoor?"

"Clownmuffle."

"Hohoho. Hohoho. Come in, come in. Undress. Your examination shall begin shortly."

She indicated a medical examination table awash in a large room stuffed with wayward machinery and overflowing cabinets. A medical gown hung from a coatrack. A second examination table, not parallel to the first, bore a drained corpse cut open. It had white hair and red eyes like the secretary. Dr. Cho bothered around the body. A rack beside it contained several power tools and sharp implements and behind it hung another portrait of the Empress, massive enough to cover the wall from floor to ceiling. Its existence cut a quadrant from the room's accumulated junk; not one tool or device touched even the gilded frame.

A small arc of red matter had landed on the Empress's knee.

Dr. Cho hefted a buzzsaw from her table and attached it to a hook on the rack. She twisted back her head and said: "Oh, I said undress."

"No," said Clownmuffle.

Another courtly chuckle. "Can I examine you with your clothes on? I think not."

"Blood's on your painting."

The doctor's head snapped toward it and she surveyed it crown toward toe until she discovered the spot. She whipped out a rag pinched between two boxes of various-sized wrenches and drew the blood away from the knee, although she had to stand on tiptoe to reach it, larger than life as the Empress loomed. Several of the room's few lights were turned toward the painting so it stood out far more than the vague murk of objects or even the doctor herself. Light did little to define her, even as she swept into the beams.

"Astute, astute. Hohoho. Dedication to Imperial dogma already? I've seen those who live to please. Fear not, love. Magic made this image, it's easy enough to clean." Sure enough, one pass of the rag removed all matter with no smear. "Now undress."

"No."

Head tilted and frowned sad. "Why not? It's for your health. I won't saw you open, hohoho. I do this often. Even the Centurions have regular examinations. Besides, I hear your Soul Gem's cracked. Your health ought to be your chief concern."

"You can examine my Soul Gem." She removed the ring from her finger and transformed it into the egg shape. It hurt but she withheld her wince.

Dr. Cho slinked closer. Away from the light, her dark hair melded with the dark room. She became patchwork squares of floating Cheshire Cat until she reemerged at Clownmuffle's side and plucked the gem daintily between two gloved fingers. "You poor love. Does it hurt? Don't answer, I can measure that. Now undress."

"You have the soul. My body doesn't matter."

"Hohoho. That's the mistake most Puella Magi make. Body and soul, mind and spirit, all these things interlink." She thatched her fingers together, the Soul Gem balanced on the tip of her thumb. "Undress."

Undress! Undress! Undress! Again and again did she fail to receive the message? Everything itched and Clownmuffle's denuded fingernails tore all across her skin. *Who are these sick freaks!* How did she get here? Why did she not already run away? She twisted toward the exit but remembered the gem in Dr. Cho's hands but by the time she reached for it Dr. Cho flicked it over her shoulder and the albino split open on the next table sat up and caught it.

"I've seen and touched countless specimens of the female anatomy," said Dr. Cho. "I promise to work efficiently."

"No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No."

"If not for me, at least for her?"

The gloved finger pointed. Across the room, past the bloodless albino, to the portrait. The stream of no in Clownmuffle's mind abated and a sudden flood of stuffiness leaked out her brain and down her throat and into her shoes. For... her. The Empress. Or the portrait of the Empress. Or the woman who painted the Empress—Handmaiden.

A patch of dried skin on her throat bled when she scratched it. The painting had a certain allure. She failed to place it but it attracted. The sensation she felt when she encountered a 10 out of 10 costume, although the ermine trim the Empress wore did not titillate, yet something of the composition or expression compelled Clownmuffle to...

No. No! No. No, no. No. She refused. The moment her trembling fingers reached to unknot the tie around her neck she forced them down. Her eyes tilted to avoid the stare of the portrait. Dr. Cho placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Do what she wants, yes love?"

Face still downturned, whole body thrumming, she reached again for her necktie and this time untied it.

After the examination, in which Dr. Cho prodded and kneaded many things and took meticulous notes and murmured to herself and said almost nothing beyond instructions for how she wanted Clownmuffle to position herself, and which also involved an assessment portion in which Clownmuffle had to run on a treadmill and grip a handlebar and jump above a bar and innumerable other things, she was allowed to dress herself. A seething, burning sensation lingered under her face as she sat with her hands in her lap and waited for Dr. Cho to prod and knead her Soul Gem as she had her body. Every touch stung Clownmuffle with pain, but she clenched her teeth and refused to make a sound or shuffle.

"That's all! Not so bad?" Dr. Cho handed the gem back to Clownmuffle. "Impressive physicals. Shame about your Soul Gem. I predict your body will continue to deteriorate the longer you use magic. So abstain and you'll hold together."

That was all she said and Clownmuffle decided not to ask questions. She left as fast as she could.

According to Laila, she had to meet one more person before she checked into her platoon. That person was the Handmaiden, who would enchant her costume to match the golden armor of everyone else. Already Clownmuffle did not want to do this. As she exited the Medical building she wondered what force made her allow Dr. Cho to handle her in such a way. In fact she wondered why she had not fled the moment she was alone. Someone—she forgot who—said if she tried to flee, they could track and recapture her. The tracking, likely true. But the recapturing, heh.

No. Wait. She knew why she stayed. The Empire's records. Someone they knew about must have the power to repair her Soul Gem. Laila would query on her behalf. Scratch, scratch, scratch. Something stuffy filled her brain. She thought about the image of the portrait and decided: the Empire's records.

Not so different from Denver. Play their game, win their prizes.

She supposed a similar reason drove everyone else to live in society.

But to change her costume. The essence of herself as a Magical Girl. Emblem of her individuality. Even if only temporarily—to some extent, one had to uphold a sense of self. If one bent to the world's whims—perhaps they never snapped—but did they have much within them anyway? She stood between the Medical and Administration buildings. A sidewalk wound between them down a short slope to concrete dock beside which bobbed a gargantuan yacht on a gargantuan lake. The Handmaiden supposedly awaited within it.

She shuffled the brochures and pamphlets, read the title of the foremost, and proceeded down the walkway. In her current condition she could not transform anyway. What a lie—what a weak excuse. A true Magical Girl demonstrated integrity even when nobody saw. Was that not the definitive element of magic? No matter how many humans Clownmuffle saved, nobody knew she did it. Nobody knew they were even endangered. By the logic she now employed, nothing mattered, her behavior did not matter...

Her gem throbbed.

She thought of the portrait. She scratched her scalp. Things mattered. But this exceptional circumstance—rare even by Kyubey's admission—Bah. She passed a pair of guards who cleared her with a nod and ascended the gangplank onto the yacht.

One other thing spurred her onward. The Handmaiden. She wanted to meet the Handmaiden. She wanted to know her face.

Laila's directions led her belowdecks. Any sense of anticipation or built tension dispersed at the premature manifestation of the Handmaiden in the corridor at the base of the stairs, no door knocked or bell rang to summon her, she simply stood straight and when Clownmuffle descended the final step said: "Hello. I am the Handmaiden to Her Munificence the Empress of Greater Chicago and Its Territorial Holdings."

"I'm Clown—"

A force slapped her. It felt like a hand but no hand approached. Her face tingled.

"The Junior Administrator and the Physician have been lax in rectifying your audacious ways. In two words you have committed two grievous errors. First, you failed to salute your superior. Second, you did not refer to yourself by your proper name, Flossmoor."

Normally one deadened pain. The Soul Gem allowed that. But Clownmuffle failed to deaden the sting of the slap, either from its exorbitant force or her system's breakdown. That mattered none. How did the Handmaiden strike her without raising her hand? Telekinesis? No. Her power changed the way things looked. Costumes, paintings. Theoretically could she extend her power to her own hand so it appeared at her side but actually—

A second slap.

"Salute your superior."

Play their game, win their prizes. Nonetheless, she said: "No."

She raised her arm to block the third slap but it struck her other cheek instead and this time with enough force to slam her into the wall. When she attempted to recover with a ducked roll, a foot crashed into her thigh and swept her legs from under her. Another foot—maybe the same—pressed against her chest. Pinned in half a second.

Garbage.

The Handmaiden stood over her. She appeared to stand rigid and straight. "Salute your superior."

The insistence on the point made Clownmuffle less disposed to do it. But the moment her hand twitched to lunge for the unseen foot, the second foot kicked her in the head.

"So many Puella Magi enter Chicago under the belief that they are special." Kick. "Those who are special do not need to follow rules." Kick. "The best way to force someone to submit

is to teach them they are not special."

Kick, kick... kick.

Clownmuffle timed the kicks and caught the next by the ankle. Except she did not, because the kick came from a different direction.

"Maybe you can set a record for longest to last before you break," said the Handmaiden. "I suppose that might qualify as special."

A thick flare heated Clownmuffle's head, not purely from the pain. But as she calculated her next strike, the heat fizzled, crisp blackness remained. After several seconds of nonresistance, the Handmaiden ceased.

"Salute your superior."

Clownmuffle performed the salute Laila had demonstrated.

"Rise."

Clownmuffle rose.

"So you're not as unreasonable as the Junior Administrator warned. I was prepared to pummel you all afternoon." Her posture remained the same straightforward stolidity, but Clownmuffle suspected she was prepared as ever to strike. Clownmuffle no longer intended to provoke her, however. Something came to her, a thought that framed everything.

"You are special."

"Incorrect. I'm a servant like any other."

"Your painting is beautiful."

"It is beautiful because of the subject it captures, our immortal Empress. Furthermore, address me as milady."

Clownmuffle said nothing until the Handmaiden struck her again. The word "milady" ranked among the ugliest words in the lexicon, but Clownmuffle compelled herself to say it anyway. This Handmaiden... Was she a rival or an outright villain? Someone who painted a portrait so beautiful, so doused in emotion, so unique and individual—Clownmuffle could not reconcile that portrait with the preprogrammed animatronic who stood before her. Like Laila, whose vocabulary shifted when she sat behind her desk, this Handmaiden must have a hidden life within her, a spark of singular soul. And yet Dr. Cho maintained her sense of self even in the context of this "Empire." So how much agency could Clownmuffle pluck from the Handmaiden? She scratched her scalp. Several strands of hair came off between her fingers.

"Oh. You're falling apart," said the Handmaiden. "You may in fact be less than special. Now transform so I can enchant your uniform."

"I can't—" Slap.

"Don't lie to me. The Junior Administrator's field report indicates you can transform for a short period of time before you experience negative effects. I can apply my enchantment in instants. Transform."

Transform. Undress. Transform. Undress. Transform. Undress.

She transformed. The pain knocked her to her knees. She coughed blood immediately and liquid ran down her skin. The Handmaiden touched her and a flash of light transformed her...

"That is all," said the Handmaiden.

Clownmuffle ceased her magic and passed out.

And so that was this Empire. Indeterminate time passed. Eventually Clownmuffle awoke in a cot in a room with three other cots. Those cots were empty, the room was empty. An oblong window near the ceiling gave only gray light. From outside the ajar door indistinct voices muttered.

She remained silent and still and closed her eyes until the sense of self returned as did her memory. As did her pain.

Simplicity streamlined everything. Her physical condition deteriorated despite her efforts so her mentality must remain firm. As it always had. Doubt and moral quandary must be quashed. As it always had. Yet the portrait, which hung also in her new room, and the eyes of which she felt upon her nape, softened her resolve—she had to solidify. As it always had.

1. Restore her Soul Gem.
2. Usurp the Empire.

Simplicity. Even if the Empire fashioned art worth more than most individuals, she must not forget its overarching design of conformity and assimilation. She had to forget the portrait. She felt its eyes but had to forget it. She turned over in her cot and had to forget it. As it always had.

She threw the blanket off her and stepped out. Someone had dressed her in a plain white nightgown. At the foot of her cot, a fresh set of white suit and tie was folded. She could not reach for it without glancing upon the portrait, but she dressed with her back turned.

Bury it all. Such gravity ill fit her. Her injury weighted her beneath the surface she much rather inhabited. It became harder to ignore certain things when she no longer had the physical dominance to stand above it.

In the hallway a pair of girls confronted her. "The Physician prescribed you a day's rest."

"Go back to bed."

"I'm well," said Clownmuffle.

The girls conferred. "She *looks* well."

"Lieutenant Bolingbrook disliked the Physician's pronouncement anyway."

"Let's let the lieutenant decide."

They led her down a hallway lined with rooms of similar structure to the one she woke in, each with its own portrait to catch her eye before she stepped past. Through occasional windows Clownmuffle glimpsed the city of Chicago, tall tenements that blotted the sky and no sense of space beyond the jumble of geometry. Not the same lakeside spot as the Administration and Medical buildings, no yacht or water body.

Downstairs, Clownmuffle met Lieutenant Bolingbrook, introduced as "The Lieutenant to the Third Centurion, Joliet." Bolingbrook, located in a gymnasium along with about twenty other girls, most of whom exercised coordinated drills such as running in a line or marching in step, immediately became the most disappointing of the endless parade of quasi-eccentric characters Clownmuffle had met in Chicago, one who made Clownmuffle realize how fortunate she had been to experience the relatively refreshing originality of Dr. Cho or the Handmaiden. On MagNet, Clownmuffle had often seen Magical Girls with uninspired costumes, generic outfits that strictly adhered to common tropes: witch, ranger, knight, et cetera. And while a girl's costume came from her soul, her spirit, her self, not even the most uninspired costume came attached to someone so threadbare as this so-called "Lieutenant Bolingbrook," who herself was an archetype, or else had long since devolved herself to be one. She essentially copied the Handmaiden's personality wholesale minus the layer of complexity added by the Handmaiden's artistic merits, and in doing so became nothing but a traditional staff sergeant (regardless of her actual rank) who belted the same orders, the same demand for respect, the same belittling remarks.

Indeed, the first thing Bolingbrook said as Clownmuffle entered the room? "Salute your superior." Followed by a strike when Clownmuffle abjectly refused to stoop before such a pathetic specimen of mass production. The Handmaiden at least had a shred of something significant so that Clownmuffle could stomach feigned subservience. Boringbrook lacked even power.

"Now," she said after Clownmuffle allowed her to hit again, "salute your superior."

In the crowd performing drills, the face of Murrieta-Temecula bubbled above the shoulders of taller girls. The portrait of the Empress hung from the wall behind her.

Clownmuffle supposed if she confounded Bolingbrook's attempts at discipline they would eventually send her back to the Handmaiden and start the stupid cycle over again. So she saluted, not Bolingbrook, but the portrait. Bolingbrook took it for what she wanted.

"Acceptable, Flossmoor. The Junior Administrator warned about your unruly nature. Trust that no disrespect shall be tolerated."

"Yes, milady." Eyes focused on the eyes of the Empress.

"I suppose you're not so unreasonable after all."

Dear fucking hell. Bolingbrook spoke only in words the Handmaiden spoke.

Bolingbrook continued: "The Physician coddles people like you too much. A day's rest exceeds my patience and you are clearly fine. Everyone, greet our other new recruit, Flossmoor."

"Hello, Flossmoor," the girls in the gymnasium intoned together.

"You can introduce yourselves during your own time. We're already behind on drills, so no more waste. Flossmoor, fall in line. Come on, I want twenty-five more laps around the gym—faster. Faster!"

Running around a gym at least allowed her the opportunity to not think. The rafters hummed with ventilation. Shoes squeaked as about twenty girls in white suits bobbed behind her. That was one good idea the Empire had: make everyone exercise in suits. The most important skill for a Magical Girl was to exert herself in a fancy outfit while retaining her grace. On some precept Clownmuffle could rely and with it she blotted the ills. Nonetheless, she hoped Laila found a girl who could repair her Soul Gem soon.

Contiguity of Bodies

Morning exercises lasted only so long. Contextual clues suggested a typical slew of evening exercises after a Spartan lunch, but Clownmuffle's first day apparently fell on special circumstances. Namely, the three other platoons embarking on some journey.

So after Bolingbrook led them in prayer to God and Empress, and they consumed simple bread and water under the painted gaze of the latter, they arranged in two lines by rank and marched out of their complex into a series of identical vehicles and drove across Chicago to the port area with the yacht and buildings.

There they met everyone else in the Empire. Many people made speeches. One she recognized, not by appearance, but by voice. "Uhhhhh," she began. Instead of a ditzy blonde with long curls, she was tall, imbued with a collegiate chic in the sharpness of her cheekbones and the smartness of her short, sleek hairdo. Much better look, much more unexpected when paired with her voice. Anyone expected a young blonde girl to sound spacey, but this Centurion Cook on a purely visual level belonged more in law school than the Valley.

Actually, Clownmuffle could appreciate the appearances of all Centurions except the superbly bland Aurora who made zero impression whatsoever. Cicero's extreme brusqueness contrasted Cook's elegance neatly, but Joliet shone as the true gem, a kind of experiment in the aesthetics of tactical ugliness, and one look swelled a sense of pride to be her subordinate. Her grotesque paleness, the oscillation of age between her myriad components, the sense that she somehow assembled herself rather than naturally existed—ah. Wow. When the light crept between the permanent dusk of wintry Chicago, when the barest gleam of twilight effervescence hit her hair...

Clownmuffle's heart palpitated. If only she wore something other than the same white suit. But Joliet was the perfect model, Clownmuffle's head whirred with costumes to drape on her...

It whirred the entire ceremony. The speeches ended, fanfare trumpeted, and the platoons of Cook, Cicero, and Aurora marched down the walkway, entered vehicles positioned on a roundabout, and exited. Only Joliet's platoon and some staff members like Laila remained. The staff members darted back to their respective buildings and Joliet darted somewhere too, Clownmuffle missed where she went because she and Joliet were seemingly the two shortest people in the entire city and a flurry of shoulders blocked the view.

"And you sisters of the Empire," Bolingbrook's harsh and bland voice cut in, "must also serve an essential function. With the three other platoons absent, the burden of energy collection in the city falls upon your shoulders. All of you shall be reassigned to the more wraith-dense areas of the inner city. Hammond and Mokena, you'll patrol North Lawndale. Orland and Harvey, you'll patrol..." And so forth. But Joliet. Joliet. Clownmuffle wanted to see her again. She had all the elements of the Empress's portrait that enthralled her but improved upon them in every way, like how a little bend improved the peak of a witch's hat, the imperfections that

demonstrated a true individuality yet within the forms and mechanisms of beauty that titillated on a purely psychological level: line, color, composition; it became difficult to stand in the same rigid posture mandated by her blathering lieutenant. She wanted to pace and plan, to imagine and design—the Centurions, unlike all others in Chicago, had unique costumes—what was Joliet's? Gold still? Would gold blot out her natural luster or complement it, like a faded and decayed monument? An ivy-strewn marble husk flecked with a fishnet of gilded leaf?

Bolingbrook's foot clopped hard on the pavement. She had paced the entire time on the slightest stretch, had refused to step on even the barest portion of snow. "And finally." She held her arms behind her back to compose a particularly Handmaidenesque figure. "Our newest recruits. It would be wasteful to fling them unprepared into such a dangerous situation as the Chicago inner city. So, I shall lead a special four-man wraith-hunting unit until I have better assessed the combat capacity of these recent additions to our platoon. That means—Flossmoor. Palos. Midlothian. You three shall accompany me to Lower West Side."

As everyone else did whenever their name was mentioned, two girls saluted and said yes-milady. One of those two girls was the one with the little bend in her witch hat. She had a new name and no witch hat and Clownmuffle was too flustered to remember her old one. Hemet? Hemet.

"Flossmoor! You *will* salute your superior when called upon."

Clownmuffle did that with her mind turned toward Joliet.

Night fell not long after. The platoon divided into pairs, apparently along the lines Bolingbrook specified in her endless monologue. Which left the aforementioned "special four-man wraith-hunting unit" of Clownmuffle, Bolingbrook, Hemet, and some fourth girl who made no impression. Bolingbrook drove them—everyone silent—to a rancid region of the city, a familiar kind of place, more vertical than San Bernardino but possessed of the same porous vitality as its denizens sought through any means available to assert control over their environment—vandalism, graffiti, aimless loitering—the same faces, the same moonwalkers.

"Flossmoor. Palos. Do either of you speak Spanish?" Bolingbrook pulled to the side of the street and parked.

"Yes," Clownmuffle and Hemet intoned in unison.

"Good. I chose a Spanish-speaking neighborhood under that assumption."

So they, four young women in immaculate white suits, stepped into the quiet noise of inner city Chicago. Puffs of their own breath enveloped them as they ascended a walkway toward a seven-story structure composed of brown concrete and brown glass, two wings divided by a thinner center and a single pair of cracked doors in the center of their obtuse vertex. Several identical structures flanked it in a grid pattern.

Windows, windows, windows top to bottom.

"The city's demolished most of these housing developments the last few years," said Bolingbrook in the same authoritative tone she always used, although any kind of factual information from her mouth Clownmuffle had license to doubt. "But those that remain are the best sources of dense wraith clusters. The first consideration when hunting wraiths is safety. Each of you has potential to become valuable contributors to our Empire and your lives are important—so don't waste them. The second consideration, however, is efficiency. Traveling in this city takes time. The more time wasted traveling, the less time to hunt. Therefore, it is imperative to assault locations where misery tends to congregate."

Yes yes, who didn't know that?

"But milady," said the fourth, nondescript girl, "aren't these places also more dangerous?"

"Correct. Which is why we pair our soldiers. The added safety of working together more than compensates the loss in efficiency..."

In front of the housing complex lurked about nine of the kind of people who tended to employ her in San Bernardino. They engaged in a conversation in Spanish about, of all things, how long until RadioShack closed down. This conversation ended abruptly when the first of them spotted the four girls encroaching. Immediately all nine looked in the same direction, they did not speak, they only looked with faces placid and gray.

"These bitches again," said one.

"Ain't the usual ones," said another.

One looked at Clownmuffle and Hemet and said in Spanish: "The fuck you doing with these bozos?"

"Getting paid," Clownmuffle replied in Spanish.

"You whores?"

"Nah," they passed between the ranks of the nine. "We're exterminators."

The Mexicans laughed. Some dashed cigarettes against concrete walls. "You'll find a lotta rats in there girl."

Inside the brownness decreased, replaced by a stale yellow and a constant hum of barebones electricity. Traces of miasma became immediately apparent, flickers of static along the surfaces and a gray murk that filtered from under the doors. Hemet and the nondescript fourth girl seemed oblivious. At least Bolingbrook's eyes flitted in the right directions.

"We'll cover each floor in pairs, so everyone will stay in telepathy range in case there's trouble," Bolingbrook said.

Clownmuffle hoped for Hemet as her partner, to spare having to learn the fourth girl's name. She already had so many names pumped into her she had forgotten most of them. First there was the girl who wrote down all her information—oh wait, that was Laila. Uh. Then the...

Handmaiden? And Bolingbrook the other Handmaiden, Joliet of course, those other Centurions—she forgot someone somewhere...

"Palos and I," Bolingbrook continued, "will handle the odd-numbered floors."

Good. She ended up with Hemet after all.

"Flossmoor and Midlothian will handle the even-numbered floors."

Wait.

Which was Hemet again?

"That way each pair will have someone who can communicate with the locals."

Hemet... Palos... Midlothian? Who even was who anymore? She forgot which name was supposed to be hers.

"Flossmoor, one final thing." Bolingbrook looked at Clownmuffle so Clownmuffle remembered she was supposed to be Flossmoor. "The Physician informed me about your condition. As is standard protocol for Puella Magi with little magical combat ability, we've assigned you a weapon."

She retrieved a small case from the inside pocket of her coat. When opened, it contained an even smaller pistol and several rounds of ammunition.

"Normally we provide training for accuracy and—"

"I can use any weapon." Clownmuffle removed the gun from the case, loaded it, and aimed down the sights at a spray painted face with Xs for eyes.

"I hoped so. Word is you're an idiot savant at combat. Prove the rumors right and keep your partner alive—but don't fire until you're in the miasma. Now night is wasting, move."

Good. For at least some blissful moment, Clownmuffle had no further contact with Bolingbrook's abominable lack of anything. Drawback, she had a new friend with nothing fun about her who tagged along at Clownmuffle's heels squeaking and stumbling up the steps to the second floor. Midlothian. Clownmuffle at least credited the name for sounding less like a generic geographic location and more like a fantasy realm, the name at least stuck in memory more than most she encountered, but she figured she ought to forget it anyway because of its total mismatch with its person.

Midlothian herself exhibited every telltale, obvious sign of a fresh Magical Girl. She—No. No. It wasn't worth cataloguing information about her. That dead space could go to anything more important, like potential costume ideas for Joliet. Person after person, identity after identity, it wore her down, it tired her out, how many more introductions could she sustain?

Six years in San Bernardino, secondary girls came and went on a monthly basis, names regurgitated and disintegrated, faces arrived and vanished forever, but at least the same handful of names repeated endlessly and at least she had time between each one to acclimate.

This way of life was unforgivable. She wanted out. She wanted no more names. How long until they forced her to learn the names of all twenty girls in her platoon? No. No. They had ugly names too. They had the same costume. What purpose did their last vestiges of individuality serve? Eliminate them all. Refer to them as a singular hive mind or tear down the whole—

"So," said Midlothian. "You're uh, Flossmoor?"

"Clownmuffle."

"Oh."

They had entered the miasma. Midlothian maybe did not notice, because the second story corridor had a natural darkness: several dead lightbulbs. Most of the smoke seeped from the apartments, wraiths slowly drained the sufferers as they slept. That was the main problem with these kinds of packed apartment complexes, the wraiths had no reason to come out and play with you.

So Clownmuffle tilted her ear to a door, listened to what was inside, drew back a few steps, and kicked the door in. Midlothian shrieked and ducked as Clownmuffle screamed: "Police motherfuckers everyone on the ground" and started firing. The miasma deadened senses, entire magical fights could ensue with humans oblivious, but they responded still to more terrestrial stimuli. Bullets spiraled over countertops and perforated a wraith in the kitchen before she flipped against the wall and kicked herself into a roll through the adjacent hallway. Five more shots eliminated a wraith in the bedroom, which dissolved atop a pair of adults face flat on the floor.

She checked the bathroom. Empty. Those two only? She guessed others lurked in other apartments.

She reloaded her gun. "Girl," she said. "This'll take forever if I do each apartment one by one. Take the ones on the left and I'll do the right."

The girl peered over the kitchen counter at the cubes there. "The... left?"

"The left apartments." As she scooped the cubes in bedroom into the special pouch Bolingbrook provided to store them, she considered. "Left assuming you're coming from the stairs."

"All of them?"

"Have to be sure." In the kitchen: kitchen knife. She liked that. Good for when her ammo ran out. She tucked it under an arm, exited the apartment, and considered the corridor, which stretched all the way to the end of the wing with a distant, almost unreadable EXIT sign.

She kicked down the next apartment, shouted the same police remark, and repeated the same actions nearly muscle-by-muscle. When she returned to the hallway, the other girl stood exactly where she had before.

Clownmuffle pointed. "Those are the left ones."

"Yeah. Yeah."

Third door kicked down, third police motherfuckers shouted, third group of wraiths dispatched, although at least this apartment had three instead of a pair.

The girl remained standing in the same spot.

"Start with the first one."

"Yeah! Got it." The girl nodded a single sharp nod.

"Kick the door down."

"Yeah. Kick it down." She turned just enough to consider the nearest door. She had transformed, she had the same uniform as everyone else, but she clutched a glass jar half the size of herself. Bottled smoke or darkness swirled inside. "Put that away."

"It's my weapon..."

"Limits your mobility."

She put the jar down and patted the cork cap. Clownmuffle took the kitchen knife out and juggled it and the handgun while she waited for the girl to comport herself, face the door, and look at her foot. She wobbled her shoe against the corridor carpet. She lifted it knee height and lowered. She looked back at Clownmuffle.

"Uhh."

"Kick it."

"I'm, ah, look, it's scary...?"

"Miasma puts humans under a trance. They won't complain."

"N, no. I mean... Augh. Uh? Unh."

Not words. Clownmuffle caught her knife and balanced the gun on the tip. Bunk. Like the new girls in San Bernardino. Kyubey whined: Mentor them, help them, but who could? Given the simplest instructions they invariably bungled. Just *do* it. Feel the natural flow. Such was magic. A lifeblood of selfhood indescribable by science like how a personality could not boil down to electrons and quarks.

Magic made all people.

As the girl stepped in another ginger anti-attempt to kick the door, Clownmuffle seized her shoulders and pulled her back. She yelped, Clownmuffle tugged off the girl's helmet and cast it aside, then the shoulderpads and she started on the fasteners of the breastplate before the girl said: "What are you—? Doing?"

"It's useless." The breastplate came off in two halves. The yellow shirt beneath little improved the overall aesthetic. "Wait here."

She dipped into the nearest cleared apartment and returned with a purple bedsheet, tulips from a vase, and several articles of Catholic paraphernalia. She stuck the flowers in the hair, strung the crucifixes from neck and shoulders, and slashed the sheet to segments which she then draped strategically around the girl to create a caped costume halfway between knight and gypsy, or a Turkish mercenary, with a shawl draped over her mouth and another around her forehead so only her pretty eyes remained exposed—and a costume like this required midriff, so she cut off a clean strip of cloth of equidistant length above and below the navel.

"What are you—doing!" The girl grabbed at the piece of cloth near her mouth. "This is someone's sheet, gross...!" She clutched her waist. "Aieek!"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. YES. YES. YES. YES. YES. YES." The heartbeat transmuted through Clownmuffle's fingertips, the flow of the world connected on her one end and her other, energies streamlined and blockages faded, the rhythm of her body matched the rhythm of her clothing, two forces on either sides of the same time pressed their foreheads together and blinked lidless eyes: Clownmuffle and Handmaiden, fabrics interwoven and intermingled, white and black or gold; a color adaptive to its environment and a color either way adverse to it. She clutched the knife between her teeth and hung the gun from her thumb and patted sides and shoulders, upper and lower arms, molded the girl, bosom and hips, little extant of either—"P, please..."—thighs knees ankles feet, up down the length, kwekwekwekwekwekwe.

She staggered back and wiped her brow. A dancer she'd created, a harem assassin, an oriental mystery, yet with the inherent religious contradiction of the crosses, ah, ah, ah! "Ah!"

"Ah..."

"The pulse restores. You've done it. This suits you far more."

She prodded the crosses. "I'm Jewish..."

"When you speak, finish strong. Don't let yourself fade away. You must exist alongside the world, not dissolve within it—or the opposite. Now kick the door!"

"Okay okay okay I'll do it!" She swung her foot, it bounced back, she clutched it and winced and tripped over her jar and would have fallen if Clownmuffle didn't catch her.

"Not like that."

"I kicked it, I kicked it, what did you expect... Oh, your nose."

Clownmuffle touched under her nose. Blood. The moment she touched it a fast flood rushed down over her lip and chin. She considered her red fingertips a dazed instant then snorted hard inward and spat the mouthful of blood onto the wall behind her.

"I'm fine. Now watch. I'll show you how to kick."

Step. Swing. Connection.

The door snapped open and Clownmuffle's leg snapped at the shin. A simple easy crack. No blood, only an unexpected bend where no bend should be and a limp useless foot she regarded in silence during the recoil until her body swung ninety degrees into the floor. The girl's shriek came from two glass walls away. The sound of Clownmuffle's body striking the ground came from two glass walls away.

All the glass in her brain cracked. Her leg lay bent before her. What papier-mâché bone...? She had used no magic. Of course, magic made all people. To exist meant to expend it. Any assertion of self—

She could think no more because the pain came harsh, undulled, unabated. Her back cleaved to the floor and she cried out and blood spurted from her breath. Her vision bleared.

Another scream broke through the glass. In the open doorway loomed a wraith and the other girl had fallen onto her butt and kicked herself away from it. It played out like watercolor. "Flossmoor, please, please get up, help, help me...!" The girl grabbed her jar and wrapped herself around it as six, seven, eight, twenty arms extended from the wraith's robe-wrapped torso and reached for them both.

Clownmuffle aimed her gun except she wasn't holding her gun. It had fallen near the door and she stared at it a moment baffled to have lost perception of anything for as long as she had. The knife was closer and she seized it and severed several hands in one swipe. But the other girl only pulled the cork from her jar, *plop*, while long sharp fingers gored her torso.

"Nff," the girl cried, which was adorable and courageous because most girls failed to maintain their cute aesthetics under duress. But she ruined it by shrieking telepathically: *Lieutenant... helllllp!*

Pah. Clownmuffle'd managed to forget that block of wood. Evoking her did no favors. The butch voice sheared her mind's ear: *Hang on. We're on our way.*

Meanwhile the smoke or mist inside the girl's jar billowed into a cotton candy-sized puff of angry cloud—angry because it had a frowny face like a cartoon—that rose toward the ceiling. The girl hugged the empty jar while the claws shredded the costume Clownmuffle worked so hard on. Blood splattered the carpet and disappointment compounded when cute cries of pain became unrestrained screams. Nonetheless no Magical Girl would allow another's misery.

The pain in her mind entered a box she locked and swallowed the key as her remaining foot twisted and her body lifted off the floor in a one-eighty degree arc through the wraith's face with the knifepoint and into a handstand while one eye went red with blood bubbling from her nose and she flipped upon a post at the foot of the bed and balanced one-footed atop it as from the bathroom rushed a second wraith. She crouched onto her knee above the splayed form of a naked bedridden man with a hideous belly and when the wraith closed one swipe decapitated it.

"Eyaaaaak," the girl kept screaming. Why? Oh, because a third wraith, in the kitchen Clownmuffle leapt past, and which her bloodied eye concealed, had gone for her.

Clownmuffle braced to lunge but before her foot gained the leverage it needed against the rounded ball that topped the post a flash blotted the room in instantaneous white. The girl's frowny face cloud, which had floated to the top jamb of the door, blurted a quick blip of lightning that electrified the wraith to cubes.

The girl screamed at her own power and sagged against her jar panting as the cloud drifted back inside it. A few moments later footsteps pounded up the stairwell.

"Where is the threat?" barked the lieutenant.

"Ahh, ahhh..." said the girl.

"Where is Flossmoor?"

Clownmuffle hopped into the doorway and poked out her head. She held up her broken leg as though in midstep and let the broken part dangle. The lieutenant, Hemet behind, posed at the end of the corridor, weapons drawn.

"Finished." Clownmuffle flourished a magnificent salute.

The lieutenant narrowed her eyes. She held some sort of gun. Not like a gun, but gun-like. "First. Do not pull me away from my own work unless your situation is truly perilous. We had to retreat from a wraith encounter of our own to assist you. Second!"

She blitzed down the hall, wrenched the fourth girl up by the neck, and struck her hard in the face. "What manner of profanity have you enacted upon your uniform, Midlothian! I count one, two, three, four, five—more than enough violations in standard dress code!" Another strike. "Your uniform is the extension of your purity as a Puella Magi. It symbolizes rectitude, devotion, and dedication. You! Stupid! *Hussy!*" Each word accompanied by a slap. "What kind of promiscuous deviant would parade in sullied sheets? What kind of—"

The point of Clownmuffle's knife aimed with clear enough intent to interrupt.

"Hoh? Turning your blade against your superior?" The lieutenant grinned. "Seems disobedience begets disobedience, isn't that true? Under normal circumstances an affront like this is grounds for death, but I'll grant leeway given your standing as a recruit. That's not to say I won't pound you to oblivion..."

Her hand tightened on her not-quite-gun. Clownmuffle had to brace her one leg to prepare to move, she could not affect the fluidity that would normally allow her to spring forward before her opponent's weapon had a chance to fire. The doorway provided cover, she hated to make her first move on the defensive but—

"Wait!"

Hemet.

The lieutenant's left eye shifted as though she looked over her shoulder, but the way her face was angled it would be impossible to see anything behind her. "Plan on breaking a rule too, Palos?"

"No milady, I just thought, before you became busy," said Hemet. Clownmuffle remembered the dumb but passionate girl she faced in the orange grove and wondered where her soul went. "I'm picking up a Magical—a Puella Magi—several miles south of here."

"Matteson and Dolton entering range."

"My range covers a major portion of the city. Since we started I've been able to read most of the others in our platoon. This one's different, she's moved our way consistently the past minute."

Nnnno. Hemet, don't talk like that. Use better words. Use your own words.

The lieutenant shifted her eyes to focus solely on Clownmuffle. "It's possible someone outside your range suffered phone malfunction and is traveling to contact me directly."

(Normally the "phone not working" excuse flew only groundward, but in the Empire they gave everyone ancient flip-tops with no internet. Someone stole Clownmuffle's old phone.)

"That's possible, milady," said the girl who was not like Hemet, but Hemet-like. "But, ah, I also have to mention... Did you read the file Junior Administrator Hegewisch typed about me?"

What was the face on the lieutenant? Annoyance, nervousness? All her negative emotions empowered Clownmuffle, she swayed on her one leg in a growing rhythm. The lieutenant said: "I did peruse it, although I spent far more time on Flossmoor's file."

Sway, sway.

"Milady, I must inform you that prior to being enlisted, a Terminatrix was pursuing me. I think it's highly possible the signature I'm picking up belongs to her."

Sway. Sway.

Clownmuffle swallowed a mouthful of blood. The jar girl ceased sobbing although she still hugged her jar. The lieutenant clicked her teeth in a pattern attuned to the motions of Clownmuffle's body.

"Two more magical signatures just appeared to the south as well," said Hemet. "They're also headed our way."

"Close together?"

"Close together."

"That's a pair of ours for sure." Although the lieutenant lacked certainty. "They saw the first Puella Magi and pursued." Her eyes closed. Taking out her throat was a triviality at this point. But sway... sway. "Okay. As much as I'd love to kick the stuffing out of you. Flossmoor, Midlothian, our first responsibility is defense of the Empire. Any foreign Puella Magi is an invader and must be eliminated, and we must allow no attempt against one of our own. Battle positions, ladies! I'll call for reinforcements." She whipped out her flip-top—it looked

enchanted—and dialed a number. As she pressed it to her ear and the empty, soulless ringtone fritzed tinny in the deathly silence her eyes struck Hemet and she added: "Gimme a reading on her distance."

"Six—five miles. At three she can attack. She creates uh, maybe thirty projections of Magical—Puella Magi—"

"Weak ones," said Clownmuffle.

"What's a, what's Ter, Terminat...or?" said the fourth girl.

"Matteson," said the lieutenant. "Foreign threat inbound to my position. Call everyone else in range. I'm at Lower West Side Hunting Area 2B," a designation that caused Clownmuffle to snicker decidedly less ladylike than she'd have liked.

"Four miles." Hemet clustered closer to the lieutenant.

The lieutenant ended her call. "Is it possible she already created two projections and those are the other signatures you're reading?"

Clownmuffle leaned against the jamb and laughed.

"Her projections leave no signature, they don't exist outside of the main."

"Signatures!" Clownmuffle managed to wheeze.

"Could anyone else be after you?"

"Nobody, I can't think of anyone—"

"What is it? I don't get it. What's happening?" said the fourth girl.

"It *has* to be two of our own," said the lieutenant.

"Signatures! Signatures...!"

"Three miles, she's here, she's—"

Thirty Magical Girls manifested in the corridor the same instant Clownmuffle slashed the closest's throat and dipped under the arc of blood and four falling swords. One sliced open her pouch of cubes and they sprinkled across the ground as Clownmuffle landed on her back, which undulated to propel her swirlwise through two ankles cleaved clean and past the handgun she dropped prior into an upward bound, gun blazing as ten other guns discharged at once and the hallway became epileptic. The scream of the fourth girl crawled up the walls and onto the ceiling to which Clownmuffle stuck gecko-like and like a gecko as the lieutenant unloaded a full clip of automatic nails long as railroad spikes that impaled plaster and flesh alike. [Breath.] And the girls slashed or dismembered or shot or else dispossessed of excess blood vanished at once while still more remained. Clownmuffle's gecko-like body shifted sideways as a spear rammed close enough to cut the side of her suit and five needles plunged into the dangling flesh of her broken leg before the imagined adhesive on her fingertips and

shoe-sole wore away and she pinballed off the left wall and back to the floor in a roll that rose into the disembowelment of a girl before she swayed rightward and her back pressed against the back of the still-firing lieutenant. [Fffhh.] And a voice cut in—

"Let go!"

Hemet, a girl on each arm, dragged halfway down the corridor, feet dredging trenches through the carpet. That sole glimpse closed as a Magical Girl stepped in front of Hemet and opened a steel umbrella that blocked the whole hallway. It became clear the intention of their formation had nothing to do with defeating Clownmuffle but extracting Hemet. Fifteen nails from the lieutenant's gun punctured the umbrella and immediately orange-red dust spread across the metal which hissed away like lit paper until only the umbrella's skeleton remained, at which point Clownmuffle aimed over the lieutenant's shoulder and over the umbrella girl's shoulder at one of the two dragging Hemet and fired only for the umbrella girl to shift sidewise and absorb the shots with her body, which spasmed against the wall with five bloody shudders and a splat.

The lieutenant whirled around Clownmuffle to fend off the foes from behind while Clownmuffle braced her one foot and bounded toward them. Her next shots took out the girl on Hemet's left before the clip ran out. Those she shot vanished in puffs but it left one girl to heave Hemet who, one arm freed, flung lousy punches mostly ignored. Clownmuffle still had the knife and still could cut and no ruined leg hurt her motion in the long weightless arc of her leap so—

—A new Magical Girl appeared and blocked her swipe, clang, with a candy cane striped rod topped by a star.

The girl's black visor spanned her face. "Hi," said Clownmuffle.

"She's ours," said Denver.

"Sounds nothing like you," as the knife drew back and sliced low and bounced off the star tip's block. They tangled, disentangled, and Clownmuffle's momentum bounced her against the bloodied wall. The needles in her leg now stung like fuck and every jostle amplified her agony as sweat drooled down her forehead and her half-liquid skin slopped against her pants leg. Duck. The blade of the star passed over her scalp. Roll. Her lack of leg placed the brunt of motion on her arms and body. [Breath.]

Denver only attacked physically. She did not form comets, she did not launch stars. Confines of a marginal space but none of the others used magic beyond what constituted their weapon of choice which led Clownmuffle to suspect. Clang. [Breath.] The fundamental weakness of those who gather together, a whole less than the sum of parts even if perhaps greater than any individual, something lost in the merger, and in any case a shadow no matter of what once-great girl made no difference.

"Hgaah," said Hemet, wedged in the doorway to the stairwell in constant struggle with the azure-furred girl who dragged her.

End this glamorlessness. The swoosh of the knife blade brokered the clang of the rod before the second hand dropped with the butt of the handgun and smashed Denver's visor and Clownmuffle's pinkie to smithereens. The inviolable sheen of pure obsidian eyeguard shattered easier than expected but Denver recoiled less than expected—either way she did recoil and Clownmuffle drew back her arm and launched the knife at Hemet's captor's skull. A tomahawk rose just fast enough to deflect it and as the infinitely-revolving gleam of stainless steel shot sparklefire beams in disco ball directions the likewise-hurling Clownmuffle caught it and came down bad leg forward.

Her insensible bone rammed the tomahawk girl's cranial plate and her/Hemet/Clownmuffle jerked through the doorway and into the zigzag conch shell of stairs. As one collective corporeality they collided against the guardrail and flipped over into the void amid the flights.

Clownmuffle caught the guardrail with one hand and drove the knife through Hemet's foot to catch her. The girl with the tomahawk and the azure furs fell further but jammed herself crab-like between the first floor stairs.

[Hhhaaa.]

The arc of Hemet's descent, stopped by the impalement of her foot, swung her headfirst into a concrete slab. Clownmuffle's gun bounced against her hip and past the azure furred girl into darkness.

Denver appeared in the stairwell doorway with the wand raised overhead. Then fifteen long nails plunged through her back and out her front. Her blood rained down the aperture and the platinum armor across her chest rusted into a swirl of dust. She staggered aside and the lieutenant absorbed her position.

"Take my hand," hand proffered, she shouted.

The sparkle of Denver's star whipped forward and cleaved the lieutenant's face. Drawing back, her blood ribboned in the shape of a question mark to punctuate her half-confused howl. Denver then vanished, much as the others wounded had, but the ten or so projections who remained crammed through the doorway. The foremost seized the barrel of the lieutenant's gun and forced it downward while the next came with a slashing claw. But before the claw connected a force barreled between all three and their Renaissance tableau of mythic strife reimagined—the fourth, nondescript girl—still fluttering in her purple vestments and the jar clamped in her arms both shield and battering ram—screaming her head off—
[Breath.] She staggered into the guardrail hard enough to shake it, whipped a frantic head left-right, and charged up the stairs higher into the building.

Her screams echoed all the way up while the disheveled work of art in the stairwell door wobbled back into the geometric perfection of three women rising into a triangle and scattered faces dotting the background between.

Purple flared below. Hemet whipped her wand at the azure fur girl climbing up to her. The skin on the strained joints of Clownmuffle's arms started to split.

And two voices entered their heads collectively:

Hey.

How's it.

Having fun in there?

Sounds messy.

Yeah.

"Reinforcements," the lieutenant breathed. The stillness of the interruption gave her the moment to break away, back against the guardrail, and aim her gun at the attackers. "The full might of Chicago's finest soldiers are coming. We'll outnumber and overpower you—"

"It's the two," Hemet batted at the azure fur girl, "the two I said earlier. The two from before."

These words came at Clownmuffle like a new language, she could not cohere the meaning.

"Dolton. Matteson. Someone," said the lieutenant.

A door opened. Below. In the darkness. A triangle of light split between the guardrails and over the body of the azure fur girl, who squinted. And a second later, the light went dark, a shadow crested it, and vast metal clanked, shifted together as a figure of immense bulk pushed through the portal. All dark save a jeweled crown on her head, but then at her side, like a lightsaber from that movie, a neon mace manifested. The entire stairwell lit up with it, the colors rubbed everything, and the full shape and form of the newcomer became apparent.

Ah. Ah. Fortune, fortune, fortune. Clownmuffle of course recognized her instantly. Who wouldn't? Selfie board regular, posed team picture extraordinaire, half of the most thrilling duo in the magical world, fashion gossip and pretty colors enthusiast, recipient of innumerable coveted 10 out of 10 Clownmuffle scores: the elder of the Seattle twins, and in the flesh, or the metal, for so little flesh showed (core component of her ensemble's appeal)—the lighting as it was, dark save her weapon's effervescence, and the framing as it was, the up-and-down profusion of stairs, and rails, and mathematical designs pleasing in their stark functionality, a perfect complement to the thousand spikes across her plating—all the elements of composition—all the—

[Breath.]

Congeries of Flesh and Bytes

Allow a digression. It's deserved.

You get these dark pockets of internet sometimes where full societies flourish. MagNet, in aim and audience, would always be insular. Five millennia of Magical Girls waste in caves and cities, incapable of geographic proximity, withheld from unity by their rabbit-eared master, and then—like magic itself—a new world emerges, one of chips and cables, where wormholes fold space inward and allow even the distant to draw close.

Suddenly, for the first time ever, Magical Girls could communicate and not compete. They could become friends.

Nobody, at first, knew what to do with this.

This context is relevant to understanding Seattle. Because the twins knew each other as companions since their literal inception. When they became Magical Girls, they did so together, at the same time, in the same place, and they reigned over their city as equals without strife or envy—something that almost never happens.

That they both contracted was rare. Magical potential has nothing to do with genetics. It has nothing to do with upbringing. Even Kyubey for all his formulas knows only how to gauge it. It's essentially a mutation.

The odds of two twin sisters possessing it were negligible.

So they entered MagNet with every advantage. Their manifestation, both named Seattle (distinguished only by the color font they used), was mythic. Their grace, beauty, originality, and bearing, were they solo, would have been of high quality but unexceptional. Their gimmick was that there were two of them, and for a populace starved of connection the gimmick overwhelmed. Magical Girls in nearby areas sometimes formed shaky alliances, sometimes managed the vestiges of friendship. Mentors cared for pupils, pupils pined after mentors. But these relationships were toys and trinkets. The impermanence of the girl beside you eschewed deep bonds.

The twins, on the other hand, were bonded by the virtue of clasped bodies within a singular womb. A lifetime of shared experience. They first came to Clownmuffle's attention a month after they joined, after the clamor for them to reveal themselves in photograph reached insanity. They posted two pictures, labelled BEFORE and AFTER. Before, they were identical in every instance save their clothes. After, they became totally different. Therein lied the charm: Had they matching costumes as Magical Girls, they might have been novel, might have been quaint, might have been a solid 8 out of 10. But their difference solidified their status, because although only vague thematic parallels of "medieval" strung them together—the one a jester, the other a knightly baron—the bond still showed. The jester, seated upon the massive gauntlet of the knight, leaned back against her arm despite the vast profusion of spikes along the armor, somehow in casual repose against such a forbidding surface, and all the subtleties of meaning and emotion conveyed in this image, all the stark

originality and subversion of expectations to reify the logic that had led to the original conclusion in the first place—not deconstruction, *reconstruction*—

Unity without conformity. Expression without discrepancy. That was what they all, in one way or another, sought. That degree of companionship and togetherness without the squandering of selfhood. No violence done against one's person to cut off or out the elements disharmonious.

Clownmuffle, who detested romance between man and woman and distrusted romance between woman and woman, nonetheless, to adopt the lingua franca, "shipped" them.

Everyone else went bonkers too. Everyone cooed and coaxed. The sisters indulged every question in ways that exceeded even the asker's expectation, their replies cycling into serpentine conversations with each another, blue text and orange text Seattles coiling for pages of a thread as they posted in such synchronized rapid fire that even the crowded host of onlookers could not interject in time. Blue, orange, blue, orange, blue, orange.

Suffice to say their cult spread, and their regular image posts became a sitewide event.

It's this context—this comprehension of the thematic and personal magnetism of these twins, who in their very existence embodied what a generation of loners sought—that leads to this dark stairwell in this dark public housing development in this dark city Chicago. Blood leaked down the pocked and graffiti-strewn walls but otherwise the silence consumed all.

Until the twin in her armor broke it with a voice only somewhat stifled: "That you Clownmuffle?"

"You're that girl from Seattle," said Hemet, who took the opportunity to grab a handrail and wrench her foot from Clownmuffle's knife.

"It is her!" said one of the projected girls. Others crowded forward, not all of them apparently aware of Seattle's fame. Nobody knew how to proceed.

"Strange," said Seattle.

Super strange, said the unseen sister.

"Who are you?" The lieutenant. She elbowed aside the projections. "If you're not one of us, you're an invader."

Clownmuffle raised her now-free hand. "No, she's a friend. It's all well."

"Actually."

You could call us invaders.

"That may in fact be our goal."

We're doing a bit of reckless invading.

The slash the lieutenant received from Denver had ruined her face and a thick rivulet of blood ran down her neck. "Ah. Well. In that case..."

The lieutenant's nail gun aimed.

Clownmuffle reached to seize it by the barrel but she was somehow slower than the lieutenant and a brakka-brakka of long metal implements fired in a spiral at Seattle. Seattle's laser mace zzoomed the air and in the afterimage of neon light the nails disintegrated.

Which was the last thing that happened before a cannonball plowed through the bricks above them and exploded in a sphere of perfect obliteration that absorbed material and girl alike in its vortex. Clownmuffle had an instant to react to the bomb and did by dropping amid the flights of stairs while above the lieutenant hurtled and the projections crisped to ash and the flames funneled. She landed on Hemet and then on the girl in the azure furs and together they plunged until they hit a hard ground and scattered. Flames flickered among them.

"What was that!" said Hemet.

If Clownmuffle had to guess, she'd assume the other twin's ranged attack, making use of her sniper rifle. Details of their respective abilities remained suspiciously vague but Clownmuffle interpreted that as meaning they had little to explain, the kind of Magical Girl whose strength was in skill rather than gimmick, a method of self-expression Clownmuffle could nonetheless respect as long as there was art in the way one carried oneself.

Oh. Wait. Clownmuffle had landed on her broken leg. While this had the advantage of not breaking anything new, it had the disadvantage of inflicting her with such pain that when she opened her mouth nothing came out except a hoarse wince.

Hemet limped to the patch of light that poured from the ruined stairwell above and looked up. "I think it destroyed the rest of the specialist's girls at least."

"GOTCHA BITCH." The girl in azure furs barreled out the dark and tackled Hemet. In one move she had both Hemet's arms pinned. Clownmuffle attempted to coordinate a counterattack but she flopped over after she forgot about her broken leg. Immense, unabated pain surged through her. Her forehead broke with sweat and she tried to... focus...

The azure fur girl... what a nice outfit. Something about the color "azure." Not mere blue. The particular gradient to summon a word so sensuous and undefined, a word of two syllables but pronounced like one rumbling glide: azure. A word like...

Aurora.

Nonetheless the furs, the deeply dyed color, the tomahawks, everything indicative of some kind of ancient, tribal past, although nondenominational in its specifics, detailed by charms and chimes—

AH FUCKING GET OUT OF YOUR HEAD THEY'RE TAKING *HEMET*

Beside her had fallen several scraps of debris from the stairwell and despite the ringing in her ears and the itch that spread across her scalp and the blood bubbling bubbling bubbling she conjured the clarity of thought to seize a fallen beam of guardrail, three feet long, mangled at the edges, and pry herself off the floor pancake-like while the last swish of azure fur vanished up the stairs.

Her body splattered blood and her good leg buckled. She still held her knife. With the guardrail as a cane she vaulted forward and bounced between the steps and wall that thronged them, five to six steps at a time, not fast but after an opponent burdened by a Hemet who better fight as hard as she could for how hard Clownmuffle fought for her, all this to save someone from a miserable fate because in this situation she truly had no choice if she wanted to maintain the unison of her own body, pieces of which came off and left a grisly trail in her wake, a slowly fragmenting and shrinking Clownmuffle whose contiguity limited and limited at the encroachment of an overly-hastened entropy and—DAAAAAAAAA—the first story an essential wreck, the stairs upward no longer functional, zero trace of bodies human or otherwise with the damage somehow localized to a severe, well-defined space and a massive hole where the cannonball caved through.

What happened to Seattle? The lieutenant? They at least ought to still exist. The caved-in remains of the entryway toppled inward as the azure fur girl kicked her way outside.

Outside, on the steps, the same Mexican men stood with their bottles and their cigarettes and watched bemusedly as Clownmuffle hobbled after the azure fur girl. She traveled down the long concrete walkway between snow-strewn planes of what might have been some urban planner's ill-conceived idea of an inner city park with all the yellow gemstones of the skyline spread out before them except one solid patch of pure black that hovered in the air above where the path hit the street. Almost heart-shaped, the dark patch elongated, its point drawn down and down and down, something gothic in the sense that Clownmuffle had seen similar designs on the types of Magical Girls who wore black eyeliner. Whether this silhouette was part of a design didn't make itself readily apparent but as the azure furred girl hobbled toward it the shape started to descend and expand.

"HNNNNEEEAH," said Clownmuffle. She wanted to say something else. She wanted to say words. Only that came out. But she had gained on her target.

She whirled top-like with a single twist of her foot and slammed the guardrail's jagged end against the azure furred girl's head. The guardrail hit. It hit hard, split the head right open.

It also caused Clownmuffle's arm to break off at the elbow.

Nonononono

The counterforce spiraled her into oblivion and she had zero mechanism to reorient. She had lost leg and arm on the same side, she lacked even balance although she still had balance and she still had her Soul Gem as a ring on her remaining finger. The azure furred girl clapped a hand to her head but was still alive. The heart shape landed against the pavement with the clack of unseen heels.

"Take us, Milady," said the azure furred girl. And the shape's sides spread open into massive bat-like wings.

Clownmuffle, hopping in a desperate gambit to stay upright, hurled her knife and the blade drove through the azure furred girl's busted skull and caused her to vanish into smoke in one instant. Her smoke sailed in a stringy spiral into the black shape and disappeared, while Hemet flopped to the ground.

"Get out," said Clownmuffle to Hemet. Clownmuffle didn't say that to Hemet. Clownmuffle said "Ghhhhhhh" and hit the ground.

And Hemet was too slow. Too staggered, too scrambling, her hands and feet skittering uselessly against the slick walkway. Clownmuffle could still, theoretically, move herself, and considered her options even in the milliseconds during which the black shape's wings spread in a ring around Hemet. Her remaining palm pressed against the ground and with it she pushed her body into an abrupt somersault to stir a little momentum in the proper direction. The slickness of the surface became her advantage as she traveled minus friction but she needed to act fast and she did not exactly know her plans but she knew she had to save her friend, Hemet.

Hemet.

Her name wasn't Hemet.

Hemet was the girl she—

—rolled under the closing wing of the figure and slide-tackled the Hemet-like person who was not like Hemet. Five ribs in Clownmuffle's body broke but her momentum shifted to Hemet and Hemet slid under the other wing and into the snow. Blep. That was the sound her body made.

The wings shut around Clownmuffle.

Hnn. What a lot of darkness. So would Clownmuffle die? Everything was cold. It was so cold her pain drained away, from her leg and arm and chest. Voices... a lot of them twisted in her ears. Dying to save someone, she did the right thing. Like a good Magical Girl. She always had been one, she had to believe that.

(She didn't want to die.)

(Please don't let her die.)

(Please save her.)

Calm down, your heart is racing, said a voice recognizable as... Denver. It'll be okay soon. Trust me, okay?

But it wasn't like Denver at all. That scared her even worse, that it was someone else speaking with Denver's voice, that all the Denverness of the person had leached out. Clownmuffle fought. She moved what remained of her arm. What remained of her leg and

torso. She gnashed her teeth and chewed against something in the blackness, or maybe the blackness itself. She didn't want to die.

Give her space you're freaking her out, said a voice.

Let me talk to her, said Denver.

We can't assimilate her if she isn't tranquil.

Just calm her down the old fashioned way! said someone else.

The blackness closed like folds of dense velvet, given form with inner wires. It clenched around her bones but pressed gently enough to close her body without cracking it. Her lungs ceased to function. Everything felt ruddy and thick and dripping, unclean—no air came. Asphyxiation. To make her tranquil. Her leg kicked. Hands pressed. To hold her still.

One hand slid under her chin and the warmth of a face pressed against her cheek. *It's okay,* said Denver. *It's not as bad as it feels. Give yourself away to the Lady—*

Electricity jolted through Clownmuffle's body. Her torso buckled and spasmed beyond her capacity to control it. Fire traveled down her veins and bone marrow, her eyeballs roved against the total darkness. She wanted to strike at Denver and maim her even in her paralysis but moments later it became clear from the screaming that entered her brain that Denver—and the other voices—all of them felt the exact pain Clownmuffle felt: the electric fry.

The darkness opened. Clownmuffle cracked against the pavement and the dark form cracked against it too. Air rushed into her lungs and the whole world ebbed distorted, color and hue and saturation offset. But above her—she fell on her back, she stared above—one thing she could perceive:

A small, gray cloud. It had a frowny face.

"Nnah, ggeh," rasped the hoarse, inhuman mechanism of the dark figure who fell beside her as a gold-and-purple amalgam rushed beside Clownmuffle, grabbed her under the armpits, and dragged her down the walkway.

"Are you alive? Are you alive?" said her—the fourth girl.

Speech Clownmuffle knew to be beyond her grasp. She tried telepathy: *Possibly.* Her body scraped past the writhing dark figure. *Hem. Hemet.*

"Hemet? Hemet? Hemet?" The fourth girl said.

My friend.

"Palos? You mean Palos? She—she flew off. On a, a broom, broomthing."

Where was the fourth girl dragging her? She could only stare upward. Snowflakes had started to fall. They landed on her face. She smiled.

What a good world. What a good world when a girl like this one, meek and incapable, young and frightened, a girl known only as "the fourth girl" who had no name or identity... When with the alteration of the costume, the injection of a spark of individuality, even she could muster the courage to fight, and at the critical instant save a life... Everyone saving everyone's lives... What a good world.

The side of a car showed up in her realm of vision and the dragging stopped. It was the car they used to get to the projects. "I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do," said the fourth girl. " Lieutenant Bolingbrook—I saw the armored girl take her—A, a clown was with her, I couldn't do anything—and that dark thing's getting up, oh no it's getting up, what do I *do*?"

Drive away. Drive, drive away...

"I don't have the keys, Lieutenant Bolingbrook had them—"

Magic runs a car.

The fourth girl blinked at her. "Hunnnh?"

Your electricity. Spark the ignition.

An eye widened in comprehension. A cute selfhood in the fourth girl's arc of learning. She hesitated, fidgeted, looked at the car window, looked back the way they came, and rammed her fist through the glass. She yelped, whipped her bloodied hand, tears beaded in her eyes, she unlocked the door... Things became black a moment. Clownmuffle rolled her head back into focus and she now sat in the passenger seat, even her seatbelt snug around her waist. The fourth girl sat in the driver's seat.

"Uh, uh, what now, what now?"

Enchant the car. Control it with your magic...

"Enchant? Oh no what am I *do-o-oing*."

Put your magic inside it. If you think it, you can do it. Okay? Another ebb of blackness came on but she had to fight it. She did not want to die. She did not want to die. She did not want to die. She did not want to—

The fourth girl shrieked and slammed her bloody hand on the steering wheel and flash, the bland interior of the vehicle became a glowing yellow and the engine chugged to life. Good. Good. All Magical Girls had an innate talent for these basics of magic... Magic was simply self-expression. The fourth girl only needed to want to do it, and she was such a good girl. Despite her fear she knew she needed to act. Good girl. Good girl.

"I can't drive!"

Less good girl. *Let your magic drive for you. Make it control the car...* Clownmuffle had of course never driven a car with magic instead of the normal car way. She had never heard of anyone doing this before. But electricity magic? Lightning bolts? Overpowered. Everything

useful ran on electricity. A girl who harness that kind of power would have more versatility than others. Nnh. So sleepy...

You know... if the specialist hadn't gone after them already. She probably wouldn't. And why would she? She was after Hemet, not them... They had no rush. Lie back and sleep.

(Stay awake.)

"Okay. Okay. Okay. I can do this. I can. I, hnnnff, can."

(Sleep and die.)

The car jolted forward. The fourth girl eeped.

(It's not just your body. Your soul. What state is it in?)

"Okay. Okay. I'll take you back to barracks. It'll be okay. We'll—"

Take me to. Take me to. Administrator.

"Uh, ah—that's where the doctor, the Physician is. Right right right." The car ran into a curb and the carriage scraped against concrete and the fourth girl shrieked again before they bounced back onto the road with an agonizing jostle.

The police. The police would stop them. Long before they reached the dock. Normally police meant nothing to a Magical Girl but here they—

Fade black.

Fade white.

They were stopped. Cops. Cops were coming. Cops were—

A red light turned green. The fourth girl, face nearly pressed to the wheel, barely peered over it as with immense perspiration she jittered her hands and guided them around a corner. She whispered under her breath a vague stream of imprecations and incantations designed to bring good fortune upon their journey.

It would be better to die in the wings of that devil than to the Law of the Cycles.

Did the fourth girl even know where to go? Not even Clownmuffle knew where to go...

She saved Hemet. Murrieta-Temecula. Hemet died. The other girl in the orange grove. Bells and iron maidens. Teeth through the ring, teeth through a finger. She died. Clownmuffle killed her. She could barely remember anything so why did she remember this now. She didn't want to die remembering this. But it was like all the good memories had fallen off her body. She tried to remember a good memory and she had none. She tried to remember the way her body felt when she moved it and it was whole, how she danced and fought, the energy of her magic in her bloodstream when she could conjure doves from sleeves and cards from fingertips, but only a bankrupt panoply of shit descended on her, buried her. Hemet's

corpse sank beneath the manure. And there was worse... N-no. Not that. Why think about *that*. That *man*—not him. Go away. *The best way to make money*—why did she not listen to Denver? In the darkness. In the darkness in Denver's embrace—*you're thirteen so legally you can't even*—and the embrace of the wings—devour her and make her nothing—eat away these memories and—

The car crashed. Into a wall. Enough to shatter a window. The fourth girl, she screamed.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry—I don't know how to park." Her head flitted this way and that. "Uh stay here, stay here, I'll get the Physician—"

Oh. They arrived. Probably did not matter. She would die.

Stay. Stay with me. Don't leave me alone... said Clownmuffle.

The fourth girl had been halfway out the door. "Ah, I, ah."

I need...

"What in the name of—in the—what just happened!"

That voice. Clownmuffle knew it. Reedy, needling, escaped from the confines of bureaucratic stuffiness, the same voice when she spoke her own language: Laila. Laila. Laila. Laila. Laila. Laila. Laila. Laila.

"She's hurt," said the fourth girl.

"Did you *crash into the building*? How do you even do that! The roundabout is way over there!"

"She's hurt!"

"Who—Oh. Oh. Oh not this again. What did she do, did she transform? She's not supposed to —"

"Just help her, please, please." The fourth girl might have been sobbing. It proved difficult to tell because neither Clownmuffle's eyes nor ears worked too well anymore.

(This is the best way to make money. You're thirteen so legally you can't even have a real job. And you'd need parental permission, just forget about it. I've been around a few years, this is what everyone does. If you don't like it figure something else on your own, but trust me it'll be a lot better if you let me help you. I know people. Otherwise you'll just roam the streets and who knows who'll pick you up. My clients, they're not, you know, the nicest guys. But they're professional men, they can restrain themselves. Trust me. I do it to, I'm not having you do anything I haven't done. Yeah it's not great but it's what you gotta do. You need food, right? A place to stay? Can't do that without money. And what else can a thirteen year old do? It's just what everyone does.)

"Get the Physician—Go!"

"Y-yeah."

He peeled off her unbuttoned blouse so stuck from sweat it tugged her skin before finally disconnecting.

(And yeah I totally get you're uncomfortable. I was in your exact same shoes. If it'd make you feel better we could practice. Or I could arrange that we both do it at the same time, would that help?)

He stroked her hair over her ear and told her to look at him.

(Look I'm here to help. After it's over you can stay at my place until we find somewhere for you to live. If there's anything you need to talk about you can trust me okay?)

He puppeteered her legs.

[Superimposed, an image of the twins enmeshed and the distribution of their tangled limbs unclear, locked in a passionate kiss with a hand on an inner thigh and another on the patchwork pied of the jester's breast.]

"Flossmoor—Clownmuffle. Clownmuffle. Open your eyes. I need your gem, I can suck some of the despair away but I need you to make it an egg, Clownmuffle—Clownmuffle?"

His oil—smelled of something acrid. She coughed and he weighed upon her chest.

(We Magical Girls can deaden the experience anyway. Like pain. Just kinda... sink out of your body and into your soul.)

[B-but—we're sisters... | What do those kind of rules matter to beings like us?]

"The gem, Clownmuffle!"

[I'm frightened... You'll keep me safe? | I promise. We will become one, my sister.]

(There's nothing else you can do. No marketable skillset. No education. Can't do anything. A magic sword or gun doesn't fly in any occupation I know of.)

Ah. Ah—Ah. Nnh. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah! Ah.

[I love you | I love you]

(Trust me.)

"Clownmuffle!"

Laila slapped her. Her eyes snapped open not because of the slap but because a dazzling light blinded them even from behind her eyelids. It hurt for her pupils to dilate but fragment by fragment they adjusted and the mixture of black figures washed against the white background resembled something tangible. Laila, who had dragged her out of the car and laid her in the snow, knelt over her. She held Clownmuffle's hand and gestured to the ring on her finger as

she repeated the same series of words in inexact repetition. In the periphery, the fourth girl rushed toward them while the swishing apron of that doctor, Dr. Cho, followed. A few more figures, less clear, emerged at the doctor's back.

None of them mattered. There was another figure. It split the array of light down the center and into a circle through which it—stepped, no—glided, no—no verb of motion described its motion. It moved but it did not move. And while from it billowed wings, ribbons, flounce, and feathers, and the strands of long pink hair, none of those things billowed, because to apply a word like "billow" to this figure was—profane.

This was God.

God's golden eyes glowed upon her. Warm. Kind. Loving. God was loving. God loved her. Clownmuffle. Miss Vizcarra. San Bernardino. Flossmoor. The names stripped away one by one to leave a pure essence of herself in a feeling like the darkness of the dark shape's wings and the cold embrace of Denver but now white, pure. Perfect.

The fourth girl did not see God. Dr. Cho did not see God. The figures at the doctor's back did not see God. They bent and stooped closer to Clownmuffle to inspect but no matter how close they grew they did not cover even an inch of her vision of God.

Laila's eye squinted and her head started to turn. Laila, unlike the others, could blot the whiteness. And a fraction of the God or Goddess who hovered but did not hover over the bloodied snow with her hands reached but not reached toward the formless fleshless entity of thoughts and feelings in some semblance identifiable as Clownmuffle shifted her immutable golden gaze when Laila said:

"No. Not you. I can save her. I can still save her. Go away."

"Who—?" said someone of the others. But God's voice swallowed theirs:

"Laila, I'm happy to finally meet you."

"We've met before. Don't lie to my *face*."

"I'm sorry... Part of me was missing then. If I seemed strange to you, I apologize. It was irresponsible of me to become lost like I did, but I'm back to how I should be. Please forgive me."

And God, somehow, bowed her head in deference to Laila. There was no malice, no pride, no sense of God's godhead save the incontrovertibly holy demeanor of her appearance, the sanctity of her raiment, the flawlessness of her composition.

"Whatever! It doesn't matter. Just leave. I can save her."

"I know you can, Laila... But it'll hurt you. You don't need to suffer—"

Laila threw herself in front of the Goddess, who had approached without approaching the entire time, and Laila's outstretched arms somehow managed to remove from view the

Goddess's face, much of her body. "MADOKA KANAME," she said. "I WON'T LET YOU TAKE HER."

The denuded figure of Dr. Cho spasmed at the invocation of the name and she threw herself into the light beside Laila where she became nothing but a voice: "Well, so it's you!—I've heard something about you! It is you, right? Where are you? Here? Miss Hegewisch, is she here? I must show her my creations. I want to see how they compare to hers. On such short notice I only have a few of my lesser ones on hand..." She leaned out of the light and motioned to the figures who had accompanied her from her building.

The Goddess Madoka Kaname allowed the doctor to speak. But she did not reply, for the doctor could not perceive her. Her gaze settled on Laila. "You want to save your friend."

"Well—I don't know if she's my..."

"It will be hard. She'll only become more sick with despair. Eventually, you won't be able to do anything for her."

Laila said nothing. Her figure diminished. The doctor talked, she described her *creations*—the other figures—one by one and ran to each's side to pose and present them. The fourth girl sank into the white.

Finally: "I can do it." A pause. "Trust me."

(Trust me.)

[I love you]

The Goddess Madoka Kaname smiled. Her smile was enough to ease the agony of Clownmuffle's corpse that was not a corpse.

"I knew someone... She kept trying and trying to save the person she loved, even though it hurt her so much."

"It's not about love. It's not about that. I can do it. I can save her *life*. If you didn't care about whether we live or die why don't you just take all of us right now?"

That silent, flawless golden stare remained on Laila, and yet somehow it also remained on Clownmuffle and she could feel it as not a physical but as a something kind of impression upon her. And although this whole time she had wondered at the Goddess and the tranquility that pierced her, and had thought perhaps it would not be so bad to die, that thin thread snapped when the Goddess grinned a little and shut her eyes and rubbed the back of her head with a little laugh.

"Well I've never been good at debating..."

"—But my best creations, they're capable of complex emotion, they even display strong magical potential, of course some kinks remain, I haven't perfected the formula, certain aspects of morality they fail to grasp, dangerous tendencies sometimes appear, but I'm working to resolve those issues and every iteration draws me closer—"

"Let me save her. If I can do it then it's not her time to die."

In one moment God somehow became a teenaged Japanese girl. "Ah, well... I can see this is something really important to you. I wouldn't want to take that away from you, even though I know how this hurt you the last time..."

"This isn't like the last time. It's more distant now. She's just someone I know."

"...Okay." God scratched her head again. She might have even blushed, although her luminescence made it difficult to tell. "But you'll have to hurry. Any longer and you know what'll happen to her."

Laila closed her eyes and exhaled. She turned away from the now less-glorious light and held up Clownmuffle's hand by the wrist so she could see it. "If you want to live, let me have your gem."

So the question was whether Clownmuffle wanted to live, and seven seconds prior she had not, but now the Goddess had a different mien, or something of her no longer compelled, and now even the doctor as she jaunted back and forth amid her light did not ebb away entirely.

Clownmuffle did not want to die.

Above all else she did not want to die.

Her ring became an egg and a final crush of pain burrowed through her but it soon diminished as Laila pressed her own egg to the cracked one and ate away the darkness. Laila's egg grew blacker and blacker until sweat beaded down her brow but for a long time Clownmuffle's egg did not get any lighter.

And then, suddenly, it did. In that moment the Goddess vanished. She blinked out of existence and her light dispersed and all that remained was the black sky and the falling snowflakes and the bobbing yacht on the shore.

"Jesus. Jesus," said Laila.

The fourth girl looked up from the hands pressed around her head. "You can't—take the Lord's name in vain—It's not allowed—"

Laila glared at her and she eeped. The doctor continued to babble in the background. Without the light her accompanying figures, her *creations*, became clearer. Each had white hair and red eyes and stood like mannequins.

"You can be quiet now," said Laila. "She left."

The doctor paused midsentence. She considered her empty theater and slumped her shoulders what-will-you-do style. "Pity. Did she say anything about me, love?"

"Yeah. Right at the end, she said to tell you that you should treat your creations with love and kindness. Now can you heal Flossmoor? She's wasting energy replenishing the blood she's lost."

"Right-right." A smart clap of her thick-gloved hands. She knelt beside Clownmuffle, shoved the fourth girl out of the periphery, and reached inside of the stump of Clownmuffle's arm with two fingers.

It hurt. She held still.

Laila wiped her face and stood. "I'll get cubes from storage. Those'll help."

But as she turned Clownmuffle reached out her remaining arm and grabbed her. "That's not what I need. What I need is—I need a way to fix my gem."

The gem in question sat on the snow at Clownmuffle's side. It no longer looked like an egg much. Instead it was like a flower bud that had started to bloom, with four distinct petals pulling apart from one another. That was her soul. The one Laila fought God for. The one God acquiesced to let continue in this world. Clownmuffle wanted to live, that was correct. That had always been correct. Nothing mattered more than her own life although there were several precepts that were essential to that life that many other people with their backs against the wall would shed in an instant. But girls did not often live to nineteen and to do so required a certain series of standards for self and selfhood. Although probably technically inaccurate, despite the agony she had just survived, she did not consider it her closest moment to death.

This understanding passed between her and Laila. Laila's hard, dark, fascinating eyes did not soften with mercy, however. She turned away and hissed under her breath.

"I can't."

"The records... the records of Magical Girls across the country. You said you'd ask your boss..."

"I did. And there was apparently somebody in our files who could help. But my boss, she—" Hesitation. She looked to the fourth girl and the doctor. But the fourth girl was beyond understanding and the doctor was too immersed in measuring and prodding Clownmuffle's wounds. "—It was the Handmaiden. Her order directly. You are not to have your gem repaired. She believes it will keep you in line."

At that hard finality Laila shifted on her shoe and proceeded back to the Administration building at a pace that might have been brisker had she not slipped halfway and staggered into the snow. Nonetheless her words simmered on Clownmuffle's surface.

The doctor drew her bloodstained glove from Clownmuffle's exposed flesh and motioned to one of her creations. "Alright, I have what I need. Heal her." At which the indicated creation transformed into a Magical Girl with the same golden armor of everyone else in the city, waved a scepter, and caused an arm to regrow in a few seconds.

Clownmuffle's head fell back. She grinned. How could she not? The Handmaiden. Exactly who she wanted. Nobody else would have sufficed, nobody else would have mattered. The Handmaiden, Handmaiden, Handmaiden. She would have to try harder than that. Or had it

been her intention all along? She must have known how Clownmuffle would react to what she did. Or perhaps Laila had explained something she shouldn't have as an act of charity.

That she was forbidden from accessing the files of the unknown Magical Girl who could repair her, that didn't matter. It didn't stagger her for an instant. Because what she did know was that said file existed. That somewhere in North America such a girl did exist and the information was kept right there in the Administration building around which wind whistled and snow blew.

And that meant, to fix everything, to repair herself, to become *who she once was*, all she needed to do was break in and steal it. Play their games: win their prizes. She stared into the night and the confused face of the fourth girl and cackled.

Vast Active Living Intelligence System

All thirty-three of them failed, which apparently happened never, and even the Lady herself sustained damage, so everyone had something to say. Blame this way and that, at least I managed to do this, while you accomplished nothing, if everyone had done what *I* did, then it would have succeeded.

Sage Rhys had no standing to speak in this debate, the circuitousness of which reminded her of forum arguments she moderated in the past, and besides she took a lot of damage and had to regenerate. That's what the others told her at least, because in this darkness, in this black space, she had no form to heal. The others told her not much, and seemed to expect her to learn via osmosis, which was literally what happened when her formless blob of "self" ebbed into someone else's formless blob of "self" and their memories comingled.

Such as now, when the vaguely contiguous element known as Sage Rhys passed through the likewise element known as Catalina Trujillo. When Catalina Trujillo had a physical form, she wore azure furs and wielded tomahawks. She ruled Ciudad Juarez from 1999 to 2003 and, with innumerable accomplices, partook in "maybe like fifty" murders, any one of which Sage could recall as if she herself committed it. Not that murders were the only component of Trujillo's conscious: friendships, triumphs, fears, intimacies likewise clustered, and in that first moment of contact between souls Sage struggled to piece her own thoughts from the other's.

None of you were even worth a shit, said Trujillo. It felt like it was just me out there. I had the target, I dragged her out the damn building, and you fuckleheads—where were you? Sucking your fucking dicks off.

Honestly Sage had only one set of memories she wanted to protect and keep private, but of course trying to keep those memories secret only made her think more about them, which must have made them easier for Trujillo to access, because while she berated her cohort she gave Sage a telepathic nudge and flashed a few pornographic memories of her own to match the ones Sage had of Aurora.

Then Trujillo ebbed past and their memories unmixed. The sensation disoriented her, but she worried mostly that the boundary between herself and everyone else would erode, that Sage Rhys would spill somewhere and be lost forever. She experienced it in some of the forms with which she came in contact: the memories of twenty or thirty people jumbled in one mind, details of lives from all across North America arranged in an incomprehensible narrative, and no real concept of the original possessor's identity. But stronger personalities, like Trujillo, had maintained themselves mostly intact.

So Sage had to protect her boundaries. It required not physical fortitude—in this zero-dimensional space, she had no hope against merging with others—but mental. She had to erect fortifications of a definitive Sage Rhys and that required a clear mind, clear thoughts, clear purpose.

Given the circumstances, she figured she had handled herself quite fucking well, thank you very much.

All this boasting, said a girl across the room. In the two days since Sage became part of this amalgam (rough estimate, because time was weird in nonspace too), she had already merged with everyone at least once. But at some point it became too many memories and new ones crowded older ones. This girl, whose name and life Sage lacked conception of, continued: *What matters most is our Lady. And in the end, when she was attacked, none of us remained to protect her.*

Murmurs of agreement.

Even now she remains vulnerable to attack...

I'm regenerated already, if she needs me I can protect her.

That only means you didn't take much damage in the last fight. What'd you bitch out or what?

I got my neck slashed, not a big wound but you can't expect me to keep running around with no neck?

Fucking pussies. Sage here's newer than you all and she didn't back down until she had her whole damn body fucked up.

A new personality entered hers the same time her name was mentioned. Abigail Anne Renfrew of Vermont, who never killed anyone but tried. She mingled less brusquely than Trujillo, breaching the membrane of Sage's headspace with a timorous shuffle as though asking permission neither granted nor needed, and even afterward only layering herself on top of Sage in a way that kept themselves distinct via a metaphysical organization only basely comprehensible. Nonetheless, the same memories surfaced. God. Fuck. By now they must all know her as the nymphomaniac who could only imagine sex. Shit—

No—It's okay, we all have those memories.

That was the thought of Abigail Anne Renfrew, although it was also the thought of Sage Rhys.

I mean. I never actually did anything with anyone. But I thought about it, and I mean—I can tell this is someone you truly loved. That's amazing... You're so lucky to have had something like that.

That didn't make Sage feel any better about the situation.

Oh, sorry, I know it's private, Sage-Abigail thought, at the same time surprised that Abigail-Sage had read her thoughts, I'll just stop thinking about them, here's a memory I like to share...

It was an Easter basket. Inside the basket was a Labrador puppy with a pink ribbon. On the living room couch behind it, Sage and Aurora tangled together and ruined the whole thing.

God this was awful. No, it's okay. It's awful. We all think these weird things when we're worried somebody can see what we're thinking. Augh. You'll get better at it.

Abigail detached. Sage for a moment was only herself. But it would not be long before the next mind melded, or two minds at once, or three, or sometimes even four. Some minds delved deeper into hers than others.

Keep it straight. Keep Sage Rhys separate. Maybe thinking about her moments with Aurora all the time was a good thing. Maybe it helped her better define herself. She braced for the next merger but before that a voice said:

Sage Rhys. You're needed outside.

It was the girl who served as the Lady's spokeswoman. The Lady's mind was the only one none of them had access to, even though Sage suspected whatever nonspace they inhabited was, in physical terms, the interior of the Lady's Soul Gem.

I'm far from regenerated, said Sage.

That's fine. You're only needed to speak to some people you know.

Some people she knew? San Bernardino? Or Laila?

Some girl or girls from Seattle, said Catalina Trujillo. *They showed up after you peaced out.*

This information dully thudded against her nonexistence. The Seattle twins. One a knight or king and the other a jester or fool.

Of course. I'll talk to them.

She was sent out immediately. Her physical manifestation had not recovered from the many nails one of the Chicago girls shot into her, and which rusted her armor and bone. Her corporeal form slumped as soon as the Lady's power drew the soul of Sage Rhys out of the darkness, but two other manifestations, those who sustained less damage, grabbed her before she fell.

The lady hovered in the night sky a mile distant. Sage stood on the roof of either the housing development building they fought in or one nearby. Before her, seated crosslegged, was the older twin in all her armor. Further back, on the edge of the roof, the younger twin reclined on her back with her rifle perched on her knee. She arched her spine, stretched, and uttered a yawn lost in the wind. Seven stories up was blustery enough and Sage's hair rushed across her face. Her too-weak arms failed to brush them clear.

"So," said the older twin.

There's our Denver.

"What a fate."

That's our girl.

The night made it hard to tell, but smoke rose from the identical housing development building adjacent theirs. A few police cars blinked around the scene of the caved-in entryway.

"Y... you—" When Sage tried to speak more, a sharp pain coursed through her sugar candy ribs, and she buckled despite the support of her companions. They eased her into a more comfortable position and she tried again with telepathy: *You two came here? To Chicago?*

"Yes."

We wanted your papers.

"One of your goons made off with them. Came here."

Planned to let them go but Mr. Kyubey gave some suggestions.

So you'll, said Sage, so you'll come here, to Chicago, where their whole damn Empire is, and all their soldiers, the entire army, but you refused—you refused—to help me in St. Louis against three of them? That's what you did?

"Sage," said one of the two supporting her.

"It's not their whole army," said the older twin.

Saving St. Louis didn't appeal to us.

"Most of them left for whatever reason."

But after you died, we had an incentive to look at your papers.

"There are only about twenty here now, according to Kyubey."

One thing led to another and—

*Shut up. Shut up, shut up. Gaah! You two are insufferable, absolutely insufferable do understand? How can the two of you talk like that? You're not even in sync, you're fumbling over each other, you're cutting each other off, the first part of one is covering up the last part of the other, you're saying two totally different things at the same time. And it hurt. Her head throbbed and her lungs tightened. The pain from her wounds intensified and even though her rant lacked any physical component it exhausted her, she panted for breath, she had to flap a limp hand upright to indicate she still intended to speak until she had regained enough energy to continue: *You two are a cacophony, one of you needs to say your whole thing at a time if you want me to understand.**

"Maybe we don't want you to understand," said the elder.

But the younger said nothing.

So the elder continued: "Kyubey told us to meet you."

Pause.

"He said the two of us, if we teamed up with... you."

Pause.

"He said we would have a strong chance at succeeding in our respective goals."

Part of Sage's upper body, under her collar bone, caved inward. She sagged like jelly and the girl to her left that supported her propped her entire back under Sage's arm to keep her a semblance of afloat.

That Chicago girl's rust magic. Nng. Fever skittered down her body. And the sudden spasm of despair, that for the rest of her life these endless voices would become inescapable, that no quiet would ever exist again, and Aurora—

"Remember what the Lady needs of you," said the right supporter. Sage's right arm had melted and its pink goo oozed down her supporter's side. The line between them blurred.

Yeah. Yes. Sage lifted her head. *Seattle. Our Lady has, at least thirty Magical Girls at her disposal. We don't need you two. You'd be better...*

Gffff. That dark room back in Denver with the cold and the sheets and the body of Aurora.

...Be better if you go back home. Someone has to take care of your city.

"The other girls in our area can handle it for a few days."

Pause.

"We want to work with your Terminatrix lady."

Didn't you always say. The younger sister wiped the barrel of her rifle with a rag. That taking down Chicago was the top priority of all responsible Magical Girls? Sure, we didn't want to help you in St. Louis. The explanation for that's simple.

"We can defeat this Empire together."

If we were going to defeat the Empire, we wanted to do it on our terms. Not yours, Miss Denver.

Get her out. Get her out of this body and this head. Get her away from these people. Everything inside and out of her melted. Five, six, seven voices compounded inside her, a resounding chorus of voices from the side of the Lady, that desired a partnership, that crowded out Sage's own useless despair at the words of the younger twin... She had to. Had to maintain. Herself. Sage Rhys. She took a deep breath with the concavity of her ribcage. One eye had melted shut. She could force the other voices out if she settled into her depths and remembered: Au *ror* a. That was the only voice she needed inside her mind, that whisper.

She remembered it, conjured that moment in the darkness, the two of them together, and wielded it as an amulet to ward away anyone who dared encroach upon her sacred space. The voices quieted. The twins quieted, apparently in anticipation of a response.

Sage Rhys solidified. Her leg shifted and she pushed herself upright, albeit with her supporters as crutches. She breathed and said: *If you'll allow me a moment, my Lady. I know the character of these twins better than you. And since you sent me to speak with them instead of any random intermediary, that must mean you value my experience with them at least to some degree. So may I?*

After a moment of silence, a voice came from one of the souls inside the Lady: *The Lady grants you permission to express your opinion.* It was a distinct voice. It wasn't Sage's voice inside her own head. She sighed. She breathed. She remembered Aurora.

These Seattle twins are unreliable and untrustworthy. We have plenty of Magical Girls of our own, in fact according to our intelligence we outnumber the Chicago girls still in the city. It would be better to rely on those we know we can trust than—

"Clownmuffle kicked all your asses," said the elder twin.

Be fair. I kicked some of their asses too, said the younger. *With my bullet.*

"True."

There's really only one Magical Girl there.

"Denver's not even real."

An interface.

"To lower our guard?"

Still acts Denver-like.

"Clever mimicry."

We've been had.

Their conversation blitzed with no pause for interjection, whatever odd desync happened earlier had been resolved, the twins returned to perfect simultaneity. If anyone was an interface, a program, a machine, it would be them, and their stupid twinness, as though real twins ever acted this way, that was totally made up and stupid! Denver—Sage Rhys—she still retained her memories and her identity, she still operated under her own control—most of the time—and these jeering, cocky bastards could...!

The younger twin straightened and raised her rifle. She stared down the sights at something off the rooftop, at the housing development building they had fought in, where the police had gathered. Everyone else looked too, even the elder twin who had her back to the younger. It didn't require a sniper rifle scope to see what had happened: on the road a white car had parked and two young women in white suits stepped out to examine the wreckage.

A moment later the telepathic relay of one muttered: *Lieutenant Bolingbrook. Lieutenant Bolingbrook, do you copy? It's Dolton and I. We've arrived, are you still in the area?*

"Clear shot," said the younger twin. The wind obscured her voice.

"Don't shoot."

"If you say so." The rifle lowered.

At least they had a modicum of prudence. Obviously, it would be idiotic to start a fight in an open area swarming with police, and more reinforcements were likely en route. Sage was about to comment but stopped: Telepathy, with enemies in earshot, would give away their position. But her mouth failed to open when she bid it. She was essentially silenced. Damn. Damn it, damn it. These twins. God. But she reveled in this anger inside her, enjoyed the feel of its spread through her chest, because she knew not a single other soul in the Lady's bosom would feel the personal fury she now felt, and that became another block in the tower of selfhood.

Nonetheless, the Lady landed on the rooftop beside her, and all that emotion drained in the aura of chilliness that pervaded from her black form. The two girls who supported Sage relinquished her to turn and give proper obeisance to the one who had redeemed them all, and Sage herself managed to land on a knee and bow her head, or else that was the natural arc of her structurally-unstable body.

The wings of the black form peeled away. No face appeared, but the face could see.

We have. "I have." Her voice, deep and raspy, more wheeze than words. Considered. "Considered..." What now to do. "What now to do." It felt like an echo. Every word spoken manifested in her skull instants before the first syllable sounded.

"Oh?" Elder.

"Big lady herself." Younger.

We will. "I will." Accept your. "Accept your..." Offer of. "Offer of." Alliance. "Alliance."

"Smart."

"And they say you specialists are all crazy."

"You can be smart and crazy."

"True."

And that was it? So Sage's voice never mattered? Had her arguments even been considered, what had—Shut the fuck up already. The fact you even got a second to speak is—No get out—It's true though Sage, you should consider yourself fortunate—No—The Lady was more than kind to you—

But we. "But I." Cannot. "Cannot." Continue to fight. "Continue to fight." Until our souls are regenerated. "Until my souls are regenerated."

"How long's that gonna take."

"They'll call reinforcements before too long."

"We might be in trouble then."

"Better be fast—"

It will. "It will." Only take. "Only take." Tonight. "Tonight."

The twins looked at one another. The glance seemed one-sided, because the elder twin's helmet covered her face completely, so any meaning gleaned from expression alone would come only from the younger. Were those Sage's thoughts or the Ladies or someone else's? Well *that* thought had to be hers—SHUT UP WE SAID.

A nod from one twin to another segued into a break in the silence. "Alright."

"We attack tomorrow morning."

"Pow!" She pounded her fist into her palm.

"Wipe the Chicago girls off the map."

"Then you take what you want, we take what we want." (An image of Murrieta-Temecula in her head.)

"And we go our separate ways."

"Deal?"

Deal. "Deal."

And so after all this time, Denver was working with Seattle after all, these girls who essentially ran a cult of personality on her website. And thankfully, this time nobody pierced her mind to tell her to shut up about it. The Lady must no longer intend to talk. It must require all of her concentration to speak even a little bit.

At the resolution of the deal, the younger Seattle put down her rifle and reached over the lip of the rooftop. Her hand scuffled something loud enough to hear over the wind and with an oof she hoisted a limp form onto the rooftop proper. It was a girl in a white suit like the ones they had seen below; Sage recognized her. The girl who fired the nail gun, and whom Sage cut with her Star Rod. Given process of elimination, it must be the Lieutenant Bolingbrook her fellows below were looking for. Unconscious, gashed, and bloodied.

"Thought you might like this," said the younger Seattle. "A token of our new partnership, if you will."

"We tried to interrogate her for information. She refused to crack, though."

"And we kinda knocked her out. We're not good at torture."

The younger twin stood and lifted Lieutenant Bolingbrook under the arm. With a single underhanded fling she lobbed the body across the rooftop, until it landed on its head and skidded closer to the Lady's feet. The Lady, although she had no face, looked down at the offering.

As the sisters watched, the wings of the Lady parted, extended around Lieutenant Bolingbrook, and snatched her up completely. Before the Lady finished consuming her, though, Sage's physical form dissolved and she returned to the void of her interior. No longer needed, she supposed, until her body regenerated and she might fight again.

The soul and thoughts of one Nadia Groesbeck, of Charleston, South Carolina, merged with hers. Oh, thought Nadia-Sage, you had such a pretty lover. Jealous!

A pen burst in the mouth of Fourth—Third—Centurion Joliet. She had chewed it absentmindedly as she stared down the school assignment on her lamp-lit desk, and she must have chewed too hard because the ink spurted out the tube, into her mouth, and down her chin.

She stood and held her hands like a Tyrannosaur as she comprehended her predicament. Her throat made a guttural noise as thick splotches dropped onto her cardigan sweater and she fought not to swallow. She stood suspended in utter disbelief of her situation, uncertain how things had managed to exist for so many peaceful minutes only to upend now. Her mind blanked.

Drop, drop, went the ink.

Bathroom, finally the thought came to her and she rushed across her dormitory. In the bathroom she tilted her open mouth over the sink's basin. Her fingers, stained black, curled around the edge and the mangled pen rolled to the drain. She fumbled for the faucet handle and shoved her lips under the stream as soon as it flowed, only to draw back hissing at how hot the water was.

Wait—her assignment. She staggered back to her desk and sure enough the ink covered half the paper and she clutched her hair as a wheeze of despair forced out her nose. At which point she pulled her hands away and realized she now had ink in her hair. When she wheeled back to the sink the water had only gotten hotter, so a thick trail of steam rose from it. All the while the taste sloshed around her jaw...

After she fiddled with the second handle and the water hopefully cooled she held her mouth to it again. But the moment before her lips touched the stream a vicious pounding rattled her door and spooked her so much she reared back and slammed her face into the faucet nozzle. The taste of blood mixed with the ink.

The fist outside pounded again against her door. She resolved to ignore it. But someone transmitted to her telepathically: *Centurion Joliet. Centurion Joliet. Milady, it's an emergency.*

She spat a black glob against the porcelain. *I am busy... extremely busy. Talk... Speak to Lieutenant Bolingbrook about it.* (Which word sounded more authoritative? Talk or speak? She had floundered in the middle over it, and felt stupider for splitting the difference.) Nonetheless she finally put her mouth under the water and let it wash over her tongue, around her teeth, and down her cheeks.

Centurion Joliet. It is highly probable that Lieutenant Bolingbrook is deceased.

Joliet's head went limp in the basin of the sink. The water ran down her face. She remained like that, eyes fixed against the sloped side of the porcelain, for many moments.

Until the voice continued: *Please, milady. We need your command. We are being invaded.*

Fourth, Third Centurion Joliet entertained the possibility of escaping out the back window. Into the alleyway and due west. Unfortunately, it didn't matter which direction she fled, because the city sprawled on all sides. The only real direction she had was straight into the lake. And then down, down, down to the bottom.

Milady! You are the only officer of military rank still within the city. Without you, we are lost.

Yes. She reached up and turned the handles. The faucet water ceased and she seized both sides of the sink to pull herself out of it. She wiped her hands and her face on the towel, and the towel now had ink all over it too. One could find tranquility in his or her assured destruction, yes? At one point, death became so certain one could ease their heart in face of it. The points that truly ruined her were those where a glimmer of hope remained—Oh what the fuck was she thinking! Everything rammed into her all at once and her body shook so violently she knocked the towel rack off the wall when she tried to put the towel back on it. She twisted for the back window only to see a gold-plated Chicago sister already there, looking in at her with a fist raised to rattle the glass.

Joliet staggered across the room, got twisted in her desk chair, and flopped onto her face. She scurried upright and in seconds undid all the locks on her door, the chain, the deadbolt, the dial in the knob. And when she wrenched the door open and prepared to sprint she had to stop on her first step because two more soldiers stood before her.

"Hnnk, I, rrk, I..."

"Centurion Joliet!" The two soldiers saluted in unison. A few moments later, the soldier who had been at the back window rejoined them and saluted too. Joliet recognized two of them, Orland and Harvey. The third was one of the new girls assigned in the past couple days. Either Flossmoor or Palos.

She had, of course, memorized all the names of her new recruits and read each of their files diligently, like a good commander. Even if Bolingbrook handled all the regular affairs, it

paralyzed Joliet to imagine the awkward situation when she got one of her subordinates' names wrong.

"Kkeh," said Joliet. "What's the, unh, situation?"

Orland, the seniormost of the trio, explained with blunt succinctness that caused Joliet to flinch at multiple points. Lieutenant Bolingbrook embarked on a standard wraith hunt with Palos, Flossmoor, and Midlothian—the three newest recruits. It was typical for commanders to work with rookies to better assess their capabilities and provide the weaker ones with needed support. During the hunt, three invader Puella Magi attacked. The first was a Terminatrix who intended to kill Palos. The other two...

"The Seattle... sisters?" said Joliet.

"Correct, milady." The new girl—Palos, as the story confirmed—saluted. "They are twin sisters who hail from Seattle. They're known to be powerful and popular Puella Magi."

And nobody currently knew why they attacked or how they even entered the city.

"I was forced to flee." Palos had an automaton voice, and Joliet figured she still had difficulty adopting the lingo of the Empire. "My magic allows me to track the signatures of other Puella Magi. Lieutenant Bolingbrook's signature had remained motionless in the place where we were attacked for a long time... Until about ten minutes ago it disappeared completely."

Not that Joliet had nursed hopes to the contrary, but based on the Junior Administrator's report, she knew how Palos's power worked. What nettled her deeper was that the Junior Administrator's report had also detailed that a Terminatrix was chasing Palos. Joliet had read it in the report, paused mid-sip of her coffee to reread it and ensure she understood it properly, and even thought to herself: "Should we really be taking a girl who has a Terminatrix chasing her?" But did she do anything about it? Of course not. She had assumed Cook, who recruited Palos, knew what she was doing...

Could one person be any less lucky? At least the dead had nothing left to worry over. Her arms twisted around herself.

"We await your command, milady. What must we do? Shall we contact Her Munificence the Empress—"

"NO! No. *No!*" She slammed the door in their faces and revolved around her dormitory living room with the only light being the lamp on her desk and the pools of ink that reflected its gleam.

Her mind raced. It whirred. It folded inward and outward as she clutched her temples. Okay. Okay Joliet. You may quite possibly be the most unlucky person in the entire world. This situation might possibly be the worst situation anyone could ever be in. But... but... But nothing! She couldn't think of a single solitary positive and even the fact that she only had three known enemies made things worse. Because she knew, just because there were three of them, they were probably the three strongest Magical Girls ever and they would only humiliate her all the more when they bent her over and pounded her despite her having seven

times their numbers. All seeming advantages were only future disadvantages to compound the lousiness of her predestined loss, she could not even profess to enter this situation as a true underdog, could not even roll on her back and elicit the pity that she sure had failed, but her failure had always been assured—Nobody would ever believe her that she had zero chance, zero fucking chance at all to win this fight or any fight or or or—

She broke down and sobbed on her knees. Of course, the moment she slammed the door on her subordinates they had simply opened the door again so they stood and watched her cry.

They didn't even say anything. They just waited for her command.

Eventually she ran out of tears. That's what usually happened. Nobody ever told her to stop. She sniffled, wiped her eyes, and stood. She said: "Ahhhhh," and put on a face as though she were refreshed, although in reality her pancreas simply failed to produce more despair necessary to fuel her sobs.

"Your orders, milady," one of her subordinates finally said.

Her orders...

Her orders, when she finally came up with them, were quite sensible. She hoped. She did not actually have any tactical know-how, because all the books her mother assigned her to read were treatises on womanhood or religious devotion or piety or... Machiavelli. But, generally, she assumed it was best to have all your forces concentrated in one area rather than scattered everywhere.

So she had Orland call all members of her platoon to meet at the Administration building, near the yacht, as soon as possible (withholding information that Bolingbrook had died). This was also sensible. For starters, the Administration building was close to Joliet's dormitory. Secondly, it faced the lake, so they could narrow the directions their enemy might attack from. Thirdly, Dr. Cho and Junior Administrator Hegewisch, the only other people who could feasibly take command instead of Joliet, would be there. It also made sense not to tell her platoon about Bolingbrook's death, because if they knew that they probably would never listen to anything Joliet told them to do.

Something weird had already happened at the Administration building, though. Someone had driven a car into the wall. Blood covered the walkway and led into the Medical building. Joliet drew back and almost gave an order for her soldiers to retreat, but Hegewisch stepped out and hailed her.

Fourth Centurion Joliet was not wearing a regulation white suit. She had ink all over her clothes and skin. Her hair was mussed, she had a cut on her cheek, and her eyes were still a little puffy. Somehow, Hegewisch looked only a little less bad.

The two of them and Dr. Cho congregated in the Administration building's assembly room. Harvey, Orland, and Palos waited outside as they finished calling the rest of the platoon, and apparently Midlothian and Flossmoor were already in the Medical building. Hegewisch and Dr. Cho knew the basics of the situation; Joliet only had to explain that Bolingbrook was most likely dead.

Upon that explanation, they sat in silence.

The assembly room seated twelve people around a long table. Two black screens hung from the wall. The room was otherwise empty. Joliet paced one side of the table, Hegewisch sat stooped with her chin cradled on a thatch-work of her own fingers, and Dr. Cho leaned against the wall under the monitors.

"Whether you wanted me to or not, milady," said Hegewisch, "I've already contacted the other Centurions."

Yeah. It was the obvious thing to do, the safest thing to do, but it killed Joliet inside. Because Cicero or Cook, if they had been in Joliet's position, wouldn't call for reinforcements. They wouldn't need help. Against three Magical Girls? Either of them would have taken the fight by themselves. The idea that a platoon of twenty could lose with such a numeric advantage. "Only Joliet," they would say.

"All three of the other Centurions and their platoons have reached their first destinations. Centurion Cicero's platoon, in Indianapolis, is closest to us."

"How far is that exactly?"

"About three hours. Milady," said Hegewisch. "However. Centurion Cicero's platoon has already engaged with the Magical Girls of Indianapolis and she claims she can't afford to fall back now. Centurions Cook and Aurora expressed similar sentiments."

Joliet had expected something like that. "So they won't help us."

"Centurion Cicero claims she can reinforce us tomorrow, after Indianapolis is secured."

"When specifically?"

"She refrained from particulars."

On a swivel of her heel mid-pace, Joliet stumbled and segued the motion into seizing herself by the hair. She doubled over and moaned as her pancreas reactivated and the humors flowed in excess: "It's—HER—plan! It's her plan—how else? How else are we invaded mere hours after everyone leaves? She's testing me—no, worse, she knows I'll never pass this test... She's going to get rid of me like DuPage. She realizes I'm a mistake. She—"

"Centurion Joliet. Please."

Joliet clawed at her cheeks. "This isn't an invasion, it's an abortion!"

"Centurion Joliet. Your mother the Empress loves you. You are blessed with her everlasting favor." Hegewisch's dull tone expressed the true meaning of her words. "It's clear our enemies were waiting for the other platoons to leave before they attacked. It was not preplanned by the Empress."

Nonetheless, Joliet roved in an epileptic fit along the side of the table. Too many failures. Too many chances. Her mother's silent goodwill finally bankrupted, after no word from her,

neither admonishment or encouragement, her entire life—after nothing but a ceaseless line of promotions and expectations but without any gravity placed on whether she fulfilled her roles and duties well or ill—Guh. She leaned back her head and allowed her vision to blur under the lights above. She was going to die. Her palms pressed together and she shook her hands back and forth before her.

"Ah. Excuse me," said Dr. Cho. "My apologies, I've been thinking about something more significant during all this. But what exactly is the issue? The Empress and the Handmaiden are here. Those two'll never lose."

The apathy of her companions only isolated Joliet in a personal Hell. "Neither of them are here obviously."

"That's incorrect," said Hegewisch. "The Handmaiden changed the costumes of Palos and Flossmoor this morning. She's around somewhere."

"Wrong, wrong." Joliet pressed her fingertips to the bridge of her nose and cradled her chin on her thumbs. "My mother has an extremely important job in a city far away from here. And she needs the Handmaiden's help to do it. Honestly, both of them are almost never in this city. Even if they like it to look otherwise..."

Hegewisch looked to Dr. Cho with obvious suspicion on her face, but Dr. Cho had closed her eyes. "Well," Hegewisch said, "I'm not sure whether you should have disclosed information like that to people without proper clearance. Given the extreme circumstances—milady—I'll assume you exercised proper judgment. Nonetheless, I can still contact my boss, the Senior Administrator. She—"

"Doesn't exist," said Joliet.

"With all due respect, milady, that's... incorrect. I've spoken with the Senior Administrator many times in person—"

"The Senior Administrator is just the Handmaiden. She changes her appearance to promote the illusion that my mother trusts more people than she actually does."

"But—No—I've seen the Handmaiden and the Senior Administrator together. At DuPage's funeral even—"

"Standing next to each other, hm?" Joliet allowed herself to grin. "The Handmaiden's pretty good at changing the way things look, huh?"

She wasn't sure exactly what prompted her to make these admissions. Obviously Hegewisch and even Dr. Cho weren't supposed to know these things. With Joliet's rank all she had to say was, "The Empress isn't here. The Handmaiden isn't here. The Senior Administrator isn't here. I know these things, and that's final." But she didn't say that. Something about revealing the information made her feel good. It made her feel a little more in control of the situation. (Plus, she could always use her power to fix things if needed...)

When Joliet could breathe and consider the situation, even if it was a bad situation, in a logical way, then she felt a little better. When she lost her head and made a bunch of melodramatic sweeping statements, either aloud or mentally, that was no good for her. Of course, "when her head was clear she felt better" was a pointless platitude. But the fact that she had entered a frame of mind where she could say something redundant must mean she had at least calmed somewhat...

Hegewisch stared the entire time in silence. She had an easy-to-read face that at first looked doubtful and then, after she had time to consider, sagged with resignation that Joliet was absolutely right. Joliet was right. Even in a calamity like this, Joliet could find some solace.

Solace ruined by what came next, as Dr. Cho slapped her hands on the table and left two massive bloody prints. "This has been enlightening, but I must return to my work."

She headed for the door and all Joliet did was make a hrrk noise. She flinched forward and tried to say anything to stop her, but she said nothing. Hegewisch said it instead:

"Doctor, you have to stay. We haven't decided on a plan of action—"

"And? I'm no tactician." Dr. Cho, in opening the assembly room door, left another bloody print on the knob, so it looked like the scene of a murder. "I'm not even good at fighting, and neither are my creations, at least none of the ones present. I considered it important to learn the situation so I would know whether to be concerned, and knowing it, I'm not. So I'll leave you two to do what you do best. Besides, this is all rather humdrum compared to what happened earlier tonight. An encounter with a deity! Surely she must have left some mark of her presence. Microscopic residue? Infrared?"

Deity? Joliet was sick of deities. She had read far too many tomes about them on her mother's behest.

Meanwhile, Hegewisch stood so fast her chair fell over. "Not concerned? Those are three powerful Magical Girls out there. They're strong and we're off guard. They can easily overrun us if we're not careful."

"Overrun *you*, loves. Fortunately, I don't rely solely on the Empire for my protection. Ta-ta!" At which, the doctor left the room and her sneakers slapped down the linoleum hallway until she door swung shut.

"I'll go after her," said Hegewisch, halfway to the door.

"Wasting your time." Joliet sunk into one of the chairs she had pulled out on numerous occasions prior when she attempted to sit and then didn't. "It's not even worth it. She knows less about this military junk than I do. Face it: it's over. We're screwed." Saying "it's over" and "we're screwed" made Joliet feel better too. She'd feel best if Hegewisch also said those words.

It was simple facts, after all. Sure, they had twenty Magical Girls at their disposal. But they also had Joliet, who counted for negative twenty-one Magical Girls. Simple math dictated they would fall flat on their face—

Hegewisch slammed her fists on the door and Joliet nearly fell out of her chair. "Will you! *Will you just shut up?*"

"I—uh—hkk?"

"You heard me. Yeah. You *fucking* heard me."

"Ah, Junior Administrator, that, that language..."

"What! Will you tell mommy on me! You have made me so fucking sick listening to you whine this whole time and act like we've already lost when we have every fucking advantage. It's pathetic. I understand now why everyone talks shit behind your back. Jesus! Fuck! You're somehow more stressful than anything I've already dealt with today—and I've dealt with a *fucking* lot."

The more Joliet shrank, the more Hegewisch grew. The Junior Administrator? She could say words like these? The benign, quiet girl who sorted files and rarely uttered anything more than a yes-milady? Joliet blinked and started to sweat.

"I—I—"

"Because if you won't fucking take command here, then—then—then *I will*. I'm sick and tired of *my life* and the lives of *everyone else around me* being subjected to leaders, authorities, gods completely out of my control and completely out of their fucking minds, be they lunatics or idiots or whatever the *fuck* you are."

Hegewisch's skin crawled across her and her eyes swept through Joliet like a laser. A series of guttural stops and phlegmatic rasps echoed in Joliet's mouth and her hands scrambled against her body as she clutched herself. That thin fragment of stabilization afforded her in the murk of despair—that idea that all uncertainty could be removed if she simply threw the whole thing out the window and eliminated herself as an actor—it all cracked. Hegewisch swung a rusted hook into her gut and wrenched her fish-eaten body out the silty seafloor, up seventeen layers of oceanic biome, back into the nebulous penumbra where the forms of either whales or great whites swam. Amid the wheezes only a single intelligible word: "No..."

"Yes. YES. I refuse to die and if I have to twist the whole fucking chain of command of this society to live then I'll fucking do it."

"But. But what can we do? They're stronger than us."

Some of the fire in Hegewisch's face glazed over. She exhaled and closed her eyes. "I'll petition the Senior Administrator—or the Handmaiden, if they're really the same—for all available records on the Seattle twins and the Terminatrix who attacked Palos."

"Even if she gives you that. It, it doesn't matter."

"It does. It does." Hegewisch opened her eyes. "Remember. Our objective isn't to kill them. We only have to survive another day for Cicero's platoon—"

"Cicero won't come. Nor Cook, nor Aurora, nor... *her*. They all hate me. They all want me to die. That's the whole point!"

"You're wrong," said Hegewisch. "They don't hate you. They don't care about you at all. But there is something here they do care about, and it isn't me, and it isn't Dr. Cho, and it isn't any one of our girls." She swept a hand behind her and pointed at the door. "They care about the records. The data we've compiled on every Magical Girl in the nation. Because if they want to conquer this nation..."

Everything on Joliet's face was wet and when she wiped her forehead her hand came back black, congealed with ink. Her body tremored from breath. The records. The records.

"The Seattle twins want those papers," said Hegewisch. "It was in Lieutenant Kenosha's report. When she was undercover as Collins in Denver, she encountered them. So we know we have something we can leverage, against both our enemies *and* our allies." She rubbed her head too, although not to wipe away sweat but to massage her forehead with her fingertips.

Junior Administrator Hegewisch. Joliet's mother had recruited her a few months ago. Had sought her out particularly and immediately promoted her to an administrative post. Her power was confidential even to someone like Joliet, who knew many of the Empire's secrets. Where did this Hegewisch come from?

"I can think of something," Hegewisch said. "I can put these pieces together and form a strategy. You can still issue the orders if you want. I don't care if you take all the credit when every one of us comes out alive. But I'm taking control of this situation. Is that understood?"

What could Joliet do? Except nod.

A long, drawn, breath. "Good." Hegewisch let her hands fall. She stood silent in front of the door and the whole room was silent because of it. They were two bodies, Hegewisch and Joliet, in a space designed for many more. The space between them was the length of five chairs along a table.

Then Hegewisch walked that gap and stopped at Joliet's side. She placed a hand on Joliet's shoulder.

"Don't worry." All intensity in her demeanor diminished and what remained was something calm, but her authority remained. "I won't let you die. You will survive."

Joliet looked up at her. Junior Administrator Hegewisch, where had she come from? How had she... when did she... The vision became blurry. Joliet flung her arms around Hegewisch's waist and squeezed her tight as she began to sob. Just like in her dormitory with everyone watching, and all that shame flared back up into her cheeks, but she cried anyway.

"Thank. Hhhk. Nnnr. Thank you... I never wanted to... No matter what I told myself, I never wanted to..."

Hegewisch extricated herself from her grasp, walked back to the door, reinstated the five-chair gap, and turned a knob. "Now," she said, "a strategy."

When I Consider How My Light is Spent

The hospital smelled of blood and alcohol. It reminded Clownmuffle of places in her past, but not all of those memories were bad. She no longer had to think about *that time*. So she didn't.

At one point she closed her eyes and when she opened them it became morning, or a vague psychic-morning because it remained dark. She rose from her bed, and from the row of identical hospital beds beside her rose several other girls in her "platoon." Everyone had made a lot of noise the night before due to the situation with Seattle. The specifics remained intentionally murky in Clownmuffle's mind, but the end result was that everyone, not only her, spent a night in the hospital. Some of them, maybe, alternated guard duty.

"Everyone up, everyone up," said... Laila? Yes, Laila, in the doorway beside a section of wall encompassed by that omnipresent portrait of the Empress. "Assemble in front of Administration for your next orders."

"Junior Administrator," said one of Clownmuffle's fellow former sleepers, "what about our morning ablutions?"

"We are in crisis mode ladies, no time for that. Chop-chop."

"Crisis mode" churned Clownmuffle's stomach, or maybe that was hunger. Sick people became weaker easier and Clownmuffle... she had to admit it. She was sick.

Meanwhile, the same girl expressed unexpected persistence. "With all due respect, Junior Administrator, the Empress's code is clear. Soldiers of the Empire are not to forgo any regimen of cleanliness no matter the—"

"Fine! Fine. But make it fast. Go!"

They filed through a dingy corridor cluttered by stained cardboard boxes full of bottles and speculums and arms to a door labeled WASHROOM by a sign in industrial lettering. The problem, clear to Clownmuffle before the others, was that the washroom did not have separate stalls for each shower. Instead, the washroom contained only a broad tiled surface with a few drains interspersed in a geometric pattern and ten to twelve nozzles jutting from the walls. The tile was once white but now ruddy brown or reddish.

More like a room for delousing than a shower. "Ah," she said to the girls lined behind her, "this won't work."

The other girls ignored her and entered the room. Their bare feet slapped against the tile as they started to pull their white nightgowns over their heads before they even reached the racks at the far end of the room, where they dropped the plain articles unceremoniously. Clownmuffle reeled back and struck the wall of the corridor as the more nude of the bunch swiveled dials and turned on the water. A lanky androgyne of colorless skin tilted back her head and let her stringy brown hair dangle. She said: "We got no towels. One of you ask the Physician for some and quick!"

If Clownmuffle had presence of mind she would have ran for the Physician, but her paralysis welded her to the wall and someone at the back of the line saluted and dashed away faster. Clownmuffle might still have run, away from this wall of sudden nudity if the few girls who hadn't yet disrobed didn't grab her by the arms and shove her into the shower room.

"Come on Flossmoor, we gotta be quick," said a girl whose face could not be seen because she was pulling her shirt up over it—GAH. Why! This was so improper. Clownmuffle retreated to the corner and slipped halfway there so that she had to throw her hands between the intersecting walls to catch herself.

Someone giggled.

Followed by a harsh look and a sharp word from a girl with red hair and fifty matching freckles. The girl was another one of the tall ones—in this steaming cube, only heights and colors distinguished person from person. Thankfully, the redhead still wore her gown as she approached Clownmuffle, one hand outstretched. "Since you showed up late yesterday nobody even got a chance to introduce themselves... It's understandable you're nervous." She smiled and extended a hand. "I'm Orland."

"Don't baby her," said a rough-throated voice from the flesh mob.

"She's young, she had a traumatic experience last night, and she's our sister. Let the officers bark at her." Orland's hand remained outstretched.

Young. They thought Clownmuffle, who beat all of them in age, was young. That mistake eased the palpitations more than Orland's unthreatening demeanor. After all, Clownmuffle's mentor—she had red hair too. But obviously Orland was a different person. Clownmuffle took her hand and shook.

"Now don't worry. I know you might not be used to it, but nobody will make fun of you or anything." She fired another glare at the same person who giggled before. "The whole 'we're all girls here' thing is kind of trite yeah? So I'll say instead we're more like sisters here. Yeah."

Clownmuffle never had a sister. She had—no need to remember *that*. Her mind frothed with things she'd rather not remember and for a long time had not needed to remember. Another image, more closely connected to the concept "sister," entered her mind to replace it: the Seattle twins.

Alright. Alright, she could do this. If she could do... the thing she did... *that one time*—No. This was more like what she had done with the Physician, when the Physician poked and prodded her. In fact it should be even less strenuous than that, because nobody would touch her. Yet somehow the paralysis ossified her even worse than in the doctor's office with the Empress's portrait staring her down.

Play their games, win their prizes. She fully planned to acquire the information necessary to repair her Soul Gem today. So she only needed to wear the proper mask a little longer, a little longer, for everything she had gone through until now it was nothing, nothing to—to—GAH.

She did it. Fast and without thinking she removed her nightgown and threw it onto the rack. She kept her face pointed down, at nothing, and slinked along the wall away from Orland and all others to one of the unoccupied shower nozzles. About twenty naked girls buzz-buzzed in the room, but the room was large. She had her space. Orland did not press her any further or even say anything. Wet footsteps clapped away and the next time she heard Orland's voice it was on the other side of the room, in a casual conversation. Clownmuffle thanked her silently. Now she could pretend nobody in this room existed as the warm water poured over her goosebumped skin.

People. People should always wear clothes when among others. That woven barrier, without it: too much of one's self became known. Everything under her skin burned and she folded inward, arms crossed in front of her chest. Her body stooped slightly as her knees kneaded. She wanted to wash quickly but at the same time she refused to move her arms. The moment's nerve that allowed her to remove her nightgown disappeared as the water slapped against her bare skin and the voices of the others reverberated in the clear acoustics: "That's because—" "—didn't hear—" "—Plainfield thought, but—" "HA, ha, ha" "You goof!" "—she looked great in yesterday's exercises, but she's kinda—" "—no, seriously—" "—I think Orland knows—" "Hey Orland, why did—" "Shut up and quit talking!"

Footsteps pattered across the hall and the girl who left earlier for towels skidded inside with an armful of them, only to immediately slip and slam onto her side. The towels went everywhere, some into the pool of water that swirled along the floor into the central drain.

"Oh dear, you okay?" The girls helped her up while others picked up towels. At least now nobody was looking at Clownmuffle, and although it didn't help much, it helped enough for her to kinda, rub her arms and shoulders and hair under the water. She had no soap or shampoo.

"Ah, oh, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry...!" The girl they helped up, she had a familiar voice. On scrutiny, she turned out to be the one who accompanied Clownmuffle on the wraith hunt the night prior. Her name was...

"Midlothian," said Orland, "it's cool you're enthusiastic, but Puella Magi need to exhibit grace and poise and all that."

"Apologies for my shoddy, uh, grace!" Midlothian straightened and saluted.

"Put the towels over there and shower as quick as you can."

"Yes!"

The distraction ended and Clownmuffle felt no cleaner than before, although at least her hair was wet. She ought to take the hygiene loss and go for a towel, but. A Magical Girl needed to always look her best, and while a lot of that did fall upon her outfit, elements of personal grooming remained likewise essential. Dr. Cho had left a medicinal scent upon her.

Cleanliness, grace, poise. An always-hopeful demeanor. These were the things that a Magical Girl required. Clownmuffle had to have faith that she still had all of them.

"Here you go!"

A small hand held out a bar of soap. Clownmuffle regarded this foreign object in utter incomprehension until her eyes slowly tilted along the length of the arm until the holder's face appeared in her periphery. Her height alone, being possibly the only girl in the room shorter than Clownmuffle, distinguished her: Midlothian.

"Kinda weird to wash without it right?" The soap dropped into Clownmuffle's hand but Clownmuffle was frozen. Midlothian's voice pounded against her: "I wanted to, ah, I wanted to thank you. For helping me out last night."

"P, please... pleasegoaway."

"Hunh? What'd you say?"

No doubt: Midlothian's eyes *looked* at her, her body, all of it, and no capacity for her skeletal structure to collapse on itself would ever suffice, even the idea of her bare back being seen, let alone the other parts, made her tremble.

"Oh. You're nervous. I get that." Midlothian fell to a whisper. "I felt weird too my first day. But hey, I think you're real cool, okay? I want you to know that."

"Cool?"

"Yeah. Last night was, well it was so scary. For so many reasons. I'm still, like, I'm still trying to process the whole thing. I still don't know what happened to Lieutenant Bolingbrook, and everyone in charge hasn't said much other than we're under attack, and when it all happened I was so freaked out I couldn't, couldn't even think? But you..."

Clownmuffle had been disgusting. Floundering around with a broken leg and a rotted body, she had essentially died if not for good luck. Luck, of course, was the final stat of the Magical Girl. When strength, stamina, speed, and defense all failed, a Magical Girl was still inherently luckier than a human. But to rely on that aspect only deepened her shame and she coiled forward with her arms pressed against herself.

"You were so cool. Even if you, aha, even if you did some weird stuff to my costume and got me in trouble. But all the other stuff—and you taught me a way I could use my power better. When I came here to Chicago and saw all the awesome powers everyone else had, I thought mine was super lame. But now I know something I can do nobody else can."

Midlothian's arms and hands lathered herself with soap. She had some feature Clownmuffle had failed to notice before, a line of scarred tissue that ran from her collarbone straight down the center of—ssst! Clownmuffle refused to look. Impropriety, and the girl operated so casually...!

"Anyway, I can tell you don't like it here, but I really wanna ask you to stick around. This is a good place, and—"

"Are you slackers done yet!" Laila's head poked through the doorway. Something especially horrible about letting Laila of all people see Clownmuffle in such a state petrified any slight range of movement she had, but Laila's eyes were fixed toward the center of the room, where Orland and a few of the more obviously older girls stood. "No way would you be taking this long if Lieutenant Bolingbrook gave the order. Turn the water off and move!"

"You heard her," said Orland. "Water off, dry off, and suit up. Move it."

The faucets squeaked and the water deblossomed into nothing. Midlothian frantically scrabbled at her skin to get the soap off but Clownmuffle had never applied the soap in the first place so she instead stood in twisted disappointment at her filthiness. Someone flung towels at them and Clownmuffle hastily cocooned herself in one.

Ahhhhh.

Everything became at ease.

"But yeah as I was saying—" Midlothian drying her hair with her towel, "—this place, it's a lot better than it looks at first. I know I've only been here a few days myself, but. Back in Grand Rapids, where I'm from—"

"Why are you telling me this. Any of it."

Midlothian's head tilted. "Hunh? Because I want to be your friend, of course."

That. It made no sense. Midlothian *was* Clownmuffle's friend. All Magical Girls were. Even the ones she fought, even the Handmaiden. The Handmaiden was her rival, after all, and rivals became friends in the end. Murrieta-Temecula, Laila, even that grouchy Denver. And Bolingbrook—well, Bolingbrook in her lack of any distinguishing traits made it difficult to perceive her as a true Magical Girl. Sometimes you got exceptions like that. The girl in St. Louis too, who created wraiths. What had her name been? She was basically a wraith herself, so of course she didn't count. But anyway. Technicalities aside, Midlothian. Was definitely Clownmuffle's friend.

Which made this conversation extremely ridiculous. Clownmuffle turned to follow the girls already finishing their showers, back to the sleeping room where their suits would be. The flow of conversation continued animated around her as Clownmuffle noticed most of the girls had short hairdos, quicker to wash and style. Often short to the point of buzz cuts. On one hand she wanted to applaud the boldness of such a choice, but on the other she figured most did it for convenience.

"Hey, come on, I'm sorry if I upset you or anything," said Midlothian. "Would it be okay if we're friends? Everyone here seems to already know each other anyway."

"Yes. Yes it's fine."

"Oh... I guess you don't want to. Okay. That's okay."

"I said it's fine."

"Yeah..."

They entered the room with the beds. Each had a fresh suit folded at the foot. Some beds also had additional feminine items. Who provided the suits, or the items, Clownmuffle only guessed. Dr. Cho's creations? Murrieta-Temecula, who had been missing the entire time? Laila? Somebody with information about measurements, because everything fit Clownmuffle perfectly.

Nothing exceeded the feel of clean luxury clothes. Or the look of the Empress in her portrait. Clownmuffle, engorged with pride's resurgence, took especial care with every crease and button. But as she looked at the Empress's portrait, something about it seemed off, unlike what she had seen before.

"Ah..." Midlothian. "Flossmoor, sorry to bother you again but, I don't know how to tie a necktie..."

Clownmuffle loved tying neckties! She jerked Midlothian into position, flipped her around, and slid the tie around her collar, over, under, over again, up, and down through the knot. Then one—*sharp*—tug to tighten it, the tightness absolutely essential, and voila. Perfect.

"Hrk," said Midlothian. "Th-thanks!"

These white suits, if only they didn't wear these white suits! Their impeccable fashion delegitimized so many of Clownmuffle's quibbles. Most of the girls around her were somehow faster at dressing than her, and most who remained applied a bit of magic to their hair (if they had any) to instantly finish it. Others brushed teeth, flossed, all diligent, all to Clownmuffle's satisfaction.

"Alright," she said to Midlothian, who had not yet charmed her hair from its frazzled, hand-dried state. "Since my mood's improved I'll give you great advice."

"You will!"

"You're a good friend, after all." Clownmuffle paused to think up some advice to give her. She snapped her fingers. "Girls like you are super cute and can bring a lot of energy, especially if we work on the stuff we already talked about last night about personal identity. But at the same time, girls like you are the most likely to die. So you should try especially hard not to die."

"Try... not to die."

"Yes! Lots of girls forget that. I'd say the three most important precepts for being a Magical Girl—"

"Puella Magi," interrupted a completely unrelated girl apparently in earshot.

"—Are 1) Look good 2) Be a good person and 3) Don't die. We've already worked on the first precept, the second I—I get a feeling you're okay on that one, so that leaves the third. You need to act with confidence in your abilities. Lightning is powerful. Not only for the reasons I

stated last night. It's also faster than almost any other attack. Nobody can avoid lightning, even me."

"I always thought my power was weak..."

"No. If you harness your innate potential—"

"Midlothian," said the same unrelated girl, on a bent to make herself related. "You would be better off looking to a more veteran Puella Magi for guidance."

Clownmuffle might have mustered a response against this nobody, whose drab demeanor suited her drab appearance, but Laila reappeared in the doorway and scolded them one final time. But it was as though Laila becoming a Lieutenant Bolingbrook copy sponged the Bolingbrook out of everyone else. They managed a degree of discipline but cracks appeared in their cohesion, cracks that gave them personality. Two girls whispering a jab at Laila's cushy job, one spending an extra bit of time with a hand mirror to add a twisty curl to her bangs. Midlothian failed to do anything with her hair so it coalesced into a ball of lint around her head. If Clownmuffle looked, she could find something unique about each of them.

She bid adieu to the portrait of the Empress as she passed through the door. Once it left her sight, any of its remaining sway diminished. A freedom swelled in her mind, perhaps buoyed by her mood, and she immediately set her mind to her most important task:

How to steal the Empire's records.

Darkness coated the outside except a dull gray over the lake. The Administration building, as bland as its name, was a two-story structure with three or four rooms to a floor. Clownmuffle's experience inside it was an entryway, a hallway, and Laila's office. Laila had a large number of filing cabinets but if she told the truth—and Clownmuffle trusted her—she had no access to the file Clownmuffle needed. So the file would probably be in a different office, on the second floor maybe. Unless the building had a basement. Point of entry posed no problem, windows lined every wall. Opportunity might prove more pertinent. Seattle and the specialist shook the Chicago girls, but bad luck had concentrated them exactly at the spot Clownmuffle planned to raid.

Bah—what was this! "Plans." She'd never needed them before. It made more sense to go with fate's flow. Feel the course that suited her and act upon it. But she scratched her head. Fate's flow fucked her of late. Or maybe she, in resisting it somewhere, had caused her own woes.

Either way, the natural course was obviously to steal the file she needed. Providence provided her Seattle as the opportunity. The twins would attack again, correct? Why else would they have come?

She bumped into someone as she exited the Medical building. One of the white-haired, red-eyed "creations" of Dr. Cho, crouched on the pavement between the two buildings, examining a spot with a microscope and tweezing bitty rocks into a petri dish. The other two creations did the same elsewhere around the area, and Dr. Cho herself crawled on her knees leaving bloody handprints everywhere as she inspected the spot nearest where God or whoever appeared the night prior.

"Ignore the Physician please," said Laila. Several girls, not only Clownmuffle, looked up. "Get into formation! Your Centurion, the *illustrious* and *renowned* Lady Joliet, intends to deliver your orders."

All thoughts of plans blipped out of Clownmuffle's mind at the mention of Joliet, that amazing girl of spectacular design, and she stood on tiptoe and even jumped to see over the shoulders of the much taller everyone around her. No sign of Joliet, and the expected formation forced Clownmuffle and the other recruits to stand in the back. The ebb and flow of the space shuffled Clownmuffle into the corner, shoulder-to-shoulder with Murrieta-Temecula.

"Eh, heh, hnnk." A melodious, jagged glass voice cleared its throat. It came from the front of the cluster. Clownmuffle leaned around the side of the formation to see but received an elbow from the girl in front of her. "Yes, hello, it is I, or eh, it is me, your Centurion, Joliet."

A long. Long. Long pause. The scratch of Dr. Cho and her homunculi across the pavement accompanied an occasional rap-tap-tapping of someone's foot in the front. Eventually, Orland said: "Yes, milady?"

"Oh eh, heh, nnk. I have... important news. I'm sure, eh, most of you, are wondering why you were ordered to spend the night here instead of your usual barracks."

Another long pause, again filled by Orland, whose red hair proved the sole thing Clownmuffle could see of the front. "Milady, Junior Administrator Hegewisch and I have already informed the platoon of the key details, namely that several invaders have assaulted the city."

"Y, yeah. Yeah. Eh. That's, it's very good, thank you, Hammond—"

"Orland, milady."

"Oh, ah, no! No! I knew that, I knew it, please. Believe me, I knew it. I got, eh, mixed up?"

"Understood, milady."

"Maybe it would be best if you let me speak," said Laila, as unseen as Joliet. "These sorry excuses for Puella Magi lack all decorum. Have you, Miss Orland, also informed your platoon that Lieutenant Bolingbrook is almost assuredly deceased?"

From the shudder that pervaded the ranks, Clownmuffle assumed not. Even the staunch girl in front of her flinched, and Clownmuffle finally had a chance to lean around the side of the formation and glimpse—

Her commander! Centurion Joliet, one hand folded downward at the wrist and the other hand perched atop it as she swayed and blew a thin collection of salt-and-pepper hair from her eyes. What exactly of her composition stirred Clownmuffle's heart so? In an instant she realized: Because Joliet contained some semblance of that portrait, those divine features, that lordly body, and a deep similarity in the eyes especially, the eyes that always peered upon the observer no matter from which angle stood; all those elements awash in a new, more

degenerate template. At one point in the previous night's encounter with God, God had diminished, become a teenage girl, but this wasn't like that, in fact its differences pushed into light the superiority of Joliet. For the Empress, her portrait, no matter how lordly it seemed, and what power it held over her, compared to the God who manifested before her, the Empress became nothing, a pale and earthly imitation. The spell of the portrait no longer held any sway upon Clownmuffle, for she had encountered something of far further perfection. And yet, the deliberate earthly elements of Joliet, that mixture of divine and base, her inherent ugliness swirled within a frame that ought to have been beautiful, *those* elements all far exceeded the baseness that had appeared in the God, so that from a purely aesthetic point of view the shortcomings of the Empress's appearance were more than compensated by the advantages of Joliet's individual quirks. *Duh!* It all came together so clearly, her understanding total—

"FLOSSMOOR! BACK INTO POSITION, YOU... UNRULY SPLOTCH!"

The voice belonged to Laila, who cut in front of Joliet, arms folded behind her back and a fur jacket perched upon the shoulders of her white suit. The sheer vitriol forced Clownmuffle into her slot.

"This is the level of uselessness you and your platoon exhibit. And befitting! No wonder you were all left behind while your sisters marched forth to conquest. Now consider the danger we are all in and act with more respect for the authorities who will guide you to safety. Centurion Joliet has appointed me temporary lieutenant, which means I am your direct superior and you *will* obey my commands."

"Centurion Joliet, milady," said Orland. "Not to call into question your judgment, but shouldn't someone with more leadership experience receive this post?"

"I, eh. Ah. Junior Administrator Hegewisch... I believe she knows what she's doing?"

"Correct," said Laila. At certain times, between the rows of humans in front of her, Clownmuffle saw Laila flit. She appeared to pace. "I've had all night to plan our course of action. It's fortunate we haven't been attacked again, but that's likely because our opponents needed to recharge. However, I'm certain they'll attack before our reinforcements arrive."

"How can you be certain of such a thing?" said Orland.

"Think about it for five seconds. If they—"

"I apologize," said Orland, "but someone of your rank ought to have punished me for such an impertinent question."

Nobody spoke. No, half accurate: Joliet made choking noises in her throat. But otherwise a projected period of silence descended, so long that Clownmuffle had a fleeting opportunity to construct a mental image of Joliet's form that would be easy to recall at a moment...

"If you intend for us to respect your command," said Orland, "then rather than simply shout at us, you must demonstrate the willingness to apply the correct level of discipline—"

The harsh but unmistakable sound of a knife being drawn and slashed across someone's face echoed between the buildings. The redheaded dome barely visible above the other heads lurched to the side.

Orland straightened herself and said: "Thank you, milady."

"As I was saying." Laila wiped something against her clothes and Clownmuffle cringed at the thought of a bloodstained pant leg. Although it did lend an aura of mystique to an ensemble... the specifics of the application were paramount, but she could not see Laila in such detail. Whatever blade Laila had drawn slid back into its sheath. "It's clear, given the coordination of our attackers and the extremely convenient timing of their attack, mixed with the threat the Incubator gave earlier, that he has masterminded this assault. With that in mind, we have to assume the invaders have perfect intelligence of our movements, including the movements of Centurion Cicero's platoon, who will reinforce us at some point. Therefore, we also have to assume that our invaders will launch a full assault on us before then, with an aim toward our eradication before Centurion Cicero arrives."

"Oh!" said Joliet. "I, eh, I think I get it. That uh, it makes sense?"

"Our enemy here is not simply three powerful Puella Magi, but an alien supercomputer. Does everyone understand this? Does everyone get the full freaking gravitas of the situation?"

What a weird Laila. Her voice had gotten stranger and stranger ever since they came to this city. Everyone else gave a unified, "Yes, milady."

"Good. Now—"

"Joliet!" Dr. Cho rushed past the ranks, skidded to a halt in the slush, and gestured in Joliet's vague direction while she poured over an open notebook with her other hand. Her sharp British accent cut over Laila's incipient protest: "I've commenced work on a new creation, one with a particularly specialized purpose. Think you can help me with it, love? The usual application of your power should suffice, although with a few adjustments of key parameters."

"Uh, ah, eh..."

Which led to a lull into which Laila could interject, which she did with a lot of shouting, which made no impression on the continually distracted doctor, who responded positively to an affirmation Joliet never made and skidded back to her creations to usher them to a new spot along the walkway.

Once the distraction ended, Laila went back to her speech... Clownmuffle became drowsy. Why did they have to stand so straight? Movement was part of a girl's aesthetic too. And she could not even stare at Joliet, nothing could be worse. Murrieta-Temecula ignored her existence and Midlothian's random glances her direction failed to sate the boredom that descended as Laila went on to explain some "plan" or "scheme" or "plot".

Something about...

"The yacht," said Junior Administrator & Acting Lieutenant Hegewisch. Who, let her add, had *no* idea what she was doing. Zero. Well, the plan, yeah. She knew about her plan, she spent the whole night at a whiteboard scribbling and erasing and bouncing ideas off Joliet's rubber face. Strategically, fuck, she could cut it, more than anyone else. Like Cook or Cicero or the Empress understood "tactics" outside of maybe a Sun Tzu book, because that was the kind of old ass bullshit the Empress probably made people read and write reports on, but none of them were real soldiers and none of them were real generals. So Hegewisch had faith in her ability to be as good as anyone else at strategy, because at least she had a brain.

But leadership? Barking orders? Getting people to follow her? God. She cut Orland with a *knife*.

The thought process behind her plan went something like this:

Their chief priority should be to split the enemy forces. Some tacticians might plan a preemptive assault on the enemy location, since Palos had a magical radar that made their position known. But if their enemies had the assistance of Kyubey, which Hegewisch strongly suspected, that meant their enemies would also know the position of Chicago's forces. So a surprise attack would not work. Striking the enemy at night, while they recharged from their battle with Clownmuffle and Bolingbrook, might also seem wise, but Hegewisch had to remember that every girl in Joliet's platoon had also been fighting wraiths (and wraiths more powerful or more numerous than the ones they were used to), so they did not really have an energy advantage either.

That meant they needed to compose a strategy that would force their enemies to come to them. The kind of strategy that didn't rely on trickery or surprise, because Kyubey would be able to sniff it out and relay it. For a long time Hegewisch sat in the Administration building assembly room wracking her brains while Joliet teetered backward and forward on the precipice of obnoxious and pathetic.

And Hegewisch finally landed on this strategy of splitting the enemy forces, which was probably a super typical Sun Tzu tier strategy, the kind you could read in a fortune cookie, but also, in this scenario at least, kind of counterintuitive? The enemy had three distinct members. The smaller your enemy, the harder it is to split them. But three was more than one, which made it possible. And as Hegewisch considered ways to achieve her goal, she realized:

The yacht.

One of their enemy, the Terminatrix, could fly. One, the younger Seattle sister, had a sniper rifle described in the declassified Denver documents as "miles-long range". But the big armored one would have no way to attack them if they sailed to sea.

A slight improvement of their situation, but an improvement nonetheless. They go on the yacht, move out nine miles into Lake Michigan, and use the magical radar of Palos to keep

track of the enemy position. The Terminatrix had a three-mile range to deploy her projected Magical Girls, but in order to reach that range she would be forced to fly over a perfectly open sea, with no cover possible. They would be able to bombard her with the Joliet platoon's own long-range attackers, of which several existed. The younger Seattle sister would likely be able to fire at them from that range, based on reports, but they would have, again, a perfectly open sky above a perfectly open sea to watch her projectile sail toward them, and then they could block it with the members of Joliet's platoon that possessed defensive capabilities.

The worry would be that the Terminatrix could bypass their offense and get within the three-mile range to deploy her forces on the boat, which might destabilize their formation and inject chaos into the ranks. But they would have to deal with the Terminatrix under any circumstance Hegewisch could conceive.

Her plan was by no means foolproof and she had to remember that. But she figured it was better than any alternative. Nobody in Joliet's platoon had a standout or truly useful ability, except for Palos, whose radar could keep them informed, and Clownmuffle, who was simply unkillable.

Also, Joliet herself existed. Hegewisch, three in the morning, over scribblings and maps, asked her: "Your ability, does it have any combat application?"

Joliet gave no straight answer. Hegewisch had a theory of her own that Joliet's power had something to do with mind manipulation, because new recruits often went to Joliet for "readjustment." If it could be weaponized, then it granted them a new advantage... But Joliet was useless. As a human being.

Nonetheless, Hegewisch explained to the twenty surviving members of Joliet's platoon the plan. "This plan will not be questioned. This plan's success lies in everyone's ability to believe it will work." She said it like she had one hundred percent faith in her plan. She stared at Orland, the most veteran member of Joliet's platoon. But Orland said nothing. Her face was still bleeding from Hegewisch's earlier slash.

Dear God. Dear Madoka Kaname, help them all live.

She touched her forehead. The frigid temperatures caused her skin to grow taut and ashen. Joliet quivered beside her. Several of the platoon girls, despite their training, despite the dampening of cold, quivered too. The proclamation that Bolingbrook was dead had startled many. The gravity of the situation weighed upon them.

"We have to hurry now," she said. "Now that I've said it aloud, it's almost certain the Incubator has heard our plan. He can easily mobilize our enemies to move before we initiate it. Orland, take five girls of your choice and get the yacht ready to go. The rest of you, we need to move supplies and sensitive documents from Administration to the yacht. Let's hurry—and let's all survive!"

A trenchant five claps set, to Hegewisch's surprise, everyone in motion. Orland immediately indicated those to assist her and they ran toward the docked yacht. The others congregated at Hegewisch's back as she led them into the Administration building. In the entryway she had

already piled containers. Denver's documents, the machines that housed Chicago's own files, crates of grief cubes, and boxes full of terrestrial weaponry. With military efficiency, the girls hoisted the containers by handles and grips and shuttled them toward the yacht.

Hegewisch carried crates of her own. They contained weapons for her personal defense, because if she had to fight she wanted to be able to fucking fight. Sig Sauer MCX assault rifle with 5.56x45mm NATO rounds. Mossberg 500 pump-action shotgun with 12-gauge ammunition. M240 Lima machine gun with belt-fed 7.62x51mm NATO rounds. For a sidearm she already had a M1911 pistol holstered at her hip and a USMC Mark 2 combat knife in a leather sheath strapped to her ankle. All of this weaponry came from the storehouses under the building, and there were many more. The Empress had somehow gotten her hands on a large amount of it, despite Hegewisch being pretty sure at least some of the stuff was for United States Military use only.

"What's the status on the enemy, Palos," she said as she tromped down the walkway to the gangplank on the dock.

Palos stood nearby with her eyes closed and a hand pressed to the side of her head like she was using a radio. "Nothing yet—Wait. One's moving—all three are moving toward us."

"So the Incubator's listening after all. Hurry up ladies! Orland, how's the yacht coming?"

"Operational, milady! Awaiting your order to cast off."

With fifteen Magical Girls at her disposal, it only took one trip to ferry the important containers onto the yacht. Hegewisch stood at the side of the gangplank and waited for the stragglers to heave their cases onboard.

"Is that everyone? Orland, head count."

Orland, who leaned over the railing of an upper deck, shouted down immediately: "That's everyone from our platoon."

"Where's Centurion Joliet?" Hegewisch asked, moments before she spotted the sniveler in question staring out at sea near the bowsprit. "Alright, alright. Get the cases with the Empire's records inside, somewhere safe. And cast off as soon as possible, enemies incoming—"

"Seven miles and closing," said Palos.

"What about the Physician?" shouted Orland from above, even as with hand signals she directed her soldiers at the controls.

The Physician remained on the walkway between the Medical and Administration building, along with her three "creations." The creations continued to comb the ground for clues about Madoka Kaname, but the Physician rose and turned toward them.

Physician, please jump on, we're pulling away from the dock, Orland said.

No, that won't be necessary. The Physician waved. *I'll be fine here. Joliet, please remember that I'll require your assistance for my latest creation.*

If I survive, said Joliet, I'll help you with anything you want. She retained her position at the bowsprit and did not even look the Physician's direction.

Then I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors! Bon voyage!

She waved, and waved, and waved as the yacht pulled away from the dock and turned toward the lake. Eventually the ship angled itself so they could no longer see her.

Hegewisch had no idea whether the Physician's confidence in her ability to survive was warranted or not. She probably could have had the soldiers subdue her and take her onboard, but at the same time, the Physician was more likely to become a nuisance than anything else.

Infinite minutia, random bullshit, details upon details upon details. Her experience with spreadsheets and data management helped her in that field. She could create a plan that toured all the angles. But could she be a *leader*, someone people respected, and followed? Someone like Denver? Except, in the end, nobody except Hegewisch had followed Denver. In the end, hadn't Denver been the exact person Hegewisch was now, the person who organized files, collected data, considered the angles in a logical fashion... and where did it bring Denver?

Well. From the reports of Clownmuffle and Palos, Denver was now part of the Terminatrix. At least she was still "alive," but. In the days since St. Louis, she had wondered again and again about Denver, and the kindness she showed Hegewisch, her enemy. Some part of Hegewisch feared she could not even live up to the qualities Denver had exhibited, and Denver's qualities had not even been enough. She considered the girls around her: Would she truly keep them alive? How many of them would she sacrifice to save herself? Did she take command to rescue everyone, or simply to form a shield of twenty-one bodies around her?

As she turned back and watched the city of Chicago recede into the misty whiteness of the winter morning light, her heart palpitated and she wondered what the hell was she doing and how the hell would she do it.

Damn the Torpedoes!

On the yacht, there was only the yacht. Lake Michigan stretched endlessly in every direction. Ice floes bobbed on the surface, but diminished as they sailed further from the coast. Their topography became a blue plane of water under the white plane of sky, the murmur of waves and the scentless spray up the boat's sides. This nothingness stirred one's agoraphobia. Although Hegewisch held the railing, her knees buckled as for a moment it felt like she had become unmoored in the world, like she fell upward, because so little remained of landscape the typical indicators of position dissolved into dust.

In that moment it felt like only her, Hegewisch, existed, on this formless canvas of color. But she had a yacht and twenty-one young women alongside her. And a constant buzz of information in her ear.

None of them knew any nautical terms, but Orland and her cohort barked them anyway. Port and starboard, aft and keel. The yacht had criminally simple controls, probably modified by magic sometime in the past so the Empress could use her army of teenage girls to pilot it instead of hiring an actual staff. Orland's aggressive seamanship meant nothing but a continued adherence to formality.

Knowing the names of all the places on the yacht might have been useful for troop organization, but none of the Empire's files discussed something like that. The best way Hegewisch understood it was like a three-layer cake. The first layer of the ship comprised what she assumed would be called the "main deck." Then there was a second layer and a third layer, each smaller than the last, with decks of their own. Ladders and steps led up to each progressive deck with an alien cluster of antennae at the absolute top. The front portion of the ship, from about its midpoint to the bowsprit, was open enough for many people to run around. The back of the ship, by contrast, required you to squeeze if two people wanted to pass. Along each layer were tinted windows, and inside the yacht an uncertain collection of rooms.

Intimate familiarity with this topography might prove inessential. If her plan operated at maximum capacity, then only the vast ocean stretch into the mist mattered. But she intended to maintain her awareness and keep contingencies available.

"What's our proximity to the enemy, Palos?"

Palos, by order, had remained glued to Hegewisch's side the entire time, at the back of the boat where they had the best view of the line of attack. "Two signatures nine miles west, moving away from us at constant rate. One signature six miles west, moving closer at a slow but constant rate."

So the plan held together so far. The Seattle sisters were forced to remain on the coast, while the Terminatrix flew after the yacht. She wondered why the younger Seattle had not yet attempted to fire on them with her sniper rifle, but either way, Hegewisch definitely did not

want to force them out of the ten-mile range of Palos's radar. Losing sight of them would be worse than potentially escaping the younger Seattle's attack range.

Orland, she said telepathically. *Stop the ship. We'll hold here.*

Yes, milady.

The whirr of the yacht's engines died moments later. The froth of stirred water in their wake died to ripples and the yacht stood still on the placid, icy drink.

"The Terminatrix's signature is now gaining at a much quicker rate. Five miles and closing," said Palos.

Hegewisch pulled from her thick furred jacket a pair of binoculars and stared into the white. Winter fog reduced visibility worse than she hoped—but not as bad as she expected. Nonetheless she had zero eyes on the Terminatrix. "We'll have to rely on Palos's radar to adjust our fire. Mokena, Hazel Crest, Munster. Ready your weapons."

The three girls in the platoon with long-range attacks transformed and stood in a line to Hegewisch's left. Mokena aimed an old timey musket with a barrel that funneled outward like a gramophone. Hazel Crest drew a yew bow notched with an arrow covered in thorns and saplings. Munster summoned an orb of purple energy between her palms. No other members of Joliet's platoon had effective ranges over three miles, and none of the terrestrial weaponry, even enchanted, came close.

"Direct them, Palos. Show them which way to aim."

Palos nodded and shot her hand ahead of her at a slight angle to the upper-right. She closed her eyes, cupped her other hand over her ear, and allowed her head to droop. Her outstretched arm adjusted its direction modicum by modicum.

"Remember to compensate for uh, wind speed," said Hegewisch, although Magical Girls with long-ranged attacks tended to have an intuitive knack for those kinds of things, rendering the reminder pointless and probably annoying. "Griffith, is your power ready?"

The soldier in question, already transformed, stood on the second deck. She held a whimsical, camera-like device. "Yes, milady."

"Four miles and closing," said Palos.

"Fire!"

Mokena, Hazel Crest, and Munster unleashed their weapons in unison. At the same time, Griffith's camera contraption flashed and for a split second the colors of the world inverted and a nauseating sense of distortion ripped through Hegewisch's body. The moment passed, the distortion ceased, and everything returned for normal except for the three projectiles just then fired were copied seven times apiece and twenty-four attacks total zoomed in the direction Palos indicated. Griffith's power duplicated small objects of her choice, and

Hegewisch hoped an increase in projectiles would compensate for the uncertainty of their accuracy.

Three crystal shards, three sapling-strewn arrows, and three purple energy balls zoomed over the ocean and cut swirls into the mist before the mist closed back up and they saw nothing.

"Ready volley two," said Hegewisch, hand pressed to her forehead. "Palos, update me on—"

"She's falling back!" said Palos. "No, not falling back—Lateral movement north—and down! Here!" Her outstretched arm redirected.

"Volley two ready," said the three long-range attackers in eerie unison.

"Camera ready," said Griffith.

"Fire!"

The second flash made Hegewisch's eyes go spotty but the twenty-four projectiles launched in the intended direction.

"She's heading up now!"

"Ready volley three. Midlothian, cubes."

Midlothian, who would have been the most useless member of Joliet's platoon if Joliet herself did not exist, tottered to the three long-range girls. She clutched a shoebox-sized container and opened it to provide a grief cube to each of them, before climbing up the ladder to the second deck to dispense another to Griffith.

"Volley three ready."

"Camera ready."

"Fire."

This pattern continued seven more times. After volley ten, Palos reported that the Terminatrix had ceased evasive maneuvers and actually initiated a retreat, at least a temporary one.

"She's hovering about five miles away," said Palos.

"That's still in my range," said Hazel Crest. "Shall I fire again?"

"Save the energy. Inform me the moment she advances again." A deep breath. The air around her turned white and dispersed. Between both Denver's records and the Empire, they knew jack cock about the Terminatrix. The only useful information came from the accounts of Palos, Clownmuffle, and Cook about the St. Louis operation. And Midlothian's account of the attack that killed Bolingbrook. In fact, Midlothian's account had proved the most useful, because it indicated the Terminatrix herself had little defensive capability: One of Midlothian's attacks had paralyzed her for several seconds. Based on that, and the fact that

the Terminatrix liked to linger far from the action while her goons did the work, Hegewisch assumed she would take particular care to avoid any attacks levied at her actual person.

A faster, stronger, better defended Magical Girl might plow through even the duplicated attacks. The entire plan relied on the weakness of the Terminatrix herself, and somehow Hegewisch's educated assumption proved correct. She breathed again and closed her eyes.

"It's, it's going well?" Joliet from the second deck, beside Griffith.

God dammit, Hegewisch had told her to remain far away and make as little noise as possible. "Yes, so far. Now milady, please return to—"

"Movement from the Seattle twins," said Palos. "They're—they're starting to close on us. Eight miles. They're moving slower than the Terminatrix did."

"What!" said Joliet. "But the coast is nine miles away, how are they—?"

"A boat," said Hegewisch.

Joliet clawed at her face and screeched some devil cry. "A boat, oh no, oh noooooo a boat, we didn't even consider they, they, they might get a boat of their own...!"

It took mustered fortitude not to fall into Joliet's trap of stupidity. The Seattle sisters getting onto a boat was a good thing. It meant the younger sister's range was less than nine miles—they needed to close the gap somewhat. No way would they attempt to reach the yacht via boat, because the boat moved slower than the Terminatrix and had less maneuverability. If Joliet's platoon could keep the Terminatrix from advancing, they 'd be able to blast the boat from under Seattle long before they got close. Hegewisch remained still, allowed her jacket to flutter, crossed her arms, and waited.

Waited...

Waited...

Teeth clenched...

"They've stopped," said Palos. "Six miles west."

"That must be the younger sister's range," said Hegewisch. It was surprisingly not much longer than Hazel Crest's range. "Shield Team, Section A, get ready."

Shield Team consisted of seven members, defensive abilities being more common than long range. However, the narrow area of open deck at the back of the yacht lacked space for all seven to cluster. Hence "Section A," "Section B," and "Section C." Idiotic names, right? Hegewisch coined them herself. Apparently a need for stupid formal nomenclature existed after all. Haa...

The Magical Girls Homewood, Tinley, and Lemont crowded onto the back deck. Hegewisch raised her binoculars and stared into the white.

"It looks like they left the Physician and her assistants unharmed," said Palos. "I still read their signatures on the coast."

"Don't bother me with irrelevant—THERE!"

A black sphere shot out the mist and hurtled their way, not appreciably slower than an actual bullet, despite being the size of a wrecking ball. Shield Team Section A activated defensive barriers, staggered by each girl's reaction speed: Tinley first, Lemont second, Homewood third. By that time the wrecking ball bullet had already crossed the approximate mile of visibility.

Tinley's checkerboard-pattern paper wall broke instantly, and in that moment Hegewisch's heart crumpled because despite the ostensible flimsiness of her barrier, Tinley was strongest of the three. But her wall did *something* because the wrecking ball smashed into Lemont's giant slice of chocolate strawberry cake with far less force and only managed to bore halfway through before it struck Homewood's thatch of living snakes and stopped completely.

The wrecking ball sat halfway in the cake a second before it exploded.

By the time it did, Tinley managed to put up a second barrier behind Homewood's. And somehow it contained the explosion. Tinley dropped to a knee against the railing panting heavily as her barrier went down and the scorched remains of serpent and sugar plopped into the ocean.

"Get her cubes," said Hegewisch.

"Terminatrix moving again," said Palos. Her arm shot out. "There!"

"Fire!"

It only took three volleys to repel the Terminatrix and she drifted back to her position on the cusp of their range, where she held still. The Seattle sisters remained in their position too and the lull provided an opportunity for Midlothian to dispense grief cubes. An opportunity for Hegewisch to take her next breath.

All positions held for one, two... three minutes.

Another wrecking ball shredded through the white. Hegewisch barely had time to scream "All sections ready" before it came upon them. Section A put up their three barriers as before, but instead of crashing into Tinley's paper wall, the wrecking ball bullet lurched ninety degrees to the right and circumnavigated the barrier with no loss in speed. It swerved, jerked, and shot straight toward the center of the boat's port—starboard—LEFT side.

Kenosha's report had mentioned the younger twin's bullets zigzagged like this. So Hegewisch had prepared. Shield Team Section B already reinforced the left side of the ship. And while Section B and Section C had fewer members than Section A, Hegewisch had made sure to assign stronger shield users to compensate.

A moment of truth nonetheless. The bullet crashed against Hammond's barrier and exploded. The force broke the barrier but could not pass through Plainfield's behind it.

The Terminatrix moved forward at the same time, synchronized exactly to the bullet. But as long as the bullet failed to damage the boat, they had no problem launching more volleys to repel her. The battlefield returned to its stasis state for another three minutes.

"Can we, can we, even—hrrk—sustain this?" Joliet played with her eyelids. "Hours of this... until Cicero shows? Assuming she—"

"We have plenty of grief cubes." Hegewisch kept her eyes glued to the binoculars. She suspected the next attack might come from high above or under the water. "And our opponent has to worry about their energy too. Attacks so powerful aren't cheap."

"But if, if the Incubator..."

"The Incubator won't waste the energy if he realizes it's fruitless." Although if he kept up the assault, it might mean he believed he'd win a war of attrition. Could she stand hours of slowly whittling knowing the very fact they were still being attacked meant their loss was assured? Her teeth cut together. "Either way, it takes our enemy more time to recharge than it takes us. She's using more energy in one go than any of our soldiers. We have the advantage."

"Hkkkkkh. Is that how it works?"

Dumb fucking bitch. Morale must remain high, couldn't she see? If despair affected their troops, they were assuredly fucked. Hegewisch considered the best way to tell Joliet to shove something up her ass without rattling the chain of command too much. Before she could, a third bullet hurtled toward them.

It went for the other side of the ship and struck Section C, who managed to block it, albeit with less aplomb than Section B. A block counted as a block in Hegewisch's book, and it meant their defenses were airtight. If the younger Seattle twin tried to attack the front of the ship, B and C could form up in time to stop it, because the sniper rifle's range limitations meant any attack had to come from the direction of the city. If she tried to attack underwater like a torpedo, the ship's military-grade sonar device, manned by Matteson, would pick it up and all three sections could combine to place a barrier under the ship.

She expected the younger twin to test these modes of attack anyway. But more minutes passed. Five became ten. Became fifteen. Became twenty and then thirty. The yacht bobbed. Hegewisch, Palos, all the shooters and shielders remained rooted to their positions. Even passively maintaining one's transformation drained energy, so Midlothian dispensed cubes at regular, if infrequent, intervals. Joliet finally fucked off somewhere.

Forty-five minutes.

Hegewisch became suspicious. Did it take Kyubey this long to conceive a counterplan? Or did he simply not have one? Under no circumstances did Hegewisch believe her scheme uncontestable. She considered the possibility that she had countered his only allocated resources in the area and that the delay wasn't because he had no plan but because he needed

time to move a new piece into position. Another Terminatrix or some nomadic girl he could silvertongue into service. Anyone with exactly the right ability to pierce their defense. Even something as simple as the ability to add more power to Younger Seattle's sniper rifle. Shit, she needed to think. Counter his counters before he implemented them. Was it even possible? Christ. God. Stupid pink-haired dumbass God. Give her a little hope, since it's all you're good for.

One hour.

And all that time, the soldiers stood at their posts. No chitchat, no smalltalk, none of the useless girlishness they exhibited that morning during their overlong bath. At some point Hegewisch's mind could no longer whirr with what possible course of action Kyubey might take. Her thoughts drifted. She considered God. She considered Denver. She considered the patterns the waves made.

She considered her life before Chicago. Laila Chatterjee of Toronto. Freshly fifteen. Idiomatic wish. She regretted it the instant she made it. That smart aleck, know-it-all Laila Chatterjee, how could one seethe so thoroughly at a ghostly image of themselves only months past? God made her do it, not the God she now knew but the God she thought she knew didn't exist. Whatever your particular persuasion. At the intersection of her Bengali parents and the sanctimonious rich Canadians she knew at school, Laila Chatterjee fast developed a certain opinion: that the only people who believed in God were morons. Christianity, Islam, toss in all the others too—eldritch assholes concocted to sway the masses and enslave the women.

Funny how that thought could bring her all the way here, to this yacht on Lake Michigan with a bunch of child soldiers under her command. So funny. The stillness of the lake, the both close and distant threat of death, the idea that she might easily fail to survive past this day... She wanted to go home, to Toronto, to her parents, to the rich white kids, to preppy school, to that insufferable idiot Laila who scoffed at displays of faith or kindness or anything other than disaffected ennui, because that was how she had felt and anyone who was not her was stupid. She wanted everyone but her to be stupid again. She wanted to undo that wish. That dumb, dumb, dumb wish, because all along for all her smugness the dumb one was her, because her wish—listen to it, brace yourself, it's so funny—her wish:

"I wish I had knowledge of God."

Clever clever Laila Chatterjee, seated upon a bench behind the school, legs crossed, arms stretched along the back of her seat, and Kyubey on the pavement before her. "I wish I had absolute, total knowledge of God." How great a wish! How she grinned. It's a classic thought experiment, "If you had one wish what would you wish for?" It's something your friend circle discusses at lunch, people spit out the standard replies: money, fame, world peace, whatever. But knowledge of God—that's the kind of thing you could never have without a wish, right? But if you had that certainty, that absolute one hundred percent assuredness that God did not exist, then think of how superior you'd be to all those ignoramuses. And if, perchance, God *did* exist, then you'd be able to save your soul from whatever bullshit punishment they concoct for atheists in whichever religion happened to get it right. Win-win, no?

Fifteen-year-old Laila Chatterjee, ladies and gentlemen. And today would finally be the day she paid the piper for her brilliant, genius wish.

One hour and thirty minutes.

No—these thoughts lacked use. She had to focus on her plan and its success. She wanted Kyubey to appear, to offer parley, she would take whatever deal if she survived. She wanted to cry but she imagined Joliet crying and the thought made her stronger because she refused to be Joliet. Joliet became a mantra in her head, a totem, a bogeyman, the darkness Hegewisch could transfer from one soul to another. Conservation of energy, and if emotions counted as energy, then for Joliet's tears Hegewisch had to remain strong to counterbalance.

If Kyubey intended—

Palos shouted an unintelligible, overexcited gurgle that upon a phlegmatic throat-clearing transformed into actual words: "One of the Seattles—SHE'S INCOMING."

"One? Where? How far?"

"This is insane, how is she this fast? She's already four miles—three miles—two—"

That many miles in *seconds*?! Hegewisch pressed the binoculars to her face.

A moment later it tore through the mist. One of the younger twin's wrecking ball bullets. And perched atop it, balanced precariously but somehow able to stand—the older twin, the one in medieval armor.

"FUCK NO," Hegewisch spiked the binoculars onto the deck and they bounced up surrounded by their shattered lenses. "BLAST HER OUT OF THE SKY!"

Mokena and Munster fired; Hazel Crest pricked a finger drawing her bow and dropped her arrow. Griffith failed to flash her camera, so two sad projectiles zipped toward the accelerated armor girl. Mokena actually managed to hit her, but the bullet bounced off the armor. And that was their last shot, because by then the wrecking ball reached them.

Shield Team Section A did their job. The same three barriers layered atop one another. The bullet itself broke the first barrier and a flash of the elder twin's neon mace cut the second.

In the ensuing explosion, Hegewisch's body lifted from the ground and she sustained for a second the sensation of flight. A feeling she both failed to comprehend and logically understood to be shellshock rattled her brain inside her headcase. She hit a railing, bounced, and slammed against a deck nose first. A Rorschach blot of blood splurged in front of her.

Get up. She said it: "Get up," not that her voice existed under the torrent of ripping, wrenching, twisting, screeching, searing, and whooshing. Her hands wobbled. GET UP OR DIE.

Her first attempt to stand lacked any coordination between her limbs and a moment passed where she broke down the action of standing into its component muscle movements like a blueprint, one that made no sense. The second attempt went better and with the help of the railing she pulled herself upright. Her knees buckled, she straightened them. She spat more

blood overboard. Two gold armor girls thrashed in the water—Hazel Crest, Palos. Palos rode her broomstick and attempted to prevent Hazel Crest from sinking.

Blood from the headless, shoulderless body of somebody nearby splattered against Hegewisch's back. Perched atop the bending railing, the elder Seattle twin drew back her neon mace and brought it upon the supine form of Homewood. The ball of the mace bounced and left under it only a waist and a pair of legs and a full circle of unbroken redness against the deck. Another girl, Lemont, clawed up a ladder to the second deck and tucked her legs at the perfect moment to avoid losing them to another swipe. On the opposite end of the deck as Hegewisch, Tinley conjured a coil of checkerboard-pattern paper. It folded into a giant origami python that coiled between the railing and slung its massive body against the side of the boat, rearing up to strike Seattle from behind.

Hegewisch had to—She snapped at Palos: "Where's the Terminatrix!"

Palos managed to drape Hazel Crest onto her broomstick and reached out to someone else, Munster or Mokena or someone, who also thrashed in the water, but the broomstick seemed incapable of supporting the weight of three people. "The—? OH *FUCK*. She's closing—three miles—fast!"

A zoom of the mace smashed massive structural damage in the paper python and liquid-hot pulp pattered against Hegewisch's nape. Twenty against Seattle they could handle, but if the Terminatrix got involved—no, not an if/then question at this point, the long-range team no longer existed. The barriers managed to prevent major structural damage to the yacht, they still floated, but in a minute the Terminatrix's projections would manifest and any hope of salvaging the situation—

No salvaging. The situation ended. Time for Plan B: Run like hell.

The yacht came equipped with four lifeboats. Flimsy rubber boats, but motorized. She had to hope the chaos of the situation worked to her advantage, that she could slip away unnoticed and skim to safety before anyone cared about her.

She sprinted around the corner, away from the distracted Seattle, or tried to sprint, because she slid on a slick of blood and a loose arm and fell hard enough to rip the knees of her pants and tear the skin of her kneecaps. The screams intensified everywhere, she shoved past several soldiers trying to reach the fracas, someone stopped and asked her for orders and she said, she had the audacity to say:

"Defend the yacht at all costs! I'm securing the Empire's files!"

And continued running until she reached the first door inside.

The interior of the yacht looked nothing like how it had on Hegewisch's previous visit when she spoke to the Empress. No trace of the room that once existed, with its fireplace and too-high walls and dark atmosphere, with its Renaissance artwork and bookshelves, with its tall-backed seat and the Empress inside it. The interior instead comprised a generically luxurious entertainment area, sofas arranged around chic tables, a counter tucked into one corner and behind it shelves stocked with fruity beverages. A window shattered for an uncertain reason

as she scrambled inside. Stacked in the center of the room were the crates she ordered removed from the Administration building.

First, she overturned a sofa and pried up a panel underneath. Around her neck she slipped the life vest she found and then overturned a tower of crates and kicked open the one that contained her M240 Lima machine gun. She had a shotgun and assault rifle around somewhere but she did not see their crates immediately and decided against wasting time as she attached the machine gun's ammunition belt.

The inflatable lifeboats were stored in compartments at each corner of the ship. Her best bet would be the ship's prow and hope the arrangement of her remaining troops kept the fighting focused at the rear. She wiped her forehead and blood came off.

In one instant the sounds of fighting pitched higher and several more windows shattered as a liquid ooze of bodies strove around. A vast array of colorful combatants had appeared outside: the Terminatrix's projections.

Her hand fumbled fifty fucking times but she got the belt into the gun and hefted it. She told herself: Don't fire unless you have to. She told herself: Hurry! The prow. But she hesitated.

The other girls... Orland, Palos, Midlothian, Hazel Crest, Tinley, Griffith, all of them. The ones she led. The ones she told: I'll make sure you all survive.

Fuck.

The world's biggest hypocrite right now, no?

Denver, how had you done it? How had you gone back into the miasma, how had you fought to protect your own foes? No color remained in Hegewisch's body. She shook harder than she had when the bomb exploded and Seattle breached their ship. Something erupted outside and the entire boat quaked. Crates fell, broke open, and grief cubes sprayed across the ground in tesserae patterns.

Anyone nearby. Anyone nearby when she—boarded the lifeboat. Yeah. Anyone nearby, she'd take with her. She would be saving more lives than if she stayed and fought—Oh fuck it. Fuck the excuses. Fucking. Fuck. FUCK. She screamed it: "FUCK." Even screaming she could not hear herself, even screaming brought her no relief as the world crashed around her. The massive form of the armored Seattle sister broke through the tide of bodies clustered outside and barreled toward the prow. The prow no longer held hope. Hegewisch fucked herself, she hesitated, she waited too long. She fucked up.

Her duty, as a leader, to these girls, she had a duty as their leader, the captain goes down with the ship, she had a duty to this sham nation Chicago, she had a duty to the frightened young girls she said she'd protect, to the liquid-eyed face of Joliet.

Okay.

Okay.

She was leader now. She would take responsibility. Reap her rewards. The concept of death horrified her. Even knowledge of God did not abate it. Even the hope that God loved them and would protect their souls did not abate it.

Still. She had a duty. She was not... Joliet, afraid. Not DuPage, self-centered. Not Cook, lackadaisical. Not the Empress, hypocritical. Not her parents, fanatical. Not Madoka Kaname, conceptual.

This opulent room, this would be her final stand. She would... protect... But everything inside to protect was inanimate. Papers. A war raged around her. Sure, she could protect the papers. That last vestige of duty. Junior Administrator Hegewisch. The files, the spreadsheets, the documents, to sort and organize, to fall away from the world and find joy in tedium, in minutiae—now which crates contained the files?

Shaky-legged, she crawled along the tower of crates. A seismic boom outside brought her to a knee. She rounded the tower to its other side.

Which was when she discovered someone alive in this room the whole time.

And that someone, seated Buddha-like, but with her back bent forward, several open crates around her, and the Empire's most classified documents in piles—that someone, flipping through the documents as fast as possible—was Clownmuffle.

The latest explosion sounded different than the others, and soon everyone started yelling. Those not already at the back of the boat ran toward it and Joliet hung her head and shrugged. Her shrug turned into a slump of her shoulders. "Well, it's ending now," she muttered to herself. Hegewisch lied when she said everything would be okay and they would all survive. Well, she probably didn't *lie*. She was just wrong.

Joliet sat at the prow of the ship, facing the water eastward, and wrapped her arms around herself. If she did not resist, they might at least do her the courtesy of ending it quickly. She wouldn't even transform, although her transformed armor had her mother's enchantment.

(Or maybe she refused to transform because she didn't want to find out her mother never enchanted her armor at all.)

A lesser force shook the boat. She clutched the sides of her head and stared into the water.

(Let it end. Let it end. Let it end.)

Sometimes she had nightmares where a monster or murderer chased her. And at some point she would shudder in her sleep, give in, turn around, and say, "Please just end it fast!" The monster never knew what to do. It stood and stared at her, which only horrified her more.

The icy air made her shiver. She watched the water's patterns while the battle raged behind her, and then in a nervy fit she jolted upright and rapped her knuckles against her forehead. The blood drained out of her skull and for a weightless moment she saw only black. In that time she already began groping along the ship's railing, and when her sight returned she had neared the cabin where they stored the equipment.

Ships, even a pleasure yacht, had life rafts. A fanciful thought struck her that her mother somehow removed all the life rafts ahead of time in exact preparation for this moment. Nonetheless, she reached a panel on the wall clearly marked with orange tape and bold black lettering. She wrenched it open and inside she found a compact cube of rubber with a drawstring and simple instructions: Pull and toss into the water.

It felt too easy. Like stuff of this sort ought to be unfathomably complex, so that in one's final throes while the ship submerged around them they could reel back in abject incomprehension of the designs provided to save them. She could not imagine a world in which a life raft actually saved someone. And yet here she was, yanking the drawstring so hard she thought she ripped it off entirely. The heavy cube hissed with air intake and expanded. She hurled it overboard and it slapped the water as its sides folded into the form of a boat with a tiny motor. It took maybe five seconds total to fully inflate. Again, Joliet was baffled at how a device meant to save someone during an emergency actually did its job.

She gripped the railing and prepared to hop into the raft, but at the last moment she turned her head toward the back of the ship to see if anyone might be nearby she could tell to join her. But while previously the narrow passageway along the side of the deck had been clogged with girls in golden armor, now the only flash of gold she saw came from a body cleaved in half by the swing of a neon mace. The upper half twirled over the side, while the legs sagged against the railing. Behind them stood a massive, medieval figure, a knight encased head-to-toe in spiky metal.

Through the closed beaver of the armored girl's helm, no sense of facial expression existed. Yet somehow Joliet knew those unseen eyes had fixed directly on her and the malevolent intent behind them flowed into her body. The raging combat lulled as Joliet ceased breathing. A hazy, foggy blanket fell upon everything, like the world became one of her nightmares.

The knight stepped past the disembodied legs, toward Joliet.

Joliet hoisted herself up the railing and swung herself over the edge. A sudden thought that she need only get the life raft started—spurt far enough away from the yacht—the knight could not swim, no way—

But she did not even get to start the motor. She did not even get over the railing. She made it halfway before the knight initiated a sudden sprint, hooked a gauntleted hand into Joliet's stomach, and flung her down the deck. She hit the wood, bounced, clanged into a metal protrusion. Something small and narrow, like a jutting screw, drove into the flesh of her side, just above the hip. She rolled over, confused by the mingling of white sky and brown deck and blue sea, and before she had a chance to react a metal foot nailed her under the chin.

Her head jerked back like it would come off, but her neck somehow held and the excess momentum traveled to her whole body and she hurtled. Hit metal and wood again. Fell over

coughing blood.

It hurt. A lot. Puella Magi had an innate ability to dull physical pain, or so she had been told, since never in her life had she partaken in combat. If what she felt were diminished, the oppressive shrieking in her flesh that locked her ability to make even moderate movements, she refused to wonder what the full force might be. She had to do something. The iron footsteps pounded closer, and this time the figure they belonged to hefted its neon mace overhead.

Joliet gripped the ring on her middle finger and transformed.

A flash enveloped her, and in that moment the sweaters vanished and gilded vestments replaced them, with long sleeves like a monk's habit and a cowl to match, but more ornamental flourishes in the puffy shoulders and arabesque designs that traveled down her front. Her mother once said that Joliet would be the "heart" of the Four Centurions, the most learned, wise, and clerical (she said this during a speech she gave to the other Centurions, of course, not in any kind of personal conversation), which was Joliet's only explanation for such an unpleasant outfit.

She regretted transforming. If she died, she would have preferred to die somewhat presentable, and she had no faith in her mother's invincibility enchantment. None whatsoever.

At least until the mace came down and bounced off her back. The knight staggered several steps until she struck a metal... nautical thing. Not one unit of force had transferred from the swing into Joliet's body. Like her costume swallowed the entire attack. Her mother's enchantment worked.

It brought little comfort, because her attacker recovered fast and said: "Ah, so you're a Centurion." She did not attack immediately, which gave Joliet time to climb to her feet using the railing, but before she got halfway the armored hand shot out and seized Joliet by the back of the neck. Again, no sensation passed through the enchanted cloth hood, but the strength of the arm lifted Joliet off her feet and she shivered helpless in the grasp.

Yeah, that's the thing. Invulnerability was nice, but a stronger opponent could subdue without inflicting harm. At which point it became only a matter of waiting... How long could Joliet even sustain her transformation? Maybe an hour, or two... and that assumed they didn't find a more creative way to end her—tying her to something heavy and dumping her overboard should work.

It turned out the knight had no need for that. She dropped her mace and with her other hand reached under the folds of Joliet's cowl. Her fingers wrapped around Joliet's exposed face.

The fingers began to squeeze.

The force was immense. The pressure compounded instantaneously upon every corner, from forehead to jaw. The palm pressed against Joliet's nose and her feet kicked involuntarily. Her hands groped the armored girl's breastplate and speared themselves upon its spikes.

Her eyes bulged. Her teeth gnashed. Her nose cracked and liquid ran down her face. The skin ripped. The grip tightened.

Every second stretched an eternity. Having no face would not kill her. She would remain, an eyeless ghoul, bleeding upon the deck, capable at all moments of feeling herself die—!

She had to do something. What had Hegewisch asked: Can your power be used offensively? Under normal circumstances, no, she had to be far too close to her foe to use it, but her foe had come close to her, they were enmeshed. Yet on such short notice, her power did not have the easy application some might expect. Yes, she could alter memories, she could retool what someone imagined, even how their cognitive processes worked to some extent, but the human mind had the capacity to thwart even magic. If she introduced a memory that contradicted other memories, the brain would rapidly reject it. She could only bend someone's mind so far, which was why she did best when she *erased* memories, as she had for those who knew the truth about DuPage. But if she built something inside a mind, it required subtlety. For instance, tweaking a person known for wholesale devotion to appealing aesthetics so they believed a specific portrait was the most beautiful object. That worked better than attempting to brainwash a new recruit into complete subservience when their extant personality would never do such a thing. Alternatively, she worked well with a blank slate, someone who had zero memories at all, for whom she could write their lives from scratch and they would accept it wholeheartedly, like she often did with Dr. Cho's homunculi; authoring an entire backstory, an abusive stepfather or a lifelong devotion to God. Those were her favorite assignments, she loved to work with Dr. Cho and invent entire people, but in this moment, her face in the process of being crushed, and an opponent she knew barely anything about—

What *did* she know? The knight girl had a twin. The other twin was nearby—according to Hegewisch, a joker who used a sniper rifle. As the plate of her forehead cracked and her brains leaked, she conceived an idea. Would it work? Probably not permanently, but if she framed a specific memory in a certain way, it might work long enough.

She had no other hope. Her hands impaled themselves on the spikes of the knight's armor. A pulse, a transmission, a signal shot from Joliet to her, while behind them the boat rocked with the force of another attack.

The knight's hand pressed for another second—and then loosened. Joliet dropped onto the deck, vision red. She wiped her face and tried to hold it together even though so many parts had cracked it felt like pottery shards. But although her sight blurred, she *could* see, and she watched the knight to learn if the memory magic held.

A second passed.

Two.

The knight turned from Joliet without a word. She picked up the dropped mace, then walked calmly to the edge of the yacht. Her armor clanked with each step.

She climbed over the railing and dropped off the edge of the boat.

Joliet couldn't believe it. Even if her magic worked, and the memory she implanted was not rejected, to cause a reaction like that—But then a small motor revved up and Joliet realized the knight had not plunged to suicide in the icy sink. Still shaky, Joliet pulled herself up and wobbled to the edge to confirm as the knight rode away on the inflatable dinghy Joliet had tossed overboard earlier.

The dinghy zipped along the water, back toward Chicago.

It worked. It actually worked. The memory held. Who knew for how long, but if it could last at least another hour—even a half-hour—then it might actually help them... win? It might eliminate not only the knight, but the joker twin too. Joliet refused to believe it. Refused to believe she did something that actually worked. She gripped her tectonic face and tilted it back to laugh—

Then saw the line of dismembered Chicago soldiers slopping the deck and the advancing tide of what must be the Terminatrix's projections heading for her.

Raise the Titanic!

The old man, in yellow rubber overalls and long-sleeved flannel, plodded up the steps from belowdecks. One rheumatic hand gripped a railing and the other clutched a tall stainless steel thermos.

The young woman seated at the back of the boat uncrossed her legs, stood, and approached. "Need some help?"

"No, no." Another step coerced a grunt; the young woman leaned into the narrow space and extended a hand. He waved her away and finished the ascent unassisted.

They returned to their seats opposite one another. The boat rocked and bobbed and cold lake mist spritzed their faces: The old man's leathern and whiskered, the young woman's thin and pointed. A crack sounded from miles east, but only the young woman heard it. The old man's fingers fiddled with the cap of the thermos until it finally unscrewed.

"Your cup, miss." He took a sharp intake of breath at the beginning and end. The young woman held out a pink ceramic mug with a crayon-sketched figure and the words "for GRAMPA!" The old man poured a steaming, black coffee near to the brim before he used both hands to stop himself. The young woman carefully brought the mug to her lips and blew, but when the boat rocked some sloshed out.

The old man poured himself a cup. "Sorry I got no cream or such like that. I tend to take it black."

"Black's fine." The young woman sipped. Another distant crack. Louder than before, but the old man did not hear.

Once the old man took a sip of his own, he jolted suddenly and looked around the back of the small fishing boat. His free hand pointed a gnarled root of a finger at one end and then the other. He leaned back as though to check the ship's prow. "Now where did your twin sister get to?"

"She's not my twin, actually," said the young woman. "She's two years older than me."

"Oh? But I thought... You look so much alike..."

"You ever see *The Shining*?"

The old man blinked, perplexed. His brow furrowed and his eyes stared at the sea city-side, although the city had long since faded into the mist. "No, I don't believe I have. I haven't been to the theaters in a long time."

"Oh, sorry. It's an older movie, so I thought maybe you'd heard of it. It's a horror film. It has these ghosts, these twin girls who show up in this creepy hotel—"

The old man slapped his thigh. "Oh yes! I remember now, I *have* seen that movie. My son was sixteen, or fifteen maybe, but he wanted to watch that movie. Dad, dad, I want to see 'Shining.' He needed an adult to go with him or else they would not let him buy a ticket. And I knew, I knew that a bunch of the local boys would sneak into movies like that. But since he came to me and asked, I figured it'd do good to reward him for acting honestly, and so I went to see the feature with him." He spoke slow, arduously slow, pausing at each comma to breathe, enunciating each word with a meticulous sense of precision. "There was the hotel, and yes, just like you said, those twin girls..."

"But they're not actually twins," said the young woman. "Everyone thinks they're twins. Ask anyone about the movie and they'll tell you they're twins, but they're not twins."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes. It's stated explicitly. Right at the beginning. The guy who owns the hotel, remember him?"

"I don't believe I do."

"Ullman. That's his name. With two Ls, because there's a doubling motif. Tons of subtle stuff like that. He has two coffee mugs on his desk, too."

"I don't remember that at all."

The young woman rested her coffee mug on her knee. The warmth felt good in this frigid waste land of ice and water. Not that Seattle didn't have such dips itself, but there's a sense of warmth in the place one lives that one doesn't find in a place where they're a stranger. "That's fine, he's a minor character. He really only appears in one scene, when he explains about the murders that happened in the hotel. But if you watch that scene, he explicitly states the ages of the girls. One was eight, one was ten. He says that explicitly. It's right there in the script. Those girls aren't twins, but everyone thinks they're twins."

The old man nodded. He took in this information with the same diligent care. He swirled the liquid in his coffee cup and sipped, then wiped his white mustache with a napkin produced from his front overall pocket. "It's a long time since I watched that feature."

"Yeah, and it's also true that the girls are twins, because the actresses who played them were twins. Part of that doubling motif I mentioned earlier, I guess."

"I'm afraid I don't really understand the point you're coming to, miss."

The young woman leaned back in her seat. She raised her mug and sipped. She turned toward another, softer crack in the distance. Chicago's implementation of a yacht had surprised everyone. Even Mr. Kyubey had said something like, *I actually predicted they would launch an immediate counterattack during the night*. His excuse was that someone other than Centurion Joliet had taken command of Chicago's forces, an outcome he had assigned a particularly low probability given the personality makeup of all remaining Chicago soldiers.

And eh, whatever. How well could an emotionless alien entity predict the actions of desperate humans? The young woman had never wanted to rely on him anyway. Although, it was Mr. Kyubey's assistance that found this little fishing vessel and the nice old man to steer it. A nice old man who did not seem totally aware of his surroundings. Mr. Kyubey himself sat curled up not far from the old man the entire journey, ostensibly asleep but probably doing something to alter what the old man saw and heard.

"The point I'm coming to," she said, "is that if you can tell someone that two sisters aren't twins, and make them believe they're twins, you can do the reverse. My sister and I look similar enough, sure. But if you act in certain ways, tell people certain things, then they'll believe what they expect to believe."

The old man still did not understand. He stared and scratched under the brim of his flat cap. "I forgot exactly why we started talking about this."

"It's okay," said the young woman. "We were talking just to pass the time. Do you like to fish?"

The old man liked to fish, and he explained his interest in great detail, lugging a bait and tackle box from a compartment under his seat, which he then opened and described each component within in turn. Hooks, line, things that bob in the water, even a knife. He mentioned how he purchased the boat after he retired, and before that he had fished from docks further up the lakeside. For GRAMPA!

And while the young woman listened, because she found that so many old people just wanted someone to listen, and so few people were liable to give the time, she also had to keep an ear piqued toward the combat six miles further. The young woman had done her job; if she continued to involve herself, she might sink the ship right under her sister. Not good. All that armor drags someone deep in an instant.

It had been *her* idea—the other's. Everything. From the twins charade to the entanglement in Chicago. Because the older sister called the shots, right? She had been a Magical Girl a few years before the younger sister contracted. So she knew a lot more about everything, and so the younger sister did as directed. The older had the whole thing schemed from the start: The twins angle would make them more popular. That was her chief concern, popularity.

"You need a gimmick. If you want to go far, you need a gimmick."

"Far where?"

"It's the internet. It's all about viral. Word of mouth."

"Aren't Magical Girls supposed to be, secretive?"

"Means it's an untapped market."

The younger's understanding was that the older had begged Mr. Kyubey for months to contract her sister. At first, he had flatly denied it, citing "energy inefficiency." And then, for

reasons unknown, he one day acquiesced and told the younger sister to make a wish and become a Magical Girl.

(First she tried to wish for world peace. You know, because it seemed like if someone had a wish, they should do something like that? But he said a wish that rewrote human nature would require far more magical potential than she—or almost anyone—possessed. So she gave up on the selfless bit and looked a little more inward. Mired in midterms, pressured by parents who demanded she compensate for the academic failings of her older sister, the younger wished for perfect grades on every future assignment. A fool motif suited her well.)

The problem, at least from one of the pair's perspective, became obvious immediately: Mr. Kyubey had been absolutely right. The younger sister had horrible energy inefficiency. She attacked hard, fast, and from afar. But that was her *only* attack. Either she fired a wrecking ball-sized bullet that exploded on impact or she fired nothing at all. For a regular attack she had what another Magical Girl might have as a finishing attack. One shot drained her, it took minutes to reload and even that pushed her to the brink.

Luckily she had an older sister, durable, fast, and powerful, but who fought with simple swipes of a melee weapon that exacted no severe toll upon her mana. An older sister more than happy to pull double duty for la familia.

Given the situation, agreeing to the weird twin gambit seemed reasonable enough...

(And everyone liked them on MagNet, and it felt nice for everyone to like you. For a time she understood her older sister's drive for popularity. But some of those girls online took things too far...)

"I don't want to be your twin anymore."

"We can't stop now. We have a following. Two hundred friends online. Soon it'll be us who runs the place, not Denver."

"I don't want to run that place."

"That's your whole problem, you have no ambition."

She never claimed she wasn't a twin, at least to MagNet people, but at one point she stopped trying to pretend she was. She thought if she acted like herself, eventually people would realize she was her own person. But it seemed like no matter what she said, nobody could even tell her apart... It was like, in everyone else's perspective, no differences could possibly exist between them. Which was when the younger sister started to wonder:

Was the "real her" just like her sister anyway?

"My dad took me to fish once," said the young woman during a lull in the old man's tale. "I'm from Seattle, so we had a little boat we would sail on the sound sometimes."

"Oho! And did you catch anything?"

"Nope. I'm a horrible fisher. And I didn't even like it that much, to be honest—no offense, it's just not my thing."

"None taken, miss." A good-natured, if raspy, chuckle. "I couldn't get my son onboard even if I paid him!"

The young woman smiled and sloshed the dregs of her coffee. The battle raged on; was her sister having trouble? The Terminatrix seemed weak, but her sister should have had no trouble given the enemy abilities and skill levels.

Mr. Kyubey, what's the situation on the boat?

Any body of mine on that boat would almost certainly be destroyed. I would rather not waste the materials, especially when I can be reasonably certain any outcome at this point will be beneficial to me. He did not uncurl his body.

But by the time his telepathic message finished, the young woman heard something new on the wind. A small motor, and close. Only a few seconds later a dark shadow appeared on the mist. An orange dinghy. One rider. It didn't take more detail than an outline to realize who, even though she had untransformed.

The older sister.

Yet the sounds of distant combat continued. *Why are you coming back?*

Although she was assuredly in broadcast range, the older sister remained silent.

"Hm? What's that? See something?" The old man attempted to rise with a grunt, but only got halfway before he slumped back into his seat.

"Nothing to worry about," said the younger sister.

It was a nervous thought, because something in her sister's expression as it drew nearer sparked unease in the young woman. A solid, fixed, unreadable expression, on someone she ought to have been able to read.

"Come on," she said, once the dinghy pulled into range, "what's going on? Say something."

The older sister's raft nearly butted against the side of the fishing boat and the motor hummed to death.

"Oh?" The old man scratched behind his ear. "Aren't you...? Where'd you find that raft?"

The boat had minimal space. Its back half barely seated four people, its belowdecks was mostly storage, and its front only fit a single captain. The younger sister considered this terrain carefully as she said: "I would like to know why you returned."

"I told you," said the older sister, "do not shoot at the yacht while I'm there."

"I didn't?"

"Liar."

"Seriously."

"Do *not* lie to me."

Where... Where did this even *come* from? What had deluded her to think something so absurd? Had Kyubey provoked this? Did he hypnotize her sister? Did he blow a silent whistle like people do to dogs and prompt a specific response? If their species were as primitive to him as he claimed, something like that was probably elementary.

Then the younger sister reached a sudden epiphany and tilted back her head to expel a coarse, singular laugh. Right! She knew exactly what happened. "Remember our briefing?" She held one hand forward and tapped her other, holding the mug, against her forehead. "Mr. Kyubey mentioned it. The Chicago commander has mind-warping magic. You must have had your perception—"

The older sister's hand lashed out and seized the younger's wrist. Before the younger could react, the older leapt off her raft and forced the younger to ground as she landed on the fishing boat. One instant, the younger sister stood mid-laugh, the next, her face slammed against the wood paneling between the seats. The for GRAMPA! mug plummeted and smashed in front of her as her older sister wrenched her arm behind her back and pinned her with a knee between the third and fourth disc.

"Hey now," the old man protested.

"Get belowdecks if you know what's good for you," said the older sister.

"Look, I won't stand for any violence on my ship."

But the older sister ignored him, and really, there was nothing he could do but bluster in useless protest. The younger sister attempted to fidget, mostly to test how well she had been pinned, and the answer was well enough. Even her barest attempt at motion received a kneecap drill deeper into her spine. Followed by a hiss in her ear: "Mind-warping magic's a convenient excuse."

If not for the pain, the younger sister might have rolled her eyes. The whole situation bordered on farce. The sheer thought of concocting such a scheme just to fire one attack at her sister—an attack her sister could easily survive—hysterical. And surely even her high school dropout deadbeat "twin" would see the faultiness in the logic?

Apparently she did, because her next word, in a far softer tone and with a slight loosening of the hold, was: "Okay."

"Okay meaning you believe me?" said the younger sister.

"...Maybe."

"You forgot they had mind magic."

"Yeah."

"You spent the whole boat ride here getting mad."

"Yes."

"But now you realize there was a reasonable explanation all along."

"...Mm."

The younger sister laughed again, more a chuckle considering her constrained ribcage. She imagined her older sister, seated in that tiny dinghy (barely broad enough to fit her untransformed), stooped over folded knees, sulking at some imagined slight.

The hold loosened and the older sister lifted her knee. The old man, who had started for the ship's controls, sighed in relief bereft of comprehension but at least able to sense the tension's dissolution. A stupid misunderstanding. Not even that, honestly. Some Chicago girl used her dumb magic and prompted a totally unrealistic, totally unearthly conflict, ungrounded in reality.

But as the younger sister pushed herself off the deck, the knee drove again into her spine and forced her down. The older sister said: "I never fought the enemy commander."

"Ohhhhhhh my god. If she can alter perception she probably made you forget you fought her? Come on, that's just basic."

"Maybe. Maybe." But her voice did not soften this time.

"You know I'm right." And all humor drained from the younger sister's voice, too.

"You could have done anything and blamed it on 'mind magic' if I found out."

"You are, the densest, *fucking*, person I have ever met. You *heard* Mr. Kyubey say the enemy commander had that power."

"You heard him too. You could have planned the excuse ahead of time. Maybe the moment you heard it you realized it was your opportunity."

"That's fucking ridiculous."

"It's something you'd do."

"I'm taking you two back to port," said the old man. "You need to settle down and stop with the foul language this minute." He plopped in his captain's chair, donned his captain's hat, and started the fishing boat's motor.

It's something you would do. That line paused their slap-and-tickle stichomythia. Was that really something the younger sister would do? Was it really something the older sister *thought* the younger sister would do? As though she were waiting all along for a chance to strike?

"You always complain," the older sister said. "'I don't want to be a twin anymore.' 'I don't want to fight Chicago.' 'I don't want this, I don't want that.'"

"I'm sick of this," said the younger. "Mr. Kyubey, wake up and explain that I did nothing like what she's saying."

Of course, Mr. Kyubey had vanished from his seat. He appeared nowhere in the fishing boat, or at least nowhere the younger sister could see from her constrained vantage. Classic, to disappear when she actually needed him.

"I'm going to take your Soul Gem," said the older sister. "It's possible you're telling the truth. But I want some insurance."

The hand that the older sister pinned was the one that wore the ring. The younger sister had zero options. "Ridiculous, completely ridiculous."

"Hold still." Two hands pried at the younger sister's balled fist.

Giving up one's Soul Gem to someone clearly under the effect of mind-altering magic did not strike the younger sister as a good idea. Alarm bells sounded in every part of her brain, and a strong terror rose from a deeper compartment. Even without mind-altering magic, putting her actual, literal self in the hands of her brutish, single-minded, irrational, angry sister would most likely end in something awful. Instinct screamed: *Fight! Protect yourself!* In the milliseconds after groping fingers started to pry the ring from the knuckle, every element of the younger sister's nervous system had voted in resounding favor of succumbing to animalistic self-defense. Her body acted before she even had time to form a plan.

The arm her older sister had not pinned shot forward and seized the shattered remains of the for GRAMPA! mug. The handle had remained around a jagged piece of ceramic, and it was this jagged piece that the younger sister drove into the eye of her sibling.

The older sister reared back. A ribbon of blood splattered the deck. The ship tilted as it started to turn and the younger sister broke away from what remained of the hold. She rolled to her feet and turned with her arms held semi-defensively in front of her. But no immediate counterattack came; her sister pedaled backward, pawing at her face and wrenching the ceramic shard out the socket. The blood gushed like a fountain and even the knowledge that the wound would regenerate failed to prevent the churn in the younger sister's stomach. Her hot blood cooled at once. She shouted: "Watch out!"

But the cry came too late. The older sister had already stepped backward into the stairway that led belowdecks. Her foot fell on empty air and she plummeted. Thump—Crash.

The poor old man, a face carved with sheer terror, twisted the wheel of his craft as he steered them cityward at maximum speed. The younger sister gripped her temples with her fingertips. *Crap. Crap, crap, crap.* Nothing good would come of this. Nothing good at all. Blades to the eyeball never improved anyone's mood. If her sister suspected her before—*Crap.* This could *not* escalate, not on this tiny boat, where any collateral would sink it like a rock—and the nice old man with it.

A stifled laugh came from below. Slow, staggered: peh, heh, heh. A form stirred in the shadows and her older sister the creature crawled on pale hands up the first few steps.

The younger sister flicked forward her middle finger with the ring and transformed. She stopped being the little sister and became a joker. Pied black and red, bright rouge circles on the corners of her mouth, a puff of white powder for her face. Bells jangled all over, on her coxcomb and the curled tips of her boots, on her belt and along the stitching of the escutcheon emblazoned on her chest.

She bounced onto the captain's area of the ship, took the old man into her arms, and bounced again over the water. She landed on the rubber lifeboat upon which her sister had arrived.

The old man sputtered: "What? I—this is—how did you—?"

Her first instinct was to escape with him on the dinghy, but she had no way to know whether they could outrun the fishing boat, and her assumptions indicated they could not. She knelt on the edge of the dinghy, able to balance without overturning it, and told him, "You need to get away. I'll deal with my sister."

"My boat..."

His boat. A waning life's splurge for a few last wrings of happiness. His confusion gave to sadness and she could no longer look at him. With as deft a pirouette as before, she bounced off the side of the dinghy and soared back to the fishing boat. She landed on the prow and manifested her sniper rifle, not that she expected it to do much good. In such close quarters, where one's distance from another could never exceed a few meters, who would win? Even if she landed a hit with her rifle, the blast would obliterate their battlefield. No—she needed to defuse the situation. Not fight. The sniper rifle disappeared from her hands. She perched defenseless and waited for her sister to show herself, but from her position she could not see the stairs. She could only hear that same stifled laugh and the slow thud of a body crawling upward.

"Hey. Polly. I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. I made a mistake, okay?"

Thud.

"You're my sister. Even if I complain about you dragging me on zany adventures, I wouldn't attack you."

Thud.

"We have to be able to trust each other. If we keep this up, things will escalate somewhere bad."

Thud.

"I'm sorry. Polly. Please. You can hit me for payback. Stab me in the eye too. We'll be cyclopes together, twins in pain. I bet if we took a picture with matching wounds, MagNet

would go bonkers—" She bit her tongue. MagNet had gone down. That one girl, Collins, seemed to have deleted it before they reached her. "—I mean, you get the idea."

No thud. Silence. The whistle of the wind, a distant shout from the old man. She glanced at him over her shoulder; he simply sat, despairing, a little lump that bobbed on the waves.

The older sister stood. When she rose to full height, her head appeared just above the elevated captain's console. Then she transformed and gained a full foot, at the expense of becoming entirely metal. Her sister, the knight. Polly.

When the younger sister contracted, Polly at first got mad. She wanted matching costumes. She impressed this fact numerous times pre-wish: "Make sure you have a knight costume like mine." She said it even though Mr. Kyubey explained a Magical Girl's costume came from somewhere subconscious, and sure enough, the joker had no control over becoming a joker. Polly hated it. "It's like a creepy clown or something." (Not that a hulking armored knight exhibited a cute aesthetic either.) But after a few hours, Polly performed a full heel turn and suddenly loved it. Still a medieval theme, harlequins and whatnot. She decided to accept Mr. Kyubey's explanation of costumes, to which she had been deaf before, and take the tangential connection to be a lottery-level boon for their popularity scheme.

The joker, however, never liked being a creepy clown. A knight towered above someone, literally and metaphorically. They adhered to a chivalric code, they warred against demons and dragons. She liked that... In the end, don't most people? It's well enough to sink into introspection, to ponder angles and facets, and whip oneself into a melancholic lather at the inherent savagery of the world. But sometimes she wanted to step away from that melancholy and consider a naïve, innocent goodness, a righteous morality uncomplicated and in service solely to the positive. If everyone else was happy, if Polly was happy, then who cared how sad was the fool...

"So. Are we really going to fight?" said the fool, resigned to it.

"Your actions have spoken," said Polly, like a knight.

The knight turned and jumped onto the captain's area, all her plate metal clanking and the front end of the ship dipping downward into the water from her weight. Her neon mace, a strange and alien device both in the context of the remaining uniform and the boat itself, eviscerated the fog. Her breadth covered almost the boat's full breadth and penned the joker into the narrow point of the bowsprit. Blood leaked from the slats in her beaver. The eye had been much too tender a spot to strike, any sort of blinding provoked an animal to instinctual fury. The sensation of the cup sliding effortlessly into that jelly remained in the joker's fingertips; it had gone in without resistance, and she had pushed without hesitation.

"If I stood here and took whatever you dealt, would you kill me?" said the joker.

The older sister remained rooted to her perch atop the captain's seat, and no motion stirred her iron exterior, only the sanguine drip-drip-drip. That hesitation boded well; even if things fell to blows, and the joker fully expected it, any seconds spent by which the blood could coagulate and cool increased the odds of a happy resolution. That moment when the jagged edge of the cup slid into the eyeball—it was not an incontrovertible turning point, a precipice

—she had to believe that. So many years of relatively amicable sorority should not be undone so swiftly. But then the joker had to pause and wonder: Did she think that because she herself still harbored such amicable feelings toward her sister, or merely because it increased her odds of survival? The metal hulk bore no mark of the girl Polly save her blood. It became so easy to distance oneself emotionally from such a creature; no, it would have been easy even if the helmet were removed... When had their bonds frayed so? When had they become more like business partners than sisters? It was long before this moment, before the deception of Chicago's mind altering powers. Something was at work here, magic had been a catalyst but not a true cause. Something dark and deep and large hefted toward a surface.

Her sister the knight never responded to her question, at least in a vocal capacity. Her hesitation ended—she struck with the mace. It swept crosswise from an upper-right corner in the triangular prism of 3D space at the ship's prow to the lower-left corner. The only obvious path of evasion would be aerial, but the knight had "the high ground," so to speak, so if the joker jumped she had nowhere to go but into her opponent's free and waiting arm.

Instead she dropped back, off the front of the ship. Before her jingly shoes touched the water, she seized the metal tubing that lined the prow, just a thin line of cylindrical steel so ropes could moor the craft at harbor, and made a gymnastic motion to whip herself along the ship's side. Her body folded into the shape of a stapler and the mace whooshed just over her coxcomb as she shot forward, almost like she were a smooth stone skimming over the water (except nothing but a thin misty spray of liquid touched her), and grabbed the same line of metal tubing only much further down the ship—in fact, at the ship's back end. The same forward lurch of momentum allowed her to swing onto the same deck where she had conversed with the old man minutes prior, where her sister's blood still stained the wood amid the shards of a broken mug.

Her sister the knight turned and faced her immediately—probably because her Soul Gem was on her back. More blood leaked; it stained the whole breastplate. Even a deep wound, for a healthy Magical Girl, ought to have clotted by now, if not already begun to regenerate. Maybe she had spent a lot of energy on the yacht? But there were other reasons a wound might not heal right away. After all, a Magical Girl's ability relied much on their mental state.

Ultimately, the joker's acrobatics had only served to corner her on the back of the boat instead of the front. The boat was so short that the knight would not even need to leave her perch on the captain's seat to strike. But a few more options opened. The main one was the old man's tackle box, left at the foot of his seat. It contained bait, hooks—and fishing line, densely coiled around a spool, which she snatched immediately and with a tap of her fingertips enchanted into something much stronger. The fishing line at least opened the possibility of subduing her sister without murdering her.

Tucked into a leather pocket studded to the lid of the tackle box was a knife. The joker took it and knotted the end of the fishing line around its hilt.

"You two!" said a voice on the wind. The old man. He propelled the dinghy back to the ship, the idiot. "I don't know what you're doing, but please stop! Please!" God, his voice was so sad, and it somehow carried so far. Her sister the knight didn't even glance at his approach.

The mace came down, again a diagonal strike meant to eliminate as much room for evasion as possible. But the back of the ship afforded marginally more space and so the joker cleaved to one side as she whipped the fishing line and the knife tied to its end over her head and threw it forward.

Her enchantment did not merely make the line stronger. It also allowed her to exert the same magical influences she used on her wrecking ball sniper bullets. With the extra weight of the knife tied to the end, it became trivial to direct. As the line shot past her sister, it bent and changed directions in midair to coil around her. It passed behind her back and around the free arm. With a similar series of abrupt motions it tightened and pinned the arm to her sister's side. Meanwhile, the other arm—which held the mace—swung to the side and the neon flash sailed for the joker's head. No, not her head specifically, but the golden bauble that jingled from one tip of her coxcomb—her Soul Gem.

She sought to kill. They were no longer sisters, but business associates, and the joker had proven herself untrustworthy, so no need to keep her around. Was this the paranoia that gripped everyone who wanted to stand above the populace? The Hispanic dictators who knifed one another in the back, the communist revolutionaries who dumped their compatriots en masse into the river? Denver ought to have exercised such mistrust, and maybe her closest man might not have betrayed her. Oh well. The joker kicked off the deck and traveled, almost weightless, through the air—attached to the end of the cord tied snugly around the knight.

All the while, that deep thing kept rising, rising, rising.

She sailed in an arc around her knight errant sister, circumnavigated the entire ship and bounced upon the sheerest tip of the prow with only the ball of one foot before shoving off to continue in full revolution. The fishing line had coiled several times around her sister, one arm was pinned utterly, but the one with the mace remained free.

And as the joker closed on a full circle around the knight, the line shortening and shortening, that arm and its mace lashed at the critical point to sever it. Even enchanted, a direct hit from the mace would cleave it clean, but the joker anticipated this. As the arm came down, the joker completed her circle and brought both feet upon the gauntleted hand. She had enough momentum to give her kick some real force and the arm shoved down. The mace swept into the wood and gored the deck, although not far enough to pierce the hull. At the same moment, the joker let go of what remained of the fishing line and her magic quickly tied it around the knight's arm.

The blood poured down the armored front in thick rivulets. The joker landed on the absolute corner of the back of the ship, balanced upon the gunwale. Her sister fidgeted, twitched, bent her knees, but could not manage the force necessary to break the thickly-wound fishing line.

The old man's dinghy pulled to the side of the boat. "What—what is going on!"

"Please leave," said the joker. Then, to her sister: "Please. I don't want to hurt you. I didn't want to stab you. I didn't shoot at you. If I did, wouldn't I use my magic now? If my goal was to eliminate you, take your place, seize Denver's documents for myself, control MagNet, whip an army into a frenzy, whatever your nutty ambitions are—even if they're just to become popular—wouldn't I attempt to kill you now?"

No response. Rationality had to prevail. Someone who manipulated what minds experienced and remembered could not tweak one's logical faculties and propensity for reason. And no matter the older sister's idiocy she still possessed the rough intelligence of an average human being, which granted stood for little, but maybe allowed a bit of object permanence.

"Oh, no," said the old man, on the deck of the fishing boat. He knelt by the gash the knight's mace had cut. "My boat. My boat..."

"Old man *please*," said the joker, "*please* get away, think about your grandchildren!"

The man no longer seemed confused—he was insensible. He noticed neither the glowing mace held fast only a few feet from his face, nor the unnatural costumes of the sisters. Humans had a propensity not to see magic even when it manifested in plain sight, but for his ignorance to persist at this level of proximity implied some other factor at work, either insanity or Incubator. "You girls are playing far too rough. A boat like this costs a lot of money."

"Sir. PLEASE."

The joker turned toward him only a smidge and only a smidge was needed. In that instant the knight ceased her transformation. The bulky plate armor vanished. The rope, which had been wound around it, for an instant hung loose in midair. Before the joker could tighten the coil around her sister's now much slimmer midriff, her sister had acted. One rapid pirouette propelled her out of the loop of enchanted fishing line; she landed on the prow and transformed again. The fishing line tightened around nothing and dropped into the captain's seat in a knotted lump, the knife clanking against the wheel.

At the same time, the full weight of the knight pressed upon the boat's extremity. It did not so much dip as slingshot; the boat's front lurched downward its back shot upward. The force launched the old man airborne. The joker caught him before he had a chance to crest his arc; he was unexpectedly light. As she clutched him close the knight bounded up the diagonal tilt of the ship and swung.

No chance for evasion existed, not due to lack of space to maneuver—she could either leap to the elevated back or dodge under into the belowdecks area—but because she was still finishing the motion she had taken to pull the old man to her. The best she could do, with a free arm, was manifest her sniper rifle and hold it out for defense. The mace clanged against it, held, and after a second of motionlessness cut through the barrel. The joker attempted in that time to pull away but could not make it far enough. She tucked the old man against her chest and turned her back to her sister as the mace seared the flesh of her back.

She screamed, or something—some brief amount of time blipped out of her consciousness because when she next became aware of herself she had fallen onto the deck. The old man trembled beneath her. She attempted to rise, but her boots scuffed the deck uselessly. Had her spine been severed? No, if she could still move the legs at all—this fucking pain, this fucking pain, *oh god fuck*—tears and blood splattered the deck. The ship dropped onto a level state. The knight's shadow fell on the joker.

The heat on her back emphasized the chilly clamminess of her face. Her eyes stared so hard at the wood and the gray-haired head and the shadow below her that her eyelids hurt. Her lips pattered against each other, dry.

"Okay," she rasped, "okay. Okay. Okay. You win, you beat me. I'll never do anything to hurt you ever again. I'll go away, wherever you want me to go. Polly. Polly."

The knight, her sister, Polly, said nothing. The shadow did not move. Something wet dripped against the back of the joker's head. It rolled behind her ear and down her cheek and onto the wood—it was blood. Her sister's eyeball blood. Less blood than viscous gel.

"Polly. Polly. Polly. Polly. Polly. Polly."

Her soles scraped. The old man muttered something muffled.

"Why did you do it," said Polly.

"I *didn't*," said the joker, before she had a chance to think maybe she should humor her, or would admitting to something she didn't do only anger her sister more? She struggled to glance over her shoulder. Her sister's blood dripped onto her face. On the captain's chair, watching, was Mr. Kyubey. "Ask him. Ask him, he knows, he was here the whole time."

"Humans cannot be trusted when it comes to magic," said her sister.

"Not the old man, him, *him*—" Her hand tried to point, that fucking rat, he never did anything on accident, he had let this happen for a purpose—

The knight raised her mace.

"You," said the joker, "you are such an ignorant, pompous, easily-manipulated *FOOL!*"

The mace fell. By the time it started, though, something else had happened. Had the joker more time or more stability in her pain-washed experience to consider it, she first would have considered using her still-enchanted fishing line to try and snare her sister again, only to discard this option immediately afterward; the line had tangled too much when her sister first escaped. But she did not have time to consider it anyway, at least not at that moment. Because at that moment, her flesh curdled, her face smeared, her sister looming above—at that moment something else gave inside her, not resignation, not fear, but a swollen, cancerous fury, fury at her sister, who had started this entire escapade for such a base reason, who had always acted so willfully and with such flagrant disregard for anyone around her, be they parents or friends or her own little sister, fury at this entire situation, at this entire gross Siamese conjunction forced long after birth, fury and a thick tide of revulsion that bubbled up her throat. The thing she *thought* in that moment—independent of whatever action she took—was a simple memory of a time on MagNet, same as any other, their twin charade paraded in a new carefully-constructed photograph, and a commentator—Clownmuffle in fact—who insinuated something disgusting, something so hideous that it made the joker turn away from her computer and retch. The kind of unpleasant image that lingers with someone no matter how much they despise it, like that half-second shot in *The Ring* where a girl's fingernail snaps off. By the time the joker finally looked back at the thread, her sister had replied, and

replied in a way that insinuated, ever so slightly, that the hideous, awful, horrible, revolting thing Clownmuffle brought up might have a basis in actuality, which was of course utterly false, something stated only to rile the fangirls, and at that moment the joker saw the debasement her sister would undergo for this nebulous, *Mean Girls* concept of "popularity"—the word by then lacking all meaning—and in that moment the joker's stomach hollowed out and there remained a cavity even to this day...

That entire memory entered her head in a millisecond, the way you can recall the merest trace of something and its entire history of associations and emotions rise in your gullet instantaneously. So, that was what she thought.

What she *did* was direct the tangled bundle of fishing line to lurch forward. Sure, it couldn't ensnare the knight in such a state. That wasn't what the joker did, or tried to do. On the knight's armored back was a design of a gryphon in schematized bas-relief. The gryphon's claws were raised high and its wings spread. Its one eye, depicted in profile, burned bright red.

The eye burned red because it was her sister's Soul Gem.

The knife, tied to the fishing line for weight, shot forward and drove into the gryphon's eye. The joker couldn't even see the eye; it was on her sister's back, after all. In the moment after the fact, she realized she had simply guessed its position, or perhaps intuited was a better word.

But she knew she hit her target immediately.

Her sister, Polly, the knight, staggered. The blood finally stopped dripping through her beaver. She remained rigid a moment, a tin golem, then dropped to her knees, then dropped onto her face.

An array of sparkles surrounded her and then her armor was gone, she was just Polly on the ground, a vacant glaze in her remaining eye.

The joker organized her strength, planted her boots against the bloody ground, and lifted herself. The pain across her back dimmed; she took off her coxcomb and brushed her fingers through her hair. She breathed a thick swell of icy lake air, replaced the coxcomb, and extended a hand to the old man.

"Are you hurt?"

He took the hand and managed to rise without slipping, although the deck had become quite wet. He sat on his seat and examined his open tackle box. He either did not mention or did not notice the body. "Oh, I'm fine. It'll be a lot of work to fix the damage to the ship, though." His hand touched the gash in the wood.

"I'm sorry. I'll help you fix it."

"That's nonsense. There's nothing to apologize for. It was my fault, all my fault." He picked up a shard of the for GRAMPA! mug. It dripped blood. "Ah, it won't be so easy to repair *this*."

Oh well, these things happen."

"I suppose they do."

The ship rocked. The waves roughened and frothed in the distance.

She hurled herself against the deck and slammed her forehead into the blood. The broken shards, the wooden planks, it pounded against her cranial plate, she screamed, she clawed at herself, she wrapped her arms around her shoulders and shivered as her face shriveled.

Then she shuddered and only a grainy throb in her chest remained.

"Well now," said the old man. "Looks like rough waters coming on."

The moment after he spoke, a massive wave rocked the boat. The old man staggered and slipped, but managed to catch the railing to steady himself. The joker slid across the deck; her sister's corpse slid too, into the stairway that led belowdecks. Her body thumped halfway down the stairs until it got stuck, only the head and torso and arms left to wobble in the turbulence.

A second, stronger wave hit them. The body disappeared down. The old man loosed an elongated "whoa." As the wave passed, the joker stood and wiped her eyes on the cuff of her motley jacket.

Amazing! This one will be exceptionally powerful.

That voice was familiar. She'd recognize it anywhere, in any state of mind. He was on her shoulder. She had no idea how long he had been there.

You performed far above expectations, Miss Kiss. Truthfully, I would have given the edge to your sister.

Her mind had the audacity to think how weird "Miss Kiss" sounded. Usually, the Incubator referred to them by their full names... because there had been two of them.

A third wave hit them. It was even stronger and the entire boat lifted off the water a moment before it slapped back down. The old man clung to the railing and, with unlikely dexterity, shimmied into his captain's seat. "If this picks up any worse, we won't make it back. Sorry miss, but I have to steer us clear."

The waves moved... in a spiral. A vast, mile-long swirl that manifested among the choppy waters, its midpoint at the edge before her vision became too obscured by the coil of wispy fog rising skyward. In that center, the water bent. Downward, a concavity, growing, deepening, a cyclone piercing to the depths of the lake.

"What... is this."

Under certain conditions, it's possible to manufacture the birth of an especially powerful wraith, said Mr. Kyubey. Needless to say, those conditions have been fulfilled.

And that was when, out of the eye of the monumental whirlpool, a vast black shape began to emerge. So that was the deep thing she dredged.

Bythos

Hegewisch leveled her machine gun at Clownmuffle's face. "What are you doing."

She knew. Who wouldn't? Denver's papers chronicled Magical Girls across the country. Names, locations, abilities. Someone must be able to repair Clownmuffle's Soul Gem. It almost reassured Hegewisch: If another person felt fear, Hegewisch felt it less. Contrarianism, like when the white Canadians said God was real so Hegewisch had to say God was dead.

Clownmuffle indicated no awareness of the machine gun. She rifled through papers, tossed some into one pile some into another, grabbed another handful. But after an overlong pause, she said:

"Pull that trigger, you won't hit me."

The machine gun sagged and Hegewisch used both hands to steady it.

"Flossmoor. I order you—" Of course that was ridiculous. "Okay. Okay. I know you won't what I say. But please. Help us fight the Terminatrix and I'll give you exactly what you need. I'll even sort the papers. Okay?"

"That girl from Denver said something similar." Flip, flip. "If I helped her in St. Louis, she'd help me." Flip, flip. "She lied."

"Denver—did everything she could."

More pages flipped. Clownmuffle had cleared half the stack. "Not for me."

"I argued with *God* to save you. At least trust me. At least *repay* me."

The entire time, a constant buzz of telepathy transmitted in the back of Hegewisch's head. Frantic pleas mingled with coarse orders—Orland's voice cut the harshest frequency. Hegewisch rationalized: Orland knew far more about close quarters combat; in fleeing the battle and ceding command to her, Hegewisch made the correct tactical decision; Hegewisch's most useful function in the fight would be to convince Clownmuffle to join it.

She hated that these rationalizations were one hundred percent true, because they were rationalizations nonetheless.

"Please. Clownmuffle. Everyone will die. Don't you believe in helping people? As a Magical Girl."

The papers ceased flipping. Clownmuffle let them cascade upon her crossed legs. Something twisted in her face and she clutched at her head, only for clumps of hair to come out. She shoved one hand forward. It had a thick cloth wrapped around it, burgundy with dried blood.

"My fingers fell off. When I helped carry these crates."

Hegewisch's gun lowered.

"I thought—last night—I don't know. Even after last night I thought—But it's only getting worse. I don't know—I don't know how long—I don't want to die."

This bareness shook Hegewisch, she recoiled from it and nearly dropped her gun. Somehow the serenity of Clownmuffle's pose, seated like Buddha amid her papers, remained. Even the perturbation on her face could not eliminate that ineffable breeziness, and as she finished speaking her features resolved back to what they had once been, the brow unruffled, the hands—hand—picked up more papers, the mouth lowered into the faintest trace of a resting smile.

Only a glimmer. A communique pealed in Hegewisch's mind:

The Seattle sister—She's retreating!

No. Good luck? For once? Hegewisch mistrusted it, but when she glanced out the lounge's shattered windows, she saw an orange lifeboat zipping away from the yacht. On it, the untransformed twin.

Trap or no, she had to take advantage of the opportunity. She turned toward Clownmuffle and began a renewed plea. But Clownmuffle had stopped flipping. She gripped a single sheet. Gripped it so tight the dried splotch on her bandaged fingers dampened and dripped. She shoved her face almost into the page, she trembled.

"This is it."

"You found something? Someone who can fix your gem?"

"Power: To shape precious metals and minerals. Creates diamond barriers. Potentially," Clownmuffle paused, dabbed her fingerless hand against her face and smeared blood on her cheek, "potentially, this ability extends to Soul Gems. Apparently altered her own Soul Gem to be smaller, denser, and more durable, offering increased protection in battle. Her potential use is offset by her tendency toward—misanthropy."

Clownmuffle repeated the final word as though it held especial significance.

Honestly, it seemed inconclusive, not that Hegewisch would *say* that. Nothing explicitly mentioned Soul Gem healing, and Denver's description appended a conspicuous "apparently" to the most promising part. Plus, no guarantee the girl still lived. Denver's records stretched years. Magical Girls died in days.

But Hegewisch smiled and said, "Wow. Awesome."

"Right here the whole time. In this little pile. Kyubey knew. Denver knew. You knew. But none would tell me."

"I didn't know. I only got clearance last night to access those files, I swear. What's her name? Where is she?"

"Real Name: Unknown. Location: Gatineau."

"Gatineau." Gatineau. "Oh—huh. That's right by, uh, right near Ottawa. I think. I went there once. I mean I never met the girl... This was before I contracted..."

No impression. Clownmuffle stared, eyes glazed. Her head tilted back. The world orbited around her. The lounge stripped away and the endless white sky and the endless blue surface swirled. Hegewisch saw it reflected in her eyes along with a thousand glittering stars. What battle? No battle existed here. No gaggle of Magical Girls blasting one another away with cannons and miniaturized trebuchets. No frenzied commands from Orland, no clangs bangs and slams, no cracks and cries. This nice pocket world inside the boat, a world for Clownmuffle alone, where only one person's problems mattered. What a *nice* little world.

Clownmuffle shot upright. She unsteadily swayed into the remaining stack of crates. She folded the Gatineau paper into a tedious square and tucked it into her pocket corner-up like a decorative handkerchief. "I'll go now," spacey, mumbling, eyes darting, "to Gatineau."

"We're nine miles from land."

"I'll find a way," said Clownmuffle, probably accurately. But before she fumbled anywhere further than a sofa armrest, her body tautened and her face fixed in a certain direction.

Through the broken row of windows, four Terminatrix goons struggled with a figure in gold. Because they were all bunched in the narrow walkway along the side of the yacht, specifics remained unclear. Then one Terminatrix girl either stepped aside or got pushed back and golden person was revealed: Joliet. The moment Hegewisch recognized her, her previously indeterminate shouts and shrieks resolved into the recognizable phlegmatic voice.

"No," whispered Clownmuffle. "They can't. I won't let them hurt her!"

Her? *Joliet*? Did Clownmuffle confuse Joliet with someone else? Did Clownmuffle ever speak a word to her or vice-versa? Did they have any connection whatsoever? Apparently; Clownmuffle sprang into action. She seized the nearest unopen crate and hurled it into the head of a goon. As the goon flipped overboard, Clownmuffle vaulted onto the walkway, caught the crate, and drove it onto a second head.

Hegewisch's reaction time kicked in and she remembered her machine gun. She aimed at a third goon approaching Clownmuffle's back and squeezed the trigger. The kickback launched her airborne, her aim went wild, couches became Swiss cheese. A stuffing blizzard whirled everywhere as Hegewisch hit the ground and stopped firing.

When she climbed up, no goons remained. Clownmuffle had done something to them at the price of fresh blood from her bandaged hand.

Hegewisch hurled the useless machine gun across the room and picked through the unsettled create until she found the shotgun she had prepared prior. Its weight was more to her liking

anyway. Clownmuffle dragged in Joliet and fanned her out of a faint.

"Nnk, hhhhkkk, uakk," said Joliet.

"Are you unhurt, milady?"

Did—did Clownmuffle say that? Hegewisch checked. The room was otherwise empty. A phantom aftertaste lingered on her tongue and she squinted. The meaning could not cohere.

"Ahk, I ah, I'm..."

"Fear not. I'll protect you," said Clownmuffle.

Joliet seemed insensible. Her eyes roved and sweat rushed down her brow. All fidgets, all fingers, all a frenetic twist in her spine. But Clownmuffle became every indicator of rigidity, stalwart and stolid, even as her blood trickled and the name of the girl who might save her rested in her pocket.

The oddity of this image failed to last long. The lounge's relative safety had been compromised. Through windows on each side rushed Terminatrix goons. Orland's commands continued to buzz, but the physical sounds of conflict had moved upward—onto the second deck. They had ceded the first. Which left the lounge exposed.

She pointed her shotgun at the first malignant face, half-bloodied but madly grinning, draped in azure furs and clutching twin tomahawks. Upon pulling the trigger nothing happened, not even a click. She had no time to consider whether the gun failed or she fucked up its operation. She held it up for defense and one swipe cleaved it. Her body avoided a similar fate but the force knocked her over a couch.

Someone—Joliet—screamed. Then rapid gunfire broke out and the room strobed black and white. Hegewisch rolled over and crawled on her elbows as bullets ricocheted against the bar counter nearby. Wood chips sprayed against her face.

The stream of bullets lasted maybe ten years, maybe two seconds, but when they ended a weird peace settled and Hegewisch cautiously drew her sidearm and raised her head over the denuded back of the sofa. Clownmuffle had scooped up the discarded machine gun and apparently wielded it way better than Hegewisch (shocker), because of the stream of seven or eight enemies, only four remained, crouched behind chairs or sofas or crate stacks and poking up their heads. Clownmuffle tossed the spent weapon away.

"Here!" Hegewisch tossed her the handgun, Clownmuffle caught it without looking, and in the same fluid motion aimed at one of the enemies climbing out of cover and dispatched her with one immediate bullet to the skull. The girl vanished into black dust before she hit the ground. But a second shot, fired at the azure fur girl, bounced off a tomahawk brought up for defense.

Clownmuffle bled from her ears.

"San Bernardino."

The voice came from the outer deck, at the farthest window at the end of the lounge. Clownmuffle's eyes only flitted its direction, but what stood there—

Denver. Platinum scifi getup, visor stretched over her eyes, star rod tap-tap-tapping against the window frame and knocking a few stray shards. Hegewisch grew ashen. Her skin flaked in ribbons. Joliet crawled to her leg and gripped it in fear.

"And you, Laila," said Denver.

"I—you—" said Hegewisch.

"Aha," said the girl in azure furs, crouched but best positioned to spring, "friends of yours Sage?"

"I know them, Catalina," said Denver.

"That's real nice and all but you also know what our mission here is uh-huh?"

"I know."

Denver climbed through the window and stood in the corner of the room, outside cover. Yet Clownmuffle neither aimed nor even looked in her direction.

She did say: "Gatineau."

"So you figured it out." Denver's eye fell on the papers that once belonged to her now strewn on the floor.

"Gatineau. You only needed to say Gatineau," said Clownmuffle.

"True. I didn't even need to consult my files; she's a veteran of some infamy, she never used my site, but I learned a lot from one of her former pupils. I could have told you the moment you contacted me, but I needed you."

Needed her. Great leader Denver. Hegewisch watched closely the azure fur girl, Catalina, although her head whirred with things she wanted to say, to ask Denver, or whatever spirit this was. Instead she said: "Clownmuffle, she's trying to distract you."

"Nothing she says matters now," said Clownmuffle.

But Hegewisch wasn't so sure about that, and sure enough Denver's eyes fell upon *her*, she could feel them through the visor. That same calm, cool, languid voice that was somehow Denver spoke: "You made things difficult for us, Laila. Nobody expected you would take command of the Chicago forces; I certainly never would have."

That voice, that cadence. The same voice that told her things would be okay in St. Louis. In that moment, wracked by fatalistic terror, that voice said they would survive. They would make it out. It was that voice that lingered in Hegewisch's mind, the one she tried to emulate when she took the role of "leader." Yet when she investigated Denver's example, remembered what specifically Denver had done to exemplify leadership, she could only at best think,

"Well, she wasn't DuPage." No—unfair. Denver had fed her a little hope, despite the darkness of the moment.

And it was funny, because what was that hope shit? Empty words, platitudes, right? Indoctrinated into children from preschool. Every story, every conflict, the same theme: If you hope, eventually something good will happen. If you imagine a bright future, you can make it real. It was that exact emptiness, that pointless regurgitation, that made Laila Chatterjee scoff at her parents and the white Canadians. Hope did nothing. Hope made nothing happen. Hope did not exist as a tangible entity, or even a real emotion. It was merely belief in something that did not exist. Hope and God were interchangeable concepts, and yet —

In that darkness—

In that hideous St. Louis—

It took almost nothing. "We'll make it out of here." The kind of sentence anyone could say, the kind Denver probably said as an afterthought, spurred by politeness above all else. How did such a weak and flimsy sentiment hit Hegewisch so hard? How did she think back on Denver and remember a powerful leader, especially when facts contradicted so heavily that assessment? Because Denver died alone, abandoned, her ranks tattered, her lieutenant a turncoat. Utter defeat. But what in that threadbare statement inspired Hegewisch so?

It was a hopeful sentiment. But it wasn't the hope that made it powerful. It was the darkness.

Happy people—her parents, the Canadians, even Laila Chatterjee herself—they needed no hope. Hope for what? They were happy. Laila, the cynic, recognized this needlessness and spurned "hope," or however you called it: God, Allah. But in that darkness. In that hideous St. Louis. Enfolded on all sides by miasma. Surrounded by waves of men and women dispossessed of sense, besieged by nightmare horrors. What made the hope real, what made the words meaningful, what brought down the useless children's cartoon platitudes, what smashed through the vestigial upper middle class religion, what placed Denver on a pedestal, and what even—yes, even—what even etched a little sympathy for that Goddess, was the hopelessness.

Denver was a horrible leader.

Hegewisch was a horrible leader.

But the total black of their respective situations buoyed them. Just the slightest amount. Just enough to mount a final stand when neither had any business making it past the first square.

Madoka Kaname was a horrible leader—a horrible God.

But she was the barest dot of white in that rolling pitch of tar, that state of Magical Girdom. She only needed to be a dot. It was the drop of water in the throat of a man crawling across a desert.

And what did it amount to? That dot of hope? Because it was still a platitude. It still meant nothing. A sham. A lie only believed because of the desperation to believe it. They all would have been better off without it. The hope only manipulated them. The hope dangled in front of Clownmuffle welded her to Denver's purpose. The hope of Madoka Kaname only kept them alive longer to suffer more.

"Denver," she said, rising. Joliet tugged her leg in vain to keep her down. "Denver, I understand now—"

The girl named Catalina kicked a crate forward. It sailed at Clownmuffle, who sidestepped it, and a tomahawk swirled after. This too Clownmuffle evaded, but when it stuck the wall it detonated and a fireball knocked Hegewisch onto her back. Two shots rang in the subsiding tinnitus of the explosion and Hegewisch rose in time to watch two of the Terminatrix's goons vanish into puffs of smoke. But Denver and Catalina remained, and they charged Clownmuffle simultaneously.

Then the battle stopped.

Not just the battle in the lounge. The whole battle. Everything. The ship went silent.

Denver and Catalina had come within a few feet of Clownmuffle before they froze at exactly the same time. Neither even looked at Clownmuffle. They cocked their heads and seemed to listen to something.

Both blurted an incredulous, "WHAT?"

They rushed through the exploded wall of the yacht and grabbed what remained of the railing to stare into the misty sea. They exchanged glances. Clownmuffle, Hegewisch, and Joliet plodded closer step by step.

Catalina vanished, poof. Denver turned around. She pointed at Hegewisch.

"Laila. Get out of here. Something bad's happening. Something—FUCK. Just, get out now. Now."

Then she also disappeared.

The ship creaked, the waves lapped, and all fell otherwise silent. A vortex of wind swirled Denver's charred papers outside and Hegewisch only realized fast enough to snatch a handful. She rushed to secure the rest, shoveling handfuls, folding the papers into a curl and tucking them into a pocket.

"What, what just happened?" said Joliet. "Did we, did we win?"

"I don't know," said Hegewisch, "but—"

"Milady!" Orland appeared on the side of the deck, flanked by a ragtag group of Chicago survivors in scuffed and bloodstained armor. "Centurion Joliet," Orland continued, with somewhat more posture. "You're unharmed. You as well, Lieutenant Hegewisch."

"We managed," said Hegewisch.

"Lieutenant Bolingbrook has become one of them. Because of her, they had intimate knowledge of our abilities. The battle was difficult, but we appear to have forced their retreat."

The white mist on the distant periphery of visible space darkened. The waves strengthened. "They left because something worse scared them." Hegewisch spoke the words in a dreamy pallor that soon shattered. "Get the yacht moving. Now."

"Back to the city, milady?"

A swirl, swirl, swirl in the far waters. The white and blue together became an ominous black. All in the direction of unseen Chicago. "No. Take us east—better yet, south. What city is south and how far?"

"Gary, milady—Indiana. Fifteen to twenty miles."

"We break for it—Go. Anyone not needed to pilot the ship, heal whoever can be healed. What healers are left?"

Orland had departed on "go." Joliet followed, head low, muttering something about "overseeing the steering," likely considering Orland a better bodyguard. Nobody protested her departure. The few who remained in the lounge doorway glanced among themselves to elect a speaker, and finally Griffith, the girl with the magic camera, saluted.

Her report:

Of the twenty-one girls who departed Chicago on the yacht, three were confirmed killed: Frankfort, Gary, and Lemont. Seven others had gone missing. These included most of the girls who had been on the back of the ship when the attack started. They had probably fallen overboard unconscious and sunk. By now their Soul Gems were likely unrecoverable.

Of the eleven remaining, which included Hegewisch and Joliet, three had received debilitating wounds. The platoon's best remaining healer, Hammond, was expected to have them in full form in minutes. Others had expended a lot of energy, and Midlothian—who survived despite her uselessness—was already distributing grief cubes.

"And Palos? We need her to sense other Magical Girls."

"She's one of the seven missing," said Griffith. "She probably—"

"I'm right here."

A broomstick descended onto the narrow corridor of deck behind Hegewisch. Palos disembarked, followed by another girl—Hazel Crest or Munster maybe. Both were drenched.

"You abandoned the fight?" said Griffith.

"No, I—"

"You should have gone after the Terminatrix," said Hegewisch. "With flight, long-ranged attacks, tracking magic—You could've forced her back and ended the fight yourself."

Palos shifted. She looked down—but when she lifted her face up again her expression was aggressively neutral. Refusing eye contact with any of them, staring only straight ahead, Palos stepped into the lounge's busted doorway and produced from a pouch three luminescent gems.

"That's Mokena's Soul Gem," said Griffith. "And Munster, and Tinley. We thought they fell overboard."

"They did. I dove down to save them. My broomstick can only support two people, so I grabbed the most important parts. I'm sorry, there were two others—they had already sunk too deep." The neutral expression broke and she turned away her face, mumbling the last part. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. If I didn't fly up first, I could have saved them all. I'm sorry. I should have realized sooner. I should have—I'm sorry—I'm sorry."

Another catch in her throat. A muffled sob. Hegewisch stared, uncomprehending. Palos had joined one day ago. She didn't know any of these girls. Hegewisch worked for the Empire five months and barely knew them. Sure, she knew their names, cities of origin, their dates of birth, their powers, their wishes, she compiled spreadsheets of them... Like Tinley, real name Desiray Parker, from Detroit, fifteen years old...

They *were* people. And Hegewisch told them she'd lead them to safety. Now three, probably five were now dead. At least shitty leader Denver died before Hegewisch did. Grrrrrrgh—Gaah. She didn't know what to feel.

Best not to think about things better thought about once in bed—

A sharp tidal yank bonked her head against the door jamb. She rubbed her forehead and mussed her already-mussed hair. Everything outside had become so dark it was like nightfall. The mist became indistinguishable from the spilt inkwell sky. What was water and what wasn't only became clear by the sharp crest of the tall waves, which flashed the tiniest white shard from the lights on the yacht.

The next wave rocked them. Hegewisch stumbled against the jagged remains of the exploded doorframe and caught herself. Palos and Hazel Crest dropped onto the deck and helped each other up. But the waves kept coming, the next hit before they were halfway risen and they fell again. Gravity's pull tugged Hegewisch's midsection and her legs scraped the deck until she hooked her feet into gashes carved during the battle.

There had been signs of something stormy building before, but this intensity outstripped expectation. They became wormwood on a dark plane of existence, even as floodlights flipped on along the yacht. People were falling down inside the cabin and Orland bellowed something above. The harsh spray and the slap of water and the creak of their metal vessel clanged over the words and Hegewisch replied telepathically: *What!*

We're being pulled. Milady, these waves are like nothing—

Slam! Another wave didn't rock them so much as toss them, for a moment Hegewisch's body lifted airborne then plinked back down. The younger girls yelped. Palos and Hazel Crest on the narrow strip of deck acted and reenacted the same farcical pantomime of half-lifting and half-falling, the chiaroscuro lighting gave it a heightened sense of slapstick, like a black-and-white comedy routine.

That was what the whole thing felt like. A movie scene, and a funny one at that, she didn't know why she thought that, because she knew this had to be dangerous, seriously dangerous, but it also felt like something finally removed from the human, a work of divinity, an Israelite cataclysm. Madoka, have you a hand in this...? She asked the sightless skies above.

But that feeling only lasted a moment. She seized Palos and dragged her near. "Where are the twins! Where's the Terminatrix! Status!"

"Five miles west—the Terminatrix is closing on the twin. There's only one twin now. I can't find the other twin."

"Anyone else, did Kyubey bring anyone else to fuck us?"

"It's them and the two girls who sank. Nobody else. Not even Dr. Cho."

Then what the hell was this shit? Hegewisch had assumed it was some Incubator coup de grace, something engineered to royally devastate them. Maybe it still was. If the designer ferret could cross millions of light years and clone himself, maybe he could make a big storm too, without needing a Magical Girl to do it. Seemed like an inefficient way to off them but—

We've lost control of the ship, said Orland. We're trapped in the current. Everyone hold on to something!

The waves had started to reduce, so for a moment Hegewisch wondered what Orland was talking about, but as the ship leaned to one side and the floodlights poured against the water she realized. A current. Yeah, one could describe it as a "current." If they were being polite, yeah. Because it was less current and more "whirlpool," and not like a little twist in the water—a gargantuan swirl of rapids that rocketed the yacht along, nearly tilting it ninety degrees into the sheer vertical cliff of waves, binding them to the water through centrifugal force alone. Hegewisch wrapped her arms and legs around the door jamb as sideways became downward. Palos and Hazel Crest grabbed one another. Furniture shifted in the lounge, everything slid toward Hegewisch, the side of a couch pinched her body. Grief cubes twinkled in the darkness as they cascaded into the abyss. Hegewisch had tucked most of Denver's papers into her pocket but a few she missed flapped past her face. Random gushes of water flowed from above, strained through the shattered windows, and washed debris away. Hegewisch's hold loosened, the cracked jamb bent.

And the sound. The roar, the thrum of ten million turbines together as what seemed the entirety of Lake Michigan funneled into the unstopped drain. Building, building, building, so loud it became hard to think, to distinguish the telepathic screeches of nearly every girl in the boat. A body slammed against the couch that pressed against Hegewisch. The door jamb snapped. Hegewisch fell—a hand caught her by the collar. She didn't know who, and the

lights had flickered or died so she couldn't see even if she looked. Her limbs fumbled and she found the railing of the outer deck.

A single voice rose out of the cacophony: *SOMETHING ON SONAR. SOMETHING ON SONAR.* The words held zero meaning. They seemed irrelevant. They were swirling, swirling, the water showed no signs of stopping, they would travel a miles-diameter circle, slowly cycling downward and downward until they reached their final abyss, what mattered the *sonar*? The voice continued: *IT'S BIG. IT'S BIG.* Who was even bothering to check the sonar—

Hegewisch looked down.

There should have only been blackness. She only looked because another gush of water hit her head from above. Her neck twisted that way reflexively.

But down there, at the base of the funnel, was an eye. An eye miles wide. An eye not shaped like the black bead of a shark or whale, or even the bulbous orb of a squid. Nor was it human. A swollen gray iris with a long slit for a pupil. In that eye Hegewisch saw herself reflected, as though the eye were only a few feet below, but it must have been at the deepest depths.

The eye reflected her.

Then water rushed over it, flooded the throbbing iris, poured into the narrow, pinched opening of the pupil. Black water upon black water, gallons, millions of gallons, shrouding it in a rippling sheen, covering it completely, the water filling and filling, rising, nearing her dangling foot—

It's stopping, we're coming out of it! A voice recognizably Orland's, the crash of torrents had quieted. The ship began to right itself. Hegewisch's body first leaned, then draped against the deck. Furniture scuffled backward. Bodies collapsed against the wood and streaked carpet.

The currents stopped. The waves stopped. Their ship, carried by momentum, clipped through silent, utterly still water. The blackness ebbed away on both sides of the horizon line, the mist returned—grayer than before, or maybe an optical trick. Girls all over sighed relief. Someone called for a head count and a chorus of "Here" and "Present" sounded across the boat. Nobody had fallen out—they were Magical Girls, after all. Hegewisch glanced back. The thing that caught her when the door jamb broke was hooked in her collar. Not a hand—the end of a broomstick, which promptly slid away and back into Palos's grasp.

Stillness, silence. No trace of any whirlpool. No disturbance whatsoever. In the mist, the forms of manmade structures stood.

Orland leaned over the railing from the third deck. Her red hair streamed like an elongated hood from the sides of her face. "Milady! It seems the current took us closer to shore. We can't be more than a mile off."

"Where's the enemy," Hegewisch asked Palos.

"Three and a half miles behind us now. The Terminatrix and one twin, they're together. Still no sign of the other twin. The two of ours who fell overboard—I'm not. I'm not reading their signatures anymore."

"Okay. Okay." Hegewisch climbed to her feet. She shoved aside the couch that blocked the lounge doorway. "We have to be prepared for round two with the Terminatrix. If one of the twins died, it's good for us, but some of us died too, so—" Shit. She sounded callous. She stood in the center of the lounge and looked at the rising bodies. Griffith, Midlothian, even Clownmuffle had to pull herself off the ground. Nobody remarked on what she said.

When she took a step, her foot crunched grief cubes. They had scattered everywhere, many had fallen overboard, but some had collected in pockets. "Uh, you. And you." She pointed at random girls. "Get these cubes back in their crates, we may need them. Let's get any injured —"

"Lieutenant Hegewisch! You're needed on the captain's deck."

Fine, fine. Hegewisch left the girls to shovel cubes and climbed up the ladder to the upper decks. She still had on a bulky life jacket, which made her motions ponderous. She paused on the top rung, glanced over her shoulder, and took in the water. It was completely, utterly, unearthly still. Not a wave. Not a bird. Not a splash of fish. Nothing. She was not a nautical type, she had never been on a boat except this one, so she couldn't say for certain it wasn't normal. Like the saying: "Calm before the storm." Except this was after it.

The captain's deck was the smallest. Its interior comprised a single room with a long paneled front and many switches, buttons, and levers. A bunch of shit blinked and beeped and Hegewisch doubted anyone, even the Empress, knew what it all did. Orland swiveled on the captain's chair and Joliet crouched in the corner, shivering.

"Here, lieutenant." Orland tapped a monitor embedded between dials. It displayed a ton of junk. Jagged static lines that ran up and down, amorphous blobs of jittery color, blocky objects of no coherent shape or purpose. "Do you know how to read this?"

"What is it?"

"It's our sonar."

"I thought *you* knew how to read it. I told you to watch it in case Seattle fired an underwater attack."

"I do have slight experience reading this device, yes. But it's slight. I can tell when something changes, when something's moving toward us."

Hegewisch crowded closer. She bent halfway over Orland's body and pressed her hands on either side of the sonar readout to try and determine something in the image. She became annoyed. What if Seattle *had* attacked aquatically? "So did something change or not."

"Yes, something changed, but I'm not sure what. That's why I'm asking, milady." She reached under Hegewisch's arm and jabbed a finger at the bottom half of the image. "See this?"

"Everything looks like random noise. I don't even know how sonar works, I thought it was like, on submarines. That thing that goes ping, ping—"

"This black shape. Here." Her fingertip tapped it. A black shape described it well: a lozenge-shaped blot where the crisscross lines and color blocks didn't go.

Something ominous twisted in her entrails.

"From my understanding, which again is based on very minimal experience, that black object indicates someplace where the sound waves we send out aren't penetrating. Basically—we shoot sound out, and it's bouncing back at us before it reaches this black area."

Hegewisch regarded it. Her voice came out quiet: "So something's out there..."

"I mean, *ostensibly*, yeah—milady. But I've been watching the sonar the whole time, whatever this is just *appeared*, I think it might be a glitch, like the system got damaged—the waters were rough." Orland spoke excitedly, her pitch rising. "Because it wouldn't make sense, right? Right? Something this large can't just appear out of nowhere, right?"

"How large," Hegewisch cleared her throat, "how large is it?"

"Based on the scale of the readout, that object's at least 600 meters long."

The screen flickered and the black lozenge inched closer to the center of the screen.

"What's that, whale—whale length?"

"There are no whales in Lake Michigan."

"But how big is that. How *big* is this thing. Com—comparatively."

Orland pushed back her damp bangs. In the pale light of the screen her face became a ghoulish green. Her eyes appeared sunken and her freckles like filthy spots of oil dribbled across her skin. "It's twelve times the size of our ship."

Twelve times.

"But it can't be a thing," Orland continued, "right? Lieutenant? Right? It's a glitch. You handle the records for this stuff, don't you? The specs? You should know about these kinds of errors. Right? It's a glitch. Right?"

The forgotten Joliet, crouched her corner, coughed a grotesque, mocking laugh. She pressed her hands over her face and stared upward.

Hegewisch leaned back, away from the sonar readout, and against the wall behind her, accidentally clicking some switches in the process and turning off the floodlights that swept from alcoves past the windshield. She clamped her teeth on her thumbnail and the soft flesh behind it and bit until her sharp canine punctured it. A blood taste blossomed.

"How fast are we moving to Chicago."

"As fast as the yacht will go. That thing on the sonar is moving a lot faster."

"How far is it."

"Uh. Just under. Just under one—one league."

"What the *fuck* is a league? What the fuck is league, I can do miles, I can do kilometers, don't give me fucking leagues, don't give me these fucking measurements I know nothing about!"

Orland's eyes blinked. "It's. It'll reach us, before we reach shore." She failed to mention the profanity. She devolved from steadfast veteran to a dumb girl playing boat captain. The enormity of the equipment compressed her into a bundle of red yarn. "But it's not—it's not really there. Nothing that large can just—just—*manifest*—manifest like that. Right? Milady? Lieutenant? It's a glitch, right?"

The bitter laughter sounded again. It had the same metallic whirr of the fans inside the machines. "Glitch," said Joliet. "Glitch. Wouldn't that be nice? A nice, lucky glitch. It's no glitch. Would it ever be a glitch? Something like that doesn't happen to someone like me."

By which point Hegewisch had spiraled out of the captain's chamber and begun an automated, eyeless process of descending the ladder back to the first deck. That eyeball she saw in the whirlpool. You could imagine—could imagine the whirlpool itself—had been some sort of magic. A powerful Magical Girl, one Kyubey had shifted into position to finish them. But a creature of that size—that eyeball—nobody could create something... like that. Twelve times the size of their ship. She knelt on the wood and rasped. A girl, Midlothian, knelt beside her and patted her back and asked if she were okay and she was a whole continent displaced.

Hegewisch knew what it was. Knew what was coming for them. There had only been one twin remaining. Something had happened. Something dark. Something sinful. Something that offended the sight of that God, Madoka Kaname, something that churned her celestial stomach, a twinge in her galactic abdomen, just enough disgust to ripple onto this world in the form of what, to her, would be the smallest bacterial mite. A glitch, if you will, but not the kind Orland prayed for, or the kind Joliet denied.

The name for it—and Hegewisch hadn't known this one, it wasn't part of the innate knowledge she gained due to her wish, because Madoka Kaname never named them; the name had been told to Hegewisch when she relayed her knowledge to the Empress, because the Empress already knew some things—the name for it was *archon*. A false deity. A creator who was not God. And what it created were wraiths. Wraiths, wraiths, endless wraiths.

The wraiths it created wouldn't matter, of course. The archon itself would smite them long before it came to that.

"Lieutenant Hegewisch?" said Midlothian. "Please, if you're sick, come inside—"

"Get everyone." She bolted upright. "Everyone. EVERYONE. Get them ready to fight. Fight with everything."

"Milady?"

"DO IT NOW."

Midlothian tottered two clumsy steps before Hegewisch remembered the efficiency of telepathy: *EVERYONE GET READY TO FIGHT AT THE BACK OF THE BOAT*. They streamed from the lounge and the upper decks, still bloodied and no longer in such neat rows or with such precision of movement. But they came, and with the frantic hand motions of Hegewisch they lined up, impractical magic weapons ready.

"What are we preparing for, milady? What is our target?" one said.

Hegewisch did not need to answer. Because at the edge of the mist, where the nebulous overcame the coherent, the water began to bulge. Upward, a cataract or contact lens, and no sense of the form that lurked beneath from the brackish darkness of the lake. The lozenge, the glitch in the system. The big fish, the antediluvian whale—Leviathan. The twenty thousand souls of a kingdom come together in the shape of an ancient, God-approved lord. The bulge rushing toward them, crossing the mile distance like fucking Bugs Bunny hellbent toward Albuquerque. HAAA! Her heart felt like it was hemorrhaging. Her brain reeled and a manic, technicolor image of Bugs Bunny pinwheeled through her inner eye. The WHITE WHAAAAAAALE—The *Pequod* meets the *Bachelor*. She couldn't handle this. This too? On top of everything before? On top of DuPage, St. Louis, the horrors seen beneath the Gateway Arch, on top of the Terminatrix, the twins, what more could God ask of her—What more.

Every single straw broke her back and yet somehow she had to snap her spine back together. She wheeled to the girl directly to her left and shouted: "Where's—Clownmuffle?" Only to realize the girl she grabbed *was* Clownmuffle. "In the lounge—the machine gun—you need —"

Clownmuffle already had the machine gun. She propped it against a twisted shred of railing and in her other hand held the handgun. Someone had healed her hand, she had all her fingers again. Hegewisch touched both guns and they flashed hot pink and would do the slightest bit more damage against wraiths. Anything, and smidge of extra power, they needed—

"Milady!" Hazel Crest, with a drawn bow, on the second deck. "It's in my range, do I fire?"

They needed—"We need—a concentrated attack. We need to hit it with every ounce of firepower at the same time." The camera girl, Griffith, she was still alive right? Hegewisch scanned the faces, found her next to Hazel Crest, where her eyes had been before she started searching. Good. Good. Griffith could copy their attacks seven times—Fourteen, or was it thirteen, Magical Girls times seven—subtract Joliet—uhhhhh—

The convexity swelled. It neared. One mile. Three-quarters. Half. It tugged the whole surface of the lake skyward. The water rushed from its sloped sides, lakes within lakes, water within water, Orland screeching from the third deck distances at regular intervals timed to the sonar. The bodies shifted on either side of her, young girls murmuring, whimpering, shaking, one girl turning and bolting—who knew where—Hegewisch only hoped she wasn't someone strong. Someone shouted: "WE NEED TO BREAK TO THE SIDE. TO THE SIDE!" like

they had that kind of maneuverability, like this monolith under the skin of Lake Michigan couldn't eclipse them either way. Only bleak, only a merging of colors, the gold and the white, the black and the blue, the muted browns of the deck, and everything a twinge of red, as that great shape neared, it neared, it neared, it neared, it neared, and as it neared it rose, the back of the boat lifted, the water beneath it pulled up as the surface broke and—

And it had *teeth*. It *only* had teeth. Ten, twenty rings of teeth, full rounded rows, churning and jabbed within gums that dripped either lakewater or black blood, a maw that rose above them like that damned St. Louis arch, and inside the maw, between all those fangs, not a black oblivion, not an endless gullet, not a vantage into nothingness—in the maw eyeballs stared back at them. Ten thousand eyeballs clustered in the abomination's mouth, each shaped and slitted like the eyeball in the hurricane—each flitting its own way as the mile-long lamprey broke the water and each suddenly turning straight to her as it crested its rise and the mouth and its fangs cast a long shadow across them.

"FIRE," Hegewisch said, certain she had said it too late, amazed that somehow none fired before she said.

And everyone fired, or launched their spears, or threw their zweihanders. Clownmuffle's machine gun rattled.

At the same moment a wrecking ball-sized sphere squealed out of the mist.

Griffith flashed her camera. Everything was replicated seven times. The arrows, the spears, the zweihanders, and the bullets, both machine-gun and wrecking ball-sized.

It was impossible to tell what happened next because the wrecking ball bullets, now eightfold, exploded. The blast swallowed Hegewisch's vision. She slammed against the back of the boat and her breath became fire scalding her esophagus. Someone tossed up a barrier—someone else followed—a third, maybe even a fourth. That shielded them from the brunt of the blast but, but—

The archon wailed. The noise it made sounded like the noise a whale makes underwater, even though it was above water. It was a shockingly quiet sound for its size. And as the explosions subsided, as the fire faded, as the roar of their combined firepower died, Hegewisch rubbed her eyes and watched the infinite-toothed maw come down.

Not on them. Not directly. Something had happened in the blast, either it caused the archon to redirect slightly, or else it had propelled the yacht in a different direction—maybe a combination of both—but they were no longer on a synced, irrevocable collision course. The water undulated and the ship lifted, the bodies upon it lifted, and the fangs brushed past them, down into the water, the scorched eyeballs still peering.

The archon sank back below. The waves rippled to steady. The girls pulled themselves up, many coughing or clutching their throats, many scalded by the heat, even while drenched by the splash.

"Anyone overboard?" said Hegewisch.

"Everyone's still here," said Palos. Hegewisch looked to her side; Clownmuffle lost an arm. Hegewisch immediately directed their best healer to patch her up. Clownmuffle was key.

"It's moving away!" said Orland. "It's moving away, the sonar shows it clearly. It's moving away from us."

A stooped figure emerged from the cabin at Orland's back: Joliet. "Heh. Heh, heh. It's not moving away. It's circling around for strike two. And hkkk, look at the boat. Look."

They looked. It didn't take long to see. The massive explosion had ripped the sides right off it. The combined force of the barriers had protected everyone at the back of the boat, but the fires had spread around the barriers and ravaged everything else. Massive gashes front to back. Water streamed inside.

"No. No." Orland ran into the cabin, ran back out. "We're dead in the water. The engines aren't responding. We're sinking."

The ballistic horror of the situation subsided and this new fuckery somehow made little impact on Hegewisch. She nodded as she observed the water flooding into their gutted hull. Yes, yes. Of course.

You need to get out of there, said a voice unfamiliar to them, and the girls whipped their battered heads in search of its source until Palos jabbed her finger at a growing black smudge in the sky's whiteness. It was the Terminatrix, flying, great batwings extended, which contradicted Palos's report that she flew by simply moving across the sky with no form of propulsion. Hegewisch didn't care about the discrepancy, only her bureaucratic mentality even brought it up, and nonetheless she could assume the reason for the change, because the Terminatrix carried two bodies that dangled from either her hands or feet.

That was my last shot, said the same voice. *I'm spent. I don't have the energy to attack again. You need to escape before it comes back.*

The Seattle twin. The younger one, with the sniper rifle. Interesting they decided to help. It implied Kyubey failed to tell them about the archon beforehand.

No way, said Orland. *We don't need your help. It's hurt—if we hit it again with everything we got, we'll finish it.*

Hegewisch kept one eye slanted to the side. The immense convexity of water was halfway through its revolution back toward them. The archon was so long it was taking a non-negligible amount of time for it to attack again. Still, they needed to act fast.

Someone shouted: "Griffith is gone!" It was Hazel Crest, who stood right next to Griffith.

"I thought everyone survived the explosion—"

"She did, she was right here, she sat down to catch her breath—"

"Law of the Cycles," said Hegewisch, and in an instant it became clear. Griffith's power, to replicate objects, required energy proportional to the energy of the objects she replicated. It

was in her file, Hegewisch knew but had forgotten, or even if she had remembered, maybe she would not have stopped Griffith from using her power anyway. After all, Griffith knew her own limitations. She had snapped that photograph well aware how much energy it would expend.

Fuck. And that sneaky Madoka got in and Cycled her while Hegewisch was looking elsewhere.

"If Griffith's dead, that seals it. Everyone into the remaining lifeboats—We're abandoning ship."

The girls, despite their wounds, sprung into activity. Gold flashed as they streamed along the sides of the yacht to the compartments where the lifeboats were stored. Hegewisch limped—some piece of shrapnel had cut her thigh muscle—at the back of the procession as they extricated orange cubes and pulled the drawstrings to inflate them. She weaved between the bodies and into the lounge. One briefcase contained the hard drives of the Empire's computers. She had secured this especially important article behind the bar and was toting it back outside when Orland appeared to confront her:

"With all due respect, lieutenant, are you insane? You think we'll stand a better chance on those dinghies than on this ship?"

"If we take all three lifeboats and spread out, it can't get us all at once..."

The logic dawned on Orland and she nodded. "Yes, milady. Sound idea."

No sooner had Orland vanished did Palos appear. "I can carry one other person on my broom. I fly fast, it's almost certain I can carry them to safety."

The words hung on the stillness of the lounge, even within the larger buzz of activity on the decks. One other person—assured safety. For an instant Hegewisch entertained the thought of herself on the back of that broomstick, but it was really never an option.

Someone shouted: "That monster's coming quick, hurry!"

"Centurion Joliet," said Hegewisch. "Obviously, you'll take our highest-ranking officer. And take these." She thrust into Palos's hands the briefcase, as well as the folded clump of Denver's papers and the Soul Gems of the salvaged girls.

Palos nodded and dashed away. The orange lifeboats floated in the water, already populated with Magical Girls. The archon had almost finished its revolution, that endless twisting remora body a shifting crescent upon the surface.

The lifeboat that contained Clownmuffle, that would be the best one. Clownmuffle had a knack, a lucky aura, an unkillability. If it came down to luck, if the archon could only get one lifeboat while the others clipped to shore, then her—it had to be hers. She spotted Clownmuffle in the middle boat, a tiny wisp of white suit packed between two gold-armored girls: Hazel Crest and Midlothian (Midlothian probably having the same idea as Hegewisch). If Hegewisch joined them, that would make it the only boat with four people instead of three,

but she considered that math negligible in the face of the indiscernible quality of Clownmuffle. She vaulted the side and landed at the fore of the boat.

The three dinghies shot off in separate directions. The lake spray spattered their faces as the front parts lifted and the tiny rubber boats skipped along the surface like thrown stones. One northwest, one southwest, one simply west—that was Hegewisch's craft, in the middle, an unspoken prioritization of deference placed upon it because of her sham rank, while the other two settled for less optimized routes. A shadow crossed above them: the broomstick. Joliet sat with her arms thrown around Palos's waist. Her head rested on Palos's shoulder and her sad, abused puppy face fell upon Hegewisch. What was that expression, in those deep-set eyes, in the brow crinkled beneath a frenetic whirl of ashen bangs? It wasn't relief from her miraculous escape, nor was it baseless pessimism. In that face—Hegewisch saw it only an instant before the broomstick shot off—in that face was shame, half-concealed behind Palos's shoulder. Shame that for all her doom *she* would live, and probably all others would die. Cassandra spared her own prophecy.

Hegewisch looked over her shoulder in time to watch the archon reach the yacht. It did not rise to devour it; nothing within it was worth devouring now. It simply dredged straight through it. The yacht burst like a toy, planks of wood and strips of metal shot everywhere, flotsam and jetsam.

Now came the lottery. Or the Russian roulette. The archon had the option of three crafts to pursue. They had already fanned out far enough, and for all its length the archon was not particularly broad. Which route would it pick? Straight ahead, correct? Directly westward. To Hegewisch's craft. Why would an imperious being of its propensity shift itself even an iota for the stratagems of mites? Why had Hegewisch been so stupid to insist on the central boat, why did she not foresee—

It shifted. Southwest. Toward the boat that had been last deployed, that had gotten the slightly slower start.

Hegewisch breathed.

"Oh no," said Midlothian. They all watched. It was the least and the most they could do.

The southwest boat, like the northwest, contained three girls. Their names were Matteson, Dolton, and Hammond. Hegewisch knew everything about them, she had even created the form for Matteson. Names on a page. Names in an Excel spreadsheet.

But now they were people, small and far away people, little forms. They lacked voices, faces in a crowd, and now they were going to die. The swell of water rushed toward them. They were aware of it. They stared over their shoulders. They summoned weapons and shields. They would have been better off without the hope. With nothing but total despair as the demiurge bore down on them, then maybe Madoka might take mercy and spirit them to her shitty afterlife. But no, they held that dot, that futile, vain, useless hope. They readied a final stand.

"We," said a tiny Midlothian, "we have to help them."

"We can do nothing," said Hegewisch.

Hazel Crest summoned her bow. She notched an arrow and knelt upon the rubbery side of the raft to aim. "It's a long shot, but it had those eyes, right? Those eyes inside it? They looked like weakpoints, if I can hit one just right—Right?"

Right? It sounded like Orland at the sonar device. Right? Right? Just a glitch, right?

"We can do nothing," said Hegewisch.

"If the angle's a little better," said Hazel Crest.

The angle of their raft changed. Who controlled it? It had a little rudder, the person at the back of the raft—it was fucking Clownmuffle.

Hegewisch suddenly remembered why she spent most of her time in St. Louis trying to get *away* from Clownmuffle.

"No. We can't. There's nothing—we can't. If we get too close—"

"We won't get too close," said Hazel Crest. "We have to try."

"We have to try," said Midlothian.

Clownmuffle said nothing. Blood ran down her face, ran from her eyes and nostrils and mouth.

If we hit it just right, said one of the girls on the far raft. Matteson, the youngest. *All we need to do is turn it away again.*

You can't, said Hegewisch. *You can't you can't you can't. Stop it, give up, lose your hope, every single ounce of it, don't you see that's the only way to salvation? Give up all hope. If you don't give up you'll DIE. It's HOPELESS!* And the hatred swelled inside her, hatred more than fear at Clownmuffle's idiotic rerouting, hatred at these stupid hopeful girls and the stupid hopeless Madoka who would let them all die unless they had nothing left to live for. Why so stupid a system, why had she not thought harder about it, she had all that power in her useless hands and she wasted it. Wasted it, wasted it, wasted it—

Bugs Bunny popped out of his burrow and said, "What's up doc?"

Ten thousand teeth and ten thousand eyeballs. Hazel Crest loosed her arrow. It flew into the mouth and nobody could even see where it landed. Matteson and Dolton and Hammond in the little boat made their final attacks: a launched javelin, a lobbed cartoon bomb with a lit fuse. Hammond, the most veteran, conjured both a translucent rainbow barrier and fired a fancy laser.

It did jack. Fucking. Dick.

Bugs Bunny bit down on the orange carrot lifeboat. The ten thousand teeth closed. Matteson, Dolton, and Hammond vanished. Kaput. The number of survivors dropped yet again. How

many now? Hegewisch kept losing count. Four in her boat, three in the other, Palos and Joliet—plus the three Soul Gems Palos scavenged. Not that those gems had any chance of coming back to life with their bodies assuredly destroyed in the whirlpool.

Nine. Let's give it nine. Let's rip out our throats and bleed to death. Let's offer ourselves as sacrifice to that useless God, Madoka Kaname.

The waves when the archon dropped back under the surface whipped laterally. Hegewisch's dinghy launched upward, hung in the air a full second, then flipped and deposited them into the water.

That fucking. Idiot. Clownmuffle. Midlothian and Hazel Crest, sure, they were dumb kids. Clownmuffle ought to have known better—than to move them closer to it—the water filled her mouth and nostrils, ice cold. It seared her it was so cold, but she felt her body rushing up. Her fucking life vest, which she had put on eons ago, buoyed her and she popped upon the surface.

A wave crashed into her face and she sputtered until a flash of orange rubber streaked the corner of her vision and she churned her arms for it. Thrashing and floundering she gripped its side, clutched while another undulation forced her head under, then forced herself to flip a leg over its side.

Clownmuffle seized her collar and pulled her the rest of the way. Hegewisch spat and wheezed, tried to speak: "—Need to," coughed again, gripped her throat, half-crawled half-oozed over the sodden sump of the lifeboat and clapped a hand on the purring motor, "Need to move—now."

Lieutenant, are you okay? Orland's voice. On the northwest boat. *We're coming.*

It's fine, it's fine. The motor's still running. You guys get out.

Yes, milady. Be careful!

Thank you.

The blood sharpened inside her eyes and she stared painfully up at Clownmuffle's impassive face. "I said go!"

"Where are the other two?"

"Other..." She glanced over her shoulder at the bobbing water. Midlothian and Hazel Crest, neither on the surface nor even dark shapes just under. They had been transformed, their armor may have dragged them deep before they had a chance to cease their magic.

Help me, one of them said.

"I'll return," said Clownmuffle. Then, hands angled ahead of her in the shape of an elegant triangle, she dove headfirst into the lake and vanished.

Hegewisch rocked upon the rocking boat in an expanse of total emptiness.

She saw no sign of the archon, no bulge or shadow in the water. The motor purred and she crawled to it and fiddled with the device that served as the rudder. "Stay. I'll return." Clownmuffle said that and for a few placid seconds the command's magic held. But the ridiculousness shot forth and she realized she needed to get the boat moving—

Abandon them?

She *knew* they weren't dead. She *knew* Clownmuffle would fish them out of the depths.

They had NO TIME. Clownmuffle was not a myth, she was flesh and blood like any other, mostly blood now, it streamed out the holes in her face. No—maybe the archon moved on. To the city. But it was a logical entity. It knew its threats. It would exterminate—WHERE WAS IT? How could the lake be so rough and so still, how could the motor purr and the waves crash and yet there not be a single sound, she had to get out get out GET OUT—

Clownmuffle broke the surface. A body under her arm, a body that remained motionless a moment upon emerging but then coughed and sputtered much like Hegewisch had as Clownmuffle lobbed it onto the dinghy. "One more," Clownmuffle said, and dove.

Hegewisch extricated her legs from under the writhing body. It was Hazel Crest, who managed to look like a mess of hair despite her hair being short. She rubbed her eyes and breathed and looked around.

"Lieutenant. Lieutenant," said Hazel Crest. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm losing my head here, lieutenant. I'm so sorry. I'm trying my best to be a soldier of the Empire. I'm trying my best, I'm so sorry."

"It's. It's fine. It's fine, I couldn't possibly care less about that."

Hazel Crest gripped her head. Her soggy hair strained between her fingers. Her eyes stared between her knees. "I can't take it anymore. I want to be a good soldier. But I can't take this anymore, everyone's dying, we're all going to die. That thing, that THING—"

"It's okay. It's okay." Where was Clownmuffle? She hadn't taken long with Hazel Crest, what happened to Midlothian? Could they even breathe? Hegewisch had heard—*heard*—a Magical Girl could use their Soul Gem's energy in lieu of oxygen, but the conversion rate was shit, and how good was Clownmuffle's gem right now? Would she push herself to the death, like Griffith had? She had that stubbornness, even if she didn't have the self-sacrifice. She would refuse to believe she could die so easily, even if she *could* die so easily.

"HEY!" a voice shouted from above. Hegewisch looked up and a foot nearly landed on her face. Palos and her broomstick hovered just above. "I dropped off the general. Quick, grab my hand, I'll take you next."

The hand came out of the mist, half-gloved, with the other half long since scorched off. A hand to safety. To zip across the lake like Joliet and reach land in half a minute.

What did Joliet say about these kinds of things? Anything good, to her, was a trick. A trap, a setup for a subsequent letdown. And as Hegewisch's hand twitched, the incipient motion of

taking the hand of Palos, she already knew the subsequent letdown, she had seen it in Joliet's face, that mark of utter shame, and Hegewisch knew she could not take the ride. It was funny, really. Hilarious. That for all her cowardice, her skittishness, her tendency to bolt at any moment—even just ten seconds ago, hadn't she had the same thought of leaving on the boat while everyone else sank beneath her?—for all that. God, it wasn't even a decision.

Hazel Crest's real name was Karen Gray. She was sixteen years old, one year older than Hegewisch, and she had joined the Chicago Empire three months prior to Hegewisch. She originated from Waukesha, Wisconsin, a satellite of Milwaukee which was itself a satellite of the Empire, so she was almost immediately conscripted. She had five siblings and a dead father and a foreclosed house so she wished for a lot of money—a common wish—and said afterward she should have wished for her dad to un-die. All of this information and more was in her personal file. And really, it didn't matter what was in her personal file, whether she were from Waukesha or wherever else, how dead her dad was and how poor her fifty brothers and sisters were, it was like everyone else, a name on a paper that Hegewisch knew and now was the face, frantic, horrified, lips clenched tight and yet somehow able to manage a whisper:

"Go, lieutenant. You're important."

And so Hegewisch seized Hazel Crest's wrist and shoved her hand into Palos's. "Take her!" Hegewisch shouted. "Don't worry about me. Take her, go, be fast!"

Hazel Crest only managed a strangled interrogative note before the broomstick shot off. Palos shouted: "I'll be back fast—I only need to take her to the other boat."

They were gone and Hegewisch's fucking mind was gone, she threw herself on the rubber of the boat, swayed up and down with the waves, shrieked into nothing. She didn't give a shit about Hazel Crest, she knew that, nice rote recital of her vital statistics, nice words clipped from a spreadsheet, all to convince yourself you were a "good person" doing the right thing when you and I both know the only reason you fucking did it was because you couldn't bear the shame of having to watch her sad doomed face shrink below you as you zoomed off to your own useless safety. It was just that, her face—nobody cared about Hazel Crest—it was her face, and had she remained under the water you would have had no qualms leaving, it was only the face of her that stopped you. Idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot.

Who even are you, Hegewisch? Laila Chatterjee? A coward or an idiot or what? You're certainly no leader. Stop trying to be Denver, you're worse at being Denver than Denver was. Commit to half of your stupid psyche and be done.

Be done.

The surface broke again. Clownmuffle's head rose enveloped in cascading water and with her was Midlothian. They both sucked in horrendous gulps of air and even though the water had washed the blood from Clownmuffle's face new blood burst to supplant the old. Hegewisch steered the raft closer and held her hand to help.

Clownmuffle seized her wrist. "It's below," she whispered, and when Hegewisch looked down she saw its ten thousand eyes aglow with a sunken gold and the pearl teeth rising out of

the endless darkness.

Ah. So Hazel Crest killed her after all.

A period of confusion followed. The last definite event Hegewisch pieced from the whirlwind was that Clownmuffle dragged Hegewisch into the water. Then water rushed up around them, harsh biting water that half-blinded her, and everything became a series of movements and blurred shapes.

She felt her body flatten against the other two—Clownmuffle and Midlothian—and an arm wrap around her back. Everything hurtled. A dizzying spinning sensation nauseated her but her face was pressed so close to the little girl Midlothian's that she fought to keep the feeling down. The water bubbled and rushed and streamed into her nostrils. She had failed to take a breath beforehand and as they span she figured she would probably drown before the thing digested her, if it even had a digestive system. Maybe the teeth would get her first, and as soon as she said that something sharp sliced her side and another sharp thing sliced her hamstring. But they were shallow slices. Then they hit something hard but squishy and about five ribs in Clownmuffle's chest snapped under Hegewisch's weight.

The water streamed off them like a river and a putrid paltry snatch of air came to her. Her body convulsed, but the arm around her and the bodies against her forced her mostly still.

She opened her eyes. They were tucked in some kind of fleshy gray alcove, a floor and two tight walls of throbbing wet flesh. She had zero sense of what it was until she glanced up and saw a massive snarl of teeth overhead. The gums. They had somehow fallen between all those rows of teeth and gotten stuck in the creature's gums.

Somehow fallen. More like Clownmuffle guided them there. Even underwater, even wounded, even with two bodies clamped to her, she managed the absurd maneuver necessary to avoid their instant obliteration.

"What... what..." said Midlothian. Clownmuffle only wheezed like something deflated.

They were a piece of food that need flossing. Flossmoor had finally lived up to her name. God just kill them already.

But God would never do that, not until they gave up hope, and apparently they all still had some. The gums writhed against them and for a moment Hegewisch thought they would clench and crush them, but they could only tighten and relax as a strangely pleasant hissing noise sounded from somewhere deeper inside the creature, almost like a whistle or a song. Dee dee-doo deeee... Dee dee-doo deeee...

What the hell? said Palos. *Are you all still alive in there?*

We're stuck in its gums, said Hegewisch.

"H, help," said Midlothian, apparently forgetting to use telepathy, or maybe she knew the best person to ask was the one whose ribs she was currently breaking.

Uhhh. Okay. So this might be difficult, said Palos. It's underwater again. I'm gonna see if there's some way to get to you.

Idiot, don't get yourself killed, said Hegewisch.

Radio silence followed. Hegewisch only had to assume Palos was getting herself killed anyway.

Although the archon's mouth remained open, and a tremendous flood of water streamed into its throat and between the endless eyeballs into its body, their little crevice of gum was too low for the liquid to sweep them away. The water itself seemed to go nowhere, into the archon, either swelling and swelling and swelling the body until it became large enough to swallow the whole world or else erasing entirely in its vacuous, black hole interior.

She wrapped her arm around the shivering Midlothian and held her head tight against her neck.

The next instant a hard and pointy body slammed against them and it was fucking Palos, who had decided to fling herself into the worst possible place to be in the whole world right alongside them. Clownmuffle gushed blood at the bottom of the pile and with four bodies there was barely any space between the ribbon-shredding teeth.

Palos landed on her back. Her legs and arms were wrapped around her broomstick. She was drenched. She probably had to navigate with her broomstick underwater, which might have actually made it easier than swimming. "Come on, I can take one of you."

Both Hegewisch and Clownmuffle's arms thrust out in unison. Together they shoved the tiny Midlothian against Palos, and Palos glanced at them—especially at Clownmuffle—half-confused in the darkness of the maw, illuminated only by the golden sheen of armor. Nonetheless there was no time for questions or protest, not that Palos probably had much in the way of the latter, given her predisposition against Clownmuffle and what could only be apathy for Hegewisch. Midlothian looked like she might mutter something, seeped in that same shame that imbued every survivor, which only made Hegewisch wonder what made death so much more appealing than this sort of escape—wasn't this the kind of thing their vain hope was for?—but then the broomstick burst off of their bodies with a heave and a pulse. Palos and Midlothian wrangled in midair, revolved around the teeth, and forced their way into the deluge of water flooding the archon's throat, knocked down by its force at first, and sagging almost into the jagged blade of three clustered teeth, but the broomstick maneuvered with magical precision and upon the second attempt the bodies cleaved into the water and as amorphous forms struggled against its tide back out of the open maw.

And that left only two now to be flossed, now coated in hot sulfurous spit, thick globs that oozed between the teeth and onto their bodies, eating away the cloth. Hegewisch, on top, had her bulky life vest to absorb some of the saliva but soon it sizzled on her flesh and she squirmed despite the muffled cries of Clownmuffle underneath. If Palos had made it to them once, she could do it again, so logically they needed only wait in this safe crevice, but...

The skin eroded off Hegewisch's hand after a viscous globule dropped onto it. Hegewisch held it up as far as she dared to observe it in the antilight and through the bleeding hole in her

palm, between the rows of teeth, she saw them: the eyeballs. Of course. Every one of them, bubbling together, clearly visible despite the floodwater, gazed at her and Clownmuffle. The teeth kneaded and the gums slithered back and forth. Clownmuffle made another pained grunt and it became clear that even the moderate motion of the archon's ashen flesh hurt her. She was falling apart, totally in tatters, and in the cesspool at the basin between the teeth the saliva collected and began to dissolve her. Little recognizable remained of her suit and a vast rash spread across her face.

Hegewisch remembered she could help, even if only a bit. She transformed—which she should have done earlier, since her armor took more time to corrode—and in the stifling space, her elbows pressed tight against her sides, swiveled as much as she could and pressed her heart-shaped staff to Clownmuffle's body. A pale pink light glowed around them as Clownmuffle's wounds slowly healed, then stopped healing and remained at an equilibrium of frayed skin as the saliva and the magic worked equally.

How long did she dare keep this up? She had to consider her own energy reserves. She had used almost nothing during the fight on the boat, but if she kept up a constant ray of regeneration it'd drain fast. At the same time, whatever pains she experienced, this fragmentary Clownmuffle fared worse. Putting Hazel Crest and later Midlothian on the Palos escape train had broken a spell, or at least dropped an extra weight on a scale, and Hegewisch started to act in a certain way mainly out of habit, or an idea that consistency held her together better than wayward pragmatism.

"How do you feel? Clownmuffle?"

Joliet is delivered. My salvation lies in Gatineau.

Gatineau again! Was that all she thought, even as she was literally digested in the mouth of the god of all wraiths?

A change occurred in the stream of water rushing over their heads. At first Hegewisch couldn't be sure, but she thought the stream weakened. Maybe her ears got used to the constant churn of liquid. But after a few seconds it became certain that it really was weakening, thinning, trickling, and above them, outside the circular mouth, the white sky appeared. The archon had hefted its head out of the water. Gravity shifted directions, and they slid downward a little along the crevice in the gums, stopping against the blunt edge of a human-sized fang.

Pop! Hegewisch heard the noise, it resounded in the cavernous maw, but her strained line of sight made it impossible to tell what originated it. She twisted around, ceasing her healing (the new orientation had caused the saliva to slosh away from them), and tried to look. She caught what created a second pop. It was one of the ten thousand eyeballs. It simply trembled a little, dislodged itself from the meaty socket, and shot into the row of fangs. A third eyeball followed, leaving another vacant black hole where it came from, but new eyes were already growing where the old ones came out. Like grownup teeth, these were baby eyes or something. How did that book in her childhood go? Baby eyes just suck everything up. But the grownup eyes discern the details.

At least two of the eyeballs had landed nearby, and by landed she meant they had been gored on the rows and rows of teeth. Thick white fluid oozed from the gray, perfectly spherical eyeballs—eyeballs that, as she looked closer, were dully translucent. Hollow. And with a shadow curled inside. The eyeballs, impaled at their bases, began to crack, upward, splitting the jelly into jagged halves, and as the crack crawled to the apex the shadowy form inside began to stir—they weren't *eyes*—

They were eggs.

The jelly split and a flood of amniotic liquid cascaded from the forms of wraiths, imperfect sluglike abominations immediately given the breath of life as they slopped onto the fangs and disemboweled themselves, nonetheless doggedly determined to slither toward Hegewisch and Clownmuffle, identical wicked grins on static-strewn faces.

"Oh crap, oh crap," said Hegewisch. More pops resounded throughout the throat, popcorn eyeball eggs.

It decided it no longer likes us here. Clownmuffle casually extended an arm under Hegewisch's armpit and fired on the larval wraiths with the handgun Hegewisch enchanted for her eons ago. The pink metal slugs ripped the faces of the animated gray ones and grief cubes rained on them. But more eyeballs kept dislodging, more kept growing in their place, and Hegewisch knew that handgun only had so much ammunition. Where was Palos?

"We can't stay," said Hegewisch.

Clownmuffle didn't bother with even a telepathic response. In an instant Hegewisch was flying, gripped by Clownmuffle's arm as they rolled between the gums and the first row of teeth and bounced from fang to fang, Clownmuffle's toes tapping against whatever bare blunt edge existed to ricochet upward with far more force than she used, and wielding both Hegewisch and the handgun with reckless abandon. Hegewisch's body lashed out and knocked a slug into the abyss of the archon's throat, while several bullets fired in time to the popping eggballs. The movements were effortless despite the improvisation, choreographed with the pleasant harmony of a professional dance, a jaunt through impossible terrain, a cruel video game ninety-nine percent spikes that someone still somehow speedran. It felt as though Clownmuffle could have escaped the archon's mouth at any moment and only withheld to catch her breath, it didn't even feel like there was any danger. Hegewisch held onto Clownmuffle as well as she could and watched the rows of teeth fall away from her below. Out of the thicket, up toward a pale white heaven—

Until Clownmuffle's ankle snapped.

Nothing prompted it. She landed with the same featherweight grace as every other acrobatic motion. Onto an angled fang, just under the needlepoint tip, on a shard of perfect flatness that ought to have posed no difficulty. They had even broken away from the oozing trail of wraith-slugs, and although the archon had finally begun to close its eternal mouth to prevent their escape, its motions were so ponderous and slow they would have had more than enough time to break free at even half pace. But Clownmuffle's ankle snapped. Snip! Like that. It folded at a ninety-degree angle. Clownmuffle and Hegewisch hung in the air a moment, tilted, and dropped toward fifty jagged teeth.

They instead landed in the open arms of a girl in azure furs. The girl manifested out of nothing, balanced precariously between the teeth, and she shifted her position to catch them and shifted more when their weight slammed against her. The teeth sliced through her legs and one drilled into her side and she grunted.

"Baaghhh!" A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth. "Saving dumbasses like you. I still say it's a waste of energy, that's what I say."

The girl in azure furs—what had her name been? Denver mentioned it—Catalina. Catalina drew back her arms and hurled them skyward like they weighed nothing. She vanished the moment they left her hands, and someone new caught them near the closing lips of the archon. It was Denver herself, whose armor split when the archon's mouth shifted and the teeth sliced past her.

"Looks as though we're on the same team now," said Denver, with zero trace of emotion or even interest. "The Lady feels quite betrayed."

"Gatineau!" Clownmuffle managed to spout before Denver lobbed her out of the archon's mouth and into the hands of two other Terminatrix projections. Then, Denver threw Hegewisch and leaped out herself.

It wasn't a projection who caught Hegewisch, but Palos. The broomstick rocketed upward, away from the thick, rounded, cracked lips and the streaked chin, while the projections worked together to bound away with Clownmuffle. "I'm glad you're safe," said Palos, inexplicably, because Hegewisch could conceive of nobody except herself who would be glad about such a thing. She was more concerned with the scenery, though—in particular the fact that the archon had stretched its tubular body far above the surface of the water and over the docks of the city Chicago.

They had reached land. They and the archon both.

"That specialist, Kyubey's dog, whatever she and her minions are—they waylaid me." Palos spoke with an easy, detached fluidity. "But I guess they're not so interested in *me* anymore, and about damn time, because they've always had worse things to bother with than someone speaking a little *justice* in this world. But I guess it took this fucking catastrophe to see it. Come on, we gotta regroup with the others and get a plan."

"A *plan*?" A plan. A plan! A plan. Unfuckingbelievable, what was this about a plan? Regroup with the others. Get a plan.

They zipped over a line of bobbing boats and onto a harbor area, where Palos skidded to a halt with her boots as brakes and nearly spilled Hegewisch onto the concrete. Gold-armored figures ran from the patio of an upscale seafood restaurant. It was a fashionable sector of town, and the boats nearby were rich people pleasure crafts. Orland, Hazel Crest, Midlothian, and the two girls who had been on Orland's boat: Calumet and Plainfield.

No sign of Joliet, who Hegewisch could only imagine had enough sense to run.

"We need to leave," said Hegewisch. The soldiers crowded around her, turned expectant faces toward her. "Pick a direction and break as fast as we can, we shouldn't even be standing here." She glanced over her shoulder. The archon loomed, a pillar of gray flesh, slowly tilting its head from a purely vertical position to one that faced the city.

And somehow. Somehow. Somehow all six huddled around her made faces at her suggestion like it was the most odious, slimeball statement possible. All six, even the rookie Midlothian. Even with their trembling bodies betraying their terror. "And abandon the city!" said Orland.

"We can't help this fucking city—"

"*Language*," said Orland.

"We can't help this *fucking* city. All we can do is die. There's no sense in that, no sense at all."

"We are the Puella Magi of the Empire of Chicago and its territorial holdings." Orland strode forth, a full head taller than Hegewisch, and with radiant red hair that made her stand out even more. "Actions of self-preservation were one thing when the battle was on the lake. Now that it's come to the populace, everything has changed."

"*You've* changed!" Hegewisch's voice became mocking. "A glitch, right? Right?"

"My family lives here," said Calumet.

Hegewisch threw up her hands. "Your family lives in goddamn Hoffman Estates, it's not even close. This city goes on forever, that thing won't even dent it. It *will* dent us."

"The Terminatrix has become our ally," said Orland. "With her assistance, we can delay the archon. Even if it proves futile, any time we buy for Centurion Cicero to arrive will save countless lives."

"You're all nuts." Hegewisch didn't even see the Terminatrix or Clownmuffle anywhere. "Nuts! You're more insane than the Empress herself. You—You're pulling martyr cards here, how can you even have a shred of hope? Why would you even want it? Why hope? Stop HOPING. Give up, realize the utter pointlessness of the situation. Flee! All of you, I order it. As your lieutenant, *I order it.*"

Orland clenched her teeth. "I'm sorry, lieutenant. This is more than our duty as soldiers of the Empire. It's our duty as Puella Magi—as Magical Girls. We must fight."

Face to dogged face nodded in agreement. How could they all be so foolishly courageous? To what end? After they fought so much and had so much luck to even make it this far? After Hazel Crest broke down on that dinghy—even her? Even Midlothian?

"The chain of command has not broken," said emotionless desperation. "I remain your superior—the refusal to follow my orders is insubordination, treason..."

"With all due respect, milady," said Orland, "that is not strictly speaking true." She pointed at something behind Hegewisch.

Hegewisch turned, while at the same time the slowly tilting bulk of the archon twisted so that its shadow even in the sunless murk of the midwinter morning shrouded them. But it wasn't the archon indicated, it was a figure in shiny lavender overalls, sleeveless but with the big dandyish gloves of a medieval duke or courtier, and flame-studded high-heeled boots to complete the merger of industriousness and flamboyance. Without the heels she had already been tall, but they added near four inches and so she towered over them, Hegewisch especially, who received the majority of her pitiless gaze, shaded as it was beneath the raised steel plate of a welder's mask.

It was Lieutenant Bolingbrook, not in her Chicago attire, but what Hegewisch only assumed was what her soul had taken on when it contracted. Behind her stretched ten or fifteen of her fellow projections. Denver among them.

Orland muttered: "Given, Junior Administrator, that your appointment to lieutenant was temporary pending the vacuum of power..."

"Ladies," said Bolingbrook, "I won't stand for restless murmuring. Look there!" Her princely glove shot upward at the turning face of the archon. "That is our enemy. None will rest until it is obliterated! For the protection of this city and against the blasphemy that behemoth exhorts against our God."

"Your *God* created it," said Hegewisch. She received a thick slap for the trouble, so forceful it knocked her between the sidestepping forms of Hazel Crest and Plainfield and onto the hard ground. It made sense now why Orland had adopted such a sudden stringent militancy upon reaching land. Bolingbrook had always been the soul of Joliet's platoon, the Imperial ideal of harsh taskmaster—she molded her subordinates well.

"Junior Administrator, you are free to leave," said Bolingbrook. "The rest of you, assume combat positions."

Weapons manifested in hands and en masse the specialist's forces and the remaining Chicago soldiers turned toward the archon. Its prehensile body bent downward and its many-fanged maw chattered far above. Hot saliva dripped down and seared the concrete and Hegewisch wondered if it would try to gobble them up, but it hung arched and merely stared with the eyes clustered in its gullet.

"Lady Bolingbrook!" said Palos. "What has become of Clown—Flossmoor? I read her signature north of our current position, and moving more northward..."

Denver answered, held tilted at a listless angle, almost as though she were bored of this situation, and her demeanor confused Hegewisch more than anything else. "We couldn't contain her. She escaped. Something about Gatineau, I'd imagine."

Palos's face resolved with trenchant hostility, lips twisted, several teeth bared. "Flossmoor—is the strongest fighter among us. I can track her position and bear down on her fast. Requesting permission to pursue."

"She'd be useful, yeah," said Denver.

Bolingbrook flashed a do-what-you-will gesture and Palos bounced off the ground, riding her broomstick sidesaddle, and shot away. Good for her, Hegewisch thought. She wondered whether Palos earnestly believed she could reclaim Clownmuffle. Probably, honestly. Denver on the other hand...

"It's doing something!" someone shouted.

All heads looked. A violent tremble appeared along the tall length of the archon, erect out of the water like a tower carved of stone, an image aided by the pictures etched into its gray flesh, curled and seemingly meaningless arabesques that only upon a closer glance conformed to a pattern, and one probably Hegewisch alone could see, for they turned out to be narrative scenes relevant to the tale of Madoka Kaname, in fact images of the endless parades of deaths she suffered during her slow ascension to godhead—crushed and eviscerated and plucked piece-from-piece by the grand witch Walpurgisnacht, ten thousand corpses of Madoka drawn in the archon's wraithflesh. But that was all the detail Hegewisch could discern before the heavy shudder rose from the base of the archon to its maw, and it uttered a surprisingly muted cough like an error on a synthesizer and vomited all its eyeballs.

They rained down, spheres each as large of any person. Hegewisch skittered and scrambled half-balanced before Orland and Calumet seized her under the arms and dragged her toward the empty seafood restaurant. Pop-pop-pop, followed by a sproingy, almost cartoon spatter of bounces as the eyes hit the ground and ricocheted back up. They crashed into wooden decks and tourism kiosks and little sailboats. All the Terminatrix goons had the luxury of vanishing, but the Chicago folk tottered. An eyeball slammed onto the bent back of Midlothian running beside them, nailed her facedown to the ground, spurting her blood in a fanning ray. Calumet kept running but Orland turned, which caused Hegewisch's body to lurch between their tightly-gripped hands until Orland let go and she slipped to the floor. Her head pounded with furious exasperation, they had spent all that time talking in the thing's very shadow and refused to even reposition themselves from under it—they had really thought they could fight it! Her chin scraped open and she swiveled, half-dragged by Calumet as her feet fought to regain control and Plainfield spawned a barrier above them that dented after the fourth or fifth egg struck it.

Under here! shouted Hazel Crest from beneath the restaurant's metal-roofed patio. Eggs beat the patio roof but only bounced off its strong slope—it was safety.

Plainfield reached it next but the rest of them had wasted too much time tripping. Orland had gotten a dazed and bloody-faced Midlothian upright, but the jar Midlothian had held with its electric cloud bottled inside had rolled away and she in a concussed stupor waved her arms at it. The balls kept falling and Plainfield's barrier shattered as one bounced inches from Hegewisch, nearly knocking her head off on the rebound. Calumet refused to let go of her and her legs refused to regain their footing and they swung in a stupid tango right in the thick of danger. Those damn Terminatrix girls, that damn Bolingbrook, nice of her to take command and spur them all to certain death when she could always return nice and safe to her "Lady" wherever said Lady happened to be protesting too much at this fine moment. And this fucking Calumet, if only she'd let go and stop trying to save her they could both make it to safety in seconds.

The stream of eggs from the archon's maw slowed, but one of the stragglers dropped straight for Orland. With a free hand, Orland whipped her extravagant diamond-studded flail, attached to the end of a long silver chain almost imperceptibly thin. It swirled expertly and sliced the falling egg to two halves, but from the broken shell spurted a wraith slug. Orland had no time to react—the slug shot fangs-first onto her face and attached.

Other fallen eggs all around them split open and the squelching progeny tumbled out. Orland released Midlothian and rammed her fist into the thing on her face until it dented and then caved, but fifty more swarmed around them. Calumet cried out, something was on her leg. Hazel Crest fired her bow as fast as she could to no effect. Midlothian stumbled toward her jar and uncorked it moments before a slug oozed onto her back.

Something lunged at Hegewisch and she didn't dodge it so much as get conveniently dragged down by the falling Calumet at the perfect time. Plainfield rushed out from under cover to try and help them and three slugs lying in wait pounced her at the same time and she fell to her knees, upper body a wriggling gray mass.

This would be an awesome time for the Terminatrix's goons to reappear, or Palos to swoop in with Clownmuffle in tow, or anything, but it didn't happen. Hegewisch groped for the knife sheathed to her ankle, drew it, and plunged it into the slug that had chewed its way to Calumet's thigh. She had to stab it six rapid times for it to die and when it did die, dispersing into cubes, it had left no leg at all, not a gnarled fleshy bone or anything, a simple absence of leg, blood gushing from a stump as Calumet screamed. Hegewisch tried to support her and turned to see Orland staggering upright, her face—her red hair had fallen in front of it—no, it wasn't her hair, she simply had no face, only a bright red circle where it ought to be, blood streaming down her front as, totally blind, she whipped her flail in an arc ahead of her and obliterated fifty clustered slugs that had been streaming her way.

Calumet screamed, and pointed—and Hegewisch saw as the last bits of Plainfield were consumed by the three slugs latched onto her. They turned toward Hazel Crest. Orland stumbled blind, so Hegewisch called out to her: "This way!"

Where's Midlothian? said Orland.

A flash of light drew Hegewisch's attention as a lightning bolt shot from the frowny face cloud that lived in Midlothian's jar and vaporized the wraith on her back. Midlothian had a massive bloody circle bitten between her shoulder blades but it somehow looked the least damage of any of them.

An arrow sailed into the last of the slugs approaching Hazel Crest, and with the massive swath Orland's attack destroyed, they had the slightest moment to act. Seizing Calumet under the arms Hegewisch dragged her toward the restaurant and shouted to Orland and Midlothian: "This way! Run this way! Hurry, don't think, *run!*"

Did I hit her? Orland said. *Did I hit Midlothian?*

"No no she's fine, she's getting up now, *hurry!*" She passed under the patio awning and dropped Calumet near Hazel Crest. At that moment Hegewisch realized the slugs had not

devoured *all* of Plainfield, part of her foot remained tilted on the ground, and she had to look away.

The stumbling pair of Orland and Midlothian had barely made progress and the slugs were closing on them. Orland kept shouting for Midlothian, Midlothian seemed too dazed to think coherently. Hegewisch started shouting at Orland to shut up but it was just a mess of shouting, Calumet shouting at her missing leg—

Orland whirled again and swung her mace. She must have heard or sensed the slugs. But the mace travelled too high—she missed. She needed to turn and run, but instead she let the flail revolve high overhead and brought it down at a more severe angle. She hit some slugs, then swung again and hit a few more, unable to intuit the correct trajectory in her blindness, and while Midlothian limped toward the restaurant Orland remained rooted to her position, despite the shouts of Hegewisch and everyone else, and Hegewisch knew Orland had decided she was not going to fumble around blind into a building when the best chance for her to do damage was in the wide open.

You all need to regroup, she said.

"Orland," said Hegewisch. "Please."

Midlothian stumbled under the patio awning, sobbing.

Get inside, you can better defend the position. Then four or five slugs lunged under the next swing of her flail, Hazel Crest shot down one, but the rest found their mark, and Hegewisch seized Calumet and turned away rather than watch.

It was a kitsch seafood place, with tasteful pirate décor, old-timey maps across the walls, schooner steering wheels mounted between the shuttered windows. The round tables had chairs turned upside-down atop them and in the center of the room stood Denver.

"You're here." Hegewisch couldn't believe it.

"I just arrived," said Denver. "The others figured it would be smarter to attack the big wraith directly rather than waste time with the offspring."

"So we were sacrifices."

"We didn't expect an attack like that."

"You didn't expect anything."

"Some of us voted not to fight that thing at all. They figured you were our target and we should fight you. But the Lady makes her decisions."

"Are you even Denver anymore?"

"I'm Sage Rhys."

Hazel Crest returned from barricading the door, but Hegewisch doubted a barricade meant much, windows lined every wall, the place was barely more defensible than the patio.

And what defenses did they have? Calumet and Midlothian had sagged where Hegewisch dropped them, they were done. Hazel Crest only fired arrows. Did Denver, Sage Rhys, or whatever the mannequin now called herself even intend to stay? Or dodge out when the danger appeared again? She wasn't the same person, Hegewisch had been deceived. Just an illusion created by the Terminatrix. Like Bolingbrook. Designed to deceive them into rushing to their deaths... Antagonists the whole time.

"It's hopeless anyway," said Denver. "That wraith is far too strong for us, we're losing members fast, the attack is a formality. Once we've failed, the Lady will spirit us away and things will resume, I think she only cares because she feels like the Incubator betrayed her."

"Those creatures are getting close," said Hazel Crest at the window. "They're on all sides."

"It's hopeless," said Calumet. "Hopeless, hopeless."

Hegewisch tilted back her head and laughed. Hopeless! That was right. That was the perfect word. That was the word she needed them to say, to keep saying. To shout it loud and clear, to whisper it in abject apathy: Hopeless. "Yes," she said, unsure whether she ought to foster their feeling or let it lie. "Hopeless. There's no chance. We'll all be devoured alive. Not even skeletized like piranhas, just gone. Maybe half a foot will remain. No hope at all."

Calumet clamped her hands over her face. Hazel Crest leaned against a table.

"I've failed you as a leader." Hegewisch turned an eye toward the placid, empty Denver. "Your other leaders failed you too, all of them, but I failed you most. Nothing remains now but for us, all, to die..."

These girls were exhausted. They had been fighting nonstop for what must be an hour now. They had not detransformed, they had used magic incessantly. Their Soul Gems must be dark... and they had just seen all their friends and comrades destroyed. It would only take a little push. Then a more peaceful end awaited them, one Hegewisch would never choose herself, but for them... for them perhaps a salvation.

"Orland is dead. Plainfield, Matteson, all of them. Never to return. Just—gone. Like that. Hopeless. Isn't that right. What happy ending can you even imagine? In your wildest dreams? How do we get out of this one? Bolingbrook betrayed you. Gave you one last lying order to sacrifice yourselves... How do we get out of this one?"

"Flossmoor returns," said Hazel Crest.

"Centurion Cicero..." said Calumet.

Denver only stared at Hegewisch. What was she doing here? Why had she even come? What expression lurked behind her cold black visor? Hegewisch had to turn from her to continue.

"It's a dream. You heard Palos—Flossmoor is fleeing. And Centurion Cicero? Joliet claimed Cicero would wait on purpose, just long enough for us all to die, because of our failure. This is our punishment for failing to protect the city."

Calumet sobbed again. She beat her fists against the insensible stump of her leg and Hegewisch knew she was gone even before a white flash consumed the tacky room and in its light a regal holiness imbued all elements. The Goddess Madoka Kaname had arrived, here in the dining hall of Shanty Pete's Seafood & Grill.

Madoka drifted beside Calumet. Calumet saw her now, reached for her, and Madoka of course had only a serene, benevolent smile to bestow upon her as she drained the darkness from Calumet's Soul Gem. Then Calumet fell back, sighed contentedly, and vanished.

"Isn't it hopeless, Hazel Crest? Karen?" said Hegewisch.

Hazel Crest said nothing. Madoka drifted toward her. A pang entered Hegewisch's stomach; after everything, after so many lucky breaks, it seemed Hazel Crest was doomed to die after all. But even this was a sort of luck, for unlike Orland or the others, whose gems shattered, Hazel Crest would have the chance to live on, much like Denver, even if in doing so she became a husk, a component of a senseless and stupid Goddess. But the windows had started to shatter. The slugs were sliding inside.

Then Hegewisch noticed the Goddess's eyes upon her. And the eyes did not look favorably.

It took Hegewisch aback, she stumbled a step and said: "It's mercy. This is a better death. Even you'd agree, right? It's *your* death after all, you're the one doing it. Right?"

The harsh gaze remained, wordless, until Madoka reached Hazel Crest and the expression softened, the ceremony repeated, and Hazel Crest vanished.

Then Madoka vanished.

She had left only Midlothian, and Hegewisch wondered why until she realized Midlothian had fainted or passed out and hadn't even heard Hegewisch's plea for hopelessness. As the slugs streamed in, crawling over one another, jamming the windows with their layered bulk, Hegewisch dragged Midlothian to the center and waited with Denver.

"So you're not going to lose hope yourself."

"No," said Hegewisch. She remembered the gaze in Madoka's eye.

"I can sense that the other projections have been wiped out," said Denver. "The Lady will recall me soon."

"Denver..."

"Sage. Please. That name never fit, if I'm honest."

"And *Sage* did?"

Denver actually laughed. The bland expression broke into a smile. "Nope. Never. I was such an idiot, so stupid... But by then there was only really one thing I wanted in my life and she had already died. So what else was I going to do? And now I'm having trouble holding on to even that. It's getting more difficult to hold things together. My parts are ebbing into everyone else..."

Over the wood, knocking down the tables, the slugs streamed. These would be the final words of Hegewisch but not Denver, so why did she bother with them?

"I—"

Are any of our own still alive around here?

That voice. Cutting in knifelike. Enough to chill her from the top of her spine to the base. Sharp, enunciated, military. The pitiless gaze of Madoka Kaname entered her mind's eye and Hegewisch herself almost felt liable to give into despair.

In the restaurant, said Denver.

"No," said Hegewisch. "Don't tell them anything. If we wait maybe—"

Two figures burst through the restaurant ceiling and landed on tabletops. Hegewisch recognized them instantly as soldiers in the platoon of Centurion Cicero, and powerful ones at that. One shredded through the slugs effortlessly with the aid of an oversized Final Fantasy-looking sword and the other provided support with a more modest ball-and-chain similar in function, if not aesthetic, to Orland's flail.

No. No. No. She made the right decision. No. What she did was *right*, with the information she *had*, she had done Calumet and Hazel Crest a *favor*, she fucking had, what else should she have done, let them fall to certain death on such a ridiculous, Hollywood movie chance, that Centurion Cicero and her platoon would arrive at *this perfect moment*—Hegewisch refused, *refused* to think for an instant—for an INSTANT—that she had made the wrong decision, no, no—no. NO.

"Junior Administrator," said the girl with the anime sword. "Centurion Joliet has already explained the situation. Centurion Cicero will spearhead the attack on the archon herself."

"Y, yes." Hegewisch felt clammy all over. She clutched the limp body of Midlothian tight.

"Who is she?" said the ball-and-chain girl, indicating Denver.

"An ally," said Hegewisch. The answer seemed to suffice, although their looks were suspicious. The ball-and-chain girl picked up Midlothian and the anime sword girl motioned for Hegewisch to follow her outside.

Hegewisch lingered a moment until Denver placed her hand on her shoulder and said: "I think, given the facts known to you at the time, you did the right thing. From a rational standpoint, you operated within an ethical framework... *I didn't always.*"

Outside, the rest of Cicero's platoon divebombed from some nearby tower in coordinated precision, cutting down thick batches of slugs before their boots even stomped the ground. Hegewisch felt little like laughing, but it was comical how pathetic they made the slugs look in only moments as they dredged lines through the horde. The ball-and-chain girl ran across a street to Cicero's lieutenant, known for her healing prowess, and handed Midlothian off to her before she and her anime sword fellow joined the line and swept with all possible efficacy toward the lake—and the archon's bulk.

While the lieutenant withdrew some syringes and administered aid to Midlothian, Hegewisch turned to Denver. "You should go, someone'll recognize you eventually and then they'll ask questions I'd rather not answer."

"Yeah." And Denver vanished.

Hegewisch strolled to Cicero's lieutenant. She and a single bodyguard had taken refuge a little further from the harbor, in an open-air eatery at the base of the first ring of skyscrapers. It was only a jog across an icy, unused street, but it took her outside the shadow of the archon.

"Lieutenant." Hegewisch managed a salute.

"Well met, Junior Administrator. Provide me the satisfaction of treating your myriad injuries, aye?"

Hegewisch sat on a flimsy plastic chair at the lieutenant's table as she wrapped up her syringe work on the still-unconscious Midlothian and began on Hegewisch. On the table, an enchanted radio spouted esoteric attack formation names and referred to locations like "Pavilion 3A" and "Harbor 19." No sign of Cicero herself.

It took a minute. Less. Cicero's platoon exterminated the slugs.

The radio buzzed sharp new orders: "All units, retreat to Outpost C. Repeat, retreat to Outpost C, do not engage the archon."

"There we go." The lieutenant withdrew her syringe—no trace of Hegewisch's injuries remained—and peered at the swaying, shuddering, shrieking worm monstrosity rising out the lake. "We were all so disappointed when we didn't get the chance at one of these buggers in Minneapolis. But 'tis said Providence bestows glory upon those it finds worthy. Fortune's wheel and whatnot, aye."

Hegewisch sagged under this affected, antiquated inflection. It seemed like Outpost C was the position they now held, because the soldiers converged on them.

"Our orders, milady?" they asked the lieutenant.

"Hold this position. 'Tis too dangerous for you to strike a beast such as that without intelligence as to its methods and techniques. Her Ladyship Centurion Cicero shall lead."

"Yes, milady," rang out a chorus, while Hegewisch sank deeper into her chair, her posture made all the sloppier by the unreal rigidity of everyone else, who stood in perfect rows amid the tables.

Only one person had the gall to question the order, and it was anime sword girl from before, Hegewisch knew all their names, she just had zero interest in scrounging them out of her memory. Anime girl said: "It would be dishonorable to allow our commander to strike before us. There could be dangers even beyond her nigh-godlike capability."

"Nay, is it not the one who strikes down such a foul and unearthly being that wins God's glory today? And should that glory not go to she among us most deserving of it? Here, she comes."

The soldiers turned halfway to the right and threw up salutes timed to the millisecond. Even the lieutenant stood and saluted, and of course Hegewisch would also have to salute one of such rank, if she didn't she'd catch hell. She lurched upright, turned, saluted.

Down the middle of the street westward, at the end of which they stood, an equestrian figure trotted. A brilliant, golden horse, composed a shifting plates of metal, devoid of any flesh yet somehow lifelike still—oh fuck, these windbags were infecting her thoughts. It was a golden horse, and on it Centurion Cicero rode, her armor similar that of the rank-and-file, only modestly more ornate, and topped with a long turquoise plume at the crest of helmet. The reason for this costume was because, of the Four Centurions—at least, before DuPage got axed and Aurora took her spot—Cicero was the only one who began her Imperial career as a lowly grunt. DuPage and Cook had been with the Empress before some of the younger girls were even alive, and Joliet was of course unabashed nepotism. Even figures like the Handmaiden and Dr. Cho had been recruited purposefully for their elevated positions, and so Cicero was a kind of symbol for the common girl, something to aspire to or whatever, so her armor was most similar to theirs.

The horse trotted like on parade, Cicero hamming up her Washingtonian glory, her gaze fixed solely on her foe, the giant worm that was currently in the process of barfing up a new batch of eyeballs. Cicero extended an arm holding a long halberd and pointed at the archon's bulging, spewing maw.

"My soldiers. Have any of you, in the darkest crevices of your thoughts, ever doubted the authority of my command?"

"No, milady," resounded an exuberant chorus.

"Today I lead you against the most abominable, blasphemous, insidious foe we have ever had the imperative to contest. The Incubator has informed us that teams of Puella Magi may fight against beings such as this and lose their lives without so much as denting its blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah, blah blah blah; blah blah blah blah blah—blah! blah blah blah. Blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah; blah blah; blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blahb; blah blah blah blah blah blah; blah; blah blah blah. Blah? Blah blah? Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah. [Calumet and Hazel Crest. She had to believe she did the correct thing. Given what she knew.] Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah blah blah—blah blah—blah blah! Blah! Blah blah blah blah? Blah. Blah blah blah blah; blah blah blah, blah blah, blah

blah blah. [Could she not go back, look at everything she did in retrospect, and say the same about all her decisions? Every tactical move she made had been to assure either survival or, in the face of utter hopelessness, a less horrid death. Was her lack of hope her undoing? Should she have hoped? Was that why the Goddess glared? Madoka Kaname was an unending wellspring of braindead goodwill, goodwill without any reason behind it. For her to do anything but smile must mean... No, Hegewisch wanted out of these thoughts. She would prefer to listen to this godawful speech instead.] Blah blah which, given the commandment passed upon us, we must fulfill. Our sisters have fallen! How many have died? Look to the sister on your left. Look to the sister on your right. Imagine *her* death, destroyed the way the hellspawn destroyed the sisters of Centurion Joliet. Let that feeling boil your blood to a screeching hiss. Embrace it! For it is that murderous instinct we must harness! Onward!"

The soldiers roared in approval, even though behind them a new clutch of eggs burst open with slugs oozing slowly toward them. The lieutenant said: "Excellent speech, milady!" and Cicero responded with a gracious: "It is Her Holy Light our Empress who bestowed upon me the power of rhetoric. Praise *her* for the speech. Praise me for *this!*"

Her metallic horse sputted steam from its nostrils and uttered a robotic whinny as Cicero's boots spurred it and it charged.

Something like ten thousand slugs slouched at her and she bore down on them whirling the halberd overhead and bringing it upon the foremost. The moment the axe blade struck the slug the entire ground quaked and a seismic boom spread far enough to knock Hegewisch back into her chair as with that single blow literally every single slug disintegrated and nothing remained on the floor of the vast concrete dock save massive fissures spread in every direction. The horse galloped onward as the archon twisted its body and bared all its fangs, and for a moment the world hung in that image: a lone horsewoman and a handful of infantry at her back face-to-face with a faceless plane of mouth and eyes. Then Cicero's horse bounded to the side, bounced upon the tip of a flagpole fluttering three hierarchal flags—United States, Illinois, Chicago—and used the bending force of the pole to launch herself over the expanse of water straight at the archon's body.

Only Hegewisch remained at the table under an umbrella, Hegewisch and the slumped form of Midlothian. She watched as the now-tiny horse landed upon the straight vertical slope of the archon's side and dashed directly up the length. The images etched into the archon's flesh, the ten thousand corpses of Madoka Kaname, sprung to life and danced between the folds, and it took Hegewisch a moment to realize that it wasn't just the dance of the archon's body that animated them, the pictures were actually coming to life, the decapitated and disemboweled images of God cackling sharp-toothed mouths when they still had them and swarming Cicero with arrows and other means. Undaunted, Cicero brought her halberd down on the archon's bulk. The flesh bent inward at once, pressed by a sphere of rushing air, and bloody cracks ran like the fissures had on the ground. It wasn't blood that sputted, but water—the dark water of the lake.

Cicero's subordinates reached the archon and aided in the fight, but it was Cicero's show. Her horse scampered higher up the archon's bulk, her halberd flashing, each strike as powerful as the last, maybe even more, like the longer she fought the grander her strength compiled, until she neared the head of the coiling form and hit hard enough to bend the entire body. An

faded, inhuman screech pealed the cold dead air. A gust tore the umbrella from Hegewisch's table and upset chairs. Midlothian's body tilted out of her seat and flopped against the ground.

The fangs began to shoot out, fired from the archon's mouth, whizzing missiles that cut in every direction. More blood—lake water—poured from the holes in its gums, its eyeballs began to crack while still in the throat. Hit and hit and hit and hit and hit! Power and power and more power still! That was Centurion Cicero, that was one of the young girls who liked to play general, and maybe unlike some others she actually had become one. No cynicism. For a brief moment when the fight began Hegewisch wondered how ridiculous it would be if, for all her bluster, Cicero wound up dying in one hit. But even then Hegewisch hadn't wanted that thought, for she wanted to see this thing finally fucking die same as anyone else, wanted to pour her anger at herself onto the true cause of her misery, on this damn thing—and everyone who conspired to create it—that fucking bunny.

"Kill it," she whispered to Cicero.

Cicero and her horse leapt into the mouth of the archon. The flash of gold disappeared into its throat.

Then one momentous BOOM—and the throat bulged outward. The cracks previously split could no longer hold. The body burst. The head of the archon flew off its stalk, one final EEEEEEEEEEE rent the air—

Then all of it, falling head and falling body, burst into black dots and lake water.

The dots rained upon the harbor and the lakeside. Grief cubes. Literal tons of them.

And that was that. The whole fight. Ten seconds, maybe? Not a single casualty. If you forgot about all the casualties that came before. Cicero and her horse plunged toward the lake and her soldiers even had the presence of mind to catch her with magic and guide her back to land.

Hegewisch to Cicero. What a trajectory.

She picked up a chair and sat in a daze through the measured celebrations of Cicero's platoon, the merits heaped upon its leader, joyous but not wild, these were disciplined women of war after all. And after a few seconds everyone quieted at the exact same instant and Cicero said, her voice authoritative enough to carry:

"Collect the cubes—keep an eye out for anyone who might intend to steal them. Contact Addison and ask her the status of *her* mission. And interrogate the Junior Administrator whether there are any more survivors in need of assistance."

Those were her orders and they were obeyed. Someone ran up to Hegewisch and Hegewisch cut her off to say: "No others. Everyone else is dead." But after she said it she remembered Palos and Clownmuffle. Well, Clownmuffle was probably not coming back. It would be Hegewisch's final favor to keep quiet and let everyone else think she died. Palos might muck that up, but then again... Maybe Palos wouldn't return either.

She was considering how ambiguously she should refer to Clownmuffle in the invariable deluge of reports they'd make her write when a new commotion arose. Addison, Addison, they kept saying. Addison was a veteran member of Cicero's platoon. What was her power? She had a sniper rifle (not as impressive as the younger Seattle's) and she could... read minds. With limitations, of course, or else the whole Empire would have gone to hell already.

Addison was approaching from the north end of the dock. She was accompanied by three other gold-armored girls, none of whom had been at the fight with the archon, which meant Cicero had actually looked at that giant monster in the water and said, "Yeah, no big deal, you four go fuck off somewhere else." Minus the profanity and plus some eloquence. But as Addison and her squad drew closer, it became clear they dragged something behind them.

A limp, black shape.

A cache of adrenaline surged up Hegewisch's esophagus. It propelled her forward, first at a jog, then a run, bounding over the fissures, skittering across the grief cubes, weaving between the gleaners. "What is that," she said. Even as she drew closer, it could only be described as a "black shape," it lacked distinguishable features or even much of a form, its edges shifting as the four girls tugged its indeterminate corners, lugging it toward an untransformed Cicero conversing with her lieutenant.

"What is that." Hegewisch skidded in front of them.

"An enemy of the Empire. We caught her attempting to flee into the city."

The shape stirred and one of the girls kicked it. It was like—bat wings. A creature composed only of bat wings, the wings without the bat. It looked like nothing, it looked like spilt paint.

Cicero dismissed her lieutenant and surveyed the harbor area. Despite the end of the conflict she did not ease her demeanor. She seemed somehow more anxious now than during her speech, and her eyes darted from place to place. She did not face Addison, but said: "Report."

"Milady! The Terminatrix has been captured. There are three more active trails, two of which we assume belong to the Seattle twins. We will investigate the remaining trails, but we believed it best to secure this dangerous threat beforehand."

The Terminatrix. This pair of ragged wings. The other three trails had to be Clownmuffle, Palos, and who else? The younger Seattle sister, probably. The smartest people were those who left early.

There was a Denver in those ragged wings, somewhere. Why had she wasted her time in the restaurant? Had she not known the danger? Her character had been so blasé, her words distant and noncommittal. Had she known something like this would happen? Maybe... hoped for it?

She had said: "My parts are ebbing into everyone else." What was her life like inside the Terminatrix? Was it similar to the afterlife Hegewisch hoped to avoid? A senseless coagulation of souls?

"Hm," said Cicero. "And you don't know which of the three trails are the twins of Seattle?"

"Two of the trails head north. The other west. Our assumption is that the two together are the twins."

No, they were Clownmuffle and Palos. Hegewisch opened her mouth to mention her reasonable certainty that one of the twins had died, but closed it.

"Travel north," said Cicero, "but take no more than two hours. We shall not linger in Chicago. Our directive remains and we must conquer the cities that Her Munificence the Empress assigned to us."

If Clownmuffle and Palos didn't want to be found, they wouldn't be. Not with Palos's power and Clownmuffle's Clownmuffle. Not in two hours. Meanwhile, that third trail could steal away—a chance for the lone Seattle sister to escape.

But it was the Terminatrix that consumed most of her thoughts. Why didn't Denver or the other projections appear to defend her? Had they lost their energy? The wings twisted but failed to act or seem anything human. Addison bowed and handed a glassy bauble to Cicero. A Soul Gem.

Cicero balanced it on her upturned palm, but her eye continued to survey the area. "All the trails lead away from here?"

"Yes, milady."

"Then it appears nobody will swipe our reward from under us this time," she said with a measured relief. "Very well, pursue the northward trails. I can rule this creature."

Addison and pals scampered off. They left the bat wings draped on the ground to fidget and twitch. Only Cicero and Hegewisch remained, everyone else occupied in some task, and Cicero failed to acknowledge Hegewisch's presence. She kept the Terminatrix's Soul Gem balanced on her palm. She bounced it up and down. Hegewisch watched her fingers. Waited for them to brace and then clench. To crush the gem without warning. But Cicero only bounced it, bounce bounce bounce.

"Centurion Cicero." Half a body emerged from the wings. Purplish, bloody, lacking an arm. It was Lieutenant Bolingbrook, her welding visor shattered, bruises staining her face.

"Centurion Cicero, milady. Please... You have to help me..."

The voice finally drew Cicero's attention. She regarded the fragmentary Bolingbrook with no change in expression. "I see. The report I received claimed you were dead. But rather, the Terminatrix used her ability upon you."

"Please... milady. I remain a loyal soldier of the Empire..." She spoke with great difficulty. She rasped and paused abruptly. She barely resembled the Bolingbrook who had appeared at the perfect wrong moment to order her soldiers to their deaths.

"This Terminatrix is a dog of the Incubator and an enemy of our Empire. Whether it were your intention or not, Bolingbrook, you have committed the most overt, obvious form of treason and your punishment shall be rightly death."

"Death?" said Hegewisch. "Milady—Isn't our directive to turn conquered enemies to our side?"

A flicker of surprise lighted Cicero's features as she realized Hegewisch existed. She composed herself and said: "Under most circumstances, yes. But an enemy who blindly follows the bidding of the Incubator cannot be reformed. She should be viewed less as a Puella Magi and more as an object he wields to his designs, and for that she must be broken before she can be utilized against us again." A readily prepared speech, and Cicero paused as she considered the Soul Gem in her hand. Something darkened and she added: "This was an order from the Empress herself."

"Milady, I beseech... you..." Bolingbrook's body started to have trouble holding itself together. It crumpled in the trailing reverberation of its final word, the head dissolved like sand, and what remained sank into the darkness.

Other forms appeared in the wings, bubbling faces, eroded and injured, sometimes no more than an eyeball—eyeballs and teeth. The eyeballs stared and the teeth chattered, a chorus of appeals, groveling, begging, one of the more fully-formed figures, the azure furred girl, Catalina, even hissing threats.

"You are enemies of the Empire. Begone, leave, your words mean nothing to me. Stop. Silence. Shut up."

If Cicero wanted to shut them up all she had to do was clench her fist. But she didn't do that. Hegewisch watched for Denver but saw her nowhere amid the devolving forms. Finally, among the layered voices, a complete shape appeared, with limbs and waist and neck all covered in black, and even a pitch black face, with red eyes. Not like anything human, more like a demon. Red lips parted to reveal vampiric fangs. It was the Terminatrix herself, even she tried to plead for clemency: but her voice was lost, halting, quieter than the decayed faces around her, and Hegewisch wondered how long she had had all these voices in her head, how much it must have driven her mad.

It stirred something in Cicero too because she became angry, dropped the gem to the floor, and transformed. She pointed the butt of her halberd at it and was about to slam when Hegewisch said:

"Wait!"

Cicero, unbelievably, waited. The voices went silent at once. Cicero's head craned toward Hegewisch and an expression of pure hatred burned into her. "I have informed you, Junior Administrator, that the punishment for this conspirator and her ilk is death. I will not brook further interruption."

"No, no. Milady. Not that. Not that. It's just. If you kill her *that* way, it could have... ah, deleterious consequences. There are mechanisms in this world unknown to most. But I have a

particular knowledge... I can't go into detail, it's classified..."

"You lack eloquence," said Cicero.

"Give the gem to me. I can... dispose of it. Properly."

Without deliberation, Cicero swept her bootsole and the gem skittered to Hegewisch's foot.

She stooped, picked it up, her fingers fumbling to pry it from the perfectly straight concrete beneath, cracking her nail. She held it in her palm like how Cicero had and inspected it. Violently dark, almost to the point of blackness. It must take immense energy to sustain so many Magical Girls, and they had almost all taken tremendous damage during the fight. It would not need much.

"Help us," said a tiny voice in the wings. "Save us."

"Hegewisch." They knew her name. "Hegewisch, Hegewisch—Laila. Laila." They knew her name.

"Go on, *dispose* of it," said Cicero.

Hegewisch retrieved her own Soul Gem and placed it on her other palm. Her gem had darkened considerably, but not to the degree of irrevocable danger. She sighed, breathed in, held the breath. She could not look at the faces in the wings, all of which stared at her, bubbling bubbling bubbling. Eyeballs and teeth. *This* time. This time even that stupid Goddess must agree... From every logical and ethical angle, this was the right decision...

You're making the right decision, said a voice in her head. Denver's voice. Sage Rhys's voice. The sound startled her and she looked at the wings again but Denver was not there, had never surfaced, had remained below in the murk. *Go on, it's okay. I don't want to watch this to the end anymore. Not when it creates monsters like that—and I started it all. I can't bear it. I just want to sleep.*

Denver...

Cicero shot an impatient glare. Hegewisch nodded and, with little aplomb, transferred the despair from her own Soul Gem into the Soul Gem of the Terminatrix. A tiny black stream to connect their souls, and in the proximity the voices of the projections filled her head much like how they must have filled the Terminatrix herself, bouncing, always bouncing, drowning all thought, none distinct from the rest, neither the actual person who had owned this gem first nor even the voice of Denver discernable. Simply. Noise.

From one hive of souls to another. The Goddess Madoka Kaname appeared.

This time, this time you can't blame me. This is the right thing. There would be no way to convince Cicero to ignore her orders. And fighting Cicero would be absurd... This is the only way. The only way. The only way.

Hegewisch began to sob.

Madoka said, "It's okay. It's okay." And it was okay.

END SECOND ARC

Last Catapult Standing

THIRD ARC: OTTAWA

Bloated yellow-green bodies filled a room of alcoholic odor. Monitors mounted to the walls displayed professional men speaking silently above scrolling lines of text. Sounds droned in meaningless mixture, pulsating like an auditory hallucination, something experienced solely inside one's mind, violent and jutting and undeniable. Outside, snow began to stick on lantern-lighted sidewalks, but here a physical humidity made all motions sluggish and little space allowed for movement anyway. The room writhed, it seethed, it seemed itself alive, breathing—despite its air's turgidity.

A prim hostess in a ruffled blouse extended her torso over the edge of a podium. Her wide-smiled mouth opened but no sound came out.

Murrie cupped a hand around her ear. "WHAAAT?"

"SEATING FOR HOW MANY, MISS?"

"MY FRIEND'S ALREADY HERE."

The hostess closed her mouth—the smile remained—and a gracious gesture permitted Murrie entry into the restaurant. The yellow-green bodies waded between the rows of tables and chairs at high counters, every person crammed inside seemed to know everyone else, they carried platters of burgers and fries with them to carouse with some other party. Children crawled between feet, running toy cars across the wood. Glasses clinked, hands clapped, every so often a shriek of laughter cut the auditory slurry. Waitresses swayed, stacks of grimy grilled meats en route to insatiable diners. A man's back bounced against Murrie, drilled her into a table that lurched an inch sideways but knocked over none of the frothing steins atop it. The man put his hands on her shoulders, shook her, mouthed apologies. He wore a wedge of cheese for a hat and a jersey numbered 12. After a few friendly jostles and a thumbs up he turned back to his friends at the bar counter.

That female creature of infinity names slouched over a two-person booth in the corner. Had to wonder if she took the two-person in anticipation of Murrie or whether it were the only thing open, parties tending to be far larger than pairs here. Murrie plopped into the open seat, facing her, only a mug of cocoa and a bowl of chili nachos between them.

You even have money? said Murrie.

Clownmuffle nodded.

How? said Murrie. *The Empire confiscated mine.*

The old man who drove me here. She withdrew a chip from the nachos bowl, swirled it in some repulsive cheese sauce, and took a tentative, exploratory nibble.

Murrie considered the chips. Her stomach had developed a consistent ache for the past six hours. *Did you beg or did you pickpocket?*

Upon receiving no answer, Murrie decided she had enough reasonable doubt to eat. She scooped a handful of chips, forwent the cheese dip (the nachos already had cheese on them anyway), and shoved them into her mouth.

If you had just. Stolen. If you had just stolen it wouldn't have mattered, do you know that? You could have stolen as easily as you killed. So why did you have to kill? If you stole, I could have said, you had no options. You were a product of the system. You and I know what it's like. I got two cousins, they push weed, coke, all that shit. Got another cousin arrested for mugging, he had a fake gun. It's crime, it's bad, but what else is gonna fucking happen? You put all the fucking Mexicans in the same shitty neighborhood where there's no jobs and the schools suck so nobody learns shit to bring themselves up in the world, where the cops look at you like you're a criminal before you're even a criminal—I mean, if they treat you like one anyway, might as well fucking be one? Kyubey's shit's the same shit. Take away someone's opportunity, treat them like dirt, they become dirt. We're a race of fucking dirt, that's what it means to be brown, and the only difference with Kyubey is he makes the white girls dirt too.

The entire time, Clownmuffle had given up trying to bite. She instead sucked off all the chili and cheese sauce and then crushed in her hand the soggy chip that remained and funneled the crumbs into her mouth. Murrie glanced down from her weird telepathic speech, in which she felt her face make all kinds of expressions even if her lips didn't move, and noticed a tooth half-bundled in Clownmuffle's napkin.

And the thing is. The fucking thing is, they want criminals. Both of them. Kyubey, the United States government, same shit. They want us to become inhuman, they want us to become culturally, morally, ethically sick. Because sick people don't fight back. They're fighting their own damn body too much to fight back. And then it becomes a cycle. Because we're now so culturally, morally, ethically sick, they can justify putting in more police, putting more of us in jail, violating what liberties we have left—Ronald fucking Reagan goes up and announces a war on drugs, a war on the citizens of his own fucking country—

A waitress dropped a menu on the table in front of her. "SORRY FOR THE WAIT! YOU CAN SEE WE'RE A LITTLE BUSY TONIGHT! CAN I GET YOU STARTED WITH A DRINK? AND YOU MA'AM, WOULD YOU LIKE MORE COCOA?"

Clownmuffle and Murrie cranked heads toward her notch by notch. Their eyes shifted to one another and back to the waitress.

"WATER," said Murrie.

Clownmuffle signaled that her current cocoa dose was enough.

"AW, NOW WHY DO YOU TWO LOOK SO DOWN!" said the waitress. "DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE FROM CHICAGO NOW ARE YOU?"

Murrie was taken aback enough to automatically say, "HOW'D YOU KNOW?"

The waitress stifled a laugh loud enough to be heard over the restaurant's ruckus. She pointed to a monitor suspended over Clownmuffle's head. The same suited men were talking, but Murrie could now read the scrolling text under them:

LAST-MINUTE TD PROPELS PACKERS TO 33-28 VICTORY AT CHICAGO, THIRD
CONSECUTIVE NFC NORTH CHAMPIONSHIP

"DON'T WORRY THOUGH," said the waitress, "WE'LL EVEN SERVE BEARS FANS IN GREEN BAY. I'LL BE RIGHT BACK WITH YOUR WATER, YOU JUST TAKE A LOOK AT THAT MENU THERE."

She zigzagged away and left Murrie wondering at the fact that there had been a football (it was football, right?) game in Chicago today, the same day a Biblical monster crawled out of Lake Michigan and nearly laid waste to the whole city. It interrupted whatever train of thought Murrie had taken in her rant to Clownmuffle, she forgot exactly where she was going with Ronald Reagan—she had intended to liken Kyubey's specialists to the militarized police in the 1980s—now it seemed out of grasp. A lot of people died in Chicago this morning. Murrie had tried to save everyone she could—She didn't want to linger on it. She at least knew, via her radar, that the reinforcements had come—But if she had stayed with the rest of them instead of chasing after Clownmuffle...

It. It had to be murder. You went too far, Clownmuffle. You crossed a line and you didn't care. The situation pushed you in a dark direction, but you delved even deeper than you needed. You became the bogeyman Kyubey wanted, someone to scare the other dirtgirls, and thanks to MagNet you could spread your fear national.

Clownmuffle brought her cocoa mug from her lower lip. *I'm popular on MagNet.*

I've got bad news for you, sunshine. There's a post on the General board every fucking day, some newbie bitching about you, and the same flame war sparks every time, and all your skeletons get dragged out to broad daylight. Everyone knows you're a thug. The only people who support you are thugs too or they want to be. You're their rock star. Their rap artist. The posterchild for their lifestyle or the lifestyle they wish was theirs because we're a culturally, morally, ethically sick race of dirtgirls and the only thing we want is power, security, longevity—cute fucking clothes—everything you have at whatever cost you paid to get it.

She sighed, leaned back into her cushioned seat. And Denver had stood up like a beacon, the anti-Clownmuffle, the dirtgirl who despite her disadvantages built an honest Empire and promoted peace, wellbeing, and trust among the clods she endeavored to raise up. Her and her cadre—Seattle, Minneapolis, Calgary, a few others. But they were all just thugs too, in the end, weren't they? Kyubey propped them up like he propped Clownmuffle, two sides of the same coin, and Murrie and Hemet failed to see it. If they had, would they have attempted a different strategy? Would everything have turned out different?

And the Empire. Chicago. Were they the same? Because for a moment Murrie let herself believe, even if she disagreed with a few—or most—of their particulars, that they were doing the necessary thing. Sifting the dirt for a enough clay to heat into bricks and build a house. The kind of organization they needed, the kind of culture and morals and ethics they needed. It had been so easy to slip into their pattern of life, even though Murrie had always

considered herself a temporary member capable of skipping town whenever she needed. So easy to speak like them, act like them, be one of them. But at the apex, that unseen Empress, was she just another prop too?

The waitress returned. Murrie glanced at the menu for the first time and picked the first thing she noticed, a cheddar bacon cheeseburger with cheese-covered steak fries. When the waitress asked if there would be anything else with the order, Murrie thought a moment, considered the fact that Clownmuffle was paying, and ordered a chocolate milkshake despite the cold.

That's why we came for you first, said Murrie after the waitress left. We couldn't kill Kyubey. But if we broke down his symbol, created a stir, we imagined others would hear our message and join... Then we would have taken on his secret police, the specialists...

(Steph's plan. *She* trusted Denver; she believed MagNet was an alternative to Clownmuffle even if she criticized its efficacy. And while Murrie, dirt poor brown girl herself, had known back then on a hazy, half-intuitive level much of what she now spoke about social injustice, it had been Steph, far more educated, from a rich Vietnamese family, who connected the dots for her, edified her.)

Throughout the conversation Clownmuffle's head lolled and occasional drops of blood plinked from the hood of the oversized jacket she must have filched somewhere during their flight from Chicago and later Milwaukee. Whether the information registered with her, whether she even bothered to listen, Murrie could not tell. But she felt she needed to speak. Nobody had ever wanted to listen, and anyone else she tried to tell—Denver, Hegewisch during their initial interview, Lieutenant Bolingbrook—quickly told her to shut up. Clownmuffle at least let her speak and something uncorked inside her, the words welled out, she had envisioned this meeting going more to the point, with fewer digressions. She tried to remember the main terms she wanted to cover, remembered the next, lifted her head to transmit it, only for Clownmuffle to cut her off:

You're passionate. Keep that quality. It's appealing.

That's all you have to say. You already said that. The night you killed Steph.

Clownmuffle thought. *Yes—No.*

No what?

Maybe—Maybe we are dirt. Her head lowered. She reached into her hoodie and drew out a small piece of paper, which she unfolded diligently. It read one word: *Gatineau. What did you say? Culturally, ethically, morally... bankrupt.* Then she shook her head. *No. That's wrong. No. Magical Girls are the opposite of that. They fight for justice—they fight with the beautiful manifestation of their souls, magic. The way they look, the weapons they use, everything is meaningful, even a little bend on a witch hat. I can't accept—*

Superficial. Superficial, it's superficial, it's a bullshit line Kyubey fed you, fed us all, just like all those rich white CEOs fed us as five-year-olds with their pretty princess TV shows. It's drivel. Hope and the power of friendship, those are just pretty words to say. It's the snare they

snatch us with. Sell us a dream—it's the shine on the chrome wheels, the diamonds on the neck. Sell us a dream, spring a mousetrap.

For a long time Clownmuffle only stared at the bunched napkin with the tooth in it and a few stray spots of blood. Her body shook, almost imperceptibly, but the energy transferred into the table and Murrie's elbows propped against it. The whole building shook, the yellow-green bodies rocked its foundation. On the monitor above Clownmuffle a yellow-green body in suspended animation released an oblong brown ball across a field. Crude arrows were drawn on the screen, denoting its arc and trajectory. A timer read 0:39. Literally last minute.

Obviously Murrie had met Clownmuffle in a moment of weakness. She knew it was only her situation that even made her listen. But she *was* listening. Maybe the situation was necessary. Someone like Clownmuffle, someone so secure in her life and philosophy, so oblivious to the suffering of others because she herself never suffered—maybe it took that. A fracture, to reform better. Steph said that too, she said that when people lift weights, they actually create thousands of microscopic tears in the muscles that heal stronger. That's how people gain strength. She applied the same concept to society: There need to be tears in order for the culture to grow.

The waitress placed a burger in front of Murrie. It not only had melted cheddar inside, but half-melted strips atop the bun. It was fucking delicious.

I, said Clownmuffle finally, coming out of her deep gaze, I never wanted to kill her. I hate thinking about it. I wish I never did it.

Yeah. Murrie's goodwill plummeted. Yeah, "sorry" doesn't mean shit on that count. She's dead, and whatever else I forgive you for, I can't ever fucking forgive you that. And it's so, it's so fucking typical, isn't it? That she would be the only thing you regret. Because that's the only moral code Kyubey programmed into us, not to kill one another, because ultimately that hurts his bottom line. So that's all that matters to you, and I can't even get mad about it because sometimes it feels like the only thing that matters to me, too. But I try to tell myself it's different, Steph was my friend, the connection was personal... Yet here I am, willing to forgive you for the other things you did, even though you murdered however many regular people. Fuck. I don't know.

I stopped knowing too, said Clownmuffle.

Murrie took rapid bites from her burger. It was so large she had to slice it in half with a steak knife provided upon her plate. She slurped her milkshake, sweet and chocolatey, even though it iced her throbbing veins, or maybe because it did. If she allowed herself too much space to breathe she remembered all she had seen in the morning. All the people who died, despite all she did to help them. As she chased Clownmuffle she felt their lights go out. Pop, pop... pop. Should she have stayed? Would it have mattered? She could ferry a willing soul away from danger but for those determined to rush to their martyrdom she possessed far less power.

If she had stayed a few minutes longer she would have been there when the twenty girls who had to be Cicero's platoon blipped onto her radar. Maybe that information would have altered their suicidal course—maybe only calcified it. The real girls had been deceived. "Lieutenant Bolingbrook" had arrived—it was the specialist puppeteering her—Murrie attempted to

mutter something to that effect but the others shut her down. Only Hegewisch had an idea— But the slow flight from Chicago to Green Bay had already allowed her plenty time to roll this scene back and forth along her bitter-tasting tongue.

The matter now was Clownmuffle. Obviously Murrie had to consider that nothing had truly changed in their situation, Clownmuffle still had to die for both the original reason and the added spur of Hemet's avenging. All logical points drew to this conclusion, one could not consider Clownmuffle reformed, certainly not after this lukewarm conversation. Leprous, sure, but not reformed. And besides it had never been about reformation, Clownmuffle was a symbol, and since Kyubey himself would never die she could only strike his symbols.

That's what Steph said: *We must adopt a new mindset*. Thinking in terms of people, that would never work. They had to sift the dirt for the clay and the rocks and other things that could be fashioned into tools—like what the Empire was doing, but with a constant memory of the dirt we came from. *We must sift the dirt to fight for the dirt*. Clownmuffle had forfeited her right to humanity. And these were lofty aims Murrie strove for. A pacifist fucking kumbaya was bunk, only shitty movies sold that lie, and it was a lie Kyubey loved to see sold because he knew no peaceful organization would accomplish jack dick.

The cancer had to be excised. She shoved the last bite of her burger into her mouth. Lofty goals, lofty thoughts. It was this core philosophy the Empire did right, and Murrie could learn from them, improve on the design. Eschew the bullcrap theocracy, the belief in some fake God of hope, scrap the ridiculous list of regressive prohibitions, abandon the useless corporal punishment, and you had an idea somewhere in there that would do great things.

Lofty thoughts. Lofty actions. Clownmuffle had to die. Her leprosy would not defend her. Pathos would not stir Murrie's heart.

She stood. *I—*

The timing indicated Clownmuffle had specifically waited the entire elongated pause for Murrie to do or say anything so she could cut her off, but the liquid casualness with which she spoke threw it into doubt. She said: *Let's hunt some wraiths*.

Murrie blinked.

Magical Girls need energy, no? Town's big enough for a snack. Help a few villagers in the process.

Fucking wraiths. After this morning, Murrie wanted fuck to do with them, but the question surprised her and she had to consider the pragmatic side of things.

Fine. Fine, she said.

Clownmuffle pointed to her milkshake. *Intend to finish?*

Green Bay, another lakeside town, cold as hell—the rung traitors went to—had at least a lot of lights and a lot of drunken merriment from downtown storefronts. The town heroes won their football game against their bitter rival, Chicago. All was well in the world. Murrie worried there wouldn't be enough despair for more than a few wraiths to fester, and her radar indicated the presence of a local girl within a mile.

She and Clownmuffle prowled the icy sidewalks looking like carjacking hoodrats, which they would have looked like even in San Bernardino, but the oversized hoodie that swaddled Clownmuffle's porous body and the aggressively rumpled white suit clinging to Murrie's kinda more whole one gave the distinct impression of a slick-talking con artist and her enforcer friend. White fucking city and they looked like this, she expected any moment policemen to roll up and ask what you girls up to. And policemen were everywhere, mostly picking up drunks, so Murrie's head twitched over each shoulder at the shrill sudden auditory uptick of every siren that passed, close or distant. The worst part of being a Magical Girl was that none of the usual remedies for anxiety worked anymore. Sure, she and Steph had turned Steph's room into a hotbox on more than one occasion, rolling around her endless array of massive plush dolls and chattering about Che Guevara or whatever real-world analogues they could connect to their situation, but it had always been a social thing, an excuse to get the air foggy and a placebo effect flowing. The drugs didn't actually *work*. Thanks magical regeneration, but sometimes she *wanted* to stuff her body full of poison. Dull her mental faculties. Not have to worry so damn much. She craved something, even if only tobacco, anything to wear down an edge. These damn cops. Kyubey's cops, Obama's cops, all the same cops.

Clownmuffle didn't give a shit, as one might expect. She didn't even turn her head to look down alleys for wraiths. Her eyes just flitted. Minimal movements. Hands in the center pouch-pocket of her hoodie. But the motions she did make operated in subtle ways to convey grace rather than mechanism. Everything down to the way she took a step forward seemed practiced.

It would be smart to observe her.

"So—"

You asked, said Clownmuffle, why I killed instead of stole. No?

"Do you actually have an excuse?"

Clownmuffle veered down an alley she had barely seemed to consider and which looked totally unpromising in Murrie's eyes. Dumpsters and garbage bags and cardboard hovels homeless people probably lived in. No visible indicators of miasma. Wasting time. The local girl might show herself any time, and what then? A confrontation? Someone who lived in such a frostbitten wasteland with such scant supply must be fiercely territorial—all part of that uncooperative, misanthropic mentality Kyubey instilled in them to keep them from getting stronger.

I asked you something once. You never answered. Why the little bend?

"What?"

Why. The little bend.

Sometimes she made it all too easy to want to throttle her. Murrie restrained herself this time. The rigid lines the Empire imposed cooled her fervor, she could look back on how haphazardly she flung herself at Clownmuffle with a wince and a grimace. If not her person, one must respect her prowess. These words all sounded nice.

"I've got no fucking clue what you're saying. Is it code or what?"

Clownmuffle's head swayed as she sidewinded between the rows of garbage deeper toward the alley. Until they reached the other side, emerged on the next street, met the same revelers and policemen, and proceeded along another sidewalk. *Your hat*, said Clownmuffle. *Witch hat. It's bent.*

Murrie clapped cold hands to cheeks and groaned, bending back like a dying marathon runner as she clomped at Clownmuffle's heels. "Fashion? Fashion's still your fixation? Fuck. Fuck!"

The way we look is a manifestation of our soul. You said it was superficial, I say anything but. Every detail is carefully arranged, and if the appearance is superficial, that's only a mark against the person. The outer reflects the inner. This is why the deviations are so important. I've seen so many witches but only you had the bend in her hat.

"It's just—what witches have in their hats!" said Murrie. "Go look up your average, dime-a-dozen Halloween witch and see if her hat has a bend or not—It's just the classic thing."

Incorrect. Some may have a crooked tip, but yours bends back downward, so the tip points at the top of your head. That's unique. It means something.

"It means nothing, I didn't even get a chance to think about it. It's literally nothing."

You have plenty of passion, Murrieta-Temecula. Clownmuffle led them into another alley. They navigated a maze of gentrified downtown city streets, every lamppost adorned with the image of a yellow-green football man. Into an alley, out. *I like your passion. There's an incalculable quality inside you. I just want—*Her hands extended from the sleeves of her hoodie to hook upward like she gripped something invisible—*you to harness it. To apply yourself.*

"I do that. I've chased you halfway across this damn country."

In that diner you told me all your ideas, you could say so much about them, but I still have such a poor idea of YOU. Who are you? What do you enjoy? What fills you with happiness? You'll never be a strong Magical Girl unless you harness the qualities within yourself.

Quasi-spiritual bullshit. Another Hemet quote: Religion is the opium of the masses. Clownmuffle had doped herself long ago, if not with a traditional God, then a materialistic one. Clothes, clothes, clothes, it was always clothes with her, the very essence of materialism,

its very symbol, the utilitarian turned decadent—and note how now in her decay she wore whatever ugly jacket would keep her soft and warm.

You said Hemet, she was personal. Clownmuffle opened a shit-smelling dumpster and peered inside. *I liked that. You loved her, didn't you?*

Murrie went rigid. "I—she was—we were *friends*."

Yes. That's love.

Alright, the platonic kind. Fine. Murrie cast a glance behind her at the entrance to the alley and the pedestrians flitting past. If a policeman shined his light on them, what excuse could they possibly give...?

So what made you friends? What sparked that connection? Or did she come spouting revolution and that was the only thing that tied you? I don't think either of you were that hollow. Something must have made you laugh...

The dumpster lid slammed down and Murrie swirled two thousand miles west and one thousand south to an comically old-fashioned vinyl warbling an airy, atmospheric indie rock band, them both in socks because it was an Asian household and Murrie's socks with holes on the heels, so she tucked her feet under her body while Hemet tapped a phone on her bed above. "That sociopath," Hemet said, "doesn't even *try* to train the rookies. I refuse to communicate with her any way except telepathically, it's *literally* more physical exertion than it's worth otherwise."

"God she's a bitch," said Murrie.

"Tell me about it." Hemet rolled over and slid an arm to indicate the record player. "Like this? Arcade Fire. Quebecois band."

Murrie hadn't even liked the music. But the place, the time, the aura, the feeling in that room so stuffed with stuffed animals and doily pink stuff, the *security*, and after for three pants-shitting nights she'd tottered behind Clownmuffle just like she did now as Clownmuffle "trained" her, i.e. charged into the biggest gaggle of pixel-faced abominations possible while shouting, "You take the ones on the left!" On the third night, encircled by grinning monsters, weird ones that shapeshifted to look like her friends at school, coming to kill her like a nightmare she once had, and Clownmuffle nowhere to be seen, a thunderous clap rang out and an iron maiden slammed down and Hemet showed up bitching at Clownmuffle: *I said, let ME handle the rookies from now on!* Then a half-turn and a hand extended and a smile and a: "Hey now, don't worry. We'll do this right."

Clownmuffle came to a rusted door on the side of a boarded-up building. The door didn't look functional, it looked like something painted onto the brick. A homeless man slept beside it. Clownmuffle held a hand for quiet, held her ear to the door, and listened. Murrie checked behind for cops.

Wraiths in here, said Clownmuffle.

"How can you tell?"

No answer. Clownmuffle twisted the doorknob and somehow the door opened, without even much exertion, which was probably good given her deterioration. Or was it bad she didn't fall apart? Murrie would need Clownmuffle as weak as possible to beat her.

The open doorway was a black hole. Clownmuffle stepped inside and vanished. Murrie hesitated. Hemet's advice resounded in her inner ear: If you enter a building, be sure you know the exits. Looking inside, it didn't even seem like their entrance was an exit, and if she hadn't seen Clownmuffle go in, she would have sworn the black portal was as painted on as the door itself.

The local Magical Girl had moved even closer. If she was perceptive of miasma, maybe she was en route to them. Her current movements were unclear. Bad, bad. This dark vortex unnerved Murrie. Her nerves were already shot to hell after what she saw in the morning. Why did she agree to this? She wanted no wraiths tonight. She wanted to sit in a restaurant and talk politics while she ate a cheddar burger on her archenemy's dime. A wretched, nauseating fear suddenly shredded into her and it was amazing to feel this emotion, this fear, coming off of what, a dark doorway? In a shitty town like this there would be no monstrous wraiths, no horrifying enemy, only the same tepid shamblers even she could destroy eyeless, and on the same day she flew into the maw of a prehistoric demigod from the deep, after everything she had already done and all the places she had already followed Clownmuffle this dark door, in this unassuming building, in this pointless village, it had to be—her nerves were shot, it had to be—and she had been so relaxed. She had recovered so well from what she saw. But this dark doorway, this dark doorway!

She leaned against the jamb. She was afraid of herself as much as whatever was inside, a contorted horrible pain in a column from the base of her spine into her head, a terror that made her incapable of even functioning, and where? Where did it come from? She was not, she refused to be, a coward, and she had hurled herself into great danger to fight for what she believed—She had a premonition that if this kept up she might die. Law of the Cycles. That was it—energy. Simple energy, she had expended a lot in the morning battle, she had flown the entire day as she tracked Clownmuffle northward, her reserves must be depleted, and it was having... a negative effect... on her brain.

Wait. Wait, she said to Clownmuffle.

She only needed a moment to collect herself and regain control. She only needed to rein herself in with rationality. This was the least fearsome thing she'd faced in a long time. She transformed. Her armor was still golden and unfitting and it had a little luminescence to shine through the door. It became marginally less dark and faint outlines of objects appeared. In her hand she held her wand. *Expelliarmus!* she thought to herself. Or better yet, for this situation, *Lumos!* Of course when Clownmuffle asked about the witch outfit Murrie could never tell her the true reason, it would be too embarrassing if she revealed the first thing she thought when she heard the term "Magical Girl" was Hermione Granger and her notion of the hat came from the beaten old one that sorted everyone into their houses. That was a kid's story for a kid, but when she thought *Lumos* the tip of her wand lit up like it did in those stories.

She entered.

Her wand's light cast a pale blue glaze on the interior. Even with the light she couldn't tell the room's size or purpose, and the objects inside seemed random and randomly arranged. There appeared to be no floor even though she ostensibly stood on one. She made out an antique-looking table with weirdly-curved legs, an overturned chair, a doll face down on the ground. A glimmer against an oval mirror. She bumped against a chair and turned spooked and became even more spooked when somebody was sitting in the chair—a massive woman, wedged between the arms, rolling waves of fat, whose head lolled apathetically as she jammed—a needle—into her upper wrist.

The doll on the ground rolled over. It wasn't a doll, it was a baby.

Murrie pressed her hand to her lips and staggered against the antique table. She knelt down and scooped up the baby, cradling it in her arms. It didn't look hurt or anything, but in the dim light of her wand it was hard to tell. Its shiny coal-black eyes moved in time to the sway of her light. It neither giggled nor cried, it only stared.

"Baby," she said. "Baby."

"Heeyyy," said the fat woman. "Puut herrr downn."

"You're not, this is not, a safe place—"

Miasma, said Clownmuffle from somewhere. The humans are insensible. I perceive fifteen wraiths. You take the ones on the left.

Fifteen. In this room? The fat woman dangled her arms out. The baby—Murrie couldn't comprehend this wriggle of flesh. Fifteen wraiths in this room—she needed to get the baby out.

When she turned toward the door someone already stood in it. A completely black silhouette with a body vaguely feminine, Murrie at first thought it one of the wraiths. It wasn't, it spoke:

"Oh my fucking hell, you just HAVE to come in and take a dump all over everything. I worked hard on this and it's still too early, you're ruining the whole setup."

It was the local Magical Girl. If Murrie had been paying attention she would have recognized her approach. The girl held some kind of gun weapon aimed at Murrie's face.

"You—you worked hard? Worked hard on...?"

"I manufactured a little misery, you know: WORK? Only fucking barbarians are hunter-gatherers, didn't you learn your damn evo-*lu*-tionary history?"

Hunter-gatherers. Versus agrarian society... The realization dawned. Murrie reeled back. "You're a—"

The gun sparked and fired. Murrie's left eardrum burst and hot liquid spurted down the side of her face as she clutched the baby close to her chest, shielding it. But the Magical Girl had

not fired on her, as Murrie turned she saw in the dwindling flare the disintegrating form of a wraith by her shoulder.

"Ratty. Ass. Bitches. If you kept the place sealed another hour there'd be at least twenty, maybe even thirty in here. Chrrrrrrrist!" The gun snapped and a spent cartridge flipped out.

Murrie stepped toward her. "You—the baby—"

"The baby's the linchpin. Look, maybe when you skanks get your own place to live one day you'll have learned something and—Oh what the FUCK."

Murrie had moved close enough for her wand to illuminate the girl, and the girl's eyes were wide and horrified, which contrasted completely her words. Except after a second Murrie realized that what scared the girl wasn't the wraiths, but Murrie herself. The girl stumbled back out the door, pointing and sputtering: "You—you're from fucking CHICAGO? Oh fuck oh fuck. Oh FUCK!"

The girl turned and plunged into the jamb of the door, ricocheted off, regained her footing, and sprinted down the alley. Murrie glanced down, it was her golden breastplate and helmet. When the girl saw the uniform—

Done.

Clownmuffle manifested from the darkness piecemeal, with some pieces never seeming to manifest at all, leaving her a fragment of a form. She held in one hand a knife, the steak knife from the restaurant, which she tucked down the neck of her sweater. Only once she stopped directly beside Murrie did Murrie realize that not all parts of Clownmuffle had manifested because not all parts of Clownmuffle were still part of Clownmuffle. She was missing an arm. The full sleeve of her baggy hoodie remained, but it flopped limp at her side and the sleeve began to stain with blood near the shoulder.

She stooped and with her remaining hand scooped up the grief cubes from the wraith the Green Bay girl killed. *Decent cubes. We split the haul, we survive another day. Gatineau draws ever closer.*

"Gatineau." The name on the paper.

That's where my salvation lies. Gatineau, and my soul is healed.

These sentences were extremely difficult for Murrie to parse. What they seemed to mean wasn't what Murrie eventually realized they meant. Her soul—Clownmuffle meant her gem. She had found someone to fix her Soul Gem.

Gatineau. That didn't seem like a place. This bundle didn't seem like a baby. But Murrie said anyway: "This baby."

Babies are best left to their mothers, said Clownmuffle, walking out the door.

Although the miasma dissipated, the room remained dark, and the woman remained hallucinatory. The baby, however, began to giggle, it clutched at Murrie's throat with its baby

hands.

A culturally, morally, ethically sick race. Green Bay and San Bernardino, two thousand miles couldn't alter the zeitgeist.

And Gatineau. After how bad Clownmuffle had deteriorated, Murrie knew it could only be that hope that sustained her. The hope that she could "heal her soul." But she wouldn't heal shit. She would be the same old Clownmuffle, nothing would change, and healthy she would return to the same decrepit human she had been before. Babies are best left with their mothers. Murrie held the baby close and stroked its head. She wasn't sure what you were supposed to do with babies. This one had soiled itself, but it didn't seem too upset about it, which was not Murrie's general experience with babies, who were upset about everything.

"Ooweheheh," said the baby.

Maybe Clownmuffle's soul *could* be healed. Maybe, in this state, she could be shown reason. Would that absolve her? Murrie didn't know. She would have to see how she felt, and for the past week she felt haunted by Steph's ghost.

She didn't want to waffle on this point. She wanted to make up her mind and decide, like she always did first thing, and it must be those shot nerves making her flinch here. So she stared at this baby and before Clownmuffle had even turned down the alley on the other side of the door she decided:

She would wait until just before Clownmuffle arrived at Gatineau. Wherever it was. This made sense for both sides of the coin. It gave Murrie more time to talk to her, probe her, attempt an ideological shift—and it also gave more time for Clownmuffle's soul and body to deteriorate. Clownmuffle could still kick Murrie's ass, so she would need every advantage possible if, in the end, she needed to fight.

Good plan. Reasonable, rational. Sensible. It made lots of sense.

Now about this baby.

In the Land of Coke and Hookers

She did the responsible thing, she alerted the authorities. A hot tip whispered in the ear of a Green Bay post-victory policeman, a hand pointed to the dark room, and when they went to investigate she dipped.

It was a white baby in a small city in the frostbitten American heartland, the police would do the right thing. In this instance they would, she told herself that, and in the end she circled back to the spot on her broom a few minutes later and under cover of night sky observed the police do the right thing.

Clownmuffle slept in a pile of boxes with the other homeless and did so as though she did it every night, like she knew these homeless men and women as longstanding acquaintances. The upside was that the homeless people didn't even remark on her lack of an arm or the plastic tubing tourniquet. Murrie, capable of flight, had better options, and snuck into a closed-for-holidays university via a third-story balcony and slept in a lecture hall's surprisingly comfortable seats.

Before that, though, she used the generous cut of the proceeds from the wraith fight on her Soul Gem. As typical, Kyubey appeared to receive the spent cubes.

I'm curious what your intentions are in following Miss Vizcarra. Do you still plan to kill her?

"Does it even matter anymore," bundled in her jacket and wondering whether Kyubey already knew her intentions. But since she only figured out her own intentions less than an hour ago, and only inside her own head, she figured he didn't.

It shouldn't have mattered by this point. I was almost one hundred percent certain that Miss Vizcarra would be dead by now. But something fascinating—and theoretically impossible—happened, and because of this Miss Vizcarra survived. Her survival has created innumerable problems that threaten catastrophe for the entire planet, but she is also one of the few people capable of correcting these problems. Thus, her survival is now essential to prevent this planet's demise.

Exhausted mentally and physically, already half-asleep, these words only seemed ridiculous. "Go to sleep, Kyubey. You're broken..."

Please! Isabel Leyva, aren't you concerned about this world? Everyone you know, your friends, your family could be in danger! Won't you listen to me?

"Fuck off. Lying rat."

He may have babbled something more, but it was trivial to zone him out. Sleep arrived...

The next day the journey continued. Clownmuffle rose bright and early, and if not for a janitor whapping Murrie with a broom, she might have missed her, not that she would have had much difficulty catching up.

The Empire had confiscated, along with all pocket change, her phone and the road map she used to reach St. Louis. They had given her instead a junk phone that only sent and received calls, zero functionality, apps, any of that, and she jettisoned it prior to Milwaukee in the reasonable paranoia that they could triangulate its position hacker-style. Physical maps weren't easy to come across, especially detailed ones, and she rifled through the Plan Your Adventure tourism kiosk fifteen minutes before she found Gatineau.

Oh fuck. Canada? She had no passport, she imagined it wasn't difficult to sneak into Canada, but man. It looked far. From Green Bay, they would have to cross the entirety of Michigan's upper peninsula and then wander through an even longer distance of formless Canadian terrain. If there were towns on their route, they weren't big enough for the map.

Clownmuffle, minus an arm, gave up hitchhiking and instead waited by the side of the road until an RV camper rattled past, at which point she pirouetted onto the chrome ladder that ran up its back. Unless the driver had been watching his or her side mirrors at that exact moment, they'd be ignorant of their stowaway. Other drivers were not. Sparse as traffic was, it actually took a long time for anyone to alert the RV camper about their passenger. But just past the Michigan state line, an elderly couple in a wood-paneled station wagon finally rode alongside the camper, signaled until its driver rolled down the window, and shouted the situation. The RV driver, an elderly man himself, pulled over, but when he parked on the elbow Clownmuffle bounded into the woods.

Rinse, repeat. Clownmuffle waited for the next camper, latched onto the back, got as far as she could before someone noticed. And as the world around them became less and less populated, as the cattle pastures gave way to forest and the snow began to fall a kind of treacherous silence settled, Murrie and Clownmuffle and the elderly couple in the camper du jour and none else. Trees, snow, the lake. Tiny towns passed moments after arrival. A chill swept through Murrie, not the kind from the cold, but an agoraphobia she sometimes got when so high, her world a murky sky and her path on the very edge of that world. It was the end of America and it felt like it had to be the end of the continent, yet it somehow was not, there was another, even larger country north and it spanned thousands of miles further until finally even the trees gave way to permafrost, tundra, and ice. She was in fact closer to the

center of this continent now than she ever had been—land in all directions, no edges anywhere.

In this maximum center, civilization stripped away. The road became half-lost in the powdery puff intensifying, the camper plowed through the drifts undaunted, Clownmuffle clung to her perch. Although Murrie kept close, at times she lost sight and navigated via radar alone. Then, abruptly, the camper made a noise, a squeal, loud enough to hear over the silence, an emergency brake. She closed in until its lights appeared in a swirl, swerving out of and into oblivion. Its weighted top half tilted. Two wheels left the ground. As it peeled away an array of confetti neon lights sprinkled the white foreground. Three police cars and an ambulance encircled an overturned semitrailer. Paramedics carted the mangled body of a man in flannel upon a stretcher.

Clownmuffle's trailer narrowly managed to avoid a similar fate. It righted itself, its wheels hit the ground, its squealing stopped as it stopped. Policemen in parkas waved lighted batons as they ran to it. Murrie had to pivot to the side of the road and due to the way the camper was turned when it finally came to rest, Clownmuffle had to also.

Guided by semaphore, the camper proceeded past the blockade without them. Clownmuffle acted as though this were only a minor inconvenience and ducked into the frenzied woods on the side of the road.

This time, however, there were no more campers. Clownmuffle walked, hunched forward, hood tightened. Murrie trailed directly behind her.

By now the chill had begun to break past Murrie's ability to dampen it. Her face became insensible. It felt like the liquid on her eyeballs had frozen and she stared through glass marbles. Not that she had much to see, for beyond Clownmuffle's denuded body was only white, white, white.

Then in the span of two seconds night fell. And it became black, black, black. That thing she had believed cold to be? Not even close. How was this only the center? How could a thousand miles stretch north and even colder become?

She collapsed. She had been riding her broom, which could function mostly fine even despite the gale, but she had sagged so far along its length to draw her face as close to Clownmuffle's back as possible, searching for a little warmth, finding her body a bloodless zombie instead, that when she drew back she lost her balance and dropped into the snow. The snow somehow felt warmer than outside the snow, so she stayed inside it. No, she needed to get up. Clownmuffle would be going on ahead of her... Her arms started to lift.

Murrie fell first and Clownmuffle continued. Would Clownmuffle ever stop? She was less a person and more a conceptual entity. A law of the universe, and constant force to propel its various processes. Inconceivable she could ever die. Even if Gatineau turned out a dud, she

would continue... to the next place, the next possible salvation, chasing even a hint of a clue, or no clue at all, she could create her own clue in her own illogical head. She failed to die because never, even for a second, did she believe she could.

But Murrie refused to think she could die either, she was young, healthy, this was only cold, Magical Girls were hardier than that. She propped her hands in the powder and pushed, strained, out of the warm ice and into the ice wind, and she got halfway before a force propelled her and, frustration upon frustration, that force turned out to be Clownmuffle.

Bit chilly, said Clownmuffle, which was absurd because her zombie face was half-black with frostbite.

Here's shelter.

A hovel, some mound with a hole in it, pinched between rows of thin leafless trees that faded into white oblivion. As they approached, the mound turned out to be a tractor or trailer or some kind of large vehicle, turned on its side, and nearly three-quarters buried either beneath the snow or the soil. The hole was a broken window and it led down a deep tunnel of sideways seats and vehicular knobs and levers. It felt unreal, like Clownmuffle conjured it—like the world conspired to provide what she needed. Jesus, Murrie had to slap herself out of this one, she was sinking into a pit of antilogic, falling into the Clownmuffle mythos, the unspeakable immortality that had pervaded MagNet, the constant whispers of her deeds and powers, her charms and enchantments, she knew—KNEW—the mythos was crap, had seen her falling apart, and knew that Steph had dealt her a blow beyond her capacity for bullshit nondeath.

Together they sank to the base of the vehicle. It lacked a backseat so the two of them huddled against the driver's side door, leaned against the thankfully-not-leather cushion. Murrie pressed herself against Clownmuffle and pressed her legs against her chest and shivered. Clownmuffle had become black all over, at least the visible parts. They had no gloves, one layer of jacket apiece, ordinary shoes with ordinary socks. Quintessential California girls a long way beyond the range at which their species could survive. It did not even make Murrie ashamed to be essentially cuddling with her most hated person, it was simply something that had to be done, although Murrie suspected Clownmuffle provided no physical warmth whatsoever.

Even in this godsend shelter, Murrie wondered whether they might both die this night, frozen past their soul's capacity to restore them. After a moment's frigid stillness, however, she got an idea that her wand ought to have some kind of fire-conjuration spell. They had fire spells in—well, she should be able to. She had never tried before, but it made sense, right?

"What can we burn," she said.

Map.

She did not want to burn her map. She would if she had nothing else. She searched their confines and under a seat found a nasty, bunched-up tarp. Better as a blanket? No, fire. She stuffed the tarp into the corner near their feet. She had detransformed after Clownmuffle dragged her down here and it took immense effort even to summon her wand. She tapped its tip to the tarp. What was the fire spell incantation? The past few months she had slipped out of the fandom, she didn't remember all the endless details she once did. Probably similar to something that was a synonym for fire. Blaze? Flame? Burn? Pyro? None sounded right.

Why hesitate? said Clownmuffle.

"I forgot the word."

It's your word. Use your word.

"No. Magic word. Something—" It was too hard to speak. *Something to do with fire.*

It's YOUR word. Use your OWN word.

Unsure but in desperation to escape this cold, she said, "Infernus," which sounded like it might actually be the word. Her wand lit up and a tiny fireball burgeoned at the tip and dropped onto the tarp. She thought the tarp might be too muddy to burn, but her magic did the trick. In moments a little blaze began, over which she could still exert some control to keep from spilling onto their shelter.

Murrie and Clownmuffle flung themselves onto the flame, their three collective hands pressed nearly inside of it, kept back only by the char that developed along their skin rather than any pain, in fact Murrie only felt relief sweep over her, warmth concentrated in this tiny spot that soon spread into the narrow limits of the trailer, shielded from the wind.

Both girls breathed relief, and in the moment it vanished Murrie noticed a brief glint of the until then unseen fear in Clownmuffle's jaundiced eyes.

And so they survived the night.

Happy New Year's Eve, said Clownmuffle, her arm slung over Murrie's waist. Murrie had slid during the night into Clownmuffle's stomach. Blood, fresh, bloomed on the side of Clownmuffle's hoodie and some got on Murrie's cheek. She tried to wipe it off before she realized what it was and by the time she did enough of it had seeped between the ridges of her fingerprints to stay there. When she licked her fingers to get it off she remembered an old book she read about a young boy lost in the cold. He had sucked on his hand to keep his fingers warm. That was a good idea, she would remember it.

But the storm had ended. Now the world was white without wind and progress became smoother. In the early morning, when the sun just started to rise and its location in the sky

was still a mystery besides the slight gradations away from darkness, snowplows trundled down the roads and Clownmuffle latched onto one. The cycle restarted.

Hours later they crossed into Canada.

It became trees, endless trees. No longer any lakeside to break the monotony. Occasional smaller lakes, lots of rivers and creeks, all snowy but with reasonable safety of travel.

Amazing. I wonder what types of Magical Girls live here.

You knew plenty of them on MagNet. Calgary, Halifax, Winnipeg. Although the rumor was that Winnipeg had died about a week ago. Nobody knew for sure, but that was usually what it meant when a regular went suddenly absent. At the time it made Murrie sad, because Winnipeg was her age and a vocal sort of moralist (one of Clownmuffle's harshest critics, using thesaurus words like "effete" and "jejune").

But now it felt too distant to mean anything.

You go here to escape, said Clownmuffle. I fantasized about living north once. Alaska in particular. So separate, so capable of being one's own person. Geography invokes a mindset. One is constantly sculpted by their surroundings. The struggle to be oneself in a world that is by definition everything but yourself is a constant of our experience...

Hnngh. The words—The word. Murrie woke upon her broomstick, she had sailed on autopilot.

We, we too, shape our surroundings. Murrie remembered Steph. But distant, hazy, everything became a haze. *Not as individuals, but a... collective. We can't just, can't just flee society. We have a, civic responsibility, to better it... so the lives of all after us are, likewise bettered.*

Too dry. Use your own words.

God! She was impossible. Murrie gripped the tip of her broomstick and sucked in exasperation. *We're all using words invented four hundred years ago, you can't just—people need to be educated! And that's what education is, giving people the right words, the best words, passing down, I don't know, knowledge, intelligence, every kid standing on the shoulders of all the kids before them, do you get it? If you just jump off and do whatever you want, you're useless—worse! You threaten the very structure everyone else has created, there's nobody who can stand on your shoulders, you flail about wildly, knocking shit over, I mean why bother with the metaphors, you go out and kill people, lots of them, just to make money! It doesn't matter to you because you've kicked yourself off the world, decided the fundamental laws of the universe don't apply... to you...* She paused, remembering Kyubey's words in Green Bay, then regained her train of thought. *It's such a fucking tragedy. You're so damn good at everything. Everyone says you're the strongest Magical Girl they've ever seen,*

or at least top tier. Despite everything awful about you, tons of people still look up to you, fear you, you have SWAY over them, you could speak to them and they might actually listen—shit! You could make a difference. But instead you just say dumb shit, always, crap about cute costumes, if you hadn't already nuked your intellectual reputation you'd only rot everyone's brains with your materialism.

Better, said Clownmuffle lying flat in the bed of a pickup. You work in this vein. You remind me of Laila.

Who?

You know her. Please continue.

Murrie continued, but upon her third repetition of her point that Kyubey kept Magical Girls perpetually benighted and used thugs like Clownmuffle as his cultural weapons of mass destruction, she realized these discussions were only taking her in circles. Clownmuffle was too willfully dense, and in the absence of yesterday's travails impenetrable. Murrie wished she had fought to stay awake the night before, maybe she could have made a connection in that vehicle, she remembered Clownmuffle's arm around her as they slept, a sense that Clownmuffle could be a real human.

But it was in fact Clownmuffle's vaunted raw ability that tainted her; she had divorced herself from the human because she had no need of it, she prized independence because she could afford it, society leeches off her more than she leeches off it. In an animalistic world, where Magical Girls had no ambitions grander than "survive," this simple cost-benefit analysis would be intuitive even to a total clod. And while six years of boundless strength had deformed her person almost beyond recognition as a human being, this sudden revocation of that strength had allowed what few fragments of a real girl to seep through, a real girl whose name was not Clownmuffle. Kyubey called her "Miss Vizcarra," and Murrie wished she knew her real first name, so she could use it instead of the dumb name she invented for herself.

For some reason, Murrie wanted to reach her, and grew increasingly dismayed at her inability. It felt like something had to happen, something had to change. The flatbed pickup proved perfect transportation, no other commuters could see Clownmuffle and so far it had kept a steady path on the only path, toward Ottawa. It seemed impossible that Clownmuffle wouldn't make it to Gatineau and it seemed impossible that Murrie could defeat her even in this ramshackle state. Somehow, it was *Murrie* losing hope, she began to tug at her hair in frustration, she beat her fists against her neck. Her Soul Gem darkened. Kyubey's words, remembered as if out of a dream, came back to her: Clownmuffle was suddenly important. A great calamity would happen if Clownmuffle died. Fate transpired to her benefit. She could never lose.

If she reached Gatineau and learned nothing, nothing at all, what would have been the point? Why had Steph died? Why had so many suffered? Why had *she* suffered? Why, even, had Clownmuffle suffered? Was this just it? That cynical precept the veteran girls on MagNet said to scare the rookies? "Magical Girls live to suffer." Was that their whole purpose?

She cried. Her tears ran like ice water. Somehow, Clownmuffle knew: *Don't worry. We'll be in Gatineau soon.*

It was so typical Murrie could only cough out a bitter laugh, zipping along treetops at the side of the road, obscured from view but apparently not Clownmuffle's uncanny sixth sense.

She could not take it. This flying, everything. Darkness fell again, the waning hours of the last day of 2013. She nosedived along the bark of a tree and her face slapped against the branches and she slammed into the snow. She rolled out roving and swinging her broom by the stick dislodging clumps of snow that dropped on her as she stomped and made noises. Some distant part of her knew this was dangerous. The rest didn't care. She wanted them back, she hated how they all died young and pointlessly, Steph and the girls in Chicago and Winnipeg and the countless others. And Clownmuffle survived because she gave up her humanity, it wasn't some tangential thing, the lifestyle demanded it. Even this point was just a circle. Hadn't she shouted something similar to Clownmuffle the night she and Steph ambushed her in the orange grove? The circles were what were killing her. The fact that she could think and think and speak and speak and know everything and nothing mattered, nothing mattered, NOTHING MATTERED.

USELESS. Clownmuffle has simply adapted to survive, like how creatures long ago adapted the sense of hunger to tell themselves when to eat. It was elementary, natural. A fact of life, an "immutable law of the universe," as Kyubey might say. And had Murrie thought she could change anything? Change a law of the universe? Like how legislators change a law in Congress. Revolution couldn't change it. Blood and rhetoric, NOTHING MATTERED.

NOTHING MATTERED.

NOTHING MATTERED.

NOTHING WOULD EVER CHANGE.

HUMAN HISTORY AND ORDINARY HUMANS HAD COME SO FAR

BUT NOTHING HAD EVER CHANGED.

Clownmuffle's shoes appeared before Murrie's eyes. Murrie was staring downward, she was on her knees. She looked up and Clownmuffle looked down on her.

Not good. Magical Girls must maintain a joyful disposition. With her zombified, fragmentary body, Clownmuffle looked anything but joyful.

"You win. YOU WIN, YOU BITCH. You'll reach Gatineau and because Kyubey needs you he'll make sure you get fixed and then you'll do what he needs and afterward go back to what you always do. I can't stop you. I can't. I can't fight you, I can't convince you, I can't do anything. I fucking can't."

No, said Clownmuffle, not a commanding no, but a sad one. *I like you. I like how you keep coming no matter how many times you fail. You're my best friend.*

Best friend. Number one. The most important person in Clownmuffle's life, or second most, distantly behind Clownmuffle herself. Everything she fucking said was a cruel joke, a cruel joke Clownmuffle didn't seem to be in on.

It's between you and Laila, at least, said Clownmuffle, really sticking the knife deep. Actually. Actually... No, I can't say Joliet is my friend yet. I still need to earn that...

"God just shut the FUCK up."

It's important to cultivate friendship wherever one goes, whoever one meets.

It was like a video game. A final boss with ten layers of defenses you had to blast through just to get the tiniest chance at a strike that actually did damage, and once you landed the hit, the boss restored all ten layers and you had to do it all again. A four-faced statue and when you shot one face to fragments it turned to the next face. Clownmuffle only grew stronger the closer she came to Gatineau. Stronger? No—denser, more immune.

Their little space was tranquil. Every minute or so the drawn purr of a motor sounded in the distance, grew to crescendo, then cascaded the other direction. Out of the nebulous white ground and nebulous white air four bent trunks twisted splintery branches like cracks in an otherwise pure oblivion. They were two forms, Miss Vizcarra and Miss Leyva, bloodied blobs, one kneeling and one upright, each dissolving fleck by fleck. Murrie dug her fingers into the snow and mushed what she captured against her face.

Don't worry, said Clownmuffle, once I'm restored I'll restore you too.

"What," said Murrie.

Your costume. I'll make sure you get your witch hat back.

That was, it was a non sequitur right? It did not logically proceed what came before in any capacity? Yes?

As soon as I'm better, I'll fight the Handmaiden. I'll restore everyone to their original, personal forms. I'll be fighting for you, too.

The Handmaiden. Wow. Not even the Empire itself, if she wanted to take down the Empire at least it would be, like, an ideological struggle. Taking a stand for what one believed in, and there were certainly ideological problems in the Empire, a quality process if a shoddy ideal. But the clothes. It was just the fucking. Clothes. That was it. The clothes. The clothes. The clothes.

She flung back not her head but more like, the entire upper portion of her spine, a violent contortion to match those along her facial muscles, the snow running down her face as she laughed, she laughed, she fucking laughed her head off, pop it fell and rolled around on the snow still laughing, fuck, this was how she died, it was so funny that this would be it, killed by the dumbest thing she had ever heard anyone say, and with such a serious demeanor—I'LL BE FIGHTING FOR YOU, TOO—like oh my fucking god, the self-delusion at that point had to be willful. Had to.

Her spine bent until the back of her head touched the snow. She laughed. She expected the Cycles to take her any moment, forced her laugh to continue, struggled to expel every laugh left in her ribcage.

No Cycles came.

Something in her chest unknotted. She laughed, looser, with a liquid ease. The migraine in her spinal column snapped and sugary euphoria spread along her nerves. The same shot nerves of the night before, now coated with a soft balm to heal. Failure—she failed. She could never defeat Clownmuffle, physically, mentally. But unlike her first thought, she felt no despair in this failure. Was this fight hopeless? Yes. But that was just it: this fight. And in this moment of clarity she realized how much *this fight* had consumed her. And she thought: Why did it have to? Why did her hope have to be rooted in Clownmuffle alone?

At which point she began to cry. As easily and softly as her laughter. No physical jolts struck her body, the bitter liquid pooled and streamed like a natural bubbling, a damp puddle growing out a soggy patch of dirt. Hemet—Steph—she had to say sorry. To the ghost haunting her. She had to say sorry, because she would not avenge her, and she would not fulfill their original goal of defeating Kyubey's symbol. That was the pang that remained. The personal component of this vendetta. And so, for the first time, Murrie truly grieved for her dead friend.

Clownmuffle remained beside her until she had her fill and the tears no longer welled.

I can tell you've overcome something fierce. That's the mark of a strong Magical Girl. So many of us flake away at the first sign of adversity. I once had to grapple with something deep and dark. It's not a matter of overcoming a single event, though. It's finding a lifestyle you can live with.

Murrie wrenched herself upright at an angle, so her body slanted, supported only by her knees in uneven snow, and with shaky balance managed to prop herself on one foot so she appeared to be kneeling. Clownmuffle once had to grapple with something deep and dark. Murrie didn't believe it, but Clownmuffle continued:

You asked, why did I kill. I didn't answer because it was hard to answer, but I kept thinking about the question. The weaker I've gotten, the more my thoughts have turned toward those times when I first became a Magical Girl. When I was like you.

From the angle Murrie looked, she saw just under the lip of Clownmuffle's hood. One of her eyes was sealed shut and a geometric rectangle of blood ran down it as though she had no cheekbone. The blood dripped into the snow.

I could have done anything for the money. You're right. And at first I tried. But the things I tried... would have destroyed me.

She started to tremble. Her other eye stared blankly forward, blankly backward in time.

It was at the last moment. What had to have been the last moment for me. If I had continued for even another day, it would have killed me. The thing I was doing back then, if I did it for

another day, it would have killed me. So I. I killed someone else—He would have killed me otherwise. He would have killed me one way or another. The things he was doing to me—

"I know," said Murrie, which she corrected quickly: "I guessed that. Steph and I figured it was something like that. You did it to survive. That doesn't change what you did. It doesn't change that you kept doing it." But it was okay. It was not Murrie's problem anymore. This confession, this justification, whatever it was, it didn't matter.

And Clownmuffle didn't continue. She let it lie like that. She stood, Murrie knelt. Wind caused the dead branches to quiver.

I had to build a life, a lifestyle, a mindset out of rocks I was given, said Clownmuffle. Nothing was ever a conscious decision. She placed her flaked black hand, missing two fingers, on Murrie's head. Pieces of Clownmuffle came off and Murrie felt them in her hair. Part of the thing I created for myself involved ignoring what made me create it in the first place. There are things you've made me remember. Things I should never have forgotten.

Clownmuffle dropped. Onto one knee. She stared level with Murrie, her eye to Murrie's eyes. Her breaths were explosive puffs of white to shroud herself before her face faded back fragmentary and bloody. In the dead stillness of this dead woodland, the street silent now for about a minute, Murrie thought she could hear a heartbeat—hers or Clownmuffle's.

I want. I want to be, an ideal Magical Girl. Someone who does good, a hero. But at the same time, I want to be alive. I don't want to die. I've always needed to balance these things, do you understand? I don't want to excuse myself. A Magical Girl shouldn't make excuses. What I'm saying is, what I'm saying is, thank you. Thank you. I want to look at where I've been and realize where I've failed and become stronger. I had to go to a dark place to do it. I had to revisit things I refused to remember before. I've thought, in the past two days, for sure, I would die. I had to keep remembering Gatineau—at some point even Gatineau wasn't enough. It stopped being a place and just a word and my hope in it shook. I needed you, Murrieta-Temecula. What you said hurt, but it also helped, does that make sense? I'm trying to talk to you but, the words aren't really, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

She flung her arm around Murrie. Her body hiccupped with a sob. Murrie had no words herself. Clownmuffle had seemed like the same solid mask the entire time.

I'm sorry I killed her. I'm sorry I lost my way. I'm sorry I became twisted inside. Clichés, stock phrases regurgitated from a movie, and Murrie for the first time realized it was because that was the only way Clownmuffle ever learned how to communicate. I want to be better. I know I can be better. I want to be like you and fight for what I believe in. I was always, I was always so scared of death, everything I did was to put myself as far away from it as possible. Not the wraiths—the other death... I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.

Fuck if they were clichés. Fuck if the words themselves were so vague, so steeped in generic notions of heroism and villainy, it was—it was a chip—a chip in the four-faced mask at the embryo inside. So sudden, so passionate, so unlike Clownmuffle and after Murrie had already given up—Suddenly she wanted to forgive her, forgive her for killing Steph, believe in the possibility she could change, people could change, they can always change, anyone can be redeemed—

Then Clownmuffle said:

That's why I'll fight. For you and all those other girls. I'll fight the Handmaiden and free you, Laila, Midlothian—and Joliet. We'll fight together. We'll fight together, okay? You and me. I'll teach you how to fight. I'll make you strong like you made me strong. We'll become stronger together. We'll do it. We'll fight them.

And a yellow bile congealed at the pit of Murrie's stomach. The Handmaiden again. "Fight for what she believes in." She meant clothes. She would fight for every Magical Girl's right to cute clothes.

No. No, don't think of that.

She held Clownmuffle and comforted her and got her blood all over her.

Then, she helped Clownmuffle up, picked up her broomstick, and told her to hop on. "We can reach Gatineau before nightfall."

Clownmuffle reposed herself, put together her visage, wiped the blood from her eyeball—except that only caused the eyeball to fall out, land in the snow, and stare up at Murrie.

They regarded the eyeball together.

It regarded them back.

Clownmuffle began to quiver. She turned to Murrie and said: *If I die—If I die—you'll fight too? You'll fight for all those girls?*

Murrie could only stare down at the eyeball. The fear in Clownmuffle's voice, hidden so well only a few minutes prior, now resounded clear and full in her ears. An arm, two fingers, an eye, and who knew what else within her oversized hoodie—how much could she live without? At what point did they reach even Clownmuffle's limit?

She refused to answer Clownmuffle's question. If she said yes, that she'd fight, she wondered if it would give Clownmuffle permission to die. Worse, she worried it would give Clownmuffle permission to hoist her along on a bad adventure when she inevitably didn't die.

After a lengthy pause, Clownmuffle said, *Of course. You'll fight. You're a good girl. You'll fight.*

"Let's just go," said Murrie.

Together they ascended between the bare shards of trees and zoomed over the frozen landscape.

Gatineau

"Gatineau—" The Baroness popped a white chocolate bonbon into her clamshell-pursed lips and rolled it into one cheek like a hamster. Upon the offer of another, she tapped her collarbone and shook her head. "Mmnno, oh no, couldn't possibly—"

Her partner, damask candy bag outstretched, donned a knowing smirk. She drew the bag's drawstrings and tucked it into her overcoat's inner pocket.

The overcoat was *interesting*. Meaning it looked identical to the uniform of a gestapo. All black, overabundant leather, fascistic precision, badges and medallions, and of course the military captain's peaked hat. High boots, long gloves, and a sallow face within a tall collar. Only upon inspection did the insignia reveal no explicit Nazism: instead of an iron cross, swastika, or SS, it bore emblems of cartoon bunnies, suns wearing sunglasses, and the letters LOL. On her cap, just above the brim, Hello Kitty's face shined pacifically.

Dwelling on clothes, Nazis or no, felt like Clownmuffle thoughts. Murrie banished them and said: "That's how you pronounce it? Gatineau?"

"Oh—" The Baroness held a hand for pause, rolled the bonbon from one cheek to the other, and commenced to chew until she swallowed with an audible gulp. "Yes, you've spoken correctly—though I'm well aware la langue française is known for the, ahem, impenetrability of its, numerous *facets*—"

Her sharp breath stopped the sentence with the expectation she might continue. She didn't. She motioned at the Nazi's overcoat until the candy bag reemerged and a new bonbon was dispensed onto her palm.

Clownmuffle currently crouched in the gutter, vomiting innards.

"Pronunciation is bottom of my worry list. We only want to find the girl Gatineau. Even a general direction, I have a radar to—"

The Nazi interjected with a sharp smirk and a snaggletooth canine. "Ahaheh! You don't want to know that at all. You don't, you don't."

"Mmh—" said the Baroness.

"Never met a more unpleasant *female*." The Nazi shook her head and began to draw the strings of her candy bag, adorned with glittery stars and an equally glittery HAPPY NEW YEAR!, but the Baroness snaked her elastic fingers inside and filched another. In response, the Nazi poked her under the lowest rib, in the thinnest portion of the corset. "*You*, Your Highness, are gonna get *fat*."

"Untrue, untrue—" Chew, chew.

"*So true*."

Swallow. "My dearest protégé, you have yet to learn, of the unparalleled wonders, of a Puella Magi's metabolism." Swallow, with more finality. "It is in-con-ceiveable to presume one of our nature could ever stray from the zenith of physical fitness—"

Clownmuffle vomited loudly. The Nazi folded her body almost ninety degrees at the hips to see around Murrie at the literally liquefying girl in the gutter.

"Look, you two," said Murrie, contemplating zipping to the next closest signature and asking them instead, "I don't care how unpleasant this Gatineau is. She's the only one who can fix my—companion—so, I'll deal with it. We have no other option. Just tell us."

"Aho—Innumerable apologies for my imprudence—We shall of course oblige your humble request for knowledge—"

"She stopped," said the Nazi, eyes fixed on Clownmuffle even as she hid the candy bag under her hat to thwart another heist attempt, "barfing."

"Oh, goodness—Finally! Wait, you're sure—?"

"She heaves any more she turns inside out, ahaheh." The toothy grin returned. "Empty. Nothing left!"

"Phew! Fetch her for me—"

The Nazi marched across the cobblestone street, hooked her finger into Clownmuffle's collar, and dragged her back. Clownmuffle's leg detached in the process.

The Baroness hefted the dome of her outrageous dress by the exoskeletal hoops that maintained its form and teetered on crystal slippers to the decaying body. Assisted by the Nazi, who helped hold the absurd profusion of skirts and petticoats and hoops together, the Baroness bent forward and summoned a clamshell mirror and plucked from it a pearl shaped and sized like the bonbons on which she snacked.

She shoved the pearl between Clownmuffle's chapped and bile-drenched lips, slammed a palm on the base of Clownmuffle's jaw, and forced her to swallow. She also broke off the jaw, but the Baroness smiled as though all were peachy as the Nazi seized her waist and wrenched her to an upright position.

First, nothing happened. Then, Clownmuffle's body thrashed epileptic against the ground and bloody foam burst from her mouth. The Nazi tilted and cackled.

"Oh what the fuck," said Murrie.

"Ahaheh. Watch, watch!"

So much foam spurted that it flowed onto the pavement and mixed with the gutter slush. Murrie stepped back to avoid its frothing. Clownmuffle became a shiny, lavender-tinted bulge in the swell.

"Feels even shittier than it looks, ahaheh." The Nazi bounced around the sidewalk, kicked a quaint brick wall, and swirled her ballerina goosestepper boot in a semicircular arc. "My first time I was like—WOOOOOAH! Ahaheh!"

"Du calme du calme, ma petite amie—AHOO! Du calme I said! You are—too—EXCITABLE—!"

She chased the Nazi around, incapable of catching her until she launched herself layers and all like a missile and pinned her against the wall in a headlock.

"Ahaheh, owowow, ahaheh!"

"DU—CALME—" The Baroness reached under the Nazi's cap and stole the candy bag.

Murrie made a concerted effort to ignore them. She knelt near the foaming heap and tried to discern any Clownmuffle within, which of course was the exact moment Clownmuffle burst upright, fully reformed, spotless, devoid of any injury.

She wore no clothes whatsoever.

As the Nazi and even the Baroness burst out guffawing, Clownmuffle shrank into a ball to cover herself while Murrie fought with her jacket and threw it off still tangled in one sleeve. Clownmuffle struggled to slide herself into it, Murrie couldn't fully escape, they flopped into the snow together. Much closer to Clownmuffle's weird, nineteen-year-old prepubescent body than she ever wanted to be. At least nobody was around to see them. Nobody except the Ottawa clowns, laughing, laughing, laughing.

Eventually Murrie got the jacket off and Clownmuffle got it on. It went down to her knees and the sleeves overshot her hands by several inches.

"Oh, oh—Oh—! Désolée, désolée—" said the Baroness, "Unfortunate side effect of my otherwise unimpeachable ability—*Birth of Venus*, after all—Sandro Botticelli—You cultured young women surely know such things?"

No. Murrie did not know such things. And she considered herself someone who knew a lot, for her age and social background. Hemet: "The ignorant never achieve." She had taken that to heart and read, and read, and read—but Sandro Botticelli eluded her, and she pinned down the urge to shove her fist down Baroness Bonbon's throat.

"Ahaheh, feels good to see it happen to someone else for a change," said the Nazi.

The Baroness smacked her and uttered a sharp, "Voyeur—!"

"Owowow, not that, schadenfreude. Schadenfreude!"

"Hmph—" She crossed her arms. "You ought to have averted your eyes in respect for her womanly decency, my protégé—"

"Balls about *womanly decency*, you sure give *me* quite the ogle when—"

Another smack. "Hold thy tongue!"

Instead, the Nazi extended her tongue and said "nyah-nyah" until the baroness plucked the tongue and pulled.

Their antics worsened. Murrie concentrated on Clownmuffle and sifted the foam in case her clothes had sopped to the bottom. They hadn't. Clownmuffle meanwhile folded and assembled and buttoned and knotted elements of the suit jacket until it better fit her body and concealed everything necessary.

"Eccck," she said, followed by: "Oh, I can speak again." Her bare feet constantly pattered the ground to avoid sticking to the ice. "Good. Telepathy detracts from communication. Something is lost."

"Says the MagNet slumlord," said Murrie.

"Dissimilar circumstances."

Clownmuffle arched her spine and checked her backside, posed beneath overdue Christmas lights strung from a decorative balcony, the effervescence of which in conjunction with the remaining seafoam on her hairless arms and legs caused her to shine, like literally *shine*. The Baroness not only healed Clownmuffle but imbued her with a, a certain beauty, Murrie disliked it. Clownmuffle ignored it, though. Her gaze drifted from her flat ass to the Nazi.

The Nazi quit laughing. "Problem?"

"Why," said Clownmuffle, "are you a nazi."

The Baroness nearly choked on her bonbon and any color left in the Nazi's Aryan face drained. Even her gothy eyeshadow paled. "I—that's not—I'm not a—I'm not that okay!"

"There's a strong resemblance."

"No!"

"Kinda true," said Murrie.

"Noooooooooo..." The Nazi shriveled. "I swear, I didn't even know what a nazi looked like, I thought military costumes were cool, I like black, I'm not racist okay...!"

Clownmuffle tilted her head, examined the Nazi from various angles, pattered in an arc around her, scampered close and gripped the poor white supremacist by the waist to pose her, hoisting up the arms, running fingers along sashes and cords and medals, jingling any brass component. "I applaud the detail. Fine material. Stitching—very good. The medals add character. You're a nazi on a public image campaign. Trying to show that the Nazi party can be fun and friendly too. It's a unique image."

Fucking Clownmuffle.

"I SAID I'M NOT A NAZI," said the Nazi. She shot a desperate glare at her companion, who only laughed.

"Oh—Aho—Think not poorly of my poor protégé—! I tire ceaselessly to instill within her grand values—liberty—equality—fraternity—In our case, sorority—"

On tiptoe, Clownmuffle straightened the Nazi's hat and tapped its Hello Kitty emblem. "This though. Bad. Very bad. Copyright infringement." She ignored the Nazi's flustered rebuttal and scampered back to take in the full picture. "Yes. Fantastic technical aspects, as expected from a military costume, traditional austerity compared to flashier, less utilitarian dress types—" (glance toward the baroness) "—plus the unorthodox mixture of comfortably cute and ominously Aryan coheres better than it ought, due to the medals only coming into focus upon closer observation, which causes the initial impression of Nazism to soften over time, showcasing more whimsy and innocence. Like an argumentative and—petulant woman who, upon breeding familiarity with a new friend, resolves into a more pleasant persona. The main flaw is the hat, it's—One cannot simply bite inspirations wholesale. And it's a centerpiece, too—Tragic. Final score, all elements weighed: 7 out of 10."

The Nazi stomped her foot in protest, but her boot slipped on an icy patch and she landed on her butt, to her companion's general merriment.

"Do me—do me—" said the Baroness.

"Of course. As for your assessment—"

"No, consider the time." Murrie pointed. Both Clownmuffle's ears bled. She had been fully healed a minute earlier and already she bled.

"*Absolutely* correct." The Nazi rocketed up and withdrew an antique stopwatch from one pocket. "We wanna finish hunting before the New Years fireworks, am I not wrong?"

"Not wrong at all my protégé, not wrong at all—" She crumpled the empty bonbon bag into a tinselly ball and sank it three-pointer style into a trash bin under an awning across the street. "There's not a *thing* like the New Years fireworks over the Hill—The way the clocktower lights up—C'est fantastique!"

C'est fantastique, Murrie wanted to mimic in falsetto. Yeah we fucking get it you speak French, how fucking cool, Murrie (and Clownmuffle) spoke Spanish and they didn't say sí or señorita every five seconds. Everything, their pointless decadence, playing, laughing, eating candies, Clownmuffle joining in oblivious to her own peril, it stirred nausea in Murrie's belly. One swallow kept it down: At least they weren't hostile. She detected six signatures in Ottawa and descended on the two together, theorizing they might be friendlier if they were already friends with one another. Her hunch proved right, and they avoided a fight with a territorial Canadian when all they wanted were directions. She should be thankful, she told herself. She got lucky.

Still. No—no. Focus.

She said: "You want to go, we want to go. So let's sort things out quick. We only want to know where to find Gatineau. We'll deal with her no matter how unpleasant she is. Just point us in a direction, please."

Her words sucked the cheer out of the space. The jokers quit flirting long enough for a dog's frantic bark to scrape somewhere distant, followed by a metal crash. A siren rang.

"I *suppose*—no point in hiding it—"

"You want her cuz she can fix *that*, right?" The Nazi pointed to the contorted metal ring on Clownmuffle's finger, almost severed at one section. "Gatineau and her rocks."

Murrie nodded.

"Okay, just. Just don't get disappointed if she doesn't give you what you want," said the Nazi.

"We're prepared for anything," said Murrie.

"Gatineau's not just *unpleasant*. She tried to murder me the first night she was supposed to be my mentor. Ahaheh..."

"Positively true—Lured her into the worst part of town, then abandoned her—If not for my timely intervention—!"

Some twinge pinched the base of Murrie's spine: *You take the ones on the left*. She forced those memories into that same sump where she buried her disdain. "Please. I can detect magic, I know the locations of the four others in this city, even a general territory..."

Another cold, long, silent pause. The Baroness and the Nazi stared at one another, the Nazi's smirk sheepish and nervous. Clownmuffle's bare feet went pat, pat. Pat, pat. She pinched her nose, which bled.

"I imagine—"

"Well, it's New Years, maybe she's somewhere else?"

"I cannot fathom that such a creature as *her* cares one iota about the holiday—"

"True, true, ahaheh."

"Which must mean she's inhabiting her typical haunt, non—?"

"Where else would she be? What else would she do?"

"And where's that," said Murrie, unheard, although the next line answered her anyway:

"Vanier, that infamous neighborhood of ill repute—Located, where now—? South of the river —?"

"North, northeast? We avoid that place as much as possible."

"Although I've heard reports that gentrification has born fruit—or at least the incipient buddings of fruit—"

Murrie had words to say about gentrification, but she couldn't get mired in this right now, and they had given enough information already. Of the four other signatures in Ottawa, only one was anywhere near the northwest. A single, lonely magical blip on the radar—Gatineau.

They kept talking nonetheless, Murrie had to throw up her hands. "Thanks, alright, thanks, enough. We won't waste your time. Let's go, Clownmuffle."

"Clownmuffle—!" said the Baroness. "I *knew* your visage rang a few silver bells—I ought to have known when you scored my protégé in that classic style of yours—"

"Yes yeah, it's her, the infamous Clownmuffle, but we gotta go." Murrie grabbed Clownmuffle's wrist and tried to pull her any direction away, but stopped upon the sensation of ripping skin.

The Nazi tilted her head with the same smirk. "Who?"

"I'll explain later—For as you can see, they're in a rush to meet our stony 'friend,' if I may even call her such in jest—Only one last thing before you go—" Her whole papery bulk heaved forward, producing from a dainty purse four bills, Canadian twenties each.

"Oh," said Clownmuffle.

"I insist, I *insist*—You must take it—'Twas my magic, after all, that consumed your vestments, so it's only fair I finance their replacement—You'll find a department store some two blocks thataway, of a chain sure to be open even this late, even on this day—I insist—"

Clownmuffle took the money without scruples. Murrie might have protested, but she would rather Clownmuffle get pants before they begged Gatineau for help.

The one who protested was the Nazi. She sputtered forward and nearly seized the baroness's wrist before the exchange transpired, although Clownmuffle was quicker. "That's a lot of money, can we still pay rent tomorrow?"

"Du calme, I say to you, du calme—I make it my practice to siphon funds for these holiday—Those bills remained from my savings for your Christmas present—"

The mere mention of this "Christmas present" made the Nazi blush. "Alright, ahaheh..." Her smirk remained, wobbly but toothy.

"Thank you," said Clownmuffle. "You're kind girls."

The Baroness curtsied, the Nazi scratched her hair under her cap. Murrie summoned her broom and wondered how Clownmuffle would ride wearing just a long shirt. Meh, her problem. She motioned for Clownmuffle to get on behind her.

Clownmuffle sat sidesaddle, pressing her hands against the front of her jacket to keep it down and remaining balanced despite holding onto nothing. As the broom ascended and the

Baroness and Nazi waved below, Clownmuffle said:

"Hey. One thing, you two. Murrieta-Temecula, please wait."

Grooooooooooan.

"Is this the first New Years you two have been Magical Girls?"

"Indeed—I contracted February this year—" said the Baroness. "My protégé could only be described as a neophyte."

"Advice: These holidays seem like happy times. Safe times. That's a trick. They're the most dangerous times. Despite the joy and celebration, the full loneliness of many only now becomes apparent. I've been a Magical Girl six years, every year a girl in my area dies either Christmas or New Years. Be vigilant."

The odd couple, dwindling below on the black stone road, looked at one another and back at Clownmuffle. "Hey," said the Nazi, "thanks. We'll watch our backs, right?"

"Exactement—" said the baroness. "Many thanks, much appreciation—"

"I wish you happy lives," said Clownmuffle.

They parted. Murrie glanced over her shoulder before she crested the first row of rooftops, past the bloodyfaced Clownmuffle, down the narrow street that seemed a relic of colonial times or a tourist trap designed that way, to the alley that the Baroness and Nazi commenced down. It effused festive cheer, warm lights in the designs of mistletoe or reindeer, quaint patches of snow shoveled into neat piles and no trace of trash. The Baroness and Nazi returned to their antics, no longer audible but expressed through exaggerated pantomime, bodies arching to laugh, to prod, to seize the partner by the waist, to poke a cheek or tousle a lock of hair, and it was such a perfect image, wasn't it? A perfect image of frivolity, apoliticism. Flamboyance and a disembowelment of history, a latter-day Marie Antoinette and her Sanrio anti-Semite, the classic symbols of oppression and racism made saccharine and harmless.

Somehow, Murrie couldn't hate them. Did they annoy her? Definitely. But as she steered her broomstick over the rooftops and they disappeared irrevocably she hoped things ended well for them, she seconded Clownmuffle's blessing: she wished they had happy lives.

She began to wonder if, in forgiving Clownmuffle, she had let go of too much. Part of her wanted to be distressed over her attitude, but the other part didn't care. It seemed like a stage of acceptance: First you hate something, then you hate that you don't hate it, then you don't hate it.

Then you're a degenerate like the rest.

Everything about the façade screamed crack house. Murrie knew plenty in San Bernardino, they had a look. You drive down an ordinary street with ordinary homes and suddenly there's one with boarded windows, carless driveway, segments of roof sagging inward, junk on the porch. It wasn't especial dereliction, but compared to the ordinary suburban realm around it, it stood out.

Here, inner city Ottawa, south of the river dividing them from the Quebec of Steph's Arcade Fire, the layout possessed somewhat more verticality, less crack house than crack tower. But it lacked the grandiosity of the Chicago projects. Chicago was a monument. A profusion of soulless obelisks, a critical mass of dispossession. The story of the people who lived in those modern art towers was one of segregation, racial covenants, class exploitation. Who were the dirt people of Canada? From the concentration of signage she'd seen since entering this neighborhood, she assumed the French. And true to French form, even their squalor had a sedate, refined, lachrymose bent.

On the uppermost (third) story, squeezed between abandoned furniture, Murrie and Clownmuffle waited at a door. No light shone under but they pressed their ears to the wood to detect what they knew was inside. It came faint and in whispers, a conversation in a language neither knew. A sharp laugh. All the voices were male.

"If she's aggressive, what's our plan," said Murrie.

"I trounce her. She agrees to my demands."

Sure. From all reports, this Gatineau deserved a trouncing. She knocked.

The voices on the other side ceased, but nobody called to them and nobody answered the door. No footsteps creaked across the floorboards and no iris flashed in the peephole. The conversation resumed.

Murrie knocked again and this time the conversation failed to pause.

Clownmuffle tried the knob. Locked. Murrie stepped from the door and peered between the piled stacks of cabinets and shelves. Down one end of the hallway. Down the other end.

She sensed a miasma. Traces at least. And her senses weren't attuned to such things. But a wraith ambush probably meant nothing to people like Clownmuffle and Gatineau. Gatineau hadn't moved in at least an hour.

Murrie transformed and manifested her wand. No need to smash down someone's door. Tapping the wand tip to the knob, she incanted the magic word, which she had no difficulty remembering: "Alohomora."

The lock mechanism clicked and the door slid ajar. A noxious plume burst into her face and she staggered aside coughing, trying to expel the thick ashy taste deep down her tongue. Whatever toxins drifted in that air stained her instantly, her skin, lungs, under her fingernails. She leaned against a chair for support and it turned out to be a chair from which Clownmuffle had the leg to wield like a stake so it collapsed under her weight and she sliced her palm on a splinter.

Clownmuffle strolled inside. Pressing the blood against the unarmored segment of her pants, Murrie waddled after.

To someone, this world was comfort. The dinginess, the drabness, the total lack of color, the suffocation. Someone had adapted to this terrain. The weaponized air required certain lungs and certain eyes. If outside had been a limp but familiar vision of poverty, the inside was a pocket dimension, a void, something divorced from any external reality. Were there walls? Theoretically.

Through the murk the solitary light of an anglerfish emerged: a bare bulb suspended by a wire. Beneath it a rickety wooden table and four hunchbacked figures gathered around an infinite cluster of bottles and ashtrays.

And it was like,

Oh. They're just normal fucking people.

Three men, all white, all bearded, although with different gradations of beard length, from a trimmed goatee to a brown bushy conniption. Functional winter wear, faded from years of repeated use but no worse than Murrie in her shredded suit or Clownmuffle in oversized 80s pastels fished from the bargain bin. They held hands of cards and smoked cigarettes. Bills swelled in the center. They drank from their bottles and muttered in French and none glanced toward the newcomers except maybe the bushiest.

Only lack of beard distinguished Gatineau. Her general ugliness obscured her age. She ogled her cards and tapped ash into the dregs of a brown bottle. When her peers lulled she muttered something terse and eroded in its beginning and end.

Kyubey perched on her shoulder. His pink eyes punctured the smoke and his fur remained unsullied, like a photoshopped image. *You made it!*

"Surprised?" said Clownmuffle. Nobody at the table looked.

No, my calculations strongly indicated your survival. I apologize for not helping earlier, but my assessment indicates that psychologically you perform better when you don't rely on others.

The classic pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps line. Ignoring how an aqueous Clownmuffle required Murrie to ferry her the last hundred miles—or did Clownmuffle consider that something she earned? By making a friend?

Gatineau flopped her cards on the tabletop and spat. She snapped the top off another bottle and swigged. One of the beardmen won the round and raked the money, so she slid another bill to the center and received a new hand. "Wheech," she said, "of you ees, Vizcarra?"

It sounded like more French at first but the word "Vizcarra" oriented Murrie. She pointed to Clownmuffle.

"And who the fawk are you?" An imperceptible finger flicked the stub of her cigarette into Murrie's breastbone, hard enough to sting.

"Murrieta-Temecula."

I explained to you she might also come, said Kyubey. Remember?

Gatineau shrugged. "How old, fille?"

Murrie said her age.

"Bah, fawking sick of thirteen-year-olds, get the fawk outta my face."

Please, Miss Côte-Lalumière. There's no logic in bickering. It'll be best for everyone involved if you repair Miss Vizcarra's Soul Gem as soon as possible. Do you remember our deal?

Gatineau considered her cards. The cigarette rolled along the ring of teeth embedded in her lower jaw. While a beardman murmured French, Clownmuffle tapped her chair leg against her knee, producing a hollow gong. "So you struck a deal with her," she said. "Funny. I recall not long ago you refused to even give me her name. Wasn't worth it. Not energy efficient? Some such argument."

The situation has changed. Your health has increased in value. It's quite simple, really. Nothing that should cause any alarm or suspicion.

"He thinks you can avert some catastrophe," said Murrie.

The poker round ended. Gatineau lost again, but this time she wagered less. The midsized beardman accrued the winnings and shuffled the deck. Cards flicked around the table with careless precision.

For some time the card game continued in silence save the occasional francophonic quip.

Well, Miss Côte-Lalumière? I've outlined the terms of our deal to you in great deal, and you claimed they were satisfactory. I ask you, please uphold your end quickly. Miss Vizcarra's state has declined—

"Well I fawking said I want the other beetch gone but you don't fawking listen to that so watdefawk?" She spat her cigarette into the ashtray and lit another, hands trembling, using her cards as a shield for the flame.

What a nobody. The hype went nowhere, Gatineau was rudimentary unpleasant. Clownmuffle at one point described her as misanthropic, but she sure got along fine with the beardmen. A Hollywood misanthropy that substitutes mere rudeness for true hatred of humanity. "Sure," she said, "I'll go."

"Stay," said Clownmuffle. "You're my friend. You have no reason to leave."

Grimacing, Gatineau tossed her cards out of contention and let another beardman earn his keep. "Fawk. Fawk."

Two beardmen partook in a conversation lasting three whole lines of dialogue.

Your power only takes a few seconds, said Kyubey, so I'm confused why you're wasting time. Miss Vizcarra, please provide your Soul Gem. Miss Leyva, please leave. It would be illogical to jeopardize everything over something so insignificant.

"Yeah, it's fine." Murrie stepped backward, struck a bureau, reoriented. "No point to get into an argument over something dumb. I'll be outside."

"I want you to stay," said Clownmuffle.

Miss Vizcarra, I guarantee that in the almost nonexistent chance of a fight, Miss Leyva would be absolutely useless. There is really zero value to her remaining in this room.

"There are other reasons."

I cannot conceive of any.

Shit. Clownmuffle's nervous. Or maybe she's prideful? Did she want Murrie to remain for reassurance or simply to deny Gatineau's slight? Both reasons were idiotic. Kyubey for once was absolutely right. She turned and hurried for the door, only to no longer see it until the air of smoke parted and she walked straight into it.

She rubbed her eye and felt so dumb but when she glanced back nobody even watched her. Gatineau rearranged her cards and Clownmuffle pried the twisted ring from her finger. Except the finger came off before the ring did. That at least made it easier to remove the ring, which she then plopped on Gatineau's edge of the table before discarding the finger atop the mound of a nearby trashcan.

The missing finger captured Gatineau's attention. She watched it as, divorced from its body, it quickly decomposed to mix with rinds and peels. "I am reminded. I'm not doing this sheet for free, no?" Her gaze flicked to Clownmuffle.

Murrie paused with her hand on the doorknob.

Of course not. I don't understand why your memory has suddenly become so faulty, even by human standards. I will provide you with—

"Not free for *her*," said Gatineau. "I want something from her, too."

That's ridiculous. Given the level of time and energy you needed to heal her, my terms are already exceedingly generous—

"It's fair," said Clownmuffle. "To get something, I must give something. Want me to fight wraiths for you? Sure. For a day, a week. Month even. When I'm healthy I'm efficient. I won't need much for myself."

"Tsssh." Gatineau lost another hand. She jabbed her fingers into her eye sockets and rubbed them in small circles. She stubbed her cigarette on her thumbnail and lit another. "Fawk that.

That's what Monsieur Cube gives. Cubes, cubes. I'll have all the fawking cubes I need, no? I want something only you have."

Miss Côté-Lalumière! Our deal—

"You do not understand, Monsieur Cube. In this fawking scenario I actually have a good fawking position for once." She received a new hand and immediately tossed the cards back to the dealer. "You need something, only I can give. She needs something, only I can give. I get the maximum I can get, non? Is this not your 'logique,' monsieur?"

Your supposition relies on the fact that only you can restore Miss Vizcarra's Soul Gem. However, I have a specialist who can take the powers of others. I prefer not to resort to the elimination of a useful Magical Girl, but—

"Ah yes. Your specialist who takes the powers. I know all your specialists, I am good friends with so many. Which was she again? Sepulveda, non? Bad luck, bad luck, monsieur. I heard she died in Minneapolis last week. Baaaad bad timing. Don't feed me boolsheet like I don't know my current fawking events."

There are other Magical Girls with similar abilities.

"Where? China? India? Look at this gem." Gatineau held Clownmuffle's ring toward the lightbulb. Her three beardmen glanced, realized she was still not talking to them, and returned to their game. "Ooh, so bad. Never seen one this bad. How long will she last?"

Please, Miss Côté-Lalumière. What you intend to ask of Miss Vizcarra could kill her. If she dies—

"It's fine," said Clownmuffle. "Whatever she wants. I'll do it."

"She won't fawking die anyway. I can restore her gem just enough to keep her alive. I will keep your precious fawking person alive for you, fawk." She lit a cigarette only to realize she already had one pressed between her lips. Unsure what to do for a moment, she stuck the second next to the first. "As long as she lives in the end, you don't care what I do, non?"

"I won't die," said Clownmuffle.

Miss Vizcarra, please trust me. There is a decent chance it will kill you even to hear what she wants from you.

"Then I'll heal her a bit first, fawk. Fawk." She spat out both cigarettes, lit a third, and inspected Clownmuffle's ring, twisted, bent. "This, it's all very seemple. You're all being fawking infants, it's so seemple."

You are taking risks with the fate of this world, does that mean anything to you? If you refuse to abide by the terms of the deal we both agreed upon, then I'll be forced to renege on my terms as well.

"Non, non." She swayed upright into the room's mist, as vaporous in her motions as the smoke that enveloped her, and tapped the tabletop with two fingers to draw the attention of

her beardmen, to whom she then slugged some French. The beardmen nodded, half-raised hands in farewell salutes, as she rolled along the round table's edge through all the staggered angles of the room. "I get both deals. Both deals, are we in agreement? Or no deal."

Kyubey hopped off her shoulder as she rose, bouncing off the head of a beardman and landing on the handle of a broken cabinet. He said nothing and Murrie had to think Gatineau had him in a bind. She might have derived satisfaction in it if she hadn't started to wonder what exactly Gatineau wanted from Clownmuffle and whether she were as normal as first thought. As Gatineau approached her she stepped aside and into an object, a tall African mask on a pole, which wobbled when its triangle nose jabbed her spine. Murrie sought a reason for its existence and found none.

"It's all very seemple. Come, I'll show you, Vizcarra. You too, eediot fille." She opened the door and stepped into the detritus of the hallway. Clownmuffle followed close and Murrie, after steadying the African mask, departed too.

They walked single file down the hallway, down the stairs, out the doorway, into the street. Along the way Gatineau tossed the ring over her shoulder and commanded Clownmuffle to make it a gem. Clownmuffle complied, but it required maximum effort. Murrie held her as she swayed treacherously into a fence and a fresh deluge of blood streamed down her face. The polished luster of her skin had completely faded, she was gray as ash or a wraith, parts peeled, faster than before. Nonetheless, the ring became a gem. Clownmuffle survived the transformation. She returned it, a withered opal stump dripping black water, to Gatineau.

"Sheet, you're fawking resilient. That's good. That's what I want. That's why it has to be you. Fawking others like us, too damn weak, oui? Fawking thirteen-year-old beetches. Can't handle nothing. Boy doesn't like them, they cry. Boy likes them, they cry. That kind of sheet. Pathetic, non?"

Her fingers snapped, she transformed. Her dull clothes became a flowing verdant gown, embroidered with silver in shiny thin lines that ran intricate patterns down to her expansive flounce. She might have even looked pretty if not for the cigarette still clenched in her mouth and the dead gaze in her eyes.

"It's very seemple for me, see? Watch."

She pried the cigarette from her teeth, tapped the corroded gem with the unlit butt, and Clownmuffle shrieked. She clutched her throat and slammed against a brick column beside her before Murrie could stop her. For a strangled moment of fear Murrie thought she might become epileptic, thrash wildly, rip off parts of her decaying body in the process, but it was a single sharp moment, and the next moment Clownmuffle bent over and panted into the ground.

The gem in Gatineau's palm had reformed. Partially. A "leetle beet," as you might say if you had an insufferable French accent—

A light blipped out on Murrie's radar. She had stopped paying much conscious attention to it once they met Gatineau, but the abrupt change triggered her senses like an ambient noise

unexpectedly ended. Ottawa had seven signatures—six locals and Clownmuffle—now only five locals. Someone in the city had died.

The tendons tightened in her chest. She kneaded the notch at the base of her throat to revive the breathing, closed her eyes, and crouched to better examine her radar. Six signatures remaining, please don't let it be one of them, not one of them, and after Clownmuffle even told them to be careful—

It wasn't. She caught two signatures close together in the general area where they had encountered the Baroness and the Nazi. They were both alive, it hadn't been either of them, and Murrie sagged a tremendous gust of air out her unstopped esophagus.

Then she felt like an asshole. *Someone* had died, some young girl in this same cold air under these same gleaming icicles in this same bilingual city. Not someone she met but someone she might have. If they had asked the girl who died for directions instead, if Clownmuffle gave her the same warning she gave the other two, would this girl have lived? Would one of the Baroness or Nazi or both have died?

Murrie opened her eyes and scampered after a Clownmuffle and Gatineau drawing ignorant into a new passageway between the buildings. She wondered about this dead girl she had only ever known as a light in her mind, a blip on a radar. Did she speak French? If so, did she mix in French words when she spoke English? Was she young, old? Was this her first New Years as a Magical Girl? Did wraiths get her or Cycles?

Around the world, Magical Girls were dying. One had probably already died since. She never met this girl, she had no reason to be affected, yet somehow it affected her. She teetered on the precipice of tears. She yanked her head to the side and instead loosed a phlegmatic sneeze. Her nose ran and she wiped it on her cuff. In Chicago, she had felt the lights die the same way, one after another. At one point she lost count. Over ten. And she had even known them, at least a little, yet nothing affected her then, maybe it had been adrenaline, fear for her own life, determination to rescue those still alive, it felt like a different world then, but even in this world the death had followed her.

Silly—Sentimental. But she thought about the Baroness and the Nazi. It hadn't been them, but it could have, and in the end all Magical Girls shared a certain kinship of experience, even Clownmuffle, even Gatineau...

After a long walk, which led them to what seemed a different part of the city, nicer, full of leafless parks and homely architecture, a skyline on one side and a bright yellow river on the other, Gatineau stopped before a hatch set into the ground in front of an unassuming apartment. The hatch had a padlock and a detransformed Gatineau, after discarding and lighting another cigarette, fished her pockets for a key.

Kyubey hadn't followed them, but he or another body of his poked his head from a second-story windowsill. *I implore you to reconsider, Miss Côté-Lalumière. Even partially healed, Miss Vizcarra will not react well. Can you not see the importance of the situation?*

"I won't die," said Clownmuffle.

The odds that you will die are high enough to cause me concern, said Kyubey.

"I won't die."

The death of the unknown Ottawa girl lingered in Murrie's head. "Let's at least be careful."

"I'm always careful."

Yeah right. Before Murrie rebutted, Gatineau turned to her, slinging a key on a ring.

"You—fille. Since you fawking want to follow me around so much, I guess you can see. Maybe it kills you too?"

If it could kill Clownmuffle, then—No, Murrie decided, immediately and without hesitation, that she would follow.

Once everyone's intentions became clear, Gatineau shrugged, absorbed another intake of smoke, and undid the lock. When she hefted the basement hatch, though, only stone waited beneath it: a solid, seamless wall of rock. Murrie predicted a practical joke before she remembered Gatineau's power, and Gatineau transformed and discarded her cigarette onto the rock face. Where the orange dot of flame struck, a straight cut like those in quarried marble split across the middle and the rock parted to reveal a few steps dwindling into total darkness.

"No rails," spoken upon the lighting of yet more tobacco, "watch the step."

They descended. Gatineau's cigarette served as their only light, fading and flaring with her breath, bolts of light flowing down the silver veins of her gown and then retracting like pumped blood. The stairs spiraled and an aural pulse rose from the pit in the center. Down, down, down. The distance soon became absurd, unreasonable, and no sense of an exit remained above, although Murrie had not shut the hatch behind her. No sewer system would go this deep. Deeper still, and deeper still. The same rhythmic clacks of the same soles upon the same steps. Ten minutes passed. More. The signatures of the other Ottawa girls rose upon the Z-axis. The monotony broke only when Gatineau discarded her cigarette into the center and lit another, and in these moments the little ember vanished into nothingness before its light revealed any floor or walls.

Murrie wondered how many cigarettes could possibly be kept on a person.

The temperature gradually increased. By some point it actually became warm. Sweat beaded on her forehead. What was this, a geothermal vent? Did they burrow deep enough to reach mantle? The constant circling, the constant lack of progress—she hated these circles, it only made her thoughts circle too, wondering the same things about their destination and the intention of their host, at several points she considered summoning her broomstick and rushing down the center until some bottom emerged.

She didn't. She followed Clownmuffle. She wiped her brow. Her eyes had adjusted long ago but only the outlines of the staircase became apparent. She watched Gatineau and learned only that she lit her cigarettes not with a lighter but by scraping two fingernails so brusquely together to spark. Magic had to be behind that maneuver. Maybe she could harden her own bones like gemstones. This girl might even be older than Clownmuffle, did that make her

even harder to kill? Was there a cutoff point, like if you survive a certain amount of time as a Magical Girl, you then become immortal? She considered that Kyubey had not leaned too heavily on threats to have her terminated.

At a certain point, the hum from below adopted a new character. After several more revolutions, it became clear it was a voice.

Not an intelligible voice. Just a voice. And even as they descended and the voice became louder, it never became intelligible. It was a voice making noise, random, meaningless noise. More goat than human.

They reached the bottom. The ground was flat, smooth, and stretched in all directions. The exact geometry remained unclear and only the stairwell they departed distinguished the dull black terrain.

The voice continued. It came from every direction and no direction.

This is your final chance. Kyubey's voice from an equally indistinct direction. Murrie caught his eyes high on the stairwell.

"Ah, wheech would be best?" Gatineau gazed into inconsequential directions as though they held great consequence. In her cigarette's light Clownmuffle became only half a face.

Then she tapped a wall that until then Murrie thought was only a void. A white line split from floor to twice Clownmuffle's height and immense doors of stone parted. Delirious light streamed through, blinded Murrie; she squinted, then covered her eyes.

When she took her hand away, a spotless shining room confronted her, a room of every conceivable variety of precious stone, arranged into patterns like silken strands, except in such a space it was thick rivulets of crystal, lapis lazuli, amber, peridot, blood beryl, sapphire, garnet, emerald, hues contrasted in meticulous variety, different shades placed in contention to magnificent effect, everything swirling or seeming to swirl to a central pillar of translucent ruby, and the effect of the entire thing was such that only once Murrie's eyes were guided to this pillar did she realize:

A human being was encased inside.

Gatineau tossed her cigarette against an amethyst whorl, and the amethyst opened its mouth and devoured it. She lit another.

"So." Murrie lingered at the entrance, although Clownmuffle had followed Gatineau inside. "So this is what you do? Collect people?"

"Oui."

"Kill them, taxidermy them, place them in display cases—"

"Oh non. Non. People who are dead are useless, non? The body, soulless, it's ugly? The value is the life. See."

Upon a marginal movement of the wrist, a straight line spread up the ruby pillar and parted like two vertical lips. The human inside spilled out but was caught by a quartz slope that rose from the ground. A woman, nude. Mid-20s maybe, short blonde hair and gaunt. Her head lolled semi-sensible as the quartz morphed into a throne that perched her body upon it in the most regal manner her akimbo limbs allowed. Her compressed chest spasmed with breath as Gatineau placed a cigarette between bloodless lips and lit it for her.

This bitch. This fucking bitch. Clownmuffle merely killing people had been bad, but this—torture, suspended animation, zoological reduction, dehumanization—to call this "misanthropy"—and for a time Murrie had thought Gatineau was merely rude. She should have expected something like this but—and Kyubey had wanted to cut a deal with her, with generous benefits... The Baroness, meanwhile, used her power to help Clownmuffle and asked for nothing in return, even gave them money—she sank to her knees. She clenched her hands into balls and rubbed her knuckles against her temples. Gatineau stroked her captive's hair, whispered something in French, and withdrew from somewhere a cellophane-wrapped slice of meat which she tossed to the girl like a fucking dog. The girl regarded it dully, then recognition flashed in her face and she tore at the wrapper with her fingernails.

These people, with Clownmuffle it had been, it had been vengeance, retribution for lives taken, these lives still existed, a rescue—but even if they killed Gatineau what about the others, trapped within tons of solid stone, for surely there were others and this was not the only room—

"How long would you want me," said Clownmuffle.

Gatineau watched her captive eat. "That's the problem, non? With us. It's bad, with the grief cubes? Meat's easier to get. I do not want to waste the good sheet on you, but at the same time, there's something about our bodies, it's different than humans, non? Monsieur Cube won't let me fawk with his precious magic girls, and even if I could, all of them are fawking thirteen-year-olds, I don't fuck around with damn thirteen-year-olds. Fawk that. But I understand you are much older..."

"Nineteen."

Blood from the steak ran down the woman's chin, down her chest, pooling into her seat, and the minerals absorbed it. Any trash, any liquid, any imperfection disappeared into porous holes that opened and then closed, mouths hidden everywhere in every wall.

"Nineteen. And in a position where Monsieur Cube must allow me. Good, good. Very opportune, you might say. The lives we live, it's a balance? The physical elements of survival, weighted against those you cannot hold. We all must live on more than bread..."

"Just tell me, how long."

"Ehhhh, given I don't want to spend cubes on you, and how Monsieur Cube will give me sheet if I keep you too long, let's say, one day? Twenty-four hours?"

Clownmuffle broke into a wide grin. "That's it? That's all?"

"Oui."

The voice that spoke in tongues still filtered from the darkness outside the room, and Clownmuffle's laughter matched it, resounded in a similar pattern of nonsense, total hysterics. She fell onto her back and rolled, she kicked her feet, and despite her thrashing no pieces of her even fell off, although she did bleed and the crystals and sapphires drank the blood deep. She didn't care. Would Murrie had expected different? She didn't care what Gatineau was doing here to these people. It was one day trapped in amber like a Jurassic mosquito, perhaps excised for some moments of physical torture, the kind a Magical Girl might withstand even if a human could not, and then—Presto. Fixed. All woes ended.

"You're fucking sick, you're fucking sick," Murrie flung impotent fists through the air. "I know you don't give one shit what I call you but someone has to call you it so here I fucking am, you're a sick fucking bastard—"

"Ah, now it's revealed why I hate you fawking thirteen-year-old beetches, non?" Gatineau wiped some brown liquid from her captive's lower lip. The captive had revived totally and now watched Gatineau rapt and meek.

Clownmuffle returned to coherence. "One day. Kyubey said this would kill me even to hear it. But I feel better than I have in days. Amazing—one day."

"Ah, well, I have not yet explained the entirety of my intentions," said Gatineau, as her hand slid down her captive's chin, down her chest, and between her legs.

Clownmuffle ceased laughing.

The captive ran her fingers carefully along Gatineau's downstretched arm, leaned her head against Gatineau's shoulder, and purred like a cat. Her legs started to—started to—it made Murrie sick. And then the wall behind Gatineau split open and a series of golden shelves cascaded outward, stocked with a neat and organized assortment of implements—

If the implements had been blades, saws, spikes, razors, anything like that, Murrie might have understood better, but it was nothing like that, it was things—she had never seen these kinds of things before, she had a vague knowledge of some of them, and her face flushed with heat even to look. Meanwhile the quartz throne descended into the ground but out of the floor and ceiling shot chains of—of—Murrie didn't fucking know all her goddam gems, she wasn't a fucking encyclopedia, something kinda teal colored, the chains shot out and clamped around the captive girl's ankles, wrists, neck, they pulled her taut, stretched her, positioned her, and yet the girl wasn't crying out or fighting, or even giving in dejectedly, her eyes were *gleaming*, she was *grinning*, she opened her mouth and made another feline purr and watched as Gatineau pulled from the shelves a—

Clownmuffle ran screaming bolting slipping bouncing into edges and abutments, gouging deep gashes in her butter skin as she struck something, revolved, flung her legs out from under her and fell, clawing and scraping, snapping off her fingernails, her shoes squeak-squeak-squeaking until finally they caught a seam between two types of stone and gained traction, even at this moment only propelling her at a drooping angle into the darkened central amphitheater and the promise of the stairwell etched in faint lines from the chamber's

light, and Murrie ran after her, an immediate response before she had time to process it, her head even still half-turned toward Gatineau's display, and the glimpse she caught sent an unbidden tremor through her body and a tingling upon her skin, then the sight was gone, Clownmuffle had already reached the base of the steps but her progress had slowed because one leg had snapped under the knee, and now the percolation of the tongue-voice grew and coalesced into the form of a male whirling out of the darkness from some opposite corner. Murrie skidded to a halt although Clownmuffle kept crawling as the man, not exactly nude but wrapped in translucent silken attire that undulated with his many exaggerated movements, golden rings jangling around his wrists and ankles, reached her by the stairs and seized her wrist, she grunted a savage "let go" but he said:

"Are you the one who doesn't like dogs?"

Which meant nothing but it forced Murrie to half-turn toward the open door of the gem chamber where the captive was now chained onto all fours with Gatineau leaned over her from behind, one hand placed upon the girl's gaunt side and the other perched on her own chin, head tilted and gaze equal parts coolly cocksure and apathetically inquisitive, although her eyes were set on Murrie and Murrie found herself glued to the spot, watching the rhythmic motions of hips, the ecstasy on the captive's face which seemed to have transmogrified into that of a bullfrog, the way the girl's hands were now trapped inside the floor to hold her still, only the dancing man's hands clambering further up her own arms broke the spell, he held her at the shoulders and leaned in to—*sniff*—her, at which point she kicked him hard in his thigh and broke away to chase Clownmuffle.

Her heart, lungs, ribs pounded inside her. The blood rolled down the steps in waves and only the constant screaming assured her Clownmuffle had not entirely melted. Telepathic voices cut in, first Kyubey's:

Please! Charlie Vizcarra, listen to me! You must remain calm. Your vitals are plunging! With your Soul Gem in its current state—Miss Leyva, you have to stabilize her!

Then Gatineau's: *Pah. She said she had nineteen years. Was this a lie? This is what I expect from fawking thirteen-year-olds. But no female that old hasn't either done it or wanted, one side or the other.*

Given how long it took to descend, they'd be climbing forever, and Murrie would never reach Clownmuffle in time. That was what she thought, until she rounded a spiral segment and the open hatch blazed ahead of her. It felt like she had only gone up three flights. But Clownmuffle had fallen just outside, on the dead sidewalk, looking dead herself, and Murrie slipped in her blood climbing out and got liquid Clownmuffle all over.

"Clownmuffle, Clownmuffle, listen to me."

The pieces had not fallen off her so much as she had simply shriveled. The form bundled in the torn clothes could have been a kindergartener. Her skin had a few obvious abrasions but even the parts that were whole seeped blood through the pores. Murrie knelt beside her and said the only thing she could: "It's okay, it's okay..." But when she reached to stroke what remained of her hair Kyubey commanded:

Physical contact will only harm her further.

Oh. Okay. She drew back, unsure what to do. Why had this affected Clownmuffle so much? It... it wasn't that awful. Or was Murrie only saying that because—Nngh. Clearly it made an impact. Could it really kill her? Could it?

"Look. Look. You don't have to do that. You don't have to go back down there. She can't force you. It's fine. It's fine. You're safe now. Clownmuffle. Charlie. You're safe, it's okay, it's okay."

The blood infant rolled over. *Mzzzgn. Mhhhyttll. Nnnnnkkkh. Nnnooo. Nooo. Noooooo. No. No! Noooo. No!*

"You can get fixed, you can get fixed in another way, we'll find a way, don't worry, you can get fixed—" Why was she so desperate to save her? "—This is nothing. It's over. It's gone."

It's the only way. It's the only way! It's the only way. It's the only way and oh no no no no not again not any more no no no no no

Here I am, Steph. Here I am pulling your killer back from the brink. "It's not the only way. We can fight her, can't we? Beat her up. Hurt her until she'll heal you just to be rid of us. That's the Clownmuffle way, no?" She winced, unsure why she had mimicked one of Gatineau's speech patterns, but it drew no downturn in Clownmuffle's horrid state. "Trounce someone and make them your friends after? That's what you said you'd do to... us. Me and Hemet. I remember that's what you said."

I can't beat her. Not her. I can't beat her. Not her.

Murrie had sorted Clownmuffle's wreckage and found her Soul Gem. It was fucking bad.

"I'll do it. I'll do it instead. I'll take your place. It's just one day. It's not that bad. Don't worry. Don't worry. I'll take your place—"

"I said I wanted no fawking thirteen-year-olds."

She turned. Gatineau leaned in the open portal back into blackness, her green gown streaked with fluid of uncertain origin. Her omnipresent cigarette flared as she extended an expectant hand toward Murrie and Murrie gave her Clownmuffle's gem.

A single tap caused the corroded sides to form back inward, petals in reverse bloom, but it wouldn't eliminate the despair, only make it easier to handle.

"I make nobody come down there," she said. "They all know exactly what to expect. I tell them everything. I find them on the fawking eenternet."

Murrie was about to protest, to call her a liar, it felt instinctual to say such a thing, but a moment's thought and she said nothing.

"You know." Gatineau smirked. "Yes, you know. You get it. If only you were a leetle older, maybe I'd take your offer."

The eyes sliced clean through her. She thought of Stephanie and crumpled inside, she thought of Gatineau in the gem room bent over—She banished the thought. God. God. Steph, you would be so ashamed. You would be so ashamed right now.

Clownmuffle had stabilized. Maybe. It was hard to tell. She ceased making those noises. Gatineau had restored her a lot—maybe as much as halfway. No fresh blood slopped out, but plenty of blood remained.

In the distance, over the rooftops, fireworks erupted.

They dazzled the night sky, red green blue yellow purple and orange, mingled in fantastic arrays, rattling the silence with pure and spectacular bombast, everything aglitter, like the gem room. The gem room in the night sky. Their current position was not too far from the festivities. She sensed the others on her radar—the Baroness and the Nazi, close together, in the direction of the rockets. So they had managed to catch the fireworks after all.

January 1, 2014.

"Happee New Year," said Gatineau as she spat her cigarette and wiped wet hands on her gown. More fireworks went up. But these streets were silent.

"So it's just perversion." Murrie sat in Clownmuffle's blood. "Not even murder."

"I do what pleases me," said Gatineau. "If I do not, I die, non? I have carved into this world a reason to live. And so, I live. I prefer life. Those who live below, they prefer life—a certain *form* of life—that is why they came. Do you not prefer life, fille? Et toi, ma petite amie?" Her slipper prodded the bundle of Clownmuffle. "Do you not prefer life?"

"Look. Gatineau." Murrie stood. The blood clung to her inside her clothes. "She's got some kind of trauma. Regarding... the kind of stuff you do down there. Something in her past. I only kinda know specifics." She thought back to the conversation in the snow, among the four bare trees. Clownmuffle had said: "He would have killed me otherwise." Clownmuffle had said: "The *thing* I was doing back then, it would have killed me." Murrie could connect dots. Murrie knew from Steph and MagNet what many young girls did for cash. Murrie imagined herself, in that position, in the position of the captive downstairs, she tried to drum up empathy for their aversion, she knew logically she could understand it, and yet the thing she wanted to say to them was "so what." A brief moment of unpleasantness, a single day and then a cure for your cancer; she would have said yes in an instant. Did that make her somewhere bankrupt? In some capacity cold, distant, emotionless? In some area a Clownmuffle herself, sneering at those who couldn't cut it just because she could?

The thought formed a cavity in her stomach. She watched the fireworks and her melancholy deepened, she now understood Clownmuffle's warning to the Baroness and the Nazi, those two girls who would soon be on their way to the apartment they may or may not be able to afford when rent was collected tomorrow, to their bed where they would do what Gatineau did in the murk; it was, after all, the ultimate form of connection between two people. The final barrier of intimacy broken, the way individuals became one. No?

"Please," she said, after Gatineau said nothing, "please look at her. She can't do it. She doesn't even look nineteen so I don't get your problem. I look older than her. You have to admit that, right?"

"It has never been about looks."

What a fantastic location to show restraint, or maybe it wasn't even restraint but mere personal preference, something about the psychology. Murrie couldn't probe. She couldn't understand, so much of this topic exceeded her reach. She had read and learned and debated, she had listened to all Steph's teachings, she had a knack for remembering phrases, sayings, slivers of advice, she had developed a precocity she believed far advanced for her age—but this topic had never drawn close to her, explored only in dreams or as a tangential, unspeakable entity lurking on the fringes of her comprehension; dirty jokes told by her cousins, so comedic to be stripped of any ulterior motive or meaning; a bitter reminder once a month in the form of blood-soaked sheets.

I am willing to double my initial offer, said Kyubey, in a way that made Murrie angry the skinflint had not brought forward this possibility previously. *Twice the quantity of grief cubes.*

"Non. I am very eenterested in Vizcarra now. She is a fragmented human being, I can see. Very eenteresting."

"You said nobody comes down there unwillingly," said Murrie. "Look at her." She flung a hand out; Clownmuffle appeared to be asleep, which was probably best. "If you extort her to this, how unwilling will it really be?"

"Oh, but that's only the start. I can make her willing. I *want* to make her willing." Gatineau shook her head, smiled. Watched the residue of the final fireworks, which ended without grand crescendo. The dots of the Baroness and the Nazi departed from their position. "I said I would heal her, oui?"

At this rate, Clownmuffle wouldn't even survive a day. (And why is this a bad thing? Let her die. Let the Cycles take her as she's mercilessly fucked by this deranged pervert, isn't that the kind of thing you'd like to see?) No, no. No. No. And she was imagining it, too. What it would look like. How Clownmuffle would cry and make those unintelligible sounds of anguish, she imagined it wasn't Gatineau there but Steph, and then it wasn't Clownmuffle there but—ughughughnonoNO. Kill her. Kill her worthless degenerate self right now in this blood just debone her and let her flesh flop.

Why did the topic need to go in this direction. Why did it need to be... *obscene*. If they could stick to the strictly moral, the strictly logical, the strictly political, it all would have been so much easier, these were things she did not want to confront and facing them they reflected, mirrorlike, upon her, imprinting her, tainting her, the filth inside as well as outside.

Clownmuffle stirred. She rolled. Murrie couldn't linger on her own problems. She had to do something. Save her, let her die, she had to make a decision, and the worst part was feeling like her decision didn't matter, like Clownmuffle would live or die as Clownmuffle pleased. No. Fuck that. Fuck that. The stupidity of the situation collapsed upon her at once and she

thought about where they were and what they had seen and what was at stake and got down and seized the fleshy homunculus by the shirt which split apart at the seams as though it too were affected by Clownmuffle's degeneration, and why the fuck not, were her clothes not her most important attribute?

"This is it then? This is how and where you die?"

I can't. I can't. I can't.

"You'll fight—ha!—you'll fight the kind of monsters we've fought. You'll fight anyone and beat them. What's it about this? The lack of control?"

I can't. I can't. I can't.

"Man. To think. Steph and I should have just come at you with a, with a dildo or something..." She hesitated, her confidence sapped by a harsh laugh from Gatineau when she said the word. She doubted her ability to speak any sense to Clownmuffle, for a moment she had a fantasy of giving some rousing speech—Now she felt like no speech could affect. There was an illusion, she had always felt it but it intensified after she met Steph, that words were like magic, if you said just the right ones in just the right order it unlocked any person, persuaded them to anything. Maybe that was possible, but Murrie had to look at herself and realize she had none of those words.

She remembered the fleeting, transient emotional connection she fostered with Clownmuffle in the snow. She remembered Gatineau bent over her prey.

She remembered Kyubey: Clownmuffle is the kind of person who performs better when she doesn't rely on others.

Well. She stood up, rubbed her hands on the cold blood all over. "I guess you can't," she said, and turned a few lazy steps toward the street. The Baroness and the Nazi were moving toward their apartment to enact a nightly ritual. Which of the pair commanded the other, in that situation? Or did they have a more egalitarian relationship? Was such a thing possible?

Miss Leyva, you need to talk to her! Miss Côté-Lalumière, do something!

"Is desperation an emotion," said Gatineau.

"He's not even desperate," said Murrie. "Even now he's holding back resources."

I have the resources and I'm willing to expend them, but they're too far away. Distribution of resources is as important as the resources themselves.

They laughed. Poor Kyubey. He must have believed Gatineau would prioritize the utilitarian over all else; he could never have understood. Murrie only needed to look once at the ornate care that went into her chamber to know that whatever sustained her, it was her life below that truly kept her alive. But Kyubey had no clue.

Gatineau offered a cigarette. She took it. It was different than weed, she coughed even though she had a tolerance to the other stuff.

Minutes passed. An occasional car even passed. Its lights glittered across the bloody pool but it passed without slowing. Nobody saw anything.

It became clear to Murrie, pacing the sidewalk, getting sick of her cigarette, grinding it into the ground, that Clownmuffle was not going to die. She would have already. Kyubey would keep begging them otherwise. Nothing Murrie said or didn't say mattered. Clownmuffle didn't need her. Her "best friend." Clownmuffle needed nobody. Steph said all relationships were founded on power, mental or physical or social, that the powerful had to cede some of it for the relationship to work, but not too much because true equality would stagnate and deflate the connection. Clownmuffle never ceded power. She never ceded any part of herself. She could never actually have friends. She would always be the loneliest girl in the world, and she didn't even care. Her friends were clothes. She preferred mannequins.

Murrie suddenly hated everything. She wanted to leave. Everyone waited for Clownmuffle to do something. Gatineau didn't care, and Kyubey, like Murrie, knew nothing he said would make a difference. Kyubey believed a human-to-human conversation might make progress, but he was wrong, because Clownmuffle was not a human being.

Ten minutes later, Clownmuffle stood up. Shakily, wobbling. But she rose. Lifted by her own arms and legs. Mentally steeled to what she had to do to restore herself.

It disgusted Murrie. Clownmuffle disgusted Murrie and Gatineau disgusted Murrie and Murrie disgusted Murrie. As Clownmuffle turned toward Gatineau, Murrie summoned her broomstick.

One day, said Clownmuffle. One day only. Then you heal me.

Not even childhood trauma could stop her. Not even a weakness formed when she was still vulnerable.

Gatineau only smirked, she had anticipated this outcome. Kyubey said nothing. Good. Save the world, Clownmuffle. If you're a force of nature, at least be one for the right side.

So while Clownmuffle descended into the darkness, led by a suddenly gentle hand from Gatineau, Murrie took to the skies, soared over Ottawa, and caught up to the Baroness and the Nazi before they reached their apartment.

This city had an opening now, after all. Maybe she'd take it. Live life with the frivolous and wash her hands of all the shit.

END THIRD ARC

T-I-N-T-I-N-N-A-B-U-L-A-T-I-O-N

FOURTH ARC: WASHINGTON

In recognition of her service, in which she exceeded the expectations of her superiors and displayed intelligence, loyalty, and leadership against the enemies of the Empire, Hegewisch received a promotion.

Cicero's soldiers applauded and congratulated. Higher ranked ones shook her hand. The informal ceremony took place in the lobby of a Cincinnati motel requisitioned as a military command center. A graying-haired motel owner filmed them via smartphone like weren't they just the darnedest kids.

Privately, after she dismissed the soldiers to their various tasks, Cicero approached Hegewisch. "I understand you managed far better than Joliet would have." Her face resolved into perfect emotionlessness. "That's no excuse. Three survivors out of twenty-one. You ought to be hanged."

Hegewisch imagined her own face looked much like Cicero's. "Probably, milady."

"It's good you recognize that. I have no authority to contest your promotion, but I can ensure you wear it better. Attend me tomorrow as we conquer this city and I'll show you true leadership."

Okay.

A sham promotion anyway. Her official rank switched from "Junior Administrator" to "Administrator." She remained tangential to the traditional chain of command and she gained no seniority over anyone to whom she was not already senior. Her direct superior remained the Senior Administrator, AKA the Handmaiden. All that changed was that Hegewisch now had access to documents which had been previously classified. These included files on the Centurions and their lieutenants (including ex-Centurion DuPage), Denver's papers, and stuffy financial documents.

Obviously, they only gave her this promotion because she had witnessed firsthand the abilities of all four Centurions and was the current caretaker of Denver's papers. They didn't really think what she did in Chicago was intelligent or brave. They only needed a pretense to bestow upon her knowledge she already knew.

Joliet, meanwhile, they called to meet the Empress personally. When the order came Joliet looked like she would have rather died to the archon. Nonetheless, two hours after the fighting ended a private helicopter landed and some powerful Magical Girls Hegewisch recognized from Cook's platoon escorted Joliet into it.

Dr. Cho and her homunculi never showed up again, even after the fighting ended. Alongside Clownmuffle and Palos, they were listed as missing in action.

As for Hegewisch and the other survivor, Midlothian, they were instructed to remain with Cicero. Midlothian officially became a member of the platoon, while Hegewisch was designated a "non-combat observer." The girls in the colony of Milwaukee were shifted to hold Chicago, but it was a skeleton force and it became clear the Empress had little interest in maintaining the city itself. Everything in it that mattered now rested in an attaché case chained to Hegewisch's hip.

She also carried the three Soul Gems Palos salvaged before things became truly crazy. But the bodies had assuredly been destroyed in the whirlpool. Even if they hadn't, it would be impossible to locate them, unlike the grief cubes, which Cicero's platoon easily recovered from the yacht's flotsam and jetsam on account of their buoyant containers. In addition to the cubes dropped by the archon, the Empire of Chicago held a weighty reserve, which Cicero's soldiers transported in the cargo bay of the bus they used to trek cross country.

Hegewisch tried to imagine being a corpseless soul, trapped in a shiny stone. Incapable of speech, signals, or any sensation. Sometimes she imagined the gems cried out to her, not exactly telepathy but some kind of empathic transfer of emotion. Their despair burgeoned. What hope might they have? For all they knew, they were still sunken at the bottom of Lake Michigan. Grief cubes had little effect.

In her motel room, which she shared with Lieutenant Berwyn, she placed the gems atop the dresser. Mokena and Munster would surely go tonight. Tinley might last another day. She hoped they went while she slept.

"Paperwork tonight, Lady Hegewisch?" asked Berwyn, back propped on four frumpy pillows and owl eyeglasses focused on a book. Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies*, what else?

"What else," said Hegewisch. She had to sift Denver's papers and inform not only Cicero but also Cook and Aurora about the Magical Girls they might fight in the next city they tried to conquer.

"Aye, it is your job after all. I do not envy you, dear lady, not one whit." She licked a finger and turned a page.

You'll die soon, Hegewisch thought. If she had to guess, she'd say all of them would die soon. The whole thing was coming apart.

The next morning all three Soul Gems were gone. Tinley hadn't lasted longer after all. Maybe Madoka realized the hopelessness and saved herself the effort of a return trip.

Cincinnati. A city with more character in its name than its layout or architecture. Cicero's platoon moved at dawn, after a silent vigil for the three comrades Cycled in the night. The plan was to locate and incapacitate the local girls while they slept. Cicero had two girls with magic-tracking abilities, less sophisticated than Palos's radar, but serviceable. They tracked girls to slums, to hostels, one even to a nice neighborhood. They caught one walking to her elementary school, a fifth grader; she sobbed when Cicero's squads encircled her. Of the seven girls in the area, they apprehended five bloodlessly. Two others, more veteran, tried some crazy stuff, but Cicero's platoon overwhelmed them. It helped that Denver compiled

fairly complete records of the girls in the area, but Hegewisch had to admit: Cicero knew what the fuck to do. Nobody on either side received an injury worse than a broken arm, quickly healed.

Yeah. Maybe Hegewisch could learn something. Now that Denver only existed as a pile of papers in her attaché case. Now that thoughts of Hazel Crest and Calumet and all those other girls kept crowding in. Now that it was far too late and her worthless life had entered overtime, past the point it reasonably ought to have ended.

Yet it was a solace. The military exactitude, the rigorous discipline, the little rituals of rank. The stuff she scoffed at prior. It held a meaning now, she understood its purpose, because these people dealt in life and death and if a millimeter could save their life they ought to work in millimeters. Cicero, Laquesha Kabwe, 16. She contracted at 9, and originated, coincidentally, in this very city, Cincinnati, a pugnacious brat by all accounts (there was only one account—her personal file, in the attaché case) who wished for a pony not because she wanted a pony but because she thought Kyubey was full of shit and called his bluff. She left home because she got sick of her mom scolding her. She wound up in Chicago, entered DuPage's platoon at a time when DuPage was still obligated to lead it herself, had a lot of creative differences, ironed them out, became a lieutenant, and was the obvious first choice when the Centurions expanded from two to four. Biography in bullet point.

So how had DuPage taught her to lead. Or taught her not to lead? Vaguely curious, which was more curiosity than Hegewisch had about much of anything these days, she stood in the corner of Cicero's refitted motel room and watched her coordinate various subgroups and squads.

No more overwrought speeches—they weren't fighting an archon. In fact, the first thing Hegewisch noticed was that Cicero did not communicate with her soldiers directly. She sat legs crossed in a chair as a pair of Tweedledee and Tweedledum subordinates named Lombard and Elmhurst paced animatedly around her and relayed information via magical radios. "Berwyn Team encircling Position A," said one. "Darien Team has visual on Mark B," said the other. They drew and erased maps and diagrams on a portable whiteboard mounted to the motel room wall. Someone had enchanted the shitty box television on the dresser and it displayed the point of view of one of the troops in the field.

"All teams are standing by," said either Lombard or Elmhurst, Hegewisch already mixed them. "Your orders, milady?"

Cicero contemplated. "Berwyn holds. Alsip orients Addison to Mark B. Darien attacks."

The orders were relayed. The precision strike transpired on the television. Darien and three other girls burst through a window and pinned a teenager to her bed before she even rose halfway from it.

"Flawless, milady," said Lomhurst in unison.

"Easy," muttered Hegewisch.

She thought nobody could have possibly heard but Cicero heard. "It was easy because I made it easy, *Administrator*. Were you not engaged against an enemy you vastly outnumbered? Did you not have an entire night between their first and second attack? I ask you, Administrator, why was your situation *not* easy?"

She had any number of excuses. Kyubey fed her enemies information. Her enemies expected a fight. Her enemies were far stronger than a few random girls in Cincinnati. She didn't care enough to list them aloud.

Cicero, however, listed them for her. One by one, each assigned to an outstretched finger. "And I will not claim these weren't reasonable concerns. They were. You were correct to consider them, and I can mention at least two Centurions who wouldn't have. But your response was idiotic. You understood the Incubator was the enemy tactician, yet you assumed a defensive position. You fortified a single area and remained there, motionless. This will never work against an intelligent commander. Given time, they will determine a method to overcome your defenses, and since you refuse to change position, you are giving them as much time as they need."

"The Incubator is a supercomputer, milady." It wasn't a defense of herself, even. She didn't care what coals Cicero raked her over. She just disliked when someone who didn't know something acted like they knew it. "Time makes no difference to him. If we attacked offensively, he could have calculated a method to defeat us in milliseconds. I considered the resources he had available—"

"You failed to consider the Incubator's weaknesses. You placed him upon a pedestal. You respected him too much. Never consider your enemy an idiot; but never consider them a savant, either. The Incubator can conceive of a plan in milliseconds, correct, but could he communicate it? Could he convince his subordinates to follow him in that time? There are leaders who succeed via intelligence, strategy. But there are also leaders who succeed because their soldiers have absolute faith in them, who will operate like limbs of a single body, unquestioning, instantaneous. The Incubator is incapable of having a relationship of such trust. You could have easily thrown his soldiers into disarray even if you didn't throw him into it. But you refused to even consider this option. You should have attacked; you should have trusted your own soldiers. But you and Joliet were essentially the same, cowards who refused to account for the capabilities of your own subordinates. You are marginally more intelligent than Joliet, so you managed to save her and yourself and one other. But I guarantee, in the exact same situation, with the exact same soldiers, all elements the same, I would have succeeded without a single casualty."

Okay.

Hegewisch withdrew from the sliver of investment she had dared put into this conversation. Even if Cicero leaned into it more eagerly, possibly because it finally gave her a chance to display her own intelligence rather than the intelligence the Empress forced her to regurgitate. Lombard and Elmhurst acted proper sycophants and Hegewisch said nothing. The operation resumed and Berwyn Team captured its Mark.

Then Cicero tried to jumpstart it again. "Remember always," she said, unbidden, randomly, "you took command and eighteen girls died. Let that specter haunt you; never exorcise it, no

matter what success you may find in your future."

"To dwell on it would only make me more timid. Milady."

"Then you would have learned the wrong lesson. But since you said that, I know you didn't."

There were no lessons. Only correct things to say to end a conversation, and Hegewisch found one. Cicero did not bother to "teach" Hegewisch afterward and narrowed her concentration on the mission.

The seven Cincinnati girls, once captured, were led into the motel lobby, where Cicero met them, attended by her Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hegewisch in the back near the motel owner who concealed no delight at the officious formality of the proceedings. Cicero demanded the girls kneel, and although some glared, they all did. The elementary girl vibrated with fear and even started to plead: "Please don't kill—" Terminated by Cicero's terse command for silence.

The silence hovered. Cicero presided, tallest woman in the room by seemingly an entire two feet, and regarded each face in turn. More than just the elementary student trembled. Few met her gaze. The silence stretched. Hegewisch checked her watch. Sorry. Her "chronometer."

"So fascinating," said the motel owner, more rings than fingers and even more bird dipper toys on her desk. "Are you in their club?"

The motel owner was allowed to talk. Hegewisch was not. So Hegewisch only looked at the bird dippers as they dipped up, dipped down.

"The metropolis of Cincinnati," said Cicero finally, "including its various sub- and exurban satellites, has fallen under the inquisition of the Holy Order of Chicago, claimed in the name of its munificent Empress, and as such shall henceforth be referred to as the Territory of Cincinnati, and its government shall be colonial in nature."

Nobody knew what that meant.

"Which of you is the primary Puella Magi of this region?"

Cicero already knew. Denver's file on the girl included a picture raided from the Selfie board. (Clownmuffle meter: 4 out of 10.) The question was whether the girl would announce it herself or wait for her six fellows to turn their gazes toward her.

She chose the former. "Me."

"I," said Cicero, "the Empress's stalwart paladin, Second Centurion Cicero, am now your superior, so you shall address me as 'milady.'"

A frigid pause.

"Milady."

"Correct. And you have inhabited this city how long?"

"Five months as head, two years as not. One week in Detroit."

Cicero remained solid. Fixed. A statue. She said: "I failed to hear you."

"Two and a half years."

"I do not hear those who do not provide the respect due my station."

Cincinnati's face scrunched. She probably didn't care about groveling. But the motel owner's gleeful giggle struck her in the gut. Embarrassment. To blather such idiocy in view of a normal human. Shame. Possibly an intentional tactic by Cicero. Hegewisch had heard Cicero eschewed corporal punishment of misbehaving cadets. She preferred more creative measures of coercion. Rationally, it made sense, because Magical Girls dampened pain, so force mattered less if it weren't lethal. But Hegewisch the Bookkeeper peered into her mental copy of Cicero's newly-declassified file, into the years she spent first as a grunt in DuPage's platoon and then as DuPage's second, and had to wonder what sorts of coercion DuPage undertook? A girl who conjured despair. She transformed that despair into wraiths normally but could she wield it physically, transfer it into the soul of another the way Hegewisch could?

Hegewisch blinked; the ritual had resumed. Cincinnati must have stooped, for now Cicero fractured her statuesque posture to pace before the seven kneeling captives, head tilted so her chin reached the same level of her nose. "The Empress, in her infinite Munificence, extends an offer toward each of you, one you are at perfect liberty to accept or deny. Her offer, in its entirety, is so: You may maintain your stations in this metropolis, as members of its new Territorial Government. In fact, your status within these regional bounds will not even diminish; thus, the Puella Magi now known as Cincinnati will become the Governor of Cincinnati, a rank only beneath that of the Centurions." She spoke this jargon as though everyone understood it crystalline clear. She turned on a jagged heel and nearly wrenched up a tuft of carpet. "The Empire will not even require of you a tithe or tribute in the form of some percentage of your grief cube intake. No, the only condition the Empress demands in return for her generous terms is your pledged fealty to the Empire and recognition of the Empress as your suzerain."

She ended on the most bogus word of all and this pause was less silent as the seven captives looked to each other in hopes that any of them knew what a suzerain was.

One girl hazarded a guess: "You mean we say you're the boss and you let us stay here like before?"

Cicero stood, arms crossed, regarding a tacky still life of pears on the wall.

"...Milady," the girl added.

"Correct. And as our tributary state, you will also be subject to certain benefits. For instance, in the event of a foreign Puella Magi entering the metropolis with aims to usurp its current rule, the Empire's might will rally to your defense and assure stability. Nomads and marauders will be forced well past the city's walls. Cube famines will be supplanted with

reserves from the Empire's bounteous stores. And your highest representative will have a voice in certain matters regarding the Empire's internal statutes."

The general mood of the captives lifted. Some of those benefits sounded good. But a wiser one added:

"What's the catch, milady? Or do you just want to decorate a map with thumbtacks? You must want something from us too, right?"

Cicero began to detail the Empire's many prohibitions and expected modes of conduct. The smiles faded, not into frowns, but into befuddlement. Did the Empire go through all this trouble of conquest only to turn them into Jehovah's Witnesses?

"And," added Cicero, "if the Empire goes to war, you must bolster its ranks."

More discontent. Magical Girls had enough of their own battles to fight someone else's.

"You may accept these terms or deny them," said Cicero. "If you deny them, you will not be harmed in any way. However, you will be forced to depart this city and any other city under the Empire's dominion. As of the last report this morning, this dominion includes Greater Chicago, Greater Milwaukee, Greater Minneapolis, Greater St. Louis, Greater Indianapolis, Greater Louisville, and Greater Detroit."

It was true. Somehow, Cook took down Detroit in one day. Detroit had nearly as many Magical Girls as Cook's platoon, but she did it. When Cicero heard the news, her eye twitched several seconds before she steadied it, and her only verbal response was, "Well." Now, however, she listed it with the same dryness as the others.

"Upon hypothetical refusal, the Empire will supply one of its own soldiers to take your place, so it's only a moderate concern of ours."

The coup de grace. If the Empire sent stooges to stay in Cincinnati, it would limit the freedom of the girls who lived there. So anyone planning on staying would now want the other six to stay too—peer pressure. Cicero really planned this one out. Or did the Empress give her a script to recite? Cicero had always seemed like the Empress's chief automaton, but Hegewisch considered she might have her own brand of ingenuity buried beneath the stilted syntax.

Ultimately, all seven girls agreed to swear fealty. Many seemed to regret their decision when Cicero ordered Lombard and Elmhurst to retrieve from the bus the Empress's life-size portrait before which they were expected to prostrate themselves and give an oath. The motel owner nearly choked in hysterics.

Afterward, Hegewisch actually had to do work. She ran each of the seven through the same question-and-answer spiel she gave all new recruits and chronicled their key information on both paper forms and the hunk-a-junk laptop they gave her.

She wondered whether she would need to also take the information for the girls Cook and Aurora captured.

The answer was yes.

And she had to do it by phone.

Smooshed in the back of Cicero's bus, legs bent against the seat in front of her with the attaché case perched atop them to form a makeshift table, she shouted at girls from Detroit and then Louisville over the purr of the motor and the chatter of Cicero's platoon. Cincinnati conquered, so it was on to the next one, and the next one was Columbus. They planned to reach it before dusk, commandeer a base of operations, and attack the next morning. Hegewisch imagined surprise tactics would work less. Word of the Empire's eastward roll must have leaked by now, even with MagNet off the web.

The bus hit a bump. Hegewisch's pen punctured the paper and stabbed her attaché case. Fuck!

She inspected her attaché case for a mark, but the black ink did not show on the black leather.

She stared at the little indentation the pentip made and stared and stared and as she stared her mind wandered into the depression into the black leather and she thought of the names chronicled of all the girls and all the girls chronicled in that semblance of heaven and her hands went taut and the pen slipped through her fingers.

No. No. Back away. Back away.

Calumet. Hazel Crest. Denver.

Not her fault.

Let that specter haunt you.

Fuck you Cicero. Fuck you fuck you fuck Cicero.

You took command and eighteen girls died.

And she knew all their names, ages, wishes, dreams, the people they wanted to be, their ideals, all of it, in her little spreadsheet, and after the fact she had to retrieve the file of each and mark it DECEASED.

Her chest tightened, her eyes blurred, then like a sensation of faintness when the blood rushes out of your head it passed, she sat back, she breathed. It didn't matter. It didn't matter, they died and they didn't matter. This world fucked them, not Hegewisch. This world and its fucked up system, where those who suffer most get rewarded simply for suffering. If the world didn't work like that, then maybe they wouldn't have had to suffer. Hegewisch didn't make them suffer more than they had been destined to suffer the moment they wished their silly wishes.

Okay.

"You dropped this, milady."

A minimal hand held her pen. The hand belonged to Midlothian.

Hegewisch took the pen. She wrote, under Country of Birth, *Philippines*. Unfortunately, Midlothian sat next to her.

"I am occupied," said Hegewisch.

"I know." Seated, she was close enough to whisper. "I won't take long. I just want to say, thank you. You saved my life. Flossmoor and Palos too, and Lady Joliet. Thank you."

Midlothian bowed her head, rose, and hurried back to her seat.

Hegewisch wrote, under Age, *11*.

They arrived in Columbus. Some fringe suburb, anyway. Cicero set her bloodhounds Hinsdale and Hodgkins on the trail of local girls while Lombard and Elmhurst oversaw the unloading of relevant supplies from the bus. Hegewisch and Lieutenant Berwyn handled the acquisition of lodging.

Berwyn leaned over the counter and effected a jaunty arch in her lumbar, teetered on toetips as she jostled her enormous circular glasses and grinned. "Salutations sir! Have you perchance a handful of vacancies in this establishment?"

This rotund, pinball-head man lacked the glitzy aplomb of the motel owner from Cincinnati. Shirtsleeves rolled until they could no longer squeeze past the slabs of his upper arms, he averted his stare from a handheld device upon which a droll video played. Whacky sound effects continued as he sized up Berwyn and her attaché case-carrying companion and said, "We have a vacancy."

"Aye my fine fellow, I've gathered so much already, unless your lighted sign in the parking lot deceived. But mayhap you misheard: Vacancies, I asked, plural—I've twenty friends in search of warm beds—"

"Twenty-one," intoned Hegewisch.

"Twenty-one aye, thank you, thank you friend Hegewisch. Twenty-one plus myself, that's twenty-two. Thus I ask, as to the total number of vacancies..."

The man stared, mouth half open. A banana peel slipping sound played. "Twenty-two, girls?"

"Aye-aye. We're exceptional pupils of St. Ursula's School for Young Females in Chicago, Illinois. A school trip—a convention—prospective collegiate opportunities, *quite* the excitement." She let a hand flip over onto its back so that it hung lazily on her wrist. "What say you, good gentleman? Our school will compensate our expenses."

Based on the parking lot, the lodging existed. The man rolled the fat on his neck to tilt his head. SPROING, went his device. If necessary, Cicero's platoon had a girl named River Forest whose power reduced one's capacity for rational thought. With her, it would not only be trivial to convince the man to allow them to stay but also barter a discount. Cicero doubted the former reason would prove necessary, and considered the latter immoral, so they had left her with the others, to use only as a last resort.

Berwyn herself seemed capable of reducing reason. One leg folded up until her heel nearly touched her ass and her foot revolved in slow circles along its ball joint. She giggled and stuck her tongue out at the man, twisted and chewed a lock of her dark hair. But the man was insensible to her wiles. His focus fell on their white suits, then Hegewisch's attaché case.

"Yeh sure. The rates..."

After they finalized the transaction, Berwyn hugged Hegewisch hard enough to lift her off the ground, squeezed until Hegewisch could no longer breathe, and eventually released her.

"Excellent work, Lady Administrator!"

Hegewisch said two words the whole time, depending on whether you counted the hyphen.

Afterward, Berwyn got called to a strategy meeting with Cicero and the platoon's lesser authority figures, including the might-as-well-be-twins, Addison, and Darien. (Hegewisch wasn't invited, although her Columbus files were readily accepted.) Darien, the girl with the gigantic sword who "rescued" Hegewisch from the slugs in the seaside restaurant, had no current rank, but her youth and ability indicated she had a bright future in the Empire. Everyone knew Cicero had been grooming her with the aim of making her a lieutenant, possibly even a Centurion in a few years. After all, if Cicero had a flaw in the context of Imperial dogma, it had to be the individual inferiority of her soldiers. Cicero herself could be the strongest, staunchest, smartest, swiftest; anathema to the material sins rumored to plague her senior Centurions; reading the books the Empress liked, saying the speeches in words the Empress liked to hear; but in many ways her undying ability hampered that of those beneath her. The hands-off style of DuPage had given real leadership experience to her lieutenants, so that two were now Centurions and another the Governor of Milwaukee. Cicero had suffered mediocre Berwyn since the start. Nobody else in Cicero's platoon had accomplished anything that wasn't an accomplishment of Cicero first and foremost. Darien was the hope to stifle that trend, but Hegewisch had no firsthand experience to tell if Darien actually had potential or if it were mere hype.

She knew nothing about Darien, honestly. Just her name, age, country of birth, wish, date contracted, previous occupations, previous living arrangements, virginity status, sexuality— Wait. She stopped in front of her motel door. Wasn't Darien from...?

Hegewisch sifted her attaché case and retrieved Darien's file. She read and reread the history to confirm what she had already memorized. But when she first memorized it five months prior, it held no relevance; now, a circumstance had changed.

There: Darien spent her first three months as a Magical Girl in none other than San Bernardino, California. The twin cities of Murrieta and Temecula, to be exact. Given the timeline, she must have been the girl called Murrieta-Temecula right before Palos took the mantle.

She couldn't tell whether this coincidence mattered. Clownmuffle probably forgot Darien existed—although the same couldn't be said the other way around. Still, who even was Darien? A name in a paper. An austere girl with intense eyes and short hair. Hegewisch had never spoken to her except during her initial interview.

Shrugging to herself, she slid the file back into her attaché case. Meaningless. Upon the push of a keycard, her door unlocked and she stepped inside.

Her room was not unoccupied. Two girls were inside. They were not members of Cicero's platoon. They were not members of Chicago. They weren't even girls from Columbus, although they were assuredly Magical Girls. Hegewisch blinked, she recognized one of the pair, although she couldn't place the face.

The one she recognized sat cross-legged atop the bed farthest from the door. Her chin rested on a thatch of interlaced fingers. Her eyelids were closed serenely; she seemed to meditate. She wore a cape, light armor (mostly around her tits), and an uneven skirt expertly perched upon her folded legs. Blue color scheme.

Blue hair.

Who did Hegewisch know with blue hair?

The other, at the lampstand in the corner, rocked in a chair and devoured a plate of cheese.

"Laila," said the first, eyes unopened. "Nice to meetcha. Heard a lot about you."

It clicked.

"Sayaka... Miki." Madoka Kaname's best friend. Before someone else strongarmed the title. "You died. You became a. A."

"A witch. In the world you know about, yeah. But in this world witches don't exist. Something else happens to Magical Girls whose souls become corrupted."

Hegewisch draped her attaché case on the unoccupied bed and stood at its foot. She made sure to keep something between her and Sayaka, and rested a wary eye on the cheese eater.

"No need for all the tension." Sayaka opened her eyes, bounced off the mattress, nearly hit her head on the ceiling but didn't, and landed atop the rounded knob of a wooden post at her bed's corner. She perched there and leaned forward until her face was level with Hegewisch's again. "You already have a good idea who I am, so lemme introduce my partner. Nagisa! Quit stuffing your face already and let's do what we came here for."

Nagisa ceased funneling food into her mouth to whine. "But come onnnnnn! You don't need me for this anyway!"

"We're representatives of Madoka. If we look bad, she looks bad, and right now you look really bad, got it?"

A forked wedge of gouda already in her mouth, she said: "YUH loohh baah!"

"Forget her." Sayaka stepped off the bedpost, spronged off the bed, and landed on her heels with her hands clasped behind her back. She wobbled back and forth, although it was clear from her positioning she wanted to block Hegewisch's view of her partner. "You and I have some stuff to talk about."

The whole time Hegewisch had watched with stupefaction. Finally given the chance, she expelled the pent-up breath in her chest, pulled off her ring, and tossed it onto the bed. "Fine. Go ahead."

At first, Sayaka didn't seem to understand. Then she burst out laughing. "Give me a break! You really think I'd come all this way to do something like that? I know you got some kinda problem with Madoka, but seriously? You think we're a hit squad?"

"I hoped," said Hegewisch, putting the ring back on.

"Madoka isn't even that upset with you," Sayaka continued, "relatively speaking. Yeah, you made some mistakes, and knowing what you know you really oughtta have known better, but she's forgiven way worse than you before. *You* know how she is."

Hegewisch remembered her look when she came to retrieve Calumet and Hazel Crest. She could debate the point, but the point was moot. It had happened, whether Hegewisch should have done it or not.

"And sure, *I* could yammer on about what a big idiot you are, and how many mistakes you've made despite having a better understanding of the way this universe works than most, but I'm not here for that either—"

"How are they. Calumet and Hazel Crest."

"Karen and Miyuki are doing great. We're doing our best to get them accommodated, and we got another of yours too, Chelsea." Chelsea—had to mean Griffith. "Things have changed in the past few days, so there's been a shake up for everyone, but ya do what ya gotta, right?"

She swayed, she tapped her heels, she jostled the hilt of her sword and caused it to clink. Nagisa scarfed in the background. It was all very animated, all very lively, and Hegewisch had to work herself up to the question:

"And Denver."

"Denver, Denver. Miss Sage Rhys. Yup. We got her too. Weird situation with all those souls in one gem, but we made sure to untangle em."

"To tangle them again in a different gem."

"Yeah yeah, you could look at it like that, but look at me. I'm part of the Law of the Cycles just like them and I'm still myself. Look. I get you got misgivings, but I'm telling you, it's really not bad at all."

Hegewisch smiled. "You didn't answer my question. How's Denver."

Sayaka quit swaying. But she, too, was smiling. "One, you didn't ask *how* she was before. And two, if you don't quit that annoying habit of asking questions without saying them like they're a question I'm gonna pretend you're not asking any questions at all."

Another witty evasion. Hegewisch remembered Denver, at the end. Tired, worn. Saying it was okay. She wanted out of where she was, and Hegewisch did the worst thing possible and put her into the frying pan instead.

"Look." Sayaka hammocked her head in her hands as she bent back to Matrix levels of absurdity. Her movements, she reminded Hegewisch of someone, but today was the day people sparked a memory and the spark fizzled. "Sage is gonna be fine. We even considered sending her to talk to you instead, but she's still too new for a sensitive job like this. Course if I knew how useless my actual partner was gonna wind up being I might've asked for Sage anyway..."

Nagisa stuck out a tongue.

"But man, look at me! Talking and talking and never getting to the point. Guess that'll happen. So let's cut to the quick and start on a more direct foot, yeah? First thing: You, Laila, are supposed to be dead."

Did this flighty bitch want Hegewisch's ring or not? Hegewisch had started to remember the things she knew about the illustrious Miss Miki, and those things were not pretty. The idea that someone could fall into fatal despair *over a fucking boy* was so cutely petty that it transcended pathetic and became a sad stereotype of the teenage female. Fantastic person to lecture Hegewisch over what happened in Chicago. Hopefully the tactical meeting would end early so Berwyn could show up and end this farce.

But the less terrible people never showed up when the truly terrible ones demanded your attention and Sayaka continued uninterrupted. "By that I mean, like, in the cosmic fate sort of way. Not whether you deserve to be dead or not, that's a different argument and honestly I'd say, you don't." Oh thanks Sayaka. "Being basically God, Madoka exists outside of time and thus knows all that has ever happened and all that ever will, as if she's seeing the entire timeline at the same time? Get that? I know this kinda stuff's not the easiest to wrap your head around, heh-heh. But basically, you should have died in Chicago yesterday. It was fated to happen. Karma, maybe that's a better word."

"Then why don't you kill me already. I swear I don't mind."

Sayaka rolled her eyes. "Oh please. You don't mean that, or it'd show in your Soul Gem. Anyway, it's not even a major problem that you're alive. At least it's not a problem now. You can keep on living a full natural life and you're not going to do anything too important one way or another."

Oh. Thanks Sayaka.

"But you see, the problem is you're not the only alive person who shoulda died. Let's see, there's you... Your friend Charlie, of course, she started the whole thing—Hannah—and one more, the big one. Christine."

Charlie was Clownmuffle. Hannah was Midlothian. Christine, of course, was the progeny of their dear Empress, Joliet. What other given name would she have?

"So," said Hegewisch, "any idea why four people who were cosmically fated to die should be alive?"

"Yeeeeeeeah, welllllll..." Sayaka nudged the television stand with her bootheel. "I don't wanna blame you, because this time you really did have the right intentions, so let's just say that Madoka did something she shouldn't have, and you were the one who asked her to do it."

Hegewisch closed her eyes; of course. She should have expected from the onset. When she convinced Madoka not to take Clownmuffle away via Cycles, to let Hegewisch siphon her despair instead. That was it. A turning point in cosmic fate.

"That's right. Your friend Charlie was past the threshold where the Law of the Cycles should have taken her, but you saved her instead. And because a law of the universe got broken, all bets were off. The timeline completely rewrote itself after that moment. And it just so happens that it rewrote itself in a very, very, very... bad way."

To a point it made sense. Without an alive Clownmuffle, Hegewisch, Midlothian, and Joliet all would have died in Chicago. But her sheer indomitable will kept them alive in a hopeless situation.

Nagisa shrieked. Sayaka drew her blade and four more flashed under her fluttering cloak as she wheeled around in combat stance and roved her eyes wildly in search of some combatant. None existed, but out of Nagisa's mound of cheese had emerged a white, fluffy head.

So that's the explanation! Although I knew that the Law of the Cycles was originally a human named Madoka Kaname, I expected that upon ascension to conceptual entity her free will would become a moot point. I'm afraid I must express disappointment with how irresponsible this Goddess of yours has acted.

"Look buddy we know well enough ourselves," said Sayaka. Nagisa recovered from her astonishment and prodded Kyubey with her fork.

It had always been a certainty that if Miss Luce were allowed to pursue her ambitions, it would result in a cataclysmic reversal of this planet's fortunes. And while certain circumstances made it necessary to concentrate particularly powerful Magical Girls with a specific set of unique skills under her dominion, I always had a contingency plan to neutralize her while expending minimal resources. Were it not for the unexpected abatement of the Law of the Cycles, my plan would have—

Sayaka pointed her sword at him. "Don'tcha think a plan that relies on so many tiny things happening exactly a certain way is prone to fail?"

"Especially if that plan relies on Clownmuffle of all people dying," said Hegewisch.

Even if Miss Vizcarra survived, which I did not expect, I had the backup plan of causing the creation of an archon to ensure the younger Miss Luce's death. The problem was that not only did she survive, but another unexpected thing occurred—You, Miss Chatterjee, took command in Miss Luce's stead. And while you were not an adept commander, your

formulation of any plan at all ran counter to my expectations. Truthfully, I had expected you would flee before the fighting even commenced in earnest.

Hegewisch leaned against the door and drummed her fingers upon the dull iron handle. Fleeing, yeah, that was probably what she herself would have expected she would do... And why hadn't she?

"That's your whole problem, furball," said Sayaka. "You always underestimate we silly humans. Maybe if you'd realize we're not all as dumb as you think, you wouldn't be, what, 0 for 3 in big cosmic fuckups right now?"

I'm more inclined to believe that Miss Chatterjee's encounter with the Law of the Cycles that night influenced her in some way. But while these errors in my calculations must be accounted for in future plans, discussing them will not bring us any closer to the resolution of our current predicament.

"Yeah," said Hegewisch. "So how about you two sort out how to solve this big mess. I'll be anywhere else."

In uncanny, unnatural unison, so that afterward Sayaka shot Kyubey an almost disgusted glare (Kyubey's expression did not change), the two of them said: "Because we need you." Well, Kyubey thought it, but that only made their synchronicity all the more disconcerting.

"Why."

After a hesitant pause, in which Sayaka waited to make sure Kyubey wouldn't echo her again, she said, "Because right now you're prrrrobably our best bet to rewrite it back the way it should be."

Dubious.

"For real," said Sayaka, "it's true. Well. You know a certain someone in a high place."

"The Empress."

"Millie, Millicent, whatever she wants to be called. But yeah. You're probably the only person she'll listen to. The only person who can convince her not to do the thing she's currently planning on doing. She thinks you're an emissary of God, and whether that's true or not if you tell her God doesn't want her doing what she's doing, maybe she'll actually buy it. If I told her she'd just say, who the hell are you?"

The simplest and most effective solution would be to ensure the death of Christine Luce, her daughter. However, that objective can no longer be achieved with high certainty of success, as the defenses surrounding her have increased significantly and the resources at my disposal grow thinner and thinner. There simply does not exist a force strong enough in this region. Although I must wonder why the multitudinous number of souls within the Law of the Cycles could not render trivial this problem with a single concerted strike on the priority targets.

"Because we're not murderers!"

If not murder, then why not prematurely take Christine Luce via the Law of the Cycles? If Madoka Kaname is capable of suspending a universal law on a whim, then certainly—

"That's murder. That's *murder*, furball. Taking someone before their time—"

Even if it were murder, as you say, it would prevent a terrible calamity. Is the life of one human being prized so highly? Nobody else would need to die. Not even the mother. Without Christine Luce, nothing can be achieved.

"That's not even true. We know a lot more than you do, there are other problems than just Christine."

Regardless, the death of Christine Luce would cause her mother to abandon her ambitions. That much is at least correct?

"Yeah but you're missing the point!"

This conversation no longer seemed to concern Hegewisch at all, despite their protests to the contrary. She stood in it, limp, worthless, a tertiary actor on its periphery, an extra with her face half-observed by a carelessly placed prop.

"Madoka's killed before," Hegewisch said. "I saw it. Mami Tomoe. In order to save a life."

"You can bet," said Sayaka, fingers gripped around the edges of the table, her casual demeanor sapped, a sharp-arched twist in her eyebrows, "you can bet we've discussed all these things and more among ourselves up there. If you want a more practical reason, then let's say that if Madoka breaking the Law of the Cycles once caused something unexpectedly awful to happen, then us running around and killing people might spark something even worse."

Perhaps if you were willing to coordinate with me, we could calculate the exact outcome of such an action—

"We're definitely not working with you. We know if you get the chance you'll try to capture her or worse."

"Don't you have a friend who can turn back time," said Hegewisch. "Or did she die in this universe?"

Sayaka wheeled around. "We're definitely not working with *her*."

Hegewisch shrugged. Alright. Let's just go around having every moral quibble possible so we can let something awful happen to the whole world. Let's be afraid, because we messed up something by meddling once, that if we meddle again it'll only get worse. Hegewisch wanted to fling in their faces, of all things, Cicero's words, not to grow timid from failure, to move forward and strike with boldness, because it seemed clear that the solution to this obnoxiously vague calamity was to kill Joliet so they ought to just fucking do that. Who was even calling the shots in the Law of the Cycles? Because Madoka would kill. If it meant protecting something she cared about, she would strike down even someone she considered a

friend. Even if it tore her apart inside, she would do it, and she would not hesitate. But Sayaka Miki, whose altruism refused to bend, even when the winds of the world battered against her, who spiraled into self-destruction only to prove a point about righteousness, this adamant refusal sounded more like her wheelhouse. Had the souls in the Law of the Cycles actually discussed this like Sayaka said? If so, had Madoka been cowed to the side of blindness by the impassioned arguments of someone far more pigheaded? Hegewisch could imagine it. She could imagine that stupid, useless God listening to this drivel.

"I don't get what's got everyone so worked up," said Nagisa. She had given up on her cheese, it had fur in it. "Right now there's a chance Laila can solve everything without violence. If that doesn't work, then we can think about what to do next."

Somehow, she spoke sense. Sayaka's body sagged, swiveled like a tin figure on a jerky mechanism, until she stood straight and arms crossed. "Right."

The plan with the highest chance of success should be pursued first—

"Nobody's asking you! We didn't even invite you to this meeting and you don't know the half of it." Sayaka swept across the room, took Hegewisch in confidentially, and whispered: "He doesn't know the half of it. If he ever says you need to do something, just remember we're past his area of expertise."

Hegewisch had to imagine they were past anyone's area of expertise now.

Sayaka drew away, cape aflutter, flopping back onto the bed Hegewisch decided would belong to Berwyn, bouncing back flowing like liquid over its edge and onto the floor, at which point she kicked herself back upright with a flurry of whirlwind leg motions. The movement, it reminded Hegewisch of someone, she kept wanting to say Clownmuffle, but it wasn't Clownmuffle, Clownmuffle was airy and buoyant, Sayaka was liquid and angles, but who had it been? That moved this way. She stared; Sayaka gave a sheepish grin.

"Sorry, whenever I get a chance to come down here I gotta stretch my legs a bit y'know? Anyway, where were we. Okay. Yeah. We're running low on time, but right now, all you need to do is convince your Empress lady, Millie Luce, convince her to stop doing what she's doing."

The idea that this conversation might end revived Hegewisch a little and she said: "Why should I? I don't know what she's doing and I see her hardly ever and I doubt I have as much influence as you seem to think. I don't know what this big catastrophe is and you've described it in the most generic terms possible. Why should I care? I'd rather not do this tapdance again."

The catastrophe in question—

"Just trust us—it's bad." More urgent. Abrupt. Cutting Kyubey off. "You're better off not knowing the specifics. Lots of people will die, that should tell you all you need to know. Lots—like, millions."

Bullshit.

No, seriously, bullshit.

If they wanted to make her care, they should know they needed specificity. They could calculate her emotions and actions to the slimmest margin, so they ought to know what would convince her and what wouldn't. Wasting time could hardly be an excuse given how much time they already wasted. Why not tell her? Wouldn't it help her prevent it if she knew what she was trying to prevent? She wouldn't be surprised in all their plotting and planning they forgot about Laila Chatterjee the person, and honestly she could not blame them because she wished she could forget about herself. But something in Sayaka's tone...

"Look. You're going to speak to your Empress again before she puts her plan into effect. When there's still a chance to stop her. She'll ask to speak to you, because whether you believe her or not she's got some inner conflict herself and she sees you as a way to resolve it. Normally, you wouldn't say anything. You'd tell her exactly what she wants to hear and get out as fast as you can. But we need you, Laila. We need you to tell her what you *know* is right—Because you're a good person, Laila, despite everything you tell yourself to the contrary, and the mistakes you've made, you're a good person. Madoka believes in you, and so do I. So please, to save thousands, millions of lives, will you do this?"

To get out as fast as she could, Hegewisch told her exactly what she wanted to hear and said, "Yes."

"I don't believe her," said Nagisa.

I suspect she's lying, said Kyubey.

"Yeah, I'm sure she's lying." Sayaka kicked at nothing. "But I think, given what we've told her, when she does meet the Empress again, she'll come to see things differently. She's not as bad a person as she likes to think."

I'd rather not stake the viable production rate of this planet on something so tenuous. I've prepared a backup plan. While I must admit its odds of success are less than half, they are still high enough to make the gamble worthwhile. At least I gleaned some useful information from this conversation.

Kyubey burrowed back into Nagisa's cheese and vanished. Nagisa no longer looked to eager to eat.

"Kyubey has no clue how bad things are gonna get," said Sayaka. "Ignore anything he says—honestly, we all should know that by now. Laila, please. I know you don't like us. I know you don't like me, or even Madoka. I know you don't think this world, this system is perfect. I know you think Madoka's an idiot for not making it better. But just because the world's flawed doesn't mean you should give up on it. It's easy to act all detached like you don't give a damn about anything—it's easy to do that and cover up everything you don't like. But if you do that you're hurting someone else. Kyubey wants you not to care. Everyone who wants to hurt you wants you not to care, wants you to let them do it. Just remember that."

The speech was timed perfectly because at the final word Hegewisch heard footsteps approach the door and the rattle of a keycard entering a slot. Sayaka danced back, yanked

Nagisa out of her chair, and drew her cloak over them both. When the cloak fluttered to the ground, both Sayaka and Nagisa had disappeared.

Berwyn entered. "Ello poppet, now well isn't this a cozy chamber?"

"That's your bed," Hegewisch pointed.

"Righty-o. What's this you got here?" She stooped and grabbed Sayaka's discarded cloak.

"Oh! This is so cool! Is this yours?"

"The last guest must have left it."

"Then you don't mind if I, ahem, procure it for myself, do you?" Berwyn slung it around her shoulders and examined herself in the tall mirror on the bathroom door.

"It doesn't adhere to dress code," Hegewisch intoned.

"It'll be our little secret. After all, wouldn't want anyone learning about your secret activities in the shower, aye poppet?"

What a cute bluff. Hegewisch never did anything in the shower except stare at her feet.

KILLTACULAR, KILLTROCITY, KILIMANJARO

KILL HER. They tried to wake her at 4 AM. No hint of sun but Berwyn screeching an emo song in the shower while one of Elmhurst and Lombard pounded the door, "Five minute warning, five minute warning." They'd expect her to be presentable in that time and Berwyn was already in the shower so why fucking bother. Hegewisch drilled her head into her pillow and prayed for sleep, one hour, five, until noon, sleep forever.

In the past two days she had gained some empathy for DuPage.

Berwyn emerged in a plume of steam and an enchilada towel still singing, so Hegewisch had no hope. She peeled herself off the bed.

Columbus was deserted. They found only one local girl, who explained that Kyubey warned them the Empire was coming and exhorted them to organize and retaliate. Instead, everyone fled, except this one girl, who couldn't give less of a shit. Hegewisch processed her while Cicero tried to transmute disappointing anticlimax into valiant triumph, then they continued their Napoleonic quest.

The final city on their list: Baltimore. Seven hours away plus a rendezvous with Cook platoon in Pittsburgh. In the back of the bus, Hegewisch's company became Cicero and her cadre of chief subordinates: Berwyn, Darien, Lomhurst, Addison.

"How can she already be in Philadelphia," said Cicero, fuming but muted enough. "The plan was clear—she was to wait in Pittsburgh so I could supply her with more cubes."

The news came only a half hour previous: Cook wouldn't be waiting in Pittsburgh. Despite having the most difficult cities to conquer, she was conquering them faster than Cicero and far faster than Aurora.

"She's playing games with the lives of her soldiers," said Cicero. "She's already lost two to the Cycles. Plus she's killing the ones she fights against."

"Pyrrhic victories," offered Berwyn.

Cicero occupied a two-person seat by herself, endless legs stretched into the central section, body arched over the seat in front of her, where Lombard and Elmhurst stooped to accommodate. "There is no excuse for a soldier of the Empire to perish to the Cycles. Not with our resources. That she's allowed *two* indicates wanton disregard. And she has zero excuse for not waiting for our resupply."

"A race," said Darien. In opposition to Cicero, she leaned into her seat and allowed her head to roll along its top, which quite considerably put it directly into Hegewisch's face. "Three Centurions, four cities each. Comparisons would always arise. She intends to prove she's superior."

"She's terrified of your ambition, milady," said Elmhurst. Lombard's eyes narrowed at her companion.

"If that's so, she's committed an error," said Cicero. "Her Munificence the Empress cherishes above all the lives of her soldiers."

"Meanwhile Aurora..." Darien swiveled a finger above her head.

Nobody needed mention Aurora. The statistics spoke for themselves. Still stuck in Nashville, the second city on her list, and with five casualties. The expenditures in grief cubes reported by her newly-appointed lieutenant increased at an exponential rate. Ominously, a significant swath of these expenditures went to Aurora herself.

"That woman should never have been appointed Centurion," said Cicero. "Her magic has tainted her. She's too accustomed to her circle of safety. She never makes proactive moves."

Aurora's ability was classified, and Cicero danced close to revealing key details about it to her subordinates—not to mention criticism of a Centurion. The casualness of the conversation surprised Hegewisch either way. Well, the casualness of Cicero—the others mostly professed affirmations of Cicero's thoughts. Springboards. Maybe this wasn't a conversation but Cicero enveloped in an onanistic circle, resolving and developing her positions out the echoes of her mind's quietest whispers. Maybe Berwyn, Darien, the rest weren't individuals but shades of Cicero's own mind, as for years she had imprinted the force of her personality upon them, tinted their natural colors, so that they were now a collection of many-hued Ciceros in conversation with one another.

"Centurion Aurora is newly promoted, we must remember," said Berwyn, the empathic Cicero. "We can be charitable to our hardworking sister, can we not? To only just be placed in command of a platoon and then embark on conquest, surely missteps are expected...?"

"Everyone understands she has been the true commander of that platoon for annum," said Darien. "Centurion DuPage—"

"No. DuPage always existed as an entity even when her presence was not immediately felt." Cicero pressed her clasped hands to her lips and stared between the heads of Lomhurst. "Her death affected that platoon deeply. Affected Aurora deeply."

"Yes, Lady DuPage's untimely decease has affected all her former lieutenants deeply—"

Cicero reached across the bus and seized Darien by her short hair to draw taut her neck and karate chop it. Darien wheezed and flecks of saliva rained on Hegewisch's paper. The punishment wasn't meant to be painful—Cicero could have karate chopped her head off. But it did shut her up.

And in the silence of the most rambunctious shard of Cicero, the conversation became even more circuitous and yes-milady. Hegewisch sat through seven hours of it.

It kept Hegewisch from chewing on Sayaka Miki at least, on the vague encroaching catastrophe and Hegewisch's dubious role as The One Woman Who Can Make A Difference.

When they reached Baltimore and Hegewisch had a room to herself while Berwyn attended a strategy meeting, she booted up her hunk of junk laptop and entered the wifi password on the back of her keycard. It took ten years for a page to load and she drummed her fingers as images entered existence row of pixels by row of pixels. Sayaka Miki had said one thing of interest. One solitary thing, and only because of Hegewisch's addiction to knowing every useless fact about every member of the Empire, of which now only an infinitesimal number remained classified to her. But Sayaka Miki let slip the name of one of those few.

She typed into the search bar: Millicent Luce.

She waited five minutes. She clicked the first result.

She waited five more minutes.

She read:

Millicent Dorothea "Millie" Luce (born October 11, 1977) is an American politician serving as the junior United States Senator from Illinois since 2010 and a member of the Democratic Party.

Oh. Okay.

Hegewisch sat back in her chair and considered exact surprise factor of this development. She had imagined businesswoman maybe. The idea that politics existed was alien. The idea of a government that was not the Empire or the anarchistic lawlessness of ordinary Magical Girl livelihood could not cohere. United States Senator, Democratic Party, these terms made no sense, and not because she spent most of her life in Canada.

The page had a picture, but it loaded far too slowly and either way Hegewisch suspected the woman it showed would look nothing like the Empress she knew beyond a general connectivity of prim put-togetherness.

She scrolled down the page. Risen from humble origins in Eufaula, Alabama, attended University of Chicago both master's and undergrad in something called "Comparative Human Development"... Nothing to suggest a life-upending event in her early teens. Upon graduation she remained in the city, became a "community organizer," snowballed prominence. Then she reached the heading **United States Senate**, subheading **2010 Election**, upon which the article deviated on a bizarre tangent, mentioning President Barack Obama (who she knew) and Governor Rod Blagojevich (who she didn't), discussing some Roland Burris who declined to run for reelection in face of scandal, Hegewisch skimmed—Millie Luce reemerged at last, defeating Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias in the Democratic primary due to, blah-de-blah, support from the suburban fringe around Chicago, which then led to narrow (5,000 vote) victory over Representative Mark Kirk in the election proper.

This alien world collided facefirst into Hegewisch's. Outside of Obama's lordly, distant, transient watermark hovering sometimes in her periphery none of this had ever meant anything to her and suddenly she was mingled inextricably with it. The remaining headings indicated topics like **Policy Positions**, **Caucus Memberships**, **Committee Assignments**. Hegewisch learned about her Empress's lukewarmly liberal positions on gun control, gay

marriage, climate change, taxation. A tiny **Personal Life** section mentioned a divorce and a lone daughter, Christine. If the world knew about Joliet did they not also know about the fucking one hundred teenage girls Millicent Dorothea "Millie" Luce had abducted into a personal army? Here's a heading: **Philanthropy**. Millie Luce funded a nonprofit organization to shelter runaway girls. Holy shit, it was right there in the article, had nobody looked into this organization? Did this organization have a website? It fucking did. She clicked its link and waited for it to load.

St. Ursula's Runaway and Homeless Youth Shelter. A phone number and several addresses Hegewisch recognized: the barracks of each platoon. Who took the calls? It had to be the Handmaiden. What did they tell all the normal, non-magical young women running away from home? Sorry, no vacancy? Weren't there regulations on this shit? Surely somebody, some official, at some point inspected this organization to ensure it was legitimate? Or *was* it legitimate? They really were runaways after all.

Millie Fucking Luce.

Berwyn opened the door and Hegewisch quickly closed her laptop in a super shady way but Berwyn betrayed no suspicion. She boogied across the carpet too close to Hegewisch for comfort and grabbed her hand and shook it.

"Happy New Year!"

"What," said Hegewisch.

"Of course we've still a few hours to go, but given the time of tomorrow's reveille I wouldn't suggest staying up late enough to celebrate, would you?"

New Years. Tomorrow was 2014. The fireworks would wake her.

Berwyn produced a popper from somewhere and popped it. A tiny spray of confetti flitted to the floor. "Yay!" she said.

"Yay," said Hegewisch.

Fireworks woke her up. She tossed and turned and tried to get back to sleep. Stupid Berwyn slept like a log, dumb grin on her face in the moonlit shine from the window. Hegewisch kept chewing, Sayaka Miki, Millie Luce, Calumet, Hazel Crest. Denver. Chewing and chewing and chewing but it never got into a state to swallow, a tough piece of fat that her teeth condensed into an impenetrable ball and occasionally stretched into its sinews only to repeat the process.

She imagined Centurion Aurora must be chewing too, in Nashville, chewing the corpse of DuPage of which she contributed to the creation, and that explained her deepening grief cube

withdrawals. (Didn't Joliet erase Aurora's memory of betraying DuPage? Of course, Joliet's file bore the amazing detail: MAGIC LIABLE TO FAIL.) Hegewisch, meanwhile, had sidestepped despair entirely, her Soul Gem did not darken beyond its ordinary level. She chewed that fact too, how her life could be such a shithill but she didn't feel a thing beyond benign soreness in her chewing jaw, whereas some girls might lose everything because the boy they liked went for their rich friend instead.

Yet again she felt like DuPage.

Why did Aurora need to chew on DuPage's corpse when she could chew on Hegewisch's? A Satan chewing, and chewing, and chewing, that's what they found at the base of Hell.

That stupid—moonlight! The window *had* curtains, but when she first got in bed the light had been at a different angle or something. Veins squirming under her arms, she got up and tromped over and seized the curtain and someone crashed through the window and kicked her in the face.

The force propelled her so hard into the ground she bounced and struck the ceiling, or maybe it was a wall, she had no fucking clue and couldn't even be sure when she finally stopped flying she had landed on the floor. Her face blasted blood. The idiots, she thought for a strangled moment, why's Cicero attacking her own goons? But it wasn't Cicero, the figure that landed in a cascade of shattered glass wore a shiny colonial redcoat and a tricorn hat. As the coat fanned out and caught the moonlight the figure dug her stiletto combat boots into the carpet and aimed her arm at Berwyn's bed. From her oversized cuff extended a cannon, her arm was a cannon, she was 1700s Megaman, this was the wrong time.

Berwyn's blanket swirled upward the same instant the cannon fired and a spiky ball like the end of a mace plowed through several layers of downy fluff and collapsed the back half of the bed. Berwyn had already dove to the side, roll-bouncing off Hegewisch's bed, hitting the wall and ricocheting as a dazzle of glitter enveloped her and she emerged in full regalia before she even tapped the ground. Syringes manifested in her hands, dripping arcs of luminous fluid as she charged the redcoat low and fast.

Hegewisch had to get the fuck out. She rolled over and attempted to crawl as the metal clash of cannon slammed against the armor plates on Berwyn's wrists. A body, either Berwyn's or the attacker's, sailed over her and dented the wall, only to bounce onto her spine and lunge back into the fray. A constant stream of blood flowed onto the carpet and even more seemed to flow up her nasal cavity and into her brain. She realized she had crawled herself into a corner.

Telepathic voices hurled a reasonable, orderly stream of information and commands. At least the tone was orderly, because the words jumbled in Hegewisch's brain. They were all under attack. A synchronized strike, quick takedowns of the lookouts, overwhelmed. Kyubey—he had tried in Columbus to organize resistance, failed there—but here, and damn. She clamped her hands on her nose, she had to stem the bleeding.

Berwyn careened into the other bed and broke it. A sharp line of blood crested from a slice on her forehead as the Baltimore redcoat fired a spiked ball that burst into smaller spiked balls and zigzagged in every direction. One impaled Hegewisch's hand while Berwyn took two to

the chest. The cannon roared with every shot and spewed smoke until the room reeked and it became hard to see. Hegewisch pried the spike from her palm and slithered sluglike along the wall for an exit, any exit, even if only into the bathroom, a closet. Nothing, only the same yellow trim.

The Baltimore girl, who might be Baltimore herself, Hegewisch read something about "Revolutionary garb" in her file, got atop the writhing Berwyn on what remained of the bed and slammed the cannon hand in her face. And slammed again, and again. Hegewisch realized she hadn't even transformed herself and fumbled with her ring to do so. As soon as she did she wondered whether maybe she should have stayed how she was, weak, harmless, no threat, a crumpled figure who would allow any attacker to continue as they please and crush whatever faces they so desired as long as it wasn't *her* face—wondered even what she thought she might accomplish by transforming. Before she had a chance to reach a decision a hand seized her collar and hoisted her up.

"Unh... unh," she said. As harmless as possible.

The Baltimore girl pointed her cannon at Hegewisch's face. Its barrel swallowed her sight, she peered only into the eternity black inside. Baltimore betrayed zero intention to talk. Her cannon lowered. From the face to just above Hegewisch's knee. At her Soul Gem. But Baltimore's face flickered, hesitation, and then—

Baltimore swung Hegewisch around. Something long and narrow plunged into the soft flesh on the side of Hegewisch's neck, she tried to see what it was but doing so caused the foreign object to dance out of her sight so that only her periphery caught the barest glimpse of it. Instead she saw Berwyn dropping away, headless.

Hegewisch understood. She had shambled zombielike to shank Baltimore with a syringe. Baltimore blocked it with Hegewisch's body.

Hegewisch transformed into goo.

She kinda wished that was, like, a figurative way to phrase it. A pretty metaphor for how she felt inside. On the other hand, it did match how she felt exactly, so the fact that she literally liquefied into a viscous molasses didn't bother her too much. It did bother Baltimore, who had been holding Hegewisch close and did not realize what had happened until Hegewisch-goo swallowed both her functional hand and the hand-cannon. She struggled to extricate them, but by then Hegewisch's upper body folded forward and enveloped her face. Any attempt she made to free herself only made her more mired in Hegewisch, and soon they were on the ground in a gelatinous mass. Baltimore kicked, swung, her motions sluggish and pitiful, while Hegewisch's face lost form and her eyeballs drifted to different halves.

The headless Berwyn injected herself with a serum that regenerated her head in a manner of seconds.

Baltimore made muffled sounds. She did not attempt to speak with telepathy, even when Berwyn approached. Berwyn knelt beside them and held out her arm so both Hegewisch and Baltimore could see; it had three syringes in it, including the one she used to heal.

"Did not our dear friend the Incubator inform you as to my abilities, poppet? Aye, he must have, he'd've been remiss otherwise. Your first error was assuming you'd finished me when you removed my head. Do I possess the appearance of a vampire or werewolf? Would a proper Puella Magi be as fragile as that? I'm more akin to a cockroach."

She loosed a falsetto laugh of abnormal femininity, like a man's voice caricaturizing a woman's.

"Anyhoo, my apologies dear Administrator Hegewisch, I'll have to keep you in that state at least until this whole predicament's been harnessed. Excuse me ladies."

When she made for the door it burst inward and Lombard and Elmhurst scrambled inside. Was the lieutenant alright? And the Administrator? That's what they wanted to know, but the answer to the second question floated a little out of reach.

They reported that the battle had ended. Five minutes of action total. Despite the ambush, a resounding victory for the Empire, praise be to Lady Cicero. (Lady Cicero did not even partake.) They were still assessing the damage but so far no known casualties.

With Berwyn's assistance, they attempted to extricate Baltimore from Hegewisch. To zero avail. More information trickled in as they worked: Sixteen Puella Magi total had attacked, seven from Baltimore, three from Delaware, the rest nomads roaming east of the Chesapeake. The Incubator organized them and, like Columbus, exhorted them to combat with Chicago. He provided them a list of Cicero's platoon's abilities, weaknesses, et cetera, as well as methods to deceive Cicero's trackers and routes to circumnavigate the lookouts.

The messengers made a big hullabaloo that, despite this, they had not lost a single soldier. There had been several grievous injuries, but all restorable by magic. The closest to death had been Midlothian. For some reason, half the enemy force had crashed through the window of the room she shared with River Forest.

It made no sense. Midlothian was garbage at combat, but River Forest had the nasty ability to lower the judgment of those around her. Why dump eight of sixteen soldiers into that room, especially since Kyubey knew exactly who was in it? What are you even doing Kyubey? A desperate throw-enemies-in-your-face gambit read so un-Kyubey that Hegewisch had to wonder whether it had been a feint or distraction from some greater threat, a thought she communicated to Berwyn, who only reassured her that "They had everything under control" while she plunged a syringe through the goo and into Baltimore's undefended neck to anaesthetize her.

Minutes passed. No second attack came.

Why? What did Kyubey want to accomplish? He'd scrounged together a bunch of weak Magical Girls, sent the strongest at Hegewisch and almost everyone else at two girls who barely—

An assassination. Of course. He must have known he had zero chance of defeating Cicero outright. But Hegewisch reconsidered the battle she had witnessed. Between Berwyn and Hegewisch, Berwyn was the obvious threat. However, Baltimore had only pummeled her to

the point of ostensible incapacitation before beelining to Hegewisch and aiming for her Soul Gem. Hegewisch, Midlothian. Two of the people supposed to be dead according to Sayaka Miki. And while Sayaka had made it clear only Joliet mattered for this hypothetical future calamity, Kyubey lacked her God's genuine prognostication—he could only predict. It made sense for him to eliminate variables for which he could not account, no matter how harmless they appeared. Perhaps he had sent another assassination squad at Joliet. But Joliet was with the Empress and the Handmaiden, so Hegewisch doubted such an attempt's odds. What about Clownmuffle? Where was she now, this pre-dawn New Year's Day? Had she reached Gatineau?

A sucking sound accompanied the cavity created in Hegewisch's form once they wrenched out Baltimore. Baltimore's solid body had given her a semblance of structure and now she flattened out along the motel floor like a pancake while Berwyn examined her watch.

"Apologies, apologies, you see, I cannot quite inject you with an antidote as you no longer have, ahem, much of a circulatory system. Fear not, however, for that particular concoction's effect ought to dissipate... eh, sometime soon." She shrugged and her watch's crystal face caught the moonlight. "I'm truly sorry. I'll find some way to make it up to you."

Berwyn's magic wore off an hour later. By then, Cicero had delivered her speech to the conquered Baltimoreans and Delawareans. As soon as Hegewisch, still feeling fluid, entered the motel lobby to process the new "recruits," Cicero pulled her aside.

"I need to know," her stringent form towering over Hegewisch, "the status of Cook. Cook and her platoon."

Hegewisch called Cook's lieutenant and asked.

"Howzit," said Kenosha. "Sure up—" (yawn) "—late."

Hegewisch had spoken to Kenosha before, as she was Cook's primary point of contact. Each time the same chill tickled her: This was the girl who betrayed Denver, who had lived with her for two years like a friend and then turned her to the wolves.

"I request a status report."

"Oh yeah oh yeah, makes sense makes sense. Let's see, status report, well the main thing I guess is we captured Philly three hours ago, so that's a big wahoo if you like that sorta thing. Anything else?"

When Hegewisch relayed the news, Cicero did not speak. She simply turned on a heel and walked away.

She considered informing Cicero that Kyubey had particularly targeted her and Midlothian. That they ought to have better security, that additional attempts could be expected. Eventually he would get his specialists into position, people actually adept at killing. But who cared? Hegewisch would have to explain a lot of dumb bullshit Cicero would never believe. What Hegewisch wanted most was sleep.

Death was a kind of sleep. Either way she'd get some rest.

But Midlothian—

Fuck it. If Hegewisch tried to help Midlothian, it would probably kill her instead. That's how it tended to go.

Days passed. Cicero's platoon waited in Baltimore. New orders would come soon, ostensibly. Cook waited in Philadelphia and they all waited together for Aurora to limp her way through Charlotte and Richmond. No additional assassination attempts came and Hegewisch had all the time in the world to ponder Kyubey's methods and goals. His perfect rationality at work. She considered every angle, eventually even wondered if he had sent assassins he knew would fail simply to scare her into doing what Sayaka Miki asked and convince the Empress to abandon her plan. Not that Hegewisch had an outlet to the Empress. Any orders from above went to Cicero alone and came from the Handmaiden. Hegewisch could not simply waltz up and demand an audience.

She wanted to not care and somehow she could even detach the fear of death from the equation but the equation itself enthralled. She kept trying to get into Kyubey's peabrain supercomputer head. Perfectly logical entity, why do you do the things you do? What spreadsheets do you consult? She recalled he mentioned his backup plan had less than a fifty percent chance of success. Had the assassination been that plan, and had it simply failed? Was he truly that desperate?

No. No way. That wasn't his plan. His would be better. If nothing else she had to have faith in him. She wanted to be him. Empty, emotionless, bland. Dispersed, everywhere and nowhere, uninvolved, a passive observer, a tinkerer, a grandmaster of seven billion pawns. She wanted to be the Empress, a United States Senator, an inhabitant of an alternate reality. She wanted to be Cicero, who paced restlessly without an objective and shot passive aggressive jabs at the absent Cook whenever possible. She wanted to be Aurora, at least dying even if slowly and agonizingly. If Aurora let merely ten more soldiers die she would match Hegewisch's own illustrious total.

Kyubey claimed he never felt emotion, but she wondered how true that could be. When the Law of the Cycles suspended inexplicably for the sole purpose of keeping Clownmuffle alive, he had to have at least felt annoyance, right? Was annoyance an emotion?

Berwyn invited her on a tourist trip around the city. Devoid of other options, even paperwork, she acquiesced. On the excuse of "securing the territory and charting the topography," Berwyn had finagled a full day's worth of free time for herself, Darien, and Hegewisch.

"We shall have such fun," said Berwyn, rose-eyed, skipping ahead along a winding bayside road, wearing Sayaka Miki's cape over her otherwise regulation white suit. She stopped at the beached corpse of a housecat and loosed a low, "Ooooh."

Darien kept swinging her arms, not at anything in particular, just swinging them, waving them through the cold dry air, scraping her ashen skin on occasion and wandering her gaze along the bay which in this weather looked indistinguishable from Lake Michigan. She kicked the steel rails they passed and once lurched her whole body into a flurry of kung fu punches at an imaginary friend. A young couple trundling a perambulator (excuse her, stroller, the lingo could get to you) gave her a wide berth while failing to notice Berwyn prodding a distended animal with a stick until its belly split and a bunch of tiny crayfish scurried out. She shrieked and scampered to Darien, who almost suplexed her.

"Wretch, startle me not," said Darien.

"Tsk, am I not your superior officer? Refer to me as 'Lady Wretch,' please-and-*thank-you!*"

Although Berwyn was clearly being facetious, Darien bowed her head and knelt in sincere penitence. "Apologies, milady. My mind wandered elsewhere—"

"Hush poppet, we're on *leave*, we can forego a sliver of the formality, can we not?"

Darien's eye turned to Hegewisch. "The Administrator—"

"The Administrator strikes me little as an overzealous executrix of minutiae." Berwyn flicked her hips left and right as she swirled toward wooden plank Hegewisch and tapped her forehead. "We've been sleeping together these past few days, so I *ought* to know now shouldn't I?"

"Sleeping!" said Darien.

"In the same room, the same room." Berwyn shrugged. "Fear not, poppet, we are no deviants—pure maidens both. Aye, Administrator?"

Hegewisch closed her eyes and pretended she didn't exist.

"I swear, milady—"

"Never swear, dear Darien. Forbidden."

"I am well aware of protocol! I meant the word figuratively, was that not clear? Milady, I much prefer you when you're not on leave."

"And you're somehow more of a stick on leave than off! Moments like these are essential to a burgeoning young soldier like yourself, one with a brighter future in this army than my shoddy frame ever had, alas. Lady Cicero can teach you combat, structure, boldness, loyalty, all essential components of leadership, but one must never stray too far from the human of it all, no?"

They had continued along the walkway. As their voices began to fade, Hegewisch opened her eyes and continued behind them a decent distance. Baltimore had nothing in it, so a day off to explore it meant little. Her isolation might make her a prime target for another attempt at her life, but Berwyn and Darien were the best bodyguards outside of Cicero herself in the whole platoon.

To Hegewisch's dismay, they failed to forget about her. She encountered them waiting at a snowy park's entrance. She bore comments on her sluggish pace and said nothing, then walked even slower as they proceeded into the park. They stopped and waited for her again, Berwyn sunshiny smiles, Darien trying to look tough but she looked less like a masculine girl and more like a feminine boy. God. Did they want to be her friends?

"So," said Berwyn, "I happened to notice, in your search history, one Miss Millicent Dorothea Luce?"

Nevermind, everything was even worse than expected. Hegewisch hung her head and shrugged. She didn't. She didn't fucking care. She didn't FUCKING CARE. She didn't want this conversation. No matter what angle they took, punitive, exploitative, let them pummel her to pulp but get her out, led into this empty park on this cold day in January nobody cared about because the holidays had died and everyone might as well have died with them, everyone except these silly girls and their silly crusade.

She shrugged. "Sure. You caught. You fucking caught me, I don't give a shit, kill me. Kill me motherfuckers, I fucking dare you."

Berwyn and Darien blinked backwards, exchanged glances, tilted heads. Darien started on some "Swearing is prohibited" bullshit but Berwyn cut her off.

"You misunderstand our intent, Lady Administrator. We seek not to punish you for unauthorized internet use—or swearing..."

"She is a slob," said Darien. "A slob is the only way to put it. I told you—I *informed* you—she lacked drive and purpose."

"The poor female has weathered several storms in rapid succession, let us not forget. She is physically and emotionally drained. Oh!" Berwyn's face became glassy. "I know! I have the perfect panacea!"

She transformed. A syringe manifested in her hand and Hegewisch tried to backpedal but Berwyn did not become a lieutenant in this fuckermother army because of slowness. The needle drove into the wrist of the hand she lifted to defend herself and a thick, cottage cheese consistency bubbled down the vein.

"Fuck, fuck, please, please leave me alone, I just want to be left alone but people keep DRAGGING ME BACK—"

She folded onto one knee and her throat shuttered closed and when she tried to breathe her chest hiccupped outward in a futile painful motion, her ribs clenched like a fist and her fingers hooked frozen and then—and then—

And then—

And then she breathed. She sagged. She sighed. Her body decompressed. Warmth billowed inside her. Everything loosened, everything dribbled a slight euphoria. She wanted, needed, to touch something. Anything. To feel it. She touched her own skin and her fingertips glided

across it, so smooth, soft, silken, she reached for Darien's wrist but Darien drew back so instead she reached for Berwyn, pale nimbus Berwyn, and slid her hand along Berwyn's wrist up the cuff of her pale nimbus blazer, and she had such small and delicate wrists, amazing, you know, because before Berwyn made her wish she had been quite a different person, but now Hegewisch could admire her feel, and Darien—Darien—those captivating features, the contoured and harshly-outlined face, but with an inner softness, less like a masculine girl and more like a feminine boy, an androgyne, really amazing when you considered Berwyn was the one who—

"You administered too much dosage," said Darien.

"Am I not a virtuoso in these matters? Nothing less would have sufficed for such a troubled young female."

Hegewisch sat on the rough cobblestone path, so Berwyn sat too after sweeping aside some slush with her shoe and flapping back Sayaka's cloak to keep it unblemished. She motioned for Darien to join, so they sat in a round-edged triangle amid this tranquil park.

"Can we even speak to her like this?" said Darien, who at Berwyn's behest allowed Hegewisch to feel her hands.

"Oh of course we cannot, not like this. Fortunately this particular admixture shall wear off... Now."

Hegewisch crashed. Literally. On the floor. Writhing.

"You have only amplified our woes," said Darien.

"I changed her mood. A mood changer, it's important. Sad people never wish to listen to reason, they adamantly demand to remain miserable."

"Her misery has increased."

"After a period of ebullience. I—wait, do you know what ebullience means?"

Their words resounded as drumbeats in her inner ear. She clutched at her face to block out all sight, sound, sensation, as all of it became hateful.

"I of course know that word," said Darien.

"I wonder, I wonder. Can you, perhaps, employ it in a sentence?"

Darien said nothing for a merciful long while.

Berwyn then defined "ebullience." Being joyous, energetic, elated. Darien said she knew that. The ebb of pain sent spasms along Hegewisch's body, but the ebb drew outward each time in a tidal pattern, away from her. The hangover, quick as it came, subsided. Tranquility assuaged the throbbing. Her frayed networks settled.

She lay there, still, while the pair discussed the dictionary. Definitions. Latin roots. Darien countered that their purpose today was not to dredge her through another lesson on the proper way for a young woman to speak, and Berwyn clicked her tongue as she remembered Hegewisch and pulled her back to a sitting position.

"Aye, you can feel it in her musculature—feel here—much more limber. I've loosened all those knots, I have."

Berwyn and Darien took turns prodding Hegewisch's back and shoulders. By the time they finished she had blinked back to reality and the pain remained only as a dwindling hum at the base of her cerebellum. Berwyn must have noticed the flicker of human spark in her eyes because she addressed Hegewisch like she existed again:

"Apologies, it proves a great difficulty to manage the mood of a Puella Magi even via artificial or magical means. Our great Big Brother, the Incubator, has ensured such inconveniences. Antidepressants would throttle his bottom line, aye. Neither of you were of our kind yet, but in years past I worked as an assistant to our sometime friend Dr. Si Yu Cho, and we performed many such experiments to test the efficacy of all manner of concoctions. Thus, even at zenith my injections can only provide the effects to which you bore witness."

"Just—Please. Tell me. Tell me what you want. There's no need for torture."

Berwyn's lips curved down in an exaggerated, patronizing frown, although she seemed legitimately disappointed. "Torture? Many have groveled for even that which I have so freely bestowed upon you. Centurion DuPage, rest her restless soul, transferred no minute sum of valuables into my possession for such dosages, even once aware of the drawbacks."

"I'm not... her."

"Aye, forgive me. It must have been superficial similarities that caused me to conjure such a connection." Berwyn rose, pressed a fist to her lips, tugged an earlobe. "I do apologize. I wanted to give you something good. I apologize."

Darien, who had stood and wandered off on her own hurling more phantom punches at the lower-lying tree limbs, noticed Berwyn and swiveled back to the conversation. "Has she 'loosened' enough yet, Lady Wretch? I demand to know why she—"

"Peace, peace. Administrator Hegewisch, what possessed you to research that woman, that Millicent Dorothea Luce?"

Hegewisch's lids fluttered at the halfway closed point. She spread a sickly grin, they knew, they all fucking knew, end the charade, get on with it, she pulsed to the same rhythm of Darien kicking and puttering and swirling her fingers in motion, let's do this. Let's get it done.

"God's emissary told me it's the name of the Empress."

"She's been talking to the Incubator." Darien had resumed air boxing. She added some kicks for variety.

"Yes. But he's not God's emissary."

Berwyn and Darien looked at one another without trying to look like they looked at one another. Hegewisch watched the trees for Cicero to step out like surprise, you fucking ratted yourself out, prepare to die, and one thwack of her fat axe would end it, flatten her into dough, complete the menagerie of states her body could assume, all she needed next was to evaporate into the sky and billow into a cloud. But no Cicero came. Berwyn and Darien were alone. Berwyn said:

"Congratulations. You're one of a select number of us who know the Empress's true identity. Not even Lady Cicero knows, truthfully. Only Lady Cook, the Handmaiden—Dr. Cho, although she's departed—and possibly two or three others are aware. Few still remain from the days when the Empress would walk among us more freely, few still pieced together the careless hints she sometimes dropped as to her identity."

"Yay," said Hegewisch. Although she remembered something. Something that seemed so long ago, DuPage, screaming at Cook as they walked away with her Soul Gem, DuPage screaming that the Empress was trying to get rid of everyone who knew the truth about her. And that Cook would be next.

Hegewisch felt DuPage had been wrong about that; the true reason had been far worse, the Empress had made her a scapegoat for all her sins. But she doubted the Empress would be fond about the secret spreading. Had Berwyn told Darien? Darien, a new recruit? Someone green enough to receive karate chops from Cicero? Although now, in the park, Darien acted more the austere veteran and Berwyn the flighty rookie.

"You're thinking, if this opulent pearl of knowledge truly comes so rarely, why then have I openly divulged this secret to young Darien? Aye, aye? Aye? Aye, I'm right, it's what you're thinking, look at her face, Darien. I pinned it like a dancing angel, pardon the cliché."

"Cliché?" said Darien.

"Yes, and you must never repeat it, my protégé," said Berwyn. "To answer your unstated query, Administrator, it is indeed true, I did tell her. But young Darien is destined for greatness in this army, all know it, she will be Cicero's successor, or at least rise to the rank of Centurion in her own right the first moment an aperture appears, only age, inexperience, and a certain brusqueness in speech and manner gates her—she doesn't yet understand there are things she can say in private that she cannot in front of her superiors—all characteristics to diminish naturally with time and proper mentorship, and I have appointed myself the task of mentoring her, so you can be certain such characteristics shall diminish."

"Everyone is my mentor, it seems," said Darien.

"But not everyone can teach you the true qualities needed in a leader, aye poppet? Lady Cicero can teach you to be strict, to be bold, to stomp the throat of your foes and the fingers of the disobedient subordinate, she can teach you combat technique, motions to practice ad nauseam until your body performs them unconsciously when instinct demands their necessity, she can tutor you in tactics, arrangements of soldiers, the psychology of hunted prey, the braggadocio of a greater force, and by no means do I deny the importance of such

wisdom, and by no means do I disparage Lady Cicero as a leader, for she is a truly great one in her own right, and I would follow her to Hell itself and laugh Death in his eyeless sockets did she but give the command.

"However.

"However it so may be that there are also qualities of leadership that Lady Cicero does not encompass, indeed that none of the Centurions encompass, nor the Handmaiden, nor Dr. Cho prior to her egress, although in fear of blasphemy I shall stop short of providing my opinion of Our Beloved and Beneficent Empress, who marshals all we Holy Knights to a grander cause than any other, and with the sweetest sound of silver horn as any alive might blow.

"Nor do I disparage the various routes by which all our esteemed Centurions have reached their forms of leadership, for all have arrived at their necessary place at their necessary time for the good of us all. Indeed, the founding of an Empire—any Empire—will always be fraught with peril, and certain corners must be cut off the populace to squash them together when otherwise we would be buzzing atoms of helium, content to go our own way.

"The mutilation of assimilation must be inflicted. We as humans must lose something to create something greater—"

"What the fuck are you saying," said Hegewisch, and immediately Darien ground her face into the stones.

"You spoke that way before and I abstained in deference to my superior officer but now, but now!"

Hegewisch didn't care. Violence, yes. Either they'll end it or Kyubey's assassins will.

But Berwyn sighed sadly and motioned for Darien to release her and Darien, face burning bright red, did as commanded and snapped a series of sharp apologies to Hegewisch's prone form, apologies for assaulting an officer. She knelt and offered herself to any punishment "Lady Hegewisch" deigned to inflict.

Hegewisch deigned to do nothing.

"Alas," said Berwyn, "I've strayed. Truly, I only wanted to ask of you one request, Lady Administrator. I suppose I'll out and ask it, aye? That would satisfy everyone except my poor self, eheh. It's hard to have a chance to speak of such things, so I become effusive when I do—Do you know the word effusive, Darien?"

"Yes."

"Excellent, excellent. Now for you, Lady Hegewisch." Berwyn sat down in front of her, crosslegged, hands clasped, and waited until Hegewisch had no choice but to meet her straightforward gaze.

The gazes met. Darien swung a foot through a clump of snow and a small creature scampered between two tree roots.

"Now for you, Lady Hegewisch," Berwyn repeated, "I ask you only: Please trust her. Please trust the Empress. She is wise. She wants to do good—for us. For all Puella Magi. And she can do so, in a way nobody has ever been able to do before. The Incubator is scrambling, he knows he cannot stop her. So please. I'm aware you have some power of great interest to her, for why else would you have received the rank you now hold. But despite your power, however great it may be, please, I beg of you, do not turn it against her. Trust that she seeks the best for us all, and aid her. Use that power to her benefit. Please."

Why, was all Hegewisch could think. Why. Why drag her out here just to ask this, why. Why should she trust anyone, why. Why. Why. Why did everyone want to tell her what she should or should not do. She felt like Darien, everyone was her mentor now. Except mentor was the wrong word, they only barked orders at her, they wanted her to do this or that.

Asking why would only prolong this farce, where everyone seemed to care so much and make such a big fucking deal about everything but she didn't care. She didn't care at all, she only wanted to go home, even though home did not exist, even though home was a motel room she shared with this same effete cunt staring her in the face.

She said, "Yes. I trust her. I trust the Empress." Slow, each syllable enunciated, each punctuation mark emphasized.

Darien expelled a tremendous breath of relief; the change in Berwyn's demeanor was more subtle, but still detectable. Hegewisch had to hold in a laugh, they actually believed her. They believed whatever she said, and only because they wanted to believe.

They returned to the motel.

Cicero was waiting. She said, "I have received dispatch from the Empress herself." Her soldiers had gathered nearby, it was an announcement. "I am to meet her personally, as well as the other Centurions. I depart immediately. As my platoon, you shall remain in Baltimore until further orders. Lieutenant Berwyn shall be your commander in the interim."

"Yes, milady," they all said, except Berwyn said "Aye, milady."

Cicero then turned. Almost as an afterthought, almost as though she might have forgotten all about it until it was too late, like she might have just left Hegewisch there in the motel but some convenient association triggered and she remembered at the last possible moment; she pointed at Hegewisch.

"You, Administrator, are also ordered to attend."

To the Stars

The doors opened on the same room. The one in the yacht, the one in any video correspondence with her, the same unseeable ceiling, the same fireplace, the same shelves and paintings and high-backed chair. The same hand on the same armrest.

The Handmaiden ushered them inside. They entered in order of rank: Cook, Cicero, Aurora, Hegewisch. Joliet awaited them, tucked into a corner, face wan and eyes fidgety, two fingertips pressed together while hearth flames flickered across her ghastliness. The Handmaiden directed them to stand beside her, in a line, and await Her Munificence's beck.

They stood. They waited. The heat oppressed, its filthy mugginess, although outside was so cold. En route, driven by a Lombardless Elmhurst, Hegewisch lolled her head along the frigid windowpane and caught atop a cell tower a blue-haired girl with a fluttering cape.

And outside the Empress's chamber Kyubey had waited on a pillar that might have otherwise propped the bust of some ancient federalist. He flicked his tail back, forth, back, forth. Cicero and Aurora ignored him, Cook flicked him a thumbs sideways, like a Roman emperor.

Inside, the Empress read. Her pages turned at sporadic intervals, she sometimes lingered and sometimes skipped ahead. Judith perpetually beheaded Holofernes above her, the arc of his lifeblood poised to drop but never dropping. One final conversation, Hegewisch told herself, one more. The endgame boss of shitty conversations. But she had honed her technique by now. Say as little as possible, nod when questioned, provide the answers expected, depart.

On a pedestal rested the Soul Gem of Centurion DuPage, a medium's flawless crystal sphere. Over a week had passed since Cook removed it from its body, and in that time it had built and built its darkness, a vast swath of black swirling Coriolis under its clear surface. Despair had not overtaken her. This fact registered as "interesting" in some subdued layer of consciousness. The girls Palos salvaged from the lake disappeared in a day. Did DuPage, trapped in a senseless impotent world, still have hope? Or did the size of her Soul Gem lend her a greater capacity for despair? Hegewisch refrained from delving too deeply into DuPage's mind, but could not shake the uncanny fact that DuPage remained technically alive.

The Empress turned a page.

Hegewisch started to sweat. She cared less now. She remained as still as all the others. She looked ahead. At nothing.

The Empress turned a page.

She did this on purpose of course. To waste everyone's time. Hegewisch resolved not to let it bother her. But it bothered her, not the wasted time, but the vacant space into which crept, unbidden at this late hour, considerations of Sayaka Miki's phantom calamity, the words "millions dead," once spoken with the immediacy of starving children in Africa, now echoing in this cavernous chamber, and a spasm of thought came that she had deadened all sense inside her but if things truly got as bad as foretold she would regret doing nothing, and it

amazed her because she had gone so many days without worry and now all anxiety clenched its fist around her at once and her skin became clammy and ashen despite the wet heat, on the opposite end of the room stood the Handmaiden watching what seemed like her in particular and she must assuredly be able to sense the subtle contortions on Hegewisch's face as she imagined some nuclear holocaust brought upon by this stupid, foolish Empress whom Berwyn wanted her to trust, this Senator Millicent Dorothea Luce of Eufaula, Alabama, who had formed an army of teenage girls and encircled what other city but Washington, D.C., home of powerful men of a terrestrial plane, diplomats and military command centers, could she? Could she do something like that? This Empress? Could she bridge the gap from the magical world to the quotidian and seize the latter's means of self-propulsion?

Millions dead. Kyubey and Sayaka Miki both said it. Why hadn't she taken them seriously until now?

The Empress closed her book.

She stood. At full height she did not stretch above her high-backed chair but around its sides fanned the full luster of her ermine robe. The clothing seemed to grow around her, she expanded into a profusion of regality, patterns of fleur-de-lises down her endless front which reached and then rolled along the carpet like an unraveling tongue, a diamond-encrusted medallion in the shape of an eight-pointed cross strung from her neck, folds of lace and silk and embroidery, a choking glut of design that sparked an image of the pictures scarified into the flesh of the archon's side although these did not coalesce into the form of God.

It was the Empress of the painting. She proceeded from her chair down a pair of steps from her elevated mezzanine to their area, although divided from them as she occupied the long carpet that bisected the room and they melted near the fireplace at its side.

"We," the word came, swelled, "are vivified by the reported progress of our illustrious servants. Twelve metropolises subjugated, their Puella Magi sworn to our noble cause, and any fractures among our ranks tempered with new alloy to form a stronger steel. And though we know thy deeds, we wish now to hear them from thine own lips. Centurion Cook."

Cook went from seemingly sleeping horse-style to issuing a prompt bow and response: "Ohhhhh, I think I understand? You seek to gauge whether our self-estimation exceeds the mark? An exercise of humility, or do I presume, Your Munificence?"

"We requested thy report, Centurion." The Empress's voice betrayed no reproach, only total tonal neutrality.

"Ohhhhh." She rose from her bow, although her arm remained folded over her chest. "I interpolated too much... As for my performance? Subpar, hehhh... subpar. Two of my soldiers perished, and five of my foe. Despite Your Munificence's decree to abstain from death? The only among us worthy of praise... I'd have to say Centurion Cicero, ahhhhh?"

Cicero's eyes flitted from straight ahead to the comparatively languorous form of her colleague. "I will leave it to you to judge who is worthy of praise, Your Munificence. I simply executed your commandments as my ability allowed. It is true I incurred no casualties on either my or my enemy's side, but at the certain cost of speed—"

"Ohhhhh, but you had the unfortunate delay? When you had to return to Chicago to assist Joliet? Don't esteem yourself so poorly, Cicero."

"I also received as assignment cities with fewer and weaker Puella Magi," said Cicero. "Consider what you've conquered, Centurion Cook. Detroit and Philadelphia are no minuscule offerings to lay at the feet of Her Munificence."

Aurora, who had the most to be humble about, said nothing.

"Baltimore though? And against an ambush orchestrated by the Incubator himself? Ahhhhh, I honestly envy your prowess, Cicero. Were it not for my seniority I imagine *you* would be our First Centurion, hehhh."

"Was the Incubator not also behind the resistance you met in your last two cities, Centurion Cook? Not to mention, your efforts in St. Louis could be considered an extension of our Empire's conquest, and ought to be heaped upon the pile of your achievements—"

The Empress laughed. The sound was so unexpected that Cicero's head whipped around with a trace of fear as though she thought the Empress might be choking or something. But the woman in all her imperial vestments laughed, three fingers belatedly pressed to her lips to scrounge a sense of ladylikeness.

"Ahhhhh, Your Munificence? It has been some time since I've heard you laugh..."

Even the Handmaiden took a stunted step forward until the Empress raised a hand for peace and pressed another to her collar to still herself. Her face returned to benign benevolence and she said: "Thou hast proven thyself such humble ladies. Our laughter stems not from derision but unimpeded mirth at those we have so arduously created these long years, like the sculptor Pygmalion to his flawless Galatea. Centurions Cook, Cicero, Joliet, Aurora. Today is a day for rejoicing, and so we implore thee to join us in mirth and laugh. Laugh."

Cicero, Cook, and the others stared at her.

"Laugh," she commanded.

"Ha, haaa," said Cicero.

"Hehhh," said Cook.

Joliet made a chitinous click in her throat, which may have been an attempted laugh or just something she did. Aurora remained silent and the only person who could summon actual laughter, nervy and nearly shrill as it was, was Hegewisch.

The Empress ceased abruptly and so did everyone else except Joliet, whose final chthonic utterance lay dormant in the crackle of the flames.

"Perhaps such mirth is o'erhasty." The Empress turned sharply on her elongated heel and her entire outfit revolved semicircular in a delayed accompaniment of her body. "For though the Midwest and yea much of the South and East can rightfully be said to belong to us, yet many lands remain benighted and indubitably our challenges only surmount. For now full seven

days have passed since we embarked on this quest to unify all Puella Magi under our governorship, and our many foes have had much time to prepare and organize. Perhaps, even, some of my astute servants have wondered why we have allowed our progress to stagnate. Trust that thy indolence comes for beneficent purpose, for we hath waited unto this exact date for a particular purpose. Do any of thee know today's date?"

"January the fifth," said everyone together, glad for an easy question.

"And what occasions tomorrow, the sixth? What especial event?"

Nobody spoke at first. January sixth, some obscure holiday? The Empress's birthday, maybe? Cicero betrayed a microscopic bacterium of discomposure, while Aurora seemed to have resolved herself into a perfect statue. The most movement came from Joliet, whose fingers extended one by one by her side—she was counting. After two full handfuls her eyes illuminated and she nearly staggered forward out of the space of the Centurions and into the space of the Empress, only just barely restrained by the invisible barrier that disconnected them, a frantic flash in her face, her lips and eyes purple:

"Twelfth—hkkkk—Twelfth Night! The twelfth night, skkaaahh, after Christmas—the Theophany—the—*the Magi's revelation that Jesus Christ was the incarnation of God!*"

She wheezed, panted, hissed, stooped over herself, seized her knees as though she had sprinted a long distance, looked up at her mother.

Her mother said: "Incorrect."

Some phantom force kept Joliet from falling.

"Firstly, *tonight* is Twelfth Night, save by the estimation of certain sects we consider inconsequential, and secondly, Twelfth Night is not the night of the Theophany but the night prior."

"Hkkkkkah, hkkk, I meant that, I meant that tonight is Twelfth Night, *tomorrow* the—"

"Silence."

Joliet fell silent.

"Thou hast better to not speak than to speak falsely. It marks a pedant or dilettante who noises at the first mention of a topic they consider their expertise, only to distort basic facts. In either case, Theophany or not, the deity of Puella Magi has yet to reveal Herself to the Gentiles. Inconsequential, inconsequential—" The Empress turned on her heel, her outfit revolved around her, and she paced toward the opposite end of the room, the topic put entirely from her mind and the interruption utterly obviated. "Tomorrow, January the sixth, is the date the One Hundred Thirteenth United States Congress reconvenes for the commencement of its second session."

Cicero didn't seem to understand. Cook did; Joliet did all too well, and hooked her hands into claws as she stared at the ground trembling. Aurora was no longer an animate object.

The Empress continued: "Some among thee may wonder the purpose of appending such significance to such an event, seemingly so far removed from relevance to our aims. It occurs to us that long have we kept even our closest servants in a state of full or partial ignorance as to the true extent of our project; we have withheld much. But this withholding was not on account of malice or mistrust; nay, there is mistrust none. At least, there is no mistrust toward our *current* Four Centurions.

"We have retained this information under the belief that if we kept it hidden within the sanctity of our own mind, unspoken aloud, we might keep our foremost foe ignorant as to our design. Alas, somehow, the Incubator hath either intuited it or else we have betrayed our own person in some subconscious manner, such as via soporific murmurings or a lapse in wariness no longer remembered. Hence, the Incubator made an unexpected attempt on the life of Centurion Joliet; only via the equally unexpected levelheadedness and leadership exhibited by Administrator Hegewisch did this assassination prove unsuccessful, and since then we have arranged exceptional measures to ensure her safety.

"And because the Incubator comprehends our design, he will have assuredly marshaled a force of his strongest Terminatrixes, perhaps in accompaniment with any powerful Puella Magi he can coerce to his goals; his army shall be formidable, although we have already stripped this continent of most strong enough to contest us. Indeed, our intelligence indicates two of his most feared specialists, Sepulveda and 405, have perished recently—one even by the hand of our esteemed comrade Hegewisch. Cook hath disposed of our rival Denver, and others too have either fallen or been won to our side: Minneapolis, Seattle, Detroit, Philadelphia, Baltimore. Who of great merit remains? Calgary perhaps, but she is loath to leave her own sector of influence; as are most whom the Incubator might desire to stand against us. As for the powerful Puella Magi of other nations, of Europe and China and the Middle East, he cannot so quickly move them in this contemporaneous world of passports and border security; and they are not so quickly moved for a conflict they believe does not concern them.

"We have taken these assiduous measures to cripple the Incubator's counterforce, yet we must consider the force he shall muster to be strong, and must prepare accordingly. Our victory hath not yet been assured, and we know for certain that he retains one loyal subject with whom we will have no choice but to contend, and indeed we will contend with her tomorrow.

"For tomorrow we shall take the city Washington, which is host to but a single Puella Magi. Yet this Puella Magi is, quite possibly, the strongest in the world."

Tomorrow we shall take the city Washington. Hegewisch knew it was coming to that but it still felt so surreal. She planned to seize the United States government. She planned to capture the fucking United States Congress and hold the whole fucking country hostage, it couldn't be real. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be, and yet she continued on this track of logistics and schematics, describing the Magical Girl who lived in Washington.

"The Incubator has placed this Puella Magi in Washington because he is aware of the danger to his world order if that singular city falls; for there is no city of such geopolitical weight as it across the whole globe. And perhaps the city's significance hath contributed to the power of its denizen, for we have heard tell that one's karmic weight influences their prowess..."

She turned on her heel and faced them, her expression somewhat surprised. "Doth thou follow?"

"You wish for us to conquer Washington, but it holds an extremely strong Puella Magi," said Cicero.

"You wish for us to conquer the United States Congress..." said Cook.

"You wish for us to conquer the United States," said Hegewisch.

They could walk anywhere. Through any metal detector. Then inside, when they transformed—it would be easy. A coordinated strike. They could capture everyone who mattered in one fell swoop. The president, even. What would the best trained Secret Serviceman do against a Magical fucking Girl?

"Thou follow," said the Empress, "we are pleased."

"However powerful this Puella Magi is," said Cicero, "I swear I shall defeat her and take this city in your name."

"Our occupation has given us ample opportunity to enter the city and observe her," said Senator Millicent Dorothea Luce (D-IL), "and she is more powerful than thee or thy platoon, Cicero. More powerful, perhaps, than our entire Empire. The Incubator hath molded this world to his liking over the course of many millennia, so he would not allow it to escape his grasp so easily. However." She had continued to pace up and down the long carpet that stretched across the room, but now she broke from her rhythm and ascended the steps to the mezzanine. "However, we hath considered long how to strike her down."

She plucked DuPage's Soul Gem from the pedestal. Although it was large and probably heavy, she hefted it with one hand. Then she looked directly at—

"Administrator Hegewisch. We asked thee once, would it be acceptable in the eyes of God for us to eliminate former Centurion DuPage? Thou said it was just. Didst thou speak the truth?"

Everyone looked at her. Some of the Centurions seemed confused; the official story was that DuPage had died in combat and those who had witnessed otherwise had received memory tweaking from Joliet (although, given the reported fallibility of Joliet's ability, Hegewisch had to wonder how well the tweaks stuck). She felt the weight of their bewilderment on the nape of her neck, the weight of an unseen Sayaka Miki, the weight of every fluffy Incubator corpse, enough weight to decapitate.

"I—"

"Thou murmur. Speak with clarity. Would our God consider it just for us to murder Yasmin Esfahani, whose soul we now hold in our hand?"

"I. I said..." She barely even remembered. Her previous conversation with the Empress, what had she said? If she had to guess, she had said whatever she thought would end the conversation the quickest, whatever she thought would make the Empress happy, if the

Empress asked whether Madoka would consider killing DuPage justified, then Hegewisch probably said yes, thinking the Empress wanted divine justification for whatever deed she did, but with pressurized slush working its way up her veins into her face she realized the Empress wanted the exact opposite, she wanted DuPage's murder to be unjust—because—because—

She planned to unleash an archon. In Washington, D.C.

"Your—Your Munificence. You—" She fumbled for words, she fumbled even for a notion of a thing to say, the words "just" and "unjust" oscillated in her brain like they were lit by giant signs made of lightbulbs, the words spelled in bold uppercase, with all watching her and the heat of the fire at her back she had no time to weigh the options—

The Empress smiled. "Thou told me then She would consider it just. That DuPage had sold her humanity and would be rightfully slain. At first we believed thee, but upon consideration we delved deeper into your heart—and thy hesitation now hath confirmed our suspicions. You lied to us, Administrator Hegewisch."

"Lied!" Cicero reached for her. "You dared speak malicious falsehood to—"

"Peace, Cicero," said the Empress. "For Hegewisch's intentions were pure; she sought to spare me the grief of knowing God's wrath. Indeed—perhaps now is the time to reveal this unto thee—Hegewisch is more than a mere Administrator. She is one whom I value as highly as any of you, even as much as my Handmaiden. I have not revealed to thee her holy power. But as our final victory draws nigh, the time for subterfuge ends. Hegewisch has the ability to know and commune with God Herself."

It was all tumbling. Tumbling, tumbling. The Empress continued, unveiled what until then had been a pseudo-Christian God: Madoka Kaname, the name spoken aloud, her sacrifice detailed, the core events of her life and ascension related, the Testament of Millicent, albeit a secondary source. Hegewisch could only thank her for not forcing Hegewisch to explain the story herself, because her mouth was filled with glue.

The Centurions bowed their heads, as if in prayer, perhaps the Empress had exhorted them to it, they intoned together: "Glory be to God."

Cook then asked why the Empress had concealed from them identity of Madoka Kaname as God.

"Because, treasured Cook, true knowledge of God is not something to announce lightly. Indeed, until but a week ago, there was among the Centurions one whom was not worthy of such enlightenment: DuPage, who blasphemed and sinned as the filthiest scoundrel, whose very ability was anathema to the concept of our true God. But DuPage we hold now in our palm, a ripened fruit, and those who stand before me hath proven themselves just and righteous warriors in God's service.

"Knowledge of God shall be kept constrained to the worthy; but it is my intention to spread this knowledge. Upon the realization of my plans, we shall appoint Administrator Hegewisch to a post more worthy of her status. We shall appoint her Pontifex, of a new church to be

devised: the Church of Madoka Kaname, through which she shall disseminate the knowledge her wish hath granted her. But to speak of such matters now outraces the point."

Pontifex Hegewisch. She imagined herself at the head of a church, delivering a sermon behind a pulpit to pews of gathered Magical Girls. The Church of Madoka Kaname, a mystery cult. God. God.

"Nor shall we delve too deeply into the specifics of how we intend to combat the Puella Magi of Washington. Her power is great enough that she would delete our entire army at a stroke; only those with my blessing can even dare to contest her. As such, we shall hold a private tactical discussion immediately after this meeting with Centurions Cook and Cicero, who shall be instrumental in her defeat."

Pontifex-elect Hegewisch had to wonder how much the Centurions grasped all of this. Cicero in particular seemed woefully ignorant of the meaning of anything. Everything inside Hegewisch crawled and she waited, waited for any of them to speak—Cook, Cook had reason—and ask the Empress if she truly planned to visit an elder god of mass destruction on a city of civilians; but nobody spoke. A tiny Sayaka Miki inside Hegewisch's head stomped her foot on her brain. She gazed skyward, her face coated in a mildewed film of her own sweat, and opened her mouth in the pause in the Empress's voice, she said:

"Your Munificence. If—If I may—speak."

"Readily, Administrator. Thy input is must valued."

"For—for the sake of clarity, you intend to destroy the Soul Gem of DuPage, creating an archon to attack Washington. That is your plan, yes?"

"No," said the Empress. "No. We plan to create two archons."

"Oh," said Hegewisch.

"As Hegewisch is well aware," said the Empress as she strolled back along her carpet with DuPage's Soul Gem balanced on her palm, showcasing it to her followers, "wraiths are manifestations of sin. Humanity's evils and vile deeds outpour into these abominable forms known as wraiths, which Puella Magi then purge. An archon, then—the greatest wraith—forms from the greatest sin. And what, in the eyes of the God who governs this world, would such a sin be?"

Silence. Then a kkkkk—Joliet mustering a nerve. "Kkkkkkkain. Abel—betrayal of—No, no, I mean Judas, in the jaws of Lucifer—Innermost ring—"

"Outer bull, Joliet, outer bull. Betrayal indeed, but remember our God's chief concern is Puella Magi, and as such all sin, when committed by us and our ilk, coagulates in all the more fearsome array of wraith. The betrayal of one Puella Magi against another thus intersects this chasm between Classical notions of sin and the true notions of *our* world. Thus, when I shatter DuPage's Soul Gem, an archon is sure to arise."

Cicero snapped out of what seemed a trance of contemplation. "Wait—Your Munificence—You can't—sully yourself with—sin like that!"

"We can. We must. It is a burthen we must bear, and we alone, and our just recompense for allowing the sins of DuPage to multiply, and to use her blasphemous abilities to our ends. For I, too, hath sinned—I, too." She paused upon her heel and considered the crystal ball she held, its occluded darkness, lacquered like a Magic 8 Ball. Aurora, who had remained motionless for so long, flitted her eyes to its surface.

"I shall break it," said Cicero, "she was my comrade and my commander and it shall be as great a sin if I—"

"We shall hear none of it. Hold thy tongue." The contemplation of the darkened ball ended, she resumed her pace. "However, we have reason to believe there is yet another way to form an archon, one more specifically tied to the unique qualities of DuPage's Soul Gem. For DuPage was able to transmute her despair directly into wraiths. Even now, the despair contained within this Soul Gem must far exceed the despair a normal Puella Magi's gem may contain—and, once the gem is shattered, where shall that despair go? It is energy, it shall not vanish, only *Legem Cyclos* may defy known thermodynamic principles; so what shall happen to it? This question exceeds the grasp of Administrator Hegewisch's knowledge, for it is not of a religious bent, but a purely corporeal... Nonetheless, the late hypotheses of Dr. Cho as well as our own reason indicates that either an archon or a mighty host of wraiths will emerge once this eggshell cracks; either outcome would be to our purposes."

The tiny Sayaka Miki in her brain kicked and kicked and jammed saber after saber into the rivets within the gray matter. She pressed a hand under her nose because she had the distinct impression it had begun to bleed but it was wet only with snot.

"Nonetheless, we shall be able to visit a formidable force upon our adversary, and while she is occupied, we shall take her. Washington shall fall and be ours. That is the crux of our design; we thought it essential to inform thee of it at this juncture."

She ceased speaking. The fire crackled and Joliet fidgeted. Hegewisch's vision had blurred. "Your. Munificence. This action—it'll kill millions of innocent people—" She hesitated, expecting a reproach from Cicero or someone, but nobody stopped her. She added, for finality's sake only, "Millions of them."

"The Washington Puella Magi shall inflict heavy damage to these archons before we defeat her; our forces shall eliminate the rest afterward. The damage to the human populace shall be minimal, and we fully intend to leave the city nigh unmolested."

"Your Munificence, I have—I have—" Stomp, stomp, stab, stab. "—I have received an emissary. From God. A messenger. She—"

The Empress span. "When? At what time? Why was this not immediately reported?"

"She, I apologize Your Munificence, she, she informed me that what you intended to do would lead to the deaths of millions—it wasn't a prediction, it was fate, she's God, she can see the future, millions will die because of this. Millions. Millions."

Hegewisch said it. She had fucking said it and finally the stomping stopped but the ache remained and her skin broke out shivering and slimy rivulets ran down her neck and back. The Empress did not reply immediately, silence save the crackling hearth reigned for a protracted eternity.

The only reason she could still hear was because of this damn silence.

"Perhaps," the Empress said, "millions must die."

Well there we fucking go. It's over. It's done. What can Hegewisch say to that? What can Hegewisch say? If God herself can't warn her away, what can? It had wrenched something thorny from inside her body to even say what she did, to even say anything that might be construed as unpleasant or unwanted in this realm of officious Cult of Personality; what more could she say? What more? What more?

She didn't say anything. Because Cicero spoke instead: "Milady—Your Munificence. Must we—forgive me—allow so many to die for this cause?"

"Uhhhhh, yeah, not to, ehrrrr, contradict but, surely another way?" said Cook.

"We can defeat the Puella Magi of Washington without resorting to these tactics," said Cicero. "I know it. Please, Your Munificence, allow me to contend with her—Cook and I combined ought to suffice."

They were fucking heroes, Hegewisch took back every vile thing she ever thought about either, fucking heroes, five months of faffery and ineptitude erased by a single moment of backbone—God, if only she could say the same of herself—

"We anticipated some such reception." The Empress regarded again DuPage's crystal ball. "Indeed, we applaud thy forthrightness, thy bravery, thy—rectitude. Yes, thy rectitude, for thou hast stood in defense of God's law over ours.

"But know that our cause is great. Our cause is monumental. Our cause shall reorient the trajectory of history human and Puella Magi alike; our cause shall elevate our species in a way otherwise impossible. Consider this: Puella Magi have existed for millennia. Nay, since the inception of intelligent life upon this terra firma; yet, in all those years, and with all the preternatural boons bestowed upon us and those like us, forever have we languished in squalor, divorced and subjugated under the foot of our keeper, and never in all that time has magic constructed aught but sandcastles. Any woman's greatness has swept away in the tide, no permanence achieved.

"This status is by design. The Incubator enjoys and requires our toil, but he requires it because it is something he cannot accomplish himself, and that same fact terrifies him of our prowess. Our God, of whom Hegewisch tells, usurped a single latch of his control with but a wish; and were we all so inclined, to wish for the elevation of our livelihood and the agency over our own lives, what dominion could he maintain upon us? How is it that in so many years, so many wishes, we remain in such a state?

"It is permanence. Any greatness can be undone with a single death, for we are isolated, weakened, kept frightened and paranoid of our own kind, encouraged to compete, to view our sisters as foe. Imagining a key, each confirms a prison. And in these prisons we live; and in these prisons we have lived."

She breathed, she stepped up to her mezzanine and replaced DuPage's Soul Gem upon its pedestal, she swiveled and resumed her march, her arms folded behind her back, a level of intellectual pensiveness etched on her face that contradicted her exalted aura.

"Allow us to confess to thee our own wish. We have kept this secret from thee, and we doubt any of thee may suspect it save our timeless friend Cook, but yea if we are to practice our own sermon we must begin by opening our trust to thee our trusted servants. We must become as sisters, and as such I must reveal to you my most intimate desire, or at least the desire I held as a young female, although I must say now I do not regret my wish in the slightest.

"For my wish is simple: I wished for immortality. A desire that has eluded mankind since its inception. Since Gilgamesh himself, that initial regnant. It is a wish, I have later come to learn, not so uncommon, and yet for all even this wish is unattainable, as to append permanence in a world that is by necessity and design entropic and ever-shifting requires impossible magic. The Incubator bargains with these wishers, appends conditions to everlasting life, ways by which the Puella Magi may indeed die, and only via these conditions can the wish in any semblance be attained; the number and magnitude of conditions varies based on the Magi's potential. My potential, it seems, was great, and so only one condition was attached, and a condition I have complete control over. But we need not speak on that condition now.

"I have lived one hundred and sixty-seven years."

Rat bastard lying Wikipedia didn't check its fucking sources it seems, so much for a thirty-seven-year-old from Alabama. Hegewisch had to drive her teeth into her lower lip to stop a sudden upsurge of laughter, a mad desire to giggle, melting as she were into the lake of fire that flowed from the hearth, melting like Berwyn's serum and the stomp-stomp-stomp restarting.

"And in those many years we have learned much, and observed the way this world operates, through wars and progressive change, riots and unrest. We have met many Puella Magi and viewed their struggles and watched them die no matter how powerful they seemed, no matter what enchantments their wishes devised for them. There have been those who attempted to band together, those who tried to create fellowships or even civilizations, and yet when the sheer force of personality that welded the several parts together extinguished—those parts dispersed. Always. Why? We have wondered. Why? Non-magical humans have been able to build societies. Nations. They have advanced piecemeal to our contemporary world, unlocked scientific secrets and devised ingenious efforts at legacy. Who among us does not know the name George Washington? The name Charlemagne? The name Imhotep? The Incubator tells us many of these advances were aided by Puella Magi, and yet the non-magical survives in writ and the magical dies. Why? Why cannot we, who are greater and more powerful, why cannot we persist as they do?"

"The answer returns always to the Incubator. It is his will we remain as we are; he enjoys the increase of humanity, now seven billion souls strong, for even as they improve their livelihoods their despair remains. But he enjoys we Puella Magi to remain ignorant.

"He is the enemy.

"He must be overthrown."

She had talked so much Hegewisch wondered if everyone else forgot that the real issue here was the millions of people her stupid scheme was going to kill. She tried to summon annoyance at her longwinded spiel because annoyance would supersede the sickness she felt spreading inside her, annoyance somehow being the most powerful emotion of them all. But the Empress, somehow, continued:

"And to overthrow him we must control this planet, for he controls it now. Be assured: We war not against other Puella Magi. We war not against the United States government. We war solely against the Incubator, but until we garner enough power we must skirmish against his subjects witting and un-."

Another pause, this an askance look at her Centurions to revive their existence and prompt them to ask a leading question, how nice of her to remember everyone else. Cicero took the bait:

"How are we to fight the Incubator, Your Munificence? He has no end to his bodies. And even if we were to destroy him, it would mean the end of Puella Magi—only he knows how to trade our wishes for our powers."

"We perhaps cannot kill him," said the Empress. "Perhaps even with a wish. We have no conception of how his biology operates, and the specimens of his body we collect dissolve into dust; perhaps always were dust. However, it is our belief the Incubator can be replaced. Rendered impotent. No longer necessary.

"With wishes, with magic, can we not usurp him? If he feels the need to subjugate us, does that not itself indicate he can be usurped? Why else would he keep magic a secret from the human population but to sever us from the permanence they have assembled for themselves? Imagine a world—for this is the world I imagine, have imagined, many years—Imagine this world:

"The human government and Puella Magi operate in tandem, open harmony. We are provided resources: lodging, security, society, psychiatric assistance, even improved weaponry for those whose own weapons are not so powerful. In return, we provide services to the boon of humankind, we heal their sick, prevent their disasters, perhaps even if the need arise fight their wars. Do the human governments not already perform this exchange with their terrestrial armies? And are Puella Magi not already even more vital, given the services we perform for their populations without their even knowing?

"And consider, then, with the Puella Magi of the world organized, aided, provided resources—consider what advancements we could make. Our wishes could unlock new avenues of technological discovery, as the Incubator has hinted to us they have already, by his design,

done in the past; only now we shall not work under his design, but our own. Could we not perfect the technologies of cloning and interstellar travel? Could we not even replicate the technologies the Incubator himself uses, the creation of Soul Gems and the disposal of grief cubes? Dr. Cho—Dr. Cho is an example. She was a poor medical student in the United Kingdom, blessed with a wondrous ability but unskilled in combat and verging on death; it is a wonder she survived as long as she did. We rescued her, recruited her to our cause, and put her to work; in safety she conducted research most beneficial to our kind and learned how to hone her magic to create humans with the potential to become Puella Magi. And with the ability of Joliet, we could imbue these humans with memories and desires, nudge them along particular paths, and receive desired outcomes. Although the Incubator has recently convinced Dr. Cho to abandon us, how many Puella Magi across the world might have powers similar to hers, or beneficial in some other way?

"With the Puella Magi of the world unified, with their lives ordered and secure, their material needs accounted for, and the support of the seven billion unique souls that compose this planet, what can we not accomplish? What futures can we not craft for ourselves? I have dreamed long on this. Long on it—although perhaps not as long as I, granted endless time, ought to have. Nonetheless, this, my friends, is the first step. We must unify this world under our hegemon."

She fell silent with a note of finality and Hegewisch could not shake the feeling she had just been given a spy movie villain speech while strapped to a gurney about to be sawed in half with a laser. But the Empress's eyes twinkled, the more she spoke the more animated her motions became, until by the end she had started to prance even, skipping on her heels with all her clothes flapping about her, some kind of bleached bird of paradise, and if it weren't for the super ominous "yeah maybe a few million people need to die for this" that sparked the whole thing Hegewisch might have even agreed with her.

Actually, no.

She wouldn't. Because she knew the Empress would want this unified utopian future world to happen under her immortal leadership, and so it would probably be stupid and shitty like the Empire. But Kyubey was stupid and shitty too, and so was Madoka Kaname and her horny angels, so the general idea of Magical Girls seizing their own fucking destiny in some sense appealed to her.

God, but this dumb plan would never work anyway. Sayaka Miki said millions would die, she didn't say they would die and the plan would work and in the end it would all be cool. Would Madoka really step in and intervene herself if the end outcome was overthrowing the Incubator? She didn't love the guy herself.

But Hegewisch had to speak anyway, the stomping never stopped, and the chill inside her had grown, and she felt near to vomiting:

"Your Munificence. The Incubator—he—there's a reason why regular humans don't know M—Puella Magi exist. It's not because we're great at keeping ourselves hidden. Either he alters human memories so they don't see magic, or maybe humans aren't able to see magic at all..." She kept biting her lip as she spoke, sometimes her tongue.

"Joliet's magic shall overcome that, of course."

Of course. Which was why—which was why they had said that it was Joliet's survival that would cause this calamity. Because if Joliet died, the Empress would have given up.

"But must, Your Munificence, we cause the destruction of so many innocent lives?" said Cicero, thankfully.

"We are indeed sorry to hear that it is foretold so many shall die," said the Empress. "We did not anticipate our plan to reach such destructive heights. But the formation of the archons is essential. We cannot hope to defeat the Washington Magi otherwise. Not when she can flatten our forces in a millisecond. The risk is too great—"

The doors smashed open. Despite their enormity, they flew off their hinges, impaled by several thin sabers, and immediately everyone except the Empress and the Handmaiden transformed. A solitary figure stood in the unnaturally natural light that filtered from the world of sanity—no, two figures, but the second was more distant and smaller.

They were Sayaka Miki and—the other one. Cheesehead.

Cicero was already charging and Hegewisch had to scream: "Wait, stop, they're the emissaries of God!" before she even had a chance to wonder how everyone but her could even see them. As soon as Hegewisch said it, though, the Empress commanded Cicero to stay her hand and Cicero stopped, although she remained in the center of the room with the carpet mused beneath her feet.

Joliet had pried a painting off the wall, propped it against a shelf like a tent, and hid under it. Hegewisch, thankfully unseen given the distraction, flinched into the hearth and vomited on the flames. She immediately felt a lot better, although her head still throbbed.

"You *idiot!*" Sayaka Miki screamed, and only when Hegewisch turned back wiping her mouth did she realize Sayaka screamed at her.

"Please Sayaka, please," said the cheese girl. "This is a really bad idea."

"I should have done this myself from the start." Sayaka slowly approached Cicero, who wielded her halberd upside-down so the butt was aimed to strike. "Miss Empress! Come on you, move aside, let me look at her at least."

"I refuse to yield," said Cicero.

"It's not like I can hurt her," said Sayaka. "You heard it: She's immortal. I can't kill her, my partner here can't, nobody can—she can only kill herself. Y'know, the 'condition' she was talking about? So yeah, you might as well chill out and let me say what I'm gonna say whether you want me to or not."

"I refuse to yield," said Cicero.

"Jeesh. Fine, fine. Then hear this: Your little expedition here? This war and all that? Not gonna work. I guarantee it. It'll fall apart totally. Millions will die, yeah, and so will most of

the people in this room. By the end of tomorrow, it'll happen."

Hegewisch noticed Joliet, under the painting, hurriedly count her fingers up to seven.

"Sayaka! You can't say things like that!" The cheese girl lingered in the open doorway.

"Warning people when they're gonna die is the surest way to meddle with the way things are supposed to be."

"That's the plan," said Sayaka.

"Changing things doesn't mean you'll change them better," said Nagisa.

"Things can't get much worse." She strode almost directly up to Cicero. "So yeah, that's it. Your plan you so longwindedly announced just now? Total failure. Trust me on it. Give up now, go back to Chicago, and you'll all live much better and longer lives."

Cicero stared down at her. Sayaka's words settled in the air. Then the Empress placed a hand to her mouth and laughed, composed and ladylike. "Cicero, please stand aside. You—You're an emissary of God, are you? What, pray tell, is your name?"

"Sayaka Miki. Pleased t'meetcha."

"Sayaka Miki. Yes, I believe Hegewisch mentioned you when she first related the tale of Madoka Kaname. You played some tangential role in her ascension, correct?"

"I dunno about that. I mostly just made things worse."

The Empress shook her head and smiled. "Hegewisch, thou art deceived." She stepped up the two steps to the level of her seat and the pedestal of DuPage's gem. "For were this Sayaka Miki truly God's emissary, how is it we can perceive her? Are not the secrets of God restricted to a chosen elect?"

"Oh come on you're gonna make a point out of that?" said Sayaka. Despite the Empress's order for Cicero to stand aside, she had only shunted somewhat out of the way, so Sayaka had to lean to look at her. "You think we can't make other people see us if we want to? Nagisa and I took human forms again to try and prevent your catastrophe from happening. It's not complicated. We've done it before."

"I told you this was a bad idea," said Nagisa.

"Shut it!"

"Perhaps that is so," said the Empress. "Who are we to determine what God can and cannot do? Surely, then, you can show us some token of your divinity? Even in human form, such a thing must be possible?"

Sayaka stared at her, gritting her teeth, eyes flitting to Cicero's gaze every so often, and then once to Cook, who had summoned a sphere of water above one hand, but who otherwise did not appear inclined to combat. "Sure," she said, and drew a blade to point at Cook's sphere. "Look there."

In the sphere of water, like a reflection, although nowhere in the room was there such a thing to reflect, appeared the form of a monstrous mermaid, composed of what looked like collage pieces pasted together, and a heart-shaped crown with a massive sword held aloft. Hegewisch recognized it, although she had never actually seen it before.

Sayaka clarified before Hegewisch had to: "That's the form I took as a witch, in the previous universe, before the Law of the Cycles existed. Nagisa has a form like that too, if you wanna see it."

"Speaks she sooth?" the Empress asked Hegewisch. Hegewisch affirmed as tersely as she could, and even the single word she spoke lingered bitter in her bilious mouth.

Cook contorted the bent the form of her sphere, but the reflection remained unchanging.

"I can summon her in full," said Sayaka, "but then I'd probably do a lot of damage to your room. She's a little big. If you still don't believe me though, we can step outside and I'll put on a show."

"Your Munificence, I recommend not leaving this room," said Cicero.

"It is quite unneeded, yea," said the Empress. "For I believe fully thou hast the capacity to summon such a creature, Sayaka Miki. My only question thus becomes: Is such a summoning truly proof of your shard of godhead?"

Sayaka's face contorted. "Seriously!"

"We would of course take a warning from God Herself with all due gravity," said the Empress. "For She is infallible and her knowledge absolute. However, we possess enemies who understand our devotion and who would be all too willing to exploit it. Consider the Incubator's resources. Could he not produce a Puella Magi with a likeness similar to Sayaka Miki? Or even, using magic, alter an existing Puella Magi's appearance to such? For in this room stands one with the power to alter appearances, and it can be assured that there are similar ones elsewhere. Perhaps, even, it is the real Sayaka Miki, who died in a past universe but, given new circumstances, survived in this one. Could the Incubator not deceive or coerce her to utter this warning in hopes to confound us? Is such a tactic beyond his ken?"

"That's ridiculous. Laila, tell them," said Sayaka.

Hegewisch honestly had no idea how ridiculous it was. It actually made sense. It actually seemed like the dumb kind of stunt the Incubator might pull.

"As for your supposed 'witch' form, could that not also be a product of magic? We admit that as witches have never existed in this universe, it would be more difficult to replicate the appearance of one. However, Dr. Cho was suspiciously coerced out of our service, and we know well the things she can create. With the Incubator's prodding, could not a homunculus be possessed with the will to wish for the ability to manifest witches? Is it even known to you, Hegewisch, whether shards of the Law of the Cycles given again human form possess such a power?"

Hegewisch had to admit it was not known to her. She looked at Sayaka Miki, who looked back livid. Was she the real Sayaka Miki? Hegewisch had to think probably. Honestly, she even still believed it, despite the reasonable doubt the Empress introduced into the whole situation. But somehow Hegewisch no longer gave a shit. It was as if when she vomited she forced out the final dregs of attachment she held to this whole farce of a situation, the Incubator and the Goddess and the Empress all contending in a panoply of absurdity. The foretold disaster loomed distant again and Hegewisch had to wonder, even if this Sayaka Miki were genuine, she was so incompetent how much faith could Hegewisch have in her prophesies?

This was a bad attitude. She recognized it, some part of her shouted in some distant corner, maybe the miniature Sayaka who stomped inside her head. This Sayaka Miki was probably real. Her prophesies were probably real.

That fact actually kinda made Hegewisch want to see her fail.

Cicero, however, gritted her teeth. "Your Munificence, I must admit, I believe I have seen this intruder previously. Only once, and in a passing glimpse during a time I have reason to believe I was under the influence of deceptive magic, but..."

"Oh yeah!" Sayaka smacked her own forehead. "That's right. You showed up in Mitakihara. Mitakihara, now why would I be hanging out in that city of all places, huh Miss Empress?"

In earlier interviews, Hegewisch had revealed to the Empress that Madoka Kaname hailed from a city called Mitakihara in Japan. Cicero probably didn't know the significance, but the Empress must.

However, the Empress remained obstinate. "Inconsequential. We have already mentioned it is likely the real Sayaka Miki still lives. Perhaps even this chance meeting between her and Cicero was engendered at the Incubator's bidding to confound us now."

It was always going to come back to that. The Incubator could engender whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, on whatever timetable he wanted. Sayaka Miki was never going to prove herself. Madoka herself might descend from the heavens with a full choir and a parade of elephants and the Empress would harden her heart. Anything might be Satan's tricks, after all. Fuck them. Fuck them all. Hegewisch wanted it to end. She hoped over half the people in the room did die tomorrow, and she hoped she was one of them.

"You believe this, Laquesha?" said Sayaka. Cicero flinched, but the Empress was quick to say:

"The Incubator of course knows thy given name, Cicero, much as he knows that the condition to our immortality is suicide alone. Be not shaken by such seeming coincidences, for our foe is bountiful in knowledge."

Halfway through the final word Sayaka Miki sprung into action. She dove low around Cicero and raised a blade to block the butt of Cicero's halberd, which she did although the force blasted her into the wall which caved like paper. She had already recovered and bounced off as Cicero rushed her, she ducked another strike and rolled over a leg raised to kick, then took

off at a sprint so low to the ground she might as well have crawled, the sheet of her cape surrounding and obscuring all but her head as she ran for the Empress's mezzanine. A wall of water rose in front of her that formed into solid sheet ice, but even as Cook manipulated it, the form of Oktavia von Seckendorff remained within and at its widest the witch smashed through and appeared in full corporeality with the sword coming down on Cook. The unseen ceiling ripped off the top and the already damaged wall collapsed in a deluge of rubble.

Cicero whipped her halberd around and swung at von Seckendorff while Hegewisch cleaved close to Aurora, whose spinning yellow ball prevented any debris from crashing against her. Meanwhile Sayaka ascended the steps and cast her cape aside to reveal five swords with their tips jabbed into the floor and the pommels outward. The Empress only laughed at her until Sayaka seized the swords and flung them one after another not at the Empress but at the Soul Gem of DuPage on its pedestal.

The first blade, then the next four, impaled the crystal ball. It bounced off its perch and struck the ground. Sayaka clenched her fist and shouted something in victory even as Cicero drove von Seckendorff into the ground with a single stroke and Cook streamed lava water atop it until its orchestral shriek caused Hegewisch to clamp her hands over her ears.

The impaled Soul Gem of DuPage shimmered. It no longer looked like a crystal ball. It wasn't a crystal ball. It was a book, a weighty tome, almost as thick as tall, and shredded parchment collected on the jutting tips of Sayaka's swords. Sayaka's victorious whoop died into confusion as she whipped her head around the room in search of some answer and found it in the palm of the Handmaiden, who held the real DuPage Soul Gem on the far side of the room.

Cicero and Cook closed on Sayaka. She backpedaled into a corner and shouted: "None of you have any idea what you'll do!" before she swept her cape around herself and vanished.

The cape fluttered to the ground, flat. Oktavia von Seckendorff melted into water, which flooded the room to knee height before it began to drain through all the openings the brief fight created. Hegewisch, in Aurora's protective circle, remained dry.

The other one, Nagisa, had disappeared at some point too.

On the mezzanine, the water did not rise past the Empress's elevated heels. She stooped and seized Sayaka's cape; she flicked it to divest it of water and inspected it with casual interest.

"It should," she said, "be now well understood the ways our enemies seek to undo us."

"Are you unharmed, Your Munificence?" said Cicero.

"Quite. And our loyal subjects?"

A series of affirmations. Joliet rose from the water, sputtering and spitting. The Handmaiden returned to the side of the Empress and handed her the Soul Gem of DuPage. Hegewisch could only think: So much for Sayaka's "We're not murderers" spiel. Maybe DuPage no longer counted as human.

"I believe," said Aurora, the first real words she had spoken the entire time, although her face remained as placid and resolved as always, while everyone turned in anticipation of what she had to say: "I believe I would be glad to die, for this Empire. I do not fear the warnings even if they are true."

"Thou speak well. Now then, thou art dismissed. As mentioned previously, we shall speak with Cook and Cicero privately as to tactical matters of tomorrow's invasion of Washington. Aurora and Hegewisch, return to your respective platoons. Have all platoons moved to Baltimore, where they will be able to quickly reinforce lest plans go awry."

It was over. It was over. The conversation ended. Hegewisch at least had to be thankful for that.

As she kept close to Aurora, whose movements across the room maintained a circle of dryness, the Empress added:

"Hegewisch, one final request. Have grief cubes of the quantity of five thousand be sent to this location as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Munificence."

She and Aurora exited.

Dede Thorow the Dolorouse Stroke

The Christmas holiday had finally ended, Sidwell Friends School had resumed classes. The lots-of-fun science teacher sprung upon them a welcome back pop quiz, "to make sure you're still sharp." So everyone sat in their desks scribbling chemical coefficients while the teacher in his plaid sweater vest and bright bowtie marked the whiteboard with the night's homework assignment.

One student in particular had almost finished the test. She double-checked her answer to the penultimate question, found it bulletproof, and commenced the final. She took a moment to glance at her fellows, none of whom seemed overly disconcerted about the whole thing. A few had already finished, their test papers upside-down and their thumbs twiddling as they read the assignment written on the board. Sidwell had an elite reputation, where even a valedictorian elsewhere might struggle to shine. But this student was unworried by all that. She had a certain celebrity to compensate for only average excellence.

What did worry her was the white rabbit atop a plastic skeleton hanging by the door.

Your business, bunny?

Senator Luce will make her move today.

Kinda busy, if you couldn't tell. It can wait until night.

She plans to attack within the hour. If you hesitate, the wraiths she spawns will cause massive destruction.

It took a lot of willpower not to contort her face into a grimace, although if anyone saw her they'd probably think she was having trouble with the test. (Which might be even worse for her image.) She instead concentrated on the final question, a trick but transparent.

It's hard enough to slip out during the night. It'll be even worse during the day. There's a camera with at least three armed guys watching me even now, you know? And two more outside the window.

I can easily tamper with primitive human surveillance technology and confuse your guards. You don't need to worry about that.

She reread her final answer. Stupid Senator Luce. Why'd the rabbit let her hang around so long anyway. No other Magical Girls were allowed into the city, but the Senator and her little lapdog could go wherever they pleased. Apparently he needed Luce for something or other, or maybe he let her in considering she *did* get elected and all. Whatever.

I guess if she really plans to attack this city, I better stop her.

I knew you'd understand. The rabbit hopped off his skull and trotted toward her. I apologize for leaving this up to you. I attempted to stop Senator Luce's ambitions earlier, but

unforeseeable circumstances caused my attempts to fail. Now, you're one of few Magical Girls in this region with the power to fight her.

Odds of success?

Truthfully, quite low. Her strongest soldiers are formidable in their own right, and her power grants them invulnerability. However, I've received information from a source of dubious reliability that Senator Luce is destined to fail. Put stock in that what you will.

The girl smiled. Low chances, the fate of the country on the line, vague prophesies, alright. Now it was starting to sound like something worth skipping class for.

I would offer the few Magical Girls I have at my disposal to help you, he continued, but the indiscriminate nature of your abilities—

Yeah, they'll just get hurt.

She flipped over her test paper. The rabbit bounced onto her desk and then her shoulder. Although nobody else could see him, which often led her to think maybe she was just insane, he felt real enough. Plush and velvety, like a stuffed doll.

Alright, she said, let's save the country, woohoo. Her dad would be so proud.

I'm glad you're cooperative. After this class period ends, you'll be able to leave the school undetected. I'll tell you where to go next.

Sure thing.

The teacher called time on the test and told them to turn them in to the front.

Upon her throne the Empress reclined. The fireplace had extinguished and the purr of some external motor replaced its crackle. What light existed came from an uncertain source located behind her, so that her long shadow stretched down the steps of the mezzanine onto her two chief Centurions gathered: Cook—Cicero.

Tactics had been discussed, plans set, no longer did any utilitarian purpose remain for their conversation, and the appointed day of Theophany had come.

"It is not our custom," said the Empress, "to reveal unto thee as much as we have in these past twenty-four hours. Yet we shall have you know that we cannot disprove that Sayaka Miki is indeed God's messenger; we can only cast reasonable doubt upon the assumption. Actually—

"Actually."

She exhaled, and her breath strained long and jagged through her lips, and she looked to the faces of her subordinates, and she closed her eyes.

"Let's speak more frankly. I think you two have deserved it. Maybe even the third in my possession," and she tapped DuPage's crystal ball by her side. "Although I trust Aurora, Joliet, and Hegewisch to a great degree—some things I must withhold from them. I wish to eschew the elevated diction, if only for a moment, as we ride to what may prove the final battle for some of us, or even all."

Her words fell upon them. It had been a long time for speech, and it was clear on each of their faces that they desired action.

"It's possible Sayaka Miki is correct. I will not say probable, but I will say possible. It is possible we will fail, we will die..."

Her voice trailed. She was uncertain of her intention with this final addendum, perhaps she spoke only because time remained to speak, and she had long become unaccustomed to the leaving silent of open spaces. She looked to her shelves, perhaps she should read a book instead, and fill the silence with the words that resonated in her mind. But she wanted to speak. She had seen so many die, and she had wished she had said certain things to them she never did, because she always imagined she had time, time, time.

But this was stupidity. She needed to place before them a front of total confidence, regardless of her feelings and fears. If she wavered, they would waver. Cicero, she could tell, at least partway believed the warning. And Cook—the Empress had never pierced Cook.

She didn't want them to die. They had each helped her in some way, and when she gave them her blessing she did so not out of a ceremonious boon from liege to liegeman but out of a true desire for their safety—a desire she could not in all honesty say was replicated with Aurora... or even, sadly, and she understood how sad it was to say, Joliet.

"I have seen many die in my time..."

So many. So many deaths it undid her. So many deaths she at many points intended to invoke the clause in her immortality; so many she once even discharged a gun at her grinning Soul Gem and survived only by the failure of her aim.

"I have sunken low. In my many years—perhaps this shall surprise you—in my many years I have been—a harlot, a thief, a killer, and a whore."

She let those words settle and tried to detect any change in their demeanor. But they were well trained.

"It was only in such depths of depravity I learned I needed something more to feed myself than the carnal pleasures of this world. But I did not learn this lesson on my own. Do you know who taught it to me?"

None did.

"Her." The Empress held up DuPage's Soul Gem. "She was a companion, I have had so many before, simply someone to kill endless time with. She hated everything about this world. Everything. She wished death onto it. Her ire infected everything near her. Even later, when the three of you met her, you surely felt the corruption of her hate...?"

"Yes, Your Munificence," said Cicero.

Cook merely loosed a low "ahhhhh."

"She filled me so full of hate I couldn't take any more. It burst out, overflowed. I knew I had to do something. I had to change something..."

No. She wasn't telling the story correctly. How could she? Some things even she could not bear to reveal to them. DuPage had even hated her; she had hated DuPage; they hated one another so much they became special, in a sense, to one another. DuPage, who had no end to her hate, only hated more, but for the Empress, it became a sort of... love. Hate and love, love and hate, they seemed to her in that moment two sides of the same coin, because in her long years the most crippling emotion had been apathy; love and hate both combatted it strongest. Negative and positive no longer mattered, but magnitude did. And DuPage dealt in degrees of immense magnitude.

How could she explain that? That emotion? To these youthful people who still lived to embrace pleasure and eschew pain? Her critics claimed the rigid prohibitions of the Empire crushed passions and created dull automatons; but it was the opposite, what she had always wanted was to foster people who could find passion in something greater. It was only when she hated DuPage so much that she felt the same as she had felt with all the paramours of her life that she knew the folly of such personal passions.

There had to be something more. There had to be something more substantial. That was when she began to read books; that was when she looked into the Bible and the Qur'an and other holy texts. Perhaps she turned that direction because religion was what DuPage despised most of all, or maybe it was simply the tattered remnants of her mid-1800s upbringing that caused some scrap of piety to bubble up her nasal cavity like cocaine years after its ingestion; either way, the impetus had been DuPage.

The Empire did not breathe as a full-fledged idea overnight; she had at first simply wanted to build. To put her passion into the construction of something relevant, based on what she read in those books. But it had grown, Cook and others had joined, formality and laws compounded...

And DuPage had always lurked. Useful, indestructible. Often the Empress believed DuPage would simply get fed up with the rigid world they had created and leave; but because DuPage thrived off hatred, she could abide even a lifestyle she hated. No, that lifestyle empowered her. She could crush the faces of subordinates with as much malice as manageable. Of course, after years, it became too much malice even for DuPage to manage; she grew tired; she started to sleep. Yet any especial circumstance could wake her up, and that old hatred revived, and so even the emotions the Empress had felt for her before the Empire's founding might flare...

"So, in a sense, DuPage holds a strong significance to me still," she said, aware that she had not spoken in a long time and that her comment must seem a non sequitur to her audience. "Perhaps I have allowed her to remain, as a dark mirror to my own soul, a glimpse of the hatred I had wallowed in..."

The sound of the engine outside stopped. A car door opened somewhere. Footsteps tapped to the double doors of the chamber and someone pried them open from the other side. Light streamed in; the Handmaiden stood in the opening.

"Your Munificence, we have arrived."

"We apologize," said the Empress, "our tale was overlong and spoken with too little preparation. I'm afraid I failed to justify my own initial point—I often overestimate the time allowed me."

Unsatisfactory. She knew it, and she hated that her subordinates were too loyal to contest her on it. She knew Cicero had her own doubts, suspected Cook must too, she wanted them to press her on this issue, argue against her, she was on the precipice of changing her mind, she could simply turn to the Handmaiden and say the plans have changed, they will leave, return to Chicago, prepare a different strategy, gather more strength—but at the same time she thought of how the Incubator desired that outcome and could not in good conscience follow through on it.

She should have spoken to Hegewisch in private. She should have received moral wisdom on the matter. It was one thing for "Sayaka Miki" to say "karma has decided, your mission will fail," but even if it failed, was it wrong? The Empress was following in the footsteps of Madoka Kaname, who had braved so much to change the universe for the better. But Madoka had the advantage of a powerful destiny, and in the end, all she had to do was wish. Even the homunculi Dr. Cho created, who had the power to become Magical Girls, could not make wishes a fraction as powerful as Madoka's. The Empress had to engineer her own destiny, and to do so required more risk. Required more sacrifice.

And how much of her willingness to proceed was formed by her knowledge that, even in the event of a total catastrophe, both Centurions and the Handmaiden slain, that she herself could simply retreat, rebuild, and plan anew however many years it took?

"Anyway," she said, rising, "it is now time for action."

Her Centurions shunted to the side and allowed her passage down the long carpet of her chamber, through the doors, and out of the limousine onto the platform by the curb. The Handmaiden conjured a red carpet for her to tread upon.

They had arrived at Arlington National Cemetery, not technically in Washington, but only across the river from the Lincoln Memorial and the National Mall. Unleashing the archons here would at least provide a marginal amount of time before major human habitation was threatened—her plan had always been to limit human casualties, even before Sayaka Miki's omen. And only Sayaka Miki's omen indicated humans would be in danger. Given her knowledge of the Washington Magi's strength, even two archons would be defeated swiftly.

Cook and Cicero filed out of the limousine and the Handmaiden shut the door behind them. Almost no humans were present in the cemetery, it being a wintry midmorning Monday when most had work or school.

"I find it suspicious we've yet to be attacked," said Cicero.

"Ohhhhh?" said Cook. "Do you know the Washington Magi's identity?"

"I do not," said Cicero. "Is this pertinent information?"

"In terms of combat, probably not? Ahhhhh, but she's not someone who can go wherever she pleases so easily."

The Empress wondered where *Cook* had learned the Washington Magi's identity. And while she was right that the president's daughter had certain leashes on her that even the Incubator could only sever for so long, she did wonder why they had not been attacked by any of the Incubator's Terminatrixes as they entered the city. Did he consider the gesture futile? A waste of resources? Perhaps, after Sayaka Miki's warning, he now had confidence the Empress would fail.

Perhaps he had attacked Aurora, Joliet, and the rest of the Empire's soldiers, now coalesced in Baltimore. After all, he had indicated a desire to target Joliet especially. But while Aurora was not a phenomenal commander, she excelled in defense—and it would take some force to strike down eighty Puella Magi. Either way, she had received no urgent communique from them, so she had to assume peace.

She signaled her Handmaiden. "Depart at once. This field is like to become bloodstained soon, and thou art of far less sturdy stock than our Centurions. Given Dr. Cho's absence, it would prove difficult to replace thee."

"Yes, Your Munificence." The Handmaiden bowed, returned to the limousine, and pulled its sleek black form away down the road that bordered the cemetery, although she left the red carpet for the Empress. Upon her departure, a cold wind blew, and rustled the white blazers of the Empress and her Centurions, as well as the waves of grass that rippled between the tombstones, whipping white glimmers in electric lines from one end of the cemetery to the other. The clouds had gathered in full and precipitation or worse threatened; not a shard of sunlight shone, yet a muddled effervescence pervaded all.

The tombstones stretched up a gentle hill that occluded most hints of urbanity, and there was a simple, orderly placidity to their spacing in lines and columns. She was to defile this sanctified ground, this monument to those who had shed blood for the nation across so many wars, to disturb the restful sleep of they who died restlessly in servitude of American ideals. She had done so because she decided it would be better to trample the dead than the living. As she regarded the alabaster slabs she frowned. Was her plan truly to inflict grievous damage to the city's human population? It seemed so infeasible. She would have been willing to accept the proposition that her plan would fail. She did not think so highly of herself that she considered her chessboard odds against a living supercomputer so high. But in what sense would her plans kill millions? That claim alone unsettled her, that claim alone kept drawing her mind. Was the destruction of DuPage's soul weighed so heavy a sin that it could

create something not even the Washington Magi and her strongest Centurions Cook and Cicero could kill?

Cook and Cicero transformed at the same time and turned toward a hill topped by a slight copse. Between two trees stood a figure, a female of teenaged years in a long coat with a checkerboard pattern. She placed a hand against one tree's bark as though to lean but instead simply stroked it up and down as she said:

Senator.

Ah. Washington.

Please, I'm Malia.

"That's," said Cicero, "she's—"

"Ahhhhhyup," said Cook, hideously. "Told ya she was somebody important?"

Anyway, Senator, you know you're not allowed to bring any friends here except your maid. Malia sat atop a nearby tombstone and crossed her legs.

We imagine the Incubator has appraised you of our intent.

Right.

The Empress reached into the folds of her jacket and placed her palm upon DuPage's Soul Gem. *We will inform you now we have no intention to abandon our plans.*

Cool. I didn't feel like talking anyway. I gotta get back to school, you know.

"Your Munificence," said Cicero, one eye on the gem, "allow us to fight her ourselves before you resort to potentially devastating measures."

"I'm game for that?" said Cook. "Uhhhhh, the whole 'let's not kill a million people' thing?"

The Empress dropped DuPage's Soul Gem before her. In the same motion, she drew from the other side of her jacket a longsword and cleaved the gem in twain with a single swipe.

Two perfect hollow hemispheres fell to the ground.

The heavy darkness that had built and built and built inside the gem over the past week swirled as a vortex.

Allowing Cicero and Cook to engage Malia alone only risked their lives—and the success of the venture. She could not have her faith shaken by ambiguous prophecies of uncertain origin. If God condemned her for this deed, well, that had been the intention from the onset.

And with it came... relief. For the two halves before her were the final corpse of Yasmin Esfahani, irrevocably deceased. All this time, the gem in her possession, she had feared somehow DuPage would return, her hate alone would animate her decaying body in a St.

Louis park and she would shamble undead unto Chicago to wreak her vengeance, not solely for the singular act of betrayal inflicted upon her but for the years of boundless hate festering festering festering within her heart.

Staring at the severed halves, feeling the ease that assuaged her long-frayed veins, she suddenly wondered, after never contemplating it before, how much her betrayal of DuPage had been for punishment, how much for tactics, and how much for fear.

The vortex grew.

The Empress stepped back from it, and Cook and Cicero stepped away on the other side. Malia, by contrast, pulled out a device—a cell phone—and engaged with it, only an occasional glance levied to track the spiral as it grew, upward and downward, a funnel the one direction and a drill the other, churning a narrow pillar into the dirt and opening a vast stormcloud into the sky.

That's your big move? Making a storm? Senator, you know that's nothing, right? Like, you have to, right?

The tombstones rippled. The tornado grew, the funnel increased. The Empress, immutable though she were, was forced to dance back toward the curb as the ground churned and turned soft beneath her heels. The stone slabs started to fall, and each that fell resounded with a cataclysmic bang, a clap that pierced the gale and gusts. The branches cracked off trees and the trees cracked at the trunks and whirled into the howl, the grass and ground wrenched in curled strips like wallpaper, something beneath groaned piteously, and shielding her eyes from the dust and dirt and debris the Empress wondered what form it would take—for it was said they all took unique forms, these archons and demiurges, these unholy creators, unique to their circumstances and their terrain. What would one spawned in a cemetery become, a Lord of the Dead, a latter-day Hades, marshalling the skeletal remains of the Civil War slain against the descendants of slaves—Cook and Cicero and Malia—or against the progeny of slavers? A century and a half unforgotten, would some of the ghastly men risen be those known in her youth?

Or would this be an archon begotten of the woman whose soul enlivened it? Madame DuPage, would this be your final adieu? Cook, before the Empress ordered her memories of the affair altered, recorded diligently DuPage's final words; how she had claimed she would return, bury them all, that she "knew something none of you know"...

There. In the winds. In the sickly swirling air, emerging not from the soil but from the clouds, as they darkened and flashed electric over the city, manifesting first as two great purple eyes and then as a dark claw descending, its form building out of the lesser blackness of the skies, the blackness that crossed the cemetery and darkened them all, so that only a scant gleam of Cicero and the flash of something liquid in the last direction of Cook remained, and this was something out of Revelations, its many apocalyptic yearnings and all its varied symbols, she had of course researched the archons, absorbed all living knowledge of them, pried from the clandestine lips of the Incubator tidbits, cross-referenced against the prophet Hegewisch, and though she had traveled far for many years she never saw one herself, of course it had not been since her religious reawakening that she even cared, and by New Orleans 2005 she was too entrenched in Chicago to gallivant across the country to look, yet there was always a

certain fascination, much as those ancient brimstone preachers who created of a few scant Biblical mentions a treacherous figure of Satan, or the blind scribe Milton whose magnum opus was dedicated to that antithesis of God; and all the men of yore who created so many names for demons, Beelzebub and Belial and Baal, *yea*—A branch swung into her—she failed not her footing—what hellspawn was such? The fiend emerging downward, an arm now, a shoulder and torso; its form was humanoid—

Rising into the air toward it was a form of angelic luminescence. Wreathed in golden feather wings, bedecked by a halo more in the vein of Renaissance art than modernity. In one hand she held a spear of pure light and in the other a brand likewise burning. All of her was either white or gold. A long tunic stretched down her front and despite the wind it did not rustle or rush but held as though the air were steady; the same for her wings as they stretched outward and rained from the feathers long shafts of rainbow, which swept over the ground like searchlights and turned the tombstones they touched to dust.

Okay, I guess it's like, a little bigger than I thought, but no big deal.

Malia raised the spear overhead. It seemed to elongate, or rather it remained the same length yet reached further than its length ought, so that it pierced the clouds above like a needle dipped into lye, and in a ring from where it touched spread light, reaching from both sides at once around the embryotic form of the archon and touching together at its back. The vast purple eyes blinked out of the sheer dark at her and its claw began to reach, its form starting to shift, losing its initial humanoid elements, bubbling, developing—What will be your final form, Madame DuPage? What will your hate finally produce?

Nothing.

For from the ring of light flashed three hundred and sixty lightning bolts at once, from all degrees around the archon, into the archon's skull. It came as a single crack, too fast for the Empress to perceive with much clarity, but the split-second onset of light burned into her retinas and so in its residual she could comprehend the individual lines of electricity purging deep into the non-light form of the archon, striking directly at its eyeballs although other lines streaked into his—its—why did she consider it male?—cranial plate.

The archon uttered no sound. No howl or cry of pain, but its outstretched claw drooped and as the afterimage faded the sky brightened with a new electric fervor and unleashed a second round of lightning.

The purple eyes became uneven. One sagged lower to the earth than the other. Fingers cracked from the claw, the Empress could see now it was still too weak, it had not been given the necessary time to develop before Malia unleashed her might against it, it had yet to adopt a complete form—

A third flash of lightning. Stretches of the archon's utter blackness peeled away to reveal thick, yellow-beige bones assembled like the mechanical plates of some aircraft, coming undone; pieces started to fall away, shift or unsettle, the black skin rotted and more of the interior structure came to light, it was mere bones, only a creature, no god or demigod, first one then the other eyeball burst. A deluge of violet jelly oozed to the soil and swept between the tombstones not yet obviated by the rainbows of Malia's wings.

Thick pieces of the archon fell after. They hit the ground with seismic rumbles, draping across the landscape, it had not been so clear before how large even the inchoate form had been, and yet its disembodied arm went from one end of the Empress's sight to the other, at least until Malia turned her rainbows against the detritus to obliterate the remains entirely. Parts of a skull crashed, cratered the ground; a clavicle, ribs, components of a spinal column. Fleshless, goreless save the jelly of the eyes; eaten, eaten by the rainbows.

Eaten until not a piece remained, and nothing further came from the sky, and the winds died, although the darkness remained.

And that was the archon. That was DuPage's hate come to bear; it bore nothing. The Empress regarded the site, expectant of—of something. After the warnings, after the notoriety with which she had constructed her personal understanding of DuPage—and would there not be a second archon? She had theorized DuPage's Soul Gem held the power to spawn two, one from the sin of the Empress's betrayal and one from the physical despair that had collected inside it. No second archon? Not even a host of ghouls, smaller wraiths, anything? Only that one form, stricken dead still as an infant?

Nothing more?

So did DuPage's gem simply lack the concentrated despair or was it true that God did not frown upon DuPage's death?

She waited, watched the land as Malia descended. No second archon. No further wraiths. Only a deep hole drilled and some damage dealt, as though a hurricane had dealt it.

That imbecilic Sayaka Miki! Now the Empress knew the girl had babbled about things she knew not. What millions were now imperiled? What disaster had she brought about? Hm? Where were the corpses? And she had braced herself to kill so many in pursuit of her ultimate goal. A farce, a farce, she ought to have better believed her own words: It had been a trick of the Incubator...

She tried to locate Cicero and Cook in the darkness, but could not. *Retreat*, she said. *Clearly we have underestimated the might of the Washington Magi, or else overestimated the might of our secret weapon. Our odds of success are too—*

Ahhhhh, but Cicero's going in.

And sure enough, a glint in the cyclone revealed Cicero bounding skyward toward Malia.

How abominable and unseemly everything had become. How mired in hypocrisy. What a foul misuse of Centurion DuPage, what utter disrespect for her station regardless of how well she merited it. Cicero plunged into the abyss not solely because she knew she could master this Washington Magi—she could—but to purge this absurd tragicomedy of its splotches.

Her armor covered her head to toe, no scrap of bare skin exposed, and all she wore carried the Empress's Blessing. Only a fool would consider this invulnerability the same as invincibility, for those with powerful binding magic or some way to restrain her could just as easily gain the advantage as though she were not Blessed at all, but so far Washington displayed no ability of that ilk. She, like Cicero, dealt in pure power, and while from what Cicero saw that power exceeded her own in both force and breadth, it meant nothing because although her Empress wavered in her rectitude, her Blessing still held.

Thus she mounted her horse and spurred it onward. It bounced upon the remnants of a tombstone and launched upward, through the maelstrom of bark and dirt and alabaster that came crashing down at the sudden cessation of the archon's vortex, toward the angelic figure of Washington. She grasped her halberd in both hands and drew it behind her, the movement lacked subtlety, but until Washington proved she could evade or repel she had no need of such tactics.

Washington noticed her mid-ascent and swept her wings crosswise so that the rainbows that streamed from them passed through Cicero harmlessly. But in the fragment of a second before Cicero closed the rest of the gap she realized the purpose of Washington's movement, not to strike Cicero, but to cleave a huge chunk out of the ground and fling it upward. The accursed darkness prevented Cicero from seeing the rush of loamy soil and splintered caskets until it lifted her, reoriented her trajectory, and caused her to flail. The dirt splattered against the narrow slats in her helm and blinded her, she swung her flail wildly and cracked seismic waves in midair but struck nothing of consequence. She did not realize she had stopped moving upward until she struck the ground headfirst at an angle that, even despite the Blessing, snapped her neck. Although her armor absorbed all impact, nothing could account for the force of her body within the armor landing against her head in such a way.

Well, she didn't *need* a neck. Get up get up get up!

She scrambled, her mechanical horse scrambled, their limbs shuffled and tangled and a metal bray rang out. The wind had died, the archon had died, but the darkness remained, the blemish of the Empress's great Sin. And this same Empress now had the gall to demand her retreat, the same order replayed ad infinitum in her head, doing nothing but distorting her concentration. As her mount righted she grabbed her head with her hands and angled it to scan the skies until she saw the luminous angel, around which waves of ice and water flashed. Cook had joined.

Milady, Cicero said, because she needed to get this buzz out of her brain, *Your Munificence. Have faith in your soldiers. The plan with the archon was doomed to fail—destined to fail. For you told me yourself, we must always act with rectitude. Rectitude! The righteousness ordained by God. If we fail God, how can we hope to succeed in the terrestrial sphere?*

Those words sounded good, but Cicero had only half-thought them, spouting the first vocalization of her feelings she could muster, tossing in the words the Empress loved to say herself, and whatever it did it shut her up—Forgive her for thinking such a crass phrase as "shut her up" in conjunction with her Empress. No! The Empress had deigned to lower herself basely into the realm of murder and blasphemy. Shut her up was the least Cicero could do.

Fuck.

FUCK!

She couldn't think about this. She had to aid Cook. Her horse bounded across the ground, which gave way beneath its hooves at each step, until Cicero realized she wasn't on the ground at all but on a line of soil ripped up by Washington and itself falling. When had that happened? The rainbows swept over her. She shielded her helm's beaver and waited for the rainbow to pass, but they didn't—Washington was keeping it trained on her to nullify her vision. Smart, but Cicero swung her halberd and smashed her own crater into the side of the hill. The soil here was soft, wet from past rain, easy to blast away. She formed a tunnel and charged into it and freed herself from the dazzling light.

If Washington had no way to actually harm them, then she might simply attempt to outlast them. One of the major differences between ordinary Magical—*Puella Magi* and exceptional ones was the capacity of their Soul Gem; endurance, if you will. If Washington were so powerful as claimed, then she may be able to prevail in a war of attrition.

Aggression would thus be key. Cicero altered the trajectory of her halberd and blasted a hole straight above. Shielded by the cone of debris she launched herself upward, into the aerial realm where Washington and Cook combatted, weaving between Cook's cracking coils of ice. The rainbows ate everything, and furthermore lightning bolts rained from the sky and sent magnified waves of electricity along the more fluid streams straight to Cook's outstretched palms. Cook's uniform was disadvantageous when it came to the Blessing, because she needed to use at least some kind of bare skin, usually her hands, to summon water. So while the Handmaiden had converted her original costume (by rumor a dainty swimsuit) into something more akin to a deep sea diver's outfit, some spots remained uncovered.

Cicero lacked that weakness, and the shattering towers of ice proved only footholds for her horse to gain momentum. The ice seemed to fall at random, but Cicero realized it always fell in such a way as to refract Washington's rainbow light—Cook was placing her ice strategically for this effect. And with all the flashing lightning the target was crystal clear, that angel hovering directly above—Cicero bounding closer, closer, closer, closer, under a falling pillar, over a sweep of rainbow—THERE!

She swung. Her halberd crashed upon Washington's body, garbed only in a pure white robe—how fitting that the side that summoned a demon would stand opposite to that of an angel—and Cicero knew from the speed of her swing and the speed of Washington she would connect.

She did connect. Connected with Washington's sword. The typical eruptive force blasted past, ruffling Washington's wings, shattering all the ice that swirled around her, but her arm did not buckle, the sword absorbed the force like Blessed armor. She blocked the attack and she wasn't even watching, preoccupied as she were with Cook.

Then Washington flicked her wrist and launched Cicero skyward, knocking the halberd from her hands. Cicero groped for the handle as she hurtled away, up and up, into a swirl of electricity that mired everything in yellow and disoriented her—she was traveling back down again. Swirling, swirling, her horse falling away, until she crashed into a tree, snapped it in

half, hastily curled to avoid internal injuries, and drove a trench through the dirt. Ten or twenty headstones in a line shattered against her before she finally came to a stop.

So. Washington *was* strong. Alright. But her Soul Gem was exposed, Cicero had seen it—a white diamond in the shape of a cherub that clasped her tunic at the shoulder.

Cook, her Soul Gem's—

Ahhhhh, an obvious fake? Come on.

What the fuck was so goddamn obvious about it? Well Cicero didn't know and as she rose her head lolling on account of her still-snapped neck a shaft of light shot from the skies and struck her in the center of her breastplate. She grabbed her head and angled it to better see what it was and it was the lance that Washington had used previously to destroy the archon. The lance hadn't been thrown, it had simply extended, stretching to an unrealistic degree from the heavens to prod Cicero with its very tip, incapable of penetrating so Cicero had to wonder the point—

It lifted and Cicero lifted with it, affixed to the tip as though it exuded adhesive. It whipped to the side and slammed Cicero against a tree, then the ground, then the other ground, then some headstones, then another tree. Whatever her body struck cratered but only after the third hit did Cicero realize the lance lashed her around with a specific intent to cause her internal injury. First she slammed awkwardly against an arm and it dislocated at the shoulder, then both leg bones shunted against themselves and snapped at two different points. She managed to weld her final limb to her side to prevent a similar fate and once Washington realized she would make no further progress the lance tip retracted and Cicero dropped to the dirt.

Cicero had somehow failed to consider this method of wounding. She wasn't sure why, considering her neck had been broken in a similar way only a few moments prior, and now she felt like a complete imbecile, unprepared, overconfident. Washington simply picked her up. Simply picked her up, picked her up! And now it hurt, it had been so long since she received any wound whatsoever, now she had three useless limbs and a rolling head, and she had become so untrained at dampening the pain. With her remaining arm she thrashed her body and tried to do—anything. Most of her ribs had broken too, she felt like a bag of jagged shards, her skin was punctured from inside her suit of invulnerability. That Empress. That Empress and her worthless Blessing. Worthless Sin and worthless Blessing both, hypocrite and pedant.

No. No. She had to, had to crush these blasphemous thoughts. Had to crush the uncouthness within her mind. Jesus Christ himself said an adulterer in mind was as bad as an adulterer in body. So when she thought unclean words, impure things, she was soiling herself even if she bit her tongue. Let the other Centurions act clean and think filthy. She was Centurion Cicero, she would not lose in any capacity, and she would not lose now. This singular setback had destroyed her composure too much, she was going wild, she needed to. Calm. Down. Calm down. Calm down Cicero. Calm down. Think.

She had little time to think. Who knew how long Cook could hold out against Washington. Her head had lolled into position to observe their fight, Cook had fallen into defensive patterns only, summoning ice towers to shield herself and distort her true position, she dipped

and slid and ran but she never even managed an attack of her own, and no victory could be achieved in such a fashion. Cicero needed to aid her, so she banished the bubbling from her mind and called her horse.

Her horse was MADE of unbreakable armor. It had no bones or soft bits inside. It was simply a series of mechanical plates animated by no mechanism but magic. Washington could never harm it.

She closed her eyes. Blotted the pain inside, applied her magic to force serenity. She caused her horse, wherever it was, to compress and disappear; she summoned it anew directly beneath her broken body. It sprung from a small cube, shifting and unfolding, lifting Cicero off the soil as she clung to its extending neck with her good arm, and then it stood fully formed and Cicero draped upon it.

Cook believed Washington's visible Soul Gem was a decoy. Who knew what reasoning Cook used to reach that conclusion, but Cicero elected to trust her. However, with Cicero's body in such shambles, she lacked much time to sleuth its true location before Washington determined a way to render her inutile.

So it had to be once more into the breach, into the dark clouds. Her horse gained speed, it ran, the broken parts of her body jangled and rolled all over. It became difficult to gain an accurate perception of her environs. But many remnants of Cook's ice towers lingered, and on a good glimpse she charted her route. The horse leapt to the first, then the second, then the third pillar, the lightning flashed around her and blinded what little accurate sight remained, but Washington was such a bright and obvious target it took little intense focus to determine her position. Up. Up. Up. She wrapped her horse's bridle around her to keep her attached and in her good hand manifested a new halberd.

Oh, wow. You don't give up, said Washington. At least vary your strategy? Running at me over and over won't work.

Sound advice. Cicero fully planned to act on it. Washington's lance lashed out, faster than Cicero could evade in her current state of semi-incapacitation, and stuck her on the forehead. It forestalled all forward momentum and pinned Cicero mid-jump between two towers just out of striking range of Washington. Washington wasn't even paying attention to her, holding her at bay with one arm while the rest of her magic encircled Cook.

Cicero had no way to hit her at this range. It was as if it had been measured to the centimeter, framed in such a way that the distance seemed tangible and Cicero might waste strength attempting to bridge it. But she knew her limits as well as the Incubator who whispered in Washington's ear; she did not strike at Washington.

She instead struck one of Cook's ice pillars. The pillar exploded like many others had, but Cicero struck with her halberd like a bat to launch a million crystal shards straight at Washington. Washington, although she had not even been watching, reacted instantaneously to the attack and dove up while hundreds of lightning bolts fired to liquefy every individual projectile. But while Washington could fire a thousand bolts at once, skeletize an army in an instant, she could not fire a million. Even with the aid of the rainbow light from her wings

and the invulnerable sword in her hand, many passed through and bashed against her body. They gored her, but they were too small to do so deeply.

Cicero never intended the attack to kill or even maim. She intended it to expose a weakpoint. What spot on Washington's body did she guard? Where was her Soul Gem?

Cook had been correct, it wasn't the cherub clasp on the robe. A shard stuck into it and sent cracks along its surface and Washington made no effort to defend it, almost as though she considered it no more vital than any other part of her costume. But then again, Washington made no especial attempt to defend anything on her person. She took a single evasive move, upward, but that did not pull her out of the wide spray of the attack. And while she had tried to destroy the shards with her magic, she hadn't focused particularly on those aimed toward her person. It was almost as if, instead of defending her body, she used her body to—

Ahhhhh. I see now? Cicero, you've actually managed to help me. Cook perched on a pillar in the distance. Malia, right? This has been a cool fight, don't you think? But you've been kinda doomed from the start?

What are you talking about? You guys are totally out of your league—

It began to rain.

Cicero couldn't feel it, and in the darkness with her lazy head she couldn't see it, but she heard it patter against her armor. Washington released her and she dropped. Her body twisted in midair until she could see the bright angelic form flash deeper into the sky, into the clouds, now using her rainbows to obliterate them, opening up a perfect circle above where drifted, on the backdrop of a slightly less dark bank of clouds:

A Soul Gem. A monstrous one. Larger than even DuPage's crystal ball, which had already been freakish compared to the gems most women wore. It was the shape of a diamond, although its color was gold, and it hovered with no apparent method of propulsion. Washington devoted everything to defending it from the downpour. Her rainbows, her lightning. Whether she defended the Soul Gem or not was inconsequential, because the rest of the raindrops plummeted onto Washington herself. And immediately began to melt through her flesh, through the downy feathers on the backs of her wings, cutting into her like knives.

Cicero hit the ground on her back. Her horse landed nearby. Washington's wings disintegrated under the extreme heat and acidity of Cook's rain, then she began to fall too. And once her wings became only skeletal fragments from which a few loose feathers and clumps of flesh clung, the rainbows sputtered and died and the rain that fell on the giant suspended Soul Gem turned to ice and encased it. Washington landed athwart Cicero, a half-lumpish mound, while the ice around the Soul Gem transformed into a chute and carried it further away.

The formless body of Washington tried to rise but soon enough distance spanned between her and her gem and she shivered, dead.

Cook hopped from her pillars and landed beside them. The rain ceased. "Not even hard? I expected a lot worse. Like, a lot?"

Cicero opened her mouth to speak but all that happened was her tongue flopped out like an unraveling carpet. *How did you do that, Cook? I thought you could only create water from your body.*

"Ohhhhh, that's a gross way of phrasing it. But I guess it's kinda true? Still, all I have to do is create water earlier and let it hang around wherever it is until I need to use it? Like, creating a bunch of tiny water droplets everywhere I go until there's enough floating in the air to saturate the clouds? That's weather for you, I guess you don't know much about weather."

So she hadn't been dodging around aimlessly simply to defend herself from attack. She had followed a deliberate route to set up a single massive attack.

You can do that?

"Guess so? Honestly first time I tried it. But, ahhhhh, gotta pull out surprises in times like these?"

She said it like it was nothing.

"I kinda figured her Soul Gem was not on her person." Cook nudged the eroded corpse with her foot. "But she musta kept moving it? I guess? Whenever I got close. So your attack was a big help, when I saw the way she dodged to defend it I was like 'ohhhhh'..."

As she spoke she twiddled a finger from which a watery ribbon extended and wrapped around the spots where Cicero no longer held together. The water froze into solid braces and set her limbs back into place. The pain remained, but after the initial shock she had handled it better and so after a few wobbly moments she rose to her feet.

The clouds above remained dark.

The Empress appeared. The cemetery had been ripped to shreds, so she tiptoed her way among the few portions the combat failed to ravage.

She panted, her hands tightened into compact shapes. "You have disobeyed my—*our*—direct order. Thou hast committed what one might consider treason, and do not respond to us with the excuse that your insubordination proved effective."

As Cicero held out her arms to steady herself, shame crept within. She realized that she indeed disobeyed orders, but that fact returned to her in such a disembodied way she could not reconstruct the events that led to such an action. No—it returned to her. The Empress's hypocrisy. Her weakness. Yes. Cicero remembered, and she refused to stare back at the Empress with shame, not that her face was visible behind her armor. It was the same stare she had turned toward DuPage, back when she was DuPage's lieutenant and DuPage derided her for every misstep.

No—no—she had lost her head, endangered everything on her own pride. The Empress's authority must remain even if she abandoned her own values and principles. Otherwise command dissolved and the purpose of society ended. Society was sacrifice, and those with control must be obeyed regardless of their correctness or—rectitude. That was what it meant

to live in a society. Because the necessary inhibitions on the individual allowed the collective livelihood of all individuals to increase. The Empress taught her these words, showed her books and philosophies even while DuPage derided her, ground her face into the dirt, sneered at any attempt she made to exert herself. But then, in those old days, the Empress had been the balm to assuage the hurt of DuPage. It was the Empress now who betrayed everything she preached to summon a demon—a demon she did not even need, not in the slightest—it was that Empress who confounded her, and she had no more mentors to right her path.

(She had to be her own mentor now. That was what it meant to be a leader. Leaders find their own strength. Nobody is left to teach them. But weren't, then, leaders antithetical to the very society they led? If a society required its constituent parts to bend or even break for the good of the leviathan, then how could a leader be both member of society and wielder of it?)

She didn't know. The things she had learned eluded her. She felt less a leader now and more a scorned child, and all she could do was hang her head—except the ice necklace Cook forged for her prevented even that. She only stood, solid, opened her mouth for a word, unsure even as her lips parted whether than word would be abject apology or baleful condemnation—

"Ahhhhh, Your Munificence, we *were* following your orders?" Cook detransformed and flitted into the foreground, hands laced behind her back. "For in a retreat whose safety is prioritized? 'Twould be yours, Your Munificence, but given the Washington Magi's great strength, mere flight would have likely proved insufficient? She would have pursued, and even if she could not kill you, if you were captured it would surely strike ahhh massive blow against our Empire? Correct? Cicero and I merely provided a distraction to ensure your safe egress. That our distraction happened to prove potent was mere coincidence."

What a bull—what a transparent fib. As if anyone would believe it.

And yet the Empress's consternation turned to a smile and in that moment Cicero understood she had never wanted to condemn their actions but merely needed a pretext to abandon her own rigid rules and regulations because the outcome had in fact turned advantageous for her. The disgust welled anew and for a brief moment Cicero held down literal nausea inspired by the pure rage that burned behind her eyeballs and down her long throat.

"Cook, thou hast always been a thoughtful subject. Thou as well, Cicero. We are gladdened by this explanation; thou speak well. Very well. As this understanding passeth between us, we shall let the matter lie dormant. As for the Washington Magi, is she deceased?" She indicated the still-bubbling corpse.

"Ohhhhhh, her. For now she is. But her gem's safe. I just moved it far enough away."

"Excellent. It would prove a poor impression if we unveiled ourselves to the United States government alongside the death of its chief statesman's daughter. Keep her in this state for now; we shall restore her body and return her alive once our plans have passed the point of the Incubator's meddling."

She wasn't simply smiling now. She beamed. She jittered, she fidgeted, the elements of the wise and lofty ruler fell away, she might as well have begun to dance there in the tattered remains of a national monument.

"Verily, Your Munificence," said Cook.

"Yes," said Cicero at the same time, allowing Cook's response to supersede hers.

"With the Washington Magi defeated, little else stands in our way. Cook, contact Aurora. Have her transport the rest of our soldiers to our position. This city is ours; we shall enter the Capitol shortly. Ah, Handmaiden."

The figure in question had returned. She stood at the edge of the cemetery. "I am at your service, Your Munificence."

"Restore the cemetery to its state prior to our combat. It would be inconvenient if it were suspected the cemetery has suffered a terrorist attack."

The Handmaiden bowed her head. "Yes, Your Munificence." She swept along the dredged holes of the cemetery and swiftly returned its appearance to unblemished swaths of grass and exact patterns of identical headstones.

"Upon the completion of thy task, Handmaiden, it would be ideal if you, for a time, assumed the appearance of the Washington Magi and attended her obligations in her stead, at least until we may restore her."

"Yes, Your Munificence." As effortlessly, she tapped herself and became the identical twin of the Puella Magi they had defeated. "Although I must admit, I shall not be able to mimic her voice or mannerisms."

"That is no matter; your deception need only be temporary, and we believe in the name of maintaining order the Incubator shall assist your disguise. Is that so, Incubator?"

The creature in question appeared—or had always been—upon the sole surviving branch of a tree otherwise blasted into curled tendrils by lightning. In the darkness, only his pink eyes stood forth from his silhouette.

Certainly. After all, your destruction is now assured.

"Oh? Confident, art thou?"

I am ninety nine point nine nine nine seven percent certain. Although I must admit I was initially confused when Sayaka Miki claimed your endeavors would fail, I now understand exactly what she meant.

"Cease thy lying tongue, knave. Cook, Cicero, attend us."

She snapped her fingers, turned, and trod toward the road upon a carpet of the Handmaiden's devising. Cook created a stream of water that carried Washington's body with her as she followed. Cicero, after standing still a long time, followed too.

Somehow unobliterated during the battle, Cicero espied the broken halves of DuPage's Soul Gem. So that was it for DuPage. That was how her story ended, huh?

Pathetic. Her gaze drifted and she noticed again the Incubator, albino eyes watching. Ninety nine point nine nine nine seven percent certain. Ha, haha. Hahahaha.

Passacaglia and Fugue in C Minor

or, 10 Minutes of Dry Counterpoint

"Pales so much compared with well tempered clavier"

—donald trump cards, YouTube Commenter

The Lincoln Memorial, Greek temple of thirty-six columns, served as the start. There they congregated. These were those who stood before Her Munificent Empress Chicago; these were her Imperial Ranks:

Of First Centurion Cook; Lieutenant Kenosha and Sergeants Waukegan, Evanston, and Skokie; and soldiers able to go forth to war ten and three.

Of Second Centurion Cicero; Lieutenant Berwyn and Sergeants Elmhurst, Lombard, and Addison; and soldiers able to go forth to war ten and six.

Of Third Centurion Joliet; none.

Of Fourth Centurion Aurora; Lieutenant Elgin and Sergeants Naperville, Schaumburg, and Wheaton; and soldiers able to go forth to war nine.

Even all they that were numbered were fifty and four.

This total did not include the one who tallied, which was Administrator Hegewisch; nor did it include Her Munificent Empress; nor did it include the Chief Handmaiden of the Empress, who had disguised herself as the Washington Magi and departed to attend the Sidwell Friends School.

Few of these assembled had ever before laid true eyes upon the Empress, now stood before them on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. The colossal form of the sixteenth president of the United States of America presided at her back, forlorn and tired despite the dignified abode sculpted for him, despite the expansive size of his seat and the breadth of his gaze. An old president, an ancient even, and yet he had been a breathing mortal of flesh when the woman upon his steps had signed her contract with the Incubator.

Her appearance approached that of the portrait that hung in their dwellings in Chicago. It lacked some of the portrait's flourish, but none mistook her, and her regal garb remained identical. She did not speak to them, and she had remained rooted to the same spot since their arrival in three buses from Baltimore, ushered by their respective Centurions and lieutenants. Midway up the steps, on a long flat platform, Administrator Hegewisch underwent most of

the task of arranging them into four columns. Because the soldiers each Centurion possessed varied in number so widely, organization by platoon would create a lopsided impression, and yet certain hierarchies had to be taken into account. Who, for instance, would stand directly behind Centurion Joliet, in the spot which ought to belong to her lieutenant? It must be someone worthy of matching the positions of Kenosha, Berwyn, and Elgin.

After consultation with the Centurions and lieutenants, it was decided Hegewisch herself would march in this position.

Next came the sergeants. Joliet lacked these as well. That left nine total, a number indivisible by the number of Centurions. While two complete rows could be formed, a single remainder would march in the third row alongside three ordinary soldiers.

Cicero's third sergeant, Addison, sedately offered to be the remainder.

The rest of the ranks were filled by the unranked in order of seniority, rather than platoon, from Mundelein to Midlothian. But this arrangement left a final row of three soldiers instead of four, a problem of asymmetry no amount of compromise could solve. Had the Handmaiden been present, she might have created the illusion of a fifty-sixth to complete the rows, or else the rows may have been shuffled to accommodate the Handmaiden herself. Or had Cook, Aurora, and Hegewisch, as a collective, been marginally less careless with the lives of their soldiers, the problem may have been avoided entirely. Such was not so. As Hegewisch paced the rows clutching her attaché case, a balding man in a suit approached her.

"Some kinda military thing?"

"Yes sir. Please refrain from interrupting the proceedings."

"Women in military. That kinda thing?"

"Yes sir."

The man considered Midlothian, who stood straight forward arms at her sides like all the others. "Kinda young?"

Hegewisch hefted herself on tiptoe to count a bunch of heads. "Junior... Junior military. Thing. Sir."

"JROTC."

"Yes. Yes, correct. Sir, if you would please step aside."

"Oh yeah of course, of course, sorry."

He stood aside. A small group had gathered. Winter was the low season for Washington tourism, but it did not reduce the number to zero, and those who chose this day to visit the man who emancipated the slaves appeared to have been treated to some sort of ceremonial display. They had already used Centurion Cicero's soldier, River Forest, whose magical ability lowered judgment, to resolve any problems with Lincoln Memorial security. But the

tourists were not considered worthy of such magical expenditure and so their inconvenience only swelled.

Meanwhile Hegewisch could not resolve the problem of dividing fifty-five people by four. She tromped between the rows, up the first flight of stairs, across the midlevel platform, up the second flight of stairs, to the side of the Empress. From this perspective, the full bulk of Abraham Lincoln, unobscured by angles or elements of the temple's façade, loomed above.

"Your Munificence. I regret to inform you that our fifty-five soldiers cannot be divided into four exact columns."

The Empress stared outward for a time, until Hegewisch repeated herself word for word.

"Fifty-five," said the Empress. "Only so many?—No matter. Send the remaining three to Sidwell Friends School to attend upon the Handmaiden and guard the body and soul of the Washington Magi."

An elegant solution. Hegewisch had not considered lopping off the remainder; she had suspected the Empress would consider this march too pregnant with honor to deprive any of her loyal subjects. Unlikely Midlothian or the other two most recent recruits would assist the Handmaiden much at all, or provide any useful defense should the Incubator attempt to reclaim Washington. A ceremonial gesture, perhaps, considering every Puella Magi in the Empire capable of detecting the presence of magic had scanned the entire city and found no magical presence beyond those for which the Empire could readily account. No Terminatrixes, no gathered resistance; a stark, obvious nothing. Was this lack of counterattack suspicious? To some extent. Clearly the Incubator did not desire the Empire's presence in Washington, given the Empress's intentions. And with his enormous resources and unparalleled communication network, surely he could have cobbled some retaliatory force. Yet it was also in the Incubator's nature not to waste resources on something he considered futile; he would not take a mad gambit if its odds of success were too low to justify the costs.

Administrator Hegewisch remembered his attempt to assassinate her and Midlothian. Had that not been desperation? Or had the assassination's odds of success actually been quite high, and simply failed due to bad luck? How low would the chance have to be for the Incubator to forsake it, given how much was potentially wagered? Even if the Incubator could only draw upon Magical Girls willing to abandon their own territories on a venture of dubious relevance, surely he could create something with at least a single percentage chance of success. And surely, given the Incubator's dealings on a global scale, a single percentage point would appear viable odds. One out of a hundred—to him, such chances bear fruit frequently. In the name of maintaining order in the human world, would he not risk it?

These thoughts, perhaps not so elegantly composed, dawdled in the back of Hegewisch's mind as she informed the three most junior soldiers of their new orders, bestowed by the Empress herself, a fact which filled all three with immense pride despite the uselessness. Hegewisch, of course, did not know of the Incubator's latest words to the Empress and her two most senior Centurions. His words that something had changed, that he now had full confidence in their failure...

Her ignorance transformed to apathy. She dismissed the thoughts that failed to bear fruit, that circled and circled and reached no conclusion. The ranks now stood, fifty-two instead of fifty-five, and she stepped into her assigned position among them. Four columns of thirteen each, and she in the seventh slot. Numbers of ill luck; numbers of luck.

As one body they stared upward, at their Empress. They anticipated a speech. The language of this Empire was speeches. But instead the Empress checked her chronometer, flicked back her hands to orient her robes, and started down the stairs. She proceeded between the Second and Third Centurions, their lieutenants, and the soldiers massed behind them; she reached the end of their ranks.

"Follow us." She spoke without great expansion of her voice, although it carried well, not only to those at her back but also the gathered squadron of tourists, who took the command to mean that they should follow the collective "us" of the Imperial soldiers. And while the Empress proceeded down the National Mall, the soldiers themselves had to deal with the unexpected error in their orientation, the highest-ranked among them facing the opposite direction, toward Lincoln, while the Empress moved toward the Washington Monument.

She did not pause or even glance behind her to consider whether her soldiers followed, either because she expected their discipline to extend to the superhuman execution of an unpracticed synchronized maneuver or because her head had mired in other matters. It became clear to the more astute that the Empress lacked experience in the direct leadership of so many.

Thus it fell to the Centurions to restore order. Cicero sprung to the fore and directed with a hasty series of hand motions the awkward adjustments necessary. The bodies scrambled fifty-two pickup style aided only by the unified desire of everyone to get where they needed. By the time they reorganized, the Empress had reached the beginning of the long reflecting pool that spanned most of the distance to the next iconic landmark.

Their antics impressed few tourists.

The reflecting pool was the next hassle. It stood directly in their way; they would need to turn slightly to follow the path that ran parallel it. For the Empress, alone, this motion was effortless; for fifty-two soldiers in a four-by-thirteen grid, less so. They had to slither snakelike, turning in a staggered pattern to avoid trampling the lawn clearly marked KEEP OFF. By the time they managed it, the Empress had again leapt ahead. She had not glanced back since she began, although the chorus of footsteps ought to have attuned her to their distance. She maintained an even pace and proceeded with all due majesty. The few tourists who followed generally followed her, although by the time they reached the Washington Monument most decided to continue no more. The National Mall spanned two miles from one end to the other.

Once they passed the Egyptian obelisk to George Washington, their goal arose. Shrouded in a semidarkness that had remained since the encounter with the Washington Magi: The Capitol. Elevated upon its hill. Tall white dome. Two wings, north and south, columns and windows of mathematic width and spacing. It grew in size, it grew in detail each step they proceeded. Down the Mall the length of a mile, around another reflective pool, and up its outer steps.

This was a creation of a different Empire, one parallel and irrelevant to theirs. Most did not yet know their Empress's intention to tie those parallel worlds together. Most believed her scope tightened solely around the world they themselves knew, the one of magic. Most, embarking from the Lincoln Memorial, had not even known the ultimate goal of their procession. But they trusted the Empress nonetheless, and entered the doors of the Capitol with the same stolid faces they had practiced for situations of ceremonial importance.

They were good soldiers.

Inside, however, they had to disperse. To delve deeper into such a sacred structure, in the wake of the terrorism that had wracked the nation (terrorism experienced before most present were old enough to be terrified by it), they first needed to pass through metal detectors. Guards instructed them to remove metal objects from their possession and place them inside bins for scanning. Each had only one plain metal ring to remove, and each retrieved it quickly upon passing to the other side.

Marching inside might attract more attention than desired. Cicero, one of the first to pass, confronted those who followed: "We're here on a school field trip. Act the part." The Empress finally paused. A suited man passed who apparently knew her, she returned his greeting, he disappeared without commenting on her clothes.

When they cleared security the Empress resumed her rapid pace without signal and her soldiers, now a gaggle, followed through a Great Rotunda in which they lingered too little to appreciate. In the next room, another suited man encountered and acknowledged the Empress.

"Senator Luce." He spoke in a strange, almost stage, whisper. Susurrant sounds snuck into the spaces between his words. "Is this your, the school you...?"

"Senator Reid," said Senator Millicent Dorothea Luce (D-IL) to Senate Majority Leader Harry Mason Reid (D-NV), for it was he, clad in wireframe spectacles and a silver tie with polka dots that looked like eyeballs, each centered around a black pupil. "These are indeed the young women I sponsor. I financed a trip for their edification. They've received passes to view the Senate today."

"Well now isn't that something." Senator Reid nodded to some of the foremost soldiers, in particular Cicero and Cook. "Exciting, exciting—day today. Unemployment benefits and, and Federal Reserve. Learn a lot about your, country, girls."

"Oh yes," said Senator Luce. "The vote on Janet Yellen as new Fed Chair. Is the tally still going to shape as we expect?"

"Yes—yes. Very likely, very likely. Although—Senators Warren and ah, Sha, Sha—from New Hampshire—"

"Shaheen. What of them?"

"Oh! Delayed. Delayed—flights. Bad—weather."

"Well, last I heard the vote won't be so close for that to matter."

"No, no. Of course not. Smooth sailing. Broad—bipartisan support. That's right, girls." Senator Reid smiled at the young faces. "Despite what you hear on the—news, we're not always uh, always so—disagreeable."

Nobody had any clue what they talked about. Senator Reid remembered something and pointed deeper into the building. "Session—starts soon. I'll need to be there. Goodbye, girls. I hope you—learn a lot."

"Wait, one last thing, Senator Reid," said Senator Luce. "I've also brought my daughter. Allow me to introduce you. Where is she—here she is. Christine, Christine now come along."

"Christine, yes—Christine." Senator Reid seemed torn between the stuttering approach of Joliet and the place he needed to be, a rip widened as an aide bolted out of nowhere, whispered something to him, performed an esoteric forward-jolting hand motion, and buzzed away. "Christine, nice to meet you. I'm Harry—Reid. You can call me Harry."

He extended his hand to shake. By now, Cicero and Cook had all but shoved Joliet forward, so that her heels squeaked across the buffered tile floor. Her head slouched between her shoulder blades and she tilted her eyes upward at the Senator with her hands clasping and unclasping.

"Go on, Christine." Senator Luce gave her daughter a significant look. Neither reproachful nor imploring, but communicating something only she would understand. "Shake his hand quickly—he has to be places."

"Hk, hkkk, hello..." Christine Luce managed no further, but did extend her hand. Senator Reid took it and gave a single strong shake; then he imparted a friendly smile and a wave that might have once been photogenic but now no longer needed to care.

He started toward the Senate chamber, made it three steps, and stopped. Tapping his chin, he turned his head and looked at Senator Luce. "Senator," he said, "that outfit..."

"Is it inappropriate?" said Senator Luce.

"It's—well it's certainly striking. Ah, uh—I have to go." He blinked, rubbed his eyes under his glasses, and vanished through a doorway.

Senator Luce checked her chronometer. "Miss Jefferson," she said, "Miss Kabwe, and Miss Romero. Please escort your fellow classmates to the galleries. A professional aide of mine will provide your passes to watch the Senate in session."

"Ohhhhh, so where may we find these galleries, Senator?" Valerie Jefferson ebbled into this geography's particular parlance.

A trenchant cut of the Senator's hand indicated the way. "As for you, my daughter, you shall remain with me. We have many more Senators to meet."

"Y... yes," said Christine Luce.

The group divided. The main traveled the path provided and met Senator Luce's ordinary female aide in front of several doors. The woman wore a smart business suit and doubled the age of all present save Miss Jefferson, although she had taken successful measures to appear younger. She divvied passes for the galleries and after explained briefly the expected behavior of spectators. No cheering, booing, or other loud noises. No cellular or electronic devices, no food or beverage. Restrooms outside around the corner. Failure to comply will lead to and a blemish on the offender's record at their prestigious academy.

The aide smiled the entire time. "I've never met the Senator's students. Her charitable work is the envy of the entire Legislative branch. Sure, there are philanthropists, but nobody so take-charge. You're lucky girls."

"Thank you," said Laquesha Kabwe, who still thought of herself as Centurion Cicero.

"Now in you go. I'm afraid I can't chaperone you myself. I understand there's a certain Miss Jefferson to watch you?"

"Me," said Valerie Jefferson.

"Awesome." In explaining the rules, the aide's formality had flaked away until she seemed the most casual of them all. "I'll see you guys in a few hours, I've ordered catering for after the session. Hope you enjoy Washington!"

At the organization of Miss Jefferson and Miss Kabwe, and even Miss Chatterjee who assisted where Miss Romero remained silent, the fifty-two students entered the upper level of the United States Senate chamber. The chamber had two levels. The lower level's space, although adorned at points by shallow alcoves or engaged columns, fit a rectangular plane. Arranged in four semicircular rows were a total of one hundred wooden desks. The outer rows were raised slightly compared to the inner rows, giving the impression of a theater designed so that anyone seated, no matter at which desk, had a good view of the central dais. The dais, backed by ornate curtains and a solemn United States flag, had a primary chair of foremost prominence and several lower desks arranged around it. These desks held papers, pens, and other notary tools, but not yet people. However, a large number of businesslike folk milled around the room.

The second level, which Senator Luce and her aide described as the galleries, ran along the entire perimeter of the first level. It also contained rows of seats arranged theater-style. These seats were clustered in groups of five by eight, so that each cluster of seats held forty people; there appeared to be ten or twelve groups total, spaced evenly along the perimeter, with some variation in the group directly behind the first level dais. The students of Senator Luce's academy took their seats with proper discipline and adherence to all regulations. Most other seats were empty. The students scanned the first level for Senator Luce, but could not find her. Senator Reid stood behind the most central desk on the innermost ring of desks. Atop his desk was positioned a podium.

Not long after the last students took their seats, the few on the first level who had been sitting stood up and everyone, not in perfect harmony but with a deliberateness that indicated some well-understood ritual, turned toward the dais. In the galleries, Laquesha Kabwe stood too, and signaled to her peers to emulate.

A white-haired, nearly-bald man walked to the central dais, lifted a gavel placed there, and made a single hard knock. "The Senate will come to order," he said, "and the chaplain retired Admiral Barry Black will lead the Senate in prayer."

The white-haired man walked away from the dais and a black man in a blue-and-yellow striped bowtie took his place. This was Chaplain Barry Black, and he said, in a voice of exceptional depth:

"Let us pray.

"Eternal God, our fortress, stronghold, deliverer, shield, and refuge. We have entered a new year, that promises *opportunities* and *challenges*. Inspire our lawmakers—to seize—this *season* of opportunity, committing themselves to the fulfillment of *Your* purposes even in the face—of challenges.

"Keep them in the *center* of your will, aligning them *with* your providential wisdom, and guiding them *with* your words. Lord, shield them—

"—from discouragement—as they persevere with in-te-gri-ty. Finish the good work *You* have begun, for you *are* both, alpha and omega. We pray. In Your Sacred Name.

"Amen."

Chaplain Barry Black left the dais. The first man returned.

"Please join me in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance."

They turned to the flag that hung at the side of the dais and said:

**I pledge allegiance,
To the flag,
Of the United States of America.
And to the Republic,
For which it stands,
One nation,
Under God,
Indivisible,
With liberty and justice for all.**

Some of the Americans among the students also intoned this well-known charm. Others, including the Canadians, merely mimicked the hand-over-heart gesture. Of them all, Miss Jefferson spoke the pledge loudest, which garnered her dubious looks from Miss Kabwe.

The end of the pledge broke the spell. People previously rooted to walls broke away and moved across the room, while several took seats on the smaller chairs on the central dais. The balding man who led the pledge—one Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT)—who was also the President pro tempore of the United States Senate and led the Senate in the (frequent) absence of its Constitutionally-appointed leader (the Vice President of the United States)—said:

"The Majority Leader."

He referred, of course, to Senator Reid. Senator Reid had not moved from his podium and began his opening speech without delay.

"I welcome back the presiding officer—" He smiled, glanced down at his notes. "And—the entire staff and, look forward to, our continuing work together over the next uh, two weeks and to see what happens after that.

"Mr. President, following my remarks and those of the Republican leader, the Senate will resume—the motion to proceed to Calendar Number Two Sixty-Five, which is the Unemployment Insurance Extension. At three o'clock, the Senate will proceed to Executive Session to consider the nomination of Janet, Yellen—to be the Chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System. This will be post-cloture time so the time until 5:30 will—equally divided and controlled. There will be two roll call votes at 5:30 first on confirmation of the Yellen nomination and—" (breath) "—second on the motion to vote cloture on the motion to proceed—unemployment insurance legislation..."

He segued into a longer speech that detailed a list of Senatorial formalities and extolled the virtues of the aforementioned unemployment insurance legislation. Overall he spoke for fifteen minutes, during which Senator Luce did not make an appearance. In fact, for the Senate supposedly being in session, the only Senators present were Senator Reid and Senator Leahy—although at some point in Senator Reid's speech Leahy left the dais and Senator Christopher Scott "Chris" Murphy (D-CT) took his place. The reason for this switch was twofold. Although Senator Leahy, as the Senator from the leading party with the most seniority, was rightfully the President pro tempore, it would be rather dull for such an esteemed personage to sit in the same chair for however many hours the Senate decided to remain in session, so he delegated the position to a series of younger Democratic Senators, which would not only reduce boredom but also teach the rookies more about the rules and procedures of the Senate body. The second reason was because, when Senator Reid's speech ended, Senator Leahy became the next to speak. He spoke about a health care law.

His speech likewise fell on a room mostly devoid of Senators. While aides and other dignitaries filled the room's edges, the hundred wooden desks that thronged the dais remained empty. The sad sight of Senators Reid and Leahy standing alone and speaking so long for so few notables struck many of the students. Other students did anything they could to stave off boredom. They had trained their bodies to endure harsh conditions, enormous physical stress, mundane drills, and formal ceremonies, but even the speeches of the Empress rarely lasted so long, and the feeling that they had only just begun loomed. Had Senator Reid said they would vote on something at 5:30? It wasn't even 2:30 yet. What would fill the space between?

After Senator Leahy, Senator John Francis "Jack" Reed (D-RI) spoke about the unemployment insurance legislation that hung over the students like the Sword of Damocles. He spoke for seventeen minutes and left the room.

The room remained devoid of Senators for the next hour and twenty minutes. During that time, Senator Murphy stepped down as acting President pro tempore and Senator Mazie Hirono (D-HI) took his position. For some of the students the boredom became unfathomable, but none dared do more than fidget, and many not even that.

Senator Murphy returned to the room to speak, ending the long silence. He brought with him a sign that read:

GUN DEATHS

in America since December 14

12041

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.

#Voicesofvictims

The sign's audacity snapped the students from their endless doldrums. He spoke for nine minutes to the near-empty chamber before leaving and taking his sign with him. Shortly thereafter, Senator Dean Arthur Heller (R-NV) took the floor. Like Senator Reed (not Reid from Nevada, but Reed from Rhode Island), he spoke in favor of the unemployment insurance legislation. He and Senator Reed were apparently cosponsors of the bipartisan bill. He spoke for seven minutes and left the room.

Where was *their* Senator? Where was Senator Luce? At one point, Lieutenant Berwyn (ahem—Leah Roth) leaned forward and whispered to Laquesha Kabwe: "Oughtn't we to check on our leader?" To which Kabwe only made an annoyed toss of her head.

Senator James Mountain "Jim" Inhofe (R-OK) spoke next. He spoke for eighteen minutes about climate change. His speech included the highlight of the hour when he mentioned their hometown:

"The National Weather Service reported that Chicago's O'Hare Airport's temperatures hit sixteen, degrees, below zero on January 6, breaking the negative fourteen-degree record set in 1884. This makes Chicago colder than, than the South Pole where it was 11 degrees below zero."

The fleeting reference passed and irrelevance resumed, although the Senator's spirited description of a vast conspiracy headed by the United Nations and the Environmental Protection Agency allowed some cause for lukewarm interest. After him Senator Jefferson Beauregard "Jeff" Sessions III (R-AL) spoke. But his distinctive Southern twang, muddled with the complete disinterest of the students and the continued bandying of large economic terms rendered his topic incomprehensible.

Then came Senator Charles Ernest "Chuck" Grassley (R-IA). He left a full second's pause between every word he said. Then came Senator Sherrod Campbell Brown (D-OH). He spoke with his head tilted down about as far as it would tilt, Joliet-style.

By now, some of the students in the back rows had devised silent games to amuse themselves, ranging from thumb wrestling to connect-the-dots scribbled on tiny scraps of paper. Those in front, less fortunate, resorted to more desperate measures, such as risky attempts to sleep while remaining upright, a technique perfected only by Centurion Cook. Some had better discipline and some remained totally apathetic; only one among them could be said to be engrossed in the proceedings, that being Administrator Hegewisch—Laila Chatterjee.

In a previous life, Laila Chatterjee had considered herself versed on the relevant political issues of the day. As versed as a fourteen-year-old could be. Possessing any knowledge of these issues whatsoever placed her above her classmates, and that might have been why she endeavored to learn in the first place. The theater below reminded her of those old issues: Climate change and benefits and spending. Her realm of expertise had been Canadian in nature but many topics straddled the divide between the nations, and here they were breathed life in a world of far more purpose and order than her own. Perhaps that explained her total bafflement when she learned the Empress's true identity as a Senator; for though this world had become so far removed from her, she maintained memories of its importance in her life. She could have been one of these people. Well, not a Senator, unless she gained American citizenship (she was currently an illegal immigrant), but... something like this. She had been a good student. That was the tragedy of it. She had top marks in all her classes. Her parents had financial security, a good education awaited her, she had never needed anything. But she made that foolish wish and trashed it all. This was a window into the Laila Chatterjee she could have been, the route she might have pursued. And she

Fucking

Liked it. She loved it. She loved the fact that a Senator could take the stage with a sign about gun violence and give a speech about it. That a Senator could talk at length about how Al Gore's global warming rally got cancelled due to record-breaking snow. They were the same arguments she would either make or argue against online, to teenage hotshots like herself who had their own Wikipedia statsheets and slanted news articles to support them. What had she thought before, when she learned about Senator Luce? That this world of politics was alien, distant, irreconcilable with her own? That still held. But the reasoning changed, because she realized the world that shouldn't exist was *hers*, not this one. Humans could not perceive magic, or wraiths, because their world functioned absolutely fucking fine without it. The entire magical reality could be excised utterly, obviated from the world, and this world—the *real* world—would remain. But if you cut the real world, the magical world could no longer sustain itself. They were parasites. Magical Girls were parasites, God a joke. Entropy? Kyubey's entropy? When would it occur, millions of years after humanity's extinction? That didn't matter either.

It could have been her world.

At 5:30, exactly when Senator Reid promised, the Senate voted on the confirmation of Janet Yellen to some post nobody knew anything about, even though half the preceding Senators spoke about it at length. Here, everyone thought, Senator Luce would at least show. After all, the entire Senate had to vote, no?

The vote itself was the most confusing thing yet, however. A dignitary (described only as "the cleric") leaned into a microphone and intoned the surname of each of the one hundred Senators, one-by-one in alphabetical order. After each name called, exactly nothing happened, because *the room was still completely empty of Senators*. All the ones who had given speeches had left. All the ones who had presided as President pro tempore had left, except the current one. The one hundred desks sat empty. The man with the microphone called a name... and nothing happened.

And he did not call the names at a uniform pace. He might call seven names in rapid succession, then pause and not say a name for several minutes. Then he would continue at that pace until suddenly he would say another five names one after another. What caused these changes in pace? What was the purpose of calling the names if nobody was responding? Every so often, someone in a suit approached the desk where the cleric sat, but it was unclear whether this were a Senator or some aide, and either way their approach had no obvious correlation to the names being read.

The calling of the name "Luce" stirred excitement for some, but it too met nothing.

However, over time, the Senate chamber slowly began to fill. First only a handful of figures entered and lingered between the desks, so it was still unclear whether they were Senators or not. But as the vote reached its later stages, the end of the alphabet drawing nigh, those small groups burgeoned into clusters, some including Senators recognized from prior speeches, often gathered into conversational groups that allowed a buzz to imbue the air.

That's when they saw her. Like a graduation ceremony where one has to sit through a thousand names before emerges the one they care about. She came through the doors in her regal attire, so even if they were not already searching for her they could not have missed her. An inaudible but nonetheless sensed wave of elation rose through the gallery, all save Aurora—apathetic—and Hegewisch—antipathic—and Cook—asleep.

Many of the other Senators stared at her, too, but still more throughout the room did not seem to notice. Her daughter followed, head down, somehow cleared to walk within this chamber despite her utter lack of credentials, although given her power it would not be too difficult to grant herself an exception. Her mother descended to a few groups of those Senators not yet looking at her, introduced them to her daughter, bid them shake hands, and then moved to the next group while those she had greeted watched her, suddenly transfixed.

She continued this pattern for the next few minutes, before the acting President pro tempore called that the vote had ended: 56 yeas and 26 nays. The Senate had confirmed Janet Yellen.

None of the Senators seemed to notice, although in these situations the result of the vote is typically decided long before it actually takes place. Senator Reid endeavored to speak, but since nobody cared the acting President pro tempore had to bang the gavel and call order. Senator Reid had become even more incomprehensible than the last time he spoke, ramming

ten or fifteen words together into a single mumble, and with the buzz of about eighty Senators filling the room (many murmuring about Senator Luce), he sank to Senator Sessions tier legibility.

Senators started to speak again, beginning with Senator Reed from Rhode Island (not the Senator Reid from Nevada who had spoken immediately before; by now few cared which Reed/Reid came from where). The surprise was that, even with the intrusion of Senator Luce and her absurd costume, the Senators could continue to talk about unemployment benefits like nothing had happened. As soon as Senator Reed finished, Senator John Cornyn III (R-TX) jumped up and accused Reed's unemployment benefits vote of being a political stunt. For Hegewisch, this spicy development far outstripped Senator's Luce's appearance. Now that more than one Senator dared be in the Senate chamber at a time, they could get to the real good stuff. Senator Cornyn continued, claiming that the vote on unemployment benefits should be delayed because seventeen Senators were currently absent.

"This ought," said Senator Cornyn, "to be postponed to a later time where we can have a real debate, we can also look for how to pay for this extension of unemployment benefits, and how to get the economy growing again so people can find *jobs*. That's what people want, they wanna *work*. They don't want unemployment compensation they want *jobs* so they can provide for their families."

Senator Reid—not Reed—attempted to interrupt Senator Cornyn, but Senator Cornyn's ability to actually be understood gave him a critical advantage and he continued:

"Unfortunately because of the timing of this vote, we know what the outcome is, and it's transparent that this is a political exercise, not a real effort to try to fix the problem."

Senator Cornyn sat down and Senator Reid got his chance to speak: "Mr. President [pro tempore], I ask unanimous consent the vote be scheduled tomorrow. 10 AM."

The acting President pro tempore asked for an objection. Nobody objected. The vote was rescheduled to a day when all the Senators could be there to vote. Hegewisch went bananas, what the hell did she witness! Senator Reid had mumbled his way through the session but a move like that sent chills. Chills. Ice cold he shut down Senator Cornyn, and it wasn't like Cornyn had been spouting nonsense. Of course, Reid's party had control of the Senate, that was why Reid was called the "majority leader." So whether seventeen Senators were absent or not, he could be pretty sure his vote would pass. By allowing the vote to be postponed so effortlessly, like he didn't give a single fucking shit, it turned Cornyn's argument directly on its head, made it look like Cornyn was the one pulling a political stunt—gaining moral high ground on a vote his party would lose anyway. It reminded Hegewisch of—it reminded her of DuPage. Something DuPage might pull in a conversation with the Empress, a subtle usurpation offered with a sneer. Giving Cornyn or the Empress exactly what they wanted but in a way that made them look a little foolish for even demanding it.

Her hype died when she saw the next Senator to stand: that aforementioned Empress, Senator Luce. Joliet stood beside her. Most of the conversation among the other Senators died as the acting President pro tempore said, "The Senator from Illinois." Many had watched her wind her way to her chair and wait for the business of the unemployment benefits vote to resolve itself before taking the floor. Many wondered what she had to say that she came attired so.

"Mr. President," she said, for it was Senate custom that speeches be addressed to the presiding officer, "today I would like to discuss a matter that, to my knowledge, has never been brought before this Senate in its long and storied history, and yet is an issue I believe of critical importance to the wellbeing not only of this nation but, also, the world."

Most of the milling Senators had not taken seats at their assigned desks. They stood in the center of the hall, at its fringes, wherever. Many meaningful glances passed between them. The students in the galleries grew excited. Hegewisch developed secondhand embarrassment.

"This issue is that of the existence of magic. Now, before I am interrupted by well-meaning but uninformed members of the Senate, I would like to clarify that I do not mean the sort of parlor trick performed by a streetside entertainer, nor the smoke-and-mirrors extravaganzas that flourish within the theaters of Las Vegas. I mean legitimate magic, which I shall define for the Senate as that which is not only unexplained by conventional science but indeed antithetical to it."

Her speech had met with an increasing number of quizzical looks from her colleagues, and at this point of pause Senator Reid stood up with renewed mumbliness and said: "Ahm, Mr. President, ummm, the Junior Senator from Illinois, I believe she's—"

"Aren't there dress code rules," said someone out of turn, causing the acting President pro tempore to bang the gavel and call for order.

"I would like to be given the chance to speak," said Senator Luce. "After all, there are absolutely no rules explicating that the content of speeches on the floor of the Senate pertain to any specific matter, a fact that many present have flaunted during filibuster." At this, the interruptions died down. Several Senators figured she was staging a political stunt and turned to their own business. Senator Luce continued: "I assure you, I do not intend to make a mockery of an institution as hallowed as the United States Senate, nor do I plan to speak overlong on my matter, unless I find there is willingness on the part of my colleagues to continue the debate after I have spoken. Additionally, I make it my objective to present to the ladies and gentlemen of the Senate incontrovertible proof of the existence of magic.

"I produce before the Senate one Christine de Pizan Luce, who some may know as my daughter, and who has the capability of producing effects that can only be described as magical given the definition I have heretofore provided. Christine, would you please produce before the men and women of the Senate your Soul Gem?"

Although they had assuredly rehearsed the speech before, Christine Luce flinched at both the evocation of her full name and the request of her mother. She bumped into the desk beside her and almost tripped before she held out her hand and removed the plain ring upon her finger. Placing the ring on her upturned palm and casting five less-than-furtive glances at her mother, she contorted her grimace and caused the ring to transform in a flash of light, so that an egg-shaped gem now balanced where it had once been.

The effect surprised a large portion of the Senators, and the communal gasp of shock that surged through the chamber was matched only by the complete confusion of those whose hands Christine had not gotten around to shaking, for whom the ring appeared to remain a ring. Those who did see the ring transform, however, quickly overcame their surprise. It was

clearly some sort of toy or device with a fancy lighting effect. Or maybe even typical sleight of hand, with the flash produced to obscure the requisite motions.

"This is a Soul Gem. It is the source of magical power for those who are capable of performing magic. For the sake of simplicity, I'll refer to such people henceforth as Magi. Allow me, briefly, to explain some of the less obvious properties of the Soul Gem..."

As she started to prattle about the sorts of things that Kyubey usually tells neophyte Magical Girls, several of the Senators started to understand. It must be some sort of game or TV show, something sweeping the youth of the nation. A piece of media Senator Luce believed had deleterious effects on those who consumed it. So her opening remarks and costume *were* a stunt, but at least one that served some kind of point relative to the matter of her speech.

Meanwhile, in the galleries, one of the seated students stirred. This student was known among her fellows as Skokie, a sergeant in the platoon of Centurion Cook. Although she was a veteran of several years, she had only been promoted to her current rank in the past week, after one of Cook's previous sergeants was given the governorship of St. Louis. As such, Skokie did not have total confidence in herself as she disturbed the utter stillness in which the students had languished for the past four hours and approached the front row cautiously. Her fellow students were engrossed in Senator Luce's speech, so few noticed her, a fact that brought her immense relief, although she could not avoid the inevitable. Indeed, the longer she waited, the worse the situation might become and the harsher her punishment for negligence. She knelt on the steps beside the seat of Centurion Cook and leaned close to her ear, only then realizing Cook was asleep. She nudged her shoulder to rouse her.

Cook's eyes half-opened and the lids drooped, but she gave no start of surprise. Her lazy pupils flitted to Skokie, who whispered something. Within a few moments, Cook reached over and shook Cicero to listen. Although Cicero was loath to look away from the spectacle on the floor, she moved in and heard what Skokie had to report.

Skokie was one of several Magi within the Empire who had an especially keen sensitivity to the presence of magic. However, between Magi with this characteristic, the exact nature of their sensitivity varied. Some, like Hinsdale and Hodgkins in Cicero's platoon, could track magical signatures like greyhounds. Others, like the missing-and-presumed-dead Palos of Joliet's platoon, had an internal radar. Skokie's power was more like a trap. She created spaces that, when entered by a magical being, set off a little alarm inside her. The practical applications of this power were excellent for guarding important areas, such as the Administration building and the yacht back in Chicago. The larger the area she imbued with her magic, the more energy it took, but this limitation could be circumnavigated with creative thinking. For instance, upon Washington's capture, Skokie had been ordered to surround the city with a razor-thin line of her power. Although this line spanned many miles and took an hour to establish, it was so thin that its total area remained at a manageable energy level. And, like a tripwire, if any magical being crossed the line, it would trigger Skokie's alarm.

That was what she related to the Centurions. A singular magical being had crossed the line on the outskirts of the city.

"Only one?" whispered Cicero.

"Correct, milady, only one."

Cicero stared stonefaced forward. Her Empress droned in the background, describing now the alien being known as "Kyubey, short for Incubator" and his role in the creation of Magi (the Incubator himself had elected not to show, likely because Joliet's magic would counteract whatever perception-occluding technology he used to cloak himself to ordinary humans). What was he planning now? In many ways, a single magical being crossing Skokie's tripwire boded more ill than an amassed army. The option existed that it was merely a dumb nomad blundering somewhere she had no right to be, but Cicero decided not to rely on such an assumption. The Incubator would know the position of Skokie's line and could have his army waiting just beyond it for when his foe drew close. The one they now sensed might be a trap designed to lure them.

"HmMMMM." Cook's voice was louder than polite given their ostensible roles as spectators. "Clearly let's scout more intel before we act...?"

"Agreed." Cicero sought one of her own soldiers among the seats. "Addison."

The soldier in question—Cicero's youngest sergeant, versed in long-range combat and detecting telepathic communication—moved to her lady's side with all due haste and silence. "At your command, milady."

"Go with Sergeant Skokie and investigate a magical presence detected near the city's fringe."

"Yes, milady."

"Should we send any others?" said Cook.

"If it's a trap, I would rather lose as few soldiers as possible. Addison will be able to locate and procure information about the target. She can relay her findings to Lombard."

Cook shrugged. "Very well."

Aurora, who had not been invited to the conversation, lolled her head. "Recall the Handmaiden too."

"Good idea," said Cicero. "Best not to remain split. Elmhurst, contact the Handmaiden and inform her of the situation."

"Yes, milady."

Skokie and Addison departed. The Empress's speech continued.

"By now, the Senate should have a general understanding of the basic rules that guide magic. Next, I shall move to a demonstration of the slightest fragment of its capabilities. Again I would like to turn the attention of the Senate to my daughter, Christine. Christine, please transform into your magical vestments."

Christine swallowed a cough and did as commanded. The same flash of light that previously enveloped her ring now enveloped her, and when it dispersed she wore golden, monkish

robes instead of her previous white suit.

The bright flash captured the attention of those Senators who had given up on Senator Luce's speech, although not the small but visible contingent who had no idea what the other Senators meant when they talked about Senator Luce's clothes or "that trick with the ring."

Nonetheless, it turned most eyes toward the proceedings, and while the initial shock of witnessing Christine Luce's changed attire was not as great as the original "ring trick," after a few seconds the Senators realized that this transformation was far less easily explained by an ingenious device or clever misdirection. Regardless of what originated the flash of light, Christine Luce's entire outfit had changed in the span of a second. Sleight of hand could not account—a mirror? Some of the Senators plodded around the room to view Christine at different angles; at Senator Luce's bidding, her daughter even twirled nauseously to showcase her new clothes.

But the most curious fact was that some of the Senators simply *did not see any new clothes at all*. This fact was murmured, met with incredulity, insisted upon. And it was this point Senator Luce, having planned everything in advance, now turned upon. For no matter what lightshow she showed them, they could always wave it away as some device, a projection, a cleverly-arranged series of mirrors; even if the explanation was impractical, infeasible, and only dubiously possible, they would cling to it rather than admit that the known laws of the world had inverted. However, no matter how great a stage trick, how fantastic, the same people witness the same deception. Here, in the center of the room, thronged about by Senators, some who could perceive and some who could not, with no apparent pattern to their positioning or political affiliation, the trick could be less easily denied, and any plausible deniability that might remain vanished as the suspicious Senators swapped places, those who could not see moved to where those who could were standing, those who could moved to those who could not; and the effect did not change. It was the eye of the person who determined what they saw, not where they stood, and while to some extent human vision is subjective, such a drastic difference in an ordinary room with clear lighting was unaccountable.

This would only be the first step in convincing them, however. The Senators were rational people. They would assume a rational explanation, even if they could not place the explanation themselves. Their modern society had conditioned them to such a response. That was all expected. All that was necessary now was to plant a seed. By the end of her speech, she would have watered that seed into a beanstalk not easily felled.

As she moved to the next component of her program, Sergeant Lombard leaned over the seats and tapped Cicero on the shoulder. She held an enchanted radio with a dial and a small screen. "Addison and Skokie are reporting."

"I praise their efficiency." Cicero kept one eye turned toward the Empress, but she knew her focus must remain on this matter of security.

"The Magi in question was easy to find. She does not appear to be taking any measures to conceal herself. Here is what they're seeing." She held up the radio. The screen displayed a lone young woman, perhaps quite young. Cicero reckoned she could not be past puberty due to her shortness and slightness. She wore an elaborate costume that marked her as magical to

any onlooker; a fancy white tuxedo with a top hat and purple band. She swirled a dandyish cane around one finger as she walked along a sidewalk.

"Administrator Hegewisch," said Cicero. "Based on the records you possess, can you identify ___"

"Ohhhhh." Cook examined the radio screen over Cicero's shoulder. "I know that young lady, she's—"

Hegewisch knew too. One instant, that was all it took. One instant and she could smile. Who else? This person was always going to show up again. Hegewisch had never denied it.

The Empress, below, kept talking. But the attention of the most important members in the galleries had shifted. The expressions on the faces of Cook and Hegewisch, while eccentric, portended to Cicero significance. This lone Magi was no wayward nomad, she knew even before the name was spoken. Spoken first by Cook instead of Hegewisch, because Hegewisch had to pause to consider what name would be best to call her, while Cook simply did not care. The name Cook said was:

"Clownmuffle."

Conspiracy of Cartographers

In this city nobody could escape history. It surrounded them within the Capitol rotunda, where they retreated to avoid disrupting the Empress in the Senate chamber. By now, visiting hours had ended. Only the intercession of the Empress's aide allowed Cook, Cicero, and Hegewisch to remain in the otherwise lifeless, vertiginous vacuum with the ghosts of gods and generals, who watched, from statues, from paintings, from mosaics, from all levels spanning ground to apex, mired in the darkness that had never left the city. A single security guard may have been a statue himself. Cicero watched Hegewisch sift her attaché case and retrieve a file.

"Weaponized playing cards. Short-range teleportation. Hammerspace."

"What," said Cicero, "is hammerspace."

"Denver did not deign to define." Hegewisch chose her words carefully; she resisted the urge to simply shrug. "I do not know."

"Ohhhhh, isn't that when a cartoon character pulls something out of thin air?" said Cook.

"Possibly. I can imagine her having a power like that."

"I do not want to rely on 'possibly' and 'imagine,'" said Cicero. "Is that what hammerspace means or not. Centurion Cook?"

Cook rolled her eyes without rolling her eyes. Her fun smile never wavered. "I'd say yes?"

"Why did you have to say that like a question," said Cicero.

"Why did you have to say that like a statement?"

Cicero turned to Hegewisch. "That's it? No other powers? And her Soul Gem is supposedly injured?"

"Because of her injury, I could not witness her use her magic much," said Hegewisch. At least with Cook being a pill it took the pressure off her. "What I did see aligns with Denver's records. As for her Soul Gem, if she's coming here now, I would assume she's found a way to heal it."

"Or she feels bad about deserting and wants to rejoin?" said Cook.

A slight twitch in the side of Cicero's face. "Given the timing of her approach, the Incubator must be involved. We will consider her a threat and destroy her with all haste."

"HMMMMM..." Cook tilted back her head so she could stare at the oil paint heavens on the inside of the dome. Her hum elongated as though she would segue into a response, but she only rapped her knuckle against her chin.

Hegewisch's main question was how Clownmuffle managed to remove the Handmaiden's enchantment. She should be wearing gold armor, not a white tuxedo. But this question felt irrelevant and bringing it up would only prolong her involvement. Although, given the alternative of returning to the galleries, maybe she *should* ask.

Cicero spoke first anyway. "Addison reports she is three and a half miles from our present location. We must formulate a plan of action now. I'll assemble a strike force that consists of myself, my lieutenant, and three or four additional elites. Her magic, as described, is not particularly exceptional, so we'll overwhelm her with numbers and superior tactics."

"Ohhhhh, excellent plan, Cicero. You're quite the take-charge sort. But I wonder? A lone enemy without exceptional magical power? Reeks of a trap..."

"I've already accounted for that possibility, Centurion Cook. Hence why I'll handle the operation myself."

Wouldn't Cicero stepping into the trap herself only make the trap more successful? Or did Cicero think she could overcome any trap Kyubey might spring?

"What if the plan's to ambush the Capitol while you're away?" said Cook.

"This is also why I should personally handle Flossmoor. My horse, at top speed, reaches three hundred miles per hour. Skokie's tripwire will alert us to any further attack five miles before it reaches the Capitol. That should afford me more than enough time to return and reinforce."

"Ohhhhh, you've really thought this through? Great work, Cicero. You have a far better tactical mind than me..."

Cook's assent seemingly ended the conversation.

"Is something funny, Administrator?" said Cicero.

Hegewisch blinked. Why did Cicero say that. Was she smiling? Shit, shit, shit. She thought she had gotten so good at resolving her face into utter neutrality during times like these. She averted her eyes from Cicero's gaze and crushed her teeth together.

"If you have an objection to my strategy, please explain. I'm aware this Empire prizes your tactical ability to sacrifice eighteen soldiers for your own skin, so by all means."

"Seventeen," said Cook. "One's just now come back from the dead."

The quip could not divert Cicero's attention. Hegewisch bit her lip and tried to construct her sentence in her head but the impatient tapping of Cicero's sole bludgeoned the silence and she could not compose things with any precision. She hemmed a classic, "With all due respect," bought herself a precious two seconds, and added, "with all due respect. I simply believe that—perhaps—perhaps the illusion of a trap is the... trap itself."

"And what," said Cicero, voice low but firm, "does that mean."

Fuck if Hegewisch knew, she just kinda said it. "It means, uh, it means—"

"Now."

"It means I think you're underestimating Flossmoor."

That was the wrong thing to say. The downturn in Cicero's already dour expression slapped Hegewisch harder in the face than any actual slap. Cook, safely behind Cicero's back, stifled a silent giggle while Hegewisch shriveled.

"Do you imply that I cannot defeat a Magi whose power is simple stage trickery?"

"Well, ah, let me explain, what I mean is..." Her eyes darted to a painting of George Washington for guidance, but George Washington didn't give a single shit. "A lone fighter standing against an army looks like a diversion to anyone, right? So any intelligent commander—such as yourself, milady," (officious half-bow,) "will plan around the possibility accordingly and expend relatively few resources against said diversion. But that, I believe, is the problem. I think nothing short of the entire might of the Empire will bring down that woman. In fact, I think even the whole Empire might not be enough."

After all, Clownmuffle couldn't die. Her death was an impossibility, so that even when she was fated to die by causality itself she said "fuck that" and lived anyway, and fucked up the whole timeline to do it. What the hell was Cicero and a handful of soldiers going to do?

Cicero lacked Hegewisch's amusement. Her stare had lowered Hegewisch to boot level.

"I ah, I mean, you can ask—Darien. Darien's from the same region as Flossmoor, and trained under her. Darien will surely affirm that Flossmoor is not someone to underestimate..."

"I am at least four times as skilled in combat as Darien," said Cicero. "I consider her opinion on this matter irrelevant. Honestly, I consider your opinion on this matter irrelevant too. I will assemble my team now. Cook, I trust you can oversee the Capitol's defense in my absence." She then initiated a telepathic communique with Lieutenant Berwyn in the galleries a few hundred feet away.

Well.

Hegewisch tried.

Fuck it, she told herself. Let them do what they wanted. How much did it matter? Let Clownmuffle singlehandedly take down the Empire. Isn't that the classic story? The big hero against insurmountable odds? That was Clownmuffle's whole shtick, let her live up to it, maybe it will at least entertain.

She turned to leave, shoulders shrugged and hands pocketed. But they would never allow that. Who else but Sayaka Miki stood in her way? Manifested to annoy them with more bullshit. Cicero transformed at once; Cook only cocked her head, as Sayaka wore street clothes like any tourist. Two security guards, although before only one had seemed to be present, strode from their posts in response to the disturbance.

"Visiting hours are over," they said.

"No wait—I'm with them." Sayaka Miki pointed to the special badges that gave the Imperial soldiers permission to remain in the Capitol after dusk.

"Even if that's true, you need a badge. I'm sorry ma'am, it's the law. Please come with us, and we'll get you registered."

Sayaka Miki for all her prophetic visions seemed unprepared for this matter of bureaucratic inconvenience. The suits seized her by the upper arm and dragged her away, a brusqueness that intensified when they noticed none of the people with actual clearance protesting.

"Watch for her partner," Cicero whispered to Cook. "The short one with white hair. How did she get past Skokie's line undetected?"

I've been in this city long before your friend put up that magic. Sayaka faced them before she disappeared through a doorway. You guys really have way too much confidence in yourselves. I'm not here to fight anyway, okay? So let's cool it and talk for a bit.

I am uninterested in such discussion, said Cicero. "This is a feint. It's meant to distract us and waste time. Let us not fall for it." She turned toward the entrance to the north wing, through which as if on cue her goon squad of Berwyn, Lombard, Elmhurst, and Darien marched in response to her previous beck. "Let us ride without delay."

Ugh, come on. This is so obviously a trap, a big one, and you're blundering right into it like idiots.

We have already discussed this possibility. Cicero turned to her goons and added: "Ignore her. The Empress decreed she is a disciple of the Incubator, and words will always remain his strongest weapon; best to not hear them. Cook, I trust you can ensure she is subdued?"

There's another enemy already in the city and already closing on you, said Sayaka. Trust me. Charlie, or Flossawatzit, or whatever you're calling her nowadays, she's a total fakeout. Laquesha, please, come on. I'm not working for Kyubey. Trust me. That Empress of yours can't see the truth because she doesn't want to see it.

"I, for one," said Cook, "would like to hear what she says."

Cicero wheeled on Cook with enough force to throttle had she not wisely kept her hands straight at her sides, although this gave the impression of Cicero as a bobbing penguin toy. "What rationale could you possibly possess for such a desire, Centurion Cook?"

Cook tilted on one foot. She stuck out her tongue. "Ohhhhh, you know. An enemy's lies reveal as much as their truths? Something like that? Is that a Sun Tzu quote? That should be a Sun Tzu quote. I kinda made it up right now, though."

"You hear her then. I'm leaving." She shot a trenchant arm to direct her soldiers.

So what's this trap, hmmmmm? said Cook.

A second archon, said Sayaka. Just like your Empress figured. It's still alive, and it's waiting.

Cicero tossed up her hands. "It's ridiculous already."

"Hmmmmm," said Cook.

Hegewisch sidled toward the periphery of everyone's vision. Inch by inch she approached the threshold at which she might feasibly make a break for it. With Cook in the center of the room and Cicero's attention directed toward Cook, nobody's line of sight intersected her. She had bridged half the distance to the north exit, three-quarters—

But was Hegewisch known for her luck? No. Of course not. The opposite. Through the west entrance appeared the Handmaiden and two of the three soldiers assigned to accompany her. All three either wore badges for clearance or else the Handmaiden manufactured the appearance of badges, so the security guards did not spontaneously generate to escort them off the premises. Hegewisch was too obviously in her line of sight to abscond.

"I was summoned?"

Cicero explained the situation as tersely as possible, omitting every nonessential word possible. The Handmaiden nodded, but did not comment further.

Can you guys make an effort to respond? said Sayaka. *You know I can't hear you, so it's kinda awkward. If you're silent I guess I'll just keep talking. So anyway, this archon—*

There is no second archon, said Cicero. *Six hours have passed since—the first spawned. Where is it? Where is this monster, that blots out the skies? Can you tell me that? No? Well, then it appears you're babbling nonsense like usual, like I said you would.*

"Excellent work ignoring her," said Cook.

Okay well this archon—Ugh you're never going to believe me are you? This archon, you could say it was. Asleep. Yeah, asleep. Sleeping late. Let's go with that.

"Have you heard enough, Centurion Cook?" said Cicero.

"Ahhhhh, perhaps? But I wonder, if the Incubator wanted to deceive us into acting a certain way, why would he tell us such an obviously fake story?"

"Reverse psychology, who cares."

I know that sounds stupid. Ugh, I sound stupid even to myself. But that's not even the half of it, if I told you the whole story you definitely would never believe me. But think about it, if I wanted to trick you, why would I say something so dumb?

My point exactly? said Cook.

"The fact that she calls attention to it only makes it a more obvious ploy," said Cicero. "Do you forget this—incurable woman attacked the Empress only yesterday?"

Ahhhhh, my illustrious colleague Centurion Cicero considers you untrustworthy.

"Are you *deliberately* wasting time?" said Cicero, who shared with Hegewisch the inability to simply walk away.

Yeah I know I kinda mucked things up last time we met, sorry about that. I got a little overzealous you could say. But the circumstances have changed, back then I mighta been able to stop you from starting this whole thing, now I gotta make sure you can finish it. This archon—it's different from the others. It's not something you can just smash to pieces. You could say it's... smarter. But also more dangerous. Seriously—ugh, you're never gonna believe me! And these stupid security guards are being real assholes!

It makes absolutely no difference what you say at this point, Miss Miki.

Heads whipped directions in search of the progenitor of that particular voice, and to Hegewisch's chagrin he turned out to be seated right next to her, half-hidden in the doorway through which she had intended to flee. How many assholes could enter this room in a way solely designed to fuck her over?

Kyubey, you really shouldn't be as happy about this as you are, said Sayaka. You don't know the half of what's gonna happen. This is a classic be-careful-what-you-wish-for scenario, Kyubey. That's the only upside here, at least you'll finally learn what it feels like to get a lot more than you bargained for.

The failure of this Empire to achieve its goals is the only outcome necessary, said Kyubey. Even if this second archon obliterates the ruling government and throws this nation into anarchy, I can simply rebuild it. Such disruption would likely even cause a worldwide uptick in despair, which will help recoup deficits accrued during this planet's last few years of operation. As long as the proposed government of Miss Luce fails to transpire, I'm satisfied. And that failure is now certainty.

He's bluffing, said Cicero. Nobody, or at least Hegewisch, had any idea why she suddenly started to use telepathy. This is all he can do. His schemes have failed and he can only attempt deception. She checked her radio. Flossmoor is nearing the west end of the National Mall. She's less than two miles away. If we waste more time trying to comprehend the Incubator's aim, we'll let her waltz right up to us. My team and I are leaving, now.

Forget Charlie! said Sayaka. Once she sees the archon, she'll probably join us to fight it. If we get your entire army together and formulate a plan based on what I know about this archon's powers, that's literally the only way we stand a chance. Are you even listening?

Cicero was not listening—finally. She, followed by Berwyn, Darien, Lombard, and Elmhurst, started for the exit.

She seemed to finally have mustered enough nerve to simply leave, the hardest thing for any obstinate person to do. And of course, once an obstinate person sets on leaving, little will divert them from that path. Hegewisch prayed for her to finally go, because it meant Hegewisch could leave too. Please. Please. Every step toward the exit formed a joyous reverberation in her charcoal heart. So close—so close—

The one person in the room with the ability to halt Cicero halted Cicero.

"We should not underestimate the girl named Flossmoor," said the Handmaiden.

That cold sentence stiffened Cicero's spine, not from fear, but from the dreaded ambiguity of where exactly the Handmaiden stood in the chain in command, whether she were above or below the Centurions, and whether Cicero ought to pay her respect when she endeavored to have herself heard. Hegewisch had observed this stupid ambiguity and the Centurions's collective discomfort around it before. As a banal tool of the Empress, the Handmaiden seldom spoke with any kind of originality, and this rarity prolonged the lack of any clear equivocation on the matter from the Empress, the only one with enough authority to resolve it one way or another. But the Handmaiden did occasionally speak not as an automaton but a thing that lived and had a brainstem. Hegewisch resisted the urge to flop onto the floor and let the gods in the upper echelons of the rotunda hurl their thunderbolts at her.

"Dr. Cho's reports on her physical ability—speed, strength, reflexes—were only slightly below those of yours, Centurion Cicero," said the Handmaiden. "That report was compiled at a time when Flossmoor's Soul Gem was seriously damaged. Assuming she has repaired that handicap, I believe your style of brute force will not so easily overcome her."

Cook waved a finger in agreement. "Right, riiiiight. I fought alongside this Clownmuffle, even if just a bit. She's, what's the word, crafty? Slippery. I don't mean to impugn your skill, of course, but I wonder if in your current mental state, as riled as you are...?"

"My mental state is irrelevant and easily ruled. Are you suggesting you would rather be the one to fight her, Centurion Cook?"

"Nahhhhh. I say let's both fight her. Same time. Crush her. Take all our soldiers with us, too. Not just the elites. Have your platoon, my platoon, what's that, forty soldiers total? Have them all prepared and ready, under our direct command."

You guys still there? Hello? Helloooooo? I swear, these security guys are not letting me go.

Cicero ignored Sayaka and asserted her height over Cook. "You want us to not merely spring the Incubator's trap, but hurl ourselves headfirst into it? That's illogical."

"Is there a trap, Cicero, or is the Incubator merely deceiving us? You've stated both possibilities as though they're certainties, but they're actually... if you think about it? Kinda contradictory. So allow me to, ah, provide my view on the matter: the Empire's power lies in numeric advantage. Why weaken that advantage by sending only a small group to combat Flossmoor? Because it's not really such a small group, if you think of how valuable you and your elite soldiers are to our total fighting force... In fact, I'd say you're almost halving our total fighting strength, given you're worth at least fifteen—nahhhhh, twenty—regular soldiers. So I propose, we not split up like that? In fact, let's not even go anywhere. Let's sit right in front of this Capitol and let Flossmoor come to us. Why rush at her? If it's a trap, I mean. Isn't that kinda silly? Let's sit here, defend this hill with our big army. Then it won't matter whether the Incubator has more forces or not, whether an archon exists or not. We'll be ready to handle whatever this Empire is capable of handling."

At some point, Cicero's breathing became audible. Her soldiers arrayed around her tried to remain as neutral as possible; this was not their discussion. But she herself seethed, it was as

though the idea of a defensive formation was anathema to her, and her eyes flitted to Hegewisch of all people. Hegewisch had a few theories about why Cicero did not want to lose face on this point in particular. She remembered the lecture Cicero gave her. But she was going to get out of this rotunda one way or another so she would not scratch that scab now.

"I believe Centurion Cook speaks well," said the Handmaiden. "Especially with Sayaka Miki and potentially her hitherto-unseen partner already inside the Capitol, sending forces away seems illogical. Centurion Aurora and I can remain inside the Senate chamber for any direct defense of the Empress and Centurion Joliet."

So Cicero was overruled. Hegewisch wondered if Cook wasted so much time on purpose so that Cicero would not be able to counter with the argument that they needed to crush Clownmuffle sooner rather than later. By now, Clownmuffle was so close there wasn't much point to a mobile assassination squad. If Cook had any ingenuity, it was in her ability to play dumb, although Hegewisch had rarely observed her make use of that "talent." Nonetheless, it seemed to have worked here. Cook had forced Cicero to acquiesce to a defensive position. And in front of her own soldiers, actually quite cutthroat. Hegewisch couldn't force herself to get too excited over the politics, though.

Cicero acquiesced.

"Then it is decided." Her voice lowered an octave. "Let us organize our army immediately."

The National Mall's idiosyncratic structures glowed white despite the oppressive nightfall. Lanterns like will-o-the-wisps lined its long lawn toward the obelisk of the Washington Monument, behind which no dregs of sunset remained, had they ever existed. The vehement darkness had lingered since the Empress severed DuPage's Soul Gem. Cicero was not fool enough to consider that fact insignificant. If anything betokened the presence of Sayaka Miki's second archon, it would be that.

The last of the soldiers streamed out the Capitol. They formed on the platform before its front, between the long flights of stairs that led down to the wedge-shaped reflecting pool and the lawn. Cicero's soldiers (twenty total, including Cicero) and Cook's soldiers (seventeen total, including Cook) organized along platoon lines. Joint drills between platoons were rare, so both Centurions decided to leave direct management to the respective command structures of each.

"Darren," said Cicero as she ordered Lombard and Elmhurst to test their magic radios and ensure communication would flow seamlessly even if the fight dragged out of telepathy range, "I would ask you something."

"Milady."

Darien. The kinks in her posture were all but resolved now, at least in these formal settings. In more private conversations the girl shone through from time to time. And even now Cicero could not shake the feeling Darien was putting on an act, the way the other Centurions would around the Empress; that she did not truly believe in the moral and ethical stipulations of the Empire. Behind closed doors, those Centurions did some truly reproachful deeds, not only in Imperial law, but in worldly law. What did Darien do when Cicero could not monitor her? Drugs, a paramour? Berwyn seemed to spend more time with her than necessary, or perhaps that was Cicero's imagination. Nonetheless the impression of something stunted, an imperfect facsimile, remained. Cicero regarded this creation with less fondness than she would have liked.

"The Administrator mentioned you served with Flossmoor in the San Bernardino region prior to joining the Empire. Is this true?"

"Yes, milady. She—"

"Do you have any insight into her fighting style and techniques that would increase the odds of a successful venture?"

Some part of Cicero wanted to consider this whole thing farce. Flossmoor would not last more than a minute, and only then if her powers were particularly obnoxious. But that meant casualties must remain zero. She had no excuse to lose a single soldier.

"Yes, milady," said Darien. "She was my mentor. If you can call it that, she was not particularly interested in my mentorship, unlike many others I have—"

"Spare the commentary, soldier. Stick to the point."

Darien, without a second missed, bowed her head severely. "My apologies, milady. Her abilities far exceeded my own at that time. She was faster, stronger, more creative with her powers. However, I believe that in my current state, I can defeat her in single combat. I was untrained then, and your tutelage has increased my ability tenfold."

"Very well. You'll lead the vanguard."

"My gratitude, milady. I seek always to prove my worth to this Empire."

Cicero stared at her, tried to detect any hint of irony, but with her head bowed and face obscured, many of the telltale signs became inaccessible. She could not honestly tell, and she drew back to the thoughts she sometimes had that she was projecting herself onto Darien, transforming Darien into the Cicero who served under DuPage and dreamed infinite ways to make DuPage beg for mercy; did Darien have the same dreams?

Doubts beget doubts. It felt as though somewhere, sometime, a lid opened. She never used to have these kinds of thoughts. Had not started to have them until—until DuPage died. Now she flinched at everything, she was losing her resolve, in another month she'd have as much spine as Joliet. She suppressed the urge to smash something, it would look abysmal in front of her troops. She needed that mask of authority, that mask of civility, that same mask she

suspected Darien of wearing, who was Darien really but Cicero, and who was Cicero but Darien?

Addison saved her. She approached, sniper rifle lowered. "I have sighted the target, milady. She has just now passed the Washington Monument."

"Binoculars," Cicero said to Lombard. Lombard dutifully provided them.

There. It took only a second to locate her, for she walked directly down the center of the Mall, as though she had phased through the Washington Monument altogether. She appeared exactly as shown in the radio, the same looping motion of her hand swirling the dandyish cane, the same pace without deviation in her steps. Only her head betrayed any life beyond the robotic, for it lolled, tilted, drooped, hooked at odd angles with her top hat perched atop it revolving and revolving but never falling. Only her eyes remained set ahead, no matter how her head tossed. A robot with one component on the fritz.

"Her Soul Gem remains in the headband of her top hat," said Cicero.

"If it's a fake?" said Cook.

"We will proceed under the notion that it is genuine. I am tired of so-called reverse psychology traps. The hat will be easy to capture, so if it does turn out a distraction, it will only be a momentary one."

"HmMMMM." Cook reached for the binoculars and Cicero had Lombard give her another pair.

"She should be close enough for telepathy," said Cicero. "Allow me to handle negotiations."

"I have met her before, you know? Maybe I can drum up some old camaraderie?"

"It's such a tenuous connection that gives me doubt," said Cicero.

Cook only shined her wistful smile under the fluorescent gleam of the pavilion lighting, which washed everything pale. Cook moved too much herself, her hands, her hips, too fidgety, it was something Darien sometimes did, there was a disorder to all this excess motion, an inefficiency. It ought to be stamped out.

Flossmoor, said Cicero.

Flossmoor continued to walk unimpeded.

Flossmoor, this is Second Centurion Cicero speaking. You have been labelled a deserter of the Empire and your punishment will be severe. However, I am willing to grant leniency given the immediate and peaceful surrender of your Soul Gem to our forces.

Flossmoor proceeded down the lawn.

I understand that you are a recent recruit to our Empire, so you may not understand the exact magnitude of your fortune in receiving any such promise at all. Under any other

circumstances, no matter your excuse for desertion, I would personally undertake the execution of your sentence. Do you understand? I demand a response now.

"Ahhhhh, words don't seem to be working...?"

Flossmoor. This is your final warning. Unless you speak now, we will treat you as an enemy of the Empire and exercise all necessary force to subdue you.

Cook cracked open her lips to utter another unwarranted quip, but at that moment the unstoppable forward motion of Flossmoor stopped and a telepathic voice reverberated inside their collective skulls:

Hi.

Hi. Like a child meeting someone new. The same high timbre. Denver's file claimed this girl was nineteen, but that seemed impossible. Was she mentally and physically retarded? Had the pubescent hormones never actualized? Or perhaps she was one of those whores who infantilized themselves to increase their appeal, like cuckoos attempting to blend into a nest of true chicks.

You will address your superior officer as milady, Soldier Flossmoor.

Flossmoor had stopped. She stood in the exact center of the long strip of grass that spanned the Capitol to the obelisk. It was about as far as Cicero was willing to let her come. The file mentioned her only ranged ability as throwing "vorpel playing cards." Such an attack could probably only travel a few meters maximum, but the Incubator may have enhanced her with someone else's magic, the way many of the Imperial soldiers were currently enhanced by Berwyn.

Flossmoor said:

The Handmaiden.

Cicero glanced at Cook. Cook shrugged.

You will speak in complete sentences, Flossmoor. Subject. Predicate.

The Handmaiden, said Flossmoor.

Ahhhhh, and what about her? said Cook. She winked at Cicero and Cicero signaled for her to shut up but of course she would never shut up.

I want only the Handmaiden. All others can live.

The Handmaiden? Cicero didn't even want to try and understand. Nobody mentioned anything about a grudge between Flossmoor and the Handmaiden. The Handmaiden herself had not intimated any such thing.

Whatever. You understand, Flossmoor, that your implied threat against a member of this Empire, let alone one of such prestige and rank as the Handmaiden, is grounds for your

summary execution. But you don't care, do you? No. You're content to babble nonsense, waste our time, and distract us. That is your entire purpose. Very well. At this point, it will be faster simply to destroy you, and I am perfectly willing to pursue that path.

She lowered her binoculars and turned to her soldiers. "Initiate—"

Send only one girl to fight me, said Flossmoor.

No? Bah. Cicero didn't know whether she were tired or what, but this nonsense was starting to weigh down on her. Her head was not thinking with the crispness it ought. She tried to process such a stupid comment as though it harbored some hidden sense she simply could not divine and found nothing, nothing at all, uselessness. Was this the Incubator feeding lines into her ear so she might repeat them in such a way as to confuse Cicero utterly? "Initiate—"

The more you send, the worse they become. Your society is an enemy of magic. Your logic and organization will not save you.

"Initiate the attack!" Cicero shouted. She aimed her halberd over the edge of the Capitol pavilion, down the long lawn, pointed straight at the tiny figure of Flossmoor. "Now! Go! Ignore anything she says, subdue her!"

The ranged soldiers across both platoons aimed their weapons for the opening salvo, while Darien and her squadron leapt over the edge and dropped fast so that the projectiles would fly over their heads. As the perfect line of synchronized shots roared against the placid sky, one final statement rang out:

Okay. I guess you'll all die too.

The fight began.

The Body Itself Balks Account

A fairy with a funny face whispered in her ear: *You can't fight them! There's something way worse, way more evil. A monster that gobbles Magical Girls for breakfast. We gotta fight that monster, not these guys. Please?*

Same words since she entered the city. Same fairy. Same shrug—Clownmuffle acted alone.

Artillery flashed from one end of the Capitol patio to the other. A transept of lawn exploded but neither flames nor shrapnel nor debris touched her. But they did create thick pillars of smoke.

Through which dropped a lime-green spotlight. A limelight. It bleached her skin and clothes, but lacked other obvious effects.

From the smoke burst a gold soldier. The black billow parted lengthwise to allow the swing of a gargantuan sword. Clownmuffle kicked up her legs, landed upon the blade, and traveled its arc until she reached her attacker's back. She rammed the butt of her baton between the shoulders and the soldier pitched forward.

The ephemeral limelight remained. Some magic—she understood now. The light illuminated her despite the smoke, so her enemies could see her but she could not see her enemies. Hm. She parried two incoming fighters and hopped the ankle-height swing of the recovering sword soldier.

"Remember me?" the soldier said.

"Yes." Clownmuffle flicked the 7 of Hearts into her eyeball. She had met the golden soldiers many times. If she had forgotten them, she would not have come.

Four girls rushed, four directions at once, four weapons falling by the time they broke the smokescreen. Clownmuffle's baton misdirected one while out her sleeve shot fifty-two cards into the face of another which meant nobody was looking at her vest from which she produced a bundled white curtain that one flick fanned into a tent around her. Several weapons gored this tent except the tent was now empty and Clownmuffle stepped from behind the falling fifty-two cards to rip the curtain away and flick it over bloody-face girl, who promptly disappeared. Except she, unlike Clownmuffle, did not reappear.

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The limelight, which left Clownmuffle when she performed her teleportation trick, found her again. No matter how hard they watched her, they would not detect her sleight of hand. She hurled her baton skyward and from her collar withdrew a multicolored ribbon that a magic tap straightened to sever the neck of the next soldier. She danced back, deflected the giant sword, disemboweled a soldier who snuck up behind. Under, across, over she weaved through bolts and bullets, hurled her ribbon as a javelin, felled a new target. Her other hand whipped her curtain toward the giant-sword soldier but the curtain came apart in eighths and

Clownmuffle's arm came apart too. She stuck the stump inside her tuxedo jacket and retrieved a new arm.

Three other soldiers dropped in gory chunks at the end of the sword soldier's backswing, and a follow-up swing bifurcated a fourth who could not jump as fast as Clownmuffle. Telepathic communication buzzed, a mix of annoyance and approbation toward the sword soldier.

"I'll handle this alone." The swordswoman shifted her stance and watched Clownmuffle for motion.

Centurion Cicero lets you fight like this? The plan was—

"Damn the plan." She ripped off her helmet and hurled it aside. Bounce, bounce it went. One toss of her head swept the bangs from smoky eyes. "Come on, Clownmuffle. I'm not Murrieta-Temecula anymore. See what I've learned."

Murrieta... Temecula. That was—that was—she remembered—a little bend. This wasn't that girl. But this face, uncovered, Clownmuffle remembered it, but she could not remember who...

She made McHenry disappear and we still don't know where she is, stop fooling around—

Captain Darien can handle her, she—

"Captain" isn't even a rank, I thought Cicero's platoon was better than this—

The turf bubbled. A thin layer of water crept between the grass. It rose as the swordswoman rushed to provide a convenient stepping stone before Clownmuffle's shoes became wet. Atop the swordswoman's sword, as the smoke subsided and the lime-green glow reflected, it became clear the entire quadrant of lawn from one bland white building to the next had become a plane of shallow water. The six hacked bodies bobbed and their blood spread in blooms.

"Ahhhhh, perfect, please don't move, Miss Darien." From the sidewalk nearest the Capitol a golden astronaut waved. Or maybe her costume evoked a Jules Verne diver. The gold plating and sleek edges added to the ensemble obscured the theme, 2 out of 10. At her back a squad of eight soldiers waited. "Clownmuffle? I believe you made one of my soldiers vanish, a certain McHenry? Please return her."

The order not to move had transfixed the swordswoman, although she quivered under Clownmuffle's shoes, especially the arm that gripped her sword. Clownmuffle considered her terrain.

"Some sort of pocket dimension? Or did you warp her somewhere?" said the diver. "Please. A favor for an old friend? We're friends, right?"

Clownmuffle said, "I'm friends with," and shut her mouth. *With every Magical Girl* flashed through her mind, words she had spoken before. She shook her head. "No."

"Ohhhhh, you don't remember? I was Aurora back then? Remember?"

"I uh, Lady Cook uh," said a soldier at the diver's side, "kinda doubt she'll have too fond memories of back then? Considering you uh, kinda...?"

"Ahhhhh, well, worth a shot?"

Out of the water's edges shot four triangular walls of ice that converged toward the center to create a pyramid. The undersides of the ice, half-melted, drizzled water in long lines that froze into ice of its own. The pyramid was sealing fast, and too high for Clownmuffle to jump. Instead, she seized her top hat by the brim and hurled it skyward the same moment the swordswoman broke her stillness and swung. The broad blade served Clownmuffle's exact purposes, she dropped behind it, for the briefest moment it blocked her from view, and in that moment she crawled out of her twirling top hat just as it cleared the closing tip of the pyramid.

As she descended toward one of the pyramid's slopes, the whole structure became water again, ready to swallow her. She flicked a new deck out her sleeve and danced upon the slowly fluttering cards while along arches of ice sprinted the diver's animatronic subordinates lashing fire whips and yo-yos and fishing poles. The fisher's line coiled to snag Clownmuffle, she weaved to evade it, it redirected in midair, she batted with her baton, but only slowed it. Finally she threw cards to sever the line, but the line reformed or else the cards passed through to no effect. The hook latched to her bowtie and an immediate, irresistible force dragged her off her perch toward the water.

The water reached out to grab her. Ice tendrils and jets of superheated steam lanced from every direction. Twenty-seven bullets, three arrows, and two cannonball bombs rained.

She caught the baton she thrown skyward at the beginning of the fight, deflected the bullets, caught an arrow between her teeth, kicked the first bomb into the other. The detonation blasted a hole in the water instants before the line carried her through it. This was the critical point. In that instant, the frothy spray encircled her and occluded the eyes of everyone watching, even the limelight. So while they watched the interior of the pyramid for her to hurtle inside and be sealed, they did not see her and they did not see the fluttering spray of cards she had previously tossed and it was behind these cards she appeared.

Out her sleeves she produced three chainsaws for juggling and with one stroke sawed off the heads of two soldiers still watching the spray. She hurled the chainsaws like missiles at three other soldiers, including the one with the fishing rod, who dodged in time. But Clownmuffle's tuxedo coat flapped open and from it flew seventy-seven white doves who alighted upon the angler soldier, enveloped her entirely in their feathers, and took off again leaving no trace behind.

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One annoyance dispatched, she seized a parasol weapon from one of the decapitated soldiers and launched herself from her shaky perch of playing cards down the slope of the pyramid toward the diver and a meager number of attendants. Someone shouted: "Keep her surrounded, don't take your eyes off her," but even when performing to a theater of thousands a true practitioner of magic could still confound. The parasol moderated her descent, jerked her left and right to evade the fifty things flung her way, projectiles and ice and steam and

whips and javelins and blades, while the diver stepped back and allowed one of her attendants, a soldier made distinctive solely by the long ponytail that swished about her back, to step forward. This soldier held empty hands outward, arms slightly bent as though holding something, one eye squinted as though aiming. Clownmuffle recognized this girl, not by appearance for she wore the same armor as the others, but from the distinctive bent of her magic—Denver's mime.

The mime jerked back her hands and trembled all over, she mimicked the firing of an automatic weapon and Clownmuffle could not see the bullets. Instead she pointed her parasol forward and swayed her body to dodge based on where holes opened upon the parasol's surface. Clownmuffle shut the parasol around herself and everyone immediately looked to the fluttering flock of doves she had previously unleashed in anticipation of her manifestation but instead she simply reopened the parasol and crashed into the mime. The mime rolled back to avoid a sharp umbrella-tip to her sternum and sprayed an arc of invisible bullets that Clownmuffle danced within. Another soldier sped from the side and took the parasol to the throat while the pyramid twisted into a sky-blotting wave of water crashing toward them. Where did that diver go? Clownmuffle dragged the body at the tip of her parasol across the ground to wipe it off like a crushed insect and opened the parasol, newly repaired of its bullet holes, to shield her from the wave. The mime ceased attacking to seal herself in an invisible box, but the other six soldiers nearby were trapped as the water came down and became ice.

At the last moment, Clownmuffle closed the parasol around herself and reappeared from her flock of doves. She dropped on a safe spot of pavement and surveyed the destruction in her wake, a broad grin cracked, it felt so good after so long to use her body in such a way again, extend it to its utmost potential, harness total control over its motions, a body solely to herself. She inhaled deep. The cool air refreshed her coursing lungs. Her hands tingled with the blows she had dealt, the heads caved, the necks severed, the blood dashed—bodies, bodies, bodies...

Behind. Patter patter barumph barumble. A soldier on a horse.

The soldier came fast but the halberd she swung lacked precision and Clownmuffle sidestepped it sans difficulty. Only the halberd turned out more explosive in force and the ground in a dome under Clownmuffle cratered and Clownmuffle herself went flying, flying into a second seismic strike that forced her to grab her hat to protect her Soul Gem and which juggled her higher into the air. She hurtled, flipping, turning, swirling, over ice and lawn, until she slammed against a hard and straight surface of white marble bricks illuminated from below by floodlights. A ring of blood burst out her mouth, her bones shattered, had she not shielded her gem it might have shattered too. She had essentially zero time to recover because the rumble of horse hooves shook whatever wall she had landed against and the glint of gold flashed in the lower periphery of her vision.

Her bones were inside her. Nobody could see them. So there was no reason why they shouldn't be fixed, and they were, instantly. She kicked off from the side of the edifice as the halberd came down and sent waves of solid rock rumbling in all directions. She hurtled through open air and the horsewoman with one bound followed, as they swirled away from it she realized they were hurtling from the obelisk monument she had passed on her way in, now cracking apart and crumbling under the force of one strike.

Ahhhhh! Cicero! That's an American landmark? You can't just smash it?

Buttresses of ice shot upward to prop the obelisk and keep its side from caving. Meanwhile Clownmuffle and the horsewoman tumbled, Clownmuffle needed options or else she would suffer another blow the moment her back hit the ground, a stream of cards shot out each cuff, doves from her jacket, petals from her lapel, smoke from her open mouth. The horsewoman swung against the air before the collection could envelop her, the cards ripped to confetti, the doves crushed to feathers, and all in a cyclonic swirl to either side of her. That was enough. From the tattered debris shot seventeen chains on all sides of the horsewoman, chains that clamped against her with shackles, against her neck, against her raised arms, against her axe's shaft, against her horse's hooves. She staggered suspended in midair the moment Clownmuffle hit the ground on her back and somersaulted to her feet, whirling around to ram a clawhammer into a soldier's brain jelly and fire a nailgun into the heart of another. An entire platoon had gathered at her landing spot in a quadrant of lawn untouched by the ice.

Clownmuffle reached into her collar just under the jugular notch and produced a napkin with which she wiped off the face of the soldier with the clawhammer. She turned in anticipation of another attack but instead rammed directly into an invisible wall. She bounced off, ricocheted half-floating a few feet back, struck a second wall, and flipped upward to find an invisible ceiling above her too.

"Got her, holy wow," said Denver's mime, who knelt by Clownmuffle's side, holding up her palms and gliding them across the unseen surface. The mime inspected her, tilted her head, and tapped the nonexistent glass. "Gotcha."

"Someone get Centurion Cicero down," said the swordswoman.

"What happened to Bellwood's face?" said another. A small crowd had gathered around the faceless soldier. Someone helpfully wrenched the clawhammer from her skull, which only caused a gush of blood to splatter down her armor.

"Same thing that happened to McHenry and Zion, probably," said a soldier. "She must have them in a pocket dimension."

The last few chains snapped and the horsewoman stuck her landing. "Lieutenant Kenosha. You're certain she is in a secure barrier?"

"Yup-yep, check it." Denver's mime danced around Clownmuffle's tiny confines and patted her hands to demonstrate its dimensions. "I knew our resident fashion critic was one uh, one tough son-of-a-gun, but that was wow."

"Can she teleport out of that box?" said the horsewoman.

"Course she can, want me to squeeze it so she's uh, crushed into a little cube?"

"Not until we know where she's concealed McHenry and Zion. River Forest, employ your ability."

A soldier holding a tome stepped forward. She opened her book to the middle and a sudden wind whipped the browned parchment pages one after another. A purple aura exuded and inky black words seeped onto the ground. Clownmuffle could only lean against her prison and grin. They had gathered, so many, to defeat her. Their identical faces in their identical armor swarmed her cell. They stripped away everything about them to band together, but that whole was less than the sum of its parts. If this soldier wore blackened robes, draped in sinister profusions, a slight hunch in her stature, a grimace in her bearing, how much more effective would become the eldritch magic seeping from her book? How much stronger the words transmitted: YOU WILL OBEY. YOU WILL BECOME PLACID. Words weakened and watered by the placid obeisance of their wielder, stripped bare by her nonentity, a worthless, wasteful carcass, something deserving a strong staff to the skull, the fracture of so many bones, blood splashed upon the soil, annihilation of her being, utter erasure, and these same words echoing: YOU WILL OBEY. YOU WILL BECOME PLACID. YOU WILL ANSWER THE LADY'S QUESTIONS. And hypnosis, persuasion, such tools ripe for harvest by practitioners of magic, but whatever had once been had drained to a sham, and all Clownmuffle could do was laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

"No effect," said a soldier. The one with the book frowned.

"Can't lower the judgment of uh, of someone with no judgment to lower," said the mime. "Like a dog. Can't make a dog stupider right?"

The soldier with the book slammed it shut. "She must already be foolish enough for taking us on. Lady Cicero, I apologize, but—"

"The only fools," said Clownmuffle, "are you." For all boxes have a false wall...

"Crush her," said the horsewoman.

The mime flourished and clapped her hands against the sides of the confine until they pressed against a Clownmuffle whose shape bent and twisted inward, bent and twisted, bent and twisted—then snap! collapsed in a glittering shower of shards each of which caught the green light still beamed from afar until they clattered against the ground showing nothing but the golden faces peering down at them.

"A mirror—"

"We had her surrounded, we had people looking from every angle, when—?"

A shimmer appeared three feet off the ground and only the fastest reacted in time before an almost invisible wire sliced through their collective midsections. Six fell severed including the one whose face she stole and the one who wielded the book, and before the book soldier fell Clownmuffle dropped upon her with a dagger plunged into the soft flesh of her throat and dragged down to the split in her belly, she seized the collected innards and hurled them into the face of the horsewoman upon whom the wire had snapped harmlessly then front-flipped past an imaginary rocket fired from the mime's imaginary rocket launcher and allowed the propulsion of its imaginary explosion to launch her toward another whose head she kicked off like a soccer ball before flashing her sleeve toward the mime and sending at her a five

hundred pound stripeless white tiger to tackle her to the ground and rip out her throat with its fangs.

Which left only the horsewoman who plowed her earthquake axe into a mirror on which Clownmuffle's image had reflected and sent the shards of glass into the still-falling bodies of her ostensible allies, but for all this horsewoman's imperial bluster her fighting style was one best fought alone. Delicious irony that of all the soldiers dispatched at least half had been dispatched by their own hands, collateral of their strongest fighters, the swordswoman or the diver or this one, and as Clownmuffle spiraled out of control spewing her playing cards and doves and hatchets and knives and shiny silver discs every which way she laughed without cease. The horsewoman charged to crush her but faced mirrors at every turn, mirrors and smoke, smoke and mirrors, the ice was a mirror too, and the limelight reflected and reflected and became useless, nobody could see her, nobody could see except what she wished them to see, the air so clogged of her distractions and misdirections.

A radio somewhere on the horsewoman buzzed: "Milady, we are running low on soldiers, shall I petition Centurion Aurora for reinforcement?"

"That woman's useless Berwyn."

"Aye. Then shall I and the ranged fighters assist? In your current position behind Lady Cook's ice—"

"Stay exactly where you are. I shall finish this fight."

"Aye, milady..."

Clownmuffle descended on the horsewoman from above, whipping a wide curtain to whisk her away into blessed nonexistence. The horsewoman saw at the last possible moment, too late to swing her axe, but instead she dropped it and held one hand out and rammed her fist into its open palm, the force created by which propelling the curtain upward and Clownmuffle gripping its tails with it.

Cook stop fooling with that monument and assist.

That same moment the quadrant of lawn rose with water and from the darkness overhead broke clouds that poured rain across everything. Did this matter? No. They had warmed her up, the shackles in her mind had come off, the rust broken and the joints oiled, what was no longer possible? Kwekwekwe. Deeper her audience dropped, into her world of illusion, every previous bafflement compounding until their minds became mush and they would accept any finale presented. Even as the water crashed from above and below the arena was of her making. The waves crystallized over cards and mirrors, the rain fizzled like acid through curtains and feathers, but the wires streamed in zigzag diagonals to cleave sheer these sheets while Clownmuffle slipped between the apertures. The shed blood boiled and the steam ran thick and the shadows stretched long and what could be seen but was not reflected fifteen times along the melting crystal shards and the jagged stalactites of ice? She swirled skyward or outward, directions no longer mattered much, flipping over her legs and laughing as she waved her top hat through the air at the watery visage rising before her of a dragon, long-fanged and spanning the breadth of the lawn, eyes aflame and its long undulating body

stretching from the ice edifice propping the side of the obelisk, the diver-chef a gilded blot atop its head flapping hands together to pantomime the closing of jaws as the jaws closed to gnash.

Clownmuffle coiled her back outward and flashed her arms forward and from her sleeves shot two squealing cruise missiles that spiraled in aberrant patterns around and around one another toward the face of that liquid dragon, smoky jetstreams coiled behind them, K-K-K-K they went as they plowed into its face and erupted broad enough to disfigure its visage and send its slopping remains to ground while she laughed so hard she inverted and her feet kicked the air above and the force of her momentum bounced her against the floor and span her back up, there was no end to her possibilities, the keys inside her mind had all clicked open their locks in unison, limits broken, decay reversed, indeed beyond reversal, for her state of decrepitude had shaken the binds of complacency that had clamped around her long before the crack in her soul and her slack mind and body had strung taut as any trick wire, any tendon sharp enough to cut all flesh save her own.

We can wear her down, she can't maintain this level of magical expenditure long.

Ahhhhh, but can she...?

Somewhere an alarm pealed, something distant and low yet loud enough to detect above the roar of the dying dragon in its thrashing headless death throes, above the T-I-N-T-I-N-N-A-B-U-L-A-T-I-O-N of the rockets' eruption still ringing the ears off the vibrations of so many mirrors. The humans, even in their sleepy state something must have triggered an automated response, the humans were rousing although they would be sleepwalkers. Humans were not even fit to be her audience, they could see neither what she wanted them to see nor what she didn't.

So she ought to bring her performance to its crescendo.

She snapped her fingers. All her curtains dropped, all her mirrors slid away, and along the vast stretch of lawn between these hollow husks of empire and manifest destiny appeared a vast parade of elephants, their bodies bleached white and their legs as long and thin and omnijointed as insects, their backs laden with pyramids and obelisks like the one that impaled the indeterminate horizon, and the waters washed ruddy orange around them, and they proceeded on their caravan hazily swaying their bodies.

Wnnnnnnnnnnh, whhhhhhhhhhh, went the sirens.

The diver, risen upon a pillar of ice, flicked flurries of rain into the faces of her parade, their skin sizzled away, their skulls shone in the limelight that now reflected in every direction, and before she could raise a wall of water they crashed through her perch and hurtled her amidst their stampede. The ground quaked, fissures split through the caked-on layers of ice and the loam of the lawn.

The clop of hooves cut across. Weaving between the stilt-legs of the elephants, smashing her axe against their underbellies to split them open and cascade their melting clockwork innards across the stage, came the final charge of the gilded brigade. The horsewoman howled some

horrendous roar and slashed one monstrous blast to wipe away the smoke and mirrors and reveal Clownmuffle in her entirety hovering above the ground.

Darien, your sword.

The swordswoman had half-extricated herself from the ice, the only one of the soldiers buried in it to have managed to do so, and she chipped at what remained welded to her leg with her sword, a maneuver made awkward by the sword's length. She flashed eyes at the horsewoman, an instant of intense hatred in those dark features, but only an instant—she drew back her hand and hurled her blade skyward. The horsewoman, dismounting her horse to leap over Clownmuffle, caught the blade and came down with both it and the halberd. The vortex of her first strike still swirled and Clownmuffle span weightless on its winds while from her collar she produced a pomegranate from which emerged a fish from which emerged a tiger from which emerged a rifle and bayonet which fired in the horsewoman's face and puffed gunsmoke laterally around her.

A white arc cut through the smoke as the giant blade whipped and a circle appeared around Clownmuffle in the dirt. The circle dropped as the surge of air rushing into the vacated space of the ground forced Clownmuffle down and the horsewoman hurtling after her. Walls of dirt rose around them as deeper and deeper they fell and all the while the axe and the sword swinging, cutting, collapsing everything upon them, into the sediment, past the layers of history and the bones of creatures long extinct which at Clownmuffle's bidding stirred from their antediluvian graves and snapped their fangs harmlessly against the horsewoman.

Clownmuffle extended her hands but before anything could be created the sword lashed out and both hands detached. The flying hands seized the horsewoman's helm and the fingers twisted to plug the slats but before they could the axe whipped back and cracked the air and the force propelled the horsewoman faster and she seized Clownmuffle around the torso even as Clownmuffle tried to stream out in the form of doves and together they grappled as the crust around them ended and they plunged into the open air of the National Mall inverted. They hung, suspended, until the horsewoman slammed her head against Clownmuffle's and erased Clownmuffle's head in a spray of gore that carried her top hat away. Out the exposed interior of her neck sprouted a giant carnation to swallow the horsewoman in the petals but successive swipes of the sword hewed it all to pieces while from her hat emerged the real Clownmuffle to pull herself away moments before a lance of solid ice launched from the sky and missed her by millimeters.

"I cannot die," said Clownmuffle, "unless I choose it."

"That's never how it works." The horsewoman encircled her.

"Ahhhhh, except the Empress." The diver appeared on the opposite side.

"You careless—*Focus.*"

It would take only a single maneuver. She visualized it in her mind and anything she could visualize she could make a reality. She was only a little winded. The breath ran ragged out her throat but she could tilt back her head and drink in the crisp night air to revivify. Sweat poured down her body, it stained her tuxedo vest and jacket, hot with the pulse of her blood,

hot with the pulse of her soul. Pristine, spotless soul, unblemished and pure. The threads of her clothes had frayed. One button torn, a rip along her pants leg. She flicked her bowtie idly and it span a full revolution. The alarm murmured distant. But her skin was so smooth, and her body whole, her nails as white as her gem, and her heart swollen with love.

Love...

Somebody once said something to her about love.

When was it?

She did not want to remember, something about this memory tasted bitter, so she drew back before she plunged too deeply into it, and that feeling of love pounding inside her chest became bitter too.

At that moment her opponents attacked. They must have coordinated through some sort of gesture, for the facial expressions of neither were visible, or else they simply relied on the same instincts and something in Clownmuffle's demeanor at that moment of bitterness belied a weakness they could otherwise not possibly fathom. Regardless the reason, they attacked. The horsewoman's axe fell from above while her sword swept sideways, the diver's water sprouted from all sides. The diver put especial focus on Clownmuffle's Soul Gem, for the lances of ice sprung toward it, while the horsewoman either refused even now to strike with lethality or believed the explosive force of her strikes to compensate for lack of precision. In this moment, Clownmuffle blinked and realized all her mirrors had broken, all her smoke had subsided, although she did not know when or why. The omnipresent limelight found her again and her glow became sickly.

It was that woman... It was *her*...

How could she forget so easily everyone else but not that woman underground? It was no longer love in her heart, the taste was too foul, and her face scrunched, and the pretense dropped. The attacks of her attackers seemed to approach as though in slow motion, elongated, tortured. She clamped her hands on the broad side of the giant blade and jerked it forward. The horsewoman's footing gave the least degree. This slight displacement altered the swing of her axe so it swept down Clownmuffle's side, removed one of her legs, pummeled her with its force. But it also blasted a misaimed hole that collapsed the dirt under the diver.

From afar Clownmuffle had not noticed but up close the lack of gloves on the diver's costume became apparent. It was hideous. What deep-sea diver would lack gloves? The exposed hands would be crushed instantaneously by the pressure of so much liquid. And it looked abominable, too, how could someone possess a costume so hideous? This woman needed to be wadded paper tossed into the garbage bin.

But although the exposed hands were the obvious weakpoint, Clownmuffle did not reach for them as she and the diver collapsed together. The diver's bare hands clamped around Clownmuffle's waist and ice spread from them to lock her hips into place. At the same time Clownmuffle placed her palm upon the inky window on the diver's helmet, a perfectly round circle of black glass, thronged by a metal strip that bolted it shut.

She saw a trick once. Dark weekend night, everyone else asleep and she bathed in the pale television hooded by a blanket while a cop car's siren careened in the distance. A magician on the screen, a man named seraphically, who could light himself aflame, who could hover over a pyramid, who could walk on water—and who could pass through solid objects as though they did not exist. Clownmuffle had observed that nothing seemed to harm these two commanders, not razor wires or rampaging elephants. Nothing dented their armor. But to pass through, like the angel magician on the television all those years ago...

Her hand pressed. Her torso was both freezing and melting simultaneously, the feeling so intense that the extremes at either end of the spectrum had become indistinguishable, like the bitterness of the love she tasted in that dungeon. And it spread, dissolving and encasing her, while all Clownmuffle had to do was press her palm against this glass window on the diver's helmet and...

And, as the man on TV had demonstrated, with the power of your mind you can accomplish anything. She had always known this, it had always been true, and as her hand passed to the other side and clutched the face inside her fingers needed only to clench to crumple it. The bones powderized, the teeth and gums and eyeball jelly, her hand pressed deeper and tore through the brain and grasped the stem and one twist snapped it.

The body fell. Clownmuffle's hand came away with it. When the body hit the ground the helmet was untouched as though nothing had changed, but the body made only a spasmodic series of twitching motions and a few aimless attempts by mindless limbs to scuffle into a semblance of coordinate motion.

Clownmuffle had been encased in the ice, her entire body up to her shoulders, and even the arm that had performed the trick was half-frozen. Her eyes flicked and the horsewoman was at her side—likewise covered in the clear cold crystal. It had surrounded them both, so thick that even for all its clarity the outer world became distorted and murky, and the only bubble of freedom that remained was focused around the diver's now-mindless body.

Cook. Cook. Get up Cook. Get up and get rid of this ice. Cook. The horsewoman kept struggling, kept trying to move her arms, but no matter her strength she could not struggle against so much tonnage without a millimeter's space to move. *Cook you need to get up. Cook. You cannot be this irresponsible. Cook. You've—bah. Berwyn.*

Aye, milady. What is the status? We cannot—

Cook is down. I'm stuck. But the target is stuck too. I require your immediate assistance.

Ah, and Clownmuffle was stuck too. Nor was she sure how much of her body remained to be stuck. She had a handless half an arm unfrozen and her neck and her head. She could not reach into her collar, her sleeve sopped with blood. Her hat perched but she could not upturn it to reveal some device hidden inside.

She still had her mouth.

Her head tipped back as far as the ice allowed and her jaw unhinged. Her tongue pushed out a parasol like the one she had used earlier and a click of a secret button caused it to snap open.

Its spokes scraped against the edges of the cavity before the fabric gently fluttered down... down...

And over Clownmuffle.

She reemerged under a bundle of playing cards she had thrown some time long before, first a stir, then a swell in the pile before the cards fell away and she crawled along the sidewalk on her hands and knees until she gathered enough strength to drop a baton out her jacket and use it to prop herself upright. Most of her tuxedo had been eaten away, tatters remained upon her, and she staggered woozy despite the crispness of this clean air, but she had restored her body, and that body would never fail her. The sirens whirled their red and blue lights, on either side car doors opened and officials stepped out unsure what exactly had sparked the alarm and why exactly they had come. The lawn had transformed into a waste of ice, a glacier immobile on the Mall, jagged peaks having formed at the apex of waves. But they saw none of that, they saw a lawn pristine and unbroken, an obelisk uncracked, the lights as they should be and a night where all was well. They did not believe in magic. They could not grasp it.

Clownmuffle, supported on her baton-cane, progressed toward the Capitol. Her lungs rasped. Her body lived.

Atop the glacier stood only a single figure, the swordswoman from before, wrenching the ice from her leg with her fingers, prying it off bit by bit. She had removed almost all of her gold armor to assist the process, so when she lurched back with a final tug and stood free she wore only a blank white shirt and blank white pants like the blank slate she had become. She had even removed her boots, and where she stepped left bloody footprints as the ice had removed the skin on the soles of her feet. Her Soul Gem shone, no longer concealed behind the plates.

The constant stream of telepathic invective sputtered by the glacier-bound horsewoman turned the swordswoman's head and she saw Clownmuffle.

The swordswoman screamed pure fury and sprinted. She did not summon anew her sword, perhaps she had too little magic to do so. She came with her hands straightened and slid the last few meters on the bloody wetness of her feet, a slippery motion Clownmuffle had not anticipated, and when Clownmuffle raised her arm to block because she did not feel like dodging, the chop that struck her bone snapped it clean in half.

Clownmuffle replied by bringing down her cane and cleaving away half the swordless swordswoman's body. For an instant she had considered bringing it down on the exposed gem, but—

But decided not to. She left it glittering among the wreckage of the torso.

She scaled the mountain of ice.

As she did, the façade of the Capitol appeared. The remaining soldiers, gathered on its patio with all manner of ranged weapons, opened fire. She swung her baton and deflected the bullets and arrows et cetera and the line of soldiers dropped in puffs of blood. See, on the TV, that trick would be accomplished by... by blanks... and then at the moment of firing, an unseen line of snipers would shoot dead all the original marksmen to achieve the illusion that

the bullets had been deflected. That would be TV. This world was not TV. It was her, her world. Haa.

The telepathic voices buzzed back and forth. She no longer listened. Whatever their words said, they did not matter. She walked atop the water of the reflecting pool and up the lower wall of the Capitol until she reached the banister that lined the patio. Seven tricked bodies lay stretched out, heads obliterated by their own perfect accuracy reflected. Only four remained standing, one who held a ghastly-green lantern that issued the limelight and who swiftly scampered behind a column, and three lined in front of the doors. Clownmuffle could not discern the true purpose of the lantern and the limelight. They had used it to improve their visibility while reducing hers with smoke, but that was only something that mattered in a coordinated attack. No Magical Girl's power could not be used to serve solely herself, but what the lantern was supposed to accomplish were this girl solo eluded her. It did no damage, it caused no adverse effects. Perhaps this Empire had spayed her to the point of inutility, and shining a light was all now she could do.

Oh well. She did not matter. Three more opposed her. Two crouched on the side of the other, who stood. The crouching ones aimed a large arquebus and a large blunderbuss, respectively, while the one in the center had drawn back the clothing around her wrist to inject herself with a syringe.

"Not another step, poppet." She already had four syringes jammed in her vein, she added a fifth. Something pained her, she swayed, her face was discolored.

One of the ones crouching visibly trembled. *Lady Cicero, she's on the patio.*

Get around her. You must free me from this ice. Do you understand?

"At this range," said the one with the blunderbuss.

Lombard. Elmhurst. Berwyn.

"If we let her pass, we endanger, hssssh, the Empress," said the one with the syringes.

Clownmuffle continued to walk.

"Not a step more!"

Berwyn.

"I am, I am telling you," another syringe plunged, "not a single step." She folded, her center twisted, a grimace withheld, her eyes went glassy, the blood bubbled where the syringes had entered.

"She's exhausted, you can see it how she walks," said the one with the blunderbuss. "She's pushed her magic to the brink. She can be defeated."

Berwyn!

Clownmuffle took her next step.

The blunderbuss fired. Clownmuffle flashed her baton at the bombshell, it ricocheted and exploded against the shaking arquebus soldier, and the perfect fan of blood which was all that remained of her above the knees splattered the pure white walls and pure white columns of the Capitol.

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The blunderbuss clattered to the floor. "Elmhurst!" The soldier skittered to the poor legs that remained, sifted the pieces. "Elmhurst!"

Berwyn.

The syringe soldier stooped and vomited. She convulsed. A change overtook her, her body rippled and the armor fell away.

"A, reserve force..." Another trickle of bile down her lips. "Kept until the end... Enemy forces at their limit..." Her fingernails split through her gloves, they became claws.

Berwyn, what is going on. Berwyn. Have faith that Aurora can defend the Empress long enough, get me out of here.

Clownmuffle continued to walk. The one soldier, mired in blood, sobbed. The other, growing, transforming, flashed bright yellow eyes at Clownmuffle and a snarl of curved fangs. Clownmuffle span her baton around her hand, around her hand.

Lady Cicero, believe in me. I've stuck by you since the beginning, Lady Cicero, so believe in me now. You know what I can do.

I know you can't do what I couldn't. Berwyn. Berwyn if you fall—

I've been your lieutenant this entire time, Lady Cicero, I could have been a governor or maybe even taken Aurora's spot as Centurion. I could have. You know—

DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE POINT OF THIS SOCIETY, BERWYN? THE POINT? IT'S SO MAGICAL GIRLS COME TOGETHER AND BUILD SOMETHING, COOPERATE, IT'S SO THEY DON'T RUN OFF LIKE LONE RANGERS AND DIE LIKE DOGS, DO YOU UNDERSTAND? DON'T YOU DARE DISOBEY MY ORDER, BERWYN. DON'T YOU DARE.

The bristling brimming rippling thing growing growling in the center of the Capitol patio scraped and shifted and its claws dug into the marble and gouged deep cuts within it as it started to rise. Drool or else the dregs of vomit seeped onto the ground and sizzled it.

BERWYN.

A beast. Alright. Something somewhat intriguing at least. It seethed all over, its long body coiled, uncoiled, its sour breath heated her face and ruffled the shreds of Clownmuffle's tuxedo. She pinched the brim of her top hat between two fingers to prevent it from flying.

The yellow bloodshot eye flicked to the stooped form of the soldier wallowing in the gore of her fellow. The word BERWYN reverberated in the mental space. The head of the soldier

with the lantern peeked from behind the pillar.

The beast blitzed. One single screech of nail against marble and it bounded. For a single instant its bristling fur itched against Clownmuffle's bare arm—then it bounded over the edge of the patio. It landed on the glacier and scrabbling barking it clawed footholds for itself before it streaked off in the direction of the frozen horsewoman.

So in the end, even that creature could not disobey its owner. They clamped the collars too tight.

Shameful.

The entrance to the Capitol stood undefended. Clownmuffle walked past the sobbing soldier and said, "Don't worry. When the Handmaiden is destroyed, all will be restored." Then she entered the doors. The moment she passed into a security checkpoint, several suited guards strode forward to accost her. "Ma'am," they said, "ma'am." They muttered something about authorization, badges, whatnot. She flicked her wrists and launched them into the walls. She did not know whether she used enough force to kill, but they did not rise to impede her.

She walked through a metal detector and it went off. Red lights bathed her. She proceeded through another set of doors.

No further soldiers came to fight her. She walked without difficulty toward the Capitol's center, where she had been told she would find the Handmaiden. The alarms brayed.

She breathed.

She entered the rotunda. A perfect circle that extended upward into a vast dome. Paintings and statues and columns and candles thronged it.

At the opposite end, straight and arms folded behind her back, stood that woman: the Handmaiden. A room otherwise devoid of life.

"Hello, Flossmoor," said the Handmaiden.

"You're who I've come for," said Clownmuffle.

The Handmaiden's face remained unchanged. "I am flattered that the object of your destruction is one so irrelevant as myself."

Clownmuffle looked at her for a long time. Her appearance lacked anything distinctive whatsoever, so much so that it transcended the merely generic and became a conscious decision to reduce herself. She had rendered herself forgettable, indistinct, nebulous, a perfect facsimile of this sham Empire, with few descriptive notes even when Clownmuffle thought hard about how to describe her. She was the key to everything. If she broke, the Empire would break. All that armor, all that gold. It would shatter.

The Handmaiden stood beside a painting. The painting. Of the Empress. The one that before had stirred certain feelings inside Clownmuffle, but by now it was easy to disregard it.

"This works for a final battle," said Clownmuffle, and she walked toward the Handmaiden.

The Handmaiden did not move. Clownmuffle's footsteps echoed up the void. Her baton swished the stale air. Her breathing had returned to normal. Her strength regained. Final confrontation...

She stepped into the center of the rotunda. The exact midpoint beneath the dome. At that moment something flashed. A bolt of electricity. Lightning. As fast as lightning. She twisted her body but she did not even have time to think and even if she did she could not have thought an escape. Lightning moved two hundred thousand miles per hour. Compared to bullets, bombs, raindrops—no comparison.

The bolt struck her. Her body jerked once and she hit the ground. She convulsed, lost control of herself, her limbs lurched against the floor. Lightning... the Handmaiden could... she had that power...?

Her body, unbidden by her, rolled onto its back as a numbness enveloped her, her brain retreated into a hidden spot where it could only watch out the windows of her eyes but alter nothing, horrendous fear gripped her, this immobility, this loss of self-mastery, and how, the Handmaiden, how could she, how could she—

Above, where once seemed nothing but air, the rotunda at the end of her vision, a painting of assumption watching her back, in this above, this emptiness, as though invisible paint flecked away, came into view, a cloud, a little cloud floating, a little cloud... a little cloud... it wore a smiley face.

Smiley face cloud. She remembered...

"Thank you, Midlothian," said the Handmaiden's stainless voice as her footsteps crossed the rotunda. She loomed into Clownmuffle's view, stooped, picked up the top hat that had fallen in all the thrashing. Clownmuffle became dimly aware of foam that ran down her chin, and something fouler, more hideous, around her thighs—no, no, no, no, no, no. No. NO. NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO

The Handmaiden plucked the gem from the band of the top hat and cast the top hat aside.

"Y-yes, Lady Handmaiden," said a familiar voice. A tiny girl tottered into view. She held an empty jar into which the smiling cloud flowed.

The Handmaiden gazed upon Clownmuffle. "I understand now. You didn't override my enchantment at all. That's not a magic tuxedo, it's a real one. Interesting. Administrator Hegewisch, will you be able to keep Flossmoor's Soul Gem secure?"

"Yes," said another familiar voice.

The Handmaiden tossed the Soul Gem across the room. It struck something soft, like a palm, but Clownmuffle could only hear it. She had to move, even only a finger—a twitch—this paralysis—

"I would personally vouch for the immediate destruction of Flossmoor's gem, but I doubt Her Munificence would agree to such wanton slaughter."

"Yes," said the voice out of view.

The Handmaiden shook her head. "And so many forces squandered when only a touch of ingenuity might prevail. Those fools. No, I ought to have conceived this plan sooner. The fault is, above all, mine. Administrator, report to Her Munificence the situation."

"Yes."

Clownmuffle's vision faded. The more she struggled, the less she moved. The foam on her chin might have been vomit. And lower—she couldn't think about it, she wanted to grab her face and hide, she couldn't even do that, she couldn't even blink, no, nonono, not this, not again, not after before, her body—she needed control—

But she had none. Her vision was fading but she could not even sense her eyelids drooping. The small girl holding her corked jar of cloud looked down sadly and mouthed something, she did not say it aloud, or else hearing had died too, but the lips seemed to say "I'm sorry" and that was the last Clownmuffle saw before all blackened.

Dunston Checks In

Hindsight lent the scheme more infallibility than merited. Prior to its success, the Handmaiden had calculated a seventy-five percent chance of failure. It relied on suppositions: One, that Flossmoor would walk into the direct center of the rotunda; two, that Flossmoor possessed no magic to avoid Midlothian's lightning bolt; three, that Midlothian would perform her task as necessitated; and four, that the lightning had enough power to incapacitate Flossmoor.

Of those suppositions, the first was simultaneously most doubtful and most assured. What skilled adversary would walk so straightly into so obvious a trap? Flossmoor understood to some extent the Handmaiden's power. Lacked she any notion of guile? How had Cicero and Cook combined fail to contain her?

Perhaps it was that exact brute idiocy that undid them. They expected a rational opponent and received a hurricane. Plus, the battle preparation had been too bogged in *who* should fight, rather than *how* they should fight. In retrospect, that may have been the Incubator's aim in distracting them with Sayaka Miki. No, assuredly it was. He chafed Cicero's austerity against Cook's blitheness; the two could never truly cooperate. They came from separate schools.

Not to mention the tools for Flossmoor's ultimate defeat had not yet been assembled. Only once the Handmaiden, observing the battle from afar, recognized the downturn in the Imperial army's fortunes, did she scramble for an alternative plan. Midlothian was one of the three soldiers the Empress sent to Sidwell to assist the Handmaiden when she masqueraded as the Washington Magi. When they recalled the Handmaiden, she decided to disguise one of the three attendants in her stead, and chose Midlothian because she seemed the least useful in battle. Only later did the Handmaiden remember the specific nature of Midlothian's power and consider how it might be used in conjunction with her own to devastating effect.

Regardless—

Although Flossmoor was defeated and her Soul Gem safely under guard of Administrator Hegewisch, the Handmaiden by no means considered it a victory. Had Flossmoor only been a feint, as previously theorized, she worked far better than the Incubator could have possibly anticipated. Worse yet, Sergeant Skokie, whose tripwires would alert them to any magical presences entering the city, was one of the soldiers currently incapacitated after Flossmoor's rampage.

At least they had been wise enough to withhold Aurora's platoon, for had Aurora joined the fight she would have been trounced same as the others. She called Aurora's soldiers to the rotunda, leaving only Aurora herself in the Senate chamber to defend Joliet.

"Haste is essential," she said as they filed in. "The Incubator will take advantage of our disarray. Locate and revive the following soldiers in the following order: Sergeant Skokie, Centurion Cicero, Centurion Cook. Then, locate and revive our healers: Round Lake, Wilmette, Crestwood..."

Simple, efficient, effective. With no other figures of authority, the Handmaiden's word became absolute. While the others ran, Midlothian indicated Flossmoor's body. "Um, Lady Handmaiden? What about..."

"Ancillary priority. Reestablishment of our forces must come first."

She should have spoken over Cicero and Cook when she had the chance. Propriety and the uncertainty of her rank disbarred her. But why? Dr. Cho had designed her for logic. Although she was only a pale shadow of the Incubator, she far exceeded the more human members of the Empire. She might have prevented this calamity. Had she only given herself the space to think.

But the Empress disliked that. When she demanded a Handmaiden of Dr. Cho, she did so because she believed the imperfect golems Cho created to be more malleable, pliable, obedient—trustworthy. At some point the Empress had become paranoid of the powerful figures with which she surrounded herself, a paranoia inexplicable given the nature of her magic. Or, like a wealthy man who desires ever more millions, was her immortality exactly what made her so afraid of death? Regardless. Another of these golems had appeared.

"All soldiers, halt!" she said. They had only made it halfway to the door. "Prepare for combat. Our enemy is above."

"So you saw me," said "Sayaka Miki," blended into an alcove among a statue of an ancient dignitary. The Handmaiden, being only a few years old, had never taken a history class, so she could not identify which dignitary in particular. "Look I already told you, I'm not your enemy. You really wanna waste magic on someone who's not gonna fight you?"

"Hold fire," said the Handmaiden. She disliked this. Even if Miki did not attack, she was delaying their efforts in reviving Skokie and the Centurions. She weighed the risks of sending the soldiers away and dealing with Miki solo. Too dangerous... or was the exact sort of risk she needed to take in this situation? The kind the Incubator would not anticipate a logical being like the Handmaiden to take? He would know that, Cicero and Cook in absentia, the duties of command fell to her. He would plan accordingly. "As you were. Resume your original tasks, revive our soldiers."

"Chief Handmaiden," said Aurora's lieutenant, Elgin, "is that wise?"

"Do it."

"No, don't." Miki stepped from her shadowed nook. Her face had changed. Teeth gritted, eyes sharpened. She looked unwell. "There's no time left. I don't know how things actually got worse than before, but they did. Charlie did way more damage than she was supposed to, but—but that's fine. That's fine. You still have me. I'm on your side, I'll fight it with you."

She stepped off her perch and landed on the ground floor. Sayaka Miki was almost assuredly a creation of Dr. Cho. Why else would the Incubator have lured the doctor away from the Empire? With her help, he architected a golem and provided it the appearance of someone who betokened some significance to the Empress. Nothing could be more transparent. The Handmaiden had churned this idea in her head since Miki's first manifestation, had stared at

her walls and wondered, felt the same chill she felt whenever she looked upon one of those albino fleshbags that followed the doctor like ducklings, for in some sense they were all her sisters, and beyond the mere genealogical definition of that word, they were the only ones in this world capable of sharing her experience.

Or had someone similar to Joliet altered this Miki's memories so that she did not even remember her origins? The Incubator had made similar alterations to previous golems he requested; only the Handmaiden, a golem requested by the Empress, was allowed the sanctity of her own memory. Despite everything, these were the thoughts the Handmaiden thought. She understood they made little sense. The situation was too dire to consider these vestigial matters of connection between humans.

It was the Incubator exploiting her weaknesses. She had been too liberal with him in peacetime. Bah. Regardless. If she understood the way the Incubator sought to exploit her, she could counter. Miki's demand that the soldiers stay only proved the Incubator did not want them to revive the others. Skokie had fallen only minutes ago, it would take most Magical Girls more time than that to span the five-mile distance from her tripwire to the Capitol.

"My orders stand," she said. "Ignore this woman. I will deal with her singly."

The soldiers nodded and exited the rotunda.

Miki held her forehead on her fingertips. "You're making a mistake, you've been making mistakes since the start, mistakes mistakes mistakes, please will you just listen to me for once?"

The Handmaiden changed the appearance of the air around herself to conceal the scissors she manifested in her hand. If the Incubator believed he could exploit the shred of sentimentality the Handmaiden held for her sisters, then she would simply have to quash that sentimentality with all due prejudice. Unlike before, Miki appeared to them transformed. Her Soul Gem gleamed bright and obvious on her stomach. "I am willing to hear what you would tell me about this supposed second archon," she said, before stepping forward. Her magic made it seem as though she stood in the same spot while in actuality she proceeded toward Miki. She had learned to stifle the sound of her footsteps, and Miki's obliging loquaciousness aided the task:

"At least you're freaking asking. Alright, first, I've been trying to not say this part because I know none of you would ever believe me, but—okay, lemme put it like this. This archon, let's say it can, it can take the appearance of... people. Alright? So it might show up looking like someone you know. That's uh, let's say that's a trick, or it doesn't matter, but it's something you need to know about so you don't get, let's say, distracted. Okay? By the way, you got a name other than 'Handmaiden'? If we're gonna fight together I mean, I'd like to call you something more, uh, natural?"

She stood directly in front of Miki, although Miki stared past her at the spot she appeared to inhabit. Miki's eyes were sunken, dark and round. Hair mussed, breathing heavy. Good. It concealed the Handmaiden, who had no other name, all the better. One swift strike, scissors into gem. Nothing more necessitated.

Nothing more necessitated.

Nothing. More. Necessitated.

One swift strike.

Nothing more.

One swift strike.

Kill her.

Kill her dead.

Nothing more necessitated.

He's winning. The Incubator was winning. She wanted to throw her head back and howl. He got inside her, he knew everything about her, he knew what she could and could not do, and had it been any other! Any other bitch she would have cut down and felt good about it. Any other.

Ha. No matter how much you stripped a person down, eliminated their sense of self, something would always remain. No matter how shallow a husk you created, something still existed inside. Souls only truly died with the body. They could eliminate her appearance, eliminate her name, create her for a singular purpose of serving this Empire, and still, and still something remained that could turn her from that purpose, some touch of weakness, some soft spot. Her sisters. Her "sisters." He knew. He knew how much she thought about them. He knew how sad she got whenever he told her one of them died, he had sounded her thoroughly, he—

ANY BRAIN COULD BE SHUT OFF.

She plunged the scissors. Full force in her limbs, nothing held back, any ghost in the machine could be exorcised.

Miki whirled aside. The scissors snipped a tiny sliver of cape. How? Did she hear? Did the Incubator tell her? No. Miki had turned to face the southern entrance to the rotunda. She had drawn several swords. Her movement had been entirely incidental; the Handmaiden simply hesitated too long. No matter. Miki watched only the southern entrance, unmindful to the corner her cape had lost. Upon quiet reorientation a second opportunity would arise—

As the Handmaiden moved she saw what Miki saw. What caused her to turn with such rapidity. The doors to the southern wing of the Capitol had bulged inward. From under them spread a pool of liquid blackness—ink.

"It's here," said Miki, grave as death. "Make sure—don't let the miasma touch you. That's the most important thing."

The doorknob rattled. The same black liquid ran from the spaces between the doors, from the sides of the doors, from the top of the doors: the doors became black themselves, no

dimension to them save the outward bulge, a bubble ready to burst. The Handmaiden stepped back toward the illusion of herself she had left behind to deceive Miki.

The Handmaiden had never fought a wraith. She woke up one day on an operating table, made a wish based on the suggestion of the only being she knew, Dr. Cho, and after a period of training served at the side of the Empress. She had restored her soul with extra grief cubes collected by the soldiers. While she knew from the reports the soldiers filed what a miasma looked, smelled, seemed like, how the wraiths moved, in what numbers they congregated, what patterns they used to attack—never had she witnessed it firsthand. She reminded herself she might still be deceived. This bubbling door might be a trick of magic, something to confound—but the coldness that swept the rotunda betokened otherwise. She stumbled on something, it was the corpse of Flossmoor. She backed toward the north entrance, the way that led to the Senate chamber. Backup. She must request backup. Aurora's soldiers had only been gone a minute. Would the Centurions be revived by then?

The doorknob of the south entrance turned. Click. The doors opened. They did not fling open, they did not loose a deluge of black ink. They opened like ordinary doors and an ordinary figure stood behind them.

The advantage of the Handmaiden's power was that nobody could see when she wavered. She resumed a stolid stance as she reviewed this relatively benign figure, its head lowered, no attempt by it to enter the rotunda. Obviously no unknown agent ought to evade suspicion. Obviously this figure possessed some sort of non-terrestrial power. But this moment of calm allowed her to repossess her faculties and consider the matter from all logical angles. Miki said not to touch the miasma—the miasma most likely meaning the circle of black ink seeping along the floor in no great hurry. Should Miki be trusted? Regardless, the Handmaiden had no intention to touch such a dubious substance. The advice, which she would have followed regardless, might have been a ploy to win her confidence. If Miki seemed to fight side-by-side against this new foe, it by no means proved an alliance.

Should she recall the soldiers? That question she considered over and over. The longer she stalled, the stronger her side became. The dark figure's hesitation in the doorway only advantaged her. Unless the Incubator used the time to marshal his own forces? At the very least, Skokie ought to be revived by now. Of course, if his forces had already crossed her line, that little mattered. Regardless. Regardless!

"Identify yourself," she said. Any conversation, were this being capable of it—

"Don't let her talk!" Miki swayed, drew back, danced forward, clicked her swords together, flicked her cape about herself, but did not commit to a full attack. "We need to, we need to—now!"

Sayaka, what are you doing! The voice cut shrill. The Handmaiden recognized it. Miki's companion, the one with the white hair.

Nagisa, I've got to fight this thing. Otherwise, it'll—

You're gonna get yourself killed!

Then so be it! I promised Madoka I'd fix this mess.

And Madoka told me not to let you die!

The figure in the doorway began to laugh. A cold creep tickled the Handmaiden's skin, because—but it was just a laugh—but did she recognize this laugh, too? Miki said it could assume the likeness of—

Just stay out of it, Nagisa. I'm doing this!

Not if I can help it.

One of the windows high up the rotunda shattered. The Handmaiden looked toward the sound but maintained the appearance of watching the figure in the doorway. A cartoon squeezed its way through the aperture. A literal cartoon. Compared to the quite real surroundings of the rotunda, this creature could only be described as a literal cartoon, drawn with thick black lines and zany colors. A sharptoothed grin and vibrant hallucinogen eyes, attached to the end of a eely polka dot body, launched at Miki. Miki swerved to evade but the broad grin opened and the teeth seized her, carried her off the ground even as she yelped and thrashed. The eel body whipped past the Handmaiden, knocked her onto her side, and shot out another window on the opposite side of the rotunda. The glass had not landed before the last of the whipping tail squeezed through.

That glass clattered in a silent space, Miki's shouts of protest subsiding far quicker. The Handmaiden stood alone in the rotunda to face the figure in the doorway.

The figure continued to laugh. But despite its laugh the space remained silent. The Handmaiden *felt* the laugh rather than heard it. And it was not her imagination, or a magical trick. The ground vibrated to the mirthful shakes that rocked the figure's body.

Hhhhhhhhand...

Maiden.

The voice was unmistakable, but the Handmaiden refused to let it shake her. An illusion, a form taken. If this were an archon, and if it had been birthed in the way it apparently had, taking *that* form made a modicum of sense. (If it were an archon she lacked the strength to fight it. But Cicero, Cook—) Regardless. Were it an archon then it could not read telepathy.

What is the status out there?

Apologies, Lady Handmaiden. Ladies Cook and Cicero are buried under a large amount of ice. Lieutenant Berwyn and the others are trying to dig them out. We have revived Sergeant Skokie...

The instant the Centurions are freed, send them to the rotunda.

The figure slopped forward. No motion in its legs, or what appeared its legs. It moved but it moved like liquid. It did not move fast. An ooze. Its ink spread. It reached the soulless body of Flossmoor. The Handmaiden watched for the ink to do something, dissolve the flesh, but it

had no effect, it lacked even enough force to budge the slight frame. The ink passed the projected image of the Handmaiden and likewise did nothing.

The figure did not ooze toward the image of the Handmaiden, but the Handmaiden's true location.

It saw her although she were invisible.

...Maiden.

How long does it take to drill through ice?

Our apologies, Lady Handmaiden...

Very well. As she drew toward the opposite end of the rotunda, she resigned herself to combat. On one side of the rotunda appeared a toolbar. Along the rotunda's top appeared a ribbon with several menu options. She chose the Eraser tool and prepared to apply a Lens Flare filter.

"Do you have a name," she said.

The figure dripped. **...Have you forgotten me... already?**

Only a small circle of the rotunda remained clear of the ink. A circle centered around the north entrance, which led to the Senate chamber. Flossmoor's body in its torn tuxedo remained the only spot of nonblack.

The northern doors opened and Administrator Hegewisch's head craned in. "Is everything alright? They sent me to—" She noticed the ink and the figure and immediately drew back her head and shut the door.

The Handmaiden activated the Lens Flare filter. A bright light stapled itself to the inkwell and blotted the figure. One sweep of the Eraser at maximum width drew a path for her through the mire. She ran diagonal, careful to avoid the ink with even the barest scrap of herself, and jumped onto the next level of the rotunda, where a bannister proved a useful foothold.

Her body already exhibited symptoms of great physical duress. Despite her commitment to clarity, she could not control fear. Fear, of course, did not stand counter to rationality, the shutdown of nonessential systems to provide more power to systems useful for either fight or flight served an obvious purpose and she could not denigrate the pound-pound-pound in her chest. Regardless. Regardless.

Regardless *what?*

Handmaiden... Hey. Hey, Handmaiden. Hey.

The Handmaiden failed to consider that the only thing that allowed her to perceive the pure black figure from the pure black floor was the relief against the not-yet-black walls; from an elevated vantage, the figure vanished entirely. Which rendered her movement a terrible

miscalculation. Furthermore, although she balanced on a banister that thronged the upper-story balcony, she could not retreat anywhere further, for the entire upper story had somehow become submerged in the same thin layer of ink, although its source had hitherto appeared to be the figure itself. She lashed her Eraser but could do no more than beat back the ink from her immediate location. Elsewhere it built and seeped down the walls, the entire rotunda began to blacken, and if she lingered in this room much longer she would lack spaces for retreat.

She ought to have left through the north doors when her back was to them, but her thought had been to lead this malevolent entity away from the Empress. Despite its capacity for speech she could not yet attribute to it more than brute intelligence. Regardless—regardless, she needed to move.

The entire first floor no longer existed save black. However, the upper ring of windows, through which that cartoon snake had entered and exited, remained. As the ink crept up the poles of the bannister she braced her legs and leapt. Performing such acrobatic maneuvers with so little room for error was ill-advised, given her lack of experience. But she landed on the alcove of a window with no difficulty and erased the pane with one wave.

Your Munificence. I must apologize, but I have encountered a serious threat in the rotunda. You must be wary—I recommend flight until Centurions Cook and Cicero are restored.

She had avoided hailing the Empress directly all this time because she was surely occupied speaking before the Senate. However, the situation had become clear. To combat this figure by herself posed too great a risk, and once its ink consumed the entire rotunda she lost the ability to delay. A regretful failure.

She took one last look at the rotunda. The figure had vanished entirely. The ink ran from the walls—from the dome's interior apex. It ran from the portraits and frescoes, which seemed to melt into oily ribbons that then darkened as though burnt.

An idea came to her, although she felt dubious of its efficacy due to her unfamiliarity with the filter in question. She opened her menu and chose the Invert Colors filter.

The rotunda became white. The body of Flossmoor became black. Shadows, invisible before, spanned its space; regardless, she failed to perceive the figure.

It had been worth the effort. She retreated through the window onto the outside of the Capitol dome.

Upon leaving, she placed her hand on the Capitol's inverted surface and felt something cold.

Something wet.

She pulled her hand away. The cold, wet, black thing stuck to it. But how? Due to her color inversion, the normally-white dome had become black, and the ink had become white. She had placed her hand on the black surface only, she had been especially careful. How...?

Hey. Hey. Handmaiden. Hey. Hey.

The figure. It rose—

out of the black spot—

on her hand. She blinked, her thoughts became tangled, although not so much that she could not think with bitter rationality that her thoughts were tangled. It was more as though she had become removed from her own body and commented on her experiences as though she watched them in a film. The black dome—its colors weren't inverted. The Capitol dome was covered in ink. Her filter had only inverted the colors inside the dome...

Hey. Hey. The figure grew upon her hand, grew inside her mind. **Hey Handmaiden. Guess what. Hey, guess what.**

The shaft of sorrow struck her as real, physical as any javelin thrown. It transfixed her through the heart, straddling the divide between the internal and external dome.

Her sisters.

Her sisters, they were so... they were...

Disappointed.

"Oh," she said, "oh."

Her body shivered.

Guess what guess what guess what guess what guess what—

"Oh, no. Oh... no."

Guess what guess what guess what guess what guess what—

Regardless. Regardless. Regardless. Regardless.

Tears flowed down her face. She could not move. She could not sob, the cold water ran, her eyeballs flicked and she saw her tears were black—ink. Oil.

Liquid despair.

"I'm sorry" came out her mouth though she had no control and still watched disembodied but she said it and after she said it the words she thought them as though she had always meant to say them except she said them before she thought them "I'm sorry I know I'm not worthy I know I'm not worth anything I know I've sold my whole life away to be the lapdog of neo-Napoleon I'm sorry I'm sorry please forgive me I only lived my life the way they would let me I'm sorry I'm sorry please forgive me please forgive me please

forgive me and my sisters my sisters please forgive me I'm sorry my sisters you never even knew me but you were all I knew I loved you all even if I couldn't love even if I wasn't designed for that but I did love I did I sobbed when you died and had to hide it I cried even though my face was stoic I am so sorry I am

sorry Miss Vizcarra I'm sorry to you when you came through those doors and said you wanted me I'm sorry I couldn't live up to your expectations it thrilled me to be important to you an importance I could not comprehend but I'm sorry I failed to even be what you wanted me to be and I'm

so sorry guess what I am worthless I am guess what so sorry guess what I am regardless guess what regard me less guess what I'm regardless guess what I'm

I'm AWAKE, Handmaiden. I'm finally fucking AWAKE."

[53/57]

Time to skip. Clownmuffle, Clownmuffle wouldn't kill her. She could sit pretty when it was Clownmuffle. That black thing in the rotunda, though—and the Empire shot to pieces. Time to admit the whole enterprise had reached its end.

Rounding a corner of this labyrinth, swinging her attaché case as a counterweight, Hegewisch grinned. Nothing like sheer terror to spark some life in a husk otherwise grown complacent. That thing though, she didn't need to know much. One look and the instinctual knowledge of her wish informed her: Archon.

Not again. Not doing this shit again. Where the fuck were all the exits? There had to be plenty, this Capitol was huge, where? She wheeled through the halls, lurched at perpendicular angles. The doors led to offices. What about fires, if a fire started? Where did these Senators run when the alarms blared?

The alarms *were* blaring. Ever since Clownmuffle entered. Her head was so fucked up right now. Due to the magic of a member of Aurora's squad, they had prevented any external noise from reaching the Senate chamber—to prevent them from hearing the rage of war. They probably didn't hear the alarms either. But that same intense shriek had wound and unwound its way so deep in her mind it made her mad. She tilted hallway to hallway trying every door.

Until she stumbled round a corner and the hallway ended, cut away by broad incisions to stare into a black void. She paused, watched this abyss, a yawning starless space, and only after five seconds realized it was the same black ink she glimpsed in the rotunda creeping toward her. She whirled away, she knew somehow if even a dot touched her kkkkkccccchhhh, gone, and a kind of death miserable enough for her to prefer even *this* life. She snagged her foot on either a lip in the carpet or literally nothing and fell like a clichéd damsel in a horror movie, she floundered upright and skittered the other direction until that direction ended in another black abyss inching her way. Oh fuck. Fuck. Alright, she considered her options, she had several doors in the dissolving hallway left to her, a stairwell up and down. In clichéd horror movies the damsel runs upstairs, but for a Magical Girl that doesn't matter, a Magical Girl can jump out a second or third or fourth-story window no problem.

She groped the banister and dragged more with her arms than her legs. Her attaché case clanged against the railing. The base of the stairs eroded black at her heels although they moved no faster and she for all her klutziness outpaced their momentum. A laugh mingled in the alarms, a voice:

Hey. I forgot your name. But I never forget a face.

The—the fuck? That voice was, it was... She tripped on the final step, clawed away from the encroaching blackness, folded up her feet to keep it from seeping onto her shoes.

Junior... Administrator. That's right. Our little Junior Administrator, on such an important mission from Our Munificent Empress.

"I didn't have anything to do with what happened there," she said. "I didn't want to be there either." What was she doing? Reasoning with this thing? It wasn't the person it seemed to be. It couldn't be. Maybe it mimicked her voice, wraiths existed that could imitate the loved ones of those who encountered them, a trick...

The whole upper story, save a tiny strip, was black. No dimension, no up or down, only black. And a narrow walkway to a door, the door to the Senate chamber. The last place Hegewisch wanted to go, the place she knew would only end badly, but she had no choice. This thing, archon, ghost, whatever, it clearly wanted to corral her with the others, oh fuck oh fuck, oh God, oh God—

God must be laughing at her. Hegewisch scorned her, ignored her warnings, walked headfirst into this, now she wanted out, how could God not laugh?

God of course was not laughing at her. Too pure for petty spite. Where was a Satan when you needed celestial indulgence in your self-loathing?

She teetered along the walkway and pushed through the door into the Senate chamber gallery.

The room had not changed. No sign of blackness. A single seated figure in the gallery, Aurora, and a glut of dignitaries below. Engrossed as they were in the Empress's continued explanation of magic and Magical Girls, nobody looked her way despite her less-than-silent entrance. She searched for other exits, several below, several above, somehow she doubted any would open onto anything but black, yet heedless she scrambled over the seats for the next door over.

"What," said Aurora, not as though she wanted to, but from a tired obligation, "are you doing."

The Empress's voice droned. "...these 'wraith' entities have manifested in numerous forms..." How many Senators had she convinced by now? Who cared. Enough to have kept them rapt all this time. While Cook and Cicero engaged Clownmuffle, she had presented for them numerous magical displays, most using Joliet. Good for her, good for her. Hegewisch opened the other exit and sure enough only black watched back.

She had cut them off. This room alone floating in space—not she, it. It had cut them off.

Your Munificence, said a voice, the Handmaiden. *I must apologize, but I have encountered a threat of great danger in the rotunda. You must be wary—I recommend flight until Centurions Cook and Cicero are restored.*

The Empress paused mid-sentence and colorless Joliet became translucent. Aurora, who had tracked Hegewisch's progress to the other door and saw what waited beyond, had a better comprehension of the danger. She stood, transformed, and leapt over the railing into the pit to rush to the side of the Empress and Joliet. The Senators were not happy about this and the President pro tempore pounded the gavel and demanded Aurora's removal from the chamber. Hegewisch, meanwhile, knew there was only one place left in this tiny world with any modicum of safety, and that place was cleaved to Aurora's hip. She slammed shut her open door and bounded onto the floor of the Senate too.

"Spectators in the galleries are *not allowed* to disrupt the proceedings!" said the President pro tempore.

"Ah—yes, Senator Luce," said Senator Reid, "while the content of your—speech—is very engaging—we can't have this kind of—disruption—"

Black flooded from every crevice dividing the Senate chamber from the outside world. It was literal blackness, like that paint those scientists engineered that ate ninety-nine percent of light that struck it, it ran down the walls and over the seats. Both Hegewisch and Joliet clung to Aurora as her little yellow ball appeared and began to revolve. The desks nearby disappeared and Aurora probably would have made any nearby Senators disappear had they not already backed away the moment she flung herself headlong among them. None of the Senators, however, noticed the black paint. Odd, because Joliet's magic should have made them cognizant, but not odd enough for Hegewisch to truly care. The living humans were the only things in the room not doused in black, they stood within it as though they floated in nothingness.

They shut off. Each of them, the Senators and aides, officials and security, they did not fall or stagger but they stood stock still in their suits and ties, hands at their sides, straight as their scoliosis spines allowed, and each looked toward the golden circle of safety at their center.

Joliet had already transformed as part of the Empress's demonstration, Hegewisch transformed too. She had no plan. Her heart-shaped staff, no matter how hard she evoked that God, could not harm this miasma. A despair so dense it had congealed into liquid form. Maximum misery compounded into a cubic millimeter. The anguish of an entire nation sloshing within its Capitol.

A spark of magic flashed across their bodies and Hegewisch only failed to flinch because Joliet flinched first. But it wasn't an attack. It was their uniforms. Aurora, Joliet, Hegewisch—the gold flecked away, its particles spiraled beyond the boundaries of the circle into the black. The armor, the monkish robes. They stood in their original clothes.

Hegewisch suppressed a manic laugh. Joliet's costume—she was a cat. She had cat ears and a cat tail. Perfect. Perfect. Perfect. Purrfect. Kill her. Kill them all. But hey, at least it meant nobody would comment on her own pink Madoka-esque abomination, ha ha right? Ha ha ha ha ha.

She needed not to lose it. Aurora's ball swirled in a solid blur against the ground. The black paint could not cross, so if Aurora simply walked to the exit, or even through the damn wall, and they stuck by her, they were safe. But Hegewisch remembered the fight on the bridge, the fight in St. Louis. Denver—Denver God bless you Denver she was so sorry—had mangled Aurora somehow, the barrier could be bypassed. The paint flowed too slowly now, but Hegewisch had the distinct impression this archon was toying with them. Waiting to crush. Ha, but that gave them a chance? Like in the movies, Bond villain waiting to kill Bond, fuck the movies, fuck the movies and fuck everything, she laughed as wild as she liked at catgirl Joliet.

"Still thy wretched self, Administrator."

The Empress stood at the circle's furthest edge. Her regal costume had vanished too. But none of her regality had faded. Rather than the effete profusion of dainty fabrics, she wore a stern, simple set of plate armor. Steel instead of gold, but otherwise like the armor the soldiers had donned... more medieval. A sanded, unreflective surface of interlaced metal plates. Her hands, thick gauntlets without a scrap of skin shone, balanced atop the pommel of a bright broadsword, upon which were inscribed runic letters past comprehension, Celtic in character. Fur trim and a short cape added the only hint of civility to the otherwise iron suit.

She wore no helm. Her uncovered head was that of a fourteen-year-old. The resemblance to Joliet became even more striking, but even then Joliet was uglier.

No hint of discomposure hid on the Empress's face.

"So."

She stepped over Aurora's swirling ball. Aurora raised a hand to stop her, but she proceeded past the line into the black. The paint rippled against her clanking metal shoes.

"Thou hast destroyed my Handmaiden? Hm."

"Your Munificence," said Aurora, like Willy Wonka telling a kid not to jump into the chocolate fountain.

"Ah, we know this feeling." Her hands tightened around her hilt. The tip of her sword, which remained straight down, pressed against the black. "Despair. So much, too. We anticipated some such weapon levied by our perfectly-rational foe. He knows our death can only occur at our own hands, after all. To infect us which such emotion must, to him, appear the only path to our destruction..."

"But he could never understand. That to us, after so many long years, this feeling is alike as softest love. Indeed, it's a feeling like this that spurs us onward. Hopelessness is the very thing that gives us hope. Why shouldn't it be so?"

"For was it not our very God, Madoka Kaname, who in the depths of hopelessness—"

"**SHUT UP SKANK,**" said Senator John Sidney McCain III (R-AZ).

Everyone conscious looked at Senator McCain.

"I DIDN'T COME BACK FROM THE DEAD TO LISTEN TO A FRIGGING SPEECH," said Senator Alan Stuart Franken (D-MN).

"So thou possess the power of speech... a quaint trick for an abomination. Or art thou merely a Puella Magi of remarkable ability?"

"Migraines can't kill me anymore," said Senator Dianne Goldman Berman Feinstein (D-CA). **"Your magical power to induce headaches is WORTHLESS, Millie Mildew."**

Millie Mildew. Sure. Great insult. Sharp-as-a-tack wit you got there, chthonic entity of pure evil.

Aurora lurched. By now, it was probably not fair to call her Aurora anymore. Joliet and the Empress, for better or worse, still exemplified themselves. Aurora had become a different person, the person known as Tania Romero. She had become something bare, veiled in wispy translucent sheets of fabric, a fragile djinn, tattoos less like arabesques and more like fissures up and down her waist. Bracers on her wrists and ankles jangled thin chains that bound her together, chains from her earrings and piercings, the chains the only gold remaining. Because of them her limbs folded inward or else she assumed that posture voluntarily, for she suddenly set to shaking as she stooped and stared at the ground.

"It's her..."

Hegewisch realized the problem. The yellow circle kept spinning—for now. She grabbed Aurora's shoulders and said quickly: "It's not, no, it's a fake, deception, it's only a monster and you can't let it get in your head."

"Only a monster." Senator Orrin Grant Hatch (R-UT). **"I'll cop to it. But that doesn't mean I'm not the same monster you all knew and loved."**

"What did I do," said Aurora, "I know I did something but I can't remember. I've tried so hard to remember but I can't. What did I do to you, tell me, I need to know."

"It's NOT HER," said Hegewisch. "It can't be, she's dead, she's dead and gone—"

"KKKKKCCCCCHHHH." Charles Ellis Schumer (D-NY). **"I thought it'd be fun to talk through all these old futzes, but if you plan to deny me..."**

A mound rose in the black, despite its lack of edges or shadow they could perceive it. It rose smooth and swift, lacking great aplomb, and as it lengthened into the shape of a person the black fluid split and ran down the sides of the woman beneath, a withered unshapely thing totally nude and gray-skinned.

The spitting image.

DuPage.

"It's fake, it's fake." Hegewisch wrapped her arms around Aurora.

"What did I do, what did I do to you..." She knocked Hegewisch off, wheeled on Joliet. "What did you make me forget? What did you take from me?" She seized the frills of Joliet's catty lolita dress and shook her whole body.

"Ah, ah, hhh, kkkkkhhhh—she's losing it!" Joliet's eyes turned to, not her mother, but Hegewisch for help.

Because the mother lunged at the form of DuPage with her broadsword, cleaved it clean, dropped the upper half of the body into the black, where it promptly dissolved. The legs and sex remained, it was somehow more hideous than the full DuPage, the appearance of her body nauseated and Hegewisch through a mixture of factors felt her head flare and the urge to vomit rise.

Joliet had her head slammed against the ground. "Hh, help, help!"

Finding her useless, or else roving her brain in her skull, Aurora cast Joliet aside, almost into the arc of her ball. She fell in supplication at the circle's edge, prostrated herself and clasped her hands in prayer. "I know I did something, I know I did something terrible to you. What was it, tell me, don't spare me anything, destroy me with it, crush me, I *need* you, I need you—milady...!"

The legs of DuPage sprouted a new shriveled torso. DuPage's broad grin beamed down at her. **You lying little floozy, you let them knife me in the back, you cheap bit of trash.**

"Centurion Aurora, we compel you—ignore this demon." The Empress levied stroke after stroke into the defenseless body, but no matter what she hacked, it grew back.

Joliet crawled to Hegewisch. "Kkhhh, help, you gotta, do, something...!"

"What am *I* supposed to do?"

"She's losing it, any moment she'll, hhhukk, she'll drop her defenses—let that black stuff in..."

"I can't stop her." Even incapacitation, not that Hegewisch had that kind of power, would fail to save them, for it would stop the spinning yellow ball too. Hegewisch's own head failed to rattle with answers, she stared at DuPage's body, magnetized to it as the Empress vivisected it with her sword, peeled at the layers of this thing DuPage, exposed innards and organs but no blood, not even black blood.

"What happens if, it, touches us," said Joliet. "What happens if that black stuff—hhhhhng, hhhhck!"

"Pure despair—pure despair. Misery beyond compare. Misery enough to kill."

"I don't even know why I did it," said Aurora, "why I betrayed you. *I can't even remember.* But it's like a whole half of me has been missing ever since you died—I need you, I need you so much, milady. Milady. I needed to be there for you, to care for you, to let you hurt me in return, I needed to be your garbage. I needed you to insult me, berate me, belittle me, hit me with bottles, stab me, open me, rape me...!"

Only in your fantasies. The upper half of DuPage's head fell off but her sneer remained.

"She's c, crazy," said Joliet. "She's out of her mind!"

Tania Romero. Hegewisch knew her file. Knew her wish. 'To be safe.' The file lacked context, Hegewisch had assumed Kyubey did what he often did and exploited a girl in mortal peril—"Make a wish to save yourself, quick!"—Hegewisch had not really thought about it. Who cared about Aurora, she had thought to herself. Who had ever cared? A perfectly generic individual, the kind of lifeless minister left standing at the end of a tragedy, only spared because someone needs to read the final line. She had blended into the thousand faces of the Empire, the same lines of statistics—fucking no, this was turning into the Lake Michigan archon all over. Hazel Crest. Calumet. What self had the Empire buried within these girls? What personality, as everything unraveled, only now bubbled to the fore? 'To be safe.' A djinn enchained, a perfectly safe djinn.

Stab me, open me, rape me. Was that what Aurora really wanted or did she think by saying it, by reducing herself so, she might mitigate even a little the ire of her master?

"Do something, do, something," said Joliet.

Aurora dug her fingers into her sides, scooped open her skin and let her blood run. She thrashed her forehead against the floor and grew insensible to any words the Empress spoke to her. DuPage smiled and seemed, at least for now, content to watch this groveling.

"Anything," said Joliet. "If, if it's despair—if you're really God's acolyte—call on God—to save us!"

Oh, this poor kid. She didn't yet understand that God's salvation was death, that God saw the problems of this world and had one chance to fix them and decided to just kill everyone a little more nicely at the same end of their nasty, brutish, short lives. Joliet didn't want God, if Joliet saw God and knew God's plan she would flee from God the way she fled from the archon in Lake Michigan.

"Aurora, thou shalt be ruled!" The Empress hacked, slashed. "Thou shalt not remove thy barrier!" *Centurions Cook, Cicero, immediate assistance is required in the Senate chamber!*

So she was calling them in? Did she not know doing that was simply sending them to their deaths? Hegewisch had no mind to worry about the Empress right now. The thoughts of God had given her an idea, or at least they made her consider her own power. She remembered St. Louis, a broom closet, her magic sopped on a door as a barrier—

She seized her Soul Gem. With a simple enchantment she surrounded it with a thick layer of pink film. The black sea was a far more powerful miasma than the one DuPage created in St. Louis, but if it *were* the same DuPage... or maybe the better way to consider it was that Hegewisch's powers, although weak in combat, might be strong when fighting a miasma itself... Fuck she didn't know but the logic was tenuous enough to grasp. Joliet had already shoved her own Soul Gem in Hegewisch's face and Hegewisch protected it the same way, and only after a few seconds did Hegewisch remember she had the Soul Gem of Clownmuffle in her attaché case. She enchanted it too. It was her own type of Blessing—and if the Empress,

immortal, could stave off the destruction of the body, perhaps Hegewisch, heavenbound, could stave off the destruction of the soul.

Perhaps. Maybe. Fuck. She didn't want to die.

Aurora seemed like she might, though. Her ball had not stopped spinning but it slowed, enough for the paint to seep through a little.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. I know you'll never accept an apology. What we did to you—what I did to you—I can't remember. But I can imagine, I *have* imagined, and all this time—You know, all this time I knew. You'd be back. I dreamed about you. I knew you would come back and do to me what I deserved. I deserve it. I do. I'm horrible. I'm the worst person. The worst person in the whole world. You gave me everything and I betrayed you. That's the worst sin. I deserve to die. Kill me. Kill me, Lady DuPage."

DuPage at present was a headless body lacking also a shoulder and one arm. But as the Empress's sword swung again the remaining hand shot out and pinched the tip of the blade between two fingers, which stopped the swing instantly despite the quivering exertion of the Empress and the harsh, unimperial grunts she loosed. DuPage flicked her fingers and the Empress hurled back into the darkness, bowled over ten geriatric Senators, and struck an unseen wall.

Oh you little goonie. You little goonie Aurora, you can't do that, YOU CAN'T DO THAT.

"Milady, anything, do anything you want—"

YOU LIAR. YOU LIAR. YOU'RE AFRAID. YOU DON'T WANT ME TO HURT YOU. YOU SAW WHAT I DID TO CICERO WHEN SHE WAS MY LIEUTENANT AND YOU KNEW YOU DIDN'T WANT THAT, NOOOO. EVEN IF IT DIDN'T HURT, NOOOO. THE IDEA OF BEING STRUCK, KICKED, KNOCKED OVER... Ha. Hear that? I'm waking up. I'm awake. The thousand-year prophecy is fulfilled, the great evil stirs from its eternal slumber. Hear that? Hear it? A thousand years ago the Once-and-Future-King Arthur tried to strike me down, but he could only seal me away. I slept. I slumbered. I drank booze, I slapped around a subordinate every so often, but I was asleep. You woke me up, Aurora. You, Cook, and our lovely Empress. You pricked me with your little pins and woke me up mother FUCKER SO NO WEASELING NOW.

The black paint shot past the arc of the yellow ball faster than it could move to erase it. It stuck to Aurora's face and front and Aurora screamed.

YOU WORM. You feared me as much as you wanted to be me, as much as you loved me. You wormy-worm-wormed your way into my graces, you hoped to be the last one I swallowed, you hoped I would hate everyone but you, but when the opportunity arose to eliminate me and take my place—no hesitation, no hesitation, no hesitation, NO HESITATION, NO HESITATION, NO HESITATION—

"EEEJJJJKKKKIIIIIIIII," said Aurora. Her ball swept through the strands attached to her but could not sever them all, her face became a black mass she clutched in futility. Hegewisch and Joliet scrambled as far away as possible.

DuPage screamed too, a leviathan echo in her throat, tinny and metal under a black ocean. She strode forward, she did not care when the ball erased her, she reemerged out the black congealed on Aurora's face, half her body twisting and emerging as though she sprung from Aurora's mouth. She seized Aurora's hair and ripped it out along with clumps of bloody scalp, she clawed at the skull with sharp nails.

FEEL IT? FEEL IT? WAS IT LIKE THIS BACK HOME? DID HE EVER DO THIS TO YOU, TANIA? AU ROR A?

Tania, Au ror a fell back as DuPage scooped out her brains in chunks and shoveled them into her mouth. Gore dribbled down her throat and naked chest as she dug deeper, the blood splattered over Hegewisch and Joliet, she burrowed into the shattered skull so her body bent like a loop from Aurora's mouth to her exposed esophagus, unmaking Aurora's bone, blood, body, her veins and muscles, down past her throat, into her torso, the stomach split on two sides and the innards spewed out, now Joliet had started to scream. Hegewisch had started to scream.

YOU DESERVED EVERYTHING THAT EVER HAPPENED TO YOU. YOU DESERVED EVERYTHING. The voice had become disgustingly muffled as DuPage choked on the parts of Aurora she attempted to swallow. **YOU DESERVED WORSE. YOU DESERVE WORSE THAN WHAT I CAN GIVE YOU. I HOPE YOU BURN IN HELL FOR ALL ETERNITY SO WHEN I DIE I CAN JOIN YOU AND MAKE YOU SUFFER MORE THAN ALL THE DEVILS EVER COULD. KKKKKKKKCHC HACK-COUGH-HACK, KKKKCHHHHHHHH.**

She snapped off Aurora's legs, split open her pelvic bone, nestled her body between the broken ribs and scarfed down the lungs, liver, spleen, intestines, looked up like a jackal over her kill except the twitching body beneath her had not died, her eyes lighted on the Soul Gem and like all the other organs she funneled it into her mouth.

Mouth stuff, dripping, running, a string of intestine hanging from it, she said to the obliterated form: **GOD CAN'T SAVE YOU.**

She swallowed. Aurora's body twitched once more, went limp. If any of her scant costume remained to disappear upon her final death, Hegewisch could not see it beneath the gore.

[52/57]

DuPage wallowed in the filth of a body turned inside out. She spat out the strand of intestine clutched in her teeth and wiped her face. Her expression belied intense disgust, she groaned. **That didn't diminish anything.** She tilted her head toward the ceiling. **I can still feel nothing but hate.**

Her eyes turned toward Hegewisch and Joliet.

You...

She crawled from the carcass. Hands and knees snakelike. Joliet panicked, kicked, and attempted to push Hegewisch into DuPage, but wasn't strong enough. Hegewisch had nowhere to go. The yellow circle had died, the paint seeped in. She wasn't sure whether she would live long enough to learn whether her enchantment protected her from it. DuPage had consumed Aurora in a span of seconds.

DuPage's hand lashed out. It clamped around Joliet's shoe and Joliet started to sob. She now clutched Hegewisch as if Hegewisch could save her. Blood smeared up Joliet's long stockings as DuPage crawled, but the hooked claws on DuPage's fingers could not penetrate the fabric. The Empress's Blessing still held, even without the Handmaiden's clothes—Aurora's skimpy outfit had simply not provided enough protection. DuPage reached for Joliet's skirt, maybe to pry it up and move for whatever was undefended beneath, but the same expression of disgust muddled her features and instead she hurled Joliet bodily out of the way. Joliet bounced into the blackness and DuPage set her sights on Hegewisch.

You were there too.

Yes. Hegewisch was there too. St. Louis. She imagined if she professed innocence it would only transform that look of disgust into the same hatred DuPage showed before she devoured Aurora. Hegewisch remembered what she knew about DuPage and what she knew was that conventional appeals would make no difference.

She had to think of something. Something, some bizarre unexpected statement that would stir the memory of DuPage that somehow lurked within this archon. This entity of utter hate. This foul anathema to God... who so much pure despair had created... created for the purpose of settling a petty score against those who wronged her.

"You, you're the pathetic one," said Hegewisch. A spasm of nervousness seized her and she laughed. "It's true, holy shit, it's so true."

DuPage's hands fell on Hegewisch's ankles. Hegewisch had a premonition of being ripped apart like a wishbone.

Last words. Amuse me.

"You—you think you're full of hate? That's cute, DuPage." Hegewisch laughed again, tilted her head back and roared. "You're nothing. You're small time. What a fucking waste. I should have been the one to come back as an archon. I'd really lay waste to things."

Crumple, went Hegewisch's ankles. There was no numbing of the pain. None whatsoever. Immediate sweat surged down her brow as she screamed, laughed, screamed and laughed together.

"YOU FUCKING LOSER," she said, "I'VE HATED TEN THOUSAND TIMES MORE THAN YOU. I HATED GOD HERSELF."

She felt herself start to split apart down the middle. At the same time she sensed DuPage was using only the barest fraction of her strength, trying to elongate the destruction, she had gone too quickly with Aurora.

She couldn't speak more. She could only scream, the pain so intense—

Then it stopped. The pressure, the pulling apart. Hegewisch tried to lift her head but couldn't before she felt the weight of DuPage snake over her body.

I've always wondered what people would say to me if I had them at my mercy. Whether they'd beg or whatever. It's interesting, right? You have one chance to convince someone not to kill you, what do you say? How do you analyze your killer's psychology and say the exact right thing to weaken them? Aurora tried, failed. You tried... failed. But you got a little closer. God-hating. I see the logic. Not bad. Unfortunately, there are literally no words that can stop me—thinking otherwise is delusion.

DuPage's hand slid into Hegewisch's stomach. The nails pierced the flesh as though they had pierced nothing but air.

Especially since you claim you hate God but tried to use her magic to stop me.

She opened her mouth and spat an object onto Hegewisch's face. Hegewisch's Soul Gem, still shiny pink from the enchantment.

Hypocrisy. Like Aurora. Man. Sometimes it disappoints me I don't even have to try hard to hate someone.

"I can prove it," said Hegewisch. "I can bring her to you. God. I'll give you God to kill."

She was saying anything at this point, doing exactly what DuPage accused her of, looking for the exact phrase to exploit her killer's psychology and survive. But it surprised her how easy it was to say. How she did not even cringe internally at the phrase. When she thought about Madoka, about Sayaka, about their whole incompetent mess, their whole sanctimonious nonchalance, how this entire thing happened because God couldn't even stop herself from meddling with her own universe's fate...

Geez. DuPage grinned. Geez, now I'm gonna look like an idiot. Because that sounds like a pretty good offer, actually.

If it worked she would say it a million times. She would scream it straight into Sayaka Miki's stupid face. Fuck it. Fuck it! "Fuck it," she said. "Let's kill God."

Whether this statement sealed the pact or not, whether DuPage planned to honor it or whether she simply planned to pretend to for a few seconds to bestow Hegewisch a little false hope before her horrendous death, Hegewisch would not know. Because an instant later a rend appeared in the blackness and Centurion Cicero charged through.

Sophia

A girl drove her pickaxe into the edifice. A sheer sheet of ice split off and crashed into shards. Cicero's arm came free and one punch eliminated the rest that enveloped her. Hands extended from above, faces gathered around a hole carved straight down. She regarded them, regarded Cook the string-cut marionette at her feet. Darien's blade had vanished, but Cicero still held her axe.

One blow. The ice blasted apart. What didn't shatter cracked and gave beneath the weight heaped atop it. A chain reaction occurred. Half the glacier crumbled. The ice, broken into tiny pieces, jangled as it ran in rivers. Jutting fragments destabilized and collapsed.

Those who had cut the hole to fish her out leapt to safety. They took with them Berwyn, curled and nearly nude and shivering. Berwyn had tried to claw her way through the ice and made it most of the way before the aftereffects of her overdose shrank her into a pale wreck. Too many syringes.

"Lady Cicero, the Handmaiden requests you in the rotunda—"

"I heard her." Cicero stretched her arms to disperse residual frost. She considered Aurora's leaderless platoon. They were likely competent enough to oversee the resuscitation of the remaining soldiers. Once they revived Cook, the ice would no longer pose a problem. But—

Cook had not detransformed. Whatever injury Flossmoor inflicted on her remained unseen. Most Magical Girls would fail to maintain their magic once incapacitated. But Cook, 21 years old, wielded mastery over body and soul. Falling unconscious, she kept her transformed state active as a final tortoise attempt to defend her body via the Empress's Blessing. Intelligent, when she had no idea whether Flossmoor intended to pursue combat to a mortal conclusion. Unfortunate, when it prevented her own soldiers from healing her wounds. Cook's uniform had openings at the hands to manufacture water should no alternative source be present, but the rest was airtight, bolted shut. It could not be easily removed like Cicero's helmet or Joliet's hood.

The entire revitalization of their army rested on Cook. Flossmoor had not even touched most of their soldiers, Cook's monstrous attacks did the trick.

"Lady Cicero, the Handmaiden was particularly insistent..."

Fine. Cicero manifested a cube that she dropped onto the ground. It unfolded into her horse. "Very well. Attempt to communicate with Cook telepathically. It may be difficult if her brain is destroyed, but it'll be faster than trying to remove her helmet to heal her." And Berwyn had similarly rendered herself difficult to revive. No Imperial soldier had magic to counteract Berwyn's powerful concoctions. The effects of her overdose would last for hours before her body naturally purified. What happened to Cook's lieutenant, Kenosha? Darien?

She found Darien the moment she thought about her, ruined on the ground but at least free of ice. "Someone heal her. The rest continue as the Handmaiden ordered. I will ride to the

rotunda."

"Milady, please take these grief cubes first. You should replenish your magic before you continue."

She almost said, "That will take too long." She held her tongue and snatched the proffered cubes from the soldier's hands. Although she felt confident about her remaining magical stores even if she entered another battle, no reason not to hold onto a few in case.

Her horse launched at a gallop. It took only two bounds for her to scale the next glacier, at which point she skidded to a halt. She blinked. She rubbed her helmet's visor to brush away some remaining frost. What she saw remained the same.

The Capitol dome had turned black. Pitch black. The blackness flowed down it and streaked the structure's sides.

Sayaka Miki's words cut into her head: Second archon.

The humiliation of defeat had been bad enough. Her, Cook, all their soldiers losing to a single idiot savant. Several minutes spent trapped in ice as her enemy proceeded undaunted. The near-subordination of Berwyn. Cicero had often wondered, at night, alone, how she would cope with failure. It scared her. But it did not scare her as much as it would have scared the Laquesha who ran Cincinnati. She had DuPage to thank for that. DuPage who punished, berated, abused her for every tiny infraction. Cicero hated everything DuPage did to her, but it also disentangled the concept of "failure" from Cicero's self worth. DuPage called Cicero a failure even when Cicero was not a failure. It reduced the meaning of failure. It made it easy to blame not herself, but the society that determined what constituted failure and what constituted success. Cicero had remained selfish like that, had she not? For all her efforts to molecularize herself and bind those particles called "Cicero" to the mass called "the Empire," significant elements of her selfhood remained. The punishment for a defective particle ought to be excision, death. Any particle a detriment to the whole ought to be shaved. But Cicero still considered her particle self of equivalent value to that of the whole. How about that for your philosophy, Empress? How about that for your cunning hypocrisy? How much faith should Cicero place in your definition of "failure" when you yourself sink to your own moral decrepitude? Cicero believed the only true failure was death. Anything that failed to kill her only made her want to rise up and bash its face in. Like DuPage.

So losing to Flossmoor, pathetic as it was, she could abide.

The fact that *Cook* had been right to believe Sayaka Miki drove her mad.

Cook had *no right* to be right. None. It was stupid. Nobody ever should have listened to a single word Miki said let alone craft tactical decisions based on what she said. Cook had acted with all possible idiocy just like she had when she forced herself into the fight only to bury half their army in ice. Ohhhh, but she acted so *chill* and *easygoing*, didn't that make her so *knowing*? Compared to this angry and irrational Cicero, wasn't Cook the one cleverly witching the truth? No! Cicero had known Cook was talking from her rear since the start. Since the start. And even now, even seeing what could only be the work of an archon, she

still knew it. She still knew Cook had been wrong. Cook had acted stupidly. Her correctness was incidental, it was stupid, a stupid decision, stupid!

Control. Control! Headlessness helped nothing. Fine, Cook won, Cook made the better tactical decision (even if her actual strategies in combat had been the largest instrument of their failure). Cicero acted rashly. Another failure. Certainly. But where was Cook now? And DuPage? Nowhere. One dead, the other alive only by technicality. Cicero remained standing. Cicero had her axe and her soul and her magic. She had destroyed one archon, she would destroy another, and then who had truly failed?

Not her.

Her horse rushed forward. It leapt over the reflective pool and onto the Capitol patio. Some soldiers worked to heal those who had fallen. None noticed the encroaching blackness.

"Ah—Lady Cicero, ah..." said Skokie. Palatine, who wielded a lantern, and Des Plaines, a healer, stood nearby. They all shifted and turned down their eyes. None were members of her platoon.

"Soldiers, the situation is officially a crisis, maintain your wits and discipline. Look there!" She indicated the black Capitol dome. "We have a major threat in proximity to the Empress. We must—"

Your Munificence, said the Handmaiden's telepathic voice, strangely distorted. *I must apologize, but I have encountered a threat of great danger in the rotunda. You must be wary—I recommend flight until Centurions Cook and Cicero are restored.*

Cicero did not need the affirmation, in fact it annoyed her. She noticed Lombard, the only soldier in her platoon still in fighting form. "Lombard, get off the ground. We're entering the Capitol now. Our mission is to rescue the Empress and Lady Joliet."

Lombard twisted. She looked like junk. Less sobbing and more like her face had transformed into liquid. Her fingers hooked in arches and she gesticulated in jerky, tin soldier automation.

From the Capitol doors behind her seeped a black surface like that which coated the dome. It spread in a semicircle, not rapidly, but Lombard did nothing to move away from the mess. Cicero clopped forward, seized Lombard by the nape of the neck, and hoisted her away from the puddle.

"Soldier. Wake up soldier. What are you, out of your mind?"

"I killed her," said Lombard.

The black puddle flowed over the gory mess in which Lombard had been mired. It caused a pair of disembodied legs to roll.

"Your other sergeant," said a meek voice. Cicero looked down. It was Palatine, the soldier with the lantern. "I saw it. She..." Palatine also looked near tears.

Cicero pieced the puzzle together and clicked her tongue to suppress a hiss. Dammit, Elmhurst. She had *told* them not to engage... Dammit. Dammit. FUCK.

As her fist clenched against the back of Lombard's neck a burst of magic enveloped her. Enveloped Lombard too, and Palatine, and the other girls. Before Cicero had a chance to react the magic was gone. And so were their uniforms.

Instead of identical golden soldiers a cluster of dainty, erratically-themed maidens stared up at her. Cicero's own uniform had reverted to its original form: an equestrian outfit like a genteel white girl might wear, starched white britches or whatever tucked into tall black boots. Her recompense for such a jank wish, she supposed.

Some of the others somehow had even tackier costumes, despite the situation some shrilled involuntarily and shirked behind one another to conceal themselves. The Empire had forced them to mature from the people they were when they made their wishes; what they considered elegant or cool back then now reeked of infantile fantasy.

Cicero might have shared their shame had she not immediately understood why their clothes had reverted. The Handmaiden had died. Whatever she encountered in the rotunda overcame her. It roused her from whatever emotional wrinkles she may have experienced at the death of one of her soldiers, a situation she was certain would have otherwise decimated her and one she knew that, should she exit this play intact, would plague her for many restless nights. The Handmaiden, however, lacked true humanity, but served a useful purpose. Her destruction betokened much ill in a pragmatic sense.

She dropped Lombard onto one of the healers and tossed the grief cubes she had taken previously. "Her mental state must be in shambles, keep her together. I am entering the Capitol."

"Lady Cicero, that black ooze looks dangerous," said Des Plaines. "Perhaps we should find an alternative point of entry?"

Wise. But Cicero suspected, given the state of the dome, they would find similar impediments everywhere. She had another idea.

"Palatine." Her hand unfolded to point and the indicated soldier lurched so that her lantern clanged against her brass belt buckle. "Your lantern is effective at dispelling miasmas, correct?"

"Yes, Lady Cicero."

Okay. Cicero had thought so. She did not know the members of Cook's platoon the way she knew her own. They had assigned Palatine to train her lantern on Flossmoor to maintain line of sight. Cook, being Cook, had only described Palatine as "being useless at everything else? In this situation?" but Cicero had a working awareness of the kinds of abilities available to the Empire.

"Shine your light on that black matter."

Palatine saluted and the others stood aside. She raised her lantern and the same ghastly green light spewed forth. It struck the black matter at an oblique angle and ate away at it like water from a hose. The areas of darkness it did not strike continued to ooze outward unimpeded, but soon a straight path led from the safety at the end of the patio to the doors of the Capitol.

"Des Plaines," said Cicero as she aligned her horse to proceed down the new route, "you're a healer, so remain here. Assist St. Charles in restoring Centurion Cook. That will be more efficient than digging through her ice to pull out each of our soldiers individually." She glanced over her soldiers; a crowd had gathered. It was mostly Aurora's squad, with a few others scattered among them—Cicero recognized Midlothian, her newest. It was clear from their expressions they intended to follow Cicero. Once they saw the dome blacken, their uniforms return to their original form, they realized the stakes. They understood their purpose. None fled.

Cicero held back a sigh. So despite the individual sparks that remained within them, exemplified by their unique and colorful costumes, they still felt that magnetic attraction toward the whole. The reason, rectitude, and justice imbued within them did not flicker at the first sign of failure. Why? Cicero, a soldier herself, wondered how soldiers could do what they did. Not soldiers like her, whose power and durability exceeded that of mortal man, but those who swarmed in waves upon beaches, singular souls extinguished in droves by sprays of a Gatling gun. How did those people find their courage? What made them fight when all animal instincts ought to have spurred them to flee?

In Chicago, against the Lake Michigan archon, she had given a speech. That speech had no purpose. She said it because, at the time, based on the Empress's teachings, she felt weighty moments necessitated some sort of rhetorical display. She had used the Empress's words and the Empress's appeals to muster the courage of an army of overdogs against an enemy they could not fail to defeat. Narcissism.

If Sayaka Miki was right about a second archon... she might be right about other things she said. If so, Cicero had far less faith in an outcome without casualties.

She shouldn't be allowing this pessimism to creep in. But as she grappled for words for a speech, even something short, something to reassure them—

They didn't need it. They knew what they were fighting for. The Empire was more than an ideal to them, it was their home, their sisterhood, everything they knew, their way of life. The Empire had assured it would become that to them, so when the Empire was sliced these tiny antibodies would flock to stem the infection. Here they came, the antibodies. The particles. Simultaneously unique and blank slate. Empty and full.

"A speech would waste time. I've wasted enough already. Follow my lead."

Into the Capitol they charged. Cicero instructed nobody to touch the miasma, which forced the gaggle—thirteen all told—to press tight together. Palatine waved her lantern's light on the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Strip by strip she uncovered the entryway, its metal detectors, passages. Palatine, it became clear, would be essential for navigation throughout this dark labyrinth, so Cicero had her ride on the horse. The miasma that the lantern cleared dispersed totally, but the edges she could not reach leaked back into the clean world created. Even

when an entire room was diligently divested of the material, it seeped through vents and cracks. Already their exit ebbed shut behind them.

They entered the rotunda. Two bodies drifted in the blackness. Cicero recognized them, one was Flossmoor, the other the Handmaiden. Both dead. The Handmaiden had apparently defeated Flossmoor via some stratagem—Good for her. A final triumph before cessation.

"It'll cost too much magic to clear this entire room," said Cicero. Aurora's soldiers carried grief cubes, but best not to waste them frivolously. Palatine already needed some. She fanned her neck and apologized for her weakness. Cicero kept them moving, on a direct route to the Senate chamber. She hailed the Empress multiple times via telepathy, but received no response. She would have assumed that meant everyone in the Senate chamber had already died, but the Empress could not die. Incapacitation was another option, or possibly this miasma distorted telepathic thought the way normal miasmas distorted ordinary speech. The Handmaiden's final telepathic message had sounded funny.

Her initial instinct had been for hurry, but she amended it to cautious, meticulous forward motion. Everyone constantly watched for something to creep out of the depths. If they got separated someone would die. The Empress, however, could wait as long as they needed to take.

Palatine waved her lantern over the doors to the north wing. Or where the doors should have been. Instead, they saw only rounded, unbroken wall. Palatine, hand of cubes to her gem, erased more and more of the surroundings. There was no door. There was no door behind them. She pointed her lantern to the southern end. No door there. No doors. Cylindrical wall only.

"A trap," said Cicero. "Even if the doors are truly gone, I can smash through—"

"*There!*"

One of the women, Algonquin, pointed in the general direction of the Handmaiden's corpse. She staggered back against two of her fellows, who caught her before she lurched toward a stray stripe of miasma. Everyone looked, but nobody saw anything except the dead girls and the empty rotunda walls, and soon even Algonquin lowered her arm, trembled a moment, shook herself, and muttered a quiet apology.

"What," said Cicero, "did you see."

"I apologize, milady, I'm simply nervous is all, I didn't mean to disrupt—"

"What did you see."

"It—I thought—"

Before she could answer a shriveling giggle cut the rotunda. Not an audible giggle. It was—they could *see* it. Not as words, or sound waves, but nonetheless something wrinkled in the blackness and the thought that entered Cicero's head was that of a hideous, dead giggle.

Something started to rise from the ink. The giggle and whatever Algonquin saw were likely illusions, but these figures rising must be wraiths. If they got mired in a fight here, they would likely get encircled and overwhelmed—if not Cicero herself, than at least her soldiers. She made an immediate decision and swung her halberd against the wall where the northern doors ought to have been. The wall blasted away—Actually, it did not, what blasted away was a giant screen that ripped inward and behind it stood the ordinary doors on the ordinary wall.

Cicero didn't bother to ponder how the miasma had created an illusion even where Palatine had dispelled it, it made no sense but she had broken through the façade and she rammed down the doors and demanded her soldiers move before whatever wanted to attack attacked. In an ordinary war, charging past the enemy lines and leaving your enemy behind you only led to encirclement and destruction, but this wasn't a normal war nor a normal army. Cicero already envisioned their eventual route, into the Senate chamber, the Empress seized, and out through any nearby wall, whichever she could blast through quickest with her halberd.

"Move, move," she said. The stragglers toddled. One tripped against the doors and Cicero shot an arm out to catch her before she fell, it was Midlothian cradling her glass jar of cloud. She thanked Cicero and ran along the route Palatine carved while Cicero took one last look at the rotunda.

There were no figures rising. There was no miasma. An empty, clean rotunda, exactly as she encountered it earlier in the day. Nothing amiss save the two bodies. Flossmoor and the Handmaiden—except the Handmaiden looked nothing like the Handmaiden, her skin and hair were bleached white, all color had drained from her.

And behind her body, easily missed by a casual glance—her soldiers in the next room called for her to follow—but Cicero thought she saw a little rip, a curling corner of paper in the image of the rotunda, and behind it a clutch of white giantess fingers reached out and peeled the corner back to cover the gap and complete the picture yet again...

They proceeded through more rooms empty save the miasma, no threats, no wraiths, no deceptions, unless the appearance of the ordinary was the deception. Cicero's knowledge of the Capitol's geography came from scant experiences but enough years in miasmas had taught her not to sweat the navigational aspects. She led them more by instinct than a concerted attempt to remember the route. And soon enough Palatine waved her lantern and the miasma flecked away and the doors to the Senate chamber stood before them.

"Stay behind me and follow my lead," said Cicero.

"Yes, Lady Cicero," they intoned together. Their chorus distorted because one said "Yes, milady" instead—Midlothian.

On this disharmonious note, Cicero smashed down the doors.

Palatine's lantern was not the only way to clear the miasma, although it was most efficient. When Cicero swung her axe (thankfully still an axe, despite the Handmaiden's death—its medieval barbarism chafed well enough against the asinine civility of her normal costume for her to have never minded the ensemble), the propulsive force blasted away not only aspects

of the surroundings but also the black ooze. Thus she already had a bit of space to gallop forward before Palatine's lantern carved a path, so she had already built momentum by the time she digested the tableau before her.

Joliet had fallen onto her face in the guise of a cat eared girl.

And also—

"It's *you*."

Her horse stopped. The soldiers skidded behind her. Palatine shined her light onto DuPage's face, revealed it exactly as it was: DuPage. Unmistakable. Same sallow, sunken, flaking face. Broad brows and a nasty leer. Nude. Drenched in gore. Pinning down the Administrator with her brittle wrists.

Palatine's light melted DuPage's face, peeled back skin and eyeballs, revealed a grinning skull. The whole DuPage turned to mush that washed across Hegewisch and someone weaved between the solid standing forms of the Senators waving her arms and only after a few seconds of contextual clues Cicero realized the someone was the Empress, unaged, clanking a suit of armor and waving a broadsword.

"Cicero! She cannot hurt me. Thou must aid Joliet and the Administrator—"

Cicero! Thou must! Cicero! Thou must!

"Centurion DuPage?" said one of the soldiers.

Centurion DuPage.

THOU MUST. THOU MUST.

Ah, Centurion DuPage. Her old, old friend.

CICERO.

It seemed any brain could be shut off. Any conditioning, any training, any rote knowledge beat into a body could be overridden given proper stimuli. Well, why not? Who had beaten that knowledge into her after all? To whom did Cicero's true loyalties lie?

CEEEEECERO CEEEECERO CEEEEEEEEEEECERO~

Cicero's axe slammed down. A fan of black ooze shot out and splattered the gathered Senators. She swung and struck the other side of her with the butt. A smaller force dredged a trench and shattered several desks. The wind knocked the Senators into one another domino-style. These Senators were fragile but the ooze swept up to catch them. Everything crashed back so forcefully, the crinkling deluge inside her could not be abated and she thought, what is this, fantasy?

She wanted all the riffraff out of the way. She plucked Palatine off her horse and dropped her with the others. "Take the Empress and the others and escape. DuPage, why don't you show

yourself already?"

What's that, Cicero? Game for a little one-on-one? Classic hero versus villain spiel, maybe on a rooftop for heightened drama? Eh? That's my Cicero. Stalwart, stoic, BORING Cicero, come on now I know you can do better, you sometimes forget I used to bounce your face against the concrete because you DESERVED it.

The ceiling detached. Like the walls and floor, it was black, and a cascading line of it plummeted toward her. Palatine wasn't watching but Cicero's heightened reflexes attuned her. Her halberd swung and blasted the blackness away, at the same time she shouted to her soldiers to cluster closer to her. They scrambled, Palatine finally turned her lantern, the blackness slapped the ground.

Before she had a chance to check which if any of her soldiers were sprayed by the splatter the blackness from all corners Palatine had not yet eliminated swept toward them. It carried the Senators like surfers, like a dumb comedy movie where the joke is how funny old people are, it's an old person doing a young person thing, and somehow Cicero felt that was the exact image DuPage was attempting to convey, anything to creep under Cicero's skin, pain alone was not her way, in fact pain was often a formality, a gateway into more insidious torture. Cicero at once realized her foolishness for considering a world in which she combatted DuPage alone, how could she have forgotten her own stringent plan so quickly? Well she knew the answer to that but she could rectify things. Hegewisch and Joliet had already crawled to the protection of Cicero's horse, they huddled with the other soldiers, the Empress swung her sword uselessly at the black murk, they had no need to linger.

"Retreat!" she shouted.

She could not swing her axe at the encroaching waves because if she used the full force she would certainly murder the Senators. Vestigial as they were, she could not do that—DuPage knew she could not do that, these surfing Senators were as much gaudy taunt as hideous human shield. But the way to the exit had not completely unraveled so she launched her horse in that direction and swung like wild. The smashed doorframe smashed harder.

Not gonna fight? Wow.

"Shut up," she said, uselessly, suppressing the urge to add an expletive in there, she had to maintain decorum, she could not unravel, this situation was not as unsalvageable as it seemed. She hacked a forceful swath toward where she assumed was the nearest wall to the outside world.

She chanced a glance over her shoulder to ensure the soldiers kept pace. Most did, they were not helpless, Joliet had scrambled to their fore, the Empress was the one who composed the rear, it didn't befit her rank but it scavenged a hint of that oh-so-exalted rectitude, after all, after all was this DuPage not of the Empress's conjuring? Was this not the outcome of her sin? Ha. Poetic justice. Cicero never believed in a design beyond the design one created for oneself, but she could not deny the coincidence. She could not revel long though, she noticed some of the soldiers supporting another, one who had fallen pale and ashen in their arms, who convulsed as if possessed, who had started to froth. The blackness had touched her. It dripped down the crown of her head between her eyes and none of the soldiers who carried her dared

wipe it away. As Magical Girls, trained ones at that, they moved swiftly even while carrying their comrade, but the wave of blackness kept coming. It would consume them if they did not increase their velocity.

"Keep forward," she shouted, then bounded her horse over their collective heads and landed the opposite side of the Empress. Few of the Senators had funneled out the Senate chamber, most seemed to have caught on the shattered doorframe like bits of trash in a sewage drain, so Cicero had the space for a full attack. She brought down her axe and the wave, as big as any in the ocean, lost all its build and trajectory and came apart into a few scattered slops.

The Empress cut down one of the smaller waves with her sword. "We must destroy her," she said in a whisper only Cicero would be able to hear. "We cannot allow this blight to persist." She leaned on her third-person pronouns but the ripple in her vocal chords pierced the diction. DuPage was not Cicero's albatross alone.

"We need," said Cicero, "to bring these women to safety."

"Of course, of course—But this abomination, this slight against God. It cannot exist." Her face darkened. "*She* cannot exist—"

Several soldiers shrieked. The one who had touched some of the black material, her Soul Gem exploded. The shards fanned in dazzling array despite the lack of light.

[51/57]

But the gem did not simply break. Cicero had seen gems break before, not often but she had seen it, and she had not forgotten the image. They broke the way a real gem might, as if at the instant of breaking they lost all magical power and became ordinary mineral matter. It amazed her to think such a thing contained a soul, and yet when a normal human is shot they come apart in much the same way, soul or not. This gem acted strange. Its metal lining bent in a uniform pattern, snapped, reformed. The gem wasn't breaking—it was becoming something else—

"What, what!" Hegewisch swerved in an erratic pattern, she swung her attaché case like a weapon except at nothing. "That's not real. That's not real!"

The Empress darted her eyes feverish and frenzied. She and Hegewisch were the only two who understood. Cicero disliked it, not whatever phenomenon was occurring, but because it forestalled their escape. They had to abandon the corpse and keep moving, the danger still remained, the Senators were stalking toward them clapping their hands and singing Happy Birthday, which could only be DuPage's idea of a grand joke, one that evaded Cicero's ken. She dragged the Empress by the arm and barked an order for the others to move, at which point out of the transforming shattering gem whipped a stream of—leaves? Autumn leaves, red and orange and yellow? They shot everywhere, swirled to the ceiling. The soldier who had died, DeKalb, Cicero vaguely remembered some sort of plant theme to her abilities, or maybe she had mixed it up, her lack of knowledge galled her, it felt of critical importance to explain this phenomenon, because the leaves had enveloped everyone and if they proved dangerous an attack could not be stymied. She swung to diffuse the blast but the force overpowered and—

And they were in a different place. Clinging to the bare branches of a massive black tree. Cicero's horse lost its footing, it skittered its hooves, she had to revert it to its portable cube form and land on her feet. She grabbed the Empress who dangled from a branch over an abyss of the autumnal leaves below.

"A witch, a witch, a witch," Hegewisch kept shouting excitedly.

"That's not possible," said the Empress. "Not in this world. No! God would never permit it, the laws that govern this universe do not allow it!"

I guess down here we're too far for God to help us. DuPage's massive face stared from above, as though she looked into a tin can full of ants. **I guess that makes this Hell.**

"Every instinct I ever had about you was right," said the Empress. She had lost her speech quirks. "There was never anything in you but hate. Yasmin Esfahani, I swear I will redact you from this world's memory!" She traced an arc with her sword and the distant, godly DuPage spat on her.

The other soldiers, having helped those dangling onto the branch, crawled toward the Empress. They raised their hands, pleaded for her to explain what was happening, what world they now inhabited, a world that seemed to possess only this bare, lonely tree and a wash of forever-fluttering leaves that obfuscated any snatch of a bottom. The only exceptions were Joliet and one other soldier—Midlothian—who instead clung to Hegewisch.

The Empress remembered herself. "Stand stalwart, soldiers of the Empire! Our foe is known. We shall prevail over the forces of evil, for our cause is just and the world tends toward justice!"

"Guess the world's unraveling now," said Hegewisch. "Laws don't matter. Why would justice?"

Hegewisch looked senile. She looked like she had become displaced in space and time, but Cicero could not worry too much about her because something had started to crawl around the trunk of the tree. Something burrowing, eating, drilling—a hole burst in the bark and the head of a creature emerged.

Wraith, thought Cicero. But no. Its face was a flower. It sprayed a puff of yellow pollen on the Empress and those who clung to her. The soldiers started to swoon. One yelled, unfathomably, "It's her... it's DeKalb...!"

Cicero had enough of this horseshit. "Magic" was no excuse to suspend any semblance of sense. Even magic had an order, rules, regulations, and this inanity pushed her patience beyond even what Flossmoor had accomplished.

She hurled her horse at the pollen-spewing flower. Whatever this thing was, it might not be a wraith, but it couldn't be too much more dangerous than one. It failed to evade her attack. Her horse connected.

The explosive force cleaved off the top of the tree. Flower petals launched everywhere. Cicero didn't give a fuck. She didn't bother to wait to see whether the horse attack did the trick. She launched herself over the plume of pollen and came down with her axe. Hard.

Hard enough to shatter the entire tree world. The walls, leaves, branches washed away at the culmination of her stroke.

Cicero, the Empress, the soldiers, everyone real dropped out of that fake world back into the one they had inhabited prior. The world of black miasma.

Any areas of safety Palatine had created were gone. The room was utter black. Cicero had milliseconds to react and she was already coming down off of a swing. She had no time to pull back her axe and swing again. Instead she shoved her axe down and embedded the sharp tip into the ground. It stuck, her arms went rigid, she held herself suspended in a precarious balancing act that nonetheless prevented her from falling into any of the blackness.

She then got to watch the other soldiers lack such a luxury.

Bubbling bubbling bubbling.

In the.

Bubbling bubbling bubbling.

Rub a dub dub. Three men in a tub.

This is so disgusting. What were they discussing?

Bubbling bubbling bubbling.

"Try the screws."

Rubble dubble. Toil and trouble.

"We've *tried* the screws. They don't turn."

I smell the blood of an English muffin.

Bubbling bubbling bubbling.

Inside the.

"You're incompetent. Out. My turn."

Poppets.

"Okay look maybe like—hear me out—maybe forget the screws. Her hands—imagine we like, snake up into her suit *through* the hands."

Doubling doubling doubling.

In the veins.

What's the longest word you can spell?

"Snake through the—inside the... Lieutenant Kenosha. Please. I respect your rank but I doubt the efficacy of your plan. St. Charles, move."

A-N-T-I-D-I-S-E-S-T-A-B-L-I-S-H-M-E-N-T-A-R-I-A-N-I-S-M.

What's that word mean, poppets?

"Sergeant, she's got the Blessing which means, I think it means, force doesn't compute against her. You have to exert force against the screws to twist them, the Blessing—*theoretically*—makes that impossible."

You can break it into its component parts.

Prefixes. Suffixes.

"That's not how the Blessing works, St. Charles. That defies physics."

Anti. Dis. Establishment. Arian. Ism.

"But—"

"*Think* for three seconds. How would that work? That would mean gravity couldn't work on her. Gravity's a force, is it not? Are you going to say to me right now that gravity is not a force?"

Against the practice of or belief in disestablishment. Anti-anarchism.

"Well, no..."

Not the true definition, of course. Something to do with English, English muffins. She looked it up. But every kid knew that word because it was the longest word. They didn't know what it meant. They knew it because it was the longest word. It had no meaning. It had been deconstructed—deconstructed in the original Derrida sense. It was up to these schoolchildren... these schoolchildren who knew it only as the longest, the most impressive word... It was up to them to reconstruct its meaning. From its component parts.

Prefixes. Suffixes.

Antidisestablishmentarianism.

T-I-N-T-I-N-N-A-B-U-L-A-T-I-O-N.

Not nearly half as long. The need to establish surpassed the ceaseless noise.

"But if all forces 'don't compute' against her, whatever that even *means*, then why is she not floating right now, completely immune to the force of gravity? Riddle me that pumpkin?"

Pumpkin. Poppet.

"Okay well, well not *that* force. But other forces..."

"That's not how physics works. Not how it works! You can't decide what is and isn't a force."

"Well, well it's, it's not physics, it's magic..."

"Magic has *rules*! It has to. There's a system at play. Laws. Law of the Cycles? Heard of that?"

"Look. Guys, guys. All we need is some kinda uh, long, flexible weapon. We go in through the uh, hands, bend it up her arms, to her brain—Egyptian-style, ya dig?"

A viscous trickle escaped with her moan. Her body stirred. She allowed the conversation of the three to waft over her as she abandoned her addlepatented meanderings on the subject of anarchy and society. Her brain began to muddle back together. She became recognizant of her grossness. A puddle of her own sludge. She was the puddle, forming protozoaic into more complex forms. She twisted. There lay Darien's viscera topped by a shiny Soul Gem.

Her body refused to budge past these twitches. The only reason she failed to vomit was likely because she had already inverted the entire contents of her stomach. So disgusting... the three men in the tub must be discussing her.

"Lieutenant Kenosha. We have no such long, flexible implement, and even if we did, how would we be able to heal her brain in such a fashion?"

Kenosha. St. Charles... and Sergeant Schaumburg. Gathered around Cook like surgeons.

When you're ugly you simply want to die. Right now she felt uglier than even before her wish. Nothing soothed her more than imagination's manifestation of her form dissolving back into the puddle.

When you're hungover you simply want to drink more to mask the pain of your drinking. Berwyn couldn't inject herself with anything more, she would kill herself. The temptation might prove more irresistible if she possessed the strength to even summon a new syringe.

Either way... she could not surrender. Neither to pain nor disgust. Things existed, things beyond the material wants of an individual. She had to act.

Or she could sleep. Sleep, sleep, sleep.

"Can't comment on physics—but those screws don't turn, ya dig? There's like zero way to remove that helmet."

When Kenosha said that a bright flash enveloped them. When it subsided, their uniforms had disappeared. Kenosha, St. Charles, Schaumburg. And Cook between them no longer wore a diver's suit—she wore a frilly bikini with an aloha-print skirt.

"Now that's the way I like to see a problem solved." Kenosha twirled her ponytail victoriously. A reckless, slobby masculinity, that Kenosha. Why be a girl if you didn't act cute? Oh rats, her brain still felt like vomiting up absolutely idiotic statements. Perhaps if she squeezed it through a wringer—

She and the three in the tub realized, like a lightning bolt, what the removal of their uniforms signified.

"The Handmaiden," said St. Charles.

Schaumburg bit her lip. "Ignore that. Lady Cook's injuries are now visible. Help me heal her. Now!"

St. Charles nodded and the two held respective implements toward the lovely lady's bashed brainpan.

Kenosha, squatting, now in a mime's stripes, looked at the sky, at the ground, and pantomimed pulling a cigarette out of a pack and lighting it. She held two fingers to her lips, breathed in, breathed out.

Neither St. Charles nor Schaumburg were exceptional healers. Berwyn could have healed Cook in seconds... They progressed arduously along the admittedly complex task of reconstructing brain and skull. Berwyn supposed she ought to credit them for being able to do it all; many lesser healers failed to restore beyond flesh wounds or the replication of simple organs. A healer's worth was based on speed and level of regeneration. Berwyn had long been the strongest healer in the Empire. Healing never gathered the glamor, though. She had accepted that fact and stood in Cicero's shadow... Cicero.

A body dropped beside her. Her head twisted, and lo, 'twas their fine friend Lombard, deposited by another of Aurora's healers, Des Plaines. Berwyn had made it her business to know her competition in the healing business, so she recognized their faces even with their uniforms changed to such strange and magnificent outfits.

Lombard curled on her side and said nothing.

"Hurry and help," said Schaumburg to Des Plaines. They had reconstructed most of the skull.

"Dark fluid is covering the Capitol," said Des Plaines, inflected toward the rudimentary. "You can't see it from here due to the ice. It's spreading toward us. Lady Cicero and everyone else went inside to rescue the Empress. Our orders are to restore Lady Cook—"

"That is *known*," said Schaumburg.

Kenosha exhaled.

Ah, milady. Charging recklessly into the Capitol? With none of your own soldiers? Cicero had once been part of the platoon that was now Aurora's, she perhaps possessed familiarity with its more veteran members, although platoons had undergone much reorganization in the subsequent years and most who had existed in the time of Lieutenant Cicero had since received promotions to governorships in Milwaukee or the like. Milady, milady. And you sent away all three of the platoon's extant healers. Milady...

Movement. She needed to. Ah. Yes. A shuffling shrug of her shoulder flipped her onto her stomach. Gravity did most of the work but it indicated progress. Milady. You're being rash again, milady. She always had this tendency to lead the charge herself. Bad, bad form for a commander. Even if she possessed the strength of an entire platoon in herself, there were reasons why commanders sat safe in bunkers while the cattle died in the fields. Cicero only knew this fact until her cattle became endangered. She cared too much about those who had sworn away their lives. Bad, bad form. "Unh... aag." Disgusting sounds she could not help but utter as her hands braced against the cracked pavement.

Should have sent Berwyn from the start. Instead of galloping into battle herself... Should have sent the poppet on a string. Her role, after all. Her assigned role to die.

Over the top of the glacial hill that obstructed her view of the Capitol flowed a wave of pure black ink.

Kenosha flicked her fingers and stomped on the spot for which she aimed. "That's a thing."

The other three, engrossed in their healing, took longer to see. Des Plaines, then St. Charles, lastly at the urging of the others Sergeant Schaumburg. "That is the dark fluid I told you about," said Des Plaines. "I do not know its properties but Lady Cicero believed it dangerous."

The mound of ice possessed the form of a pyramid collapsed upon itself. Cook drew it to ensnare that killer magician, instead she ensnared their own soldiers. Immobile bodies, obscured by layers, could be barely made out. As the ink inched down the uneven back slope Berwyn thought for an instant the ice would serve to protect the ladies encased from direct contact. Not so. The ink sank in. It did not pierce or crack or break the ice. It simply sank as though it were a semipermeable membrane. Tendrils of the darkness dangled down. The telepathic voices of those not yet unconscious by the cold began to buzz.

"Sergeant, Lieutenant," said Des Plaines. "I advise we remove Lady Cook to a safer location."

The ink swept too far down the slope of the pyramid. It obscured the view of the others, but they screamed for help louder.

[50/57]

"Those people..." said St. Charles.

"If we move Lady Cook we'll take even longer to heal her, we need to wake her up as soon as possible if we want to save them," said Schaumburg. "Work! Work! Idiots! Work! Des

Plaines. Des Plaines!"

[49/57]

Something was happening inside the ice.

[48/57]

[47/57]

[46/57]

Des Plaines wrenched her hair. "I left them. I left them. I left them!"

[45/57]

"SERGEANT I LEFT THE WOUNDED ON THE PATIO—"

"Des Plaines. Des Plaines."

"Some shit." Kenosha puffed another imaginary cigarette.

"SERGEANT I LEFT THEM ON THE PATIO, I ONLY BROUGHT LOMBARD, I FOLLOWED HER ORDERS TO HELP YOU, SERGEANT I LEFT THEM—"

The patio. Ah, correct. The ranged fighters who had fired from the Capitol patio. Addison, Westmont, Alsip, Clearing. Plus a few from Cook's platoon.

Berwyn's arms, which had held her halfway up for some time, wobbled and refused to cooperate. She hit the walkway with her chin and spat blood.

"Des Plaines. Des Plaines."

And those still screaming must be the ones trapped in the ice...

[44/57]

[43/57]

Lombard stood. She had taken to mumbling. She walked calmly up the slope of the ice toward the blackness.

A gunshot burst. Berwyn glanced, Des Plaines shuddered as smoke smoldered out a hole in her head.

"We *must* restore Lady Cook," said Schaumburg. "Now! St. Charles. St. Charles!"

[42/57]

[41/57]

The screams died one by one. Those on the patio had long gone, so these were the ones who had followed Darien on her initial assault, who had fallen to the magician, as well as Cook's personal strike force who tried to trap her in the pyramid. As before, Berwyn knew the names of those in her own squad, she recounted them one by one although she could not distinguish one silenced scream from another:

[40/57]

Niles.

[39/57]

Burbank.

[38/57]

Maywood.

[37/57]

[36/57]

[35/57]

Something was happening inside that ice. Berwyn needed to rise. Schaumburg seemed determined to wait until the last possible moment, to heal Cook as quickly as possible. The blackness would sweep over her and Darien before it reached them, they seemed content to let that happen, none even remarked upon Lombard—

Lombard.

Lombard. Lombard, stop. Please.

Lombard, without looking back, shook her head as she proceeded toward the ink. More screams within died.

[34/57]

[33/57]

[32/57]

Lady Berwyn, is that you? Lieutenant? Not Lombard's voice, but another she recognized, one of those trapped in the ice—a girl named Norridge. *Lieutenant, what's happening? I can't see anything. Please. I don't know what's going on. Why is everyone screaming?*

It's okay, Berwyn lied. Worry about nothing, Norridge.

Wait... Wait! The ice is gone. Where am I? Lieutenant, where am I?

The ice, gone? But it was not gone. Its base stood before her eyes. Almost entirely submerged now.

This place is weird, lieutenant. I don't understand. This is like, I don't know. It's like being inside a collage—

Norridge cut off and did not continue.

[31/57]

Berwyn the entire time had dedicated her body's energies to rising. Her hands and legs pushed. She glanced to Lombard, but Lombard had already walked into the darkness. She had not immediately died. In fact, the darkness appeared to do nothing to her. She continued to scale the misshapen pyramid which retained its shape even beneath the blackness. Her hands and feet blackened as she sometimes slipped on the icy slope and had to support herself.

Turn back, Lombard, Berwyn said, unsure whether it were already too late. *You didn't do it. You don't have to die for it.* She recalled a moment when she and Lombard, before Elmhurst arrived, paired up to fight wraiths. An old memory. Lombard laughed when they killed the wraiths, she said some joke. Berwyn failed to remember the joke but remembered laughing. Since then they had rarely spoken outside an official capacity. Berwyn realized she had spoken to very few people except Darien outside an official capacity. And she had always justified her extracurricular communication with Darien as her teaching Darien philosophy and morality—mentoring her to become a better soldier. It was an official capacity too. One for which she sensed Darien cared little.

Berwyn suddenly realized she had no real friends.

Lombard continued another two seconds, slumped, and her Soul Gem broke.

[30/57]

Their deaths mattered to her as numbers. Names ticking down a counter. A reduction of strength. Everything became the Empire's strength. She always knew she sacrificed aesthetic, personality, liberty to the Empire and its mission. She had never known she had also sacrificed her empathy.

A ripple pierced the air around Lombard's corpse, which slowly slid with the blackness toward Berwyn and Darien at the base of the ice structure. Behind that ripple something seemed to glimmer, something that attracted Berwyn's attention until she pushed aside everything to redouble her efforts to control her own body.

"Easy. Steady. Come on. Steady. St. *Charles!*" Schaumburg's voice became the only voice. The field of telepathy went dim. Berwyn gurgled and blood and other fluids dropped from her mouth.

Easy. Steady. The Empire required her as a function. She wanted to sleep. Lie still and sleep. Forever. The Empire required her.

Her arms gave again. She watched the blackness reach the base of the ice. It ebbed inches from her and Darien.

A hand wrapped under her torso and hoisted her away. Ash-scented breath heated her clammy cheek. "Heya there, couldn't uh, couldn't forget about my fellow lieutenant could I?"

Berwyn's mouth hung open. Drool coalesced at the base of her jaw. Then she flopped a shaky arm toward Darien. "H... her."

"Uh right, her. Thanks for the reminder." Kenosha stared at Darien's remains. She waved her hands to create some sort of container and scooped Darien into them, Soul Gem and all, a few seconds before the blackness would have reached her. Then she bounced with them both up the second mass of ice to where Schaumburg and St. Charles crouched over Cook.

You left Lombard, Berwyn said. She did not want to sound accusatory but she wanted to sound accusatory.

"Eh well." Kenosha placed the bowl of Darien beside Cook and dropped Berwyn onto the ice. "I've seen uh, I've seen a few girls who wanted to die. It's best to let em."

Schaumburg's hands slapped together. The sound would have cut off Kenosha if Kenosha did not speak unnaturally fast to finish beforehand. But the clap and Kenosha talking seemed unrelated and Schaumburg soon stood: "There. *There*. She's healed. Her brain's back. She'll wake any moment." She clasped her hands together, raised them to God, and shook. St. Charles gnawed on three fingers and flitted her eyes toward the ocean of black ink that had swallowed everything, the ice, the ground, the distant lights. Elevated a little, the totality of its advance became undeniable...

And Cicero had plunged into it. Ah, milady. Milady.

"Milady," said Schaumburg. Her gesture of prayer transformed into a sharp salute, one St. Charles rigidly mimicked as with a stretch and a yawn Lady Cook lifted her upper body and propped herself on her elbows.

"Ahhhhh... What happened? How's it going?"

"Milady I apologize for my terseness but I have little time to explain," said Schaumburg. "You *must* remove your ice and free our soldiers trapped within. Please, quickly, before that black substance reaches us!"

Cook considered. She looked both ways. Looked at the faces. Looked at the bloody Darien and the less bloody but equally unmoving Des Plaines. "Okay?"

She raised aloft her lovely fingers and snapped. The ice became water, warm wonderful water. It rushed as a current away from the blackness, it swept them and the girls trapped inside it. Everything in Berwyn's world became water, crystalline clear, vaguely fragrant. Some part of Berwyn's intuition stirred and her mouth forced into one of the hapless smiles of those without recourse to do anything but.

They washed up on a lawn amid some floodlights. At the base of the Washington Monument. The fragrance remained but the warmth went the way of entropy. A body slid against Berwyn's. Several more logjammed afterward. They were the bodies that had been trapped in the second glacier of ice, the one Cook created during her and Cicero's ill-advised personal tango against the magician. These bodies were not in one piece. The magician must have sliced them prior to their cold internment. They had lost consciousness, they would not have been able to scream.

"Ohhhhh, only this many? I thought there were more. What exactly is that black stuff?"

"Something, well we don't know but, something that seems to kill you if you touch it, Lady Cook."

"Ahhhhh." Cook tiptoed among the bodies. She counted on her fingers, finally pointing to herself and saying, "Fifteen."

Berwyn could twist and turn. She counted too. Cook, Kenosha, Schaumburg, St. Charles—the awake ones. Darien, Des Plaines, Bellwood, River Forest, Crestwood, Stickney, Hodgkins, plus three of Cook's she did not know by name.

These the all-important numbers. The size of a marshaled force. Manpower. They romanticized war, you know? They said courage and valor and even tactics mattered. But in the end, in almost all wars, what mattered was numbers. Number of men, number of weapons, number of supplies.

She *kept counting numbers*. She wanted to stop. She could not stop.

Schaumburg elbowed St. Charles. "Hurry, get to work healing the rest. You take Des Plaines. Maybe she's calmed down. I'll take this one. We must make this group operational as soon as possible."

"Ohhhhh?" Cook said. "Why's that?"

"Lady Cicero and the rest of my platoon entered the Capitol to rescue the Empress. As they have not yet returned, I can only imagine they've faced difficulty. With your abilities, Lady Cook, you can create a bridge to their position so we can reinforce them."

Cook nodded at this sensible suggestion. She regarded the piles of flesh gathered at her sandaled feet. She watched Kenosha flick another imaginary cigarette into the aether. She even gazed down at Berwyn, who struggled to make a signal that she could still be made useful. She failed to make that signal and Cook turned away.

"Sooooo... Yeah... I'm thinking here... Let's not?"

Berwyn's intuition proved correct. Womanly intuition they called it? Delightful irony.

"Lady Cook," said Schaumburg.

Cook pulled a flush flower pin from her hair and jabbed her skirt with it. The pin bent at the tip. "So the Handmaiden's dead, but the Empress isn't. I guess that's to be expected?"

Hmmmmmm..." She replaced the pin in her hair. She tapped her lower lip and looked around at nothing in particular. "Yeah, yeah, I think we shouldn't overtax ourselves?"

"What do you mean, Lady Cook."

"I mean... Y'know, when I first started hanging out with our charming Empress and our less charming DuPage, I kinda envisioned chilling a few weeks then heading somewhere else? This whole thing kinda came outta nowhere. I guess I went along with the flow... It was always convenient to stay? I didn't have to do much and what I did have to do was pretty fun? I think the flow's changed now."

The others stared at her silent. Somehow, white smoke enveloped Kenosha's face.

"The clown girl, the Handmaiden's death, now this... safe to say we've finally reached our limit? There was always going to be a cap to what our little society could accomplish."

"L. Lady Cook. What you're suggesting... is desertion..." Schaumburg advanced, thought better of it, turned to St. Charles. "If that's what the lady intends to do I can't stop her! But we will reinforce Lady Cicero and protect the Empress and Lady Aurora. St. Charles—"

Cook drew the same floral pin from her hair and with a casual tap of her hand drilled it into Schaumburg's skull through the temple. Not a bead of blood dropped. Schaumburg slumped like a deactivated robot and Cook caught her to gently lower her to the ground. St. Charles watched without reaction. Like she watched a show on television. Her face had turned gray in the effervescence of the floodlights. She made no effort to do anything.

From Berwyn's vantage the three figures of Cook, St. Charles, Kenosha formed a triptych divided by the borders of the Washington Monument and its ice scaffolding. A flash of red and blue passed over Kenosha from a distant police vehicle. None moved for several seconds, completing the illusion of portraiture, penitent saints on opposite ends of an elaborate wood paneling. Berwyn supported herself on an elbow. She nursed a vague scheme of tricking Cook into picking her up, at which point she might jab a syringe into Cook's unprotected stomach. This plan lacked any tangibility; summoning even one syringe exceeded her capacity. And a woman who commanded liquid with such alacrity likely could control what flowed where within her own veins.

Quietly, Cook said: "It'll be better if no needless lives are lost in a hopeless situation, I think?"

"I did a lotta, uh, lotta bad shit for this," said Kenosha. "I killed. Dammit. I did it because I thought this would work, that we'd create something to uh, to help Magical Girls around the world."

Cook said nothing.

"You won't even try, Val? You won't even try? What if it's not even that bad? What if we can beat whatever's in there easy?"

"You can say that? After that clown destroyed us? Ahhhhh... I think that's a lie we teach kids. That anything is possible if you just try hard enough... I've always believed in understanding my limits. That—" She swept a hand to indicate the National Mall, now swallowed black—the Capitol, the Smithsonian, the lawn, everything. "That's beyond me. We don't even have grief cubes? We kept our stores in the Capitol... They're lost now."

"I know. I know Val. I just, uh, I just... fuck. Fuck. FUCK." Kenosha held a hand over her eyes. She might have started to cry but the chiaroscuro lighting concealed it and her vocal inflection did not change. "Sage... Fuck. It was for nothing."

Always a coward.

The tableau shattered. Everyone rose from their stupor in search of that unearthly voice. Berwyn rolled over. It came from the black pool puddling toward them.

Get in here and fight me Cook. Come on Cook. COME ON COOK. COME ON COOK. COME ON COOK. COME ON COOK.

Cook, Kenosha, everyone watched the ebbing tide of the black despair. Everyone listened to the voice that resounded from its every square centimeter.

COME ON COOK YOU KNOW WHO I AM. COME ON COOK. I SAID I'D BE BACK. I TOLD YOU I'D BE BACK DIDN'T I. DIDN'T I DIDN'T I DIDN'T I YOU USELESS FUCKING WHORE DIDN'T I.

It ebbed closer. Cook had transported them far from it but it somehow caught up.

LET'S GO. LET'S FUCKING GO BITCH. YOU'RE THE ONE. YOU'RE THE ONE I NEEDED. AURORA DIDN'T SATISFY. YOU'RE THE BITCH. YOU'RE THE BITCH. LET'S GO. COME ON. LET'S GO.

Berwyn collapsed. A figure began to emerge. The blackness ran off it like water. Everyone knew that figure.

BITCHFUCKER. MOTHERDICK. WHOREBAG. COME ON. FUCKSHITTER. HELLCUNT. LET'S GO. COME ON. I'M AWAKE NOW BITCH. BEDTIME'S OVER BITCH. LET'S GO. LET'S FUCKING GO.

Cook snickered. "Oh my god... Oh my god? Oh my god?"

DON'T FUCKING LAUGH AT ME BITCH. COME HERE AND FUCKING FIGHT ME. COME ON. YOU'RE THE ONE I WANT.

The snickering bloomed into laughter. Kenosha let her hands fall—her face glistened—she laughed too. Berwyn sputtered a laugh. Only St. Charles remained uncomprehending. Berwyn's laughs became a mouthful of bloody phlegm.

BITCH. BIIIIITCH. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. FUCK. COOK LET'S FIGHT. LET'S FIGHT. I WANT TO DESTROY YOU. I WANT TO BECOME INTIMATELY ACQUAINTED WITH EVERY MINISCULE ELEMENT OF YOUR BODY. I WANT

TO UNMAKE YOU. FUCK. COOK. COOK COME ON. DO THIS FOR ME. YOU'RE OLD AS FUCK DON'T YOU WANT TO DIE ALREADY? I DON'T THINK IT'S POSSIBLE TO BE YOUR AGE WITHOUT WANTING TO KILL YOURSELF EVERY NIGHT. I NEED THIS COOK. I NEED TO DESTROY YOU. COOK. COOK STOP LAUGHING. COOK.

Cook stopped laughing. "I think... maybe it's rude to laugh when so many of our friends have died?"

"Fuck it," said Kenosha, sobbing and laughing together.

"Ahhhhh, but it's always so hard to know what's right to feel?"

COOK. COOK GET IN HERE. COOK I NEED YOU. COOK. IT'LL BE A PARTY. I HAVE AURORA IN HERE WITH ME RIGHT NOW. COOK. THE EMPRESS, CICERO, THEY'LL ALL BE HERE SOON. COOK. COOK. COOK YOU FUCKING WHORE GET THE COCK OUT YOUR EYE SOCKET AND FFFFFFFFUCKING GET IN HERE. GET INSIDE ME YOU BITCH. COOK. COOK.

The blackness seeped close to the outer ring of bodies. Cook's eyes flitted to its ebb despite the figure beckoning to her from the shallows. After a sigh, Cook held out her hand and bowed graciously.

"My apologies, First Centurion. But, ahhhhh, I'm not dumb?"

A new fount of water rose from the grass and washed the remains of the Empire of Chicago away. Berwyn rolled on the tides and watched the figure recede, it waved its arms wildly, it shrieked, it tore at its hair, it rent its flesh, but in the end nobody went into it and they said goodbye to the dream of the Empire forever.

The dream lived. No matter how many died. The dream lived, it never died. You may murder a million people but you may never murder an idea.

[29/57]

They who remained to wield this idea scattered into the Capitol rotunda. Her, Cicero, Joliet, Hegewisch, and one of whom the Empress regretfully lacked knowledge.

[28/57]

The others had fallen to despair.

[27/57]

The Empress could not die. Joliet and Hegewisch somehow seemed immune to despair's grasp; they plodded upon the black floor at leisure. Cicero possessed enough acrobatic acumen to evade death and beat a path for herself by ramming the butt of her halberd against the floor to form a series of shockwaves. Her method lacked grace, it looked foolish, but it invariably worked.

[26/57]

The final one rode upon Hegewisch's back. Hegewisch sagged under her weight and finally dropped her onto the safe ground of the rotunda.

[25/57]

A jovial DuPage curled out of the darkness as the Empress passed the threshold into the rotunda. She severed its grinning face and slammed the doors shut behind her, afforded a final glimpse of the unseemly beings her soldiers had become.

[24/57]

Yeah, run in there. Run wherever. If you're lucky it won't be me who kills you.

[23/57]

Joliet struck the ground wailing. She beat the tiles. "This world, this world can't, kch, can't hate me any more. Not any more than this."

[22/57]

The Empress jabbed the steel heel of her boot into Joliet's unprotected section of thigh between her stockings and skirt. "Cease. It is moments like these we must exude the most fortitude."

[21/57]

She understood her hypocrisy. She could not die; others could. This was the most strategic line, though. Joliet could not be reduced to a burden.

"Where'd the black stuff go?" asked the unknown soldier.

"There was some the first time we passed through," said Cicero. "What is happening? What is this archon that transforms my soldiers into monsters?"

"Forget explanations," said Hegewisch. "We're close to the exit. Look—windows." She pointed high.

"Where's the Handmaiden's body?" said Cicero. There was only one body on the ground, in a ruined tuxedo.

"WHO CARES?" Hegewisch had abandoned all decorum. "There's a way out RIGHT THERE—"

"Your wits are rotten." Cicero dismounted her horse. She tapped the ground with her halberd, and even a tap caused the ground to shake. "We've simply fallen into another trap."

"It never ends, it never ever ends," said Joliet. "Kill me or kill this world, aaaaaauck..."

The appearance of their world changed. Its gradations ran in ringlike layers up the rotunda's height. Scissors propelled by no hand cut squares into the bright daylight windows and pieces of paper floated away to reveal eyeballs staring in at them. At this point, discerning between the hallucinations of the miasma and the vagaries of the labyrinths proved impossible. The tile paneling effected unusual checkboard colors, first dark, then pastel.

"Whatever this is," said Cicero, sliding close to the Empress, "it was your sin that birthed it."

The Empress readied her blade. She knew.

From the onset her mind flashed back to that singular moment, that swift stroke of metal through DuPage's Soul Gem. How quaint, one might think, that so slight an action harbored such devastating repercussions. Not so quaint once they remembered the omens bestowed, from godly envoys, prophesying exactly what transpired; one might consider it an exercise in hubris, the Pharisees proclaiming their knowledge of YHWH but when His Son stared them in the face they denied him. Perhaps that was the message to be taken, perhaps God in Her power placed upon the Empress's road this challenge, and mere faith would have saved her.

But other interpretations existed. For the Dolorous Stroke that severed DuPage's mortal coil and created this unholy abomination to lay this land to waste fell of her own will. She had long considered the shedding of DuPage a necessity for the Empire to purge corruption. She knew few of her Centurions led the lives of spiritual edification she impressed upon them; she knew some of her Centurions wallowed in the sloughs of lust and gluttony. They believed themselves either undetected or exempt, though they were neither; and DuPage, worst of them all, wretched to her fibrous roots, tainted with overwhelming hate and the pure narcissism that can only come from such hate—even when one's hate is, as turned toward everything external, turned toward everything internal—DuPage could not continue a member of this Empire.

Yet DuPage had existed from the beginning, the Empire had grown around her, her influence had shaped it, Cicero was her pupil, Aurora her pupil, the next generation of Centurions her pupil; DuPage's hate engendered reflective hate or reflexive fear in them all. This poison had to die. Perhaps this necessitated death caused the Empress to put undue weight on the tactical advantage of using DuPage's Soul Gem as a weapon against the Washington Magi. She might yet grant that. But there had been a significance to that Dolorous Stroke. It had not come of wanton disregard.

If the death of DuPage sparked the circuits for the deaths of them all, of Aurora, of Cicero, of all her legions, then perhaps that had always been the price to pay for leaning upon her evil. If given the fantastic opportunity to undo her action, to unswing her sword, would she? And what would her alternative become? To keep that blighted sphere in her possession forever? As she captured America, the world, as she implemented her goals in practice, as she formed the utopia she desired—would that sphere always linger, always throb as an aneurysm in her brain, ready to burst and flood the brain with vile fluid? DuPage would never die of her

despair. Never. She would never fall to the Cycles. The Empress could not believe it. In the week she held the corpseless gem it sometimes birthed, at random, a fell creature, nothing she could not dispatch, but its seething life terrified her, and she wondered if when the critical mass of despair had finally been reached would the crystal ball simply vanish or would it expunge that evil en masse?

She could not be sure, but even if it didn't, even if she locked it away in whatever vault the nations of the world prepared for her, whatever pocket dimension formed by the craftiest Puella Magi, always it would throb, always in her brain, always leaking its blood to poison her.

DuPage had always needed to die.

If it cost them all, every one of her soldiers, if it cost Hegewisch, if it cost Joliet—

Then so be it.

After all, it would never cost her. She would never die by its hand. Even if it took her ten years of hacking and slashing she would slay DuPage, excise with surgical precision the blot in her brain. The blot in her brain was a more dangerous prospect to her life than an apocalyptic danger. For the key to her death lay in her brain, nowhere else.

No matter how many years it took, she could rebuild everything she lost in this day. No, she would rebuild it more efficiently, more stalwart to her purpose, foreknowledge against past error. Possessed of a greater understanding of the Incubator, and whatever understanding he gleaned of her mattered not because, as he knew everything, he could never learn anything.

What had she said before? "Hopelessness is the very thing that gives us hope." She had not spoken idly.

Nonetheless, she would not abandon the lives still left her. As long as they drew breath, Cicero and Joliet and Hegewisch and the unknown soldier who clung to a jar full of clouds, the Empress would fight for their lives.

The phantom scissors glided across the surface of reality. The pieces they cut away revealed letters in newspaper print. Snip, snip. They read:

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.

A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers.

Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see it shine and a bobolink has pins. It shows a nail.

What is a nail. A nail is unison.

Reality ripped at two separate spots and a pair of long white arms drawn by crayons swerved outward. A Cheshire smile split between them and opened to reveal a panoply of hideous colors.

Each finger on the hand was a Swiss army implement, a razor edge or a corkscrew or a paintbrush or the head of a mule. One arm swept for Cicero and the Empress, the other for Hegewisch and the unknown soldier. The lines of newspaper-print gobbledygook curved in rings around the arena, mazelike passages of text. Some passages she recognized, her mind fell to distraction even in this peril, while Cicero's mere paroxysm brought a cataclysmic force upon the hand.

It burst into letters. They fluttered like confetti. The Empress swore she detected snatches of Christine de Pizan's writings but before she could confirm the letters drifted into the groundless ground. Across the way Hegewisch crawled bleeding while the other soldier struggled between two fingers.

While Cicero bounded to strike down the second hand the Empress reached out and snatched a scrap of paper. It wasn't words, it was a string of albino paper dolls, one that extended as an endless accordion when she pulled until finally the string went taut and snapped between her hands. The paper dolls came to life and crawled up her arms, but she ignored their useless attempts to slice her and regarded the multicolored smile as it spewed a deluge of literal word vomit.

The paper dolls were everywhere now. Hegewisch, who crawled to the tuxedo body in the now-dubious center of the labyrinth, beat them back with her attaché case. Cicero destroyed the second arm with a second strike and caught the bloodied soldier before she fell, only for a circle of fifty-seven new rips to appear in the newspaper covering the walls and an arm extend out of each. The Empress became dimly aware that Joliet clung to her leg like the bestial creature depicted by her humiliating uniform.

From above, fifty-seven eyes watched. The Empress said: "So it's you."

"DIE," said Cicero, sweating and panting, hurling herself at the smile.

Fifty-seven.

Cicero drove her halberd into the face of the thing that was once the Handmaiden. As happened to most things Cicero struck—it died.

One must wonder what properties of this particular miasma prevented the Law of the Cycles from functioning. What circumstances had been created that disallowed the intercession of the Goddess Madoka Kaname? Was the despair simply too great for even Her? Nonsense. According to Hegewisch, God would eventually have to contend with the planet-sized despair of Her own celestial Soul Gem, and She would do so effortlessly. DuPage's despair, although great, appeared as a mere drop to Her. So what caused this? A unique property of the archon known as DuPage? No archon had ever exceeded the laws of this universe. Or perhaps the explanation were more simple... Perhaps it was not Her capacity to fight the despair that proved the impediment, but Her inability to peer inside a space so dark... As though they were no longer part of Her universe at all, but placed within an entirely separate, if parallel realm—DuPage's realm.

The labyrinth broke. The words and familiars shredded to dust. The rotunda returned as a shape of perfect blackness divided only by the distinct forms of human bodies. Cicero created

a spot of safety for herself and the unnamed soldier before she landed.

THAT WHORE.

The voice emanated from a twisted panoply of Laocoön figures, fifty-seven or maybe less (truthfully she could not count with such precision at such a glance, and perhaps she had ascribed more significance than merited to generic clusters) images of DuPage clawing, tearing, cutting at her own sallow flesh with breadknife nails.

SHE CAN JUST WALK AWAY LIKE THAT? SHE CAN JUST WALK AWAY? THAT WHORE, THAT SLUT, THAT FUCK, THAT EEEEEEEJJJJJJKKKKKKKKKKKHHHHHHHHHHH!

"No matter how many I times I strike her she reforms," said Cicero with a sense of cool if breathless detachment the Empress envied, "I perceive no center or weakness... no point of vulnerability."

"She's, she's the miasma herself," murmured Joliet.

"I suspect the same..." Cicero's eyes drifted from DuPage to DuPage. The Empress, though accused of blindness, knew well the workings of her underlings, knew their rivalries and spats, knew that most of all Cicero strove to surpass this very enemy they now faced. Yet she continued the discussion with tactical clarity, and despite her great physical stress. Was it true that any mind could be shut off? Or was Cicero simply strong enough to progress despite her foibles? Yet against the Washington Magi she disobeyed orders, ruled by her passions...

WELL. WELL WELL WELL. YOU'RE ALL STILL HERE. THAT'S REALLY GOOD, THAT'S REALLY REALLY GOOD I SAY, BECAUSE NNNNNNNGGHHHHHHHH. AAAAAAAAAAAAKKKKHHHH.

Ahhhhhhh.

...You know, you know that skank left you all to die? She knew you were here and left you. You should all hate her as much as me. She left you. Flushed herself right down the toilet with all that slimy afterbirth she calls water.

"Cook," said Cicero.

THAT'S RIGHT! So now you can all die twice as hard because of it. Then she screamed in consonants inimitable by human lettering.

Cicero did not give her space to continue her scream. She rushed down the center of the room slamming her halberd and blasting back the ink. She beckoned for the Empress to follow as she continued to cut a path for the exit. She rode, stoic, unbending, attacks so practiced they fell with uniform force and velocity. The curvature of her body showed through the tight-fitting jockey's clothes she wore, where before it might have been obscured by armor. Her face shone with sweat but her arms moved unfailingly.

The Soul Gem that substituted the top button on her coat swirled black.

The Empress kicked Joliet off her leg and followed, cutting what she could. Joliet scampered behind while Hegewisch knelt in the center of the room doing something to the tuxedo body.

Cicero neared the edge of the rotunda, swung her axe, and did nothing. Her axe bounced back. Her whole body lurched, stunned.

We'll start with you, Cicero. You might be a little fun. Like old times, right?

Cicero swung again. Her halberd clanged against the miasma as though she struck an invulnerable barrier. The twisted, melting forms of DuPage ebbed toward her.

Her strength must be failing. She could push her body to its limit, she had trained herself to do that, but her soul had rarely been so tested.

"Administrator," the Empress called. "Your power—you must cleanse Cicero's soul or you will all perish." She realized only after she spoke that she had used the proper second-person pronoun. But—she could forego that vanity in this instance.

Although Hegewisch had eventually decided to follow, she dragged the limp body behind her. She did not appear to hear the Empress.

Don't worry, I'll take my time. I'm learning from my mistakes. I have to draw it out to get any relief.

Cicero's horse reared back to strike with its hooves at the figures thronging it. Cicero rolled onto the narrowing strip she cleared before, the unknown soldier rolled with her. The island began to close. Cicero howled and smashed her axe down; the blackness drew away, but only temporarily.

"DIE," she said. But what she struck did not die.

"Administrator, swiftly," said the Empress. "Joliet, do something useful and fetch her!"

The distance between her and Hegewisch seemed to stretch. No, it did stretch. Hegewisch grew smaller and smaller, although she continued to drag the body behind her on a dogged path toward them.

"Hegewisch!" shouted the unknown soldier.

"I don't need her." Cicero spat into the miasma. She wiped her face with the back of her glove. "She can't handle my despair anyway."

"Even if she can only siphon part of it—Cicero, you are the only one with the necessary strength."

"Aye, milady," said Cicero, suddenly effecting a bizarre cockney accent. "'Tis the truth, ain't it poppet?"

A DuPage lunged for Cicero and Cicero swayed too sluggishly to react. The Empress dove in front of her and parried the creature with her blade, but more pressed inward. "Cicero!

Centurion Cicero, remember your training!" Cicero had faded fast, too fast, she had seemed so strong and stolid until but a few seconds ago, no gradual decline, she had burned herself at full percentage until she simply lacked any more to burn. Hegewisch had become pathetically tiny.

Let me chew her, Your Munificence. It's the death she deserves.

"Let it be known." Cicero clapped her hand against her cheek. "Let it be known, Your Munificence. Let it be known. Let it be known, in the end, of all your servants, I was the greatest."

But Cicero, how can that be true? I'm right here.

"The Handmaiden... too weak. Cook, a coward. DuPage... tainted. But me. But me...!"

Too many DuPages. They thronged. The Empress could not keep them back, yet they swelled only slowly, without great effort to push past her, allowing the gradual pressure of their combined weight to do all the work for them.

"It's time!" Cicero shouted, swirling her halberd around herself like a show performer or a character in crass entertainment, "it's time for my FINISHING MOVE!"

She had well and truly lost it. "Cicero, you have no such ability."

"I do now." And she sprang a hundred feet into the air.

For a moment she became lost in the miasma that swirled all the way to the top of the rotunda. Her uniform, mostly black, could not stand out, and she shrank to a size equivalent to the still-distant Hegewisch.

Oh what the hell is this. Come back here Cicero. You can't just jump into nonexistence what the hell—

"REASON—"

Cicero's voice, tiny, at the end of a tunnel, traveled to them.

The Empress heard that word and started to tremble.

"RECTITUDE—"

Out of the above blackness shot Cicero.

The Empress's vision misted. Yes... yes...!

Oh what the hell. This dumb book again? This reason rectitude shit again?

"JUSTICE!" Cicero and the Empress screamed in unison. A swell of strength surged into the Empress's own breast. Cicero was right. Cicero had always been right. She was the Empire's greatest creation, its most flawless outcome, the embodiment of the ideal Puella Magi she had

striven to attain, one both strong and learned, pure and just, the hours she had spent with Cicero, lecturing her, teaching her, the potential putty she had found in a wisecracking young girl trotting on her pony from Cincinnati who could smash a big hole but had little else to speak of, that girl who the Empress had molded, formed, shaped, detailed, composed into a sculpture worthy of any Michelangelo, these words of Christine de Pizan roared in a final cry of triumph, DuPage corrupted, Cook corrupted, Joliet corrupted, Cicero remained, Cicero proved the enterprise had worthy goals, that even with a rotten center the Empire could create good, this strength she felt inside her was hope—HOPE—that truest expression of HOPE, Cicero, Cicero the Empress could love you no more were you her own daughter, for you were, a soulless golem like one of Dr. Cho's but while her homunculi trended toward wicked depravity you trended toward the light of God and understanding, and together you will usher forth the rebirth of the Empire, NOW!

Her Blade of Endless Regents and Cicero's Axe of Endless Servants struck together, as one, united in purpose and power. Everything that was black and damned flashed white.

This was a Stroke to counteract the Dolorous.

This was the Fisher King revived. These were his lands set in order.

This was the fragment shored against the ruins.

The Empress had never felt such power, not with all her armies arrayed before her. She knew then what was writ in the ancient texts was true. Evil could be destroyed. Hate could come apart in pieces. She had sought so long for this emotion, this unmingling of what she hated and what she loved; and as she thrust the emotion from her own heart she thrust her sword into its physical embodiment. Die, DuPage. Die you old ailment, you persistent malady. Here is your panacea!

She felt momentarily faint as her slash subsided. She knelt and balanced her head upon the hilt of her blade as she drove it straight down. The sky opened above her and the pale thieved fire of a Cheshire moon-smile bathed them from the heavenly spheres. She sensed no blackness in her field of vision; everything glowed white, so much so it blinded her and forced her to squint. She exhaled with exertion and turned to her servant, her comrade, her friend, her daughter, her sister, Cicero. Cicero also knelt. It was clear by the state of her Soul Gem she had expended every last ounce of energy.

"Cicero. Cicero!" The Empress pressed her hands against Cicero's head and raised it. "Cicero, you are everything I wanted to create. Cicero! Do you see Her? Do you see Her?"

Cicero's black irises rippled. Her sight set on something over the Empress's shoulder. "I... She..."

"It's Her you see, Cicero, it's God Herself. You're worthy, Cicero, you are worthy of me and you are worthy of Her." The Empress grew aware of a wetness on her face, it was tears, real tears, tears she had not shed in many decades.

"DuPage..."

"DuPage is dead, we've irradiated this world of her presence, our Stroke was absolute—Cicero! You are loved. You are loved!"

The Empress wished she could see. That glimmer that lurked in Cicero's eye, the reflected image of God, the sensation of divine beauty tingled against the back of her neck. What did she look like? Hegewisch had described her, unsatisfactorily, as "kinda plain," but the Empress could not believe such rot. She turned and of course nothing but the glowing whiteness greeted her, it was not her time, if ever her time could occur, and so she was denied the privilege of sight that Cicero had so rightfully earned.

"Tell me, Cicero, tell me, what does She look like? Please, you must let me know. Even a single word... A single word...!"

Cicero's jaw hung open, her tongue trembled, the Empress could see the word forming, with almost as much corporeality of the final words of the Handmaiden inside that wretched labyrinth.

The word she spoke was—

"Don't you dare blame me for this!"

That wasn't Cicero's voice, although it had synced so well with the Empress's expectations for her to speak. Out of the white at Cicero's back appeared a figure, still dragging a body behind it—Hegewisch.

"This was your fault from the start. You idiot, you moron, how can you be so weak? How can you be a god and be so weak? How can you have changed one bad thing in this world and called your work finished? How can you look at *me* for what I did when you let this and all of it happen? Did you think your stupid blueberry friend could stop it? Did you? Did you?"

Cicero vanished in the Empress's arms.

[20/57]

So. The Assumption. Cicero carried to heaven.

"Answer me. Answer me. Madoka Kaname, answer me. Answer me. Answer me. Madoka Kaname. Answer me. Answer me! Answer me. Why did you let this happen? Answer me. Why have you let all of this happen. Answer me. Do you actually have any power at all? Answer me—and you're gone."

"Silence... silence thy blasphemies, Administrator. Give thanks for thy sinful life and the benison thou art allowed to witness."

The Empress wiped her eyes. Things became much clearer; she realized most of the blinding glow came from her tears. She noticed beside her, at her knee, a body turned facedown... It was the unknown soldier.

Dead. Her gem, shattered.

She could not make sense of this body. When did she die? She had cowered near the Empress almost as Joliet had. That was her final memory of this small, unknown soldier. She ought to have been protected, how had this...

Hegewisch saw her too. "Midlothian," she said. Her face crumpled in bitterness. "Midlothian. So Cicero gets to go to heaven and here you are, dead. There's justice. There's your reason and rectitude." She let go of the body and swung her attaché case against her own head. "FUCK." She kicked the tuxedo body and the tuxedo body gurgled a little life.

Crawling catlike came Joliet from some undetected corner, a black smudge on the everlasting whiteness. Behind her, as though she brought it with her, came a black line, spreading, a circle around them, closing slowly.

A piece of the dome creaked, snapped, and broke against the ground. The blackness swallowed it and continued.

It's not the world of a millennia past, King Arthur. Heroism alone can't kill me.

The Empress watched only the ground between her feet, where the corpse of the unknown soldier lingered on her periphery. The incandescence had already begun to fade.

"Thou did not exist one thousand years ago, DuPage."

There's a part of me, now, that has. And of course, you're not that old either.

"This is, hhhh, this is when we need to run," said Joliet. She pointed at the gaping cavity at the top of the rotunda. "There's an escape."

Everything in the Empress's mind darkened. Her face went slack and she scraped her swordpoint idly against the tile. She felt the bead form in her brain, that deadly little bead.

She reached through her skull and crushed it like a pomegranate so its fluid ran down her fingers. "Joliet. Thou must fight."

"W, whhh, what?"

"Thou art a servant of this Empire and thou shalt do its bidding. Just as Cicero did, to the uttermost."

Joliet stared back, blank, but not blank enough to stop her from keeping just beyond the encroaching line of the blackness.

"Didst thou not hear? Hath thy feline ears gone deaf? Thou cringing, sniveling blot, thou wretched useless being, hath thou ever had a single mote of courage in thy self-parodic frame?"

"Uh... I..."

The Empress reached out and seized her by the hair. She brought Joliet's face against the iron plating of her kneecap. "ANYTHING? ANYTHING, JOLIET? HATH THOU EVER DEMONSTRATED ANY WORTH? Cicero did her duty and died without question in the war against evil, what is it thou hast done?"

She struck Joliet's face with the hilt of her blade. She flung her away, her mere sight suddenly disgusting, repulsive, inducing of nausea, she a withered lump in comparison to lordly, ascendant Cicero, and Joliet ostensibly the product of her own womb—ha!—well, the second contributor to her creation had admittedly been lacking in value. And the other Centurions suspected she were merely another creation of Dr. Cho's, one who used her magic to forget her own origins—if only! If only the Empress could disown such failure so readily. Cicero had risen from garbage, from the dregs of a society on tilt, unlearned, willful in her pugnacious ignorance, contrary to all attempts at edification; and yet the Empress had formed her clay into greatness. With so much more time and so much more control over Joliet, how had her shape turned so unseemly? What ingredient in the one proved absent in the other? Joliet's brothers, seventy years dead, had been unremarkable but not slime.

"Fight! Make thyself useful! Idiot girl!" Every strike eased the bubbling beads. "Even if one's body fails, the will can always be mastered! And is thy power, so graciously granted thee, perhaps not the exact thing necessary against such an evil? She may be an abomination, but if she truly bears the mind of DuPage—have her destroy herself!"

"I, I can't, my powers, hhh, hhhhaah, they're not that strong..."

The Empress kicked her in the stomach, a useless gesture due to the Empress's own ill-conceived Blessing, but her foot lifted Joliet into the air and flung her toward the boundary of the black. DuPage had laughed the entire time.

More of this. More please. I could watch this for hours. This is what I need.

If this Empire crumbled, let it crumble entirely. If Cicero had died, nothing else of it harbored worth—save perhaps the Administrator. No, the Administrator faltered too, she raged at the God she ought to glorify; let her crumble as well, it would only take a few years before the Empress found another with her power, another better suited to the mantle of prophet.

Joliet crawled on hands and knees away from the DuPage who leaned forward to laugh in her face, but their world had yet again constricted. The whiteness had all died and the Empress could see that Cicero's final attack had left most of the rotunda intact, had not carried even to its ends. Cicero had fought stronger in ordinary combat. Her soul had been exhausted too much. The sickness strengthened in the Empress's stomach.

"N, no... I won't fight, I promise... Don't hurt me," said Joliet, capable apparently of suppressing her stammer when groveling for her pathetic life.

The mother-daughter spat's over already? I guess nothing lasts long anymore. She placed her palms upon Joliet's cheeks and Joliet refused to even resist.

Wait.

No.

It was—it was a momentary flight of fancy—she lost her mind for a moment—NO.

The Empress rushed forward with her blade raised and brought it down on DuPage. No matter what she believed she could not allow the murder of her child, no! Joliet was still young, only fourteen, her development had only begun, she could be salvaged, she could be someone worthy of love rather than hate. The bile in her belly burned as she divested the DuPage creature of its limbs. She turned and swung again to sever the torso. The head fell laughing and when she reached for Joliet the hands still gripping her cheeks turned to black ink. Joliet screamed and reached for the liquid, miring her fingers with it.

"No, stop—It hurts, IT HURTS. Stop it, stop it, I'll do anything, ANYTHING!"

(The Empress had allowed this. She had wanted this. Her last-second change of heart shifted no blame.) She stood over the writhing Joliet, unsure what to do. Joliet's outfit had a high starched collar and its Blessing would prevent a clean decapitation to keep the black matter away from the gem hidden among her frills. She raised her blade anyway and aimed for the chin. But as the blade came down it bounced against the flailing cuff of Joliet's blouse and the Empress staggered back.

She tossed away her blade and dropped to Joliet's side. She reached for the blackness to pry it away. It would never hurt her, she thought, but as she groped for it she discovered her fingers passed through it as though it did not exist, as though either the matter or her person were intangible. She pawed Joliet's face but could not scrape even a drop of the blackness away, as her gauntleted hands rose they shined with the same unblemished metal luster as before.

What had she done? What had she done? What had she allowed to pass? Joliet screamed, and screamed, and kicked her feet, and writhed. Her back arched against the ground and every muscle in her body went taut. Like an incubus possession. Her cat tail became a rigid black line.

They're dying one after another.

Joliet held suspended in her arched position—then collapsed. The black fluid on her face drained into her mouth and nostrils. The face that remained behind was pale, wide-eyed, unresponsive. Her body did not move.

"Joliet... Christine." She jostled Christine's face. "Christine? Christine?" She gripped her own forehead.

The main thing that staved off hysteria was that Joliet had clearly not died. She remained in a transformed state. But the Empress had no idea how long her life's thread would remain uncut, with that vile matter inside her... She seized her discarded sword and rose. She turned to DuPage who stood before her, still bare.

"Perhaps," said the Empress, "perhaps my strikes to you are like those a plastic knife. Is that so? Perhaps it is. But, DuPage, I can inflict upon you a million of those strikes, ten million,

however many it takes to destroy you. I can strike at you for five years straight without tiring. Do you understand? This is what I can do to you."

Sure.

"Your only hope was to inflict such despair upon me by destroying everything I had. It must have satisfied you greatly to destroy my Centurions one after another, even my own daughter... Or whatever you've done to her. Do you intend to use her as a hostage? Is that it?"

Why would I do that.

"Do not act the idiot, DuPage, that's Cook's game and it even ill befits her at times. Jester you may have always been, but of the Shakespearean variety. This battle may rage centuries, but I will always win. I will outlast you. You cannot kill me. Whatever bind or jail you may place me in I will dig myself out of, even if it takes me a year gnawing at my prison to break it. Your defeat is preordained. And everything you took from me can be rebuilt."

For curiosity's sake, let's say I did use Joliet as a hostage, would that actually make you stop? A widened smile.

The Empress closed her eyes and considered. The distress she had felt to see her daughter hurt was already beginning to fade. The logical component of her mind knew the illogical DuPage, who desired misery above all else, would never allow Joliet to live; Joliet was, essentially, already dead. Her death was the Empress's fault, just as the unknown soldier coddled at her feet, just as, if she considered it, the deaths of Cicero and all her other soldiers.

But she had prepared for that. Sayaka Miki's warning, that her actions would cause a calamity that killed millions, had echoed in her ears an entire sleepless night. She had shored herself to this proposition. She had over a century of training. She could distance herself from any emotion, become cold to any heat; and in the greatest despair she found the most hope. Joliet was not her first child, nor the first to die; the death of her creations was something to which she steeled herself upon their creation.

"No," she said.

Thought so.

"You will die, DuPage. By my blade, unless some stronger champion arrives before I finish. Once you've killed everyone who matters to me, you'll have no further way to hurt me. So, will you kill Joliet now or wait until you're desperate?"

Millie, your speeches won't work on me. I've got an idea, you see? A really good one. I thought it up just now. I'm starting to feel a little excitement inside me, I'm starting to shake. See this hand? Even I can tremble, look.

Perchance DuPage possessed an aim in her rambling, perhaps she merely rambled. The Empress wondered which would happen first; the Empress struck DuPage to death or DuPage exhorted the Empress to suicide. Despite everything, the Empress placed her odds on the former.

"For God and for the world I will create," she exhaled, almost a whisper, as she raised her blade and prepared to commence the longest battle known to humankind.

Before she took a single step Joliet sputtered. Her body twisted, she gurgled, she turned onto her side and vomited. Black liquid burst out, mingled with saliva and stomach bile. She retched and coughed. Her legs cramped and fingers clenched.

"Christine—Joliet. Are you well? You have nothing more to fear. I will protect you."

Joliet reached out to her. She lifted herself, shaking. DuPage did not seem about to attack, so the Empress reached back and grabbed her hand. She helped her to her feet. She said, telepathically, because if DuPage were an archon she should not be able to perceive it: *I will distract her. Take Administrator Hegewisch and escape through the roof of the rotunda. If you move quickly you may be able to evade her—you'll only need to jump a short distance. Do you understand?*

She and her daughter were the same diminutive height. Their eyes met upon an even level. Joliet's were fearful, rattled. Whether DuPage gave her up willingly as part of a prank or whether Joliet somehow, somehow gathered the inner strength to fight the darkness, the Empress could not tell. If the former, DuPage would likely snatch her away again at leisure, and the Empress could do nothing for her. If the latter, then hope remained...

Joliet extended a hand and graced the Empress's cheek. "I'm so sorry," she said.

"I forgive you," said the Empress. "You're still young. You'll learn. You'll grow. Now run!"

She wheeled on DuPage. DuPage laughed as the Empress hacked at her, hewed her to pieces, struck at the black ground until she reformed anew to be hewed again, she offered no resistance save that same black laughter.

Why wouldn't she die? Cicero hypothesized DuPage was herself the miasma, which meant only the miasma's total destruction would destroy her; Cook would have been most suited to a task like that, but Cook had departed. Cook had never needed, or seemed to need, to learn anything; the Empress's teachings had never touched her. Cook abandoned her, after so many years of servitude. Cicero had died... They had all died.

The Empress had killed them.

Her useless strokes blew bubbles in her mind. Beads coagulated. She thought of their deaths, they suddenly and inexplicably turned hot on her again, she didn't understand. Cicero, the Handmaiden... all of them... the young, scared soldier she had slain with her own attack. Why were these images appearing constantly in her head?

And she was so eager to cast them aside. To dump them all in the trash and start anew. Those faces who had served her loyally, who had believed in her project, who had conformed to her rules. That was her mentality, disposable pawns, ten years to whip up a new batch... The next would be better. Was that what she told herself? Really? Without the corruption of DuPage, the next Empire will be stronger. She told herself that? She believed it?

Face it. Millicent. Face it. DuPage was not the source of the corruption. Face it. You've known this the whole time, haven't you? DuPage wasn't the source, it was you, Millicent Luce. The root itself. The Empire failed because you failed. Your talk had been pretty, you had read a lot of books, you effected an aura of intelligentsia; pedantry. Superficiality. You created what looked like an Empire but in reality you were unneeded. A vestigial, greedy tumor sucking its lifeblood with your voracious gulps. Willing to discard any host at any inconvenience... With that mindset, what could you ever build that mattered?

You led them to death. You deserved all of this. It was your Dolorous Stroke that unleashed this evil. Cicero was right, those accusing eyes, when she said it was your sin that caused this. Your sin, Millicent Luce. Your sin against the God you claimed to worship.

You are every hideous hypocrite this world has ever known.

King Arthur? King Arthur was history's most infamous cuckold.

She was the one who sinned. She and DuPage were one, unified, inextricably linked. Their hates wove together. Had there ever even been a DuPage? Truly? Had DuPage ever really existed? Or had it been merely a shard of the Empress herself, Millicent Luce a century and a half old having congealed decades upon decades of this world's strife into her own body finally plucking from it a shadowy breathing entity composed of what she could no longer contain. Mordred was Arthur's incestuous progeny. What was DuPage to the Empress? What were these souls she had let plink into the gutter?

She reeled. She tripped over the body of the unknown soldier. Why had she, bestowed so many years, groped so greedily for the years of the youth? What had she done? What had she done? What had she done? What had she done? What had she done? What had she done?

She was the poison. SHE WAS THE POISON.

Everything inside her became a husk. A terrible longing filled the emptiness. She seized her head and scratched at her scalp. She blinked and roved her eyes for something, something to hold onto, but the world was dropping fast away from her, and she knew, she knew there was only one way to atone, only one way do make up for all her amazing evil.

She tore at her sheath and pried at the inset gemstone. She could not pry it, not with her gauntlets, she had to pull them off, and even then her fingers refused to work, she scratched and scratched until her fingernails found a hold and plucked the thing out, but it then slipped from her hand and clattered to the ground, a momentous noise.

So many years and all for naught. So many years wasted. She had never deserved, never deserved, squandered everything, lied and manipulated, rotten and corrupt—

Her daughter stood nearby, watched, pale terror on her face, as Millicent Luce raised her blade and brought it down on the gem.

The soul severed. The body dropped. The magic unwound. Those Blessed became mortal anew. The Empire ended. The last survivor of the Civil War died.

The daughter, Christine, swooned with almost Victorian-style faintness as the bulwark of invulnerability dissolved. She held her hand against her face and mumbled: "What have I done, what have I done."

The thing that called itself DuPage looked upon the corpse. Its expression remained an ominous neutral. It did not, readily, have anything to say.

"I did it," said Christine, "I did what you wanted. Right? Right? That's what you wanted? I did it for you. You could never have done it without me, without my power. I just want to live. I know, I know you hate me. That's okay, I deserve it, I know. But please let me go, I'll dig a hole for myself somewhere far away and lie in it, nobody will ever see me again, that's all I want. That's all I want. Please. You can ruin the whole world, I'll just stay in my hole."

"As though begging will matter," said the Administrator.

The thing spoke. **Why**, it said. **Why won't it satisfy?**

"As though she'll show any leniency, you stupid stupid fucking idiot."

I don't understand. I don't. Why?

"Here she goes. Working herself into a lather. Then she'll trash us all. Don't worry though, I've got a secret weapon." But the Administrator said it apathetically, as though it didn't matter one way or another. She prodded the stirring body of Clownmuffle with her shoe.

I've known her for years. This moment should mean something. How? How? How? Is it the suffering? Did I need to make her suffer more first? Is that it? Like how I should have taken it slower with Aurora? Am I burning everything too quickly? Is that it? Its head lifted. It looked at Christine. Maybe I can practice on you.

Christine shriveled. She herself burned inside, uncertain whether she did the right thing or not, or even the smart thing, she was very confused, she wanted to go home, she wanted the entire world to fall away from her, she could live inside a box forever, if the entire world became a black spot she didn't care. She might have made an unbidden noise had not the thing's gaze fallen upon her with the same stark apathy of the Administrator, the words recited mechanically, minus feeling.

What will that matter, though. It's just you left. Maybe I can make you last a long time but you'll die sooner or later and then where will I be? I'll be alone. Cook will never come back. Nobody will ever come. I can't leave this place, I can only extend my miasma so far. I'll be alone and then where will I be? I'll be here. Ha.

The figure that represented DuPage had gradually begun to diminish. Since the final attack of Cicero its miasma had scattered, several spots of the original world shone through, and it curled forward both its back and arms to regard the corpse from a new horizontal angle, decided the new perspective changed nothing, and sank into its mire so that only the upper half of its head remained unsubmerged.

It blew bubbles in the tar a few moments, then sank entirely.

It coiled its uncertainly elongated body out elsewhere and encircled Joliet in its lithe, pale arms. It clamped a hand over Christine's mouth to muffle her shriek. **No sense worrying, not when I still have you to play with. Who knows? Maybe I'll find something fun in you yet.**

The Administrator kicked Clownmuffle, harder. "Hurry up and open your eyes you lazy ass. Do your big hero shtick *before* someone else dies."

Clownmuffle gripped her head and groaned.

About seventy crawling long-nailed fingers crept across the shivering Christine's face. **Your fear is tasty enough. You're so pathetic I can kick you again and again. Maybe you'll suffice. Maybe...** The DuPage thing clamped its teeth around one of Christine's cat ears and Christine wriggled and made a muffled wince of pain. **Us together in my little prison. I can produce enough energy to keep you alive, I can make you use your magic so you forget your own misery again and again... Maybe you're perfect. Maybe you're eternity.**

Its endless hands maneuvered Christine's head so she looked at it.

God. That's a sad eternity.

It let go of Christine, folded its arms back into itself, and shrank into a single DuPage form wearing its despair like a cloak.

Everything fell silent save Christine's whimpers and Clownmuffle's groans. Only the Administrator stood, her attaché case swung slowly back and forth as she looked up at the hole in the rotunda and the partial moon beyond.

The DuPage-entity sloshed its palms against its face. When parts of its skin came in contact with itself, they stuck and pulled apart as though welded by adhesive. At one point its hand passed completely into its cheek and was absorbed only to resurface through the base of its jaw.

Wait. A dim flicker in the pitch black eyes. **You're right. You're right. You're absolutely right. You said it. Joliet, you said it. Say it again. Say it.**

Christine froze in terror and looked to the Administrator as though she might know what exactly the DuPage-thing wanted her to say. The Administrator shrugged. "Hhkkkhhh... hhhh?"

I'm not trapped here. I'm not confined to this city. It rose. Layers of itself flowed off its body in thick folds. **If it were any other city, sure. That's the way it goes. Thank you, thank you, thank you Millie. Thank you and your ridiculous ambitions.** It swept up the corpse in its arms and hugged it, sucking it halfway into its body. **Washington. Washington! Chicago, St. Louis, Washington!** It relinquished the corpse and the corpse schlucked to the ground. It began to dance, or flow, in long gallant ebbs, its legs immobile, welded together into a single pillar, body bent the shape of a boomerang. **"Ruin the whole world." That's**

what you said. That's what you said, Joliet. I heard it I heard it. If Aurora doesn't satisfy, if Millie doesn't, then what about the whole world... I can extend this reach. I can make everyone feel what I want them to feel. That's right. That's right! That was my wish. Aaaaah, that was so long ago, but that was my wish... That's why I came back. I can make my wish a reality. And—and— It looked to the Administrator. —And perhaps even beyond the boundaries of this world.

"Hhkkk, hhh, yeah... Yeah... Do that..."

This sick, stupid, dry world. Why should I only hate the people I know? The people I don't know are all the same. Yes, this is good, this is right, I can feel it inside me, this is what I need to do. This is what I woke the fuck up for. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes...!

It seized Christine again and oozed pieces onto her.

I'll need you. That's right. You'll be important. I know exactly how. Your power only works if you touch people? We'll change that. I have enough energy inside me, you'll be amazed how much energy someone like me can have. I can turn you into something worthwhile, Joliet. We're going to do this together, Joliet, you big idiot, you stupid coward, we worked together to kill your mom, let's work together again. I've got something better for you than a hole in the ground. Let's crash this world to the ground, eh? Eh? Whaddya say?

"...Y, yeah. Yeah. Okay. I don't care. I don't ffffucking care. Let's do it. Let's do it." Christine eyes swirled in circles. "Let's do it! Let's do it!"

Out of the inky mire rose new forms. As the blackness washed off them it became clear they were the members of the United States Senate, thronged in a circle around the rotunda. They all began to clap.

"Let's do it," they said. "Congratulations," they said.

You too, Junior Administrator. You're in on it too. I need you. I can see it in your eyes. You're done with this whole fucking thing. I can see it. You said it to me earlier, let's kill God, were you begging for your life? Yeah, yeah. But I can tell, you didn't say THAT particular thing for no reason, I can see it. I can sense certain things, I can. Let's fucking wreck everything. That's what I say. Let's fucking wreck shit, tear it all down, and maybe something better will show up in its place, by that point I won't care, I can finally die or sleep forever, the world won't need me anymore. Fuck I'm giving a speech. Fuck fuck fuck, okay this is your first job Joliet, if I start giving a speech tell me to shut the fuck up.

Christine, mouth taut in a misshapen grin, nodded quickly and eagerly.

But the Administrator only shook her head. The body had finally roused: Clownmuffle sat up, abruptly, as though galvanized by electricity, and spat some remnant froth. She wiped her mouth with her sleeve while the Administrator said: "And on cue, here she comes. Sorry DuPage. It sounds like a plan, honestly. Fuck this whole stupid everything. Maybe the world needs to get truly bad again before God decides to get off her ass and do something. But I'm

afraid it's not going to happen, because what we have before us is a girl who doesn't give a shit about fate or anything, who will destroy you without much effort at all."

Clownmuffle blinked and took in her surroundings. "Handmaiden," she said.

"Dead," said the Administrator. "Her spell is broken, as you can see." She tossed Clownmuffle her Soul Gem.

Clownmuffle transformed. Instead of the shredded tuxedo she had been wearing, she wore a brand new glittery replica.

"She's dead," said Clownmuffle. She wore the same face the DuPage-thing wore after the death of Millicent Luce.

"Don't worry, there's some new evil thing for you to kill. Look."

Clownmuffle looked. The Administrator indicated the wreckage of the Capitol rotunda, the thick miasma that coated it like paint, the applauding Senators, the rising forms of the members of the House of Representatives, and the rippling waves of the DuPage-thing.

After a few seconds the Administrator realized Clownmuffle wasn't looking where she pointed.

She was looking at Joliet.

Her face was that of someone who had fallen in love.

END FOURTH ARC

Only in an Arithmetical Ratio

HELL ARC

A door opened onto a dark space. A switch flipped. For five seconds nothing happened. Then something sparked and yellow light plus dull buzz made real a sofa, a television, drawn curtains, a mound of clothes, a kitchen refrigerator and sink, an ominous hallway and a few doors at the end of it.

"Power's on at least—Mmnh—"

Three voyagers labored pendulously inside, one after another they collapsed. Against the kitchen counter, upon the sofa. The lights flickered. The Witch remembered Hemet's songs: *When the power's out, in the heart of man...* Those songs were about this corner of the world, after all.

"Ta—! Filthy—the miasma has *coated* me in soot—what about you two?"

Facedown against the sofa cushion, her body unraveling onto the carpet, the Nazi murmured: "Food."

"If the power's on—perhaps we'll have hot water too—a shower—!"

"FOOD."

"Food?" The Baroness lifted her head from the fridge, leaving a dirty black mark. "Well—"

"I need anything. Anything."

"Désolée désolée ma petite amie—I'm afraid our larders have run low—"

"No. No. You *said* you'd go to the store today. That's what you said, I heard it." The Nazi twisted her face to entreat the Witch for affirmation. "Didn't she say it? Didn't she, didn't she?"

"Ah—But I did mention, I do believe—the shelves were more or less bare..."

"Anything. I'll eat fucking anything. I'll eat fucking you if you're not fucking careful!"

"Now, now, my protégé—That swearing, certainly excessive—"

"Oh shut up, shut up, shut up shut up. Take your FREAKING hot shower. FUCK I'm so hungry." The Nazi gripped her stomach and, in a gesture either of total desperation or total melodrama, gnawed the couch cushion.

The lights flickered and went out. The conversation quieted and in the dwindling effervescence they turned their faces together toward the bulb. A pack of wild dogs woofed

on the street below, or they might have been something else. The Witch became aware of her continuous heaving breath.

A strand of electricity cracked between two filaments and the bulb resuscitated. The constant hum resumed and the hounds below skittered slipping across the ice until they woofed into a different alley.

"I—I do believe—shall take that shower before the opportunity eludes me." The Baroness slid across the walls and disappeared into the dark.

"Have fun," the Nazi whispered once the frozen pipes up and down their tenement squealed. She and the Witch oozed in the living room for several minutes before the voice of the Baroness cried:

"Ah—! It's warm—it's warm—! *Slightly* brown, but warm—Come come, let us not waste this chance." Her head poked from the doorway at the end of the hall. "HMMMMMM—? A good hot bath will do you both good."

Warming up would only make a deeper bite when cold returned. The best defense was to freeze. At a certain temperature your corpse body could not longer distinguish thermometer extremes. They merged into a single feeling, hot, cold.

The Nazi betrayed no enthusiasm at the prospect either. After the Baroness harrumphed into the bathroom, she checked her wrist as though she had a watch and lolled her head toward the Witch: "What's the time."

"I don't know."

"Close to midnight right? Right?"

A flash of the Nazi's old grin. She crawled up the sofa to an end table where she seized a remote. She mashed the buttons until the television they stole from the vacated room next door defrosted and unfocused blobs of color fritzed across the screen. The sound came before the image: a low, funereal soundtrack muted as though heard only through several layers of wall. The disconnected blobs converged into an empty podium in front of a blank black surface.

"I thought you said you wouldn't watch that show anymore," said the Witch.

"Anything so I don't have to think about how hungry I am." The Nazi shambled into a seated position and leaned over her knees to rub her hands together. Nonetheless her stomach squelched and the vigor in her face contorted as she gripped her middle. The Witch, finally beginning to recover from the night's hunt, hoisted herself onto the sofa too while the Baroness's screechy singing voice pierced the walls coincidentally in tune to the death march music from the TV.

The Witch hated this show. She did not understand it but she hated it. Nonetheless she could never help but watch whenever it came on, which happened every day at noon and midnight. It always showed the same podium with the same black background. If you started watching

early enough, before the camera zoomed in, you would see that in front of the podium, seated in several rows of chairs, were men and women well dressed, heads bowed, some with laptops, others with devices. A solitary American flag hung to the side and a pair of pillars framed the outskirts of the room. The floor was the same black as the wall, and a sign hung from the podium that read:

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

The show always started the same way, timed to perfection, and even without a functional clock the Witch had watched the program enough to time the opening act to the music.

Thus, she held a hand over her eyes when the Press Secretary sprouted from behind the podium to fling her hands out and cock her head and beam at her audience with the same hideous face she always wore. The first time the Witch watched the show, this action had no effect on her, in fact she laughed at its silliness juxtaposed against the pomp and circumstance of the venue, but as the newest episode of the show came out every twelve hours and each began the same way she slowly developed a reaction, she stopped wanting to see the Press Secretary emerge, something about the way her face looked sat poorly in her stomach, and the way her hands moved, and it was only when one night she had a dream in which she stared at that empty podium, stared and stared and stared at it, and woke with a start with the Press Secretary emerged not behind the podium but in front of it, that the Witch started to cover her face when it happened in real life.

The Nazi, she noticed, also closed her eyes during this part.

The Press Secretary never made a sound when she emerged, so only when she began to speak did they know they could look again. "HIIIIIII, efurryone~!"

"Hi, Madame Press Secretary," the Witch and the Nazi said together. They looked. The Press Secretary clutched her podium and leaned toward the camera smiling and happy. It had somehow taken ten or twenty episodes for the Witch to recognize her as Centurion Joliet from the Chicago Empire. Her distinctive face had not changed, and the wriggling cat ears and tail were no excuse for forgetting. She had carried Joliet on her broomstick, after all. Away from that lake. Joliet had sobbed the entire time, first from fear, second for being a coward. She kept mumbling: "I should die, I should die." Now she said: "I wub you all so much, myah! Myah, myah!" She batted her hands like paws. "Another whhhhhhISKERful night here in Pawshington, but, but other places aren't so lucky-ducky, meow-meow~"

"Ahaheh, fuck you bitch." The Nazi made a rude gesture at the television.

"Before we begin our press bwiefing let's give a round of applause for all the good work our new pwesident's been doing, meow-meow~! Yaaaay, Pwesident!" She clapped, and although the Nazi continued to spout obscenities, she and the Witch clapped too.

"Another, anofur weally *weally* busy day. We're all so sad about the twagedy in Miami. Weally, weally sad!" She balled her paw-hands under her eyes to mimic tears, although she maintained her sheepish grin. "Myah! *Furtunately* you're super lucky-ducky that Pwesident

DuPage is here to fix efurrything, meow-meow~" She winked and stuck out her tongue. She could not be more hideous. Her appearance sickened and her jerky prancing motions to either side of the podium, almost a choreographed dance, heightened the disdain.

"I'd eat you too cat bitch, ahaheh, ahaheh!" The Nazi bounced on her cushion. "Roast you on a spit, ahaheh. Turn you over a flame."

"The Pwesident has put the biggest and bestest-est minds on the case, meow-meow~ We've uncovered lots and *lots* of great information, meow-meow~ In fact, we can *confirm* that, that the weports of scaaaaary spooooooky monsters showing up in kitties, I mean cities, I mean—well I've gone and wost my twain of thought. Stupid me~ I'm such a dummy, aren't I? Meow-meow~"

"Cook her, suck out her brains. Ahaheh."

The Witch, despite certain misgivings, also would not mind seeing the Press Secretary diced into mincemeat. Everything about her stirred resentment. At first the Witch thought it had to do with an ingrained hatred of the American political machine, its fascistic defense of a capitalistic system that stomped on the livelihoods of the many to the benefit of a few. But there was something visceral, personal about what she felt toward the Press Secretary. It lit a fire inside her she long feared frozen, and she understood the Nazi's magnetism toward watching: As long as she hated, as long as she despised, she had a reason to keep watching, to keep surviving each day to despise some more the next night, and in a way her hate became a twisted form of hope.

"Anywho~ Time to answer questions from the pwess, meow-meow~ How about, uh, how about you first, meowster?"

A sallow press man stood. "Does President DuPage have a comment on Governor Brown's threats to secede the state of California...?"

"You bet. You bet, meow-meow~ After all, our Pwesident is committed to maintaining our Union and keeping our country stwong and fwesh! So here's what she had to say: She said, ahem, quote: 'Governor Brown can come and fight me one-on-one. Do it, bitch.' Wowza~ Our President sure has a fiery *dispurrsition*, meow-meow~"

Another reporter stood. "Reports indicate that Public Enemy One Valerie Jefferson was sighted in Chicago. Do you plan to mobilize the armed forces to capture her?"

"Oh no, oh no oh no! Miss Snifferson is much, much too stwong for our military, bless their hearts. However, the Pwesident's offer stands: A replacement for the Pawshington Monument to whoever brings her head... Myah~!"

Another reporter. "These so-called 'monsters,' or 'demons,' or 'wraiths,' as they're called, is there any connection between them and the reports of young women fighting with magic—"

"Uuf!" The Press Secretary tripped and fell. She upended entirely, so that her head struck the ground and her legs twisted in the air. The podium wobbled. Everyone could see her panties.

Another reporter stood. "Madame Press Secretary, what is the President's comment on the reported Chinese-Japanese alliance...?"

"Oh that." The Press Secretary stood. "Our frisky Pwesident prepared a, pwepared a statement for that too~"

"Look at that," said the Nazi. "Who is she trying to trick? Ahaheh. It's *so* blatant. I can't stand it. Who voted for these clowns? Where's the black guy? Bring back the black guy."

The Witch didn't understand that part either. Nobody really did. Some time in January the President just became President DuPage. The Nazi, a born and bred Canadian, might be forgiven for thinking an election happened, but the Witch had spent too much time declaiming the American government not to understand it. Something had gone wrong, she knew it had to do with the Chicago Empire, but she knew not why or what. The reporters flocked to Washington when it happened and returned with lukewarm optimism: "New President DuPage Promises Peace and Prosperity." Every mainstream rag, for the first time ever, approached the situation with the same bias. Nobody seemed to treat the transition as abnormal. Nobody seemed to mind that the new president was a 25-year-old Canadian. The military, the Senate, the judiciary, nobody acted out of line, and at first the world continued as it always had. Other nations, baffled, sent envoys, and the envoys returned with the same ambiguity as the journalists. Nobody understood anything.

Somebody screamed. Several reporters scurried aside as a man with a flapping tie surged forward, raised a gun, and fired three or four times into the Press Secretary's body. This was also a daily occurrence. The Nazi stood and cheered as the Press Secretary bounced against the black wall and left her blood running down it in a smear. The disgruntled gunman leapt onto the platform, his hand was shaking, he aimed for the gem, enough rumors had cropped up online that they began to aim for the gem, but they invariably missed. The Press Secretary hammed up her wounds, swooning against the wall, blurring blood. His hand shook, she glanced at him with her unwell smile, the bullet missed her completely. The camera made it hard to tell but it looked as though he jerked his hand aside at the last moment.

"Oh no, whatefur shall I do~!"

Then she made a horrid retching noise. Her eyes went blank and wide and her body convulsed. Her mouth hung open, massive and dark, and her head rolled back. An arm shot out of it, followed by a second, they reached and gripped the sides of the Press Secretary's head for support as an entire body began to emerge.

The online theorists memetically referred to this figure as "Schrodinger," because she only appeared once the cat was half-dead. (Those less hip with the lingo sometimes referred to the Press Secretary herself as Schrodinger, only to get heckled into oblivion.) Schrodinger, who the Witch knew as Clownmuffle, tipped her top hat, drew a curtain from its depths, and whipped it over the assassin. In an instant no assassin remained. The audience of reporters stood and applauded, and Schrodinger bestowed them with a theatrical bow and a jaunty bounce on her heels.

"Yeah. Yeah! Ahaheh." It became unclear whether the Nazi clapped and laughed for the assassin or Schrodinger or both. Either way, she never seemed to recognize Schrodinger as

the decaying, vomiting corpse she encountered one New Years night in riverside Ottawa. Had not the Witch known her before her injury, when she wore the same white top hat and tuxedo, she might not have recognized her either.

Operatics concluded, Schrodinger attended her bloodied kitten, who held a hand skyward and babbled some dying-Egypt-dying nonsense without losing her gurgly smile. One whip of the curtain and the Press Secretary's wounds were restored. Schrodinger gave a final bow, waved away shouts of encore, and climbed back into the Press Secretary's mouth, slamming it shut behind her as she disappeared.

The cat tightened her floppy bowtie, smoothed her skirt, and stepped back to the podium. "Ahhhhhh, hem. Kkh." She rubbed her throat, turned and spat, then licked the back of her hand with a long tongue. "Akkkhem! As for the gwim tidings in Detwoit, our snuggable Pwesident issued *apaw*logies but added: 'If they wanted to live, they shouldn't have hanged themselves...'"

"What—What—! I said—"

The Baroness, swathed in steam, tromped across the hall. Her loose bathrobe flowed around her as she stormed to the television, held a hand over her eyes, and fumbled for the switch, which she pressed before the Nazi had a chance to realize what she was doing.

"I said—no more of that ugly program—You *promised* me—"

"Hey. Hey! I was watching." The Nazi fumbled with the remote but her numb fingers dropped it instead. She shot a glare at the Baroness. "You can't tell me what I can and can't watch."

"You *know* that program never helps anything—!"

"YOU never help anything. You fat cow! Where's the food? Where's the food? All I asked for was food, you say ah ah ah yeah I'll get you the food, where is it? No food. No food!"

"This—this—has nothing to do with the food—"

"It sure does. It sure does. It's the least you could do, you lazy useless cow. Cow! You stand around when we fight, you don't pull your weight, *I'm* the one who does all the work, the least you could do was find food, but you can't even do that, do I have to do that too?"

"I am a support unit, know you no tactics? Support—I heal—I increase your vitality—vim—*vigor*—Without my aid you would never even peel yourself off the couch, my protégé—"

"Shut up. Shut up, shut up, I can't STAND your stupid way of talking, IT'S NOT CUTE ANYMORE."

"Oh—? What would you have me do—abandon everything that makes me, me—? Turn myself into a sulking argumentative little buffoon like you, mademoiselle—?"

The Witch, meanwhile, stared at the dead screen with the afterimage of the Press Secretary burned into her eyeballs. The air became dense, the steam filled it from the bathroom, her

chest tightened and her eyes watered. The pair's screams bounced back and forth. Her ears throbbed, she clamped her hands to them. Once they started, they would not stop for hours. It would intensify its pitch until she wished death to them both. Especially so late. The program turned off, she suddenly wanted nothing more than sleep, but this racket could overcome even her tremendous fatigue.

Plus she hated their voices.

She snuck outside, the pair too engrossed in their world to notice or care. It would be dangerous to go downstairs alone, so she opened the window at the end of the corridor and stepped outside. She landed on her broomstick and lifted herself higher and higher, the air purifying with altitude until she could close her eyes and breathe deeply and decompress her lungs. Despite everything they had raked a good haul that night, so she did not fear the waste of magic. She required these quiet, lonely moments to maintain sanity.

Ottawa had become black. Few lights shone, their apartment one of them, several isolated rooms scattered across its skyline, a few flickers in the corners. The streets, nonetheless, seethed, although the things that seethed did not qualify as human or living. She took care not to rise too high, because at a certain distance from civilization the coldness ebbed away, and if it did she could never force herself back down. She only needed to manage an elevation above the rooftops to stay protected from the threats below.

She flitted to the places where wifi sometimes worked, but tonight they did not work, so she could not check the latest comments from communities both magical and non concerning the Press Secretary's briefing. So she reclined against the broomstick and watched the stars as she coasted along the cityscape.

What happened? How did Clownmuffle wind up there? She told herself not to care. Even if the world collapsed around her, her life was better with Clownmuffle outside it.

She had thought, at first: Good. Let the fools in Washington run amok. Burn down this world. Unjust, unfair, built on the back of centuries of enslavement and repression. The revolutionary mindset. Tear everything down to build something new. A revolution was like lancing a boil, you had to split the skin to drain the pus. She didn't know. Now she wanted not to care. It overwhelmed her too much if she tried.

It had overwhelmed almost everyone. Ottawa had emptied of Magical Girls. On her radar, besides her and the Nazi and the Baroness (and they persisted solely due to unity), only a single blip remained: Gatineau.

She had not spoken to Gatineau after that night. But every time Clownmuffle appeared on the camera she wondered the same thing, that whatever Gatineau did to her in that pit led to her new home in the cat's maw. She had never liked Clownmuffle, hated her even, hated her to the point of obsession, but that hate had, perhaps mostly, stemmed from Clownmuffle's absurd sense of dignity. Now even that was gone.

Gatineau had not moved for three days. Her radar blip lingered in the exact same spot: her underground chamber. The lair into which she lured Clownmuffle. In the past months it had

become common for her to spend extended stretches there, but this period had stretched abnormally long.

Clownmuffle never needed her. Of course. Anyone could have known that. But in that cold land, in that overturned truck, she had deluded herself... In that white dead forest... she had tossed away a large part of herself to help her. Just as she had changed herself for Hemet, become what Hemet wanted her to be, she tore down that construction to be what Clownmuffle wanted instead. It had been so easy, in the end, to cast aside her indignation, her need for revenge, her philosophical standpoints. It had been, either cast them aside or break. She took the path of least resistance. She was weak.

She flew toward Gatineau's blip. She had a question.

The area around the entrance to the lair, a dense agglomeration of poverty, of course seethed with wraiths. But the Witch had better learned how to use her powers in the months since coming to Ottawa. Speed was key; no matter how many you killed, more always replaced them. She divebombed the alley where Gatineau showed them the entrance. The wraiths turned their distorted face toward her as though they expected her but they were only lesser wraiths, so she blasted them with several ribbons of magic and slammed against the unlocked cellar door. It split open, more wraiths shambled, but she already knew the spell to use against the wall of solid rock with which Gatineau sealed the entrance. "Defodio," she said, and a force issued from her wand strong enough to tunnel through.

She sped into the dark. Her radar operated in three dimensions, she had a decent idea how deep she needed to plunge before she reached the bottom. Led only by a spark of light at the end of her wand she descended.

Wraiths shambled down here, too. She had not consciously expected them, and to an extent she regretted her decision to plunge. As she reached the bottom and the sheer stone floor rose to greet her she waved her lit wand and cast flames upon the shadowy figures. There were not many, at least not like on the streets, between the buildings, in the homes.

Gatineau. Gatineau, I've come.

No response. She sped to the wall Gatineau had opened for them when they first visited, beyond which Gatineau waited.

Gatineau.

Why she descended she no longer knew, a whim or flight of fancy, perhaps it was yet again taking the path of least resistance, because at a certain point something always gave and the life you led became untenable and you needed to do anything, anything new, pursue any curiosity, rekindle any flame. She pounded her fist against the stone but it was stone and it hurt.

Gatineau I want to talk about Clownmuffle. About the girl you brought down here.

She'd been foolish to risk so much for this. The Baroness and the Nazi needed her. She wasn't as useful as the former or as strong as the latter, but without her they might not last much

longer. Not that she had a logical reason to feel desperate yet. But something about the air down here enclosed her, elevated her anxiety. Claustrophobia. Or agoraphobia. The darkness made it unclear which. It should have been neither, she was as accustomed to cramped hovels as open skyboxes. She zapped a wraith clustering close.

A subterranean rumble unbalanced her. She shoved her broomstick against the ground to steady herself as silt and small stones rained from an unseen above. The sheer stone wall began to part down the middle, a golden light burst through. It blinded her and she reeled back hands against her face. The light seemed to sear her skin but her skin did not change. The light seared the creeping things at her back and they squealed and burst.

A crucifix. A gigantic crucifix made of gold. Lined with inset diamonds. Whatever had once been inside this room had become it. A charred black form trembled upon it, arms splayed, body hanging. In a line on either side of it hung several others—from nooses.

"Gatineau," said the Witch, entering, hand palm-outward upon her forehead.

The walls were a mosaic. Penitent scenes played upon them, in opal, in emerald, in rhinestone.

"Gatineau. What have you done in here?"

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve bodies hanging.

The thirteenth, upon the cross, lifted its head. "Art—fille. One final expression, c'est manifique, ouais?"

"You killed them."

"No. No. Non. You are the same eediot as before. I would never. Death, it's useless? No? I have any other materials to use, I would use them. This is my final expression, it's because there's nothing left but death."

The Witch said nothing.

"They killed themselves. All of them. I knew nothing, I sensed nothing, yes? I believed the filth above could never drain down here, but I was the eediot now. Ironic, yes?"

Two mineral spikes burst from the ground. At first the Witch thought they sprung to pierce the body on the cross stigmata-style, but they stopped just before its face. On one was stabbed a cigarette and the other scraped for a spark to light it. A whorl of mouth opened and clamped the cigarette between its teeth and the tendrils retreated into the ground.

"So they found all this convenient rope down here?"

"Eediot. Look. Look."

The Witch looked. Truthfully, she had not observed the hanging corpses in much detail; she lacked the desire. But a slightly more detailed examination revealed a caved portion of forehead on each.

"They dashed their heads against my stones until they died. Tsah, they hated it so much. They were in so much pain. And I was unaware, unaware of their pain, I who believed to know them so intimately..." Although she spoke rapidly and with unbroken fluidity, the cigarette did not fall from her lower jaw, and a veil of smoke occluded her.

This vain creature probably only let her in as witness to this final work of art, whatever she believed it signified. The Witch lost hope she might learn anything about Clownmuffle, and her indecisive mind tilted toward the "you don't want to know anything about Clownmuffle" side of the spectrum. This was the sort of silly whim someone stressed out of their mind would take, nothing more. She supposed it provided an iota of closure when the blip on her radar inevitably died. Not that she cared, not that she cared.

"I think, yes, I think I could have protected this place. Not difficult? I could always separate it from the world above. So easy, so seemple. Bah. The layers of this world are thick. Human misery means so leettle to it. What happens above should never matter down here, oui?"

"I don't know," said the Witch. She looked for a way out. If she bolted, the stone doors might seal before she had a chance to escape. She did not detect magical intent in Gatineau's rambling, but one could never say for sure.

The next words stopped these formative plans: "Eet was your friend, you know? e."

"Clownmuffle."

"That name, that stuuupid name, I can only hear it, I can only hear her, what did she do to me, what did she do?"

"What did she do," asked the Witch.

"Nothing. She did nothing. I do not understand. Fille. She was exactly as I wanted her, exactly what I needed her to be. But it did not work, non? Somehow. I did not take what I wanted from her. She took it instead from me. I do not understand what she did."

Her will. Fate and everything twisted to her will. She chewed what she wanted, swallowed what she liked, spat out everything that displeased her. Any connection she forged with another human being was to increase her consumption. The Witch glimpsed her heart at her lowest point and destroyed her entire sense of self just to save her, to save Clownmuffle, and at the end Clownmuffle decided she no longer needed her and severed the tie. Malicious? Intentional manipulation? Or a beast with an instinctual bent to preserve its own life? A force of nature, a cycle of the universe, something undeniable and unalterable, on a constant loop of replenishment as long as it had the material vegetable, mineral, or animal to digest within its tides? Gatineau might not understand.

But the Witch understood perfectly.

"She tricked you," she said. "She lured you with her vulnerability."

The smoke slithered in a shroud.

"You thought you had control. Her strength surprised you..."

"Only one thing," said Gatineau. "She spoke only one thing. At the end of the day, after she had been everything I wanted, everything I craved, the spirit I desired, the finest I had ever possessed, far excelling my human collection, in the moment I was most madly in love with her—she said—'Oh.' She said—'Funny. It doesn't even matter to me anymore.'"

It made sense now. It came together. Epiphany. The cat wasn't the one who wanted to crush this world. Nor the Empire, or whoever donned the mask of President DuPage. Clownmuffle, Clownmuffle, she had found a conduit into the souls of every living human on this planet, she had found endless veins into which she could leech, so she sucked the world dry like a citrus fruit, like the frozen orange she kicked into the Witch's face in that grove the night Hemet died. The cat belonged to Schrodinger, after all. Schrodinger decided whether it lived or died, whether it spoke or remained silent. Clownmuffle, Clownmuffle.

Gatineau tossed her head against the cruciform and laughed. Her cigarette flew out of her mouth and the ceiling swallowed it. She laughed, and laughed, and laughed. She laughed and sobbed. She sobbed, and sobbed, and sobbed.

"I neglected them, I let them wither, my friends, my lovers, I could only think of her, of that eediot, that eediot... And so I have lost everything, and she has gained it all!" And she laughed, and sobbed, and laughed. "This is my final statement! Regard it! Regard! Fille, fille, look at my final expression! Know that although she took everything from me, she could not take what waited at the bottom of my Pandora's Box self, that still a dreg of art remained, the art of my soul! I sacrifice what remains of me. I sacrifice it for this art, this pharaoh's tomb. Regard it. Etch it into your memory, a lesson solely for you, fille, my fille."

The Witch regarded it. She stood among its tactless melodrama for what felt a long time. A token of respect to one who suffered as she had.

Then she went home and the tomb sealed behind her.

At home the lights had yet again extinguished. She let herself into a square of almost total blackness slotted inside a city of almost total blackness. No hum, no dogs or other creatures barked. A single, distant, interior rush of water. An exhalation of breath.

The light at the end of a cigarette flared the face of the Baroness orange. She sat crosslegged on the sofa, bathrobe loose around her shoulders, the Nazi bundled and curled and sleeping beside her.

"I believe—when I used our shower—I cracked a pipe somewhere." the Baroness said, and fell silent to allow the distant rush of water to speak instead.

"Ksssssssssh," said the water.

"You calmed her down."

"The usual way," said the Baroness. "Considerate of you to give us our privacy."

"Gatineau's past the point of return."

"Oh—You saw her—?"

"She's transmuted her soul to art."

"Mmhn."

"Sex, I guess, couldn't keep her alive forever."

"—Mn."

The Baroness's face faded. A rice grain of ember flitted to the floor and became the blackness. The Nazi twisted in her sleep and whimpered, the Baroness ran fingers through her hair until she fell quiet.

"Different strokes—for different blokes—?" The Baroness suppressed a chuckle. "You've seemed stressed yourself, mon amie—My power is, of course, to heal—body and mind."

"You know as well as me that'd explode once *she* found out. Not interested anyway."

"C'est vrai—c'est vrai." The cigarette danced in the dark, a firefly. "I'm sorry. Irresponsible of me, I must be an adult now—at fifteen. Alas—in ages past, they expected even more of us women even younger—should I complain—?"

Her face flared orange. It faded.

"Ksssssssssh," said the water.

"Keh," said the Nazi. "Ch."

"I know you never watch the show," said the Witch, "but do you know the girl? Not the cat, the one who..."

"Schrodinger, ouais."

"So you've seen it..."

"Non, non, I only read about it online—I must know what it is to protect her from it."

"Then do you know—"

"That she's your friend—? The paste-faced one—? Indeed—I knew it immediately."

"Yeah." The Witch had never moved far from the doorway. She watched the Baroness at the distance of a portrait. "Clownmuffle. That's the name she gave herself. I... I. I think you won't react well to what I'm going to say next. One way or another. I considered not telling you. But I think you have a right to know."

The flame flickered. The Baroness stared nowhere, her eyes had been blank the whole time, a subterranean creature evolved to blindness.

"I intend to leave."

"I imagined you would—you are a uniquely unfettered person. That you've stayed with us so long has quite frankly surprised me—You could go anywhere—Do you think they have wraiths in Nunavut—? There are islands, in the Atlantic—thousands of miles from the next inhabited locale—You and you alone could reach them. Could you carve for yourself a life even in this Hell—? I wonder..."

"I intend to destroy Clownmuffle."

The blankness erased. The Baroness stared at her, the her she could not see, but she stared nonetheless. "Your—friend?"

"Whatever she once was to me, what she is now is killing this world. Even if it wasn't the best world, even if tearing it down might be what I want just as much as her. I have a responsibility not to let her do that. And a responsibility to an even older friend..."

"Mn." The Baroness nodded. "They say she is inhumanly strong—perhaps the strongest one of our kind in existence."

"Internet rumors. But she *is* strong, stronger than me. I don't plan to fight her that way, though. I've seen her when she was vulnerable. She's seen me when I was vulnerable. She took something from me then. Maybe I can take something from her in turn."

"Metaphysical—abstract—I doubt, in this world, things turn in such ways—"

She was probably right. Assuredly right. The Witch knew her own explanation was bullshit. Straight bullshit. Clownmuffle had knocked the block tower that was Isabel Leyva to the ground, the wobbling inchoate form of an identity she had attempted to build for herself, that Hemet helped her build.

If she bashed her brain against the glittering diamond that was Clownmuffle, bashed until her head caved in like the hanging corpses in Gatineau's pantry, then at least she would have built a little block tower for herself before the end.

"I've made my decision."

"I cannot keep you either way—Truthfully, I'm drained enough managing my little friend—Soon I fear I will have to devote my entire self to her—Fear or perhaps pray?"

"If I succeed I'll save you both. For your generosity and charity, that's reason enough to fight."

"If you succeed."

"If. Yes."

The Nazi twisted. The water rushed. The darkness gleamed and the cigarette's light dulled. The Baroness contracted to a mouth and thin, unglossed lips.

"My petite amie will not be so gracious about your sudden departure—No, not at all—"

"Good. Let her turn me into the enemy. If she's mad at me, she won't be mad at you. If she hates me, she has a reason to hope."

"Like how she hates that cat—"

"Exactly the same."

The water ceased running. It may have run out, the utility may have died. Its sound became a quiet, steady drip.

"Thank you for taking me in," said the Witch. "You're a kind person."

The cigarette snubbed against an ashtray and the darkness completed itself. "Farewell, Isabel."

"Au revoir, Paula."

A second of silence, blackness, emptiness, nothingness—then the Baroness giggled. "I have never heard more abominable French—Not *revoyre*, revwah..."

But by then the Witch had already slipped out the way she came and departed.

The Pequod Meets the Delight

Although the Witch intended to clash against Clownmuffle in a final, spectacular fashion, she had learned from past mistakes—and internet hearsay. Rumors circulated, all Washington was drenched in black material, the same seen on the walls during the Press Secretary's show, and this material apparently killed whichever Magical Girl touched it. Even with her broomstick the Witch could not consider herself immune. She needed to confirm these rumors and determine a way to counteract the effects. She also needed to know what had even happened, whether Clownmuffle and the cat alone controlled the city with the help of this "President DuPage," or if others pulled certain strings.

So she needed to ask someone who would have been there when it went to tatters. Kyubey couldn't cut it—he'd been mum since the incident.

She went to Chicago.

In Ottawa, during the day, parts of the city functioned as a city. Dawn rose upon a Michigan gouged by Godzilla's claws. What the people did down there she could not discern but they were there and they did something, with giant machines, digging—digging. Icestorms did half the work, the month was April. Maybe they dug a little warmth from the dirt.

The lakes, on the other hand, were as quiet as they ever were.

She detected five magical signatures in Chicago. She did not know whether that were less or more than she expected. Three of the signatures were grouped together on the lake, near the coast. The other two, separate, appeared deeper in. She decided to approach the group over those in solitude.

Once she drew close enough to see the miasma that flowed amid the skyscrapers and drained into the lake, and oriented herself better to the local topography, she discovered her targets drifted in a houseboat upon the icy water.

She hailed telepathically as she descended: *Hello. I'm a Magical Girl. I mean no harm. I only want to talk, and I'll be on my way.* She figured no sane girl would waste energy fighting her. The problem these days was not resource scarcity. Lunacy, however...

Lack of response unnerved her but she stuck to the plan and landed on a flat second-story deck. The boat looked like someone cracked off part of an apartment building and floated it to sea—perfectly quadrilateral. It bobbed, swayed. She kept hold of her broom and rapped the rickety door.

"Hey, hello? It's me. I'm a Magical Girl. I don't want to fight. I just wanna ask some questions about the Empire that used to be here."

Footsteps tromped upstairs from inside and a face appeared at the window. The door opened, the Witch braced for a rough or at least suspicious welcome, but the figure who stood before

her wore a bright smile and clapped her hands close to her chest as she teetered on a single heel.

"Lovely! What a pleasant surprise, a visitor." She wore a white cape clasped around her neck by a gold-embroidered collar. She shouted over her shoulder: "Mia, Riley, I'm letting her in!"

A prick in the Witch's wrist caused her to look down. She had a syringe sticking out of her. She had not noticed any motion from the girl. Sleight of hand.

"Aye, but don't worry poppet. If you're an honest young thing, you'll never find out what I injected you with. But if you're, shall we say, deceitful...!" She withdrew the syringe and slung it into the folds of her cape. "Now, time to pretend I never did that and act friendly-like, aye? My modest name is Leah Roth, now come with me, you'll meet the others."

The Witch expected some such reaction. Vague hospitality mingled with less vague threats. She followed Roth into the boat, down the stairs, to a windowed room with its windows coated in black paper and a lantern on a round table around which the other two girls sat.

They played a game. Monopoly. Silver pieces thronged a board congested with property. Pointless dollar bills piled in stacks. One face, perched atop clasped hands, glared in concentration. The other was—the Witch recognized her. Couldn't tell from where, but she remembered her long ponytail, her careless grin as she shook over her head a pair of dice she eventually deposited onto the board and proceeded with a cheer and a finger shoved into the face of her wincing opponent.

"Mia. Riley. Please! Possess you no concept of hospitality? We have an honored guest. Apologies apologies young miss, I swear to you on my honor we are a poor representation of the fabled Holy Empire of Greater Chicago. Alas, our esteem has dwindled these difficult months..."

The player on the losing side of the roll shot up and fired a finger. "Quiet, Berwyn. Your mockery's bad enough when it's between us. If anyone besmirches the name of the Empire, it's you."

"Aw chill *Mia* you're just mad I snagged Boardwalk," said the other as she slammed her piece one, two, three, four, five, six times. "The waterfront belongs to me! Your days are numbered, Mia."

"My name, to you, is Darien—"

"Pllllease peppermint," said Roth, "you ought to have realized by now that your constant insistence on that fact is why she continues to call you that?"

"Yeah yeah either way, my property pleeeeeease, Miss Banker?"

The ponytail girl turned to Roth and noticed the Witch. A glimmer of recognition flashed, but her memory of the Witch seemed as tenuous as the Witch's of her, as she bounced upright and waved her finger up and down up and down while bopping her forehead with her other wrist.

"Ooh ooh. Ooh. You're, you're uh—who are you again?"

"When I was a member of the Empire my name was Palos."

The ponytail girl's face scrunched. She shook her head. "Member of the Empire? Nah nah, that's not where I know you."

"I never heard of any soldier named Palos," said Darien, or Mia, or peppermint, eyes narrowing. "You, Berwyn?"

"Nope! Though I must admit I was not an encyclopedia on our many, many members, so let us not leap to hasty conclusions, pepper."

The ponytail girl smacked her hands together. "God. Damn! You're that chick who uh, showed up in Denver. The one who asked where Clownmuffle went."

Memory flooded back. A blizzard, the porch of a gated mansion, a girl who laughed and pretended to smoke an imaginary cigarette. "Collins."

"On the money. But that's a dead name now, we uh all got dead names now amirite?" She nudged Roth's ribs. "Mine's uh, double-dead. I'm Riley now."

"Tarsus Shmarsus, I'm Paul already," said Roth, an apparent in joke only she got. "That whole title thing was a tad passé, I think we can all agree in retrospect. Young people groping for a sense of legitimacy they did not possess!"

"Can all agree except Miss Five-K-in-Debt." Riley indicated Darien with a thumb.

Darien had seethed the whole time. She perpetually appeared on the verge of interjecting but bit her tongue each time. The dim lighting intensified the severity of her gaze, she stood taut between her limber laughing compatriots.

When a lull finally came she managed to speak: "Lieutenant Kenosha's recognition lends you some credibility, Palos, but if you came here expecting handouts, you'll receive none. You're a deserter, and were times not what they were, you'd be executed."

Roth rolled her eyes. "Noooo she wouldn't. Peppermint, baby. Please." She leaned confidentially to the Witch. "She's not normally this uptight, I dunno what's gotten into her."

"I want no handouts. I want information. I intend to destroy whatever has taken over the capital. I intend to restore this world."

The three stared back. The conviviality of the wobbly two drained. Collins, or Kenosha, or Riley, chewed. Roth maintained a smile sickened by the stringent arch of her brows. Darien did not change.

"Is that... so," said Roth. "Don'tcha think if it were so simple it'd be done already, poppet?"

"I know the woman who lives in Joliet's mouth. I think—"

"We all know her," said Darien. "Is that supposed to make her any less untouchable?"

"Yeeeeeah don't uh, don't think Miss Muffle's gonna lose a fight. Ever. Cook, Cicero, forty goons couldn't stop her."

"She *can* be beaten," said the Witch. "I've seen it. Even when she was at full power. You know she came to the Empire with her Soul Gem cracked? How do you think that happened?"

Silence.

"It was me. Me and one other. We attacked her. She beat us, but we did that to her." The Witch tactically adjusted the details.

"So does that mean she has a weakness? Something that can be exploited?" said Darien.

The Witch had not thought of any such thing. In her head she imagined she might talk to Clownmuffle, say something to bypass her emotional defenses, or else simply die, either scenario equally desirable. But as she considered it, considered how, even with a terrible plan and no real combat expertise, Hemet somehow damaged Clownmuffle's soul, she formed a theory...

"She's a lot stronger as an underdog than the opposite."

Once she said it she realized how stupid it sounded. Riley and Roth laughed, Riley said, "Bitches these days, I swear." It was only Darien's hard, serious stare that lent the Witch's claim a little credence, and as the Witch dwelled more upon the logic she recanted her hasty self-dismissal. Yes. Wasn't it so? Clownmuffle had always operated on a logic all her own, divorced from the logic of this world. They kept ramming against her with their real-world rationality and burst into flames each time. Yet somehow the weakest, most pitiful challenge had crippled her.

Darien's trenchant voice, rather than being interrupted by the jokes of the other two, silenced them. "She's right."

Roth winced. "Pepper. Pepper, please..."

"Flossmoor said it herself, before we fought her at the Capitol. She said: The more you send, the worse they become. She wanted us to only send one soldier to fight her."

"Dunno bout that," said Riley.

Roth pushed the Witch against a wall and hissed into her ear: "You need to stop. You cannot do this. She is not mentally well, she is barely hanging on. I have done everything in my power to heal her, you cannot undo it. I will not allow it."

The Witch remembered the unknown fluid currently coursing through her veins, but more than that a sincere pang of regret pinched her heart. "I'm sorry," she said. "That was not my intention. I only want information and I'll be on my way. Nobody else needs to be dragged into this."

"Then let us tell her," said Darien. "I am not afraid of the past."

So they told. They sat around the Monopoly table and spoke. The atmosphere changed, Darien dominated it, although Roth did most of the speaking amid Riley's irrelevant interjections. In fact, Darien barely spoke at all, staring at the Witch from a cross-thatch of fingers, while the entire story played out in terse, muddled, obviously censored sentences. The story of the Capitol, the Senate chamber, the unknown Magical Girl who claimed an archon was coming, the manifestation of Clownmuffle on the National Mall. Cicero and Cook's forces combined to fight her, their (hastily described) defeat. The black ink that spawned from the Capitol dome, the voice of ex-Centurion DuPage within it.

The story had holes, some more obvious than others, some a byproduct of legitimate gaps in the teller's knowledge, some intentional omissions. Nobody could say for sure what fate befell the Empress, Cicero, Aurora, Hegewisch, the other soldiers—Roth applied a cheery optimism to this fact, an implication they survived much as Joliet and Clownmuffle somehow had, although the Witch detected her artifice. Nobody knew the identity of the Magical Girl who warned about the archon, or how an archon even spawned, unless it had something to do with the people Clownmuffle killed during her rampage. ("A definite possibility," Roth added.)

They confirmed that any Magical Girl who touched the black ooze died.

The Witch had hoped for a clearer line connecting the Clownmuffle who left Ottawa with the one who lived in the cat's mouth. Too many details remained obscure.

"You three are the only ones left?" she said.

"Of course not," said Roth. "I think it was... Fourteen of us who escaped the Capitol?"

"Fifteen," said Darien.

"Chicago's a total wreck, though," Roth continued. "We three are skilled veterans, yet we can't even live in the city proper. The others relocated to safer realms. There was a girl, where was she from? Sent a bulletin online..."

"Fargo."

"Aye, Fargo. Chicago may be postapocalyptic hellscape but a small, isolated city like Fargo? According to the bulletin, it's a nice place for a decent-sized clutch of young ladies. The main girl said she'd help anyone who swung by. So Schaumburg led a group thataway."

"My radar indicates five Magical Girls in this city, including you three."

Roth and Riley communicated wordless bewilderment at this number, which resolved when Riley gave an apathetic shrug. "One's gotta be, uh, some nomad, someone who stumbled in, I'm sure they're dead soon. The other's Val."

"Centurion Cook," said Darien.

"She always hated that name. I'd be like, yo Cook, looks like there's *too many cooks in the kitchen* and that was just about the only way to uh, make her actually mad..."

"So of course you said it as often as possible," said Roth.

"Well yeah."

According to Roth's story, Cook had actually met the Magical Girl who warned them about the archon. She had a closer relationship with the Empress and accompanied her to Washington prior to the invasion. She also better knew DuPage, under whom none present had served.

"I'll speak to Centurion Cook," she said. Before she rose, however, a new voice cut into their conversation:

I can't tell yet whether your actions are the byproduct of irrational despair or some logical purpose.

It had been a long time. Since January the Incubator had grown withdrawn. He manifested infrequently to collect cubes and refused all attempts at communication. It had become easy to forget his existence. The Witch started in her chair and glanced around; he appeared between them on the table, atop the unfinished Monopoly board. His body had a gash along his side, but otherwise he had not changed.

"Begone, strumpet!" said Roth. "Shoo, shoo." She waved part of her cape at him.

"If you've finally decided to speak I can only imagine it's important," said Darien.

That's correct. Recent events have required me to limit my interactions with Magical Girls. I've been especially busy, just as you've all been. The level of despair seen on this planet has only been matched in certain theoretical scenarios. I must admit I've lacked the adequate resources to collect its energy.

"Trouble finding enough new Magical Girls?" the Witch said.

That is part of the problem. Either way, I'm afraid I can't stay long. This body will be needed somewhere else soon.

Nobody present, of course, had any cause to trust him. Some displayed more open suspicion than others, but none more than Darien: "Then is this preamble needed? State something of substance."

Of course. He paused. He stared only at the Witch, but something in his demeanor seemed to regard the other three as well. *I'll say this: As it stands, your odds of defeating Miss Vizcarra, let alone the Washington archon, are zero. You can be assured that this is a calculation we have checked and rechecked numerous times.*

"Then it's not something any sane person should be considering, hm?" said Roth.

"He lies," said Darien. "He doesn't want anyone destroying that thing. It's generating a treasure trove of energy. Why else would he bother to tell us this?"

While I will not bore you with specifics, I will state that although the current situation was initially desirable, it has reached an unsustainable state. Wraiths have become so plentiful that Magical Girls are dying before they can garner a net positive in energy.

Allow me to explain: When each new Magical Girl makes her wish, she uses up a large amount of energy all at once to turn it into reality. In a sense, then, every Magical Girl starts "in debt." Depending on the wish, it may take a Magical Girl a week to pay it off, or several years. A large part of choosing prospective Magical Girls is based on my prediction of their wish, my approximation of their debt, and my assessment of their ability to survive long enough to repay it—and from then on generate profit. Miss Roth and Miss Matthews paid their debts long ago and have produced many years' worth of profit. Miss Abgaryan and Miss Leyva have also paid off their debts, but more recently. However, many Magical Girls cannot say the same.

I never expected the situation to become as dangerous as it has. It has only reached this state due to the unforeseeable circumstance of an archon that was willing to cooperate with rogue Magical Girls. But this planet now actually costs more energy than it gains. Magical Girls are dying too quickly. Even powerful veteran girls who have long been a source of reliable profit die unexpectedly due to the staggering volume of wraiths. I could recruit plenty of additional Magical Girls, but my calculations indicate that few of these will be able to repay their debts. As such, this planet has transformed from our most promising source of energy to yet another resource drain.

He sighed. Hemet taught the Witch enough basic economics for her to follow the gist of what he said. Riley had tuned out, Darien had drawn in, and Roth kept flitting nervous glances.

This scenario is, sadly, more common than we'd like among species capable of reversing known laws of thermodynamics. It always happens in such a way: Some minor, unexpected miscalculation, certain members of the species acting in a completely illogical manner, and then the fundamental nature of the planet is altered to an unusable state. This is not even the first miscalculation for this planet in particular. However, I was able to rectify these previous miscalculations, and it was expected I would be able to do the same again.

Didn't he say he wouldn't take long?

Once the true nature of the situation in Washington became clear, I assembled a team of the most powerful Magical Girls on the planet. No short-term resource expenditure was considered too costly in order to salvage the planet's viability; I promised them lifetime supplies of grief cubes for their cooperation. They were not only physically powerful but possessed abilities that would be particularly suited for fighting an enemy like the Washington archon. I calculated a ninety-nine-point-nine-nine percent chance of assassinating Miss Luce, the main reason for the global spread of despair, and a seventy-six percent chance of destroying the Washington archon.

I cannot enter that miasma myself, so I possess only a partial record of what happened, but it seems as though Miss Vizcarra eliminated the entirety of the team with little difficulty.

"You didn't account for her in your calculations?" said the Witch.

"You saw what she did to us," said Darien. "You should have known."

I did know. Even accounting for that, I came up with the percentages I did. It's clear, however, that I somehow misinterpreted the situation. Nonetheless, once this team failed without even accomplishing the objective that was considered a near certainty, it was decided that this planet could no longer be salvaged. My species has withdrawn almost all resources; I remain only to collect what can be collected from the Magical Girl population that already exists.

So the world was really doomed. The Witch knew that. She had always known that. It was hard to see what happened to Ottawa, to Gatineau, and not know it.

Darien closed her eyes. She thought deeply, which only caused Roth to fret more nervously over her. Roth attempted a strangely unfeminine giggle and began some kind of casual remark, but Darien cut her off:

"So you'll do anything you can to stop us from fighting back. You'd much rather we linger as long as possible. That way, you can squeeze every last drop from this world."

Riley fiddled with a Monopoly piece, the boot.

That is the rational action for my species to take. It is also the rational action for you to take, as individuals programmed for self-preservation.

However. He sighed again. What these sighs meant, who knew? Everyone knew his emotionlessness. What use did someone like him have for a sigh? *However, I must admit that this planet's predicament has caused something that has not happened in my species for thousands of years: It's caused a difference in opinion.*

All rational calculations indicate this world can no longer be saved. Any combination of Magical Girls I could organize to fight the Washington archon would fail, at least according to the available data. Thus, the opinion of every member of my species bar one is in perfect harmony: The planet must be abandoned. We cannot waste more resources here. The differing opinion, as you may have surmised, belongs to me.

"You." Darien concealed her mouth behind her clasped hands. "You, as in, this particular white rabbit sitting before us?"

All members of my species currently located on this planet are considered the entity "me." While there are—or should be—zero differences in personality, capacity for rational thought, or intelligence among all members of my species, we are differentiated by the varied appearances we take. For instance, some members of my species possess aesthetic qualities designed to better appeal to members of a completely different species than your own; these superficial differences delineate identity in lieu of other unique features. I will not waste time delving into specifics.

"I wanna finish this game," said Riley.

Returning to my original point, said Kyubey, eliciting a massive groan, it is of my personal opinion that although all rational calculations indicate a certain outcome, there remains an unknown probability of an outcome for which our calculations cannot account. In simpler terms, I believe it is possible for a miracle to occur.

Even Riley looked at him. She nearly spat she laughed so hard. "Kyubey's got a spiritual side now guys!"

I believe this opinion, rather than being illogical, is based on logical precepts that can be explained, if not quantified. It is known that an entity who rules this universe as a God exists. It is known that this entity, rather than being a fixed law, is capable of unexpected caprice in its actions. It is known that the Washington archon acts in ways completely unlike all previously observed archons, and thus it could possibly deviate from archons in other ways potentially beneficial to us. With these unknowns known, I believe enough reasonable doubt exists in our equations. I believe we should continue to strive for this world's salvation.

Riley laughed. Roth laughed nervously. Darien stared stolid. The Witch did not know what to think.

For this opinion, my species has ordered my immediate execution upon the cessation of my duties on Earth. Although these unknowns are recognized, they are not considered significant enough for a logical being to reach the conclusion that I have reached. I cannot fault my species for desiring my destruction; I am a deviant and must be treated as one. However, I also cannot deny my own calculations. To do so would be to admit that I am illogical.

"So you plan to help us?" said Darien. "Can you be straightforward for once?"

"What do you mean, help *us*," said Roth.

I do plan to help. However, I have little I can offer. I retain almost no resources. I cannot conceive of an actual strategy that would prove victorious, so I can't even assist you tactically. However, I might be able to provide you with a way to safely enter the miasma in Washington.

Roth kicked a cabinet. The whole boathouse wobbled. "No, no. No. This has verged on the absurd."

"Let him speak," said Darien.

But Roth's finger aimed at the Witch. "And I expected more humility. I can't believe it! I cannot! This entire enterprise is suicide. Suicide! This world may have gone to pieces but we have not. Do none of you understand? We have retreated to the final sanctum. We have surrendered the gate, the battlements, the main hall, but we have finally ceased our besiegers at our final portal. We can survive in this state. The world may not outlive us, but *we can survive*. We can be happy. We can carve a little happiness for ourselves."

"I wanna finish this game." Riley rubbed the dice against the tabletop.

"The Incubator has always been our foe. If the Empire ever meant anything to any of you, it ought to have meant that. To trust him, to even abide him as a necessary evil is the true enslavement of our kind. He is our jailor and each imagining a key confirms a prison. Damn this world. If I gave up so much of myself to live in it then maybe it can give up a bit of itself to be my home. Gyeeeeeeaacckh!"

She stormed out of the room. Her footsteps tromped along the deck outside and her body flashed in front of the sparse light that filtered between the black papered windows. The sound of her mumbling pierced the flimsy walls.

The Witch considered asking if she would be okay, but neither Darien nor Riley appeared distressed, so she said nothing.

I implore you to act in the best interest of your species. Once you arrive at Washington, I'll send my assistance. Now, I must be going.

Before they had a chance to reply, he darted off the table, slithered into the shadows, and vanished.

"I didn't want to drag anyone else into this," said the Witch. "I think it's best if you guys stay here. I'll handle things on my own."

"No," said Darien. "That woman, Clownmuffle, was once my mentor. Many people were once my mentor, everyone always seemed to want to teach me something. But she was my first. If anyone can win against her, it's me."

The Witch refrained from remarking upon Darien's past with Clownmuffle. Clownmuffle had been around for years, so she must have "mentored" plenty of people, in the same narcissistic way where all her advice revolved around the insular world she fabricated for herself to escape the world around her. Now Clownmuffle's world was leaking out and this world could not contend.

Before, things had felt more like a suicide mission with an outside chance the world might be restored. Now, it had started to form into something legitimate. The Witch worried she might be dragging other people to their deaths. The Witch worried she didn't care.

"I'll speak to Berwyn," said Darien. "I've made up my mind." She left the room.

"So." Riley tapped the tabletop. "Guess this game's finito. You uh, you still interested in speaking to Her Excellency the former Lady Cook?"

The Witch nodded.

"That broom seats two right? Take me with, I haven't paid Val a visit in a hot minute. Good to get outta the cramped uh, atmosphere? Especially since I imagine our friends might get to shouting soon."

That was a feeling the Witch understood. Already on the deck the mumbled voice of Roth rose as Darien's harsh steps approached her. The Nazi and the Baroness recreated.

She rubbed her wrist, where the mark left by Roth's syringe had already regenerated. She wondered what concoction had entered her bloodstream, if one had even entered it at all. Placebo perhaps. She seized her broom and led Riley outside.

The temperature in Chicago reached the negatives. Despite daylight. Despite springtime. Ice coated the sides of skyscrapers in shingles. The wind whipped her witch hat and she remembered the cold day in Denver she met Collins, the Terminatrix in pursuit, the white breath puffing. Riley clung to her waist. Fog obscured the streets but the Witch imagined it looked like Ottawa at night, more undead things than living.

Riley swore she had no idea who the other magical signature belonged to, even when the Witch detailed its position, but she pinpointed Cook's place not far from the coast. She had a chattering effervescence, she could not shut up. She rattled about anything that came to mind, and her hot breath thawed the nape of the Witch's neck. She mentioned they used to watch Schrodinger's cat on TV, until one day Darien tossed the set overboard. She mentioned Cook somehow managed things by herself, they invited her several times to join them on the boat, where offshore they could sleep without worrying what monstrosities might crawl inside to eat them, but Cook liked things better on her own. The Witch did not recall meeting Cook. Maybe she saw her once, during the speeches they gave in the Empire. She had no idea what kind of person she was. But if she lived alone in this city she must be powerful.

The Witch decided—to recruit her.

This was no longer a suicide run. This was real time. If Kyubey could believe in a miracle they all could. Hemet... This was your dream, wasn't it? To spearhead a crusade to fix our sick world. Well, your dream would be fulfilled, the world just got a lot sicker first. If Roth thought they surrendered most of the castle, then here was the charge to retake it. If imagining a key confirmed a prison, it also confirmed an exit.

Her hands shook and not simply from the cold. They tightened their grip against the tip of her broomstick.

Cook lived, based on the vertical axis of the Witch's radar, on or near the top floor of one of Chicago's endless skyscrapers, a four-tiered pillar emblazoned with the word TRUMP. Tall, but not the tallest, or couldn't be, because the unknown fifth Magical Girl had apparently reached an even higher altitude only a mile southwest, and when the Witch glanced that direction through the mist and miasma she spotted a monolith that could not be rivaled in this part of the world. No surprise, she figured, that the Magical Girls had taken to the vertical limits of the city. Safer, removed from the mire that collected in the streets, the same reason the original proprietors lived there, except society had upended and now Magical Girls held more real power than anyone. Humans of prominence either went to Washington or fled. Wasn't the previous president from this city? Nobody knew where he went.

They landed on the roof of Cook's tower. A helicopter and its crew waited there, men and a woman in arctic parkas, headsets, and sunglasses. They drank from coffee mugs and steamed the misty air with their animated chatter.

"Heyo," they hailed as the Witch and Riley disembarked.

"Heya," said Riley, "magic biznitch going on, friends of Miss Jefferson and all that?"

"Sweet, sweet," said the helicopter crew. They pointed to the stairwell.

The warmth was oppressive. The ecosystem shifted from tundra cold to sauna hot. They crawled down stairs alongside vines and coiled roots and fallen, rotten fruit. Rivulets and small waterfalls flowed in controlled patterns. The permafrost that the Witch had built around herself for protection shattered and dropped away. She wheezed against a gushing root before she descended the full floor. Sap gummed her palms. The thick air constricted her lungs and inner organs. Riley's chipper demeanor sagged too. When they reached the base a rippling pool of water clutched at the soles of their shoes. Signs of architecture stripped away, replaced by broad ferns and thick boughs. Apples, pears, papayas burst when stepped on. They brushed past a small tree and a flock of paradise birds flapped squawking against the canopy. A serpent bolted between the Witch's feet and despite everything she shrieked and jumped into Riley.

"Christ she uh, did some serious renovation." Riley pantomimed a machete and hacked a path for them through the denser sections.

They figured they were lost until they found a grand piano interwoven with ivy and a golden pair of doors beyond it clear enough to open once given enough shoulder force. By now Riley had hailed Cook multiple times via telepathy and standard shouting, to no avail. Once she cracked open the doors and took a peek inside she drew back quick.

"What?" said the Witch.

"Yeeeeeeeah. She's fucking."

"That's all anyone does anymore."

"Tell me about it."

"I'll wait outside until she's finished," said the Witch.

"Ah, yeah, thing bout Val is, she's never finished." Riley jump-kicked the doors and they screeched open.

The jungle opened into an edenic clearing colored by pastel-print flowers and lines of falling water. Minimal shafts of light streamed through the few flecks of windows that remained and in the center, fanned in wide array, were men. Smooth, toned, she clearly had a type, nude of course, glistening from the gentle whirlpools and warm drizzle that pervaded the space, variegated only by race, in which they were as diverse as the fowl that watched from their perches and chattered lewd commentary. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven. Twelve bodies lounging.

And a thirteenth form, female, between them, the central point, around whom everything curled like the eye of a hurricane. Her body was as smooth as any of theirs, distinguished only by its prim, elegant frame, more androgynous in appearance than really feminine,

especially with her legs crossed to conceal most of her nakedness. She extended a hand to grasp a bushel of grapes and pulled them closer to her mouth.

The Witch had seen all this crap before.

"Val, Val. Val. Heya howzit, sorry to uh barge in yanno thought we might have a talk or what?" Riley sauntered inside, waved at a few of the men who gave her a rousing cheer, descended into the lagoon up to her knees. "As you can see we got ourselves a fun visitor."

Former Centurion Cook only seemed to notice their existence after she had shoved half the bushel of grapes into her mouth. She made a frantic murmuring noise as she tried to pull away from the fruit and only managed to spurt a thick dribble of purple juice down her chin. "Ahhhhh," she mumbled as she swallowed. "Ahhhhh. Hi?"

The Witch slanted her eyes to a neutral side and composed her strategy in a millisecond of free thought. "Hello. You haven't met me, but I'm—"

"Ohhhhh, but I remember? Murrieta-Temecula? Some tangly name like that? Running headless with your little witch hat, I'd remember that witch hat anywhere. Very memorable bend, at the top of the hat?"

"Yes, I've heard others comment on the bend—"

"We've met... Ahhhhh, but maybe you don't remember me? I looked a lot shorter back then. Blonder too, whiter. St. Louis?"

Few memories remained from St. Louis. She remembered Clownmuffle. She remembered the Terminatrix. The other figures merged into a blur like the intermingled bodies before her now.

"Hey maybe a, uh, maybe a formal introduction?" said Riley. She stood halfway between them, both in distance and depth, gradually stepping into the Cook side of the pool, pushing aside a muscular arm that reached for her thigh. "Valerie Jefferson. Riley Matthews. And uh. Uhhhhh. The Witch."

"Isabel Leyva... if I didn't forget?" said Cook. "I'm afraid I didn't take as much interest in your case as I ought to have... I was the one who brought you to the Empire after all? But I did peruse your file."

"She's a fun kid. Lotsa fun. She had me in uh, hysterics you know? I forget exactly what she said but I remember she said something to me and I couldn't stop laughing."

"Is that so...? I always enjoy a good laugh. Everything is bearable as long as you're laughing. I like to laugh all the time?"

"If you wanna laugh, you gotta play Monopoly. Funniest fucking game. Darien, you know, she's a card. Brainless ape. Buys nothing. Lands on a property, refuses to buy it. I cannot for the life of me fathom what she's saving for."

"She's still young... Thirteen? Fourteen? I only remember because Cicero made such a hubbub about her... Thought she would be the next Centurion."

"Won't spend a *centurion*."

Cook straightened her shoulders and forced her voice to a level of commandment that otherwise seemed impossible. "Wench, if thou deignest to bringest into this hallowed hall such abominable puns...!"

They had all lost the plot. The Witch stood dumb in the doorway as Cook, Riley, the twelve men laughed sitcom-style. A long dormant rage flickered inside her. Could there be no more obvious symbol for capitalistic decadence? The words of Hemet flickered inside her. She could revive within herself the old song. She could—she could—

She slammed her foot against the ground. The water splashed and clapped and nobody stopped laughing but she shouted anyway: "This world is dying. It is DYING, people, it is sick and dying at the hands of the people in Washington, they are KILLING this world. None of you are ignorant to this fact. None of you can deny it, no matter what fabricated reality you've built for yourself. This world is dying. I am leading a team to save it. A revolution. We're going to overthrow Washington, overthrow this President DuPage you apparently know so well, overthrow the tyranny of Clownmuffle. We're going to cut out that cat's damn tongue and stake it on a pike. Do you understand? WE ARE GOING TO ACT. WE ARE GOING TO RISE. WE ARE GOING TO SAVE THE WORLD. Do you remember the old stories? The world in peril, a hero against all odds striving to save it? That story is now and we are its characters. THIS IS OUR MOMENT."

This was the moment the obtuse prospective ally fell silent, shaken from their languid stupor, this was when the hero's impassioned speech struck them to their core. The underdog socking the stone edifice of the system, whatever that system might be, whatever government or cultural inequality, this was Hemet reviving within her, a spirit possessing her dry cork corpse. The capitalist system... brought to its final conclusion, a suicidal self-genocide after endless consumption left nothing to consume but our own pallid bodies. This was the Eucharist of the monopolists. Old Man Moneybags... Of course Darien would be the one who refused to purchase a thing.

But Cook never stopped laughing, not at any point during the Witch's speech, until her laughter drowned it, a howl, until the water waved and rippled with the tremors that convulsed her body, and wheezing in the silent lull she said:

"S-s-save...? This world...? It's not, it's not worth saving dear..."

"It is. It is. It is," said the Witch.

"Let it die, let it all die... Let humanity die, die, die, let us all close our eyes into this peaceful sleep... Amen?"

"We wrench the poison out by the root and we rebuild it better. Humanity was founded on moments like these. It's when the most is risked the most can be gained."

"Ahhhhh... ahhhhh. Ahhhhh, ahhhhh." It became a labored breathing. Cook fought for control of herself. "Ahhhhh. Dear... dear. Riley, you did not lie..."

"I never do." Like a good lieutenant she stood aside, arms folded behind her back, and brownnosed.

"Dear. Do you not realize who you're talking to...? I was, once, First Centurion Cook of the Holy Empire of Chicago and Its Territories... Do you understand? I served as the right hand of Her Munificent Empress. You weren't in the Empire long, but do you know? She wanted to save this world too... Rewrite it. She dreamed of a society... A utopia, all Magical Girls working in harmony with humanity, our united goals pushing us to heights, breaking free of the Incubator, forging our own destiny, healing all diseases, purifying the polluted land, producing food and mineral wealth to satisfy the seven billion of us who exist and then some... She had all these grand dreams of revolution. She pieced everything together for years, collected everyone she needed, formed a strategy, even walked into the Capitol at Washington and held the Senate as her captive audience. And even she failed...? Even her? After she had the gall to make me think she might win?"

The same smiling laugh turned skyward and Cook's eyes shut. Riley kneaded an elbow.

"And here you are... Isabel Leyva? Funny girl? Promising the same thing she did, but you're just a kid... a little witch on a broomstick with a cute bend in the hat? Save yourself some time, girl... There's nothing you can say to me."

The Witch opened her mouth to speak. Closed it. She had no response. The entire framework behind her confidence was belief in a miracle. She had no real strategy, a vague notion she could strike some chink in Clownmuffle's armor nobody else would know about. She suddenly felt stupid.

"Ahhhhh, fuck..." said Cook. "I hurt your feelings, sorry, I didn't mean that... I'm a jaded, useless floozy. Nothing I say matters...? But I'll tell you what I told DuPage when she asked me to jump into that miasma: I'm not dumb. And I'll add... I'm not worth it anyway."

The conversation did not progress past that point. Cook's jungle cabana rejected the sullenness the Witch attempted to inject into it.

Eventually she left. Riley stayed behind, "To catch up." The Witch fought her way back to the roof, ignored the helicopter crew, and took off.

For curiosity's sake she flew to the only tower in the city taller than Cook's, where the other Magical Girl lived. She did not have to search long, she found the girl standing atop the radio antenna spire at its apex, a single figure balanced on one foot, the other folded in some sort of yoga pose. She did not quiver. She wore a wind-eaten Christmas sweater.

"Hello," the Witch said. She recognized this girl from MagNet. She posted a lot of pictures on the Selfie board, where the Witch had always lurked because she enjoyed the hate she felt toward Clownmuffle's posts. This girl, and her sister, had been Clownmuffle's favorites. So the Witch had always hated her too.

"Hello," said the girl, who did not open her eyes.

"How long have you been like this?"

"Awhile."

"I'm going to Washington. To kill the cat and Schrodinger and President DuPage."

"Who?"

"The people on TV."

"I don't watch."

"Oh. They're destroying the world. I'm going to stop them. Will you join me?"

"No."

"That's fine. I didn't expect it."

"This world is alright for me already."

Her world was the top of a pin. "I see."

"But I'll pray for you. I'll pray."

"Okay."

"I'll pray."

Satellites Falling Out in Europe

Good? You know what. Fuck Cook. Fuck neo Buddha atop Sears Tower. Certain garbage is better off excluded from a movement. Not that the Witch had any right to call it a movement. The world's most justified terrorist organization, alright. At the boat Darien and Roth had reached a truce. They both decided to accompany her.

"The objective is simple. There will be no complications. Kill the cat. Kill Clownmuffle. Kill DuPage."

The Witch didn't say that. Darien did. Solid atop a world of water, the colors swayed but she could not quiver. Roth hung her head and sat against the railing. Her shoes squeaked together. Her white cape crumpled.

"Another thing: *I* lead this expedition. Berwyn, you foreswore your title. Palos, you deserted. Your heads remain on your shoulders solely because I have no other heads to command. You *will* answer my orders, is this understood?"

Ehh? Where did, what? The Witch had barely landed. She remained in the airborne world. She had to reconstruct Darien's impermeable words to parse her meaning. "I think—"

"Did I ask you to think, soldier?"

Lieutenant Bolingbrook resurrected from her decades-long death. That same bearing and lingo. The Witch hesitated, despite the obvious impatience etched on Darien's brow. She had assumed *she* led this expedition, that the expedition was an extension of her own journey as a human being. In an ancient bedchamber, Hemet said: "Humanity seeks power. We must root out that impulse." Our communal power, she said, could overcome the power of the individual. Society is community: Those who accumulate personal power are aberrations. Like Clownmuffle.

Their ragtag society of three already had a deviant. The Witch wanted to tilt her head and grin at the ghost of Hemet creeping back to unlife. At the ghost of Isabel Leyva creeping out of the roadside snow in Ontario.

"Yes, sir," she said. And saluted.

Darien frowned. She searched the Witch's face. The Witch knew why: to detect irony. But she would find none, not a milligram. Was she resorting to old tricks again? Compromising her identity and beliefs? No other interpretation arose.

"I," said Darien, "am glad we reached an understanding so easily."

It was Roth who tightened and nearly shrieked as she flung herself across the deck and ripped at her hair: "How can you? How can you indulge her? I know why *I* did it, but you—" Her head rolled from her shoulders and plunked the ground. Darien, who began her swing before

her transformation even completed, held a gargantuan sword. Blood ran down its edge until it struck the hilt and dripped. Its long shadow plunged the deck in darkness.

"I shall not tolerate disobedience, Berwyn." Darien wore a wedding dress. Unblemished, white, ribcage constricted by a hundred crisscross corset strings. The veil shrouded her face. Then she reversed her transformation with as much efficiency as she initiated it. "Pick up your head."

Roth's body fell to its hands and knees and started fumbling. The head sobbed. "I gave up everything, I just kept giving and giving, I only want what little I have left... Please!"

"You retain the option not to accompany us," said Darien, "as I know neither Cook nor Kenosha shall. You may, as they will, save your pathetic life to eke whichever existence you may scrounge."

"It's you, pepper, it's *you*, you're the only thing that still matters to me..." A clumsy hand struck the head and rolled it over.

"As I explained to Berwyn, any personal element to our relationship is terminated. She, and you, shall refer to me only as: Centurion Darien. Yes. I am this Empire's final Centurion. Out of respect to those who existed before me, I'll appoint myself only the Fifth Centurion."

"How can you, how can you throw away everything? How can you act so cold? I taught you, I nurtured you, you can do this to me? So quickly, so easily?"

Whenever these two talked the Witch stuck out as an obvious third wheel. She had hoped they would have at least resolved *this* kind of crap by now. But the moment she had that callous thought she regretted it, Berwyn finally found her head but struggled to orient it back on her body, her eyes streamed tears despite the continued clarity of her speech, she was the ghost of Hemet grasping for the Murrie that crawled out of that snow and left behind everything.

"The truth is," said Darien, "I never asked you to do anything for me. And despite all you taught me, all Lady Cicero taught me, I think I'm starting to see that my most important teacher was Clownmuffle, and that her most important lesson was that if I want this world to obey me I have to make it. And to make it I must eliminate all weakness in body and spirit."

"That's fake! Fake!" The head rolled between the shoulders. "You're telling yourself that because that's the only way you think you can beat her. Fake!" The boundaries of the entity Berwyn bled into the deck and sky and lake, her colors mixed with theirs, her form deconstructed into basic elements, she melted only to reform. "I'm not a weakness... I helped you, I made you stronger... I know I did..."

"Palos." Darien swiveled with minimal movement. "I grow tired of wasting time on matters that should have already been settled. We have a long trip to Washington. On the way I will need to know everything about your abilities, its limitations, the limitations of your physical body. I need to possess enough knowledge to wield you as an extension of myself. If you are not an extension of me you are worthless, is this understood?"

"Yes, sir." This whole sham authority would fall apart in face of Clownmuffle.

"Now we depart."

"Well. Miss Self-Appointed Fifth Centurion—Soon-to-be Emperor, I presume? Well. That's all fine and all, but have you an actual plan?" Berwyn eventually said after roadbound hours behind the wheel of a requisitioned four-wheel monstrosity. She spoke long after the car last fell silent, the Witch beside her and Darien given the spacious back half for herself.

"Insolence, I won't brook."

"Tactical advisement I'd consider a worthwhile point of discussion, aye milady? Or shall we rush in, headless and heedless, and trust our faith in ourselves shall earn the day?"

"I am conceiving a plan." She sat in the center seat, her legs outward, back stooped, hands pressed into a form of prayer to divide her eyes as they bored into the Witch's forehead through the rearview mirror.

"Conceiving, aye, of course, of course."

"Obviously the, conception will require additional intelligence, which we can gain with Palos's radar once we reach Washington."

Berwyn allowed her statement to simmer without comment until they reached the next junction. They needed to cut their way out of Chicago but since then took byways to circumnavigate major cities. They brought a hoard of grief cubes shored up with Riley over the past four months from the immeasurable tides of wraiths prowling the docks.

"You may have stripped me of my rank, milady," said Berwyn, "but in life I was Lady Cicero's trusted confidante, even in tactical matters. Aye, it may be wise for our young Centurion Darien to consult with me..."

An aspirated, strained grumble passed between Darien's pressed lips. "Very well. But turning around is not advice I will listen to."

"To which I will listen,' milady. Poor form to end on a preposition, aye?"

"If you intend to waste my time—"

"I simply think it prudent to remind you that you still have much to learn. Nonetheless, I'd like to call to your intention that your stated goals for this expedition are too, hmm, how shall we say? Your scope is too wide, milady."

"How so."

"It is entirely superfluous to kill that Clownmuffle character. She is merely an enforcer. In fact, I'd argue it's superfluous to kill DuPage, or whatever she's become. Aye? The true menace is our old friend Lady Joliet, who manipulates the world via the airwaves. DuPage may have mired a single, albeit important, city, but Joliet's using her abilities to spread that despair worldwide—"

"No," said Darien.

"No, says the lady. Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Your thinking is entirely rational," said Darien. "The Incubator would think the exact same way. Didn't he say as much? He conceived a plan that had an assured chance of killing Joliet, with DuPage considered a secondary objective. His plan failed."

Berwyn's hands wrung the steering wheel. "An irrational plan does not assure success, whatever you may believe, my young lady."

"Joliet distorts people's perspectives," said the Witch. Why not chime in? Why not exist as more than cannon fodder? "People try to kill her all the time. They miss at the critical moment, even when it seems impossible."

"Aye, that's something in her wheelhouse of powers, at least as I understand them. Have you any way to deal with *that* pernicious snag, my young lady Fifth Centurion and Prospective New Emperor Darien?"

A thick smile spread. "Simple, Berwyn. I cut people to pieces even when I'm not aiming for them. As plenty of our former platoonmates and even you yourself experienced firsthand."

"Quite the reductive, specious resolution you've concocted, my young lady. Is specious a word you know the meaning of—apologies, of which you know the meaning? Hm, my fair lady?"

Darien's silent glare answered the question.

The "strategic" discussion progressed nowhere. Their vehicle progressed well enough, though. The despair that gripped the nation had manifested in quiet ways, in houses, in closets, not on the roads, which remained tidy if strewn with potholes. The Witch barely spoke; Berwyn and Darien spoke a lot. Their presence swelled and flattened her against the pane of her window. She compressed, tinier, insignificant. She thought and thought of some kind of strategy when they confronted Clownmuffle, even if only to say something, but her ideas were empty. On one hand, Darien's arguments, seemingly stupid, *felt* right. If the Incubator had attempted to assassinate Joliet and depose DuPage, and failed even with more resources and a genius mind, how could their shitty gang hope to even leave a scratch by doing what he had done? But Berwyn buoyantly tore down any proposed alternative.

And the Witch understood Berwyn's logic. Berwyn wanted no answer to exist. She wanted Darien to realize that. She wanted them to go home.

They parked on the side of a deserted rural road and slept in their seats. Darien had argued for them to forego sleep. Didn't need it, she claimed. Berwyn pooh-poohed her and threw her white cape over herself as a blanket as she snuggled in the driver's seat. The Witch watched the stars.

When Berwyn's snoring became loud enough to exasperate, Darien's hand fell on the Witch's shoulder. The Witch turned, expecting some reprimand. Instead Darien's hard gaze had softened. Her eyes looked askance at Berwyn. She said:

"Hey."

"Hey," said the Witch, after hesitation.

What had once been solid now devolved into a collection of fidgets, not necessarily nervous, but with an idle, lazy kind of distraction. Darien's gaze kept shifting, her palms rubbed together and then against the seat. "You were going to do this fight alone, right? Before you came to us."

"Yes."

"And how exactly did you think you were going to win?"

"I don't know."

"You said you know her? Clownmuffle? You said you hurt her?"

"That's right," said the Witch, "I was Murrieta-Temecula."

"I was also Murrieta-Temecula. That's the thing though. She never seemed *that* strong. I don't understand, was she holding back her abilities?"

The Witch had nothing to say. The Witch, like anyone else, could not claim to understand Clownmuffle. The twinge of folly returned and dispersed like an ebbing tide.

If I may interject, said the Incubator. Darien and the Witch searched for him, their heads turned all over, they found him in the cup holder. His red eyes gleamed but otherwise he became a nocturnal blue. *I did not want to mention this while Miss Roth was awake, but—*

"I thought you were too busy to talk to us for long," said Darien.

Let's just say this venture of yours continues to advance on my list of priorities. As I was saying, I do believe there is a reason for Miss Vizcarra's unusual increase in power. I've observed her a long time, and while she has always been a powerful Magical Girl who has mastered her body and abilities, she has never struck me as someone of abnormal power.

"I thought so. I thought so." Darien nodded like a bobblehead. "I knew it. We only lost because of Cook. Cook destroyed us. If I hadn't gotten stuck in that ice—"

No. Truthfully, Miss Jefferson should have been able to defeat Miss Vizcarra alone. I would also have wagered that Miss Kabwe could have. While Miss Vizcarra matched them both in

terms of raw power, the addition of Miss Luce's invulnerability magic should have given them a clear edge, as it did in previous fights against even stronger opponents.

"She just has some kind of, I don't know, protection," said the Witch. "It's like she can never die. It's like luck."

Under normal circumstances, I would consider that hypothesis ridiculous. But upon reconsideration I believe it may be true. I think the karmic importance of Miss Vizcarra has increased an immense amount due to the intervention of God.

"God," said Darien.

"God," said the Witch.

Correct. You may meet an emissary of hers soon, but that's beside the point. I'll simply say that at one point, Miss Vizcarra was meant to have died. But God herself, acting as the Law of the Cycles, intervened. That action changed the course of history. As such, one might say that this entire timeline exists in its current state solely because of Miss Vizcarra. If that's true, then it means the karmic weight of the entire universe rests on her shoulders. In effect, this would cause her power to increase exponentially.

Darien and the Witch exchanged a dubious glance. "So does that mean she can't die? Or what," said Darien.

I don't know. The only other entities I can say with certainty were revived by a divine act were already divine themselves. This circumstance has never occurred before, at least in this timeline. This is part of why I'm willing to take a poorly-calculated risk on this venture.

The driver's seat rustled; Berwyn turned over. They waited a long moment before continuing.

"But you also offer no solutions," said Darien.

I'm sorry. However, there is someone you may meet in Washington who may, in fact, know more than I do. I've attempted to communicate with her myself, but she's quite stubborn. She refuses to pay any attention to me.

"And her name...?"

Sayaka Miki.

"Who is she? What does she look like? What are her abilities?"

While Darien probed about this Sayaka Miki figure, the Witch started to zone out. The truth was, for a long time now, she had nurtured an idea about how to beat Clownmuffle. The answer to Darien's previous question, of how she planned to win by herself, but something she refused to speak aloud.

Communication.

It seemed obvious. If Clownmuffle could never die, then simply convince her to change sides. It had to be possible. She was not omniscient. Maybe she didn't realize what the cat's broadcasts did to the world, maybe President DuPage's malefic aura tainted her somehow. Maybe Joliet had rewired her—although she didn't exactly know why Joliet, the sniveling coward who rode on the back of her broom when the sea beast attacked, wanted the world to burn either—No matter the reason, it seemed such a clear and tantalizing option to simply *persuade* Clownmuffle. As simple and clear as Berwyn's assassination plan. As obviously flawed.

When? The Witch had to face it:

When had she ever convinced anyone of anything? When had she ever persuaded anyone? Who had ever listened to her? Clownmuffle never did, nor Denver, nor the MagNet community, nor Cook. She had always fancied herself a budding revolutionary. "Gonna change the world," she thought to herself as she planned her uprising with Hemet. But she wasn't. She didn't tell people things. People told her things. Hemet, Bolingbrook, Hegewisch, now Darien. And Darien herself was a receptacle for other people's visions. What appeals emotional, logical, ethical could she employ? What authority?

And if she tried and failed, what instead might Clownmuffle convince her to do? Just as she had in that roadside snow. Just as she had in Ottawa.

Darien morphed back into a girl the same age as the Witch. She interrogated Kyubey, but nothing he said eased her mind. She distrusted him, she distrusted god, she distrusted everything but herself and everything had done everything in its power to shake that trust.

This would never come to pass. They would turn back before they even reached Washington.

Except they reached Washington. Berwyn drove them the entire way, at times with a paper map plastered against the windshield as she discerned bizarre alternate routes. She did not seem to notice Darien's increased restlessness, the constant wobbly motion that accompanied a maintained sense of authority. She loosed passive aggressive jabs whenever possible but she never turned the car around, never slowed or brought things to a confrontational head.

They reached Washington.

It had changed. Everyone knew the city, its pictures flooded every textbook, an inescapable symbol of Americana with more notable landmarks per capita than cities millennia older. A city, one might learn, built by slaves, financed by slavery, and even in its latter years breaking the backs of the souls that financed its insatiable churning machine.

They made it far into the suburbs before they reached the edge of utter blackness, the vortex that swallowed the ground. And while wraiths grouped in thick bunches and on multiple instances they stopped the car for Darien to dispatch them before proceeding, the preceding

array of sad hovel houses did not diverge from the world they all knew. Then they reached the precipice of Hell and it yawned back at them a toothy gape. They stopped the car and stepped out and regarded from the last few feet of unblemished road.

In their world it remained day, a murky frigid sunless day but overcast rather than truly dark; in there a perpetual night, eclipsed by an unseen disc that spotted only this small region of the earth. Inside lights danced. Inside flowed a stream of vehicles. They had stopped on a side alley because the streets in the suburbs had grown so congested. When they climbed onto a rooftop for better vantage they could see every major road that fed into the city clogged. News vans, limousines, sports cars, busted jalopies, every sort of pilgrim flooded inward, and it was only the light and color of their forms that provided much substance to the world inside. Black shapes, spires and pillars, rose, indistinct, to form a skyline or backdrop, power outage city, a city divorced from all light, yet a city with its own stars around which patterns of blue swirled.

(And the power's out... in the heart of man...)

"That's it?" said Darien. "I expected worse."

The few reports I received from the team I sent indicated it's much stranger on the inside than the outside, said the Incubator on Darien's shoulder, a defective model, with its head connected to its neck by only a stripped of flesh and a wriggling wire of spine, as though someone had unsuccessfully geeked it. The rest of its body retained its typical comportment. Please be wary. And don't enter yet, or you'll assuredly die.

"Cheery," said Berwyn. "Hell itself. How far we've come as a civilization. Tsk, tsk."

"Palos, your radar. How many Puella Magi inside?"

The Witch dreaded this question. As soon as they neared she knew the answer. Her radar could not read this world. It was not simply an absence of magical signatures, even though she knew at this distance she should have detected at least Joliet and Clownmuffle: A rigid, unbending wall extended at the exact point where the street became a black hole. Her radar bounced off its edifice.

"I don't know. I can't read it. There's a Magical Girl about a mile north, though, on the rim too." Plus a couple others bouncing around the general vicinity, but the one on the rim seemed most relevant.

That would be Miss Miki. I highly recommend you speak with her.

"Miss Miki?" said Berwyn.

"An angel," said Darien, "according to him."

"Oh, delightful. Angels now. And here I thought I'd had my fill of religion with all the Empress stuffed inside me. I've just recently finished spewing it all out, now they've brought me a live specimen to devour."

"I don't care for your poetical phrasing," said Darien.

"You care for my nothing. The tragedy of our times. But alas, why should Her Munificence Darien X worry herself with the psyches of her peasants...?"

They went to speak to Miss Miki the ostensible angel. They found her in a tent, the kind you might camp in, set up on the sidewalk and making use of a patch of decorative dirt to stick some of the stakes. If anyone expected any ceremony they must have been disappointed because through the open tentflap they saw her warming her hands around a canned fire looking hobo chic in the trendiest Goodwill fashions. Half her hair had compressed into a shiny solid clump attached to the side of her head. She had blue hair for some reason. She stirred a can of soup with a spoon, took the spoon out and tasted it, put the spoon back in. A bundle of rags rustled and the shaggy head of a real hobo extended, regarded them, decided not to give a shit, and dropped.

"Hiya," said Sayaka Miki, the angel.

"Are you Sayaka Miki, the angel?" said Darien.

"Eh. Whaddya think? I don't quite have the look, now do I?"

None dared enter her tent. They stared from outside, lined in an even row, Darien centered. The Witch wondered what kind of response Darien might have to the lackadaisical tone Sayaka Miki took, but Darien actually knelt and bowed her head.

"Your Grace."

Oh yeah. The theology of the Law of the Cycles had been a big deal back in the Empire. The Witch hadn't been there long, but Hegewisch had given her a mound of pamphlets. God and whatnot. The kind of stuff Hemet would sneer at: "Delusions to sway the populace." But Darien stooped. Her eyes met the ground. Berwyn, after a hesitant moment, lowered to a knee.

"I think I can remember your voice, at least," Berwyn said. "You were the one who warned Lady Cicero and Lady Cook about the archon."

"I remember it too," said Darien.

"We-hell, that was a long time ago wasn't it?" Sayaka Miki lifted a spoonful of soup to her lips, blew, and slurped. "Nice cloak ya got there Leah. Mind if I ask where ya got it?"

Berwyn blinked. She pulled at the corners of her white cape, which she had worn without fail since the Witch met her. "I forget exactly. A motel somewhere."

"They leave those things lying around in motels?"

"Well, I was sharing a room with Administrator Hegewisch at the time. I assumed it was an overlooked leftover from a tryst—"

"Yeeouch." Sayaka Miki set down her soup can. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "Sorry, sorry. I wasn't expecting visitors today. So I'm afraid I can't live up to whatever image you expected from an angel, or whatever you think I am. Why don'tcha guys come in? It's actually pretty spacious."

"Your Grace, it would be arrogant and unbecoming of mortals such as we to..." Darien faded away midsentence, seemingly at loss for words. "Ah. Be so close... to your presence?"

Sayaka Miki shook her head and laughed. She kicked her crummy shoes against the ground and scooped up her soup can. "Alright, alright, I'll come out then." She pushed open the tentflaps and strode into the demilight, shielding her eyes from the non-sun as she considered either the rooftops or empty sky. "I hope it doesn't make me sound more ominous or all-knowing than I am if I say I actually expected at least some of you to show up one day or another." Tall, fluid of movement, she loomed above the Witch.

"Your Grace," said Darien, still bowing, "our intention is to defeat the evil in Washington and set right the wrongs our Empire created."

"Kyubey tell you he already sent some guys way tougher than all of you and they got their butts kicked? In the fatal kinda way?" She slurped her soup.

"Yes, Your Grace."

"He tell you I was part of that team? And got my butt kicked? Only difference being I didn't die?"

No answer. Berwyn smiled. "Is that so, Miss Angel?"

"Eh, yeah, but I wouldn't look so happy about it, Leah. Your pal here's only trying to butter me up with all this Your Grace crap. She thinks having an angel on her side'll give her the edge she needs. That right?"

Darien finally raised her head. "And you claim you're not all-knowing. Lady Cicero, at least, could never tell."

"I dunno about that, I think maybe she humored you. You got some obvious tells, Mia. You're in less control of your body than you think. Geez, that sounded really creepy, and to think I was trying to sound wise. Guess I'm no good at this ancient mentor kinda stuff."

"To be honest, I prefer it that way," said Darien. "I've had my fill of mentors. And I figure if God does exist, he or she doesn't have to put on airs for the humans."

"We've strayed from the point, hm?" said Berwyn, who rose alongside Darien. "If this woman was your ace—Nice of you not to inform me ahead of time, by the way—it appears she's as impotent as us all. Tell us, Miss Angel, how you, ahem, 'got your butt kicked,' as you so sagaciously put it?"

Sayaka Miki slurped her soup straight from the can and left a brown mustache on her upper lip. She opened her mouth to speak, noticed the stares, and wiped the mustache with a

sheepish grin. "Sorry, sorry. I picked up some bad eating habits last time I came planetside. I blame it on an old friend. Crappy excuse, I know I know. Anyway, yeah. Kyubey had his big ol' plan. I'm sure he calculated flawless odds. He didn't invite me, of course, but I'm not camping out here for no reason, and whatever that miasma does to turn Magical Girls into witches doesn't work on me, considering I'm part witch already, you could say." She considered the stares of her audience. "Guess I'm going a little fast for you guys?"

"What's a witch," said the Witch.

"Ehhhh long story. Let's just say it's what Magical Girls would turn into if there wasn't the Law of the Cycles. It's what happens if you touch the miasma. Anyway, story time:"

Story Time with Sayaka!

So Kyubey's corralled this whole huge host of Magical Girls from all over, different countries and all that. The strongest possible. You'd figure he might want someone like me around just to translate but nah, course not. I also figured he might bring along a few of my old friends, considering they're pretty tough cookies themselves, but no dice there either. We're talking twenty-thirty total. Five of them are just there to deal with the miasma, the rest are combat. He's done his homework at least. He knows the Magical Girl in that miasma he has to worry about isn't Charlie Vizcarra, it's Christine Luce.

"Joliet? Her?" said Darien. "No. Clownmuffle is far—"

My story buddy? Lemme finish. Charlie's tough, I'll give you that, but is she, like, top tier tough? Ninety-nine point nine percentile tough? Maybe, but we're talking some serious contenders ol' Kyube's brought in. Nah, Christine Luce's a serious deal. Sure, she might have seemed weak when you knew her, but you realize where she's living, right? A miasma. Probably the most powerful ever. Something like that is generating energy like nobody's business. Christine—Clownmuffle too, but it matters more for Christine—is being charged past her limit. We're talking peak Magical Girl performance here. So a pretty mediocre memory manipulator has been cranked to a full-scale reality bender. Well, is she really bending reality or is she just bending your brain? Doesn't really matter.

But Kyubey's got girls specifically designed to handle that. People who don't need their senses to fight. People with pocket dimensions and anti-magic force fields. Crazy. So while they all stream into the miasma I tag along in back. I know my target. It's neither of them, Christine or Charlie. I can't vouch for their reasons, but they're Magical Girls. There's something in that miasma pure evil, and it's my job to root that thing out.

So I skipped the big fanfare lightshow when Kyubey's squad cracked against Charlie and Christine, I went for that archon.

"The archon isn't that big a deal, though," said Berwyn. "If Joliet dies—"

You guys. Seriously, I swear. We can hash out the morals or the pragmatism, you think I'd still be here if I were pragmatic? Christine's not as bad a kid as you think. Maybe that's the part of me that's Cycles speaking, but there's no Magical Girl that doesn't have her reason. No witch either, that's what I've learned. And you know what? Maybe even no archon or wraith. Who's to say? But I have to keep myself going somehow. I have to save this world. I went straight to where I figured the archon would be waiting: the Capitol.

I entered through the front. No security, human kinda security I mean. Also no wraiths. That's the weird thing about the miasma, it's not generating wraiths like it should. I guess it makes witches instead. Anyway, when I get inside, when I get inside—

You know who I see?

Three guesses.

Guys come on that's an invitation to speak, you can speak now.

"President DuPage," said the Witch.

That's the dullest answer, you think I'd make you guess if that were it?

"Lady Cicero," said Darien, suddenly excited.

"The Empress," said Berwyn.

Wrong wrong wrong. You'll never guess because I never could have, although in retrospect it makes a ton of sense. After all, have you ever stopped to wonder why Christine and Charlie can live in the miasma without it killing them, when any other Magical Girl who touches it becomes a witch?

"I assumed the archon controls the miasma somehow not to harm them," said Berwyn.

Me too. Turns out there's another explanation. Your old friend Laila Chatterjee. Your little Administrator.

"Hegewisch?"

Bingo. I'll admit I got a little mad. "What the hell are you doing here?" I asked. Then I calmed down, gave her the benefit of the doubt. "Did your new President force you to do this?"

She was excited to see me, a nice change. She looked around, she asked me: "Where's the others? All the rest? I know she has a lot." Referring to Madoka, of course—er, God—uh, crap, I'm gonna get sidetracked if I try too hard on the details. I told her it was just me. Madoka didn't send anyone else. In fact, she didn't really send anyone. I'm going rogue a little here.

Her mood went kersplat. "Really? Really? She isn't sending anyone?"

"Tell me about it, I know how you feel."

"So you're saying God doesn't actually care that the world is in this shape?" said Darien.

That's exactly what *she* asked, Mia, thanks for the line reading, although her delivery was a bit more on the disbelieving, then angry, side.

"I should have figured," she said.

I'm not a big fan of when people talk bad on Madoka, as you might imagine, so I tried to change the topic, something like, "You don't have to worry. I'm strong enough to kill the archon. Just tell me where she is."

You wouldn't believe it. I didn't. She shook her head. Her face went from mad as hell to blandly apathetic in a way I didn't care for. She opened that case she always carries with her, and, well—

We got in a fight. My butt got kicked.

The end!

Story Time's Over

"Administrator Hegewisch," said Darien, a skeptical eye levied. The Witch had to agree with her sentiment. Hegewisch had tried her best on that yacht but she had no combat abilities whatsoever.

"Look, remember what I said about Christine? How she got all powered up from the energy in the miasma? Same for Laila. Except even crazier because Laila was always operating way below her potential. She had a pretty powerful wish, all things considered, even if her reasons behind it were dumb, dumb, dumb."

Sayaka turned over her soup cup and no more than a drop plinked onto the pavement. She had sipped from it on occasion during her speech, making a mess on her chin, which she wiped away with a thumb. She dropped the can, kicked it, bounced it like a hackysack on her heels.

"She'd've probably killed me too. But believe it or not, angels have guardian angels too. You there, Isabel. Your radar, you sensing a Magical Girl 'bout a mile west a here, away from the miasma?"

The Witch nodded. She had been aware of this singular presence for awhile, assumed it a local girl.

"That's my partner. Nagisa Momoe. She got sent down with me and she refuses to go back until I do. We finally got in enough arguments that she's not too keen on hanging around me,

but she's always watching. I gave her the slip last time with the old cheese-on-a-mousetrap trick. Held her up long enough until she could swoop in at the nick of time and save me."

She missed the can, either on purpose or accident, and it clattered to the ground.

"So. Here's the deal. Laila kicked my butt last time, but I've had awhile to mull things over and I know just how to beat her. And if I can beat her I can beat El Presidente. I've got two major problems, and that's where you guys come in. I'm in charge now, by the way? I dunno what toy soldiers you all were playing at before, but I guarantee I can beat any or all of you silly in a fight, so don't try me."

"Tell me your plan and I'll decide if I like it," said Darien.

"You three distract Nagisa. Get her outta my hair and this world's good as fixed. Whaddya say?"

Her constant stream of speech, which streamed even when she did not speak, ended. Her animation skidded to a halt in accompaniment, the entire time she had alternated between skipping back and forth, spinning n a heel, dribbling soup down her gullet, bending her back as far as it would go, rolling her head on her shoulders. She fell still and her clothes around her fell still a moment afterward. The eyes of Berwyn and the Witch were allowed to turn to Darien. Darien remained focused on Sayaka.

"You want us to be a distraction, not even for an enemy, but an angel who won't even kill us. I'm sure you like that, Berwyn. Something nice and safe."

Berwyn tugged the edges of her cape around herself. "Actually... Actually..."

"Actually I find this utterly absurd. I can't believe it. A babushka doll of absurdity. First Lady Cicero opened up, she trusted nobody but herself, flung herself at Clownmuffle all alone, despite whatever she preached before of fellowship and unity. Then Darien too decided: I shall stand alone, hoist the weight of the world onto my shoulders. And were that not absurd enough, my poppets, we've reached the final gate, and Darien has opened, and here we find Miss Angel, Miss God's Herald, and here she is... espousing this exact same lone wolfism. I cannot believe it. I cannot! I cannot."

She did not rile herself up. Her voice never exceeded a level tone. She maintained a smile as though she provided sound advice. The Witch looked at her, processed her words, and thought—

There was another doll, larger than all the rest, with the exact same mentality. That doll with the top hat and white tuxedo.

"She provides no particulars," added Berwyn after a pause. "Simply, 'I'll make it happen. With my force of will the world will work the way I want it.' If only it were that simple! Aye. How much different this world would be if only we could will its existence the way we liked! Pah. I'm insulted. None of us trust one another. We trust only ourselves. It's the same as it ever was."

"The way Kyubey likes it," said the Witch. She remembered a conversation she once had—long ago—in a diner in the frigid north, seated across that largest doll herself.

Sayaka Miki span with a mercurial glimmer. She terminated in a shrug. "You're absolutely right. It's true. I can't deny it. But it's not as though you guys can do anything about it. You've got no way to enter the miasma, do you? Maybe if you fly around on Isabel's broomstick, but that won't get you into the places you need to be."

"The Incubator told us you could provide a way to enter the miasma unscathed," said Darien.

"He did?" said Sayaka Miki, rolling the discarded soup can atop her foot like a soccer player and knocking it skyward so she could catch it. "I can go in myself, but it's not like I know a way for you guys to do it."

Oh no, said a familiar voice. They did the usual look-around, except Sayaka Miki, who acted as though she heard nothing as she balanced the can on her head. *I apologize if my words misled you. I never insinuated that Sayaka Miki was the Magical Girl who might possess the power to bring you inside the miasma.*

"Classy as always, Kyube." The soup can dropped, she caught it. "You oughtta know when you use big words and complicated sentences you confuse us dumb humans."

Your facetiousness misses the mark, Miss Miki, considering you hardly qualify now as human. Anyway, the promised assistance will arrive shortly. Miss Leyva, you should detect her and her assistants' approach within a few minutes.

"Are we allowed to know the identity of this help?" said Berwyn. "Some girl from faraway lands, perhaps? Even a name would reassure, if that name were meaningless. Perhaps this rhizomatic caginess about our intentions all stems from you, Sir Incubator."

Unfortunately, this person's identity is not meaningless to you, which is why I withheld it. I assumed that if you knew it you would have less faith in her ability to help you, but I assure you that I am over seventy percent confident she can bring you into the miasma, by far the best odds given our current timetable.

Berwyn nodded, then pantomimed blowing her brains out with a pistol.

But, as she'll arrive soon, and you've already reached your destination, I suppose there's no longer any harm in revealing her identity—

And at that moment the signatures burst onto the radar. One, two, three, four, arranged in a pattern that indicated they rode in a vehicle. The signature felt familiar to her, though. She couldn't always tell signatures apart, or attach specific signatures to specific people, but these signatures—three of them, at least—stood out to her, and always had, because they were subtly different from everyone else's, a changed timbre, something unnerving in the background. The same distinctness she had felt with the Handmaiden. Like something about them was a little subhuman, incomplete, partial. Artificial.

They were those secretaries. The ones in the doctor's office. And the fourth signature, the relatively ordinary one, had to be—

The Witch had long forgotten her name. But Kyubey remembered every name, and so he said it:

Dr. Si Yu Cho.

I'm a Coffin, Going Through Hell

Many people possessed names they hated. Many people possessed lives they hated, identities they hated. Maybe the world had once been different, one's purpose known to them by birth, assigned by their surname, Miller or Franklin or Fletcher. They did what their father did, and his father before him, and his father before him. They lived in a single hamlet, comprehended little of political affairs, sustained themselves on scriptures as on bread, and if they happened to be female they had even fewer considerations. Not to imply that this mode of existence was easy; it had always been harder. But people then learned from birth their lot and to accept it. They had no questions, not of themselves or their peers.

How did Kyubey trick girls back then? It's easy to think, putting yourself in the shoes of some fifteenth century Joan of Arc, some Babylonian Ereshkigal, that between life as a factory for reproduction and the temptations of power and freedom anyone would choose the latter, but consider that those ancient women had never known anything different, had never been shown anything different. So much of modern society did Kyubey's job for him. Girls, and boys too, but girls especially, grew up fed lies that they can be different, special, somebody, important, relevant, even though the possibilities of such an outcome are statistically far less likely than even the most repressive of ancient times, where a regent was only a thousandth of the population instead of a hundred millionth; but nobody told these boys and girls that the price for this illusion of freedom was the burden of crafting for oneself their own identity, a more complex and incomprehensible task than the straightforward slaughter of pre-penicillin childbirth death rates.

Who are you?

In this world, who are you? Your name is no longer tied to it. You don't even speak the language from which your name once originated. Your parents work in an office, or they teach, or they police; but you are no longer them. What does it mean to be *you*?

Kyubey, like Hollywood, seemingly supplies the answer to this question, and like every aspiring actress or screenwriter or director or creator, any admired regent, he titillates jaded palates with dreams of significance. He supplies what is most desperately desired, a sense of self, a unique costume, power, wish, everything is bound to you, your identity, who you want to be, who you are. For many girls the wishes come second, and in a few months when they invariably realize they didn't really need what they wished for, many still derive a sense of satisfaction from the identity their wish created; many, despite their misery, do not even regret their choice.

What did Christine Luce, whose name more than most today shackled her to an unwanted purpose, what did she wish for?

She forgot.

She assumed she forgot by design; she could use her magic on herself. She had, until the Handmaiden died, forgotten her costume, what she had become, who she was, the identity

Kyubey or her psyche or God or whoever gave her. So when she remembered, or rather after the immediate peril to her life finally ended and she could bother to look down at what she wore, well.

Well.

Wasn't it so cute?! The ears, the tail! The tail! A real, bona fide tail. Who else could say they had one? Come on. Come on! And her outfit, so adorable and stylish, a gothic edge to prevent the saccharine sweetness of her feline aesthetic to overpower, it encompassed the moodiness and mysteriousness of the cat, could she even *have* better taste? Myah myah~!

She practiced, in the mirror, every day, having scraped off the miasma gunk to see herself, poses and movements, actions, the best way to bat her hands, to bend her knee, to sway side to side, how it looked when she wiggled her tail this way and that, familiarizing herself with—you could say—her body, fidgeting her ears, scrunching her nose. Meow-meow! She practiced her inflection, her mannerisms, vocal tics, the subtle lisp, she loved to pull up her lip just a little to see the sharp fangs that once were her canines. She made purrs and growls in her throat to give it an animalistic quality but moderated it to maintain optimum cuteness.

And! And! Clownmuffle agreed. Clownmuffle agreed, in fact she coached her, suggested ways to improve, to grow naturally into the identity an unremembered self once forged, always constructive in her criticism, genuinely ecstatic for the progress Christine made down her chosen path.

Amazing, wasn't it? Anyone who knew her would never have believed she could go on that stage and speak in front of all those cameras. Nobody. Christine wouldn't have been able to. Pitiful, pathetic Christine Luce, Joliet, the Fourth or Third Centurion, disregarded, shunted aside, a burden—No more! Contrary to popular belief, contrary to her own belief, she stammered or cowered not because she couldn't face people. She did so because she couldn't face people as the person her mother forced her to be. A role that chafed against her natural purr-sonality, a general, a scholar, a Renaissance woman, a reader of ancient literature, a feminist—Nyaa! Her she was, the real Christine Luce, disregard the portentous or pretentious name, this was who she always wanted to be. And when everyone saw her, this time, everyone cared. One way or another, love or hatred, she mattered, she mattered more than anything else to them.

That's what she thought, at least, the first few months.

Draped on her belly across an armchair, her stomach depressed against the cushion, feet kicking, tail wiggling, she checked the message boards. The comments after a performance thrilled her. Some wished her painful, horrible, strangely descriptive death, torture, sexual torment, while others rabidly defended her, white knights who pleaded on terms either humane or lustful for her innocence in whatever sins they believed the DuPage regime to be committing, she often posted in these message boards herself, a carefully collated list of accounts, some posing as her most ardent supporters, some her most baleful enemies. Love or hate, hate or love, she could make them do either, and either was as gratifying. She checked both human communities and magical, a janky forum had appeared under management of the girl in Calgary as a temporary replacement to the MagNet that her mother had made such a hoopla about destroying. The magical conversation was even better. Humans often spoke

with the braindead pantomime her magical power inflicted upon them; Magical Girls, slightly more resistant to her wiles, came up with the exact same arguments almost entirely on their own.

That idiot Calgary, said the lady in her mouth. *Ignorant of cohesive aesthetic.*

"Jealousy," said Christine.

She's a 3 out of 10 at most. Dismal. Let me respond to her.

"Alright." Not that she had much of a choice. Clownmuffle's zealotry knew no limits. A pair of arms extended from her mouth and grasped the phone. Christine had to sit there with her mouth open and wait for the fingers to tap an answer to the latest comment. Honestly, having someone live in your mouth, kind of a drag.

Necessary, though. A lot of people tried to act on their vivid descriptions. Christine could handle the human assassins, but Kyubey had already sent one squad to surprise her.

It was enough to cause, every so often, her old nervousness to strike anew. The fear of death, the stammering clamminess. In retrospect, she had to wonder why she had been such a coward before—why did her life matter so much to her? She had not been a person she even wanted to be. Was losing that self so terrible? Yet now, as before, unease gripped her, with her mouth stretched open and the hands reaching out, her heart began to palpitate, she shifted her body to sit better on the armchair, curling up her legs.

What is it? Do you sense an enemy?

No, I... I don't know. There. It's passed now. And it had. Her heart returned to normal.

Clownmuffle finished the comment—she had written an essay—and handed the phone back to Christine before retracting her arms. Christine cleared her throat with a cough and stared at the phone, stared through the phone. Her vision became vacant as though she had entered a trance.

Sometimes she still failed to understand herself. Even in this paradise (now that the President no longer bothered her), able to think clearly, free of all inhibitions, sometimes something still felt, you know. Wrong.

A fist pounded the door to her room and she jolted.

"You're on in an hour. Know your lines?"

Senator Hegewisch. Christine gripped her heart and stared at the door. The Senator's voice remained dull, level, but in her current mental state, these stupid useless foibles, what did she have to fear? In this world?

"Press Secretary. Are you there?"

"Y, yes." Christine clambered to the door and opened it. Hegewisch stood half-asleep, rubbing her eyes, gulping down a yawn. Her attaché case hung from her hand like a leaden

weight.

"Breaking news. Another mass suicide. Berlin this time. The line is that non-American affairs don't concern us. Got it?"

Christine nodded. "So, so it's spreading..."

"It always would. This country is too ingrained in worldwide affairs. They can't just ignore us. They're watching your program too, now."

"I see... hh."

"That's all I came to say. Goodbye." Hegewisch revolved on a sharp heel and marched down the hall, down the stairs, away.

Christine stood in the doorway several seconds. She had whipped herself into such a bad mental state, she still shook as though she expected Hegewisch to come roaring back. She banged her hand against her head. Dumb, dumb.

Something wrong?

"Don't worry." Dumb Clownmuffle. Christine couldn't delude herself. Clownmuffle didn't really care. Christine had manipulated her mind. She knew. She knew. When Clownmuffle first joined the Empire, Hegewisch labelled her rebellious, a threat, likely to desert or worse. In such cases, they had Centurion Joliet swing by for a little memory manipulation. Back then she had been much weaker, she had needed to strategize. She could not simply inject the thought to hate or love something. She entered someone's mind, looked at the structure that already existed, made slight modifications based on existing principles. Clownmuffle prided herself on her love of certain aesthetics. To her, appearance meant everything... Centurion Joliet merely tweaked some aspects, so that the aesthetic of the Empress, particularly the Empress as she appeared in that one painting, would appeal to her. So as long as Clownmuffle remained in the presence of that painting she would become a semblance of obedient.

It maybe worked, maybe not so much. She wound up deserting anyway, after all. But Joliet never erased the changes she put into Clownmuffle's head. They still remained, and although she had refrained from tampering more with her, even when she now lived in Christine's mouth, she could not deny this fact. Joliet was related by blood to the Empress, as much as she sometimes wished she was one of Dr. Cho's homunculi. The similarities between their appearances were similar enough. And Clownmuffle had always had an eye more toward unusual aesthetics than the flawless. One had to imagine Joliet's manipulation combined with Clownmuffle's ordinary proclivities to form an extreme attachment not to the Empress but to her stranger, uglier daughter...

A sham. All of it, a sham. Nobody cared about her. Nobody liked or hated her. Just like the Centurions, who looked down on her but lacked the liberty to actually despise. Just like her mother, who found her a disappointment but kept pretending to believe in her nonetheless. That identity *had* been her identity, this new one only seemed to matter because she

possessed the ability to strong-arm the world's opinion of her. Nyeh. Kkh. She was still standing in this doorway. She hated these moods of hers, why did she have to have them?

She went for a walk.

One hour before showtime gave her time to cool down, calm her head and heart, and show up in front of the cameras to give another stellar performance. Living in the utter blackness of the miasma, her eyes had adjusted enough to make out gradations and shades of darkness. She knew a little route. Amid the monuments and pillars, along the edges of the National Mall ravaged by the battle four months prior. Ordinary humans continued their business in their city, more flocked inside every day, tourists and lobbyists and journalists and foreign dignitaries, all hoping to witness the President's humor and character for themselves and craft their various responses upon it. Men and women. They recognized her, too, of course. Hegewisch advised her not to go outside but she said it lifelessly, without feeling, so why should Christine listen? Besides, if she wanted to avoid their gaze, as she did right now, she simply needed to distort their perspectives, twist their collective field of vision to obviate herself, and walk as though invisible. Her magic, she had come to realize, was perhaps more powerful than even Cicero's or Cook's. Why had she always considered herself weak? Why had she...

She...

Her eye caught something. A spot of pure white in this terrain of black. It stood out among the ceaseless bobbing heads, stooped, gray at best, collecting the dense miasmatic soot, some darker than others, the difference determined by their time inside. Not this one. White hair, pure white, and a pale face to match, she walked alongside all the others in their constant pull and shove, gaze blank as them, otherwise indistinct save color, but Christine knew that color.

"Clownmuffle. Do you see her?"

Of course. She's distinct.

"Do you recognize her?"

Clownmuffle paused a moment. *Yes. A Magical Girl once in Minneapolis. Same hair. Hideous outfit, though.*

Minneapolis? No surprise. The Empire eventually captured that city. No doubt her mother ordered one of these albinos sent ahead of time to rot it from the inside, render it ripe for taking. This young girl walking, it could be coincidence, but she had a suspicion. One of Dr. Cho's. Christine had weaved for so many of them memories, lifetimes, dreams. She had crafted their identities, determined who they were, what they wanted, what drove them, how they visualized themselves.

She set a pace behind this white-haired creature and observed it as it reached one end of the National Mall, turned around, and walked back the way she came. She wore no ring, not that any Magical Girl ought to have been able to survive in these conditions without Hegewisch's Blessing, but considering Kyubey's resources, one could never be too careful. She clutched a

scrap of paper in her hand. She wore a trim and smart outfit, as pale as her save a navy skirt and shiny black shoes that seemed to sink into the floor.

I think anyone, no matter their natural appearance, can find a look that suits them. But it requires contrast. Albinism could be beautiful, but the girl in Minneapolis matched it with an all-white outfit, you can't do that. You fade away, become nothing.

While Clownmuffle rambled, Christine reached out and placed her hand on the albino girl's shoulder. The girl stopped in place. At first she stared ahead, but as Christine's magic restored her perception, cleared her head of the miasma's forces, she blinked and looked around.

"What is happening? Everything is black..."

"What's your name," said Christine.

The girl finally looked to her. Recognition flickered in her eyes. "A cat..."

"Did someone send you to find me?" said Christine.

Clownmuffle, who had babbled even during this terse conversation, suddenly stopped. *Assassin?*

"I don't think so." Certainly not one Christine had to worry about, anyway. "Did someone send you to find me, girl?"

The girl looked Christine up and down. Her recognition dwindled to uncertainty. "M, maybe. Are you the Press Secretary?"

"You're not a real human being, are you? Were you told that or did your creator not bother penning the details?"

"I," the girl blinked. "I don't know what that means, 'not a real human being.'"

The crowds seethed past in either direction, shoulders and legs that jutted but nonetheless never brushed them. "How old are you?" Christine asked.

The girl looked at her fingers as she counted. "Sixteen—No, seventeen days."

"How old do you think I am?"

"Older... Older than me. Um, thirty-four days?"

I like this girl's mindset. Fresh.

"Very fresh," said Christine. "You remember Dr. Cho, Clownmuffle? Back in the Empire? Probably not by name, although I'm sure you met her. She liked to make people. She must have made this one."

"Dr. Cho is my Creator," said the girl. "I am to do what she says. She told me to find the Press Secretary, who looks like a cat. I have tried asking many people, but they told me to go

to the White House. I do not know where the White House is."

"What are you supposed to do when you find the Press Secretary?"

"Are you her? I am only supposed to tell her what I am supposed to do. I think. Um. I mean, I am only supposed to... do... the thing that I am supposed to do... to her? I apologize. I am an idiot, please forgive me." She bowed graciously.

I love her. I want to protect her.

"They're all like this, before I get to them," said Christine. She decided no need to prolong this ruse. She only had so long before her conference. "Yes, I'm the Press Secretary. Pleased to meet you, girl."

The girl's red eyes brightened. She bounced on the tips of her toes and clapped her hands quick and fast, only to realize midway through her foolishness and fall still and silent with a bashful groundward glare. "Ah. Uh. Ahem. I apologize. I am an idiot, please forgive me. I am happy to have completed my task. Please, receive this letter from my Creator." She proffered the piece of paper.

Christine took it. Dr. Cho's handwriting. Although the girl herself had not yet stained with the darkness, the paper had faded and smudged, which meant the girl must have been wandering around the National Mall at least a few hours. Still, Christine could read it. It began:

YOU OWE ME A FAVOR, LOVE!

(All in capital letters, of course.)

REMEMBER LOVE? THAT DAWN BEFORE MY HASTY DEPARTURE? I BELIEVE YOU WERE IN FEAR OF SOME ATTACKER OR OTHER. BOARDING THE YACHT? PERHAPS I ONLY EXPLICATE SO THOROUGHLY TO JOG MY OWN DIM MEMORY, AS I MUST ADMIT IT'S POSSIBLE I HAVE MANGLED SOME DETAILS. ALAS! BUT I NEVER FORGET A FAVOR OWED ME, OR A FAVOR I OWE (APPENDED TO PREVENT MY SEEMING VAIN), SO I CAN RECALL CLEAR AS CRYSTAL YOUR PROMISE—YES YOU, MISS CHRISTINE LUCE, IN CASE MY CHARMING IDIOT OF A CREATION SOMEHOW HANDS THIS NOTE TO A DIFFERENT CATLIKE CREATURE—TO ASSIST ME IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF MY LATEST CREATION.

YOU SEE HER HERE BEFORE YOU, UNLESS SHE SOMEHOW STUMBLED ON HER OWN TABULA RASA AND DASHED HER BRAINS AGAINST THE SLATE, IN WHICH CASE I WILL NEED TO CREATE ANOTHER, AND A SHAME TOO, I'D RATHER NOT RISK WHAT IS EASILY MY PUREST PSEUDO-DAUGHTER ON SUCH A DANGEROUS VENTURE, BUT YOU'VE APPARENTLY TAKEN TO LIVING IN DANGEROUS LOCALES, LOCALES I CANNOT ENTER MYSELF, SO HERE SHE WANDERS UNAIDED, AND DRAT I'VE COMPOSED A RUN-ON SENTENCE, ALAS. EXCUSE, AS ALWAYS, MY POOR ENGLISH, AN UNFORTUNATE SIDE EFFECT OF HAVING LEARNED THE LANGUAGE IN A NATION THAT SPEAKS IT. WHERE WAS I?

That was the end of the page. Christine turned it over.

YES! THAT'S RIGHT. THIS CREATION YOU SEE BEFORE YOU. SHE IS TO BE MY MASTERPIECE, I HAVE LEARNED MUCH FROM THOSE I CREATED BEFORE HER, IT BECOMES DIFFICULT TO EVEN IMAGINE IMPROVEMENTS, WITH PROPER EDUCATION I AM CERTAIN SHE WILL BECOME INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM A REAL HUMAN, NONE OF THOSE NASTY DEFECTS THAT CROPPED UP IN PREVIOUS MODELS. THIS CREATURE WHO STANDS BEFORE YOU SHALL, I PRAY, BECOME MY CONDUIT TO GOD, A BEING WORTHY OF CAPTURING HIS OR HER, I HEAR SHE IS A HER, ATTENTION, ONE CREATOR TO ANOTHER. AND YOU, MY DEAR FRIEND, WHO HAVE HELPED ME SO MANY TIMES BEFORE IN MY ENDEAVORS, SHALL FULFILL YOUR PROMISE AND HELP ME AGAIN AT THIS PRECIPICE OF A VICTORY THIS SPECIES HAS NEVER YET ACCOMPLISHED, SAVE IN PONDEROUS WORKS OF GOTHIC HORROR.

ARE YOU NOT EXCITED? I AM EXCITED! !!! SO HERE IS WHAT I TASK OF YOU: A TALE, SPECIFICS LEFT TO YOUR DISCRETION, ALTHOUGH I EXPECT YOUR BEST WORK, A TALE OF A YOUNG WOMAN PIOUS AND RESOLUTE, BENT IN ALL PURSUITS TOWARD THE RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY, THE DEFINITION OF WHICH BEING OUTLINED IN THE MORE OPTIMISTIC OF THE SCRIPTURES—I AM AWARE YOU HAVE SOME LEARNING IN SUCH TEXTS—FOR WHOM NO MORAL QUANDARIES OR INDECISION EXIST, FOR WHOM NO PHILOSOPHICAL PONDERING NEED APPLY. A JOYOUS HOME, A LOVING FAMILY, FROM WHOM SHE HAS PARTED SOLELY ON HER PATH OF DEVOTION TOWARD AN EVEN GREATER FATHER—OR MOTHER—I'LL LEAVE THE SPECIFICS OF HER CONCEPTION OF GOD TO YOU. UNDERSTAND YOU MY DRIFT? I ANTICIPATE THESE WORDS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN YOUR GEARS, YOU HAVE A BETTER KNACK FOR THE FULL FLESH THAN I, LOVE. THE IMPERATIVE IS THIS: HER GREATEST WANT SHOULD BE TO KNOW GOD. I LEAVE THE REST IN YOUR EVER-CAPABLE HANDS, LOVE.

SI YU LATER! (=^·ω·^=) P.S. AS A TOKEN OF MY GRATITUDE, YOU MAY DECIDE HER NAME.

By the end of the page she had started to run out of room and had to cram her letters together to fit. Classic Cho, in person on topics she cared most about she could be even more effusive, in fact Christine considered this letter timid in comparison with its position at the apex of the doctor's personal journey, the resolution of the Frankensteinian identity she crafted for herself, or perhaps that she simply inhabited naturally, without ever any need to pause and consider her direction, which fork in which road to take, whether she should have made a different decision too far in the past to undo it. According to the Empress, Dr. Cho had come to Chicago on the brink of death, but that seemed impossible, an exaggeration at least.

"Have you read this?" she asked the girl.

The girl gave an overemphatic shake of her head. "No, I would never! It is not for me."

"It concerns you," said Christine. "I'm to... train you, let's say."

"Train me..." The girl stared back all serious and contemplative. Then she grew eager. "Of course! You must be a learned scholar for my Creator to send me to you. Please fill my idiot head with good thoughts!" Another bow.

That pious personality idea's dull, said Clownmuffle. No conflict. No contrast. No junctions or indecisions. It fails to inspire.

"I did promise," said Christine.

Tragic pasts make for better stories. Why bother if she's so milquetoast? How can she ever reach the catharsis of completion if she's always been so sure of herself?

"I have an appointment in a half hour," said Christine, checking her watch. "But I'll be sure to do what your Creator asks once I finish. In the meantime, you can stay at my apartment. Follow me."

"Yes, Teacher!"

A molestation. By a priest. Tint her devotion to God with fear of God's misuse. That'd give her journey more weight. How does she reconcile her optimism with the real cruelty religion has caused? Render her with several shades.

Christine deposited the girl in her apartment and gave her strict orders not to go outside. She indicated food in the refrigerator before hurrying to her conference. She took Dr. Cho's letter with her and reread it on route, bouncing forward and diverting the attention of everyone who might walk into her path so that they stepped aside instead. She span, twirled, allowed her full catlike charm to shine on display, and disallowed anyone save the lady in her mouth to see. She leapt up and punched the sordid air. Utmost faith... ever-capable hands. Hehe! Dr. Cho, Dr. Cho. Christine remembered the creatures she helped create before, the bodies comatose or infantile upon a medical rack, the specifications given her: An adopted prodigy, a nymphomaniac runaway, many others, many shades and textures of life. Her mind already whirred with the specifics of this new charge. Incidents in early years, half-remembered toddler visions, sermons that inspired, a pageant play, Mormons—for some reason she thought Mormons, then shook her head, too modern—had to be Catholic. A loving family, yes, but an irreligious, the kind of suburban Christians who attend Mass Christmas and Eastertime—and it would be Eastertime soon, wouldn't it?—but have no further connection to God, no, this girl would find Him or Her in her own way, on her own terms, never forced...

"What's got you so happy," said Hegewisch, enveloped in forms, behind a pair of owl-eyed reading glasses she had adopted recently.

"I—aheh—hkkhh," she turned and cleared her throat. At the last moment she considered that Hegewisch, whose designs confounded her, might have some arbitrary stick-in-the-mud complaint against Christine helping Dr. Cho. She shut her mouth.

Except it opened right after and Clownmuffle stuck out her face. "She's making a person."

Christine placed three fingers against Clownmuffle's forehead and pushed her back inside. Coughing, clearing her throat, she could at least rely on Clownmuffle's characteristic

ambiguity to keep everything unclear.

Hegewisch's eyes narrowed from behind her glasses, she attempted to parse the statement, she shuddered and the care left her as she shuffled her papers to bring another to the fore. "Fine, fine. Just remember, Berlin, non-American. You're on in two."

Choked by her giddiness, Christine gave a performance halting and less comprehensible than normal, counterbalanced against a more gregarious sense of motion, she danced around her podium, twirled, pirouetted, hopped among the dour journalists and shook their hands, invited them into her dance. When the assassin du jour manifested, a harried young woman reporter with a pump shotgun, Christine weaved between the pellets, allowed none to even graze her, and karate chopped the attacker in the neck to render her unconscious so the dullard human security could haul her away. No Clownmuffle needed.

Hegewisch criticized her performance afterward, but in a way that suggested she really didn't give a shit. Back to your forms and parchment, little lady, it's a long way from that yacht on Lake Michigan. Christine skipped the long way home and this time she let everyone see her. She made them forget by the time she reached her door, her heart palpitated, twelve hours until her next conference and a perfect canvas with which to work.

Twelve hours to herself. Well—almost.

Outside the door to her living quarters she said: "Would you, ehm, mind leaving for a bit?"

Silence.

"Clownmuffle?"

You meant me?

The corridor was otherwise empty. "Y, yes. Just until the next conference."

Of course not.

"Oh... right." So much for that. It did not help that when Clownmuffle lived inside her mouth she could not use her magic on her. Because she wasn't really inside her mouth, and Christine had no idea where she really was. Transmitting her power solely through voice had little effect against someone so powerful, either.

Minimal setback. Ignorable. She entered her room.

The girl sat on a simple chair, ankles crossed, hands smoothing her skirt. She held her head bowed and her eyes were closed serenely. Against the backdrop she glowed.

Although the door had opened loud enough, only after she opened her eyes and recognized with surprise who had entered did she stand. "Hello, teacher! How was your appointment?"

"You're my appointment now," said Christine, and shut the door behind her.

From the homeless tents, the doctor's station wagon, and the piled debris left on the streets and sidewalks they formed a makeshift camp at the edge of the archon's miasma, not quite escaped from the more rudimentary miasma that blanketed all habited places in this country, but enough to provide for themselves a bulwark of defense while they waited, and waited, and waited, as the hours turned from midday to dusk to night and the sun and moon's positions in the sky remained unchanged. Still, many wraiths seethed, but Sayaka Miki volunteered to destroy them, hurled herself into huge hordes slicing and dicing wearing a cape that was for some unexplained reason identical to Berwyn's.

The rest clustered in a ring around the fires they created, seven Magical Girls and four homeless people. Dr. Cho's three homunculi cooked frozen food on pans and plates brought from the station wagon, sizzling sausages and eggs. One deposited a helping of salted, seasoned potatoes onto the Witch's plate. She shoveled down a mouthful in the same breath she said thanks. She wondered how the Nazi would react seeing food like this. She wondered whether they had Kyubey to thank for it.

"So that's the terrible fate that befell our lovely Empress?" said Dr. Cho, legs splayed from the open passenger side of the station wagon. Her labcoat and leather smock flowed against the ground and she patted her massive gloves against her knees. "Tragic! I understand now why our dear Incubator advised my retreat from such company."

"How would you prefer your eggs, doctor?" said a homunculus.

"Benedict, can never decline a quality benedict. Have we the materials?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Divine, divine. And you, friends? Benedicts? Omelets? No stinginess allowed, I've instructed my pupils in the culinary arts, and we've all strength to muster."

"Wanna benedict," muttered a hobo.

"Benedict for our rugged individualist right here, Lachesis."

"Yes, doctor. Right away, doctor."

The other hobos followed suit, voicing demands. Darien requested pancakes and syrup. The pans over the flame sizzled, wrists flicked, food dashed and flipped. Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos hardly supplied one plate before someone demanded seconds or thirds or fourths.

"Miss Blue Hair with the pouty face? Plenty for you as well, love!"

No answer from over the barricade, only chop, chop, chop.

Darien dissected her pancakes, laden with whipped cream. "Your girl's been gone a long time, doctor. She ever coming back?"

"Does my face betray me? It's best, of course, to maintain a cheery demeanor. Negativity breeds no success, none at all, no-no-no." She nibbled a buttered slice of toast. The Witch wished she took her gloves off to eat, it looked disgusting. "But I am simply petrified with anxiety. You've no idea how much time and energy I poured into this creation. Why our little Joliet has decided to live in such a beastly area, I'll never know."

"Do you ever watch the news," said Darien.

"Never, no, what does that matter to me? Why do you ask?"

Eggs benedicts were deposited on the plates of those who requested them. Dr. Cho attacked hers with gusto. "You should have been there, Lieutenant Berwyn. You'd have appreciated the effort. Do you younger kids know? Berwyn was once my laboratory assistant. Her powers quite useful for such-and-such tasks. I forget why she requested a transfer."

"I stopped liking what we made," said Berwyn. Her demeanor had remained dour since Dr. Cho's arrival, much as Sayaka Miki's, whose costume she shared. But she had refrained from another useless speech, like the Witch she finally seemed to realize words meant nothing to anyone anymore. She cut up a sausage.

"Needless, needless," said Dr. Cho.

The Witch received a country fried steak. The homunculus Clotho offered to slather it with gravy, but the Witch declined.

"Hey."

They all turned their heads. Sayaka Miki had returned, face sooty. Her cape hung stagnant and several swords lined up at her sides. When she spoke again, she spoke with immense reluctance, grinding her teeth, almost stopping after the first syllable:

"I've found a friend of yours."

She stepped aside and revealed the fourth homunculus. The one who did not appear on the Witch's radar, because she was not a Magical Girl. The one Dr. Cho sent into Washington with a note for Joliet.

The Witch considered the plan suspect from the start. It relied on Joliet doing as Dr. Cho asked, something Dr. Cho considered certain, something the Witch found farfetched. Sayaka Miki's face betrayed the plan's success, though. She seethed, shoved the homunculus forward.

"This is stupid. So stupid. This shouldn't be done, not like this. You're all trusting Kyubey, and that's a mistake. Big one."

"Ah! Ah, ah!" Dr. Cho shoved her plate to Atropos and strode to the mousey blank girl.

"The plan should be, you guys distract Nagisa, I do everything else. This isn't good for any of you. It isn't gonna solve anything. Dammit. Dammit!"

The doctor withdrew a pocket flashlight from her smock and shined it into the girl's eyes, one after the other. "Remember me, love?"

"I..." The girl blinked. "I think? I don't remember where. But you definitely seem familiar. I apologize, I am being quite rude: My name is Millicent, but you may call me Millie. How do you do?" Her hand reached out to shake.

Dr. Cho jerked it almost out of her socket. "Nice to meet you, nice to meet you, love. I am Dr. Si Yu Cho. The many others all gathered, you'll learn their names in kind—"

"I'm Darien."

"Yes yes, she's Darien. But you, Millie, you're the important one right now... You must, simply must tell us about yourself, I want to know everything, who you are, what you've become."

The jittering chattiness transferred through the doctor's gloved hands against Millie's shoulders and caused the entire body to tremble. Left, right, behind, forward, the doctor inspected, confirming with nods and murmurs the exact physical resemblance of the character before her with the thing she had cast into the abyss. She stuck her hands under the girl's armpits and forced her arms up, inspected underneath, let the arms fall, pried open the mouth and shoved her eyeball almost inside. Millie made only tentative attempts to speak.

"Give her space, Si Yu." Berwyn pried the doctor away. "Come on, come on. Hey. You can do the whole rigmarole later. Are you hungry, Millie?"

They sat her amid them. She received a plate and after a silent prayer everyone watched her eat, which she stopped doing once she realized they did. An arms-crossed Sayaka Miki leaned against the station wagon behind her.

"I saved her from wraiths, y'know. She could've easily gotten eaten."

"And one thousand thanks for that," said Dr. Cho. "Millie, Millie, Millie. You poor unfortunate girl! Why were you wandering by yourself so late at night?"

"I. Well I, I do not quite know, my apologies." Millie kneaded the ball of her hand against her temple but stopped when she remembered everyone stared at her. "I am new to this city, so it is possible I became lost."

"New? Where are you from?"

"I am from Eufaula, Alabama." Minus any trace of an accent. "I have come to this city to attend a prestigious school. I am very eager to learn and grow as a person." She set down her plate. "Thank you all very kindly for the food and hospitality, but my school has a curfew and I must return before the headmistress scolds me."

They had tried to sit down Dr. Cho as well but she refused, animated incorrigibly, a constant swish of her labcoat as she paced around the circle of seated figures. "Such earnest, forthright sensibility. Tell us more, more. Who are your parents? How old are you? Any siblings?"

Childhood pets. Who is your favorite person in the whole world? Your least favorite? Do you get good grades—well of course you do. Have you read the Bible? Or is some other religion your bent? Do you ever imagine murdering someone? You're how old again? Teenage, right? Then you must have had sexual thoughts of some kind, why don't we discuss those—"

"No."

Darien tossed her plate aside. It skidded across the ground, bounced, and landed perfectly atop a stack of finished plates piled by the station wagon. She downed the last of her beverage and tossed the cup similarly. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she asserted her height over Dr. Cho, although she was not taller than Dr. Cho.

"You'll have all the time you want to interrogate her later. First, we need her to do something."

"Me? Do something?" Millie tugged at the knot that tied her collar, realized her impropriety, and forced her hands back clasped into her lap. "I will try my best, Miss Darien, although I do not know what you would demand of me."

"Something the doctor assured us you could do. Someone summon the Incubator. Why isn't he here already?"

I am here, although I would rather not show myself until Miss Miki is subdued. She fully intends to destroy my body when I appear, and I hope to avoid unneeded waste.

By the time Darien transformed, Sayaka Miki had already sunk into the shadows, nothing but two blue eyes that blinked and went out. Darien readied her blade and ignored Millie's shocked gasp but she failed to react as five thin cutlasses shot from the darkness and sank into five fleshy bodies hidden around the campsite. One, two, three, four, five deformed Incubators staggered, twitched, slumped onto their sides, and dissolved into dust. Even after the ashes swirled toward the flame, Sayaka Miki's blades remained rooted where she had thrown them.

"What are you doing," said Darien. "This girl needs to make her wish. That's the only way we can enter the miasma."

"Yeah." Sayaka Miki melted back into the light. "But you're not entering the miasma. Didn't I tell you that? All you're gonna do is distract Nagisa and I'll handle the rest."

"If this Nagisa woman doesn't think you can win," said Darien, "we shouldn't either."

"It's not *about* that, you idiot. It's not about winning and losing. God's got a hundred thousand Magical Girls like me up there in her heaven. She could drop a whole army of angels and clean up this city in seconds. Know why she doesn't?"

Someone started to cry. It was Millie. She stared at the ashen lumps that were once the Kyubey bodies, which still maintained a partial Kyubey structure.

"Cuz God's a law. Here since the beginning, here until the end. Alpha and omega and that jazz, y'know? And there's always been an end, and she's always known it, and she's always accepted it, because there has to be an end. And it's sad, y'know, because God's also a person, a really really good person, maybe the best person I've ever met, and I know how hard it must be for her to accept all the bad crap that goes on in this world, and the fact that everyone on it is gonna die one way or another. She made a mistake once, she influenced this world some way she shouldn't have, and it made everything the crapsack it is now, and she's had to shoulder that grief. Because she's a law, she can't do anything about it. She can't knowingly break herself again just because she did it once. The first time, she got tricked. More or less. Someone who really should not have been able to interact with her said something to her and it made her mess up. Because she's still human, y'know. This time, there's nobody to interact with her. Nobody to trick her. So she's gonna have to trick herself, and that's where I come in."

Millie's tears weakened; Dr. Cho had sprung to comfort her, but Millie instead stared at Sayaka, red-eyed.

"In one life I was a pretty good friend of hers, so I managed to convince her to send me down here. Not to physically influence anything, just to have a chat with that same person who tricked her in the first place to try and set things right. This was seen as a kinda loophole, y'know? That person could see and interact with God anyway, so she was kinda outside the rules of causality. Well, that was the excuse I gave her, and it was clearly a bogus excuse, but it was just believable enough to convince the human side of her to override the law side and send me down. But the law side knew something was fishy, so it sent Nagisa too to keep an eye on me. And that's how we got here. It's not whether I can win, because I can, I'm stronger than any Magical Girl in that miasma, I know I am. The question is whether I should be fixing this world at all. And in that question, I'm on the human side, Nagisa the law side. Does that make sense?"

Of course it fucking didn't. Nobody knew what the hell she was talking about, and the expressions on their faces must have shown it, because as Sayaka Miki ended her speech she looked at each of them and lost the stern confidence in her expression and voice, withdrew a little sheepishly and rubbed the back of her head with an almost silly smile, eyes squeezed shut.

"Sorry, sorry. I'm no better at all this metaphysical crap than any of you, I know. Geez, I probably just made things worse. Let's start over—"

"That is not true."

"Ehhh?"

Millie. She pointed a finger straight at Sayaka. "That is not true. How can you say things like that about God? God is loving and kind. God protects His creations. You do not know anything, and you killed those animals for no reason!"

"Look. Hey." Sayaka pressed a hand to her face and shook her head. "Yeah, God is loving, kind, all that. But—"

But something had caught Millie's attention. "You are alive!"

In an instant Sayaka flashed her cape and five new swords appeared, her face darted side to side, then she and all of them saw him—the Incubator—clutched in Millie's hands like a stuffed doll, clasped tight to her chest.

Don't worry, Millie. I expected Miss Miki might try something like that, but don't worry. I'm still alive.

"Get away from him!" Sayaka Miki surged forward, blades drawn, low to the ground, a sharp kick to Darien's shin to redirect a blow otherwise poised to stop her, at Millie—

But Millie enveloped Kyubey with her body. "I will not let you hurt him!"

Sayaka Miki had no way to attack Kyubey without going through Millie first. And she clearly lacked the will to do that. The swordpoints trembled inches from the girl's body, but drew no further.

"Put him down, Millie. You can't trust him. He's a liar and he'll con you bigtime." She glanced to everyone gathered at the campfire, as though requesting assistance. But Dr. Cho only watched avidly, scribbling notes, Darien said nothing, the Witch said nothing, the other homunculi said nothing, the homeless men ate their meals. "Leah. Leah, help me out. You don't want your friends to go into that miasma, right? So help me stop her from making a wish."

Berwyn slumped so far forward she seemed to collapse like a wirecut doll, a solitary visible eye peeking between thumb and forefinger at the fire.

"If you disobey me, soldier," said Darien, "I will shred you. Is that clear, Berwyn? I may not be able to strike this angel but I can strike you."

"No need, no need," said Berwyn. "I'm checked out."

"Then you—Isabel," said Sayaka.

The pleading, bitter and impotent anger turned to her, the Witch, lost and forgotten among so many, a nameless follower transformed, a silent observer who lacked a voice. Sayaka's arm plunged into the swamp and fished.

"Isabel. You're better than this. You think it's okay to use this poor girl as a pawn? To make her chuck away her life just so you can go on your suicide tour? Whose side are you on, Kyubey's?"

Make a wish, Millie. You were attacked earlier by monstrous creatures, don't you remember? They prey upon the weak and defenseless. They are the embodiment of true evil. You are one of the chosen few who can fight against them, one of God's beloved. Make a wish and become a Magical Girl!

"He's absolutely right, absolutely," said Dr. Cho.

"This world will die if you don't," said Darien. "Do you see this city? Look around you, do you see it? This is a war."

Dr. Cho seized Lachesis and swung her into a lazy waltz. "Open your heart to him, love, open it wide and allow your wings to blossom heavenward. God is real, God is real, and we shall prove it and serve, prove it and serve!"

"And serve," said Lachesis.

"I am so very confused," said Millie. "I am sorry, may I have a moment to, simply think..."

That woman intends to kill me, Millie! I need your help. I'm in great danger!

Unbearable.

"You can't talk about her like you know anything about her." Sayaka's arms stood straight at her sides. Her head lowered. The shadows lengthened across her body, cut her into fragments. "None of you know anything. Even if you claim to serve her—ha. Ha! Can't you see? This is his plan. He always has a plan, always. He's tried to destroy God before, why would he stop now?"

Her words went nowhere, nobody seemed to listen except the people who refused to listen, Dr. Cho spiraled into an absurd rondo with her puppets, Berwyn became one of the homeless men stabbing aimlessly at a plate gone shallow. Words meant nothing to Darien and the Witch, well, the Witch...

"Miss Miki, that is your name?" Millie, still arched defensively, turned to her. "Is it. Do you stand by what you said earlier? That you were sent by God?"

"Her name is Madoka," said Sayaka Miki. "She sent me."

"But... you also said, and forgive me if I misinterpreted, you also said that she is now trying to stop you?"

"I said—it's complicated—"

A sad nod. As she did, she lifted her head for the smallest instant and a tiny patch of white fur shone just under her neck. In that instant Sayaka Miki drove her sword with pinpoint accuracy into it.

The bundle Millie held crumbled into dust. She opened her hands and the ashes seeped between her fingers, onto the tent of her skirt. She suppressed a whimper. Her eyes glistened.

A hundred pink eyes opened in a ring around the campsite. *Your wish, Millie, quickly!*

"What?" Sayaka Miki said. "This many? I thought you were running out—"

Quickly, before she kills us all!

"I wish," said Millie. "I wish, I wish, uh, I wish—"

"No. NO."

"I wish to know, God."

Titillate Their Jaded Palates

The first step inside the city went down. The one in front stumbled past the threshold between normality and nothing, caught herself on a hand and cartwheeled as though she planned the maneuver from the onset, but she fooled nobody. Berwyn and the Witch, more cautious, toed their way inside. It may have added humor to the situation if they weren't both relieved Millie's enchantment actually worked. At the last moment, before they entered, Sayaka Miki babbled that it wouldn't, that their Soul Gems weren't protected, that they would turn into monsters the moment they touched the miasma, but that actually gave them more confidence, because her desperation made the lie obvious. Sayaka Miki now skulked behind them, unable to blend into this darkness, but her body still cast shadows on itself and her swishing cape at times constricted her into a more marginal form.

At the boundary, Dr. Cho, Millie, the other homunculi, and the homeless men waved. "I'll fix you a feast upon your return, loves! We've much to celebrate today. See you later!" She took Millie under her arm, but Millie's mouth squiggled. The row of bodies were finally were eclipsed by the edge of the city as the descent steepened.

The Witch skidded, Berwyn caught her. The buildings rose, black pillars, into the crescent moon sky, where more stars gleamed than necessary, larger too, large enough to make out distinct five-pointed designs amid their luster. The whole vista bent like a rainbow, or like her eyes had become a fish's. Some of the buildings stretched horizontal. If she stared too long they drew farther from her, and the yawning hole issued a subterranean chuckle, and the stagnant air garroted her throat. She scratched fingernails against her neck but nothing was there, nothing but skin.

She rode her broomstick. Doing so alleviated the tension and made the descent much easier. Soon, Berwyn rode with her. But Darien groped her way along crags and outcroppings in her wedding dress. She drove her sword into the ground and used it as a crutch.

At one point Sayaka Miki scampered past, as though on straight, level, horizontal terrain. She sent one glance over her shoulder, first at Darien, then at the air, and disappeared behind a building. Her pattering heels resounded far louder and longer than they ought but eventually diminished into a dull thudding that might have been the pulse of blood in the Witch's brain.

"So she's off. Aye, figures she wouldn't wait around for us," said Berwyn. "How does it feel, Fifth Centurion Darien, to have your lone wolf suicide charge stolen out from under you?"

To bridge an invisible precipice, Darien hurled her body forward, scraped her hands and feet against a blackness, caught hold of something and clung. "Quit wasting time. It's nearly midnight. I don't plan to prowls this city blind. We need to make it to the press conference while we know our target will be there."

The one slowing them down was Darien, of course. On the broomstick, the Witch more than matched her pace.

"I could inject you with a little something to balloon you like a big gasbag, then you'd float past all this jaggedness, what say you, Fifth Centurion?"

"Refrain from supercilious suggestions, Berwyn."

"Oh! Supercilious. Spectacular word, Fifth Centurion, truly a feather notched only in the most talented wordsmith's cap. Could you, ahem, for my edification of course, myself being so ignorant, could you define it?"

"Useless. Useless, unnecessary, devoid of purpose—"

"Oh yes, supercilious, that's what it means—"

"Are you mocking me, Berwyn?"

"Looks this like the face of a mocker?"

They reached a lane where humans walked. Thick, pliant lines that swayed as though the walkers were both drunk and professionally synchronized. They streamed from nowhere to nowhere, nothing distinguished their blank gazes, and even as Darien crawled on her belly above their hatted heads they did not look up to see her. Berwyn, who gesticulated toward her face during her final comment, fell upward and landed amid them headfirst. The humans stepped on her, lost their balance, and fell, and all the humans in the line behind them fell the same direction to maintain their sync.

Sudden disorientation seized the Witch and she gripped her stomach to prevent it from upending. Her legs gripped the broomstick as her hair, which had hung around shoulders like normal, lifted and dangled downward at the sky. Or the sky's reflection? She clamped her eyes shut and the space inside her eyelids was lighter than the darkness outside. A little of her own effervescence she could dwell on, cling to, linger within, until a hand twisted her hair into a knot.

"I said, quit wasting time." Darien shook her skull so the eyeballs rattled.

Berwyn rose and pulled the Witch down to earth. "This way, poppet, you'll feel better. Create the world in your head, don't bother with what your senses tell you."

That advice meant nothing and helped less and their grips drew her like a ribbon until she spread out taut along her broomstick, at which point Darien gave a massive yank and dragged them both to her. The human heads rolled past. "Both of you, shut up. Listen solely to the person here who knows what they're doing." She paused, thought, added: "That's me."

"You don't even know where the White House is," said Berwyn.

"I do. I do. It's whatever way I say it is. That's how it works."

"That's not how anything works!"

"It will be. I'll make it. I'll make it work that way. If I believe in it, I can make it happen. That's magic. What's reality? It's what the strongest will says it is."

"History written by the winners," said the Witch. A fragment of a passage remembered from a book left upside-down on a pile of socks in a room on the edge of a desert.

"Exactly, exactly." Darien pointed from Berwyn to the Witch. "If you two believe in me, I'll be even stronger than if I just believe in myself. That's how I'll beat Clownmuffle. If have you two, and she doesn't."

"She has the cat," said Berwyn.

"Skin that cat. That cat doesn't figure. She's a zero. Whatever tricks she has because of this miasma, she's still a zero, always was, always will be."

"You can't. You can't, pepper. You can't just ask us to put unshakeable faith in you, that's not how it works, that's not how the Empress did it or Cicero, you can't just say you believe in yourself so much it becomes true, you're just like them all. Sayaka Miki, Cicero, taking everything onto your shoulders, demanding trust you do not deserve!"

End this endless argument. That's how they always go, the same points repeated, progress seemingly made only for everyone to lurch back to the origin and retread the same ground, supply the same arguments, reach new conclusions, no change, all the men at their pulpits the same way, kings decapitated and the world no better so they decapitate the revolutionaries and bring back the kings, only to hate the kings again, no relief, no progress, no advancement, and yet somehow you look at this world and the world five hundred years ago and something clearly happened between all the nothing happening... Something went right. Where? When? The cycle of the argument never changed. The violence beget new violence. When in all that did humankind have the chance to develop?

"There," said the Witch. "White House." She extended her finger toward the black. She didn't know why she said it, she thought it might stymie the ceaseless back-and-forth, the voices pounding her nauseated brain, but when she said it and pointed in a random direction the darkness developed gradations and the shape of a structure emerged. A shape she knew, not the same color. As though she manifested it with mere word.

Darien seized them both by their collars and hoisted them along. "Perfect. We can't have arrived much later than Sayaka Miki."

"Sayaka Miki? You saw her?"

The sword sliced in a lateral arc and came to a stop at the throat of a short, frumpy Magical Girl with a cat-eared hood. However, it was not Joliet. She wore suspenders and puffy... pantaloons? Furballs hung from the tips of her cap. They jostled as she fidgeted in fright from the blade.

What a bizarre, disparate outfit. It made the Witch think of Clownmuffle, made her wonder whether she would love or loathe this collection of leggings and fur trim, midriff and vaguely winter wear. Considerations of aesthetics had long slipped her grasp, tenuous as her hold always had been. It seemed phantasmagoric that Clownmuffle might still exist in the same state as always, unchanged, providing the same vapid commentary.

"You must be Nagisa," said Berwyn, hand placed atop the blunt end of Darien's blade to lower it. "I hoped to speak to you."

"Really sorry!" Nagisa hopped foot to foot. "I can't stay to chat, I gotta help Sayaka. Do you know which way she went?"

"Where have you been all this time," said Darien. "We waited for Cho's hhomunculus to return almost twelve hours. You're just now distressed?"

She gripped her head by the ears of her cap. "Ah, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! She knows all my weaknesses! She set traps. I thought I was keeping an eye on her, but then suddenly I found a treasure trove of cheese, the next time I looked you had all run inside..."

"Cheese."

"Aaaaaah, I'm so embarrassed, please forgive me! Just tell me, did she really go in there?" Nagisa pointed at the White House.

Darien had only lowered her blade the degree Berwyn forced her. "Yes."

"There? You're sure? Not the Capitol like last time?"

A pause. "Yes, there," said Darien. The Witch wasn't so sure. Sayaka had spoken about skipping straight to the source: President DuPage. The White House didn't figure. Did Darien not know? Or did she deliberately intend to buy Sayaka time? Even though they had been at odds before... Maybe Darien believed in her a little, too.

"Oh, oh, oh! Why's she gotta be so difficult? Why's she always gotta rush off and do something dangerous by herself? I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, Madoka told me to protect her, I wish you all well. I wish you all well!"

She leapt onto Darien's blade and used it as leverage to launch herself forward. She seemed to float, but in a way that suggested a lack of control, something left to chance or fate. A plush soft feeling brushed past the Witch's leg. She and Berwyn fell back as between them slithered something that blended perfectly into the darkness save a series of bright polka dots. It maybe had a face, too, but it had already passed them, and save a fuzzy bulb at the end of what might have been a nose they could not see. It followed Nagisa as she leapt through a White House window.

"These angels of God fail to impress me," said Darien.

In an eerily perfect rendition of Nagisa's little girl voice, tainted only by a hidden deepness that lurked in the base of the throat, Berwyn said: "'Why does she always have to rush off and do something dangerous by herself?'"

"Implying something, soldier?"

"Perhaps you ought to be less critical of those you emulate so thoroughly? Is there not an elevated vocabulary word for that, o enlightened Centurion? Hippo, hippopotamus?"

"I am not alone," said Darien. "I have you and her."

"And Sayaka Miki has her little munchkin, but there's a difference between being alone and geographic proximity to humanity."

"There's a difference between me and her, too," said Darien.

"Oh?"

Darien embedded her sword into the ground. She extended a hand harshly in front of her and peeled away the long white glove that adorned it, until it bunched at her wrist. Without any further movement of her body, she turned her arm to Berwyn and held it, wrist bent back, blue veins pressed against her olive-colored skin.

"I need you to inject me. If Joliet bends perception and memory, I need something to counteract that."

Upon opening her mouth to speak, Berwyn closed it. A long while later, she opened it again. "I have no vaccine for such a specific magical effect."

"I am aware. Your limitations are well known to me. However, you can put me into a state where I won't rely on memory or perception. Turn me berserk."

"Berserk."

"Yes. Make me hate. Make me charge, blind, deaf. I can wreak destruction without my mind. I have enough faith in my body. Enough faith in my sword."

"I hope I don't actually need to explain to you why that idea is garbage."

Something registered in the Witch's mind. "The cat gives her press conferences to an audience. Reporters. If you're berserk, you'll kill them too."

"Could anything be more irrelevant?" said Darien.

That attitude. It chafed something deep, an attempted switch flip, nudging position into a weird middle ground between on and off, the spark of electricity almost surging and yet not quite able to conduct to the other end of the wire.

Her mouth hung open in the drugged position of nonstarter as Darien considered the question answered and turned back to Berwyn. "You know my strength. I cleave people to pieces even when I don't try to. My reach is long. Make my hate blind. You wanted trust? This is trust. This is me, putting my trust in you. Do you understand? I need you to be my brain. You'll observe the fight from safety, figure out what's needed, and give it to me. You the brain, I nothing but your muscles, your weapon. Do you understand, Berwyn? This is why I need you." Her sternness slackened. She seized Berwyn's wrists and held them as she stared Berwyn in the eye. "Leah. You know I'm not an idiot. Trust me, and I trust you. Together we destroy them. It's such a simple fight. It's Joliet and Clownmuffle. Sayaka Miki can handle the rest, it's a two on two fight. It's not insurmountable. Don't think about how strong Clownmuffle is. Think about how strong *I* am. I know you're strong. Please. Leah."

"Pepper..."

"Trust is what you wanted? Then this is it. You can inject anything into me. I won't know until after you do it. Something that knocks me out, turns me into a vegetable, whatever. You could carry me home and I wouldn't be able to stop you. I'm letting you do this because I trust you, Leah. Because I know you want the same thing as me. You're only scared because you think we'll lose, but if you believe in me, you don't have to be scared."

Berwyn tugged away her hands and pressed them to her face as she suppressed something halfway between hiss and whimper. "It's too dangerous. It's dangerous enough if you have your senses, but deprived of them—"

"There's no other way to get around Joliet's power."

"What if it doesn't even work?"

"She may be stronger, but it's the same Joliet, she's not smart, she's not clever, she crumples at the first sign of adversity, Cicero despised her for a reason. Everyone despised her for a reason. We can *beat* her. Don't you at least believe that?"

And murder thirty or more people in the process... Or was the Witch in the wrong to care? She understood on a logical level that no amount of collateral ought to be too much. But at the same time, that attitude, it reminded her of—her. Clownmuffle.

The switch flipped.

"I'll go first," she said. Darien and Berwyn glanced around as though they forgot they had a third person until they finally found her again. She had somehow drawn away from them, closer to the White House, a large divide bridged them. "I'll go first and make sure everyone leaves the room except Joliet. I'll be a diversion. I'm not useful for anything else, after all." Especially since her radar failed to function in this miasma. But this suddenly felt like something she had to do. Must do. Even more than confront Clownmuffle directly.

"If you alert them to our presence, you'll—"

"Nagisa already charged in. I'm just one more." She stumbled toward the White House entrance. The building stretched above her, stretched on either side of her, enfolded her like a horseshoe with a thinning gap, in which stood Darien and Berwyn.

And Darien's voice shriveled: "Berwyn, hurry, we have to go *now*, you have to decide, I leave it in your hands, do we fight or run..."

Then it became too silent to hear and the Witch passed between the columns and pushed through the front doors. She expected some kind of security check, and there was one, although nobody looked or cared when she walked through and the sirens didn't even go off even though her hat had a metal buckle.

A few braindead oafs milled about the lobby area. Doors led in many directions. She knew nothing about the White House's interior, she hadn't thought this far ahead, the press room

had to be somewhere close to the entrance, right? She noticed an ancient secretary behind a desk who typed on a computer one finger at a time.

"Excuse me excuse me, which way to the press room?"

Tap. Tap.

"Hey, hey, which way to the press room, which way?"

Tap.

The Witch hopped, draped her stomach on the surprisingly tall counter, and stuck her hand over the edge to wave in the lady's face. "HEY."

The lady blinked and looked up. "Welcome to the White House how may I help you?" Any brightness in her eyes resumed stupefaction.

"Press room, where's the press room, I'm a press member!"

"Press room's in the west wing just through that hall take a left then a right and you'll be right in it. Have a nice tour!"

The Witch checked over her shoulder. No sign of Darien yet. What if Berwyn said no? Injected her with sleeping medicine instead? Then the Witch would be fucked. Pretty funny, right? Ha, ha. Until the fucking occurred, however, she intended to stick to the plan.

"I lied, I'm not press," she said. She whipped out her wand. "I'm, uh, I'm a fucking terrorist. I'm taking this place over!"

Wow. She could not have said a stupider thing. It was the first thing that sprung into her mind to clear the room. The woman did not seem to know what any of the spoken words meant, only "terrorist" seemed to have impact, marginal impact at best, and the Witch was not even tall enough to lean over the counter without leaping onto it entirely.

The only fortunate thing about all this was that the Witch was actually a terrorist. She swiveled her wand overhead and shot a ribbon of purple magic at the old woman's computer. It burst into flames and the woman—

Continued to tap the keyboard.

"Oh my god," said the Witch.

But after the third tap the woman realized what had happened and blinked in surprise. The Witch stood atop the counter and sent more magic sparkling, bursting into arrays of fireworks near the ceiling, causing sprinklers to rain and a shrill alarm to ring. Several of the people in the lobby jolted to attention and while the Witch had assumed them to be tourists or lobbyists or whatever they turned out to be armed guards who reached into their suits and withdrew pistols.

"*Expelliarmus*," said the Witch. The guns went flying before the guards had a chance to shoot. "That's right, I'm the world's first magical terrorist. Run away before I blast you to smithereens...!"

Luckily, her magic could be more persuasive than her mouth. She slung spell after spell around the room, set an empty chair on fire, then a potted plant. The dull faces of those around her changed, became horrified. People streamed out the doors yelling. One brave guard reached for his fallen gun, but the Witch leapt from the counter and stomped his hand before he could reach it. His fingerbones snapped and a sickness spread in her stomach, she had gone too deep into the role, but she reminded herself that if these people got out with only a few broken fingers, they would be far better off than if Darien charged in swinging her sword. She kicked the guard in the shoulder, careful not to use her full physical force, but capable of dislocating it nonetheless. He got the message, no more bravery. As soon as she stepped off his hand he rolled away and stumbled after the rest, shouting for backup into his radio.

Shit. Backup. If they sent more Secret Service goons, things would get worse. She failed to consider that. She hoped the backup would be as sluggish arriving as the first guards were to her initial attack. She scooped up the fallen handgun and rushed down the hallway the old secretary had outlined.

Loud as possible she made her presence known to the stillborn zombies still shambling ignorant despite the alarm and the calamity from the next room over. She whipped her magic against the walls and left bright purple burns upon the total blackness, bounced into all sorts of objects, reeled as her nose came away bloody from a door that had blended effortlessly into the environment, grabbed a young man not yet appraised of the situation and hurled him into a side room. Her magic lit the way. If she fired it ahead of her, she could sear markings and show herself the correct direction.

She rounded a corner and reached the press room.

They had gathered, the bobbing talking heads, the men and women in sharp dress and all their devices, computers, notepads, pencils, the podium between their two rows with the same plaque from the show, fifteen cameras pointed at it or more, an American flag, and the cat scratching the air with her paws and meow-meowing to the people of the world. "Happy Easter *efurryone*!" she lisped. She clapped and confetti spurted from her paws. When she saw the Witch enter, her eyes gleamed. She wriggled in excitement. "It appears we have a weally *weally* special visitor today!"

The Witch skidded to a halt between the bobbing heads, hoisted the pistol to the sky, and fired. It made a popgun sound. Her other hand directed her wand and she lit the American flag aflame. "It's me," she said. "I'm the terrorist now."

She seized a young woman journalist too dull to react and hurled her across the room, against the podium. The podium bounced and the cat steadied it but this absurd action galvanized the rest of the journalists and they rose shouting for the exits, goaded by the Witch who galloped after them and fired her gun as a prod. Like sheep they moved en masse, it only took one to flee for the rest to flee. The room emptied, the humans departed, the Secret Servicemen arrived.

"It's me you bitch." The Witch hurled her witch hat onto the ground and stomped it, stomped the little bend in particular. "Call off the goons and deal with me yourself, send them away right the fuck now."

Dumbfounded, but smiling, the cat had watched, confusion mixed with mirth. The Witch could not tell if she recognized her, but Clownmuffle had to. *Had* to. Right? Clownmuffle couldn't have totally forgotten her. Right? She had to remember the costume. The hat. The little bend. Had to. That was her identity, that had never changed, she had to, the clothes if not the human who wore them. Had to. Had to.

The cat's smile and gaze went vacant. She tilted her head so that she stared at the ground. "Yes," she said. "Alright," she said. Conversing. With the girl in her mouth? Telepathy did not work in this miasma, Sayaka and the Incubator told them that. The cat's head lifted and she flourished a paw. "Pwease assist the evacuation of the kittyzens." Her vacant stare transferred to the squad of guards; they holstered their guns and streamed out the room.

The room stood empty, except the Witch, except the cat, except the clown who lived in her mouth. Blackness impenetrable, a few cameras, a few chairs, a podium, a charred American flag. The Witch's ribcage decompressed. The air flooded in, thick and fast. She did... something. She got the people out. Alone now she wondered why, why she did something like that. To save a handful of brainwashed humans. To confront Clownmuffle on her own terms? She succeeded at the former, here was her chance at the latter.

Assuredly the cat already worked her magic on her. She could not trust what she saw. But she had no plan to attack. She extended her hand to the side and dropped the handgun. It clattered against a chair. She extended her other hand and dropped the wand. She held her arms like that, open, the folds of her cloak allowed to part to reveal the fine gold embroidery of a crimson tunic, the lion crest upon which her Soul Gem glimmered in this otherworldly darkness.

"Clownmuffle."

The cat cocked her head. "Wowie! Today's assassin is twuly dewanged, folks... But that's a cute word, Clownmuffle~ Might be a *pawsitively* adorable name for a Magical—uff!" She tripped and landed on her head.

"Clownmuffle. We need to talk."

For all she knew Clownmuffle had already stepped out of the mouth. Already about to whisk the Witch away to the same nowhere she sent everyone who disappeared in one her tricks. The cat might manipulate her senses in such a way... She stashed that thought.

Clownmuffle. Whether the Witch sensed her or not, she needed to have faith she could hear the words.

"Clownmuffle. Clownmuffle... I. I came because I... I want to help you." She did not know whether she lied or not. "You're, you're someone who matters to me. I want to help you—"

"Consider you're on camera, kid!" the cat hissed under her breath, while maintaining her sickly smile. She was about to speak again when her cat ears twitched and her eyes went wide. She dropped under the podium.

The Witch guessed what she sensed. She dropped too. Something whooshed overhead.

Half the room detached from the bottom half and soared upward. Half the chairs lost their backs and the other half toppled over each other as the force of wind carried them. The Witch slapped her hand on her crumpled hat to keep from losing it.

Clack, clack. Crystal heels came down upon the center of the room, a gleam for only a moment before the white dress settled around them. The long solid rectangular blade extended to the side, reoriented its direction, and swept sideways at incomprehensible speed. The bridal veil obscured half her face but her posture, stance, explosive pulsing breathing, strained nervous twitches of her hands and fingers, it told the story.

A potted plant toppled. The cat scampered for the nearest exit. Darien operated like a machine, her stroke bifurcated the cat geometrically and instantly. Too instantly, more instantly than the cat expected, because while the cat came apart in a bloody mess she did so a second delayed. An illusion.

Darien did not care. She swung. And swung. The chairs burst apart in pieces. The cameras spurted static shocks. The upper half of the room splattered against the ground in the exposed courtyard outside and burst into a million black globules. Windows, cut like by lasers, finally struck the floor and shattered.

In two seconds or less, the Witch knew, she'd come apart too. Scrunched into a ball, hands wrapped around folded legs, she compressed herself into the minimum possible size. Her position close to Darien's feet gave her an advantage, but she held out little hope. The wind rushed past her ear. A few strands of hair drifted onto her cheek. Additional fake cats fled, came apart, burst into raining blood, but Darien didn't care, she kept swinging, endless, furious, emitting a constant but low roar from the base of her throat like something heard in a deep cave with water. Then:

Clang. The sword stopped. It vibrated with its stored and suddenly stagnant energy, a pulse that traveled down the steel into Darien's hands and caused her to vibrate too. The Witch dared raise her eyes. At first she couldn't make sense of the scene, blood and dead cats collected everywhere, and the blade seemed to hover in midair, stopped by nothing at all. But the illusion diminished by degrees, the blood drained into the floor, the dead cats decayed until even feline skulls disintegrated. Out of the lacquered black emerged two arms in white sleeves, palms clapped around either side of the blade, holding it steady despite Darien's trembling strength. The arms extended out of a mouth, a mouth that belonged to the cat, who had fallen to her knees and tilted back her head, eyes aswirl. A coughing, choking sound matched the deep rumble as a top hat emerged, head, shoulders, torso.

Clownmuffle.

The cat's back arched as Clownmuffle climbed out of her mouth, hands still clapped around Darien's blade, one leg and then the other. She stepped down the front of the cat's bent body

until she reached the ground and the cat rolled over to sputter and wheeze.

Darien's seething, heaving, breathing built. She wrenched back the hilt of her blade, or tried, except Clownmuffle held it fixed. Although Darien fidgeted, the blade stood still, until it looked less like a real object and more like something painted onto the background.

"I know you," said Clownmuffle. "Bride. Too formalistic? Traditional, the word. And unfitting for someone so young, though you've grown. Perhaps that unfittingness fits. A preteen wife, as we've all been wed so young to this unexpected lifestyle. What did I mark you before? Three out of ten? I'll revise: Four out of ten. One day, however, you'll be a woman, and then it'll just be so dull. Savor this relative apex."

The shriek Darien uttered caused thin red lines to open on the Witch's hands and Clownmuffle's face. She jerked the hilt two more times, gave up, released it suddenly to attack with bare hands. Clownmuffle detached an arm from the tip of the blade and held it to block but Darien's fingers ripped straight through. Clownmuffle only yawned. She bent backward to avoid a similar strike to her eyeballs and stuck her bleeding stump behind her back. She twisted her other hand, still glued to the sword's tip, and sliced the blade laterally across where Darien's stomach should have been had Darien not already retracted groundward to sweep a crystal heel for Clownmuffle's ankles, a maneuver Clownmuffle hopped over as she withdrew her arm from behind her back to reveal a perfectly restored hand while the severed one on the ground pounced and seized Darien by the throat.

Darien didn't give a shit, she chomped her teeth around the hand's stump, tore it off, and spat it out. She rolled back and seized the wobbling hilt of her sword an instant before it struck the ground and surged forward. Clownmuffle allowed its smooth side to glide along the surface of her palm before catching it again a centimeter from her constant grin. She swung like a discus thrower and launched Darien plus sword over the wall, into the air, into the dark. A feral cry trailed her.

"Don't worry. I'll finish her soon." Clownmuffle tipped her top hat and leapt over the wall after Darien.

"Kuh, kuh, careful—her mind—something's not right with it—"

Clownmuffle was gone. The cat sobbed. The Witch had not noticed before, but somewhere in the fight she had lost her arm. She clutched the stump as blood streamed down the side of her dress. Clownmuffle, somehow, had forgotten or not seen the Witch. "Somehow." More like, as usual. Either way, it left the Witch alone with the cat. She picked up her wand, quiet, not to attract attention. The cat didn't seem to notice her either.

In combat, the Witch never considered herself stellar, even after the experience she got fighting with the Nazi and the Baroness. Utility, sure, but raw combat, meh. However, she had one spell, ripped straight from the same books, that she theorized might give her an unexpected advantage over any enemy. Well, not Clownmuffle, because Clownmuffle had demonstrated many times the ability to dodge the Witch's spells without even looking. But the cat, sobbing, distracted, not paying attention, perhaps considering herself safe while Clownmuffle took care of the assassin...

One spell. The killing curse. It should kill her if it hit her. It wouldn't even need to touch her Soul Gem, because it was the killing curse. It killed. That was what it did, all it did. No maiming necessary, no internal injuries, it simply killed. One shot. Then it ended, they saved the world...

Her hand tightened around the wand. Her jaw clamped. So easy. So easy! And here she was... wondering whether this stupid obnoxious catgirl knew what she did, whether she knew how much she had hurt the world, whether she was just scared and did what people told her. She remembered Joliet from the yacht, clutching her back as she ferried her over the lake to safety, crying exactly like now. A coward. A little girl. The same age as the Witch.

How. How, how, how could her resolve falter like this, now, with so much at stake, she tried to visualize the faces, the thousands, millions, billions of people on the planet who needed help, she visualized them however as such a massive clump that the faces became nothing but dots and the dots combined into a single shaded feature. The cat's sobbing face remained a single face. How. How. How. Where did the resolve go, the resolve against Clownmuffle, was it only Clownmuffle she could truly hate, or could she even truly hate Clownmuffle, if she got the chance would she ever actually kill even her?

Could this hesitation be the cat's power? Mental manipulation. Falsified sympathy. What she had tried and failed to inflict on Darien, who had been too mad to care.

She blotted her internal voice with Hemet's. Action. Revolution. Sacrifice. Bloodshed. To form a better future, to drain the pus. To lance the boil. She could—if she shut off her brain—overrode herself—an easy motion, a two-word incantation...!

"Avada Kedavra."

The spell lashed out. It pierced the cat through the middle and scattered in dim sparks against the ground behind her.

The cat continued to sob, as if nothing happened. The Witch crawled to her and stuck out her hand. It passed through. She waved until her brain could no longer sustain the illusion and it faded away. The cat had already escaped. The room stood empty. She thought she heard Darien's subterranean grumble somewhere, but distance and sound had distorted.

She climbed onto a seat that had only lost its back and stooped over her knees. Relief. Somehow, she felt relief.

But she had accomplished nothing. Darien fought Clownmuffle. A fight Darien had no hope to win, no matter how long she prolonged it. The cat could be anywhere, they showed their hand, Nagisa would find Sayaka eventually...

She looked up. In Darien's rampage, she had destroyed the podium, the stage, most of the cameras. Most. One remained standing, turned on, a light indicated recording. It showed the remains of the stage through the small screen on its back.

Did it still broadcast? To every TV in the nation? To the streaming services? The Witch rose. She fished her hat off the ground, stuck her arm into it to straighten it, and plopped it on her

head. She walked onto the stage, behind the remains of the podium.

"Hello," she said.

The camera lens, the amorphous billions of humanity, stared back, or maybe she spoke only to herself.

"I am the Witch." No other name would suffice. "My friends and I are going to topple this government." The words came unconsciously, without thinking, so that she suddenly became panic-stricken and thought about what she was saying. A brief moment; she straightened her cloak around her shoulders. Her audience had finally arrived. Her pulpit.

"We will defeat the cat, we will defeat Schrodinger, and we will defeat President DuPage. We will defeat anyone who defends them. We have already stormed the White House, as you saw. Their defenses are paralyzed. God is on our side, God has sent us angels. As you all probably know by now, magic is real. Wraiths are real. President DuPage is a wraith, the cat is a magician. They have corrupted this country. We will defeat them."

Her chance. Her moment. Her movement. Hemet's journey resuscitated for a final lap. Billions watching. Maybe only millions, okay, but billions would hear about it soon enough. People worn, tired, hungry, depressed, people atop stools right now with the nooses around their necks, human and Magical Girl alike, the Baroness, the Nazi.

A message. She could unify them. She could bring them to Washington, make them march, a rebellion, even if Darien and Sayaka Miki failed, could Clownmuffle overcome the entire tide of humanity? Could she? Could she stand, alone, against so many? Berwyn and the others said Clownmuffle alone defeated forty Magical Girls in the Empire. That was forty. How about a hundred thousand, a million? Eventually enough would appear that her tricks could no longer fool them all. The more fools who watched the harder they became to fool. "You can fool some of them some of the time..." Humans and Magical Girls, united. She only needed to unite them, a message here, a call for hope, peace, cooperation, brotherhood and sisterhood, a call for defense, for justice, for reason and rectitude too, a call for the salvation of the world, a call to join hands for a common, noble cause—a cause of love.

No.

No, that would never work, why would she expect that to work? She had never convinced even one person to join hands for a common cause. Love? Love. Love, in this world? Gatineau in her depths, Cook in her heights, twelve lovers each, each without love. No, that was overly cynical, love still existed, she remembered the Baroness, remembered Berwyn, but... But. She also remembered the Nazi.

Love would not sway the masses.

"This is your final chance," she said. She lifted a fist and clenched it. The thin red lines cut by Darien's screech burst and blood ran down it, better than she could have choreographed. "Once we're finished, you'll never be able to do it yourselves. We're going to cut that cat to pieces." She slapped her palm on a sharp shard of the podium. She focused on the pain, refused to blot it although she could, allowed it to infect her, to cause her eyes to bulge, her

mouth to twist, her fingers to curl. "We'll ram her on a stake! Stick her on a spit. Roast her, chop her, impale her, peel her skin, gouge her eyes, dismember her digit by digit. She's a magician like me, you know, you've surely heard the rumors, we don't die right away. We'll make her suffer for what she's done, for the agony she's inflicted, for everything—"

(She remembered the cat, sobbing, pathetic, just a girl, same age as the Witch, but here she had so much less hesitation, here it was so easy to speak, had the cat truly been manipulating her before, or was it simply easier this way anyway?)

"—We'll make her last. Every torment and torture you can imagine, it'll be amazing. Fantastic. Glorious! This is the chance, this is the first chance we've gotten, to crush those gluttons who lord it over us, who act so superior, who think we're idiots, who giggle when we're hurt, who tell us to suck it up, who say 'if they didn't want to die they shouldn't have hanged themselves...' This is that chance, this is where we destroy them, there shall be no golden parachutes, there shall be no book deals, no executive positions in the private sector, no offshore safe havens, no banks in Luxembourg, no! None of that. There'll be guillotines and firing squads, the execution of Maximilian a thousand times over, a purge, a bloodletting, we'll let the blood out, we'll let it flow through the streets of this damned city, we will!"

She slapped her palm against her face and left a bloody print, in any world but this she'd be mad, in any world but this she'd be in bad taste, but this world had gone to Hell, this world lived in the depths, the people she spoke to were not Mister and Missus Petit-Bourgeois with Junior and Fido playing fetch on the lawn, oh fucking no, this was a speech for all the Nazis out there angry and impotent and wanting to cave in a skull. She seized the podium and hurled it aside. She flicked her hand and a drop of blood landed on the camera lens.

"This is your last chance to stand with us, boys and girls, because once something's dead it never comes back. Do you hate her? Do you really fucking hate her? That cat, that damn cat? Imagine her right now, imagine her face and her mannerisms, her lisp and her trashy puns, imagine her tripping and wriggling her legs in the air, her tail, her ears, call that image into your head right now and ask yourselves, *do I want to kill her?* Do I want to see her *scream?* Imagine the bullets blasting open her body, the knives plunged, the bombs, imagine it right now. Right now!"

She gave them a moment to imagine. She had no podium to clutch so she bent over and clutched her knees while she panted from all her screaming. Wiped her lip with her hand and left another bloody smear, her whole face grew hot and wet and sticky. The iron taste lingered on her tongue, in her nostrils.

"Well, this is your last chance. If you hate her, if you really hate her, now's the time to do something about it you lazy assholes. Now's the time to get off the couch and make due on the promises you made to yourselves. I know who you are, I see you there, this is your chance. Your chance. *Your* chance. YOUR CHANCE. Washington, you know the city, the Capitol, you know the place. Human, Magical Girl, come on in. There's a nice doctor outside the city who'll help you get inside, if you ask Kyubey I'm sure he'll be all too happy to guide you to her. We're burning everything in here. Burning it to the *ground*. You better hurry if you want in."

Her speech had not been that long but she felt like she had prattled John Galt lengths. Her lungs ached. Her throat dried to parchment. She had no way to gauge the reaction of her audience, whether they cheered or jeered, or simply thought her a lunatic. She must look like a lunatic. Hemet would never approve of her, she had gotten too excited. Her fervor bent inside of her. She needed to bring things to an end.

"Last chance," she said. She thought: *In conclusion...* and had to fight not to say it. "Bonfire of the century. A time to grind and a time to crush, a time to kill and a time to peel. Do you want to kill them? Do you? Do you want to? It's up to you. It's up to you. Good, fucking, *bye*."

She whipped out her wand and sent a quick spell into the camera. It exploded, the sparks rained. She sagged back and slid down what remained of the wall. Slid until she sat. The decapitated chairs watched her, the ghost of the cat mewling. What did she even say? It sickened her to replay the words in her head. Nonetheless she imagined the Nazi, leaping out of her seat, hollering at the television set. She imagined a fuse of action lit. She didn't know. She didn't know. Maybe her words were too weak. Maybe too strong. She didn't know. She didn't know. Hemet couldn't tell her, the spirit went silent. Maybe she awed them all to silence. Maybe she became the clown.

Someone stood in front of her. White, phantasmic: ghost. No, Nagisa, the angel girl.

"Sayaka isn't here, is she."

The Witch shook her head. "I'm sorry. We lied."

Nagisa didn't respond. She bounced off in another direction and left the room empty again.

Illness crept into the Witch's gut. Somewhere, metal struck metal and echoed.

Some Say Law and Order Are Code Words

The whole sofa nearly upended. It wobbled, at least, and came back down with a thump. The television fizzled static; after a few seconds a NO SIGNAL sign appeared.

Why did the electricity need to work tonight? It never turned on yesterday. They had pressed together in total darkness. In her sleep she twisted at every creak that settled down the tenement's spine, every gurgle in the pipes. Now she stood arched, an exponential angle to tilt her toward the TV, hands in intermittent phases of rigid at her sides and tangled around her head, a constant catching noise in her throat. Like so: ckh-ckh-ckh.

"Please—" said the Baroness.

The Nazi untangled an arm to thrust it toward the gray screen. "Can't—can't believe it. Can't believe it! Look what she's done. Did you see that? Did you see what she's done?"

"Forget it, please—"

She would never. No. Too willful, impudent, imprudent. Once fixed upon an idea she railed it into the dirt. The idea had fixed. That damn Witch. This was her plan? She must have gotten confused somehow. How could she do this? Lure them into her suicide cult?

"I'm going." The Nazi searched the room, frantic, seized a jacket from the stack of dirty laundry. "How, how far's that? Washington. Gotta be, can't be more than, what? Five—six hours. We'll filch a car, plenty around. Can't imagine border security's tight. Easy. Six hours, it can't be over by then."

And it midnight. And the dogs howling outside, the streets clogged, they had already hunted and it drove them nearly insane, it had gotten so much harder after the Witch left, and it had only been two days. So tiring the Baroness had not even bothered to protest when the Nazi turned on the TV, and how she wished she did. How she wished she did! She watched, arms akimbo in the same position she left them, bundled blouses for a pillow, as the Nazi skittered every which way around the room, grabbing all sorts of inutile junk. A kitchen cabinet opened, she withdrew a trash bag, started tossing her items inside. She swayed down the corridor clutching the bag like Santa Claus and returned from the bedroom with it even more laden.

"Please—"

"It has to happen. We have to destroy her. It'll save everything."

She didn't care about saving anything. The Baroness heard the speech. She knew which words riled. A weak hand pressed against the carpet.

"God, finally. Finally someone's doing something about it. I can't believe it took so long, fuck! Ahaheh, and it'll be so great. I can imagine it now, what that cat's stupid face will look like, we'll make her scream. Damn!"

As she stooped for more articles by the door, the Baroness pounced. In reality, it was more of a calculated fall. She had managed to expend the last of her energy to lift herself, despite the soreness in her muscles, the desire but the inability to swallow one of her pearl candies and reinvent herself, as she had already used one on the Nazi, who took an atrocious hit during the evening's combat. She swung out her arms and latched them around the Nazi's midsection as they collapsed together against the doorframe, the Nazi hitting her head hard and loosing a quiet "oof." The bag dropped from her shoulder and scattered its contents to the side while the body struggled to rise but could not against the full force of the Baroness's dead weight.

"Get, off, you fat cow. Fat—cow! Get off, get off me already."

"I will not—allow you—to go. Ma petite amie, I will not—"

"God. Fuck! What are you even doing? Come on. Come on!"

Her fingers slid through the Nazi's hair. She pressed her nose in the hunched crook of the Nazi's neck, inhaled deeply. She could feel the pure hate that reverberated under the surface of the Nazi's skin, a pulse in the blood, chunky and thick and jagged, it scratched the veins as the heart beat it inward and outward, it caused the small small girl to writhe and shriek. Hate. Hate for anything. Hate for everything. Hate for the circumstances, the hunger, the weakness, the despair, the wraiths, the humans, the cat, the Witch, the television, the electricity, the trash bags, the clothes, the carpet, the door frame, the United States of America, the apocalypse, the Nazi, the Baroness. Hate that turned inward as well as outward as easily as breathing. Inhalation, exhalation, a heaving pulse, one quick and ragged and spiteful and one slow and calm and soothing, or she prayed for soothing, she stroked the soft hair and whispered: "My sweet—"

The Nazi no longer uttered words, only unintelligible screeches of frustration.

"I love you," she whispered into her ear. "I love you."

A quieting, maybe as imagined as imagined she her voice was soothing, an elbow thrust against her sternum, hard enough hurt, but she allowed her body to settle more snugly against the one beneath her, constricting it, embracing it, holding it steady, the sweet scent that exuded from the skin after consumption of her candy still faint under the soot. She could imbibe it as long as she could stomach a throat full of dust. A little foot kicked.

"Love—love—" A pleasant, gentle coo, into the ear, while her fingertips traced circles, a love to stifle out the messages heard on the television, a love to transfix.

"Nngh. Nnnrrrgh."

"My sweet—"

Stillness.

The cat's broadcast, a ritualistic event, beloved by all, today provided a special treat. They outdid themselves with the formulaic assassination attempt this time, ah yes. Too bad the cinematography did not satisfy, everything became a blur, the cat manifesting in many incorporeal clones that came away in gruesome but unfilling detail, then a long pause. Although for several minutes the screen showed nothing and the studios refused to cut the broadcast, everyone watched—transfixed, you might say. For Cook, of course, she could take it or leave it. Her friends weren't of such temperament, they always needed resolution, you know how it goes. She really only tuned in for their sake, Joliet had never been someone who particularly mattered, at least in her opinion. Perhaps others cared? Meh? Sometimes she understood when people cared, even if she didn't, but who could care about Joliet? DuPage and Cicero always despised her, often they acted as though despising her were a matter of course, assumed Cook despised her too, but really? Very meh, top ten mehs of our generation.

Cook liked her friends happy. It killed the mood when even one person got sulky. She displayed the twice-daily broadcasts on a screen of cascading water, nice and big for everyone to watch, because all of them wanted to watch, so at least they were likeminded in that regard? However, this thing that happened when the silence finally ended, she didn't like that. Few things she didn't like, she didn't like this. That silly Witch. Playing a silly game.

She especially didn't like the way her friends reacted. Hooting and hollering, whooping and pounding their fists against the air, whipped into a lather. They acted as though Joliet herself still spoke to them and used her magic, well, that was the power of persuasion, wasn't it? Once an idea takes root, it's not so easily dispelled, be it a nagging thought late at night or the lightbulb of invention... ahhhhh. What a shame. Cook liked to forget ideas. Memory sifted good from the bad. Something like that? This city's finest poet once put it:

That mean I forgot better shit than you ever thought of

"Good, fucking, bye," said the Witch. The screen went static. The crowd went wild. Water sloshed around Cook's waist and then shoulders as she sunk amid the waves of her friends. Blub, blub, she became half a head from which bubbles issued. Blub. ...Blub.

"Oh fuck."

"FUCK."

"God damn!"

"Holy shit."

"Crazy, crazy."

All slurred together into a meaningless slush. She dipped a little deeper and their voices became muffled and filtered, indistinct, a peacefulness in nonsense. She'd wait until they settled.

They didn't settle.

She sank deeper. Until the pressure built in her lungs. But the voices continued, the sloshing frothing, why? Who cared...? Really? This stuff got so tiresome, always something or other, dead bodies in the streets, whatever...

Her friends started getting up. Started moving. Tromping around her shallows. Slick bare legs and arms that glistened. She returned to the surface. "Uhhhhh, hey? What's going on...?"

They didn't hear her. Too quiet a voice, this actually happened sometimes. Oh well. A wall of water rose in front of the room's sole exit and solidified to prevent their disorganized exit. They paid attention to her after that.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"Let's go," said a friend.

"Yeah, seriously," said another.

"Ohhhhhh, go to Washington?"

Nods and affirmations in abundance. Met by a slow, sad shake of Cook's head:

"Nahhhhhh, let's stay here."

"But we're *always* here."

"Something big is happening. Let's go."

"Yeah, fuck that cat."

These fun men did not even possess clothes. This whole thing could not be sillier... come on. She rolled her head toward Riley, the only non-nude person present. Cook had attempted to entice her to pleasures, but Riley didn't seem to mind just watching so...? Couldn't blame her. She lived two years undercover in Denver, she had to dissemble. Cook taught her herself how to do it best, because she did it all the time. All in the tendons on the neck. They needed to be loose. Wring them, like this. She placed her hands there, between neck and shoulder, and kneaded, while Riley made a little noise. In that instant, she had wondered, wouldn't it be funny? To snap Riley's neck...

"Let us out," said the friends. One of them, despite his bare skin, attempted to scale her wall, made it nowhere, slipped and plopped into the water.

Cook propped cheek on hand and expelled air. "Whyyyyy?"

"Because we're not your damn prisoners," said one. "If we wanna leave, we can fucking leave, can't we?" The other friends liked that, they buttressed it with affirmations and nods.

"But," she said, "this is all really dumb? You're pretty likely to die, is all I'm saying."

"Let us out," said one, and soon they started to chant it: Let us out. Let us out. Moses to Pharaoh.

She extended a hand toward Riley. "Alright, alright. Go take them on a ride," she said. And added: *Send them in circles around the city until they get bored, okay? Soon enough they'll want back.*

Riley slithered down the side of her tree and spooled into the water. Only after a moment did Cook realize she had mimed for herself a little paddleboat. She wobbled her feet back and forth to slowly cross the surface of the lagoon. Several bright birds perched on her shoulders. They took flight when she extended her arms, stretched, yawned.

"Hm. Well, ya know, I think I'll go to Washington with em."

"Ohhhhh. I see. You're stupid too?"

"Please, Val. Some faith? I'll admit it's uh, opportunistic waiting until they actually got going to help em out, but better uh, better never late? If that Witch's speech got your friends going, I'm sure it'll get plenty others going too..."

The friends parted as she padded between them. She climbed out of her boat, slid the straps of an imaginary backpack around her shoulders, and hoisted an invisible hose which she aimed toward the wall of ice. She motioned for the friends to stand back as she braced her legs and pulled a lever on the nozzle.

Nothing happened. Riley tapped the fake end of the nozzle, only to immediately reel back, wave her arm frantically, blow on it, shove it into the water—hot, hot, hot. When she finally cooled down her fingers with a silent sigh, she pulled the lever again and this time the ice wall began to melt.

Cook watched this goofy flamethrower mime almost in disbelief, not at that crappy performance (although it did really suck?), but at the logic...

"Why," she finally asked. "It makes no sense? If everyone else is going to do it, why do you have to? I mean, good for them? They're making it happen, saving the world, hurray. No need for you to bother about it..."

She could lock them in, of course, ice not even Riley could melt, it would be easy. But the comment about prison stuck with her, that wasn't who she was, a warden, her friends were her friends, they stayed because of that, no other reason...

"Come with us, Val. You're strong. Sure they could use you. Don't ya think? I mean, you keep saying you're not dumb, you're not dumb, but if it works, don't you wanna be in on it? If the world goes back to normal, doubt they'll let you keep living up here in this tower, right?"

"Ohhhhh, you mean like get in nice with the new regime?" That made more sense.

But Riley shrugged. "Fuck. I dunno. I just wanna make sure it works. I wanna make sure they do it. Maybe getting the ear of whoever's in charge next is a bonus, too? Maybe we can, uh,

you know—Convince whoever they are to do things a little better. A little like how the Empress dreamed it? Maybe we can turn this whole shitshow into something with a good ending. Give it a purpose... Give the Empire a reason for ever existing. Yanno? Like that? Not just a return to normalcy. But when normalcy returns, it's a little better normalcy than the normalcy that came before. A little better world. I think that's maybe possible? No grand, sweeping revolution. Just a little better. Even a little better is better."

Her sheepish ramble ended with a goofy grin and a "who, me" shrug. Cook didn't know. She guessed that was a good enough reason. If the world was revolving anyway... She should have guessed this wouldn't last? This, too, shall pass. That's the phrase. Even an apocalypse passes. The world won't end so easily...

"Okay. Go ahead. I'm not your jailer, you're right. You're free people. Go ahead, do what feels right."

"Come with us," said Riley.

But if they could do what felt best for them she could do what felt best for her, too. What suited her, that's the phrase. Suited, like clothes, and what suited her was this languid clotheslessness, the feel of her own body and nothing else to change it, make it suitable for society. So ironic—or perhaps perfectly fitting (fitting being another clothes word, what a cute coincidence)—that Magical Girls always had heaps and heaps of clothes on them, all sorts of stuffy formal wear, perfect creases and folds and embroidery... More constricted by that junk despite the ostensible freedom.

She waved them away. Eventually they left, to find something to wear and rejoin the world outside.

Cook sank back into her water in her silent room. All very fine, no major inconvenience: One big whatever.

"Caw," said a bird.

"Caw-caw," Cook said back.

She blew bubbles. She kicked her feet to cause ripples.

If this is what the world wanted, to leave her alone, so be it, she could be alone. Wasn't that her wish, after all? To be left alone? Not quite, but something similar to that. That was what she wanted, after all. The water was as warm with one body as thirteen.

Drip. Drip.

Drip.

She'll find new friends? That's it. That'll do. She stood. The water washed off her. She looked around for something but wasn't sure what. It was fine for them to go. DuPage wasn't waiting for them like she waited for Cook. Cook, of course, it was all very obvious, all very clear...

An encounter with DuPage, she did not quite want that. No, not at all really? So let everyone else go. She'll find new friends.

But the city was dead. Ohhhhh—how could they do this to her? Leave her like this? She was nice to them all, wasn't she? She wasn't a mean or bad person. She took care of them? Right?

Her lagoon had resolved into stagnant, sitting water. The water dripped from her fingertips did not disturb its placid surface. They would come back, right? Come back to her? Even if everything changed, they would come back...?

Val, come on. Riley from above. The roof, probably. *Let's do this. I think we can. If everyone goes together, yanno?*

If everyone goes together. She twisted her fingers together. Ten wriggling digits bent and intermingled. She tried to wring the water from out of her body, to turn herself into a dried prune. They would leave her... Leave her alone.

Ohhhhh, sure, I guess we can do that, she said, her voice relaxed and languid despite the cramped twisting nature of her body. *Maybe it'll even be fun?*

Fifty-two white doves split down the middle, but before the blood and feathers could obscure, mad eyes shoved through the gore. Somewhat annoying, an audience with such an aggressive gaze. Cynics she might misdirect, turn their rationalism against them, but this bride was blindly watchful.

Down fell her blade. Clownmuffle bounced aside as it whooshed millimeters past her board-flat body. Their faces crossed for an instant and in that instant the bride spat and the saliva sliced open Clownmuffle's cheek. Blood rushed into her mouth, tasted like cherry cola. She drained it into a glass she produced from her cuff but instead of cherry cola it was cherry bombs which she hurled like Yahtzee dice at the bride's back as she glided past.

Except somehow the bride had already contorted her body in the midst of a second swing. Instead of following through she brought up her blade like a shield to defend from the bombs before they exploded as multicolored fireworks. Until then the bride had only ever attacked regardless of peril to her body, but this shift meant she took her eyes off Clownmuffle. And with the fireworks blasting all around—

Ta da! It may be unbelievable, but Clownmuffle had truly teleported behind the bride, a baton already lunging to deliver the coup de grace to the bride's undefended head. Instead, the baton clanged against metal. No head present. No body, either. The blade, unsupported, wobbled and fell. Clang, it went. Fizzle, went the fireworks.

A spray of white embers cascaded and through them lunged the bride. Where had she, when had she—well! So it seemed Clownmuffle had fallen prey to the same foibles of her

audience. She could appreciate a fellow practitioner of misdirection, even as the bride's two hands straightened into blades sliced past her fast enough to shear the tuxedo off one shoulder and cut clean through the arm under the other. From the stump spurted five hundred and twenty playing cards that swirled toward the bride.

The bride unhinged her jaw and screeched. Blood erupted from Clownmuffle's ears. Crisscross gashes split her vision, each playing card cut into confetti, her tuxedo unraveled into ribbons. She blinked to heal her eyes and whipped a handkerchief to restore her clothes but the cards scattered no larger than pixels and the bride's relentless assault resumed in the form of subsequent swinging karate chops. She looked absurd. The exaggerated kung fu gestures, devoid of style, contextualized her dull uniform into something parodic. She lacked elegance or even form. The frantic strikes of a beast. Brainless. Instinctual.

The wedding gown had gone to tatters. Strips flashed around the girl's legs and no effort went to preservation of modesty. Perhaps in that sense the uniform had improved. It made one ponder, consider how a costume so emblematic of enchainment to societal mores gave way to the harpy roving now inside it. The veil split down the middle to reveal a single red eye bulging. Drool drizzled from gnashing teeth, and everything about this girl had become so sharp. When Clownmuffle waved her handkerchief toward the face to wipe it away, a few stray beads of blood from earlier wounds diced it to uselessness. Sharper and sharper still the girl became, Clownmuffle bent backward to avoid the karate chops but when she seized the girl's wrists her palms split open. Her feet, simply from stepping upon the ground, chopped up the miasma and allowed bright beams like searchlights to shine through.

Clownmuffle drew a dagger from behind her ear. It snapped in two when she stabbed. She pulled a revolver from her top hat. The bullets split into pieces when they crashed against the bride's body. The bride swung a hand and Clownmuffle's shoulder burst blood even though she dodged the attack entirely.

She doubled back, flipped, rolled, gained enough distance for a momentary reprieve. What a wonderful girl, what a pleasant surprise. She had never possessed abilities such as these when Clownmuffle saw her last. No, she remembered that outfit, constrictive, limiting the flow of natural motion. A reliance on singular broad strokes. This girl's costume had done all the fighting for her. Quaint, but for such a lousy costume, Clownmuffle could never get too excited. It had all changed now, the longer this fight drew, the more thrilled she became by this bride, who activated new skills, something never learned or taught, the natural impetus of her body, to become *sharp*. Her emotions and her body unified as one. A complete mastery over self even in the throes of madness. Was it not so? Beautiful. This girl cut the world simply by existing within it. It did not contain her, could not, the black splitting at the seams for her and her alone...!

It would not, of course, be enough to stop Clownmuffle.

Pyrotechnics. How long can a body survive aflame? Let's find out. Clownmuffle clapped her ankles together and extended her arms. The bride drilled into her, one arm plunged under the ribcage, the other into the throat, and at that moment Clownmuffle flicked a lighter nobody had seen her produce and immolated herself with the help of combustible fluid she had lined beneath her clothing.

The bride, of course, being brought so close to her, and with so many twirling strips of fabric dangling from her body, caught flame as well. As Clownmuffle expected, the bride didn't care. Even as her face charred black she pressed deeper into Clownmuffle's body, eyes locked against eyes. She reached up through Clownmuffle's throat into her head. She was reaching for the gem on her hat, like a mole, prepared to drill out through the skull and skewer it in a single strike.

Before that happened (although she allowed things to progress to a certain point in order to heighten the tension), Clownmuffle buckled her heel and caused her legs to no longer support her weight. Backwards she fell, and the bride fell with her, not because she couldn't stand herself but because her single-minded ire required her to remain as close to the object of her hatred as possible. But the flames burned so bright, so close, that—

That when Clownmuffle hit the ground the flames flared brighter and for a brief moment—she needed only a brief moment—a pure hot whiteness consumed the millimeters between their faces. In that moment the thing the bride clutched became not innards, not soft flesh, but soft cotton, the body not Clownmuffle's, but a life-size doll, an effigy if you will; classic substitution. The real Clownmuffle flourished dramatically from behind a curtain on the opposite end of the stage, a pointless gesture because her audience still focused too heavily upon the doll. Oh well. Sometimes you can perform an illusion too well. Fire makes it even easier than usual, it gums up the eyes, occludes with smoke, distorts with waves of heat. A cheap trick, yes. Not Clownmuffle's proudest. She ought to have given an opponent who possessed a hint of beauty in her soul something more. She already felt bad.

The bride's crackling body fidgeted. She realized something did not cohere. Too late, of course, on this stage nothing would put out such a blaze save the revelation that the blaze had never existed.

Yet the bride rose. She staggered, her fingers curled. Her body would not be able to support itself much longer, no matter her willpower.

Except the flames began to sizzle. Smoke rose, first tiny plumes, then billowing gray clouds that looked almost white against the total blackness of their backdrop. The waves of heat dispersed, the orange embers diminished. The charred flesh renewed and glistened, water drizzled from her arms and shoulders, chin, neck, chest, the now-exposed midriff that looked somehow even slighter without the corset than with, the remains of the gown, everything—her entire body. Sweat. She was sweating a river, enough to extinguish the flames. Absurd. Completely absurd, Clownmuffle loved it, she laughed and clapped, "Encore!" That's a trick. How'd she do it? Some kind of hidden mechanism, tubing that ran surreptitiously along her body, ready to dispense fluid on command, something Clownmuffle had failed to spot. Or else, perhaps, true magic, could this mad little girl be so enlightened as to realize there was no such thing as "powers" or "skills" and that with magic she could accomplish literally anything? That each imagining a skillset, confirms their uselessness? Was this girl so mad she simply did not care about anything?

Clownmuffle welcomed the continuation of their struggle. Her opponent deserved her enthusiasm. Let's rage together. Let's all lose our minds and dance in this endless spiral of irrelevance.

But the bride instead withdrew into the smoke that now surrounded them. Clownmuffle opened her mouth to call out to her but the bride rushed from the side with her giant blade and Clownmuffle had to climb into her hat for a moment to avoid an inconvenient bifurcation. By the time she climbed back out the bride slashed from another direction, then another, then another, each time drawing into the smoke, turning one of the magician's best friends against her. Moments like these had confused Clownmuffle since the fight began. Usually, the bride attacked with mindless straightforwardness. But other times, she acted with a rational, tactical purpose. Nothing intelligent enough to be spectacular, but any intelligent thought from this frothing red-eyed beast surprised. Who gave in to madness only partially? Hatred didn't work like that.

And smoke was only one half of the equation. The bride's next strike cut Clownmuffle through the middle—or appeared to. Instead, a pane of glass came apart and shattered against the ground, while the real Clownmuffle seized the bride from behind before she had a chance to dart back into the smoke. The bride's sharp skin drove into her own but flesh wounds concerned her little. When the bride twisted her head and opened her mouth to scream a torpedo into Clownmuffle's face, that was when she saw it.

Ah.

What a disappointment.

She shoved her hand into the bride's open mouth before the sound could issue. The bride bit down and chomped the hand off clean at the wrist, which did not stifle Clownmuffle's ability to control the hand. The fingers probed around the tongue—the only soft and smooth part of the bride's entire body—pinched something small found beneath it, and shoved against the roof of the mouth to pry it back open.

The severed hand crawled out quickly before the mouth could snap back closed. After it hopped back onto Clownmuffle's stump, a casual adjustment of her cuff removed any indication it had ever been severed, and now between her fingers she clutched the little thing she had discovered under the bride's tongue.

A person. A tiny person. It wriggled.

They really were using all her own tricks against her. Living inside someone's mouth! Classic!

She almost laughed before something pricked her thumb, a stinger or nettle. She examined it—a tiny syringe. Hm.

Her entire body locked in place. Motionless save fluttering eyelids. Fingers, hands, arms, they remained still, no matter what she thought, no matter what she attempted.

She couldn't move.

She couldn't move anything. Only her eyes. An occasional twitch. A reflexive tremor in certain tendons.

A blurred memory struck her, a thought she thought she vanquished, an electric paralysis, a body on top of hers, a crystal prism, it blended together and she could not construct individual details, her emotions flared between them, eyelids flickered PANIC but she crushed that grape of panic with the involuntary undulations in the base of her throat and streamed the cold juice into her hollow interior. They loved to rob her body of its capacity for motion. It was worse when they surprised her. When she opted into their designs herself she could bear it, because it was her freedom to suspend her freedom. What did this tiny creature do? A syringe. Serum. In her veins. Her veins inside her body. They could never see what lurked inside and so she could change it at will, that was her right, that was what she had won for herself. One instant, the serum should be gone, replaced by her familiar blood on its familiar beat.

No.

Nothing changed.

Her veins had become steel rods under her skin. It was the small person's magic, and everyone's magic was an extension of themselves. The small person didn't simply inject her with a fluid, the small person injected her with herself. The small person was inside her. The small person could see and feel and touch and taste her insides. Clownmuffle could not get rid of her.

"It worked, it worked," said the tiny voice between her fingers. "Pepper, quick, do it now, before she figures something out—the Soul Gem, one stroke!"

The mad bride sliced out of Clownmuffle's locked grasp and swiveled on her heel to reaffirm her grip on the hilt of her sword. Whether she heeded the tiny person or her madness set her on a singular path that happened to coincide, who could say. But her eyes fixated on the band in Clownmuffle's top hat, on her gem.

Who cared about the bride. Clownmuffle needed—this creature—OUT. Out of her. Out out out. Out! Out, out. OUT. The others, the others, they thought they could control her, they could only harm her partly, they could only violate her in one way, the rest of herself remained, she could dwell in that part and cede only a fragment for the use of whoever desired it, she could do it in return for something, a cure to her disease, she was strong enough for that. What had this Lilliputian left her? Eyelids, a few snatches of skin displaced from major arteries? Her thoughts, she still had her thoughts, her brain, her sight—Sight.

As the bride swung Clownmuffle mustered the control that remained and fluttered an eyelid shut. The eyeball within its cavity of bone, unseen by those outside, unseen by those inside, disappeared. It reappeared under the bride's foot the moment she stepped down, another burst grape, thick and slick enough. The bride wore heeled glass slippers, and still such a young woman. Her ankle twisted, the full force of her body came down on it. Not enough to snap it, but enough to eliminate her balance.

Clownmuffle opened her eyelid. From inside extended the barrel of a gun, which fired a dum dum bullet into the bride's face as she fell. Splat. The bride could no longer be said to possess a head. Her body thumped against the floor.

She waited for the headless body to rise. Experienced girls learn to live without their brains. But this girl was apparently not experienced enough. She remained down.

"What, what!" said the tiny creature still clutched in her frozen fingers. "How. How! You cannot, you cannot, I refuse to allow this, I will DESTROY you—AAAAAEUGH!"

Another syringe plunged into Clownmuffle's thumb. And another. And another. All sorts of ugly things started to take hold in Clownmuffle's body, but by that time she didn't care. From the smoking barrel of the gun in her eye socket climbed a tiny Clownmuffle to match the tiny person in her fingers. Just a tiny Clownmuffle, cobbled together from the few parts this cunt could not control. Rudimentary, simple, a little jerky as she made her way down the larger Clownmuffle's body. She swung down the earlobe, bounced off the shoulder, cushioned her fall in the tuxedo's boutonniere, hopped to the outstretched arm. The little doctor didn't seem to notice, indeed was quite surprised when, after cramming around ten syringes with far too much anger into the large Clownmuffle's various fingers, she glanced up and saw the little Clownmuffle perfectly fine before her.

"No," she said. She shook her head. Clownmuffle seized her by the hair.

The large Clownmuffle crumbled. It broke apart, spurted blood, liquefied, resolved into acrid goo. The arm and then the hand detached and the little Clownmuffle and the little doctor dropped, hit the ground, bounced, came to a stop in the bloody drainage from the bride's stump neck.

"Hi," said Clownmuffle.

"No."

Clownmuffle's regular-sized top hat, no longer supported by the corpse crumbling beneath it, dropped on top of them and sealed them into total darkness. At which point, a renewed Clownmuffle, now fully formed and fully sized, bent and scooped the hat off the ground. She brushed dust off the brim, plopped it on her head, and considered the tiny doctor she had left behind in the blood, a speck only visible in contrast to the bright red.

"I knew it. I knew it," said the tiny doctor. "I knew it. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry."

"You'll disappear now." Clownmuffle extracted a napkin from her cuff.

"Please. Please. Do anything you want to me. Torture me or crush me. I don't care. Please—let her go." A tiny arm pointed to the much larger body on the ground behind her. "She didn't do anything. I controlled her the whole time. She had no choice. I forced her to do it, she's not to blame, only me. Please, will you promise me, will you let her go? Please."

The tiny being clasped her hands together and shook them. She got on her knees. At the same time, she began to grow, so slowly it was difficult to tell, and only after a few seconds had passed could Clownmuffle say she was definitively larger.

"I am begging you. *Begging* you. I don't care what happens to me. See how calm I am? Even while you suspend your instrument of doom above my head? I'm coherent enough I can even

think to call it something so florid as an 'instrument of doom,' aye? Or maybe this floridity is a kind of panic itself. Look. Friend. I understand you have us at our mercy. I can't bargain with you. I can only beg."

Clownmuffle knelt to examine the creature in better detail. She had taken it at first for a doctor, because of the syringes, but what she had thought was a labcoat was actually a white cape clasped around her neck. It concealed the rest of her uniform, she looked like a tent with a head, or a poppet created by tying a noose around a handkerchief.

"PLEASE. PLEASE. Can't you see? Can't you see? I was the one who made her do it. I was. Don't blame her. Don't blame her! Please, please. Don't just LOOK at me like that, say something, show SOMETHING, or god dammit get it over with and let me die before I want to die. I've let go of everything about myself, I've sacrificed everything already, I'll let the last few pieces fall away and then you can take my body, my soul, all of it, one final trade—for her."

Thoughts of the uniform sank into a lower level of consciousness. Clownmuffle became aware of the words for the first time. She tilted her head to make sense of them. "What are you saying?"

"DON'T KILL HER."

Kill her. The hand shot out of the cape-tent and pointed at the headless body. By now the tiny not-doctor had become the size of a toddler.

Clownmuffle failed to comprehend. This creature pleaded. She sobbed. She clasped her hands and shook them. Nobody had done this before.

"I'm sorry. I'M SORRY."

She was sorry. She didn't care what happened to her. Just don't kill her friend.

Huh.

Well.

Of course?

No Magical Girl would vanquish a penitent foe. That was the whole... there was an idea here... something distant and faraway but remembered nonetheless. She once killed a girl and it horrified her. It tore her to pieces. She remembered it—even though she had forgotten at some point. It had once been a piece of herself not to kill other girls.

She had let go of a lot of pieces of herself. Like the tiny girl did. "What did you mean, when you said you let go of everything about yourself?"

"Hunh?" A blink, a snag in the sob. "What did I...? For her, for the Empire, for those ideals. Those stupid fucking ideals. I cut away my identity, my personality, left only a few bits of character to lean upon in lieu of anything else, now I'll drop those too, I'll drop everything.

Am I too abstract? I can babble about nothing like a drunk atheist. I know, I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'M SORRY."

How did Clownmuffle get here? Why did it suddenly feel like she had also sacrificed so much of herself, even though she had only ever done whatever she wanted?

She sat down. Crossed her legs. The beggar became a midget. But the beggar had fallen onto the floor, rolled, beat her fists against the ground. The blood soaked her. "Why, why, why." An endless string of why.

How did this city become like this? So black? Where did the cat go. No, she didn't need the cat. Why did she want the cat? She wanted to stroke and pet the cat. Purr, purr. Kitty, kitty. She had a bag of bones to feed you. Her own bones, plucked one by one from her body.

"Please. Please. We never should have left. We never should have come. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

Clownmuffle crumpled her handkerchief and crammed it into her mouth. In the distance, over the black tops of towers against the black sky, an orange blaze had risen. Like a sunrise.

She had only ever lived her life the way she wanted. Right? She had only ever been the person she wanted to be. Yes? She had never allowed, save for sparse and short-lived intervals, she had never allowed anyone to inflict their rules or structures upon her. She had forever dwelled within the inviolable space of her own body, her own mind. No government or authority controlled her. Right? That was right, right? She was stating true statements, right?

But if it were true, how had she, looking now back at herself, at things she had not remembered, but which she had never forgot, how had she done so many terrible things? How had she—killed people?

The fires on the horizon raged. The black buildings crumbled and fell. The pool of blood within which she sat reflected it bright and full into her face. She felt the heat on her neck, and all the while the beggar sobbed, the beggar pleaded, the beggar begged.

"I won't kill you," said Clownmuffle.

The sobbing stopped abruptly with a sucking sound in a snotty nostril. "You—won't? Or her?"

"I won't kill anyone."

A flood of people passed through a space onto her bloody stage. They screamed, howled. They held signs and torches. "KILL THE CAT," they chanted in unison.

"I'm a good person," said Clownmuffle.

Each Confirms a Prison

The midnight broadcasts burned Hegewisch. Five AM nights did not surprise, no particular difference existed between night and light in this world, still something lurked in these hours or maybe they lurked in her mind. Even after three days minus sleep her nape might prickle and she'd know, it's then, it's the midnight broadcast. Duty demanded she watch it. Confirm the cat stayed on message. Noon it never mattered, midnight her eyeballs became heavy and sank deeper into her skull and no matter how hard she rubbed them she could not coax them out.

Due to President DuPage's habits, the Capitol and White House swapped purposes. Legislation in the latter, executive residence in the former. As the only relevant member of the Senate, Hegewisch had to spend most of her time in the White House, but she deliberately placed her personal office in the Capitol 1) as a break from that bullshit and 2) to keep an eye on DuPage. The second reason hadn't seen much use lately but the first roared bloody rage in its lieu.

Consider a government. A modern one. Consider the number of people who work together to make it function on even a basic level. Senators, ministers, secretaries, generals. Departments, agencies, branches, cabinets. Now consider that Hegewisch alone remained lucid enough in this city to keep all those elements organized. If she delegated a task, it was as likely completed as the delegate was to off themselves in the interim. Occasionally it was both completed *and* they offed themselves, either way she had to scrounge a replacement. Bigwigs vanished and nobody knew where they went. She seized monkeys off the street and crammed them into positions just so the gears would continue to clank. The screws rattled loose. They rattled in the base of her skull.

She had never been happier in her life. But it strained her body to its limits. She imagined, this was what the people who climb Mt. Everest feel like. Frostbitten, deoxygenated, every tendon aching, no material gain on that summit, no reward at the end of that rainbow, yet they still did it. A joy in exhaustion. A joy in reaching a limit.

Still she despised these broadcasts. As the cat emerged onto the podium and spat her opening words, Hegewisch checked her email.

The latest read:

Are you still going to avoid your own family ? What for ?

I just wanted to know what's the crime we committed ?

Give birth to you ?

Or

sacrificed our life to raise you ?

Or

Gave you all the freedom ?

Or

Can't be as rude as you ?

And you don't remember anymore your mom's birthday?

Ah, another of these. She started receiving them a month ago. Being a Senator put Hegewisch in the public domain, and although she went by the name Hegewisch they found her nonetheless.

She deleted the email. She rubbed her eyes. She glanced at the monitor in her office in time to see a blade whip through the podium on screen.

"Well fuck." She expelled all her air. Once upon a time the mere act of saying "fuck" relieved her, weren't those the days? She pushed back her chair, picked up her attaché case, straightened her tie, and exited her office.

Hopefully Clownmuffle could handle things, they had figured at some point Kyubey would send more Magical Girls their way, and if he did he probably had a better plan than last time. She believed in Clownmuffle, more than she believed in anything, even the God she knew existed. But—

Her thoughts went no further. She had passed through the doors into the Capitol lobby. As DuPage lived in the Capitol permanently, visitors were not permitted, for their safety more than the president's. The doors were typically barricaded, and only Hegewisch could open them with the keycard tucked into her breast pocket. The doors had been busted down.

Sayaka Miki stood in their stead.

"Oh, I actually forgot about you—"

But Miki didn't seem so chatty this time. Nope. She shot forward, lightning-blink fast, but Hegewisch already had her fingers in her pocket reaching for her keycard. Sayaka, silent, had learned from their last encounter, but so had Hegewisch. She flicked out not her keycard but a folded piece of paper that slapped against the ground and unfolded in a ring of light.

A figure substantiated between her and Miki in time to deflect five drawn blades held by two hands. Hegewisch drew back into the cluttered space of the lobby, where the counters and metal detectors had been dismantled but remained in pieces strewn about, unclipped the latches of her attaché case, fingered the five hundred fluttering sheets within to call between her fingers the one she needed.

"Alright then, gimme a motherfucking pony," said the figure she had already formed, who forced her halberd forward and knocked Miki back—or rather Miki leapt back on her own volition, flipped twice, and landed with her heels braced against the wall before shooting corkscrew-style around the circumference of the lobby. Too fast for False Cicero, but

Hegewisch already had the second paper down. A False Cook appeared, slouch as pronounced as Hegewisch's, and called from the lobby sprinkler system a sheet of ice to slam in Miki's way and absorb the points of her swords.

"I'm not interested in fighting," said Hegewisch on impulse, fatigue made her sloppy, she knew Sayaka didn't give a shit. If Miki were a reasonable person her story would have deviated a thousand times before she reached this point.

"I want to not deal with this shit anymore," said False Cook.

The Capitol lobby was not an especially large place. Not the kind of place someone could flee long from powers as widespread as Cicero's or Cook's. Miki fought like Clownmuffle, minus the real bullshit stuff. Close-range, emphasis on agility, maximum maneuvering. Already she kicked off from the ice surface and pinballed around the room to assault from a new angle. Hegewisch barely had time to think. Fortunately, her false souls thought for her. Kindly, Dr. Cho had measured their reaction times, appended these statistics to their files, and now their files came to life where the true soul lacked.

Miki whipped blades from her cloak, shed a cloak, had a new cloak, reappeared from under the old cloak, Clownmuffle kind of crap, about fifty blades impaled the floor and from the sheet of ice manifested the image of Oktavia von Seckendorff. Whatever dead stillness imbued this universe shattered with the sharp crack of ice and creak of roof as the gargantuan witch came into being. All the ground became water, serrated edges of liquid that managed to cut Hegewisch's pant-legs before she selected another page from her folder and summoned a False Aurora (Illinois, not Colorado) to create for her a circle of safety.

Three Centurions summoned and Miki never got close to her. Hegewisch had already improved over their last meeting, and that time Miki gave her time to think while they argued a bit before the fireworks. "I wish, I want, let me be safe," said False Aurora beside her.

The blade of von Seckendorff crashed toward Hegewisch's head but False Aurora's golden circle zoomed toward it and blinked it out of existence, leaving von Seckendorff to consider her (its?) empty hand with as much confusion as a face minus eyes or mouth could muster. Despite the omnipresence of the miasma, the scenery had somehow changed. An ocean spanned in every direction, any sense of walls had stripped away, an image reminiscent of Lake Michigan, except the image ended at the border of False Aurora's circle, where the ground and everything else remained black as ever. Miki rode on a sailboat with a conductor and a full orchestra playing whale sounds. False Cook and Cicero ebbed toward her on an iceberg.

"I've got a few hundred more I can create." Hegewisch hoisted her attaché case high and cupped her other hand around her mouth, since Miki had somehow gotten quite a distance away from her. "If Madoka really wants to beat me, she should open her own briefcase instead of sending the same old you over and over."

Miki responded by turning a blade on herself and ramming it through her heart. She sagged to her knees amid the orchestra, a wide-eyed gag frozen on her face as blood spurted in a thick arc overboard. Her hands, operating independently of the rest of her, drew more swords and rammed them in, through her sides, through her back, legs, neck, she impaled herself

from every direction, until the blood spouted from her in torrents, until it drowned the orchestra save for their bobbing hats and the whole ocean became red.

Some kind of strategy, not that Hegewisch knew what. She didn't bother piecing the details. Instead she fingered her papers and picked out two she figured might be enough to put Miki down, at least for long enough to finish the deal.

The level of the ocean rose. Although Hegewisch remained on a solid circle of black, she seemed to sink deeper and deeper into the red ooze, until she could no longer see False Cicero and False Cook or von Seckendorff or anything save dark shapes indistinct in the distant liquid.

The orchestra's whale noises died and became indistinct. In their place chimed something pleasant and heavenly as the bloody sea began to glow.

Shit. Her power. Regeneration. If all this blood belonged to Sayaka Miki, then—

Miki came at False Aurora's circle from one direction, disappeared, and at the same instant a second Miki regenerated out of the vast sink of matter and assaulted the circle from its opposite end. False Aurora's ball shot for that Miki, vanished it too, but a third Miki struck, a fourth, the blood reformed into bodies upon bodies, False Aurora seized Hegewisch by the waist and shivered, she muttered: "I wish, I want, let me be safe. I wish, I want, let me be safe. I wish, I want," a kind of mantra, timed to the chime of Miki's regenerative bell, until it wasn't true. She wasn't safe. A Miki finally moved too fast, while the yellow ball was too distracted, and shot into the safe space of the black circle. Her blade tore through False Aurora, swept downward, embedded into the ground. It had pierced the paper that contained Aurora's file. Cut clean through the name (Tania Romero) and wish (To be safe). False Aurora faded and the file became useless parchment.

The bloody ocean drained the same instant and Miki propped herself on a blade. On the dregs of liquid drifted the files of Cicero and Cook, broken into pulpy pieces. Hegewisch hadn't considered a weakness to water, but it made sense. If true Magical Girls were contained in their gems, her facsimiles were contained in the relatively flimsy form of paper. Fire would be another weakness. She could iron out these problems later, however, and while the loss of three powerful files hurt, she could remake them later anyway, and she had plenty more in the interim. Miki, on the other hand, wheezed for air and clutched a hand to a heart that beat so loud Hegewisch could hear it.

"You're in a bad position here. Your gem, see it?" Hegewisch pointed. Miki's gem, exposed on her stomach, had turned a particularly awful shade. Although something about that fact raised Hegewisch's suspicion. That regenerative trick probably took a lot of magic. Creating twenty or thirty bodies in such a short time would tax an ordinary Magical Girl. But Miki, for her faults, had an angelic advantage and an innate resistance to despair thanks to her connections to the Cycles. Hegewisch found it difficult to believe one impressive move had drained her so thoroughly. A trap, a false gem, something meant to lure her? Did Miki possess that much guile? What the hell?

"I'll," said Miki, "never be in a bad position." She wiped her forehead, wiped her mouth. "I'll end this. Step aside. Let me fight the monster. I know you're not bad, Laila. I know it. So why

are you helping that thing? It's controlling you, isn't it. Isn't it? That's fine. I'll save you."

"Controlling me." Hegewisch had to think about these two words because for a moment they sounded like a foreign language to her. Maybe the fatigue talking. "No. Miki. Don't you get it? DuPage is asleep."

"Asleep..."

"She might have come back as the embodiment of evil, but she's still lazy fucking DuPage. She burned herself out. Got so mad she couldn't sustain it. After a week she was bored, after two she went to sleep. She hasn't woken up since."

Now it was Sayaka's turn to blink as though she understood nothing. "Asleep..."

"Yes. Comprehend? Asleep. She doesn't give a shit. About the United States? The world? She couldn't care less. The only thing that still matters to her is Cook, and Cook's never gonna come, so instead of getting mad at herself she went to sleep. I run this fucking country. Me."

"You—you? The broadcasts?"

"Yep, that's me, Joliet and Clownmuffle are too dumb to know what the hell they're doing. It's me, I'm the evil bad guy, I was the big villain all along, wow, what a surprise, yay." She tapped her chin. "This is why you should talk more instead of rushing into everything."

"I don't believe you."

"I mean, I'd offer to show you DuPage herself, she's in the rotunda just through those doors, but of course I'm not gonna do that. You should stay and talk more. You can't move. I've already got my pieces into position. The moment you take a step you're cooked."

Miki obviously didn't believe that statement either, but Hegewisch hadn't lied yet. Their conversation had given her more than enough time to set everything up, and due to the particular powers at hand Miki had no chance to detect her scheme.

"No," said Miki. "You're a Magical Girl. You're a Magical Girl who knows Madoka. You know what she's done and what she stands for. I refuse to believe you could do this, Laila. That you can be the one behind what's happening in this world."

"Trying to get you to understand, that's probably pointless. But believe it or not, evil old Laila's evil plan is to make this evil world slightly less evil. It's just that, for some reason, it seems the world has to get really, really shitty before Madoka decides to get off her fat ass and do something about it—"

Yeah, Miki wasn't having that. Despite the obvious drain she was feeling, she seized her sword and lunged. But, as Hegewisch promised, she only got a single step.

A lightning bolt manifested out of the nothing above Miki's head. It flashed once and was over in less than the speed of an eye blink. Miki collapsed. Her swords clattered out of her cloak and her boots scuffed the ground as her body folded in on itself and dwindled to a series of spasmodic jerks.

"I wish only to serve my Empress in the way she demands of me," said the False Handmaiden, appearing to Miki's left.

"I wish my heart worked," said False Midlothian, appearing to Miki's right.

"Quick, her gem," said Hegewisch. "Her power's regeneration, she'll be up fast." She didn't know why she said it aloud. As manifestations of her magic, they obeyed her orders without need for communication, even telepathic; her thoughts were their thoughts. This instantaneousness was pretty useful, it was how she managed to summon both pieces and maneuver them into the correct position without Miki catching on, but sometimes it felt awkward standing in silence, around other people. False Midlothian pried Miki's gem from its place and handed it to Hegewisch with a modest bow.

Sure enough, Miki already started to revive. Her twitches resolved to semi-conscious limb movements, followed by the opening of her eyes, a weak palm pressed against the ground and an arm bent to push. But the voltage had knocked her out at least for a few seconds, enough to detransform her, and without her gem she wouldn't be able to do anything.

Anything except talk, and right now Hegewisch had other shit to deal with, despite her previous invitation. She sorted the files of Midlothian and the Handmaiden back into her attaché case, causing them to both lose substance, and summoned in their stead a girl from Las Cruces whose power involved spider stuff. The files from Denver's collection were often less reliable than the assiduous statistical information Hegewisch or the Handmaiden or Dr. Cho compiled for the Empire's own soldiers, but Denver had at least known to track the most important factoids. As such, Las Cruces did not speak (no wish listed, no personality traits set down), but she did employ her powers to inject Miki with paralyzing venom. The venom kept Miki down a few moments more, long enough for Las Cruces to envelop her head to toe in a cocoon of steel-strength silk.

Miki's blood had already purged the magical toxins by the time the task was complete, a testament to her resilience. Or maybe it was a testament to the ambiguous strength of Las Cruces' venom, the specific parameters of which were absent from Denver's notes. Maybe a False Berwyn would have been more effective, but hey, the job was done. Reading through the files, Hegewisch had learned that magic powers came cheap. Almost anyone could be replaced. She scraped Aurora's paper off the ground. Miki had done significant damage to it, but she could type up a new sheet with all the relevant info. Cook and Cicero's soggy clumps were more problematic, she could no longer read some of the stats. Waterproof paper, they had that right? Or maybe lamination. That'd make the pages much more durable, but also heavier and harder to sift. She would have to consider improvements after she resolved whatever Kyubey hurled at her.

"Yeah, yeah. Settle down," she said to the muffled cocoon now strung against the wall. "I'm not gonna kill you. Trust me. Once everything's back to normal we can even have a nice, long conversation. I'm sure it'll fucking suck for us both but we gotta have it, I guess, if either of us wanna make any progress." She shined Miki's Soul Gem against her sleeve. Damn. It was actually in turbo shit shape. Once blue, now purple, verging on black. No way had someone as powerful as Miki expended so much energy in such a short fight. She must have started the fight already a mess. But that made no sense, the world was crawling with wraiths and Miki

was good enough to kill them. She should have had no shortage of energy. So why let herself get this way? It gimped her during the fight. And forgetting Hegewisch, how had Miki planned to beat DuPage like this? Had she *wanted* to lose?

It reeked of plot and sent a little paranoia up her spine, yet she couldn't fathom the specifics of why Miki would want to lose.

Man. What if Miki just kicked her ass there? What if Hegewisch died right at that moment? That'd be a hilarious end, wouldn't it? She was about to pocket the gem when she glanced up and saw the other angel approaching from beyond the busted-down doors. What's-her-name. The not relevant one. Um. Hegewisch knew she knew it, tried to remember—Nagisa! Nagisa, yeah. And the Sweets Witch, Charlotte.

"Oh no, oh no," said Nagisa as she reached the doorway. "I was too late, oh no, ah! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, don't worry, I'll fix this. I will!" She teetered on her tiny feet and turned as if to consult Charlotte, whose goofy cartoon face gaped back equally nonplussed.

"Yeah no." Hegewisch suppressed a yawn. The cityscape at Nagisa's back had morphed from its characteristic black to orange and enflamed. Distant voices traveled on the dead air. Something was happening, the broadcast had clearly tripped an event. "I don't feel like doing another fight right now. So I'm sorry to do this, but if you make a move I'll destroy Miki's Soul Gem right now." Hegewisch held it up to make sure she saw.

"What! You—"

"Nagisa, please. I'm so tired of this shit. Come on." She had—somewhere—here. Sifting through her pockets with her free hand, she drew a handgun which she aimed at the gem. "I'll let you take her body if you want, it's right in that cocoon. But we're not doing this shit anymore."

Nagisa's face lowered. "You wouldn't do it. You wouldn't kill her."

"Really underestimating how much I care about anything anymore, Nag. I've checked out of a whole lotta crap just to keep chugging." She strode forward, past Nagisa, who scampered aside, and onto the Capitol's patio to better survey the surroundings. Nagisa's appearance actually chucked another wrench into Hegewisch's understanding of events. Given how Nagisa fished Miki out of the fight the first time they scuffled, Hegewisch would have at least expected Miki to have dealt with her for the rematch. But Nagisa hadn't shown up any slower than she did the first time, it was just that Hegewisch managed to beat Miki fast enough. So if Miki really did want to lose, was Nagisa supposed to be party to her plot, witting or unwitting? Perhaps, by getting herself killed, Miki intended to hurl Nagisa into some sort of berserk rage and get her to finish the fight where Miki couldn't? Was Nagisa really the type of person who would go into a "berserk rage"?

This crap bugged her, she didn't know why, and so much else no longer did, amazing. Maybe Miki just particularly pissed her off. She walked to the edge of the patio and looked over the railing at the National Mall beyond.

"Ah what the fuck. You see this?" She gestured for Nagisa to come to her side. Nagisa gave her a disgusted face instead and remained rooted in her doorway, although Charlotte did unfurl from around a Greco-Roman pillar to take a peek. "What the hell's this crap. You know?"

Nagisa shook her head emphatically. "Please—"

"If you tell me I'll give you your friend back."

"I told you I don't know!"

What a guileless little girl, if Hegewisch were her she'd have made something up, anything.

Below, as far as the Mall stretched, and it stretched in directions that weren't Euclidean unless you knew how to look at it, the humans had gone bonkers. Their neat marching rows broke apart, crashed together, entangled. People sprinted in random directions. People tripped and fell. People hoisted flaming debris over their head and hurled it. And their fires raged even farther, even beyond what Hegewisch could see with her eye uniquely adept at seeing in this haze.

"Jesus. What'd Joliet tell them this time?" Maybe the program's interruption caused them to riot. But that seemed unlikely.

"I don't get why you're doing this, Laila," said Nagisa.

"Hey. I already had this exact talk with Sayaka. Let's not do the whole thing all over again." Hegewisch tossed both Miki's gem and the handgun to the Las Cruces spider girl, who had remained attendant at Hegewisch's side despite Hegewisch's propensity to forget her. While the spider girl kept the gun trained and Nagisa at bay, Hegewisch fished her pockets for one of her many enchanted phones. "I said it already. DuPage is asleep, I'm in charge, yadda blah."

"Sayaka thinks she has to be the one to save everything," said Nagisa. "But she's wrong. You can defeat that archon by yourself, Laila. You know that, right? You don't have to be afraid of that thing."

Not even listening at this point. Why Hegewisch ever bothered, she never knew. Tap-tap went her phone as she brought up the latest broadcast, which had been uploaded online infinity times already with all variety of clickbait titles. Whatever happened had caused quite the stir.

"You don't need to help this evil!" said Nagisa.

"Kid. Please. If I do Madoka's job for her, she'll never learn." She skipped passed the part of the broadcast she saw, the initial attack. The next few minutes were hard to parse, clearly something was happening, a fight. Most happened behind the camera, and since all but one stream was apparently destroyed, she had no way to change the vantage.

"Maybe you've got that backwards," said Nagisa. "You ever think of that? Huh?"

"I've thought of everything. All I ever do is think." Here we go. Someone took the stage again. A girl in a witch hat. Hegewisch knew this girl. Palos. Isabel Leyva. "This world sucks dick, Nag. Everything about it sucks. Everywhere something trashy is happening, someone's getting fucked, someone's falling apart. All it does is chew up dreams and shit them out. Except once there was a girl strong enough to make it a little less shitty. All I'm asking is for her to do that again, use her godly powers, actually make it a *good* world for once. Then I can go to Hell, I don't care. It doesn't matter, whatever eternal torments you think I deserve, sure. I'm so done, Hell can't make me care."

What the hell was this speech? Not Hegewisch's. Hegewisch knew her own speech was bullshit, she was just rambling whatever popped into her head. She meant Leyva's. It was almost hilarious. She was trying so hard to sound angry. It came off like a toddler temper tantrum.

"You know, you *know* Madoka can't just influence the world like that," said Nagisa. "She's a *law*."

"She did it to save Clownmuffle, so don't give me that bull."

"You tricked her that time!"

"All I'm doing is tricking her again." The video neared its end. Leyva got bloody, got louder, did not get more convincing. Still, the braindead desperate masses probably didn't need much convincing.

Nagisa stomped her foot. "Oh, you're *just like* Sayaka! She's trying to do the same thing. She thinks she can do whatever she wants down here because she represents Madoka's 'human' side or something, it's so stupid! You're both just making Madoka out to be whatever you want her to be, and it's not right!"

Hegewisch paused the video. "But Madoka sent Miki to stop me."

"No she didn't!"

Miki had said the same thing before, the last time they fought. But Hegewisch thought that couldn't be true. It didn't make sense. Did Madoka not care *at all*? Like, Hegewisch didn't care, but that was because she was a jaded piece of crap. Madoka was the opposite of that. Honestly, Hegewisch had expected Madoka to send a whole army months ago. She never expected things to progress this far, but when they had, she had carried on the same way her heart kept beating—mostly out of habit. The Law of the Cycles could end this shitshow instantly. When Miki showed up alone, she figured it was Madoka putting way too much faith in her friends (as usual), and when Miki claimed Madoka didn't send her and that she was acting rogue, she figured it was Miki being a dumbass (as usual).

But if Nagisa backed up what she said...

"That's stupid. That's the stupidest thing," said Hegewisch.

"Sayaka thought the same thing, no matter what I told her." Nagisa had gotten so wrapped up in the conversation she no longer sent sidelong glances at Sayaka's gem. "But Sayaka was being silly. It's not our job to do more than what Madoka has already done... It's against the Law of the Cycles."

So if this were all true—then Miki attacking with her gem in such a state, and expending as much energy as possible, meant—

Hegewisch knew exactly what it meant. She planned to bring Madoka herself to the negotiating table.

She leaned over the railing and took in the ugly world. At one point it had to prick Madoka's finger. At one point she had to draw a bead of blood.

"Laila, please, stop this..."

Instead, Hegewisch slid her hand into her attaché case. The current crisis needed to end. She had faith Clownmuffle could handle the initial invaders, and she could deal with humans herself, but she worried eventually enough Magical Girls might show up that even preternatural luck couldn't save the day. Fortunately, Palos had explained exactly how they were getting Magical Girls into the city.

She slapped a paper on the ground. False Clownmuffle manifested. Hegewisch had put especial effort into collating her file, combining information from Denver with information from the Empire and new information based on what Hegewisch herself had witnessed. No doubt this mimic lacked Clownmuffle's ingenuity and inability to die, but she kept the raw stats and abilities.

"I don't remember," said False Clownmuffle.

"I need you to—" But Hegewisch stopped, remembered Nagisa, figured she might get in the way if she had an inkling of the order. Instead, Hegewisch communicated it wordlessly, or rather didn't communicate it at all, simply thought it in the sanctity of her own head. False Clownmuffle nodded. Find "the doctor" that Palos mentioned at the end of her speech, the one who could bypass the miasma's effects. Eliminate her.

"What are you doing?" said Nagisa as False Clownmuffle sprang over the side of the patio and vanished into the thronged mob that advanced.

"Nothing that matters to you. Now," she said, turning back to the Capitol and beckoning False Las Cruces to follow, "wanna barter over Miki?"

Not to be rude, truly, but this had gone on much too long—that was what Millie Luce wished to say to the gregarious doctor, but a constant stream of speech formed a formidable barrier to

any sort of interjection whatsoever. The Headmistress would be so cross with her. That was what Millie wanted to think, but in fact, her mind dwelled on other topics, so much had happened so shortly it became difficult to process, and a terrible fear welled in her heart that she had, somewhere, made a grievous error.

To know God—That had been her wish. And so knowledge she now possessed, inside her head like a collection of memories she had pilfered from another, something she could tell was genuine although she had not witnessed the occurrences herself. It was not the God she expected, had believed in. She still had to parse this knowledge. It was as though everything she knew her entire life had been a lie. It caused her hands to tremble.

"Can you believe, Lachesis, the immaculate perfection of the human body, the care that went into the crafting of every facet of its design?" The doctor droned. "The mastery over anatomy required to even begin its replication..."

"I cannot believe," said Lachesis. The doctor's friends were much quieter. Some of them served Millie food, but she received the distinct impression that if she rose and tried to leave, they would bar her.

"It is through the immaculate nature of the human body that we, mankind, can bridge the divide between us and God." The doctor held a fork between two fingers and waved it lazily in abstract illustration of her point. "The men of the Renaissance, I believe, felt something similar, hence their attempts to perfect the human body in the form of art, art being, shall we say, a lesser imitation of life, as thus their efforts always coming short of the mark, no matter the precision of their imitation. God is the ultimate designer. The ultimate truth in not one but all disciplines, biological or psychological, an interweaver if you will of them all. Aspiration toward the ideal of God is the only way humanity as a species can crawl forward, even if our understanding is doomed to never match God's in total. Follow you me, love?"

"I do not follow," said Lachesis.

"Yes-yes, you never do, but Millie, my dear chum Millie, what of you?"

She swung her arm around Millie's shoulder and reeled her close. Oh! Millie did not quite like when the doctor did this, even if she sensed the doctor meant no ill will. Now might be an excellent time to mention that she needed to leave, the bright orange lights that built above the rooftops concerned her, perhaps they ought also to concern the doctor? The doctor was unconcerned. Concern did not seem to be a component of her nature.

"I am sorry," said Millie. "I would rather return to..."

"God, God, speak to me of God, contrasting opinions lead only to greater truth, in the end, in the end."

"Ah. Um." She did not know what to say. What had God been to her, what was it now, it was all so confusing, all so fresh and new. Everything felt fresher and newer than it should. God—was a being, of course—but also an—experience, one inside each and every human, something shared between all bodies, distinct though they may be. They began from God, and they ended with God. The bodies were merely dust.

It would be, she knew, difficult to articulate this thought.

The doctor's expectant gaze only fell off her when someone arrived. The heads of Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos turned in unison, the doctor a moment delayed. A young woman stood between the doctor's vehicle and the tent in their little campsite, a haven from the bright orange, although from time to time Millie still coughed, as she did now. Due to the brightness she could not make out the newcomer. She shielded her eyes from the ash.

"Are you the doctor," said a voice.

"I am! Yes, yes, that's me. Dr. Cho, pleased to make your acquaintance, love." The doctor jerked forward, extended a hand to shake, did not receive a handshake.

The figure stepped forward, past the dome of ash that had enveloped them. She wore a shiny red coat draped around her shoulders and a tricorne hat. It was a little funny. She did not look like she belonged in this era, but she was pretty nonetheless. However, her stare was hard. Millie realized that several other people, all pretty young women, had accompanied her.

"We're from Baltimore," said the one in the red coat. "Sorry we're late. We came as fast as we could, but the roads are jammed. Everyone's headed this way."

"Baltimore, Baltimore, never been," said the doctor.

"You *can* get us into the miasma, right?"

The doctor rubbed her gloves together. "Can I? Well, no, to be specific, I cannot, my powers are actually rather limited among Puella Magi, as you might know, if you've heard of me before."

The red coated girl from Baltimore twisted her face in annoyance. "So did Kyubey and that chick on TV lie or you just being a shitter?"

There is no need for this misunderstanding to continue, said Kyubey, who uncoiled from a trash bag and hopped onto Millie's knees. She stroked his fur behind his long rabbit ears, he was rather cute. *Millie here is the one who can grant you entry into the miasma.*

The red coated girl shoved Dr. Cho aside rather brusquely and stomped her heavy leather boots toward Millie. Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos attempted to stand in her way but Dr. Cho called them aside. "It's alright, quite alright, if the Incubator wishes to use Millie's abilities, I suppose I ought to let him. It was his intervention, after all, that allowed me to reach this position in the first place."

Yes, Millie, please enchant their Soul Gems like you did with the others. It's very important to the fate of the world!

Important to the fate of the world... Millie did not know how or why. She of course had plenty of questions, but she had the same questions when she sent Darien and Darien's friends into the miasma an hour or two ago. Of course, nobody had answered her questions then. However, it was not often people answered her questions, was it? She had often found the

adults and figures of authority at a loss for words when she questioned them on the things that truly made her wonder. She had needed to find the answers for herself, was that not right?

Either way, she soon found several Soul Gems thrust into her face by the red coated girl and her friends from Baltimore. And regardless of what she felt, she could not doubt the presence of the black miasma that covered Washington, a miasma to which she had been blind before she made her wish to know God. Its maleficence was undeniable, simply seeing, smelling, hearing it confirmed her suppositions.

"Okay," she said, standing. "Please, though, let me do it one at a time. It will not take long..."

One by one she protected their souls with the grace of God. As soon as she finished, the entire group departed. They did not bother to say goodbye or thank you, but that was alright. They were determined to fight evil, and so they were good people, and Millie was glad that she helped them.

Perhaps she ought to even join them...

But the doctor would not let her leave. Over the next hour, many more Magical Girls arrived. They came straight to the doctor's campsite, demanded Millie protect their Soul Gems, and plunged into the dreadful blackness.

"Could they not all come at once?" the doctor asked Kyubey, who remained in Millie's lap. "Must they arrive so staggered? It's difficult to arrange my thoughts like this."

Logistically, such an arrangement would prove impossible, said Kyubey.

The doctor paced. She bit aggressively into a loaf of French bread. Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos followed at her heels and supplied her with anything she needed, be it food or materials to scratch out some notes on her latest train of thought. Despite her various annoyances, Millie could in some ways respect the doctor. Many people believed that science and medicine were incompatible with religion, that one denied the possibility of the other. Millie had never seen it that way, coming from the perspective of one who believes, and the doctor, coming from the opposite perspective, did not seem to see it that way either. Despite the whirlwind of activity that had buffeted Millie in the past few hours, the doctor remained, in her fidgeting, her animation, her constant motion of leg and mouth, a surprisingly stable reminder of space and place.

What did those esteemed men of science first think, when they discovered the bones of creatures that had lived on this planet billions of years before humanity? Perhaps the same thing Millie thought now, finding her notions of God as told in a certain book to have become defunct by new knowledge: Yet God persisted.

A new person arrived. This one was alone. But she looked like a Magical Girl, like the others, and some of the others had arrived alone, so other than the doctor's harrumph of annoyance nothing at first changed...

Until Kyubey said: *Watch out—Run! That woman's dangerous!*

Before Millie even understood what he meant, one of the doctor's friends—Lachesis—dove in front of the doctor and received in her stead a mangling sweep of sharp objects. Lachesis dropped, the objects stuck to her, they were... playing cards?

"Hm?" said the doctor. "There's no need for violence."

Clotho and Atropos changed clothes with a flash of light. One held a sword, the other a shield, but both fell instants later covered in the same cards. Only by this point did Millie realize something dangerous was occurring, but the realization came sluggish. She stood and Kyubey dropped beside her.

"Look at this mess now," said the doctor. "Don't worry, my loves, I'll put you back together soon enough. But you—" She pointed at the newcomer. "—What have you to say for yourself?"

"I don't remember," the newcomer said.

Millie, run! said Kyubey. *It's extremely dangerous to stay. Leave the doctor and run, I'll get help!*

"Well, take a seat and I'll serve you a meal." The doctor indicated her vehicle. "Plenty, plenty. On a full stomach you'll feel better—"

Through a plume of smoke the figure rushed. She wore a white tuxedo and top hat and a blank expression. She swung a baton but before it connected with the doctor's skull one of the fallen assistants lurched upright and took the blow for her. The skull caved. Blood splashed, onto the doctor, onto Millie, and she dropped to her side her heart suddenly heaving and a hand pressed to it as she realized: They are hurt, they are dying, a killer—!

All while Kyubey shouted for her to flee. *If you can survive another five minutes,* he said, *help will arrive!*

The blood, it was all on her hands, her face, she could feel it, oh no, oh no. The body of the assistant fell. It was Clotho. Was she—was she—oh no.

"Oh dear," said the doctor. A flash of light manifested in her hands—a chainsaw. "I suppose I've no choice, now do I love?"

Dr. Cho is not a competent fighter, said Kyubey. *She'll be overwhelmed in moments. Flee, while she can still distract that woman!*

No. No! Millie did not know this attacker or why she attacked, but Dr. Cho was a good person, and so were her friends. She—she needed to protect them! That's right, she was a Magical Girl—one of God's chosen. It was her sworn duty to defend this world from evil.

She knew what to do. Nobody had explained the rules, but she understood, instinctually. The ring on her finger transformed into an egg-shaped gemstone on the palm of her hand. Here goes...

Dr. Cho, do you really want your prized creation to be destroyed? You cannot win this fight, you're completely outclassed!

A second assistant, Atropos, received a blow that had been aimed to break the doctor in half, while the doctor lunged with awkward swings of her chainsaw that appeared to miss despite the attacker not even moving.

Here goes...!

The second time she tried it worked. A dazzling, holy light bathed her. It cleansed, in an instant, the soot from her skin and hair. It was warm, compared to the icy chill of the nighttime air... It chimed. The light had a sound, deep within it, she heard it as though she heard it inside her head as she closed her eyes and felt a serene peace spread inside her, her fear and horror compressed into a darker portion of herself, the portion she left behind as she transformed. Her vestments changed too, but that was circumstantial, she was only dimly aware of the downy robe that ran down her body, the flower petals that cascaded past the hem, the laurel crown that sprouted from her hair.

Her eyes opened. The light subsided. The feeling remained... Here she was.

Even in the single instant of her transformation, the terrain had warped. Clotho's headless, mangled body had crashed through the tent of the homeless people, who cowered among the torn fabric flaps. The doctor's station wagon had caught fire, all its windows broken, the front half depressed on tires that squealed as they emptied from the thousand perforations caused by the playing cards that coated them. An arm, just an arm, rolled against her shoe.

But no nausea overcame her. This was the peace, the certainty of God. It was His—or Her—strength that filled her.

The doctor skidded to a stop against the mound of trash that enclosed their campsite. She had traveled through the fire on which they had cooked the food, blood and stew stained her labcoat equally. Her chainsaw whirred uselessly where it had fallen. As she tried to rise, one arm broken, while the woman in the tuxedo approached with a languid calmness, she flashed a smile.

"Rather rude, love. Rather rude indeed... Hck." Blood dribbled down her chin.

"Don't worry, doctor!" Millie drew her bow. She had never practiced archery before, but the motion felt natural and correct. She aimed for the tuxedo woman's leg.

"Lachesis," the doctor said. "Make her safe, will you love?"

A fist sailed into Millie's gut. She doubled over and her arrow whizzed against the concrete. Before she understood anything, a force hoisted her off the ground. It was the third friend, Lachesis, cut and gashed all over but maintaining the same neutral expression that the friends always wore.

Then the doctor, the campground, and the woman in the tuxedo receded. "Now, as for you my friend," the doctor said before a rooftop eclipsed her and suddenly Millie could see nothing

but the bright flames that spread a full three hundred and sixty degrees around her, the embers that travelled into the starlight, and the blood that dripped onto her face from Lachesis's wounds.

"Wait," she said.

But they kept leaping across the rooftops. Many of the stars above were moving. Millie realized they were helicopters. Their ubiquitous drone had always been there, but she had not noticed until now.

"Wait, we can't leave them."

Keep running! It'll only be a few more moments. Help will arrive soon!

Where did he go? Was he running alongside them? Was he in danger too? She could feel something. Fear. But it was not her own fear, even though she was afraid. It was two distinct fears, hers and another's. It emanated from the one who carried her, Lachesis.

On a distant rooftop, from the direction they had come, the woman in the white tuxedo appeared. Her tuxedo remained white despite how much blood had run everywhere... And she came, with dogged determination, with absolute precision, after them. Much faster than them.

Lachesis, as long as you slow her down for a few more seconds, you'll accomplish what Dr. Cho wanted from you. Please, you must do it!

"No!" said Millie.

But Lachesis had already dropped her and turned to face the woman in the white tuxedo with a magical sort of staff, tipped by a glass ball that shined colors as she waved it. She incanted something under her breath and fired beams of energy at their attacker. She had placed herself in front of Millie, shielding her. She would die to protect her... No! No, no, no. Millie refused it. Refused it. What good was she, that all these people would sacrifice themselves for her sake? What point was that, why should she of all people be defended?

She got up and kicked Lachesis in the shin, hard, perhaps too hard, enough that the grunt of pain pained her as well, but she had a plan, she did! She drew her bow. Kyubey shouted at her: *No, Millie, you mustn't! Lachesis is an empty vessel, there's no point, let her do what she was made to do!* But she refused to listen. She fired her arrow.

It shot past the woman in the white tuxedo. She moved effortlessly, as though she did not dodge, but Millie instead missed, yet her aim had been true, she was certain. She summoned another arrow but the woman with the white tuxedo was already upon her.

"I don't remember," she said as she seized Millie by the face.

"What don't you remember," said Millie, elevated off the ground so that her feet dangled, her voice muffled by the palm that squeezed to crush. "What—don't you—"

Her nose cracked. Blood surged down her throat and she could no longer speak. None of it made sense, who this woman was, what she could not remember, why she attacked... why she

wanted them to die... was she not a Magical Girl herself? She did not look like the monsters they had told her about.

She felt something. Through the hand that crushed her. A feeling, like the one she had felt from Lachesis. Emptiness—or perhaps that was not the word, as it was not an emotion—melancholy. Millie's own fear, and from this woman in the white tuxedo, melancholy.

She placed her hands on the woman's hand. It is alright, she tried to say, stroking the fingers. It is alright. You do not remember, but together we can try to find it...

For a moment, she thought, the pressure loosened.

Then she hit the ground. The woman in the white tuxedo had dropped her. She stood staring forward, at nothing or everything. Lachesis aimed her staff to attack but Millie grabbed her.

"I don't... remember."

One hundred holes opened along her body. Her face burst open and her top hat went flying until it too came apart in holes, so many holes it was like it was being eaten, like a thousand little bites consumed it to scraps.

At the woman's back descended a helicopter. It hovered a few feet above the rooftops, its door open and a collection of faces peering from within. At the foremost stood a young woman with a long, whipping ponytail, who held her arms outstretched like she was playing at firing a gun.

"I FUCKING *GOT* THAT WHORE," said the girl with the ponytail.

The woman in the white tuxedo slumped, first to her knees, then onto her side, like she was about to take a nap, except instead she was sand, and came apart like sand.

Millie pressed her wrists to her forehead and stared between her feet.

The ponytail girl hopped out of the helicopter, followed by a series of men who landed with far less grace. Finally, a beautiful woman who looked like she was on a Hawaiian vacation stepped out.

"Ahhhhh," said this woman, "I would suspect a trick."

"I tore that hat, uh, tore it to pieces." The ponytail girl inspected the sand. She seized handfuls of it and let it run between her fingers. "That's where her Soul Gem is, right? She uh, couldn't possibly have..."

"I would expect anything at this point?"

That feeling, that melancholy, lingered. The two girls chattered, and the one in the swimsuit waved at the helicopter pilot to have him or her land the helicopter somewhere nearby.

"The doctor," said Millie, "and Clotho and Atropos."

She ran. A momentary fear passed the first time she leapt from one rooftop and landed on another, but not enough to ward away her concern. "Hey wait," said one of the girls who had landed, but Millie could not stop for them, not even to thank them for saving her. They might be hurt, they might need help...

The campsite was not difficult to find again. When she landed, she realized that Lachesis had followed her, although the fear that had emanated from her subsided into something dull, stagnant, and bland, no real emotion at all, a feeling that panged Millie's stomach as she regarded the wreckage of the campsite. She found Clotho first, in hideous condition, and the sight knocked her on her knees, and she stifled the sound she made with her hands.

"Heya girl, don't run off like that." The one with the ponytail landed beside her. "Let's uh, let's introduce ourselves yeah? Good idea. I'm Riley, that's my gal pal Val lagging in the back with the others."

Millie crawled through the blood until she came to Atropos in similar condition. She could not look for long, and why did neither of them—Lachesis or Riley—why did neither of them feel anything? It was the same dullness in them both. No, there was a little more under Riley's surface, Millie sensed it as Riley brushed past, gesticulating and talking, but it was so buried, and so diminished, she could not even define its character.

Even the homeless men in the tent had been killed.

A slide of ice extended from the nearest roof. Val and the men slid down it and bustled around her and the gore. The men were all excited. They wanted action. They wanted to go into the city. In fact, some were already breaking off from the group and heading toward the black pit of miasma that had enveloped Washington. They had no organization, neither in body or mind, and the harsh, sharp feelings inside them shoved and jabbed against her even if they themselves did not.

The doctor had fallen by the wreckage of the vehicle. Her labcoat fluttered around her folded knees.

"Well-well, it's uh, it's our old friend," said Riley. "Dr. Si Yu Cho, look how far you've come."

She had seemed so chipper and cheerful, even when Millie saw her last, so pleasant and happy, and even now she wore a mild smile, it did not look as though it were possible she were...

"That's too bad," said Val. "It appears it's a place of death after all?"

Riley was quick to respond. "But look at this, look everywhere, they're burning everything, it's working, it's working Val—there's a movement, a revolution, shit, it's gonna happen. And if we just killed Clownmuffle—"

"Ahhhhh, don't be an idiot. She's alive, that was a fake or a trick. You know that, yes?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, I know, but still, but still."

The men had mostly separated from them by now. They were wandering deeper into the darkness. A few called for Riley and Val to join them.

"Be right there," said Riley. She knelt beside Millie. "Hey, you're uh, you're the one who can get us inside, right? Think you could, yanno..." She held out her Soul Gem.

A bizarre, frightful impulse seized Millie to take the gem and smash it into a million pieces on the ground. God! What a revolting feeling. How could she think something like that, and why? Her skin became clammy and slick and she took Riley's Soul Gem and enchanted it the way she had all the others, but quickly.

"Thanks-a-million. Val's too?"

"Ohhhhh, I dunno? It's a bad idea for me to go in there. DuPage is waiting for me, after all."

"Come on Val you've come all this way."

Millie clamped her hands over her head to force out their voices but their feelings remained. She could sense them without hearing, or seeing, or touching. Liquid blandness, stirred by certain whims. If anything existed in these people, it was buried, deep, she could discern it more clearly now that the men, who carried with them a clear and giddy bloodthirstiness, an excitement, a sense of hate, she could discern it now that the men had left and it was her, Lachesis, Riley, and Val alone in this little whorl of corpses. Languid, loose, ready to flow whichever way—in Riley, somewhere, a sense of... hope? Maybe. Maybe she could sense hope, but it was so wrapped up in devil-may-care as to have become senseless. A "let us see how it goes." And Val was even more buried, what came from her came from the bottom of a deep well. Who were these people? How did they get like this?

The doctor, the doctor. It was so irrevocably sad. Millie had only just met her yet it felt like she was someone of immense importance to her. Under all her memories, she felt some kind of connection. She could no longer maintain herself. It was too much. She broke down and sobbed.

She sobbed a long time. Her knees ached, pressed against the concrete. Nobody spoke, and she could not see to tell if they were looking at her. She crawled over to the doctor's corpse. She fell over it and hugged it and held its head. All she could wonder was: Why? Why was this world like this? Had it always been? She remembered a world much better, suddenly everything had changed...

A pair of arms wrapped around her and pulled her into an embrace. "Hey... I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

No. She was not. It did not seem as though she would ever be alright again, and yet she knew she had to continue living. Who held her? She smelled sweet. It was Val.

"Hey, hey," Val said. "I'm sorry. The doctor was a good person. I'm sorry."

Riley was no longer among them. She must have left with the last of the men. Lachesis sat to the side, senseless.

"I cannot," Millie tried to say, "cannot, cannot..."

"I know. I know. It's hard. It's really, really hard?"

Val must want... that's right. Millie still needed to enchant her Soul Gem. She wanted to rejoin her friends. She could feel that, right. It was the thing deep at the base of Val's well, the little dark thing that was so hard to grasp. Only now, alone, in this canopy of quiet, so close, could she reach deep enough to grace it with her fingertips. Loneliness.

"You have to let all that go," said Val. "That's the first thing anyone learns. You have to let it all go, so there's nothing that can hurt you anymore."

Like Val had, and Riley. Like all these unfeeling people had. They turned themselves into liquid, so that no matter what knives plunged into them, they were never hurt. The perfect midpoint between hate and love, non-negative, non-positive: nothing.

Millie stood. Val, like water, let her. She wiped her eyes hard, wiped them again, wiped them a third time, a fourth, kept rubbing, deeper, harder, until her eyes were raw and when she looked everything was an incoherent blur. Not incoherent enough for her to not understand. She turned toward the dark splotch of Washington.

"I," she said. "Will annihilate that evil."

"HmMMMM? Say something?"

"That evil should not exist. It is against God. It is against this world. It is against these people. It created all of this. It has no worth. I must annihilate it."

How? Did not matter. Did not factor. Not a question. One solution. Inside, deep, to the center. To the pulsing core.

"That thing's pure hate, kiddo?" said Val. "You think you can destroy an emotion?"

"*You* did."

Millie pressed her hand to her Soul Gem and enchanted it with her own protection. She walked toward the boundary between this world and the seething black hole that sucked it into oblivion.

Miss Jefferson, please restrain her. She must not be allowed to enter that miasma. If she dies, every Magical Girl in the miasma will die as well. She has to be protected!

Val said nothing.

Lachesis, stop her now! Dr. Cho would want her protected.

Lachesis looked up, dull. "Doctor... is dead." She made no effort to move.

Miss Jefferson, listen to reason. It would be catastrophic if Millie died. Your friends would be killed and the world destroyed. Do you understand? Miss Jefferson!

"Fine. Fine?" After a heaved sigh, Val's footsteps sounded at Millie's back. A hand reached out and seized Millie's wrist. "Sorry, but it's a no go."

Although Millie's strength had increased tenfold since she became a Magical Girl, she knew by the touch alone that she would never be able to break Val's grip. It was startling, actually, in comparison to her languidness, the strength of her hold. But it was not something that concerned Millie. She stopped walking, only a few steps from the edge of the miasma. She turned to Val.

Millie could feel emotions. Feel them like tangible things. She could feel Val's emptiness. She could feel her own fury and sorrow and hatred and every other whirling awful feeling one could feel, and next to it that emptiness laughed, it was a laughing, laughing emptiness. At that moment she wanted nothing more than to obliterate that emptiness, the same way she wanted to obliterate the emptiness that had swallowed Washington, the emptiness that created the tuxedo woman's melancholy, the emptiness of this world.

So, rather than receive, Millie transmitted. She shoved her hand against Val's chest and prepared to inject everything that raged inside herself. Right past all the nothing, all the empty, into the tiny gleam of vulnerability that remained, and Millie knew it would crush her, because this woman, Val, she could feel it, cushioned by nothing for so long she had become so weak when actually compromised by emotion, it was not something she was in any way prepared to deal with. Hate, sorrow, pain, this woman could not handle—loneliness—no matter how strong her body or her magic was, oh no. She would plunge into despair in a single instant.

But that...

No.

That was such an ugly thing to think. An ugly thing to consider. No. It was not right. Val was only scared. Like them all. She had only protected herself. Only surrounded herself in an armor of nothing...

So, instead of hate and every other ugly emotion, Millie transmitted—Hope.

All the hope Millie could scrounge inside herself. Hope for the future, hope for humanity, hope for accord with God. Hope for the end of this ugliness, hope for the doctor's soul, hope for them all.

"I'm sorry, Val."

Val let go. She dropped to her knees. Her face contorted and she grasped at her shoulders. She looked much the way Millie had envisioned her looking once swollen with hate. Hate, hope, love, ugly and beautiful, it was as if it were the same thing to her—as if there were no difference.

But that was silly. Of course there was a difference.

Millie knelt beside Val and hugged her. "It's okay," she whispered, as Val had done for her not long before. "It's okay, it's okay."

"I, I, what is, how, I, I...?"

"It's okay." Millie stroked her hair. "It's okay, this is a good feeling, I promise. I promise." Her own heart calmed. The tempest inside it dispersed, all that hate and sadness, the waters became calm.

Hate was a fantastic emotion to destroy something. Even if that something was hate itself. Hate could reduce a city to rubble, it could wipe away an entire race of people. It could overthrow a government, an economic system, an institution, a religion. It could even, she thought, overthrow God, if it were strong enough.

The hate in this world had become strong indeed.

But Millie smiled as she whispered soft words into Val's ear. She had withstood it. It had seized her but she broke free. How had she done it? For a moment she had wanted nothing more than to kill, to kill anyone, to kill Val who did nothing wrong. But it was like there was a voice inside of her, some innate part of her composition, either in her body or her memories, that pulled her back. Was it God, working through her? She had knowledge of God, though, and as much as she wanted to attribute it to Her, she knew it was not so. It had been herself—

Or those who had created her.

There was no Headmistress, was there? No private school.

Hate could destroy, but there was another way... She believed that. Believing that was the essence of hope.

She stood. Val remained on her knees. She turned toward the miasma. Between her legs rushed Kyubey:

I don't understand. Miss Jefferson, you are more than capable of restraining this girl. Why aren't you? Miss Jefferson, the fate of everything hangs in the balance!

"I must go, Kyubey," said Millie. "I can feel it, I have been able to feel it all this time. None of the others understand or know. They can destroy, but that's all. There's another way..."

There is no other way, said Kyubey. Nothing matters except logistics. There are currently close to fifty Magical Girls inside the miasma, and many more on the way. Once enough arrive, it's feasible that they will have enough combined power to destroy the archon—

"There's more at play here than power and numbers."

That is completely illogical! Even if the entire city is burned to the ground, even if everyone inside the city dies, it doesn't matter. As long as the archon and Miss Luce are destroyed, everything can be rebuilt. What are you even trying to accomplish, Millie?

"I want to... save them. Them. I want to plant a little seed. I want it to grow up right."

Unfathomable, completely unfathomable. Miss Jefferson, please get up! You must understand how illogical this is!

Indeed, Val rose. Her arms hung in front of her and her head swayed with her body until she rose to her full height.

"I understand."

This is absurd.

"Millie, I'm going with you?"

Hope is an illogical emotion. It causes creatures to act irrationally under the mistaken belief that the outcome will be beneficial, even when such an outcome is extremely unlikely, as it is now. Your hope is actually endangering your species, don't you realize that? This unaccountable optimism is adding unneeded risk, for no tangible reward! Why are you concerned with how this planet is rebuilt? I can ensure that everything returns to how it was before.

"Ahhhhh, that's what you don't get, Kyubey," said Val, as she proffered her Soul Gem to Millie. "The way you like this world to be, and the way we like this world to be, not quite the same? Not quite at all... That was the Empress's dream. I remember now: She wanted to free us from *you*."

And you'd risk the annihilation of your species for that?

Val shrugged. "I've got hope."

Millie didn't understand quite half of what Val had said. But even if the words made no sense, the feelings did. This world could be a better world. A better world for everyone. That was the hope they shared, the hope Millie had transmitted to her—the hope that had been buried deep inside her long ago. It wasn't Millie's hope anymore, Val had made it her own...

"Are you ready, Val?"

Val nodded. Kyubey continued to protest, but they ignored him now. Millie took a final glance at the doctor. Lachesis sat by her, stroked her hair. Thank you, Lachesis.

Thank you, Dr. Cho.

"Time for a chat I guess, Yasmin," Val whispered under her breath.

Together, they entered the miasma.

Hate

"You're a self-centered, arrogant jerk who looks down on lower class people I hope you know that. It is my greatest wish that one day it catches up to you."

—Anonymous

Eventually the Witch quit rubbing the rot in her brain and looked up. She no longer sat amid the press room wreckage, but on a flat stone in a moonlit field, which fanned toward the Capitol and its fires.

Three men passed. Sharp-dressed in suits and suede, they cocked their heads among one another. One caught sight of the Witch and did a double-take.

"It's her!"

They crowded around her. From a frontal view, she recognized them, although they hadn't worn clothes before: Cook's men. She blinked, the field faded, she had never left the press room. A tide of people climbed over crushed chairs and past hewn walls toward the Capitol. But when she rubbed her eyes the previous image of the field transposed on this image, it made her ill.

Alerted by the first three, others swarmed her. Someone seized her wrists, another shoved her, a few tried to claw her away. A feeble attempt to hoist her onto shoulders failed and her collapse caused a domino reaction among the crowd.

"Alright, alright," she muttered beneath the noise. "Alright, alright." She didn't know what was alright, but it was the easiest thing to say.

"Hey come on, you're mucking it all up, let the lady speak," said one of Cook's men, perfect image of strapping young professional save for a glittering earring set in one lobe. "I happen to be an acquaintance of hers, all of you stand down."

Two more of Cook's apostles appeared, followed by a staggered further three, and combined in their many-hued suits they managed to form a protective barrier. "Let her speak, let her speak."

She had nothing to say. Everything inside had become swollen. She had already spoken, on the television. "Alright, alright." Alright, okay, equilibrium, evenness, peace.

They took it as a call for silence and despite their numbers, despite their rabidity, despite many not even caring to hear and shoving through the crowd toward the Capitol, an eerie

quietude stuck her on the head. She swayed, her knees buckled, everything became heavy. Two men supported her.

"They hurt her," said the earring guy. "They've wounded her, she's hurt!"

Just leave her alone. Please. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to be alone, forever. After all her dreams: The irony shivved into her gut.

"Alright, alright."

"She's not hurt, she's not hurt at all idiot."

"I don't see any blood."

"It's magic, they used some kinda, magic spell on her. Who did it, the cat? Schrodinger? We'll tear them up, won't we?"

The fragile silence shattered and everyone went nuts again, shouting, calling out, humans emerged to jockey for the Witch's ceded role of leader. A loud enough voice howled: "JUSTICE!" or something like it, and the tides followed that voice toward the Capitol.

In the commotion she got separated from Cook's friends, but new hands seized her by the shoulders and guided her along the twisting friction of so many bodies. A door kicked open and the hands pulled her inside, set her on a chair. A face cut into view: Riley, ponytail swishing. "Heya, you did great. Better than I coulda ever done, damn. You take it easy now, we'll uh, we'll finish it." She winked, pointed finger-guns at her, and sidestepped back out the door to melt into the mob.

Alright, alright.

A dark room. She sat in the first of a long row of seats. Additional terraced rows descended to a semicircular stage at the bottom, where more people gathered. It looked like a theater. Was there a theater like this so close to the Capitol? Or another trick of the miasma. Why care. If only these seats didn't have armrests, she could stretch out and sleep.

Below, again and again, people climbed onto the stage, which was covered in thick smoke. Again and again they immediately fell back into the waiting arms of the crowd. It didn't look like force compelled them, more like they spread their arms and trust fell backward. But it clearly annoyed them, they were desperate to get on the stage, they tried all parts of it, some even attempted the stairs.

Among them, or more accurately near them, were Berwyn and Darien. A weird moment of happiness struck her that she had no idea what to do with, she had mentally labelled them both dead the moment they gallivanted after Clownmuffle, but Berwyn seemed totally fine and Darien, although unconsciously resting her head on Berwyn's shoulder, breathed. Although her good feeling faded fast, it generated enough residual energy for the Witch to haul herself from her seat and half-fumble, half-drag herself to them.

"You made it."

Berwyn nodded. "Indeed. Somehow."

"What happened? Clownmuffle, is she...?"

"Right there." Berwyn cocked a thumb toward the stage while administering a syringe to Darien's neck. "That demon truly cannot be defeated, I did warn you. She simply imagines a reality in which she does not lose, and that reality subsequently becomes ours. It must be her power, aye? I've heard nobody, not even her, knows her wish. I can see certain wishes that might lead to such an outcome..."

She draped Darien as best she could into a seat. The Witch examined the stage, but saw only smoke. "Then how'd you live?"

"Begged. Aye, quite simply begged. For my life, for hers." She tapped Darien's cheek. "A final and desperate gambit, yet somehow it had an effect. Our clown's been a different beast ever since. There, there—Pepper..."

Darien stirred, moodily, and Berwyn forgot the Witch to attend to her. So the Witch moved on, into the open area in front of the stage. She swayed with each step, numb-armed, and did not feel much need to advance. Yet something stirred her, this sloshing inside, and she kept thinking: Alright, alright. This is it, alright. One final note of closure, then I can die in peace, alright.

Pushing aside the people, who recognized her and shunted away in deference, she climbed onto the stage. A whip of her wand waved a beam of light that dispersed the immediate wall of smoke, so that she carved a foothold for herself on the tough, school auditorium-style planking.

"Hey." Her voice deadened in the fog. But by holding out her wand, she could create a path. Several humans made tentative attempts to follow, but she held a hand for them to wait. "Magical threat... let a witch handle it." That's right. No need for anyone else to get hurt. Fine sentiment, eh? A nice little hypocrisy, her the humanitarian, her who called for riots on nationwide news. Eh, heheh. She actually laughed, low and sonorous, elongated by the miasma, an echo that resounded back at her: Heheh, ha. Ahaha. Ehe.

A wisp of fog cleared and Clownmuffle sat before her, crosslegged, hands twisted as some cheap parodic Buddha. Nothing had tainted her outfit, but she wore an unexpectedly pensive expression, eyes sunken and staring, not at the Witch dead ahead, but into nowhere.

"Hey."

Clownmuffle's pupils tilted. "You're..."

"That's right. Me again."

They stared in silence. Here she was, the final confrontation. Now...?

"I'm a good person," said Clownmuffle.

Such a bizarre comment prompted only a harsh, mocking laugh. "No, no you're not. What? What the hell?"

"That's always what I've been, you understand. A good person. Yes. A true Magical Girl. I adhered to certain standards." She lowered her face and rubbed her forehead. "A good person."

The Witch realized. Somehow, Berwyn had actually beaten Clownmuffle. Just by begging, so simple, it was surprising nobody begged before, well she usually fucked them up too fast. Bit by bit, Clownmuffle had made concessions to herself, concessions necessary to survive, necessary to maintain her sanity. She accepted no authority over herself save herself. That's right, that's who she was, she rejected everything except herself, and so she had always chosen herself over everything else. So she stooped to that need, bit by bit, to heal herself, to accomplish her goals: for survival.

It was like what Gatineau said. At the end of that day underground, Clownmuffle had simply abandoned the part of herself that couldn't bear that sort of torture. Just as she abandoned all her morals and statutes, one by one, to reach this point. The willow that bent to not break.

And it had taken only one moment. One moment of clarity for her to realize just how low to the ground she had twisted, and in that moment she snapped back with all pent-up tension unleashed.

How'd the Witch know this? Well, one might call it empathy.

"Ahaha. Ahaheh. Heheh. Ha. Clownmuffle, oh Clownmuffle, oh Clownmuffle, I guess that's right, there would only ever be one way for you to die, that's if you killed yourself, isn't that right? Isn't it? There must be so many people who'd wish for that, immortality save by suicide. Damn, damn, ha, ahaheh...!"

That's a great ending. Yeah, let's go out that way. Yeah...

Let's die.

She could not die. Some final string wound tight around her neck, even as every other mooring to this world vanished down the gullet of a great black hole. And with a wry smile she said, without thinking:

"You know... we could always say we did what was necessary. Right Clownmuffle? We did what was necessary to survive. Maybe that means, to survive, we can ignore this too. Even this. Say fuck you to them all, right? All those ideals, like man. That's just *society*, yo. Those were never ours to begin with, society imprinted them on us. Don't murder? Oh man. Like, wasn't that the whole point? We wanted to be outside society, in our own special ways. And if that means society treats us like zeroes, like dirt girls, then maybe we should treat it the same way. Destroy it completely, burn it until it's only you and me left. Then we can finally be what we truly want, without anything to tell us otherwise. Trial by combat. What's worth more, you or me or society? Winner takes all... That's why you guys are here, right?" She confronted the crowd. "You came to this city for the same damn reason. Who is worth more,

you or this moronic government? If you can burn it down, well I guess that means you win. Anyone still standing at the end, they were right all along, yeah?"

The crowd reacted at several points during her spiel. At the edge of the stage, several people shunted aside as Berwyn forced herself through and tried to climb up. "What are saying? Have you truly lost your senses, you damn girl? Don't rile her, whatever you say don't say *that!*"

Berwyn got a leg onto the stage only for the stage to open up and bite her leg off. She tumbled into the arms of the humans, some of whom shouted for first aid. Completely unconcerned, Berwyn slid a syringe into the bleeding stump and began to regenerate.

"Whaddya say, Clownie my girl? Kill them all or die—"

Mid-sentence she realized even this was stupid and drove her fingers into the soft flesh of her own throat. Her flesh, she found, was already coming apart, soft and squishy like a half-rotten corpse, which was, literally speaking, what she was. One momentous yank, that was all it took, and *pop* off came her head. She spiked it onto the ground and while it tried to speak on its own to finish the sentence she slammed her boot against it, again and again, until the bone of her skull cracked and broke apart. The brain mushed underneath.

Her body slumped. Sludge spurted from her neck, once, twice, tapering, a trickle, nothing. Her body convulsed and went still.

Her hat, which had gone flying when she pulled off her head, settled and floated on the tar.

"I," Clownmuffle said. "I'm..."

While the Witch's head did not exist, other observers did. To those among them possessing a magical bent, namely Berwyn, it became clear that a change had occurred. Clownmuffle's typically white opal gem, embedded in the band of her top hat, had become a ghastly lavender.

"I'm..."

"Don't listen to her," Berwyn said. "She's lost it. There's no need—no need—for any of this to continue. No need at all, aye?"

"If we all storm at once," said a human.

"No, we mustn't provoke her. She is extremely dangerous."

"Who the hell says 'mustn't!'"

"I..." said Clownmuffle.

The murmur went silent.

"I should be done now."

The stage split apart, like a jaw with two rows of jagged teeth, and swallowed everything on it. A single grassy hill took its place. The Capitol loomed far in the distance and flames flickered from its dome.

Atop the hill stood two guillotines, side by side. The humans and Berwyn looked around, the theater had vanished, the seats disappeared, Darien had fallen onto her side churning and moaning now more from withdrawal than injury and the wind rustled their coats and hair. One guillotine blade had already fallen, the Witch's head now cradled in a basket, her slumped body on its knees behind it. The other hung suspended above Clownmuffle, in a similar position but possessed still of all component parts.

Ah, it was ending now. Finally. And Clownmuffle would come with the Witch after all, to wherever they deserved to go. The sludge had left her and she now felt withered, empty. Nothing left, nothing at all.

Nothing left but a tiny bead, a little marble of flesh in the pit of her vacancy, which started to roll down the slope her slumped body made, roll and roll and roll until it rolled out her neck and plopped into the grass.

That bead was her friend, Stephanie Vo, Hemet, who Clownmuffle killed and the Witch erased. Gone now.

The decapitated body of the Witch slid its hand across the grass and grabbed the palm of the girl beside her, Clownmuffle. They had almost become friends before, in that white world with the branches. Clownmuffle didn't need her, though, and maybe she still didn't need her, but this time, at least, they would die before they had the chance to betray one another.

Clownmuffle's hand, at first balled into a fist, opened. It wrapped around the Witch's hand and held tight.

It's been a fun ride, Clownmuffle, it was fun to hate you, it hurt to need you. This is the best end for us both. And as long as we both accept it, it isn't even sad. Nobody watching is raising a voice in protest. Not Berwyn, she understands. She's still in the world, she knows it's okay for me to die if you die too. Steph can't stop me, and nobody else would. So if I won't stop me, and you won't, then...

"I'm sorry," Clownmuffle said, although her inflection was dull, already dead, and it was impossible to know if she said it to the Witch, said it to the watchers, said it to herself, perhaps said it to the little bead of some ghost she kept inside her gut.

Clownmuffle's guillotine fell.

A man scrambled over the crest of a nearby hill, climbed onto a stone, and shouted: "THEY FOUND THE CAT. THEY FOUND THE CAT. THEY FOUND THE CAT!"

"Typical of egomaniacs, you take a good story meant for everyone and make it about YOU.
Going on about YOUR depression, how it hauled YOU out of YOUR dark place."

—Anonymous

The guillotine cleaved Clownmuffle's head clean at the neck.

Her head hit the ground, bounced up, and exploded.

Out of the rain of streamers and confetti a fully-formed Clownmuffle emerged, caught her top hat before it swirled too far away, and bowed stately stapler-style until her brow scraped the grass. An audience cheered, although it wasn't the audience gathered, or any audience visible. She still clutched the Witch's hand but the Witch had remained headless, a body bobbing while straw spewed out its neck. This would not do, so Clownmuffle swiped the witch hat off the ground and produced from it a jack-o-lantern that she promptly affixed to the stump instead. A clap and a squiggle of a secretly-produced wand sent a spasmodic shiver down the Witch's body and her limpness transformed into a coatrack kind of hanging, impressive only as Clownmuffle pinwheeled away from her to let her stand on her own scarecrow legs.

"My lovely assistant, Pumpkinhead," she offered by way of explanation, even though half the human audience had already broken from the whole, toward the distant stick figure proclaiming the cat's seizure. Others, torn between two shows, slowed in their escape, turning, twisting, watching both ways, and along this breadcrumb trail of heads Clownmuffle bounced, a simple coal-black shoe pressed against each head in turn while Pumpkinhead followed by compulsion alone.

The not-doctor in the mishmash, white cloak and scandalous underneath, cried in protest a Shakespearean sort of oath, one quite endearing so that Clownmuffle in mid-flip between two stepping stones sent from her sleeve a single dove which transformed into a white rose as soon as it reached its intended recipient. But the not-doctor batted it to petals, hoisted her somnolent companion onto her back, and followed as fast as she could.

Meanwhile, Pumpkinhead required the return of her lovely hat, but Clownmuffle realized said hat had lost its little bend, the tip had straightened entirely, so that its aesthetic became less witch and more Puritan. Witch-hunter if one would, but it was nothing a deft fold couldn't solve, followed by a frisbee throw to land it exactly atop the grinning gourd.

This fun Walpurgisnacht bounced upon the final head and down a winding slide around Mount Brocken into a pit of multicolored balls. By now Clownmuffle could feel her insides rotting, the ribs breaking into ash, the intestines liquefying, but she maintained the winning smile of the entertainer. After all, Pumpkinhead could still smile, even though she had to cut off her head to do it.

The ball pit overwhelmed and they sank until they reached the bottom and fell down a cylinder on the sides of which were painted the kinds of stars you paint on a baby's bedroom wall. Then this sky dispersed and they descended in a flurry of acrobatic pirouettes toward the pitch black Capitol and the million lights of torches held by the tide of humanity forming a singular whirlpool around it. The ant bodies, all merged into one big mass, broke apart and became distinct figures by the time they landed, by the time that even a scratch would shine the light right through Clownmuffle.

Turgid reflecting pool water splashed around her ankles. Pumpkinhead dropped beside her, but they must have escaped the not-doctor. There rose before them in all its Greco-Roman glory the Capitol, blazing fortress the walls scaled by interminable humanity.

She had been here before. It was different now, but she had been here before. Now everyone ran the same direction as her, but she remembered a bit of splattered gore before the doorway, a pair of legs severed at the ankles and a splotch of what remained.

Her eyeball rolled out, she caught it and it was a piece of coal.

She plugged it back in and continued. It came apart as powder in her socket but she continued, toward the activity in front of the Capitol, where two flights of stairs extended to its entrance. Despite the masses, though, the mezzanine at this entrance was bare except a single figure, slumped in the shoulders and hands in the pockets, larger than life projected so that she seemed to swell to the size of the whole dome, gnarled hair hanging and hangdog eyes lazy. She was... who was she. She held a briefcase. Who did Clownmuffle once know.

"Everyone," this woman said, "please return home. It's under control. President DuPage has a bad cold... nonetheless the duties of state will be done. Please return home..." She sounded like she might fall asleep, or already had.

Gatineau. That was her name, yes. Gatineau.

Clownmuffle momentarily lost her purpose, stalled by this flourish of memory, and while the bodies rushed around her she placed a palm to her forehead and tried to remember her reason for still living before she instead died.

Then a fierce cry peeled in this soundless sphere and her attention oriented through the tangled raw space columns to a post. About half the height of the Capitol mezzanine. It stood at a lazy angle, pulled by countless cords, which the people tugged in a semblance of unison to shift it toward an upright position.

At its apex, bound, was her cat. They had shredded her. Punctures dribbled blood all over, one eyelid swollen shut, one cat ear severed and the other split down the middle. They cut up her uniform, loosened some bows and removed others, undid the parts that buttoned, one shoulder bare. A noxious dribble, not solely blood, down her chin.

Using bobbing heads as platforms, Clownmuffle closed the gap, great long bounds while from one sleeve she drew her baton and the other a deck of cards. Fifty-two fired at precise angles to sever the strings hoisting the post and yet there were somehow more strings, an

unfathomable number of strings, as though every human present in this multitudinous tide held one.

A hand, connected to the body of the head she balanced upon, seized her ankle. A voice cried, "Schrodinger," and the attention of several turned toward her and Pumpkinhead.

She swung her baton at the man who held her, visualized a world in which he lost his dear head and had to wear a pumpkin instead. A world where all these heads became pumpkins and they all followed her japing and gamboling with perpetual grins and a mischievous bent. Her baton stopped at contact with the man's skin, the millimeter distance before it caved the side of his skull. Her neck tautened and the visualized future of his head dispersing in gore rattled her dusty interior. She became instantly ashen all over, her baton clanged amid the tumult. A gunshot rang out and she allowed it to pierce her gut in a puff of smoke, but when a second shot came she caught the bullet in her teeth, chewed it like gum, and spat what remained alongside an arc of fruit punch posing as blood.

A choke caught in her throat and her chest heaved, a jolted staggered half-balanced sway atop the same head, a sway that just so happened to evade two or three more bullets fired from the crowd, and with a final momentous hiccup she forced from her lips and into her hand a parasol, which one simple click opened and propelled her skyward. Up, up, through this dead dank air, to the post erected by the crowd, to her battered kitten. She discarded the parasol and clutched the post just below her cat's bound feet, and drew a single Ace of Hearts to free her. Vomit spittle dripped upon her top hat and more shots rang out. Just beyond, the Capitol's mezzanine stretched and the woman with the briefcase watched, bored.

Someone lit a flame at the base of the post. A large amount of flammable material, papers and documents, had gathered there, and it went up instantly. The fires traveled in a spiral around the post, higher, higher, while Clownmuffle remained rooted looking at the cat and holding the card to the ropes.

It was not her cat.

That statement seemed impossible. It clearly looked like her cat. Identical to her cat. Minus, of course, all the abuse, but Clownmuffle had often imagined what her cat would look like abused, and it looked much like this. Suffering carved into every inch of visible flesh, the invisible inferred, like the space between the lines of a book. Pain and hopelessness rendered exquisitely—but it was not her cat.

"I..." The cat's head lolled. Its voice came out a raspy whisper. "I w-wish... to forget, that... f-forget that I..."

Clownmuffle peeled back and landed on the tip of Pumpkinhead's broomstick as the flames reached the top of the post and engulfed the "cat."

She burned sensationally. At first. Her screams disintegrated faster than she did, into the sound of a cat run over but still breathing in the road outside your house at night, a long and sorrowful yooooowl you might think was a werewolf if you were eight and Charlie Vizcarra and up later than you should have been. But her image crumpled, became aliased and then

devolved into JPEG artifacts, descending from 1080 to 144p over the course of a few seconds.

Sand cascaded from her body. The image quality reduced past visibility. The crowd made noises too indeterminate to be called a cheer.

On the mezzanine, the woman shuffled some papers in her briefcase. Her head tilted and she exhaled for a long time. "Well. There you go. You've roasted her, all happy now? It's time to settle down. Go back home." Her voice blared as though from a megaphone, and the crowd murmured in response. "The DuPage administration pledges to listen to your complaints..."

Across the face of the Capitol, upon its dome, gigantic screens appeared. They presented the final moments of the "cat," from the moment Clownmuffle stepped away until nothing remained but dust. The moment repeated on a loop, projected at least ten times.

Clownmuffle and Pumpkinhead drifted on the broomstick. Funny. For a moment Clownmuffle thought she had a reason to persist. Even if she had wasted every worthwhile element of her own self, there was still another person, external to her, for which she could bother to live. Pumpkinhead spoke, without speaking: *Alright, can we die now?* And Clownmuffle had to wonder why they hadn't already, why the cat was even important. Because she had a particular aesthetic? She scratched her head and hair came out between her fingers.

Please. Please. I just want to die, said smiling Pumpkinhead. *I can't unless you do too. You're the only thing I have left. Please. Please. I know dying is super fucking hard for you, but please.*

Aesthetic. It mattered. Fashion, uniforms. They expressed the soul. Souls mattered. Because souls mattered, their expression mattered. She tried to tell herself this, but even these words sounded hollow. She knew she had said them before with utmost conviction. With conviction in nothing else, even. Where did all her paragraphs go? On MagNet. Where did they go, she wrote them, didn't she? She had the drive and energy to write them, where did that go? She only needed one thing. One thing to hold onto, anything, give her one thing, one excuse not to die, one thing to have left.

The Gatineau with the briefcase might know. She piloted the broomstick with her feet as she careened past the ashes of the not-cat onto the mezzanine. Twenty-seven previously unseen Magical Girls formed to bar her way but a careless half-flick from Gatineau shuffled them aside. The mezzanine, contrary to initial observation, did not possess Gatineau alone, but an entire army of Magical Girls, and not an army like that sham in Chicago, where everyone wore the same drab costume, here a cornucopia of individualistic spirit bloomed on speckled petals for her consumption, girls in all manner of garb, girls she had seen on MagNet, girls she had not, girls beautiful, girls hideous, girls sprightly and girls depressive, girls of every texture and flavor, arranged in patterns with Gatineau at their center. For a moment spirit revived within Clownmuffle, a thought and feeling toward a previous bent, the twitch of her fingers possessed and a rapid-fire summation of worth on a scale from one to ten, but only a moment. None of these girls were real, she understood. They were the same as the not-cat roasted on the spit, not the same as the not-doctor.

"Joliet," said Gatineau. "Where's she?"

"Joliet..."

"The cat. Real one. Don't tell me you fell for it too, I figured a connoisseur like you could spot the difference."

"She's."

"You don't know. Great. Well, knowing her, she ran and hid the first spot of trouble. With her power she can keep herself safe. What about the people, you think that's enough to pacify them?" Checking her cellphone, she cast a nonchalant glance over the mob below. "I wonder if they'll notice if the cat's back next week like nothing changed. Maybe we should play it safe. I'm sure she can use her power to make her face look different, right? You know anything about that?"

Clownmuffle seized Gatineau by the lapels of her well-designed but horribly kempt jacket and forced their faces together. "Give me a reason to live. ANY."

"Eh?" The phone slipped back into a pocket. Gatineau's eyes flitted to Clownmuffle's gem. "Ah." But her momentary understanding became confusion again. "How? You're supercharged with energy, there's no way you should be that bad."

A tiny wisp of a creature butted her way through the myriad of exotic birds and waved hands in frantic gesticulation. Her costume was so atrocious Clownmuffle loved it and a spark of real life existed in her face. "Charlie, Clownmuffle, whatever you wanna be called, you know what it is, you know what makes it hurt inside—"

"Will you shut the fuck up already Nagisa?" Gatineau placed a hand on her head and shoved her back. A single thumb angled over her shoulder indicated a group of fifty-six girls each training a gun on a single Soul Gem pinned to the Capitol doors. "I'm being nice enough just letting you hang around, so come on." She checked her phone again, tilted her head and reexamined the mob, shrugged. "I think it worked, it was the cat they wanted, the cat they got, they're lost, they'll break up soon. Gimme your gem Clownmuffle, I'll make you feel better."

"Your magic won't do anything," said Nagisa, although in a whisper, like saying it quieter would mean she wasn't breaking whatever rules kept that Soul Gem hostage to the fifty-six. "When the problem is inside, no amount of energy will save her..."

"Go eat some fucking cheese already, Clownmuffle what the hell is your issue, did the cat really die somewhere and you're sad about it? You're not even a human being, the hell happened?"

"One thing," said Clownmuffle. "One thing is all I need."

Gatineau clearly wanted out. She kept glancing at the crowd below, kept checking her phone. "Fashion," she said after a moment's thought. "Check out Nagisa here, look at this costume,

it's something literally only you could like. At least give it an outta ten for me, you'll feel better I'm sure. What the fuck is with the pumpkin?"

She lashed her hand out and knocked the pumpkin head off Pumpkinhead. It hit the ground, splat, and Pumpkinhead fell off her broom and crawled around for it.

"Perfect, the cat's death is trending everywhere." Gatineau held the phone up for Nagisa to see. "Catharsis without hope, that's exactly what we need. The symbol dies, the regime lives on, the people feel at peace like they resolved something even if they resolved jack fucking dick. Then they can convince themselves to die."

"Please," said Nagisa.

"Please what? That's exactly what your shitty God does, right?"

Nagisa said nothing.

Gatineau snapped her fingers and turned again to Clownmuffle. "Is that what this is about? You feel bad about what we're doing? What you've done? Is that the thing?"

Clownmuffle said nothing.

"Oh come on Clownmuffle. This is what you want too, don't delude yourself. You've hated these people, this world a lot longer than I have. Or is 'hate' the wrong word? Apathy probably sums it better. You haven't given a damn about these people in years. Maybe your whole life. What was your wish again?"

Clownmuffle said nothing.

"Ooh, Nagisa, I bet you know what her wish was, right? Whole omniscient God thing, or at least her secretary, you must keep better books than me. What'd Clownmuffle wish for? Tell me and I'll give you a treat..."

Nagisa said nothing.

"How about 'Tell me and I won't blast Sayaka's Soul Gem to ten million smithereens?'"

A hesitant pause, a glance toward the hostage Soul Gem, and Nagisa sighed. "I'm sorry, Clownmuffle... Trust me, I don't wanna infringe your privacy, but—"

"I wished," said Clownmuffle. "I wished..." She leaned back against the mezzanine railing. Pumpkinhead found her pumpkin head and placed it back on her neck, although it was not quite shaped the same as before.

She wished... Well, she remembered it instantly. Or it was better to say, she never actually forgot. There was nothing left inside her, anyway, except a few little bits. The tides had finally gone back down, and certain things languished, exposed, in the dead light.

"I wished for Cely Sosa to disappear."

"Ooh." Gatineau pursed her lips. "Cely Sosa, I'm sure she deserved it, whoever she was, or maybe she didn't. But there you go, there you go. Don't tell me you're sprouting a conscience out of such a sour seed."

Clownmuffle said nothing.

So.

She had always been garbage. Always, her whole life. That made sense. Yep. If she thought about it, that made a lot of sense.

Gatineau seemed to realize her words did not have their intended effect. Her cocksure attitude softened, she placed a hand on Clownmuffle's shoulder. "Hey. Hey, it's alright. Hey. I'm sorry... Look, let's go inside, take a little break. I'm sure you'll feel fine with a breather. We'll find Joliet, and then you'll have a reason to live, trust me."

"Clownmuffle," said Nagisa. "Please..."

Any reason would work, Clownmuffle did not want to die no matter how garbage she was, above all she wanted to live, but there were certain things with which she could not live. She would trust Gatineau. Trust the concept of her cat Joliet, trust it all.

With a motion for Clownmuffle to follow, Gatineau stepped toward the Capitol doors. She made it only one step, however, because a voice from below called:

"Do not lose this hope you hold."

That voice—

Of all the people she could forget, that one she could not. That voice belonged to the Handmaiden. Now *that* had been a reason, but that reason ended, the Handmaiden died. Or so she had been told, a sudden excitement flared, she turned toward the voice, but it was not the Handmaiden.

It looked more like that tasteless girl from Minneapolis. Yet again only the hated names returned to her. Albino, conservative dress, and walking atop a bridge of ice that spread above upstretched heads. At her back, fiddling with fingers, perfect inverse to the starched collar of the first, a woman nearly nude, bronzed in a swimsuit.

Gatineau spat static and shoved Clownmuffle aside for a better view. "Cook—Cook?!"

"Everyone, please listen to me," said the one who had the Handmaiden's voice. "Do not give up!"

"Cook's here, Cook's here." Gatineau oscillated. "What the hell?"

"Do not allow your hate to mask your hope! Everyone! You did not come to this city to murder a single cat! There is a greater purpose. Everyone!"

"Cook what the hell are you doing here?"

The one in the swimsuit shrugged. "Uhhhhh, because I'm dumb?"

While the albino spouted more words into the crowd, kept repeating "Everyone" in particular, Gatineau swiveled away, strode along the mezzanine, followed by Nagisa and a squad of henchmen not-girls, mumbling to herself, counting on fingers. "Cook. Cook, well, and with all my Centurions exhausted... My Clownmuffle exhausted... Shit, shit, shit." She opened her briefcase and rifled through the pages within. "Damn."

"Everyone! Remember your hope. Remember your hope for a better future! You came here because you are suffering. Do not be distracted so easily. Everyone!"

Everyone didn't seem to know what to make of the albino exhorting them. Most continued to leave, as though they did not even hear her. Understandable. The crowd spanned an enormous distance, and she was a single albino, despite her elevated platform. Gatineau didn't even listen to her, immersed in unseen logistics, and for a moment Clownmuffle thought she might be the only one. Even she wasn't sure why she listened.

"Everyone..."

"Ahhhhh, don't take it personally, Millie?" said the one called Cook. "I think everyone's just tired of talking? You gotta read a mood, really. Go with—well, I'd say 'the flow,' but I'm kinda getting a little predictable with that line? Go with everyone. And right now, I think they want a little action?"

A single tensed foot and Cook launched forward. Fast. Wielding twin spires of cyclonic liquid bursting from the edge of the bridge, from which rained one hundred and seventy-seven spear-sized icicles upon the mezzanine.

Gatineau snapped her fingers the instant before they shattered against her. "I know how to handle her." Instantly her goons shuffled to intercept and nothing but a few glinting fragments bounced against her tailored suit. She turned sharply on a heel and marched toward the Capitol doors. Rather leisurely pace given the situation, even given time to check her phone again.

Her birds of paradise, meanwhile, waged the warfare. Here they formed, movable walls that shifted across the mezzanine, organized immaculately by the weapons they wielded. Barriers of every possible sort emerged. Cook's liquid cyclones crashed against them, shattered ten or twenty, but ultimately dispersed against the sheer volume stacked against her. Undaunted she gallivanted across the air, light as air, above and below the projectile volley. Her skin glistened, even in this darkness, and tendrils formed out of the moisture to skewer anything she could not evade. A graceful tango one way, the other, while further watery worms sprouted and bashed, crashed and roared, sizzled and cracked. Steam rose in some areas and others froze into glacial lumps. Left, right, center, downward, direction lost meaning.

Gatineau motioned for her goons to remove the Soul Gem from the door. They did so, and also opened the door for her, and she passed through.

Some bits of water slipped through the cracks in the defense, every so often a fake girl melted. Clownmuffle, cleaved to the balustrade, had at her either side Pumpkinhead and

Nagisa. Both of them spoke to her, their words indistinct, not solely due to the shrillness of combat, Clownmuffle's interest went elsewhere, she watched this woman Cook who vaguely existed as an entity already storage-binned in some mental attic and wondered where, how, with what nerve... she dared fight...

With nothing on? Seriously? She had seen bad clothes, good clothes, mediocre clothes, the kinds of clothes so indistinct as to be uncategorizable, but *no* clothes... none, a bikini, a frilly sort of skirt, gladiator sandals, hibiscus in the hair.

"Hey, hey!" Nagisa seized and shook her. "Fight, you have to fight!"

You won't, said Pumpkinhead.

The area in front of the Capitol doors accrued such a concentration of faceless but colorful creatures and their shimmer, cutesy, sparkly armaments that only a master magician could slip through their barricade. Cook, uncaring, instead redirected a whirled drill of ice and water into the Capitol's wall. Glass shattered, wood splintered, chunks sprayed everywhere as a noise like a blender drowned everything. The black paste that coated the walls broke only after the walls themselves did, only after a few seconds but before the goon barricade could shift positions, and Cook dropped into the hole. The fight left Clownmuffle's field of vision and she remained against the balustrade, left with nothing, blinking, thinking, trying to think, while onto the mezzanine climbed new people, real people, led first by real girls most of whom she knew, there was Baltimore, there some girls from Philadelphia, then men and women who could only be human, up the stairs or vaulting the balustrade to rage against the barriers which retreated in disarray to more and more defensible positions.

"Everyone! Everyone, we can do it! Together," the albino was screaming from somewhere although Clownmuffle didn't see it. Someone climbing knocked over Pumpkinhead.

Everyone. Together.

Everyone.

Everyone. Please direct your attention to the barrier that our friend Gatineau has erected in front of the Capitol doors. It's actually sixty-three barriers, if you can believe it, and if you would like I can count them individually for you. But for the purposes of our show tonight, that won't be necessary. You can all see this barrier is impenetrable. Look at our friend there, the man with the tattoos on his bald head, assailing only the first of these barriers with a wrench. And that young miss over there, having ripped her skirt to run better, she is even firing a gun at it. Clearly there is no illusion here, these barriers are inviolable.

Now, we could take the route of our friend Cook and burrow through the wall at a completely different point. Several of our more acrobatic friends in the audience have already done so. But this is the Capitol of the United States, a monument of some importance, and it would be a shame to damage it. Well, that's no concern to mine, but what *does* matter is that I show you friends how to walk through these sixty-three barriers as though they do not exist.

Step aside, please. I require complete concentration. Yes, you there, Mister Wrench. You too, with the ripped skirt. Aside, aside. Your full attention. Impatient crowd today, eh? Very well,

I'll quicken the pace. But I do warn you, doing so reduces the chance of my magic being successful. Without certain incantations and precautions, the chances of success drop to only forty-three percent, and failure means I'll be trapped in the barriers and bifurcated. I am perfectly willing to take this risk, but I implore the more fainthearted in the audience to look away. Shield the eyes of the children. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a very dangerous trick.

Flourish. Hand pressed against the first barrier. "Simple. A simple trick. Simply push..."

And she pushed, and her hand went through.

"As long as you have magic in your heart, you can push." She stepped through the barriers, one by one (although many were stacked so close together she only had to step once to clear several). She pretended to struggle on the last barrier, acted as though her foot was caught, but after judging the crowd to be fed up with her antics, pulled through and bowed on the other side. The fake girls looked at her but did not act, apparently without instruction to.

By the time she passed through the doors into the Capitol, Pumpkinhead and Nagisa had already flown through the breach Cook created. "You're really doing it!" said Nagisa.

Why, said Pumpkinhead. *Why won't you give up and die? Why, why? What stupid reason could you possibly have...?*

She didn't have a reason.

Everyone had a reason.

That's what magic was for, right? The magician stood alone on stage. The master, severed from humanity, wholly distinct. But he performed for *everyone*...

She raced forward. The inside of the Capitol was anything, everything, no clear geography or topography, the way Clownmuffle loved it. Gaineau trudged ahead undaunted, assailed by an endless strike of ice and water. Her briefcase swished. Left and right her fake girls—it would be best to conceptualize them not as unique entities but as an extension of Gaineau herself—absorbed impacts and diverted flows. They propelled counterattacks in impenetrable fields, endless quantities, mazes where every route reached the dead end of a speeding bullet. Clownmuffle found the correct routes anyway, while Cook used her own minion, the entire liquid element, to power through.

"You too, Clownmuffle...?" Gaineau did not bother to glance over her shoulder. "Tch. Now that's trouble."

Nonetheless the nonworld rearranged and in front of Gaineau stood immense double doors, set with a proportionally absurd keyhole, something so large a person ought to have been able to fit through it. A semicircular formation of minions buffered Gaineau as she opened her briefcase and tossed another sheet to the floor. From it emerged an identical replica of Gaineau, except instead of a suit she wore something pink and unpleasant, with a staff topped by a heart.

"Open it," the original Gatineau said, and the copy climbed up the face of the door and slid herself into the keyhole.

The body twisted. An inner mechanism unlocked. Cook said something like, "Ahhhhh, I think I get what she's doing?" and the door started opening, opening and opening, opening like the door during an all day marathon of *Little Nemo in Slumberland* when the only time you happen to look up from your toys is the scene where the door opens, again and again you look up and every time you do the same door is opening.

It swung inward. Cook's lateral slicing swimming pool-sized disc of ice cleaved enough barriers to break a hole but Gatineau already stepped into the seething breathing space where dark shadows rose and fell in layers upon one another, rising, falling, rhythmic but not necessarily alive.

Somewhere between ten and twenty such figures, it was unusual for Clownmuffle to fail to count exactly and more concerning even that the exact total existed on so wide a range, but the end of each of these shadow creatures did not necessarily correlate to the beginning of another. And at the apex of their slumbering mound: a small throne of black matter.

Gatineau stopped only a few feet into the room, while what remained of her scattered forces did everything imaginable to prevent the entrance of Clownmuffle and Cook. One arm, with the briefcase, hung leaden at her side. The other flicked out, overly limber, into a perfect salute.

"Madame President. I apologize for this disturbance of your slumber."

Only the heaving, breathing.

"Ahhhhh." Cook skewered a girl who looked like a bird. "Ahhhhh."

"Madame President. A matter of interest has arisen, and I believe I would be derelict in my duties if I did not inform you."

Heaving, breathing.

"Madame President. Lady Cook has arrived."

Two eyes on the throne snapped open.

Ehhhhhhhhhhhh?

"The whole story reeks of apathy."

—Anonymous

Although the physical blackness that encompassed Washington had patched the hole in the Capitol dome Cicero once created, the hole itself remained. And here, now, a second hole broke, on the dome's opposite side, so that an ignorant observer might surmise post facto that a singular beam of destruction passed through one end and out the other.

Cook hurtled upward. Clownmuffle hurtled upward. Hegewisch hurtled upward and hurtling them came the singular concerted force of all this dark energy coagulated howling thick and black across the canvas of night: **LET'S DO IT MOTHERFUCKERS**, albeit elongated to such a feral howl that only by the relatively corporeal **fuck** could the rest be pieced retroactively.

Washington dwindled beneath them. They entered space, endless space, more colorful than the world they left, Denver's world. Denver had a wish. It was in her file, and Denver kept a more complete file on herself than any of the hundreds she stalked, a more complete file than even the Empire demanded of its denizens. In it, scrawled, dreams and catch phrases, segments from youth and age alike, a pre-teen idealism coupled with a morose ancient wisdom. "I wish I could change this world." What an excellent wish. No mention of how to change it, of course. But that was the rub, that probably mattered less, no, she knew exactly what she wished for and why, it was right there in the verbiage: "I wish *I* could..."

And despite her wish, the world didn't change. Did Kyubey warn her ahead of time, a wish like that dwelled in the domain of God alone? Did she care? Did she believe him? Well God, you listening...?

No God here. As they spiraled gravity stripped away, ebb and flow stripped away, all laws resolved to the blankness of the stars. Clownmuffle caught an asteroid, Cook latched her foot within the crater of a miniature moon. A girl from Laredo with thrusters in her feet laced arms around Hegewisch while the vampiric form of DuPage still becoming something comprehensible blotted this space's color fanning wide and broad and encircling them as their descent finally began.

They fell only two feet and landed on the rounded edge of the Capitol dome while antlike crawled everyone else through the holes. **Thank God for you Cook, thank fucking GOD.** Cook's liquid flowed, DuPage's liquid flowed, the human tide with liquid tensile strength flowed, and bouncing bounding circumnavigated the span of the spinning dome, spinning lateral as though the ground turned perpendicular to itself. The Laredo girl exploded in dust and whirling Hegewisch glimpsed someone rising above the crowd, swishing ponytail, hands clenched by her shoulders like she held the straps of a backpack, but she flew instead of walked so Hegewisch surmised she mimed more of a jet prefix.

The jerky, levitating motions rose Kenosha above the rest, gave her a good angle, but she had to maintain at least one clenched hand to persist this illusion of the jetpack, and that limited her firepower to a one-handed finger pistol. Which she jerked back absurdly fast, more like a submachine gun, and littered Hegewisch's more expendable papers to pulp.

Sluggish, flicking her temple for stimulation, Hegewisch paced around the gravitational pull of the dome and ignored those who attacked her. On one side she had the continent's best healers beaming restorative magic into her veins, on the other the continent's best ranged artillery. This fight mattered to someone, not her. She didn't want to be here anymore, she had papers to file, let someone else take charge...

Cook you slutwhore. Cook baby my lovely you came back to me just to get fucked SO HARD, so hard.

Within the masses of blackness the DuPage avatar writhed, wrapped her gaunt arms around herself, clutched her shoulders, quivered.

Come here, you're the only one I have left, I need you Cook, I need you. Great black arms cascaded toward Cook, crashed through her walls of ice, but fumbled thick-fingered as the lithe human form slipped free. **Everything's so fucking boooooooring now. It's so empty, I need you to fire me up, everyone else was such a disappointment. You won't die that easy, will you? Cook, Cook?**

Sixteen witches remained in the miasma, not counting the Witch who appeared on TV and now seemed to be a Pumpkin Head. They served as DuPage's harem, or at least they slept with her, and raging roaring out the Capitol holes they came clawing now awake and rending the flatness at least with their labyrinths. One segment of the world became a circus tent dervish, another a garden of earthly delights, a third the inside of a piano with strings twanging and dicing humans to ribbons. An eight-armed gimp Brahma with zippers up and down its four-faced head crawled along the walls crushing bodies with its steely palms and bulldozed an unwitting Kenosha into the muck. Both arms pinned, only a ponytailed head about to pop off its neck, but with a feat of improvisation Kenosha sucked a big gulp of air in her cheeks and popped her lips as though spitting watermelon seeds, which shot clean through the witch's head.

A whirlwind approached Hegewisch from the east. Who this time? Well: Clownmuffle again.

Hegewisch had long entertained the prospect of fickle Clownmuffle turning on her. In her back pocket she had kept the Handmaiden-Midlothian combo for that moment. But in this bedlam the setup was unmanageable. Her Fakes were shoved every direction, some killed outright just from falling beneath the clattering feet, and she had started to run out of viable lines of defense. Clownmuffle's baton batted them aside no matter who they were. Fake Darien deflected. Fake Kenosha poleaxed. Worthwhile Chicago fighters dwindled; but this was the girl who beat the real Chicagoans anyway.

That meant the other files. Denver's, lackluster at best.

Elder Seattle, full metal medieval, bulky enough to buy time, waved a laser mace but mostly just got in Clownmuffle's way. She had memorized literally every form in her collection, she only needed the correct combination. She had full confidence in that fact.

Fake Seattle came apart in many armored pieces. Clownmuffle had manufactured a purpose but her gem was still in the dumps. That was it—right. That was it, Hegewisch thought as a

bubble of blood from one of her healers intercepted the playing cards and popped a sanguine deluge.

That was it: Hegewisch needed no power but her own.

KILLKILLKILLYOU! Bloody scream of rage split the middle and the Capitol itself came alive, tens of thousands of mouths opening across its surface and gnashing at the legs of everyone gathered. Above, hopping from falling shard of ice to falling shard of ice, Cook maneuvered a small moon from the bogus starscape via tendrils that stemmed from its polar icecaps. It actually looked like a duel between two equivalent powers—DuPage flowed her black body like a malleable ocean surface, waves and wisps, which complemented Cook's powers perfectly. A rather dull, dimwitted visual metaphor, black liquid against crystalline clear, an obvious right versus wrong... Of course, DuPage had the dignity to never couch her atrociousness in any sort of sanctimony. An example to emulate.

But the question of whether DuPage could defeat Cook remained. Cook's cowardice had always been beneficial, because if any Magical Girl in this universe could defeat the archon DuPage, it was her. Even now, clouds of moisture burst around her and rained hellfire droplets in concentrated bursts. Wherever they struck sizzled and melted away, revealing for even a moment a white Capitol beneath. Unlike Cicero, Cook could attack many places—every place—at once. She shattered a developing form with her moon as she severed a circle of DuPage and left it to rot. Pieces peeled back, froze solid, disintegrated.

It became clear, actually, that DuPage was laughably jobbing. The most impressive counterattack she could muster came from her endless voice, **KILLYOUKILLYOU**. The biggest obstacle was everyone on the dome, Cook seemed unwilling to injure them, so to attack a piece of the ground she had to first sweep them aside with a flat wall of ice, something that batted even Hegewisch aside as she bounced between the crowd and lost sight of Clownmuffle. DuPage didn't even seem aware she was giving up far more than Cook gave, if Cook could be said to be giving anything.

Cook made it look easy.

First in St. Louis, on the arch. Then by the bridge: Cook, as Aurora, overcame DuPage easily each time. A naturally bad matchup. The Empress, paranoid, perhaps fostered Cook's development in a way specifically to limit DuPage's capabilities within the Empire; after all, she chose Cook specifically for the mission of her assassination.

Fucking hell. Hegewisch hadn't planned on *this* being a problem. DuPage was essential, even if only asleep—better if only asleep. Forgetting Clownmuffle momentarily, she searched her briefcase for a Cook counter. Lessons from Pokémon said "electricity" and the first electricity user she could remember was Midlothian, not practical for this sort of combat. What about her healer who made blood bubbles, could she do something with other liquid? No? Then what the fuck was the point of this useless bitch? Cook could control it as both ice and vapor, hot or cold. Ice or fire powers would thus be useless too.

Think outside the box idiot, all you need to do is bypass her defenses and the fleshy brown lich in the center is easy prey. She consulted her teleporters, her psychic attackers. Here we go, three of the former and two of the latter, if she unleashed them together, even with their

dinky offenses, they needed only a single good hit—Cook's gem hidden in her hibiscus hairpin...

Clownmuffle came whirlwinding between clamping jaws of Capitol spraying a parabolic arc of white doves. Off guard, Hegewisch swung her briefcase and swatted enough doves out of the sky to avoid being pecked screweyes, although a splatter of birdshit did smack her shoulder.

At which point the Capitol dome detached. At first it wasn't clear why, but Hegewisch realized: Cook had severed it. She had isolated the core of DuPage from the rest of the body that spanned the city. Shit, the dome had made that maneuver easier than it should have been, what the hell was DuPage thinking staging the battle in such a place? (Nothing, she was thinking nothing, duh.) But Hegewisch lacked the luxury to not think. She summoned Denver's friend Calgary, who had conditional null-magic powers. The Fake Calgary swung chains of anti-fantasy that severed both the curdling bits of DuPage and the cards, doves, machine guns, chainsaws that Clownmuffle juggled recklessly along her gallivant. It had more effect than Hegewisch anticipated, Clownmuffle had to dance back in a rare defensive gesture. But it wouldn't work for long, Clownmuffle's physicals without illusions were high enough.

Meanwhile DuPage! After severing the dome, Cook had quickly eaten away more and more of the segmented DuPage that draped it. Although DuPage still screamed **KILLYOU** mixed with **SLUTFUCKBITCHCUNT** and other fun strings, she had been reduced to a skullcap of darkness at the dome's apex. Cook was in no worse shape than heavy breathing.

Hegewisch broke for them and drew the five sheets she previously prepared but before she flung them to the ground a single playing card pierced all five in a row. Fucking—! Fake Calgary died and soon afterward a wrecking ball Clownmuffle bowled through her healing squad. Hegewisch sent the last of her barrier team to intercept.

She had sprinted close enough to hear Cook, despite Cook's languid volume.

"Ahhhhh. Sorry. This'll be good for you too, Yaz."

WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU CALL MEEEEEE?

Icicle spears from every direction pierced DuPage's avatar, which was more or less what remained of her. Black blood splurled.

Everyone cheered. Well, those not locked in combat with the witches. A bleeding Kenosha ran to the fore and howled for Cook to finish it. The albino with whom Cook had arrived waved arms and hopped to try and see above the heads of several tall, handsome men.

"How sad." Cook directed her magic with the aplomb of a maestro but the face of a hangman. More and more of DuPage was eaten away. "You... and me. Could I have done this any time? Even that day four months ago...? I gave up too easily... You're not hard to beat."

BEAT? BEAT? BEAT?

BEATBEATBEATBEATBEATHHKKKKCHHGHNNBNNGHKKKH

The impaled, twisted, hemorrhaging avatar of DuPage standing in a sad puddle of densified hatred began to cough. Her chest hiccupped violently within the remains of her cocktail dress, a heave, her mouth opened, closed, opened wider, eyes bulged, black veins hoisted to the surface of her pallid skin.

She spat something up. It whizzed at Cook fast as a bullet, but Cook sidestepped without change in her disappointed expression. "Well," she said as she pressed her waters further into the territory of DuPage's body, erasing her now up to the legs. "At least... I get to be the big hero for everyone? I'll admit it's undeserved. If it's any consolation to you—nah, maybe it'll only make you more mad? Well, anyway, I think after I kill you, then maybe I'll try dying too. I held on for such a long time, but after certain consideration? I have to wonder why."

YOU'LL DIE *NOW* BITCH.

The projectile DuPage had spat orbited the Capitol dome. It whizzed full circle and nailed DuPage's avatar in the back of her head.

DuPage expanded and erupted like a big bubble. In the moments before the projectile had landed, Hegewisch and Cook and everyone finally realized what it was. Small, shiny, a glint even in this bleak world: a Soul Gem.

A Soul Gem that Hegewisch, bookkeeper of the Empire, recognized. She had kept detailed information on the shape, color, and size of each Imperial Soul Gem, true, but she recognized this one in particular because she saw it plucked from the most horrifyingly mutilated body she had ever witnessed.

It was the Soul Gem of Fourth Centurion Aurora, which DuPage four months ago had swallowed whole.

The splattered mass of DuPage's avatar coalesced around the Soul Gem in the shape of a new figure—Aurora herself. Nude, withered, endless eyes set straight into the ground before her precariously tilted feet.

"Get out Val," screamed Kenosha whirling a lasso or grappling hook over her shoulder. By the time she finished those three short words it had already ended.

A small yellow ball appeared near Aurora and zipped in a perfectly circular arc.

Three standing sheets of ice vanished. Cook understood this power, she was too smart not to realize what she had to do. She was already bouncing back on the heels of her gladiator sandals. She was not moving fast enough, the ball had not started far enough away.

By Kenosha's third word, Cook shut her eyes, pressed her lips into a form of smirk, and shook her head.

Then she vanished, unmade from Aurora's circle.

Kenosha tossed her lasso and only realized at the end of her swing she was too late. She staggered forward, onto a knee, and shrieked. The albino looked confused, didn't seem to

realize what was happening or how. Cook was simply gone. Gone the way Clownmuffle might have made her gone after shuffling a sheet in front of her.

All the ice and water disappeared. The moon, no longer supported, landed against the dome and bounced off. Aurora hung her arms and lolled her head toward the splotch of black that remained of DuPage.

"May I..." she said, hoarse, so hoarse it was as though her throat had been clawed out, "may I please die now...?"

The black splotch said nothing. Already the rest of her body was streaming in from the rest of the city. Thick lines of the blackness crawled up the dome, weaved between or rushed through the crowds of everyone, concentrated toward the single splotch. Any of them, anyone decent at least, Kenosha maybe, Clownmuffle of course, even possibly some of the other Magical Girls who had snuck into the fray, any of them could have ended it at that moment, before DuPage had a chance to recuperate. But Kenosha was on her knees, Clownmuffle breaking the final barriers, and everyone else too confused.

Now that the ice was gone, DuPage could reclaim her severed self. The tendrils streamed to her.

Aurora asked again: "Please... I did it for you. Kill me..."

Without a word, almost grudgingly, a tendril shot from the mass and speared Aurora cleanly through her Soul Gem. The dead eyes went blank and Aurora's corpse dropped onto its side.

The thump of a real, corporeal body roused Kenosha and she roared up blasting twin Tommy guns at the swelling mass, too late. Clownmuffle stepped through the final barrier and opened her tuxedo jacket; the barrel of a tank extended from it and fired a mortar shell.

Clownmuffle was still a problem. Clownmuffle would never die, while everyone else would. Hegewisch had to kill her, or she'd find a way to win.

Clownmuffle's Soul Gem was black to its limit but Hegewisch believed one hundred percent that total despair would never come to her.

Not naturally, at least.

Hegewisch placed her hand on her own Soul Gem. Darkness streamed out, at her direction. It snaked toward Clownmuffle. The enchantment that Hegewisch previously placed on Clownmuffle's Soul Gem protected her from the killer, dense despair of DuPage's archon, but clearly it couldn't protect her from ordinary, run-of-the-mill despair. And Clownmuffle only needed a little more, a tiny push.

(If this failed, Hegewisch could simply kill herself and destroy all her enchantments. That's right. Clownmuffle's life was tied to hers. But let's see if we can win first. Save the trump card for later.)

The last of her standing Fakes rushed Clownmuffle at once, from four different directions. Only a distraction. She needed only a moment, a moment during which Clownmuffle didn't understand that the line of despair twisting toward her was a threat, why would it be? She had lived in despair four months now, it had been harmless to her, but Clownmuffle you see, it's different this time, don't see that it's different. The line coiled around and slipped up her back, where she could not watch, toward the head, you're a little dulled now aren't you, Clownmuffle? As much despair as you already have. Your senses aren't so attuned. You—

Something smashed Hegewisch in the face, hard, enough to lift her feet off the ground and whirl her almost three hundred and sixty degrees. Whatever it had been exploded in a mash, wet and pulpy, covering her suit... orange? Triangular pieces like curved glass shards.

A pumpkin.

Didn't matter. Hegewisch had already maneuvered the stream of despair close, without looking she shot it toward where Clownmuffle's Soul Gem had been, only as she did so realizing how futile the effort was, of course Clownmuffle would dodge, notice at the last second, perhaps had noticed immediately and only pretended she didn't to create tension for her "audience," or something Clownmuffly like that.

Except the line of despair hit. Hegewisch could feel it hit, as though the despair were an extension of her own body. An enchantment stopped her for a brief moment. Its membrane was too porous, it could block the dense despair but not this threadbare trickle. The despair sank in. It pumped straight into the gem, which was already nearly full, just as Hegewisch surmised. She swelled it to its limit.

Only then did she dare wipe the pumpkin gunk from her eyes. She was in no way surprised to find that she had not, in fact, hit Clownmuffle.

But she had come close. Damn close.

It had taken such little time to fill up the nearly-full Soul Gem that Clownmuffle was still in the action of falling, striking a parkour roll, and bouncing back to her feet as though nothing had happened. But it was clear from the position of the one that Hegewisch did hit that Clownmuffle had been pushed. By the Witch, her pumpkin head replaced with her real one yet again.

You've seen those movies, right? Everyone has. Where someone is about to get killed, and another character shoves them out of the way and dies instead. That conceit is always so absurd. Why does the shoving character have to stop exactly where the first character had been standing? Why not dive tackle them, so that both the shover and the shovee fly to safety? It's a ridiculous notion, one that never makes sense, Hegewisch hated it every time she saw it.

It was even more absurd here, because the Witch's Soul Gem was in a completely different location on her body than Clownmuffle's. This wasn't a bus hurtling down the street. It was a precision strike levied at a few square centimeters. The idea that shoving Clownmuffle out of the way somehow caused the Witch to get hit was, frankly, unbelievable. Until Hegewisch realized that the Witch was not standing on the ground. She had lifted herself up onto her

broom, flying high enough so that an attack aimed for Clownmuffle's head had stricken the Witch on her chest.

The Witch had specifically, knowingly, and willingly leapt into a position for Hegewisch to infect her with total despair.

That's right. The Witch didn't even like Clownmuffle. Hated her. Had spent all that time single-mindedly striving to kill her.

"Ah." The Witch's broom flew out from under her. Her body struck the ground on its knees. "I did it, Clownmuffle. I can die without you."

The sky split open. A sick lurching sank Hegewisch's stomach. Although she had planned to kill Clownmuffle this way, she forgot what would happen afterward.

The light of heaven swept across them from the skyward fissure. The witches that remained of DuPage's harem, wrangled by Lilliputians, burst into dust instantaneously.

Madoka Kaname, Goddess, descended.

"Hey," said Clownmuffle, blind to Madoka but aware something was wrong with the Witch. "Hey. Wait. You can't—no. I'm with everyone now. You're with me now."

The Witch, who could see Madoka, closed her eyes. "I'll believe you, Clownmuffle. I'll die believing you... And I won't ever have to be proven wrong." The warm, radiant light bathed. Madoka Kaname opened her arms wide, a benevolent smile turned toward her charge.

"Isabel." Her voice echoed. It cut through the madness of the battlefield, of DuPage regaining form. Hegewisch had time to wonder how nobody had died to the Cycles in this battle yet, and discarded the thought—they were dying in quicker ways here. "Isabel, it's alright. You don't have to worry about anything now. It's okay..."

Choir, organ, pipe arrangement. Her hands extended toward Isabel Leyva, 13, of Murrieta, California. She was not distracted, even as the slight form of Nagisa shoved to the fore and saluted.

"Um, um, um! I regret to inform you, but um, it's Sayaka! Taken hostage...!"

No consternation, Madoka accepted this fact as she stole from Isabel her despair, drained her dry of all feeling, hollowed out the pumpkin to create an ever-grinning jack-o-lantern.

Another figure, a shockingly mirrored image of Nagisa, differing only in her far more tasteful choice in dress, scrambled out of the wings of everyone. She didn't salute, but pointed, realized her rudeness, shoved her hand against her side, fidgeted, clasped them together, considered this finally an acceptable position.

"It is you. God! I made my wish to meet you..." She was sobbing, she unclasped her hands to wipe her eyes, it was clear she had been sobbing since before Madoka's appearance—she must have finally figured out what happened to Cook.

"God," said Clownmuffle. She blinked at the same sky as everyone else. "Oh. Do you mean that one girl? Did she come back?"

Hegewisch sighed. She picked up her briefcase, straightened her tie, reflexively checked her phone, which had shattered at some point. She should have expected this moment, even if she managed to stop Sayaka from starting it. Or maybe if she waited a few moments, Madoka would finish her business and vanish again? She had already removed Isabel Leyva's despair. The final witch's empty head grinned a final peace. She vanished unceremoniously.

Some happy eternity awaited her, piece of an everyone, maybe once removed from a world she felt she needed to change, she might be able to find true happiness. There was a joy in tedium. A ceaseless, unchanging world, where the only thing to do was register information, never act on it. If only you could just forget the world outside and devolve it into numbers and facts, is that your sort of compassion?

"Is that your sort of compassion...?" Hegewisch said. She probably could just wait for Madoka to leave. But maybe this was a conversation she wanted to have. Because she wanted to believe, that her actions were still capable of doing something worthwhile. Even if they were atrocious, maybe she wanted to buy into her lie that she did it not to simply end everything but to improve it, improve something, anything. Madoka, God, was the answer to that, and Hegewisch was the conduit between everyone and God.

"Well," she continued, "I think maybe we've come to point where we can reach a—"

Who you talking to.

A thick, spear-shaped tendril shot from the black mass and gored Hegewisch through her lower spine, into the mushy guts, where it burst and spread like roots into every part of her.

Hegewisch tried to slump to her knees but she was not allowed to fall. Her legs bent weakly, so that only her toetips scraped the ground. The black lines inside her delved, and delved, up her throat, into her eyes.

DuPage used Hegewisch's eyes to see.

To see Madoka.

Good. Good. Thank God, good, fucking good, GOOD.

Every part of the black mass DuPage, every splotch extended. One, two, five, forty, ten thousand lines shot toward the Goddess Madoka Kaname from every direction, clamped around the geometry of her celestial body. The instant any piece of blackness made contact with even the train of her dress it fizzled, curdled, snapped and rained soot but the sheer quantity of DuPage continued to press forward past this obliterating aura of anti-despair, overpowering suffocation of all these endless hates conglomerated to its final marshal. The specter of a young woman bleeding to death in bathtub formed the bones of this boneless thing that could not be killed faster than it could penetrate forward. The first thick band seized Madoka by the ankle and held, held long enough for an endlessly repeating stream of similar bands to attach and replenish any hate painstakingly eradicated.

A quiet gasp of agony came from Madoka's mouth, the glow of her alchemized eyes tilted upward. Nagisa sprung to her aid instantly—blew her horn and spewed bubbles to such pitiful avail, even if she were powerful enough to break a line of DuPage, five lines of DuPage, fifteen or twenty lines of DuPage, even if her bubbles multiplied and burst with such cacophonous spray that whole swatches dissolved, that the bare dome shone phosphorescent with her pink-sheened deluge, it was not happening fast enough, surely enough.

Nice to meet you. My name is DuPage. You'll die.

While the entirety of the archon's attention bore upon God, almost as an afterthought a sleight of tentacles hit Nagisa like batting a fly. Despite everyone—everyone still alive, that is—hacking at the blackness, striking, crushing, shooting, using any weapon available, despite the concerted effort of everyone even if they did not know what they were fighting or why, even if they did not see the God being slowly bound and crushed before them, despite all this they were inutile. Cook alone had done more than any of them. Because even if they had everyone, DuPage had *everywhere*... and they could not strike with enough breadth to sever her. Not even Nagisa.

Of course, of course—Hegewisch swayed within her affixation. Clownmuffle, of course. The one woman who can stand against everyone. She could stand against everywhere, too. Clownmuffle possessed more certainty than God. Even as God's anguished cries transformed to piercing shrieks, even as her choir accompaniment clattered into an orchestra where all but two members had been gunned down by a madman, well, even then Clownmuffle would prevail.

Clownmuffle wasn't doing anything. Clownmuffle couldn't see God. Clownmuffle was looking at DuPage's avatar as though it were the thing that mattered.

Then—

Then the angels. Nagisa and Sayaka were but two. Any moment now, the sky would break open. The souls of all departed since antiquity would stream down, a concerted force of the greatest heroes mankind had ever mustered. Yes, yes, actually, this was perfect, this was the moment, finally, where Madoka would be forced to act, forced to preserve herself, break her own foolish rules, resurrect this world...

A coil finally reached around her throat. Her white dress had ripped, space and stars rather than blood ran down it. Her screams had become something altogether different than the human sensation of sound.

Hegewisch swayed.

"Madoka, I'll save you...!" Nagisa shouted as all her bubbles were popped. She had shifted her strategy and now shoveled massive chunks of the blackness onto a shiny silver platter with a covering cap like someone might serve at a fancy restaurant. Her comic witch form, that cartoon worm Charlotte, drove through the blackness gnashing perfectly triangular fangs over and over, ripping and gulping down parts of the archon. She bit through gristly tendons to sever many of the strands that enveloped Madoka, but it only took a few seconds for the aftereffects of swallowing so much despair to show on a face now spotty with clown makeup.

Nagisa sagged to her knees and vomited. The darkness flowed out in a torrent and rejoined the whole. Nonetheless, she forced more onto her platter.

"W... why..." Madoka managed to choke out as the sky shattered like glass. "Yasmin..."

DuPage was not one to dwell on why. Come on, Madoka. Don't tell me you don't know why by now. Are you so naïve?

Nagisa, between gasping wheezes, tilted her head imploringly to Hegewisch. "You—you can save her—you have the power—Laila!"

"Nagisa." Madoka could barely wheeze. "Nagisa, run, get away...!"

Of course. That's why there was no flood of ghosts from heaven. No army of the dead. Because even now she wanted to protect "everyone." Madoka didn't want to risk losing her friends, she would sit still and do nothing and be crushed to pieces—YOU FUCKING IDIOT. Just like her wish, just like her wish, she would annihilate her own being to allow "everyone" a better chance at life. You idiot, your friends are part of you now, if you die will they even exist? Or do you think they'll take up your mantle and serve as the Law of the Cycles in your absence? God, maybe they'd do a better fucking job.

Maybe she thought that stalker chick with the long black hair would swoop in and save her as always. If that girl even still existed. Maybe she was like everyone else nowadays and just wanted to die, was that it Madoka? Did all this despair start with you?

One of Madoka's arms came off. A stringy line of liquid space, inset with glittering stars, draped from her stump to the severed limb, until DuPage's formless body slurped it up. Nagisa swooned in disease delirium, her eyes swirled. Everyone struck uselessly at the body. Kenosha fired a fake machine gun, gasping for air. Clownmuffle swung at phantoms.

Hegewisch swayed.

Someone climbed up one of DuPage's sloping tendrils. Wispy, white. That albino. Almost undoubtedly something Dr. Cho created. Her hands grabbed the sinewy bits. Her footing was unsure. She slipped and almost fell but caught the piece of DuPage currently tearing off Madoka's leg and stabilized. She crouched, held out her arms for balance, and flung herself forward.

Rather than anything meaningful, she wrapped her arms around Madoka's torso, one of the few parts not yet in DuPage's grasp, near the gem that might be Madoka's Soul Gem or might just be decoration, Hegewisch didn't fucking know. She grabbed on and held, and that was it. She did absolutely nothing else.

No, that wasn't true. She shouted: "Help me. Everyone, help me!"

Nobody was listening, of course. Madoka's leg came off. At this rate she'd be quartered. But the albino kept crying: Help, everyone, help...!

She gave up on everyone after a few moments and shouted directly at Kenosha: "Help me! Help me!"

Kenosha had expended a ton of energy. Sweat beaded on her brow and her ponytail hung limp. She tilted her head toward the albino and didn't seem to know who she was at first. Then she came to her senses.

"Grab me and pull!" said the albino. "Everyone, pull!"

"Uh, I, uh... ALRIGHT FINE." Kenosha seized her. She pulled. Them pulling together did not improve Madoka's plight one iota.

"EVERYONE! PULL!" the albino screamed.

Kenosha glanced over her shoulder at the crowd. Her eyes settled on a gang of well-built, handsome young men in impressive suits who collectively whaled on a single tendril with blunt objects. "Dammit you guys, fucking help got it?"

The young men looked up, looked around, saw Kenosha. They seemed completely confused as to what Kenosha was doing, but at another shout they rushed to her. "Pull, pull," the albino kept shouting, and the whole gang, ten or twelve total, grabbed Kenosha in not quite a chain but a gaggle and pulled.

Soon they were all shouting for help, to pull. Nagisa, wiping the black backwash from her mouth, shouted weakly too. Madoka had a tendril through her gut. Her head lolled. But more people, seeing the growing group all pulling at something together, joined. First it was mostly Magical Girls, maybe because they recognized Kenosha, but soon random everymen and -women clambered up the tendrils, grabbing, pulling...

Beautiful, right? What a beautiful sight. Could make you cry. If it wasn't a useless fucking gesture. No matter how many people grabbed hold, even as the effect snowballed and soon almost everyone was joining in, acting on a kind of herd or mob mentality, nobody understanding what they were doing but seeing that everyone else was doing it and feeling compelled to participate, no matter this swelling of human mass, nothing happened. Their combined pull could not even budge Madoka. DuPage only laughed, her avatar again erased by Clownmuffle, again forming out of the blackness somewhere else, she did not even bother with the people grabbing Madoka. In fact, since they no longer fought her, it gave her more tendrils to sprout.

Useless. Fucking useless, fucking useless, fucking useless...

"Laila—you can end it." Nagisa again. Crawling toward the group to grab on and pull too. "Laila—you know who can end it!"

Do you see it, Hegewisch? Damn, and I didn't think we'd actually do it, actually kill God.

Yep. This oughtta end things nicely. God dead, hope ruined, a world where both wraiths and witches ran free. Wouldn't last the year. Ha, haha, ahahahahaha... Not the slightest hope of

renewal.

She closed her eyes. She unhinged her jaw to sigh. It was the most she could do. A bit of movement in her extremities. Her fingers fiddled with the latch of her briefcase.

Aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh. Just like how Cook would say. Plus fifteen question marks at the end.

Her briefcase opened. She did not need to look to find the file she needed.

Denver kept less detailed files than Chicago. With one exception. Hegewisch might have expected some significant depth for the other Aurora, *Aurora*, but that Aurora had no file at all. Either Kenosha dropped it during her hasty flight from the city, or Denver did something to it. So Denver had one file of consequence, a file so detailed it put Chicago to shame. Less file and more diary. Pages upon pages of observations, understandings, explanations, questions, thoughts, answers, loves, hates. A hefty chunk of paper, clipped together by a clothespin. Many pages missing but the gist of it remained.

Hegewisch lacked the motor skills in her commandeered body to do much else than knock over her briefcase and spill the file onto the ground.

Before her she appeared: Sage Rhys.

Sage Rhys. Ah, welcome back. How have you been?

Sage Rhys didn't reply. She clapped one hand atop the other and held them out crisscross. The star-shaped emerald set in the palm of her long white glove broadcast a dazzling array of light on the ten thousand humans grabbing hold of one another. Out her gem emerged her powerful Star Rod—twelve inches of candy cane hilt bedecked with a glorious five-pointed star, razor sharp. As soon as the last of it left her gem she caught it in her other hand and held it aloft.

"This cosmic effervescence shall illuminate the heavens and guide mankind on their inexorable journey to the stars! Phase 1, **ACTIVATE!**"

Rainbow glimmers manifested across her body and formed into armor: bracers for her wrists, plates above her shins, a thick belt around her midriff. Her glasses morphed into a solid sheet of visor and an array of bogus star fleet medals jingled down her chest. She posed—it was necessary, as her file indicated in all-capital letters—as a glint of light flashed at her back and caused everything to twinkle.

Phase 1—**ACTIVATED.**

She tossed her Star Rod into the air. It twirled overhead like a baton, held its position far longer than gravity ought to have allowed. As it did she struck another pose, wrists clamped against each other to form the shape of an unbending X. One leg bent at the knee as she leaned to the side supported solely by the other.

"In this milky dream of infinity mankind spreads unfettered! Planets, solar systems, galaxies cannot contain them. Only heaven remains, and this light shall lead them into that unknown! Phase 2, ACTIVATE!"

A hand jolted out to catch the Star Rod which suddenly dropped. Her visor sprouted into a full helmet and sharp wings emerged from her back. Thrusters engaged in a line across them and she hovered upward, above the mass of DuPage.

Phase 2—ACTIVATED.

Her head bowed, as though in deference to the complete blackness before her, the blackness of the words that echoed almost past the point of sense: **THISISALLIEVERWANTEDISN'TIT?** The words that, Hegewisch knew, rose before only a stronger disappointment than any before. DuPage could never quench her hatred, not in this form. Hatred was her existence, and if she could not hate, she would negate herself with endless sleep.

It was time to sleep.

"The unlimited darkness of the universe folds inward upon itself. Man ascends ever higher toward celestial heaven but finds instead of stars only the stygian hunger of the void."

No poses. No bombastic declaration, only a whisper. Yet her voice carried even in this calamity, even as God crumbled like a statue within the span of her visor.

"Phase 3, activate."

Denver's armor shimmered black and stars, galaxies, aurorae danced across her body. The miasma had already darkened everything but it yet grew darker in a sphere around her as she held aloft her Star Rod. The five-pointed star at its tip pulsed, trembled, cracked; its points split from the body and turned inward to pierce it. The yellow center unpeeled like a blooming bud until all gleam of gold became only an orb of total black.

Phase 3—activated.

Denver could not move during Phase 3, so her positioning during Phase 2 was key. She had drifted away from Madoka and the everyone army, closer to Clownmuffle and DuPage's avatar. The avatar was near DuPage's true core, but that didn't matter so much. The entirety of this black void was part of DuPage's body. And while Cook or Clownmuffle or Nagisa or someone else suitably strong might cut off a piece of that body, DuPage could not. No matter how hard DuPage tried, she could never remove from herself even a square centimeter of her hatred.

And there was not much in this world but her.

The sea of black rippled, undulated. The rod of Sage Rhys formed the eye of a vortex immeasurably powerful, a portal from this world to somewhere distant and empty: a black hole.

**THERE IT'S ALL BLACK ALL BLACK ALL BLACK ALL BLACK ALL BLACK
ALL BLACK ALL BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA**

Something flashed out. A single, vivid purple bolt. It stuck in what remained of the ground at an oblique angle. It was a neon purple arrow. Where did it come from? Who fired it...? There was nobody, everyone else grabbed with both hands someone else in the chain of everyone. Yet someone had fired an arrow, and with that arrow—

They had severed the final tendril.

Still screaming a final **BLAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA** DuPage swirled into the vortex.

The pull against Hegewisch's body suddenly became unbearable. After all, DuPage wasn't simply holding onto her. They had become linked, irrevocably. The rest of her, across the whole city, not just the void, was whipping into Denver's final black hole at infinite speed, far faster than anything else being pulled because unlike the dome that could crumble her body's natural impulse was to hold together, as one united everywhere. And that everywhere was going somewhere else. As the first of it did, so did the rest.

But she held her link to Hegewisch, and Clownmuffle held Hegewisch.

"Let go," she said, or rather mouthed.

Clownmuffle held. Why? Their relationship had long since severed.

"You're everyone too," said Clownmuffle, who could be heard.

Oh.

"Thank you," said Hegewisch. "Thank you for reminding me."

Her attaché case, linked to her other arm by a chain, dangled behind her. With all strength mustered she swung. Her body had already started to deteriorate from DuPage's tendrils. So it only took one swing, with a Magical Girl's strength.

She swung her case, hard as she could, against the arm that Clownmuffle held. The bone shattered. The ragged skin and flesh stretched for a few seconds, then split.

Hegewisch and the last moor of DuPage disappeared into an endless blackness. The moment afterward, Sage Rhys ceased her black hole, dropped to the ground through the completely caved space where the dome had once been, and dispersed into dust.

Imagining a Key

A figure stood atop the radio antenna of Willis Tower, once known as Sears. Head bowed, palms pressed together, one leg drawn up and the sole of her foot placed against her lower thigh. In this position she had remained four months. Kiss. That was her name, Kiss. Hungarian in origin, a language she never knew, so its connotations had always come from her natural tongue.

If one stood perfectly still, and never spoke, and never thought—one consumed no energy. A complete oblation of selfhood. The unnatural cold long since settled into her biorhythm. She could feel her own heartbeat, and feeling it allowed her to reduce it to nonexistence, until her blood did not pulse.

In this way, she became not a person. Ella Kiss. Seattle. She had become the antenna on which she stood. She added about five more feet to this once-tallest building.

After four months, somebody had spoken to her.

The action had forced her to exist again. Her total nothingness became, instead, a zero-point-zero-zero-zero-zero-one. The radio antenna told the one who spoke to her that it would pray.

She had attempted to resolve again to zero afterward, but she could not. Her hibernation was ending. She soon felt twitches in the antenna, signals transmitted where before had been stillness. The building was coming alive again, and so she steadily increased, a larger and larger fraction of a percentage.

Then, perhaps two days later, the world awoke too.

The clouds broke. Rain fell upon her, warm rain, strangely warm rain, no sunshine—this was Chicago after all—but rain, hard and fast and hot. It struck her head, back, arms, every part of her body. The resonations spread throughout her skin.

It had become clear. She could no longer not exist. She had to exist again.

Her eyes opened.

The entire city of Chicago fanned around her. The skyscrapers, the suburbs, the lake. Sounds, which had before been silent, filtered upward: car horns, a low rumble, some medley incomprehensible but undeniably human. In the narrow streets so far below, people were moving. Everyone—everyone was returning to existence.

"Oh," said Ella Kiss.

The world of before still existed. It would always exist. The things that had happened, the things she had done, they will have always happened, they will always be done. She killed her sister. That fact was truth.

But she consumed energy again; she could no longer cease existing without death.

Even in the rain, amid the bustle of humanity, she could sense a massive amount of wraiths. Yes, something had happened alright, and even if that something had ended now, what had done could not be undone. Its residuals remained.

Ella Kiss tilted back her head, took in the rain on her face, and summoned her Soul Gem. A flash of light enveloped her, a costume of a fool or jester. A rifle manifested in one hand.

Time to exist.

The news helicopters had swirled around the city for some time now and their coverage had played on a television that thankfully never ran out of power. Who knew how the Baroness' little friend would have reacted if she did not have at least this outlet for her impotent hatred.

So now, now that everything had ended, and the men and women on all the channels were saying the same thing: It's over, it's over—not that any of them knew exactly what it was, why it had happened, or how it ended—now her little friend had finally, finally, *finally* fallen asleep. On her side on the couch, her chest slowly rising and falling, and no discontented dreams to trouble her. Finally, a peaceful sleep.

The Baroness sat beside her and ran fingers through her hair. The smoke from her cigarette pooled the space above her as she allowed the television to play. Were its constant buzz of excitement and exclamation suddenly stoppered, and silence allowed again to reign in the household, perhaps her little friend would awaken in shock, and the whole rigmarole would repeat.

She leaned back against the cushion, stretched her legs along the floor. Tears remained in her eyes, but she had stopped her silent crying.

"Thank you," she whispered, so silent even she could not hear it, while a reporter hanging wildly out the side of a helicopter fanned her arm to indicate the United States Capitol and the dome that had collapsed. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Isabel. Thank you. You don't know how much this means to me. You probably will never know, because whether you survived or not you probably will never return here. But thank you, if you are dead, and watching maybe, thank you—thank you—thank you. Everything you loved may have left this world, and you may not have had much reason for what you did. You may have done some ugly things to make it happen—I saw your speech on TV. But Isabel—Isabel—thank you. Because it meant something to me, because I had something to protect, thank you. Thank you. Despite your emptiness, despite the husk you had become, you did something good. In the end, you did, that was what the Baroness believed.

Thank you—Thank you. Maybe this note of thanks is no consolation to you, Isabel. That's okay. Just know that somebody thanks you.

The Baroness smothered her cigarette.

Very carefully, she shifted her little friend's body on the couch to make room, and slid under the blankets beside her. She was quite warm, quite smooth and soft. And she was alive, and the world was alive, and together they would live. Tomorrow they would leave this wretched home. There would be much to rebuild. Already people—not hounds—howled outside, adding to the noise of the reporters. But for now, for now—

For now they could sleep, like this, together.

Thank you.

In an alley, amid stacks of trash, a few corpses lingered. Not really a surprising scene, everywhere else looked much the same. In the final moments before the end, the miasma began to chew the few thousand apples it had kept stored in its cheeks. For everyone hobbling around amid ecstatic cheers, another everyone lay dead.

Two figures here were alive, one an albino seated in an almost catatonic trance, the other a cat unseen to the first perched on a jutting fragment of building. The cat kicked her legs over the side and rolled her head against the stone. Fifteen helicopters shot overhead—she counted their cyclical whirr as they neared and then departed.

Dr. Cho was dead.

This fact surprised Christine Luce more than the dismantling of the miasma. Dr. Cho had always seemed, to her, one of those types who stood outside the corporeality of this world, who inhabited a metaphysical plane, some dimension of thought and theory that lacked practical application. She could never bite the world, but it could never bite her in turn. Well, but the doctor had been the one to produce bodies. The thoughts had always been Christine's.

The albino still alive, Lachesis, Christine never touched her. She was just an assistant, so she lacked a mind or memory. But she lingered beside the body the way a pet might, praying for the miracle of resurrection.

On a personal level, Christine and Dr. Cho hadn't connected much. But there was no denying their professional connection, a connection that created life. How many of their children were still alive? She could ask Kyubey. For some reason she had never wondered about this before.

She really shouldn't worry about it now. Once the hysteria subsided, everyone still alive would clamor for her head. Without the miasma, the energy that gave her such control over her powers would fade. She wouldn't be able to remain invisible to their sight forever, so she

needed to act fast. The pragmatic side of her, that same useful cowardice, almost instantly concocted a plan. Reach the airport, board a plane, cash out the favors Kyubey owed her and carve a niche for herself in one of the smaller, isolated cities to the north. She would take this final dummy Lachesis with her and fill its head with thoughts for her protection.

Assuming Kyubey owed her favors.

Nobody owed her anything now but hate, and she realized, now that the overwhelming darkness had fallen away and the remains of the world were held up to the light, that this time, finally, she deserved it. The four months had passed in a daze but now she knew exactly what she had done.

Anchorage would be a good city. As she boarded the plane she would spread a rumor that she left the country. Competing rumors, competing countries, did she defect to China? A new life in Tristan da Cunha? Or like all those Nazis who vanished into Argentina? The uncertainty would breed conspiracy and they would not look so much in their own nation.

Dammit. DAMMIT. An entire life, on the run, running, hiding, every single human in this whole world searching for her, she dug this hole for herself, she dug it so damn deep and she dug it just for herself, the exact thing she feared most and she leapt right inside it. "Ha, khh, kkka-ha-ha, kkkkcccchhhh..."

She coughed on her own phlegm and choked until her eyes watered and the inside of her throat got all scraped up nice and good the way she liked it.

Her best option was to disappear the way only Magical Girls can. Then she could be the bogeyman that haunts this world, the cat creeping somewhere, where is she? They'll never find her. They'll always believe in her. They can chase her but she will have long ago escaped, where they can never find her, khekhek.

Someone pitter-pattered below. Christine's head lolled with semi-apathetic interest that immediately lurched such surprise that in her startled scraping she dropped off her perch and hit the ground hard enough to spit blood.

Her magical distortion of self to prevent anyone from seeing her should not have faltered even given that graceless plunge, but the newcomer saw her anyway. She leapt back with equivalent shock and collapsed into a mound of trash that instantly sullied a somehow spotless white dress.

"Huh? Hello? Are you okay?" said Millie.

"Hkkkhh, kkknng—Hckh. Ah." Christine stood, wiped her bloody lip. "You can see me."

Millie blinked, as though this question were obvious. "Yes."

Then her magic was fading faster than she thought. Of course, Millie might have stronger-than-average tolerance given she was both a Magical Girl and a product of Christine's own mind. But the alarms went off, time to leave and not hang around, only so much time. The airports will be crammed, assuming they're even operational.

Millie's surprise dissipated. She shrugged and continued the way she was going: to Dr. Cho's body. Lachesis lifted her head but said nothing.

And despite the still-pulsing escape routes in her head, Christine stood aside and watched as Millie knelt near the corpse and placed her hand on its forehead.

"Doctor," she said. "Doctor Cho. I did it. I did something, at least, although I am afraid it is difficult for me to understand what I did. And although I know that what I did was good, and that many people were saved at least partially because of it, I... I still do not feel happy. Even though I met God, even though I helped God. Many people also died because of me—Val died because of me. You, you also died because of me. So I understand that no matter how many times I say sorry to you, it will mean nothing. You will not even hear it. But I do want to say: I am sorry."

Then she clasped her hands, bowed her head, and prayed—silently.

The blood from Christine's split lip pooled upon her upturned palm and drip-dripped to the pavement. She sucked the lip and swallowed the blood and wiped the rest on her thigh. The cut regenerated. A cough swallowed in her throat.

If Christine hadn't made this Millie, her situation wouldn't be so precarious now. She had been completely ignorant to this fact in the moment, but knew enough now to understand that Dr. Cho did not want this particular creature created for no reason.

She approached and hovered a hand over Millie's shoulder, ground teeth together, and touched her.

Millie looked up. Her expression was more blank than perhaps it should have been. "Yes? Do you need assistance?" She blinked and stood abruptly. "I am sorry, I really should have spent more time helping everyone—there must be many wounded people, people in trouble. I do not know what I was thinking. There will be time for the dead later, for now I must—"

"H, hey."

"Yes? I am sorry, I am sorry." A flurry of useless activity.

After a pause, Christine swallowed. "In, uh, in not long, I'm going to disappear, and you'll never see me again. You, uh, you don't know who I am—but I—" (Made you? Saying that will only be weird.) "I, uh. Okay, okay, you see her?" She pointed at Lachesis.

"Yes, she is unharmed, do not worry. I will help her."

"She's your, your sister you know."

"I know." She knew? She added: "Were you a friend of Dr. Cho? Oh, that would explain a lot, I am so sorry for not realizing sooner. Did you come to pay your respects as well? Or did you not know until now that she..."

"So Dr. Cho told you. About where you came from."

Millie shook her head. She stared down at the doctor. "No. No, I only guessed. But it is hard to deny, given the evidence."

"Okay... okay. So you know, that if you try to go back to the place you think is home, you won't..."

A sad, simple nod. "I was created for a single purpose, I am coming to understand. A purpose I served."

This statement was punctuated by a long silence, a deep gulf that plummeted down, down, down into an endless awkward moment. Tremors ran up Christine's veins and her hands shook at her sides. A vision entered her head of throwing her arms around this girl, embracing her, an action upon which she could not act.

Millie tilted her head. "Oh! Your emotions—you—I am sorry, I believe I have the ability to sense what other people are feeling, and you—If you consider it invasive I can attempt to stop—"

"Nnh, I uh, gh. Hkk. I, uh. Mmnh. You—I—you." In a sudden seizure of resolve she threw her hands forward to at least grab Millie's shoulders but halted just before touching the plain material of her blouse. "Millie. Millie, don't ever think... don't ever think there's a purpose, a purpose beyond what you make for yourself. You—you may have been made with a purpose. Even if it's not the, the one you think." Christine scratched her throat. It was more like a competing triangle of purposes. Kyubey, or whoever masterminded this plot, and Dr. Cho, and Christine herself.

"I..."

"That girl there, is your sister. She, she doesn't have much... in her head. So it'll probably be, uhm, really hard but—but please take care of her. Teach her. She can—she can learn. I know you have some, uh, some good stuff in you. So just, just teach her that stuff..."

She turned away, she sounded like an idiot, the other part of her head screeched to flee before she lost her window.

"Are you an assistant of Dr. Cho? You seem to know so much. What is your name, if I may ask?"

What's your name, what's your name—cat, Joliet—she suddenly laughed, although she was aware it sounded like a laugh only to herself. Another helicopter rushed overhead and spooked her, to hell with it, to hell!

"Christine," she said as she already started running. "Christine de Pizan! Read my book. Read my book, it'll tell you everything. Ha, hhakkh, kkkkkkkhhhhccchhh..."

Between the buildings she darted. Millie called after her. Millie the fruit and Christine the rind. Down the drain she circled, around and around, and disintegrated into the realm between fact and fiction, to become the bogeyman that haunted the new world...

At the Capitol, everyone still didn't know exactly what had happened. Many were wounded, many more dead. Some went ballistic in victory while others rolled screaming with a leg gnashed off at the knee. The wound-up tightening of remaining human energy loosened; everyone fell apart.

On the magical side, the archon had vanished without dispersing its power, so many were more exhausted than the humans. Kenosha lazed, near comatose, on a ravaged knoll in the Mall. She might have celebrated despite her fatigue, if not for certain circumstances that turned her reflective instead. Cook's harem, like good urban professionals, congregated in geometric patterns nearby and discussed the ramifications of "today's revolt" in detached, technical terms. They had all been to college. Some were Marxists, others more Randian in bent. Despite differences in opinion they remained all smiles, the discussion itself was great fun, fantastic speculation on future developments. They didn't know Cook was dead yet.

Elsewhere, Berwyn picked her way among the wounded and administered haphazard dosages when she could. She wiped her brow as she moved from one moaning body to the next. It had been her tactical decision to remain outside the final confrontation. She had someone to protect, after all. Nonetheless an iota of remorse crept inside, a feeling that she had been so close to something large and instead hid...

This iota she crushed with every fiber of rationality. She made objectively the correct decision. There was a reason both she and the person that mattered most to her were still around to comb through the aftermath, while several familiar faces were nowhere to be seen.

Not Clownmuffle, of course. Miss Vizcarra, Miss Flossmoor. She sat cross-legged on the Capitol mezzanine, surrounded by the wreckage of the dome. Nobody approached her, not even the maddened flurry of revelers howling bad attempts at songs down the steps from her. Her continued existence may have prompted reason for worry, but Berwyn had a suspicion that without a hand to steer her Clownmuffle would slump like a marionette. The problem would be when the humans calmed down and remembered their hatred for her, their Schrodinger.

Until then, Berwyn healed as she could. Darien, who she had left under a tree to recover, eventually caught up to her. Rubbing her head and neck and blinking, she said: "Wha—did we win?"

"Aye."

"I don't remember any of it," said Darien. The disappointment more than apparent.

"You did phenomenal, pepper." Berwyn slid a syringe into someone. "Phenomenal, absolutely phe-*nom*-e-nal. I did help, of course." The attempt, in her mind, was to sound genuinely congratulatory, but she had to focus too much on her task. Her magic had started to

run low. One of those factors, or both combined—either way, her irritation equaled in obviousness Darien's disappointment.

At least the understanding was mutual. Darien hung back aloof and surveyed the surroundings. Berwyn, although busy with her work, made sure to gauge her expression when she noticed Clownmuffle on the mezzanine. But Darien only lingered a moment there, a slight frown, and then a loosening of all tension into a sigh. "What happened to the Witch?"

Berwyn did not know. She had not seen her. Not since the guillotine, at least, so she could suspect a finale.

Nor had she seen Miss Sayaka Miki or her other angel friend, the short one with the white hair. Angels were busy folk, and those two had overstayed their welcome on this world anyway. Mission accomplished, they might proudly declare in echo of the strung banner under which they passed on their promenade back to heaven.

No, the first familiar face who approached them belonged to a creature not altogether human. *Congratulations*, the white rabbit said from a lofty perch on the severed neck of an equestrian statue. *It appears this world will continue to exist after all.*

"And that means you'll continue to exist too, hmm?" said Berwyn.

Yes. My species still considers my behavior to be irrational, of course. A miracle's occurrence does not retroactively justify the act of hoping for one. But the terms of my execution were specifically tied to the time this world ceased operations, and it appears its operations will continue for the foreseeable future.

"Why you telling us this." Darien, arms folded, stared down the Mall toward the ruined Washington Monument. "What do you want us to do for you now?"

Oh, nothing of the sort! I simply hope you both continue to be productive Magical Girls. To describe the current situation metaphorically, you might say that the splinter has been removed, but the wound is still infected. It will require many Magical Girls to eliminate the wraiths that have appeared across the world. Maintaining positive relationships with those who remain is more pertinent than ever.

In classic Kyubey fashion, he managed to make even his rare gestures of kindness come across as sleazy. The frigidity between Berwyn and Darien cracked for a moment and they exchanged bemused glances that led to bizarrely synchronized shrugs. Darien turned away suppressing a snort, which only made Berwyn giggle in kind.

"Alright, thanks Kyubey, you're a most appreciated conversation partner as always," Berwyn said upon recovery.

Of course, the way this world operates will need to change. It takes relatively little energy to prevent a human from learning something that is foreign to them. But now that the secret of magic has been revealed, I'm afraid it would take far too much energy to cause the entire human species to forget about it. As such, I will be requesting your cooperation as I establish several new methodologies for the collection of grief cubes...

The good humor faded and the glance Berwyn and Darien exchanged turned suspicious. "What is that supposed to mean," said Darien.

I could explain, but I must admit my powers of persuasion on certain topics can be a bit lacking. There'll be somebody coming along soon to explain in my place, in a way that will be more familiar and comforting to you. In fact, they should be arriving any moment now.

As though he had timed it (he probably had), the moment he finished his sentence the omnipresent sound of helicopters encircling the city grew into an attention-grabbing roar. Everyone craned their necks. From above black shadows descended, twin-propelled and barely off-balance, touching down first with the front landing gear and then the back in a cleared section of the Mall nobody remembered having been cleared. One, two—three four five. Pentagrammic in position, sleek long sliding doors opened and figures poured out onto the grass.

A ring of cameras flashed. The collective news, present at the cat's final conference only a few hours prior, had reconvened for a moment of this exactitude. An outer disc of new copters revolved, each tilting inward to watch the disturbance. Shouted questions assaulted the figures who disembarked, a standard litany of who what when where why. The figures were not (ostensibly) military. Their outfits were bright, showy, attention-grabbing, despite the practiced lines in which they wove, despite the years they had dwelled in this world's shadows. The press people recognized none of them, but to those who had frequented MagNet in its heyday, a few faces sprung familiar. Foremost of them, with a genial smile and a camera-mugging wave that drew a few eyerolls from her followers, was a person best known by the name Calgary and jangly with gold chains, diamond rings, a glinting canine poking just below a curved upper lip.

It became clear these girls weren't as practiced in whatever formation they had attempted to make. Calgary set the tone, acting and looking the part of a hip hop star passing fanservice to paparazzi, snapback and Versace skinny jeans and a fur-trimmed jacket short enough to bare midriff. Calgary was the last remaining of Denver's inner circle, an illustrious upper echelon of MagNet that included the Seattle sisters, Minneapolis, and the favored of Denver's local underlings. She had always played the role of the "fun one," the admin who'd wink a blind eye if your chat on the Romance board got a little racier than PG-13, the strategic counterpoint to the heavy-handed moralizing of the others, the drug PSA that featured a rap rhyming "crack" with "whack."

"Eyo, eyo." Hand gestures too nondenominational to be considered gang signs, a pretended jump shot basketball tossed to Baltimore who she recognized among the growing crowd. Whatever seriousness this squad had attempted to muster devolved, half started to ape Calgary and the other half made a woeful attempt to keep composed. "Waddap, eyo, eyo."

Her grandstanding waded her into the orbit of Berwyn and Darien, but she knew neither of them and instead tilted half an eye to Kyubey. *Which way?*

Up those stairs, he replied, with a flick of the tail toward the mezzanine.

You sure she's safe?

I've been monitoring her physical and mental condition to the best of my ability. I believe her to be quite sedate.

"Right, awright." Around a wrist she swung a glinting chain with a diamond-encrusted piece that read SWAY on the end. Arching her knees into a series of agile bounces just restrained enough to seem casually if athletically human, she gallivanted up the steps followed by a handful of the other Magical Girls who hadn't been completely ensnared in the camera flashes.

"Charlie V!" Calgary shimmied a wide elliptical pattern around the clown in question. "Charles the Fifth, my king! Used to be you'd send girls light-seven-to-strong-sixes, wasn't that the shit? Not to wax overly braggadocious my babes, but she gave me a nine, eyooo." A tongue wagged at both her underlings and the reporters who had tramped after her. "Now it's all business, eyyy. Everyone's thinking you gotta answer for some stuff, eh, no skin off my flint but whaddya gonna do? Wrists out betch, you under arrest."

Good acting. Only a few realized her exact level of anxiety as the near-comatose creature cradling its legs before her lifted a dull expression her way.

Cameras clicked and Calgary's smile gleamed even as her eyes flitted far too fast between Clownmuffle and the lenses.

"Eyo," she said. "Hands out, not quite feeling the use of force right now. Come on, unless you wanna get dogpiled by all these lovely chickadees I got on squad, eyo."

Clownmuffle just... sat.

Calgary risked a nudge with the edge of her Louboutin men's red bottoms. "Eyy, come on," she whispered. "Everyone's waiting."

This phrase registered and Clownmuffle looked up. "Oh..."

She held out her hands. In a millisecond Calgary whipped a crazy-eight with her chain and the chain wound up around Clownmuffle's wrists. Once set securely, the chains transformed into a set of jeweled fuzzy cuffs and a far more confident Calgary squatted and posed for the pictures that flared all around her. SCHRODINGER APPREHENDED, the titles would say under the articles already written in the time it took you to read this sentence.

Calgary had the power to nullify the supernatural with her chains. This extended to both miasmas and Magical Girls, as a file in a briefcase once stated. With the cuffs secured around Clownmuffle's wrists, Calgary quickly flashed a hand out, pulled the ring from Clownmuffle's finger, shined it on her jacket, and showed it to the cameras before finally pocketing it. Clownmuffle continued to sit.

"Awright, eyo." Calgary motioned to her goons. "It's safe now, tell the big man he can come on out if he want."

The word spread electric down the line of Magical Girls who suddenly seemed not dispersed at random but at perfect intervals to maintain the peace and scope out any possible threats. It

returned to the five helicopters, whose blades had finally slowed enough for the drone to subside.

Everyone who turned their heads after the misdirection involving Calgary and Clownmuffle realized that somehow a small stage had been erected in the center of the helicopters, complete with a podium and a microphone. Although not many had noticed, the fifth helicopter (which was identical to the others) had never opened its doors. Only once the word reached the Magical Girls who formed a perimeter around the landing zone and the attention riveted to the stage did it betray any activity. Its door slid open, a single figure emerged—this one even the humans recognized. The president's daughter. Morose in expression, she considered the surroundings without much interest. She wore a kind of white robe but her bearing was blandly professional.

After a few moments of inspection, she nodded back to the helicopter. A final figure emerged, and this one was a man, recognized by every single person present regardless of age, ideology, or country of origin. He wore a thick, pendulous coat that swished around his heels as he strode onto the lawn, white snow powder on his shoulders.

Guided by his daughter, he reached the stage and took a position behind the podium. His daughter stood behind him, watching the crowd, while he tested the mic with a careful adjustment.

He cleared his throat: "Hh-hm." The crowd had gone ballistic at his first manifestation. Cheers rose from one end of the vast human tide to the other, cheers from the people watching in their living rooms, cheers from across the planet. This figure, this distant president who prior to the incident had maintained perfectly lukewarm approval ratings, whose career trajectory had seen him go from unknown outsider upstart to standardized byword for "the administration," now elicited a tremendous hurrah. He could have been anyone, any president. His importance was that he was *the* President, as a concept. In that moment, although the moment would not last forever, all of them loved him. He was safety, security, relief, an ending.

"My fellow Americans," he said, and the moment he spoke the crowd fell into rapt silence, "and even those of you among us today who are not Americans, for I know that this disaster has not been, solely, an American tragedy—to all of you, I say: the worst is over.

"I say the worst. I say the worst because, in truth, we still have a lot to do. Our cities, our homes are in shambles. The DuPage administration has left scars on this country—scars that won't immediately heal. And on top of that, we as a community must now grapple with new facts, new facts that have come to light about our very existence. Magic, is real. That's the simple facts. I know I didn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. Like many of you, I had grown up with a certain idea about what this world is. It's come as a great shock to me personally, to the people of this country and the world, what we now know.

"But we do not have the luxury to sit and ponder these developments. We don't have time, right now. Because our sisters and brothers and mothers and fathers are dying, our cities are on the brink of destruction, our very way of life has reached a precipice from which we might not ever come back if we don't act now.

"Some of you may already be acquainted with a few of the brave young women I brought with me today. We have here my own daughter, Malia. Over there is Miss Hong from Calgary, who was a great help to me during the last few months, and there are many more I could name but we'd be here all week. My own daughter, that's what I learned, my own daughter was one of these brave young women. It came as a great shock, to me personally, just as I'm sure it must come as a great shock to all of you out there learning just now about your own daughters.

"Here we were, thinking we were safe and secure in our homes, in our homelands. We never knew—I never knew—just what these brave young women were sacrificing each and every night to keep us safe. The evil—I believe we can call it that—the evil that preyed on us. These brave young women fought just as any soldier overseas might, in our own cities and towns. So the first of many changes that I'll be making during the long recovery of this country is to give these brave young women the support they need. The support they deserve.

"As such, I'll be forming, effective immediately, a new branch of our military. The United States Magic Force—USMF for short—will be a way we can organize, train, and supply these young women and ensure they can perform their duty in the best possible conditions, with all the benefits we already extend to any other serviceman or -woman. All American mages—I say American of course because I don't intend to overstep my bounds, but I hope that our friends and allies across the world will follow suit—all American mages are freely encouraged to register as members of the USMF. In exchange, they'll be supplied with payment, housing, the best training possible, psychological and mental health resources, and more as we better understand exactly what these young women need in order to do what they're doing to protect us.

"And we need them now more than ever. Our cities are filled with what we've now come to know as 'wraiths,' creatures I never could have believed existed if I didn't witness what all of you witnessed here in this very city not two hours ago. Anarchy has fallen in several of our largest metropolises, and we'll need the help of every mage we can get to put an end to it."

He paused, straying from his orator's gaze that somehow looked at everyone at once to instead stare at the thickest cluster of cameras dead ahead. The ruins of the Washington Monument rose behind him. "We need you now more than ever, young mages of America. We need you to fight, to protect your homes and the people you love. Please, I'm asking you, go to your nearest government facility, be it a town hall, police station, courthouse, or anything of the like. Register with the USMF. Together, we can—we *will* heal our great nation."

The crowd cheered. They cheered for a long time, applauded, although the President signaled through posture alone he was not quite finished. He waited until they settled.

"Of course, it will not be a quick or easy task. If we rest on our laurels now, if we think we're finished, we could even see our country slip into a far worse state than it's currently in. And while a lot of our local governments, at the state, county, and even city level, still function to a limited extent, our federal government could not be weaker. The judiciary and legislative branches have been almost completely compromised, and until we better understand just what effects the DuPage administration had on the minds of our Supreme Court Justices,

Senators, and Congressmen and -women, they will not be able to resume their posts. As such, until we can get the country back on its feet, I have no choice but to invoke emergency powers and assume control over all three branches of the federal government. These measures will be temporary, until we can be certain of the stability of our nation. But at this moment in time, we cannot afford to be bound up in obscure formalities and regulations that were designed for a world much different than the one we now find ourselves in. This crisis requires immediate and decisive action, and without these emergency powers that action cannot be taken."

He cleared his throat, acted as though shuffling papers on his podium, but there were no papers. "I'll speak more on what exactly those emergency powers entail soon, once we have a better idea of the scope and magnitude of the situation. For now, though, allow me just to say: Stability will return. It has been a dark day for America, a dark day for the world. But today, is a new day. Together, everyone, whether you use magic or not, everyone will work together to ensure a safe and happy future for ourselves and our children, and our grandchildren and their grandchildren. And I extend my hand to our friends and allies around the world, and ask for their cooperation in the coming months and years, no matter how trying they may be.

"Together, I promise, we will not only return this world to normalcy, but build a foundation on which the entire human race can develop into something much greater. The revelations these past few months have been shocking, but we can learn and grow from them. We can work together and push ourselves to places we might never have reached in the world before magic. We can develop new technology, new cures for diseases, new ways of solving the great many problems that face us. Perhaps, even, we may journey to the stars...

"I thank you."

The crowd cheered. The President looked to his daughter, who nodded to several of the Magical Girl soldiers who had formed a defensive line in front of the stage. The President turned to exit the stage, but someone shouted:

"Schrodinger, what about Schrodinger?"

For some reason the President heard this remark. He and his cadre looked to the Capitol mezzanine, where Calgary waved back beside the captured Schrodinger in question.

A stir occurred, the question reverberated, and some of those who had not quenched their thirst leaned in as though they expected a summary execution right then on camera. Even people who had fought on the Capitol dome and seen Schrodinger fight alongside them leaned in.

But the President said, "We are nation of laws. All apprehended members of the DuPage administration will be tried in a court of law. And if that court finds them guilty of crimes against humanity, only then will we grant them the justice they deserve."

On the mezzanine, Calgary pressed her hands deep in her pockets so the flaps of her jacket spread like wings at her sides. She tilted back her head and whistled a wayward eye at Clownmuffle, who had remained seated the entire time. "Hear that? You'll get one final stage to perform on, eyyyy. You can be sure everyone will be watching this time..."

Two of her goons seized Clownmuffle under the shoulders and hoisted her to her feet. Several frenetic glances were exchanged between the Magical Girls near the President and those on the mezzanine, hastily a plan of action was communicated and Calgary commanded the same goons to shuffle Clownmuffle into the remains of the Capitol.

"It'll be easier that way, if we put her in this crowd everyone'll tear her to bits."

The goons nodded and led Clownmuffle along the mezzanine.

A final stage, Clownmuffle thought. Her own private Nuremberg. It seemed something was still sensible after all, and she imagined how she might look in such a place, a courthouse before a guillotine. Everyone watching.

Everyone wanted her to die.

Alright. If that's what they wanted.

But Clownmuffle didn't want to die.

Calgary had Clownmuffle's gem in her pocket. She put her anti-magic chains around Clownmuffle's wrists.

Clearly, nobody could escape from these conditions.

Is everyone watching?

Did everyone see Calgary place Clownmuffle's Soul Gem in the pocket of her jacket? And everyone can clearly see the jacket has no holes? A well-made jacket. Designer. Wouldn't do for it to have holes. As everyone can see, there are no holes at all...

Are you watching, everyone? Do you see these chains binding Clownmuffle's wrists? Powerful anti-magic chains. It would be a singular feat simply to escape regular chains bound so tight, but these chains have a peculiar property of being anti-magic. As Clownmuffle is, of course, a magician, this makes them particularly dangerous. She please asks you your patience.

Because very soon, it will be revealed that Clownmuffle's Soul Gem is not in Calgary's pocket. No, in fact, Clownmuffle will show that it has, as if by magic, transferred into her own pocket. She could of course show you right now, that is if her hands were free so she could reach inside and retrieve it. But as everyone can see, her wrists are bound tight. Is there any way to escape this prison? How could she possibly escape?

As everyone watched Calgary's assistants lead Clownmuffle to the doors of the Capitol, Clownmuffle twisted one wrist. The trick handcuffs popped open.

THE END

Credits

I. Titles

1. West, Nathanael. *The Day of the Locust*.
2. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Marble Faun: Or, The Romance of Monte Beni*.
3. Franzen, Jonathan Earl. *The Twenty-Seventh City*.
4. Yoshida, Reiko (trans. Grant, Tiffany & Jones, Kyle). *Girls und Panzer*.
5. Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*.
6. Barnes, Djuna. *Nightwood*.
7. Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*.
8. Joyce, James Augustine Aloysius. *Ulysses*.
9. —
10. Pynchon, Thomas Ruggles Jr. *Gravity's Rainbow*.
11. Coles, Dennis. "Mighty Healthy".
12. Calhoun, John Bumpass. "Death Squared: The Explosive Growth and Demise of a Mouse Population".
13. Dibbell, Julian. "A Rape in Cyberspace, or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society".
14. Dick, Philip Kindred. *VALIS*.
15. Milton, John. "When I Consider How My Light is Spent".
16. Farragut, David Glasgow.
17. Cussler, Clive Eric. *Raise the Titanic!*
18. —
19. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "N.Y. Electric".
20. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "N.Y. Electric".
21. —

22. Spinelli, Jerry. *Loser*.
23. Staten, Joseph. *Halo 3*.
24. Hieronym. *To the Stars*.
25. Malory, Thomas. *Le Morte Darthur*.
26. Bach, Johann Sebastian. "Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor".
27. Stoppard, Tom. *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*.
28. Whitman, Walt. "I Sing the Body Electric".
29. Hopkins, John & Graham, Bruce. *Dunston Checks In*.
30. —
31. Malthus, Thomas Robert. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*.
32. Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*.
33. Håstad, Jonatan Leandroer. "Ice Cold Smoke".
34. Gastrow, Jason. "Bubsy 3D 2".
35. West, Nathanael. *The Day of the Locust*.
36. Quayle, James Danforth. "Reflections on Urban America".
37. Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "The Waste Land".
38. —
39. Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "The Waste Land".

II. Thanks

This was a difficult project. I have never worked on a single project for so long, and I think everyone who has stayed with it to the end. Thank you also for the thoughtful reviews and feedback. I strive to continue improving, so all of your comments have been extremely helpful. I really cannot thank you enough for all the support.

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