

Fargo

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Fargo

by [Bavitz](#)

Summary

[Post-Rebellion] In the frostbitten American Midwest, ragged Magical Girls vie for territory to survive the unforgiving landscape. One such girl is Sloan Redfearn, who wastes away in Fargo, North Dakota, nursing a grudge and watching her hopes slowly die. But when Kyubey approaches with a unique opportunity, she becomes embroiled in a conspiracy that threatens to topple gods.

Cherish the Merry-Go-Round

FIRST ARC: WILLISTON

A gaggle of amorphous shapes drifted behind the frost-coated front window of the convenience store. The door opened with a bell and the shapes coalesced into the form of a man, draped in rags and furs, blowing into his hands as he stomped his boots on the welcome mat.

"We close in five," said Sloan Redfearn behind the counter.

"Ayup," said the man. The parts of his face visible behind the beard and trucker cap were beet red. He wiped his nose and shambled into the aisles, fingering each individual item on the shelves. Sloan could do nothing but watch.

Ten minutes later he deposited an armful of snacks and a six-pack of beer onto the counter.

"Howzit, Sloan." The man motioned at the nametag on her apron. His beard parted into an irrepressible smile.

She swiped a bag of chips. "It's good."

The man glanced over his shoulder, although they were and had always been the only two in the store. He leaned over the counter and lifted his eyebrow. "You lookin' for work?"

"I got work." She was at it as they spoke.

"I mean real work. You in school?"

She swiped the last item and punched the numbers. "Twenty thirty-seven, please."

"Ach." The man patted his sides. He opened his patchwork coat and rifled through an interior pocket. His hand emerged with a billfold. "Reason I ask is, there's a demand for girls like you. Out in uh, out in Williston. You know Williston, doll?" He slapped down a ten, a five, and five ones and started scavenging for change.

"I know Wahpeton," she said. Directly south of her present location, Fargo. When prey was scarce she sometimes went down for leavings.

"I'm saying Williston." He fished a quarter and delved for more. "Out west, near Bismarck but not quite. You know Bismarck?"

Who was this guy, asking her about these pointless dead end towns in a pointless dead end state? She curled her hands around the edge of the counter and tapped her nails against the glass, her gaze fixed on his sausage fingers as they dipped in and out of the wallet.

"Point is." He found a dime. "There's oil in Williston, you betcha. Big oil. All em corporations are setting shop for the long haul. We're talking big oil, big big oil." He flapped his hands like a bird to demonstrate the bigness, accidentally launching coins from his open billfold. "And when there's oil, well, then there's men. Men to drill the oil, men to truck the oil, men to watch the men drilling the oil. A whole lotta men and none too many girls, you fish my drift?"

Sloan's eyes narrowed as she fished his drift. "If you continue this line of conversation, mister, it won't be until the snow melts they find you again."

The man blinked, his smile hesitant but extant. Gauging whether to assert dominance or laugh it off and move on. He would choose the latter, eventually. Girls who talked like that weren't the girls he wanted. Sloan corrected her slouch and straightened like a centipede, looming a head taller than him (the counter was elevated) and erasing any conceit of good humor.

"Ayup." The man crouched to retrieve the coins he dropped. The conversation died.

He bid her good-night as he left the store with his bags.

Sloan waited until his truck rumbled away before closing shop. She locked the doors and stepped into the frigid bite of late autumn, temperatures approximating zero. Filthy mounds of week-old slush moldered on the corners of the parking lot. A lone street lamp tilted overhead, blinking.

She shuffled into her long brown overcoat, her most precious possession. She had pilfered it before she left Minneapolis. Trailing down to her boots, the furred interior could stave off freezing even in dead winter. At night it functioned as a blanket and in summer she hung it in her apartment and stored stuff in its innumerable pockets. It gave her a cylindrical, androgynous appearance that minimized unwanted attention. Oh, how she loved her jacket so.

It would still be a dismal night. The jacket could only appease the cold, not erase it entirely. And if the recent weeks were any indication, wraiths would be few and far between. As if even they hated the weather. At least it wasn't snowing.

Fargo by night had a postapocalyptic vibe. Discarded husks of old trucks rusted at the side of dilapidated shacks. Everywhere lights flickered: streetlights, storefront lights, starlights. Nothing had any consistency. If all the lights turned off at once the city itself might vanish from existence. She wrapped a hand around the Soul Gem in her pocket and kept her eyes open. In such a dark place, the black miasma that heralded wraiths could slip past a careless eye.

When Sloan reached Fargo's central business district, as transient as the rest of the city, she heard a guttural murmur from behind the decrepit line of storefronts and hesitated. Her auditory senses weren't her most reliable quality, but the sound merited investigation nonetheless. She shuffled along the brick facade of a shop until she found a crevice alleyway and flattened herself sideways to pass through.

By the time she had reached the end of the alley, she knew she had prey. The ghoulish moans were inimitable by anything but a wraith. She grabbed the edge of the wall and peeked out at the trash-strewn lot behind the stores, the kind of place nobody went even during the day, enclosed by barbwire fence and a flurry of NO TRESPASSING signs. In the center of a grainy plume of shadow stood what could be taken as a tall and gray man swaddled in a vaguely buddhist robe. The bald, shriveled head extending from the elongated torso had no real face. A frenzy of static and glitches swallowed its features, a melange of pixelated terror that belied the inhumanity of the otherwise humanoid appearance.

Sloan sighed. A lesser wraith, small potatoes. She didn't have the luxury of complaint given her circumstances.

She unleashed the magic from her Soul Gem to transform into her Magical Girl attire, which meant little aesthetically because she continued to wear her large brown jacket over it. It was too damn cold to traipse in a miniskirt.

The plan: Eliminate the target while expending as little magic as possible. She wasted no time materializing her weapon, a large machine gun with a long, Gatling-style barrel. She held the heavy turret at her hip, although it tipped her somewhat off-balance. With magic she could lighten the gun or have it levitate by her side or something spectacular, but who gave a shit. She took aim and readied to fire as the wraith turned toward her.

Something leapt from the roof of the nearest building and somersaulted at the wraith with superfluous acrobatic pizzazz, emerging from its self-indulgence at just the right moment to strike the wraith over the head with a curved scimitar. The wraith reared back as its assailant stuck the landing and readied a quick second strike that would surely finish its intended target.

Sloan rammed the other Magical Girl out of the way and hoisted her machine gun to bludgeon the wraith herself. But it had been a long time since she had been so active in combat and she misjudged the weight of her own weapon, only raising it halfway before losing her balance and tottering forward helplessly.

The wounded wraith fled, oozing through the barbwire fence and into a sprawling snowfield beyond. While Sloan recouped herself, the other Magical Girl took off in hot pursuit. She cleared the fence in a single bound and sprinted atop the snow. Sloan gritted her teeth and swung her turret around, hardly taking time to steady herself as she squeezed the trigger.

The machine gun churned as it loosed thousands of luminescent bolts into the field, blasting the barbwire to smithereens and eviscerating the landscape. The ground spewed puffs of white powder as Sloan planted her back foot and sprayed round after round, indeterminate toward what she aimed for and what she hit.

A spasm of pain stung deep in her forehead. She cut off her magic at once and clutched her skull. Her gun stopped, although the turret continued to spin with a mechanical whirr.

Shit. She had used too much.

Sloan discarded her gun and staggered into the tattered warzone she had created. She had to have hit the wraith. For as much magic as she used, if she didn't hit it...

Four small black cubes sat in the snow, a malevolent aura quickly dissipating around them. Sloan fell to her knees before the spoils and scooped them up with a fistful of snow. For so weak a wraith, it was a decent drop.

The tip of something sharp settled on her shoulder. "I suggest you fork over what I'm due."

Sloan struggled to her feet and faced the other Magical Girl. She was a ragged thing, a valkyrie from a dying empire. Vestiges of a typical Magical Girl costume clung to her, threads frayed at the edges and what looked like handmade stitch-work on the collar. Her gaunt and worn face expelled breath in a pasty cloud.

"You aren't due anything," said Sloan.

"I landed the first strike," said the other. "And I'd've finished it myself if not for you." She wiped her nose with the back of a dainty glove.

"Look kid," said Sloan. "I dunno who you are or where you come from, but Fargo's my territory."

The kid moved the tip of her sword from Sloan's shoulder to her throat. "I ain't fucking around. The cubes, please. You can keep the city, like I'd want this dungheap."

Sloan rehearsed the actions it would take to disarm her opponent. Knock the sword out of the way with one hand and blast her in the face with the other. The kid was an obvious novice, evidenced by everything from her stance to her language. In a fair fight Sloan won every time. But the pain in her skull lingered and a desperate fatigue swept her. Her magic was low. Dangerously low.

With a grudging sigh Sloan opened her hand, all four cubes perched on the upturned palm. The kid ogled them a moment and then carefully picked out two.

"Take them all," said Sloan. "You idiot. Take all four."

"This is fair," said the kid. "You got the finishing shot, after all."

The kid backed away, pointing her sword at Sloan with one hand and clutching the cubes to her chest with the other. "Don't worry about seeing me again. I'm moving up in the world. A landfill like this is no place for me."

She turned and ran into the darkness.

Sloan sagged to her knees and let her Soul Gem roll onto the ground, awash in a putrid splotch of brown. She placed the two cubes beside it and let them do their work. That stupid kid. Only taking two cubes, when she had right to them all. If she didn't learn, she wouldn't last.

Corruption streamed from her Soul Gem and osmosed into the cubes. Only a few seconds and the cubes refused to cleanse any more. Her Soul Gem remained mud brown.

Closing her eyes, she cupped her hands around the Soul Gem and leaned her head close. "It's okay," she said. "You're alive." She spoke as if to the gem rather than herself. Although the gem was herself, technically. Her soul, if you got metaphysical about it. "You had a bad night but tomorrow will be better. You survived worse than this, so you'll survive this too. It's okay."

She kissed her Soul Gem and opened her eyes. It looked slightly less brown, she was sure of it. She tried not to think how frequent her pep talks were getting.

When she recovered enough to look up, she found herself staring into two emotionless red eyes attached to a sickeningly cute cat-thing that blended into the snow perfectly. Its tail flicked back and forth.

The girl who escaped has far less potential than you, said Kyubey, that Mephistopheles of adolescent girls the world round. He spoke via telepathy; his face never moved. *I'm surprised you were unable to control the situation.*

"I was tired." Sloan pushed herself upright. She kicked the spent cubes at him and let him eat them with the weird alien mouth on his back. Sliding her Soul Gem into a pocket, she wrapped her coat tighter around herself and headed the way she came.

Kyubey trotted alongside her. *How unfortunate that such a promising Magical Girl has resolved herself to this fate. At full capacity, your prowess and expertise would allow you to reliably fight wraiths in even a large city.*

She climbed through the broken fence. "You have your cubes. Why are you still talking to me?" Her discarded machine gun vanished with a wave of her hand.

It's important I keep an eye on the mental health of promising contractees. It would be inefficient if I let a useful prospect disappear before extracting as much as possible from her.

"You already have a pretty good grasp on my mental health. Gonna ask me about Minneapolis next?"

I didn't plan to bring it up if you didn't first, said Kyubey. *But you may find it of interest that your replacement, Miss Ibsen, is managing the city adequately.*

Sloan stopped in front of the alley back to the main street of Fargo and sighed. "You're not even trying to be subtle, are you?"

With one deft movement she grabbed Kyubey and drop-kicked him. His ragdoll body soared skyward in a series of midair contortions, the expressionless red eyes betraying no surprise or discomposure as he disappeared over the roof of a building. Sloan clapped her hands and laughed. That felt good. He was normally so surreptitious with her she forgot the catharsis of obliterating his adorable body.

She headed home.

Her second-story apartment overlooked a liquor store and a video rental joint, both advertising their wares with neon signs that pierced her curtains and drove her crazy when she tried to sleep. She closed the door behind her and tromped her boots dry, flopping onto her mattress and pulling them off one after another. She kept her coat on. Heat wasn't cheap.

She shook her cereal boxes to find one that wasn't empty. Corn flakes. It would do. Shoveling handfuls into her mouth, she poured over the nutrition facts on the side of the box.

Kyubey tapped her window. *May I come in?*

"Are you like a vampire, you can only come in if I let you? Would explain a lot."

The rat bastard pushed open the window and slithered inside. *It's merely a formality based on human ideals of etiquette. Speaking of which, it was rude of you to kick me.*

"Boo hoo." Sloan's corn flakes went extinct and she tossed the box aside to save the crumbs for later. She had figured she hadn't seen the last of Kyubey after she kicked him. If he wanted to talk, he wanted to talk. And since he had opened their conversation with every obvious way to butter/rile her up, he probably wanted something from her. "Let's cut to the chase, yeah? I could use some shuteye."

Kyubey stared at her from the center of the room. *I have an opportunity for you, Sloan.*

She fell back on her mattress. "Not interested. That was easy."

It's in your best interest to listen to what I have to tell you.

"Yes Kyubey, you sure know what's in my best interest. I believe that. You made a compelling case for yourself with that whole contract bit."

His face remained ever fixed. *Are you unhappy with being a Magical Girl, Sloan? Or are you unhappy that you were ousted from Minneapolis?*

She counted cracks on the ceiling. "Hurry up and tell me this opportunity of yours, Cueball."

Of course. I am offering you the opportunity to reclaim your territory of Minneapolis.

Wham. If the satanic hamster wanted her attention, he should have opened with that.

Tell him no. It's Kyubey. You can't trust him. Tell him no. She opened her mouth to form the word and closed it without saying a thing. He already had her soul, what more could he steal from her? What did she have to steal that was worth more than a chance to return to Minneapolis and smash Clair Ibsen in her pockmarked face? Was that not the dream that had sustained her through so many frigid Fargo nights?

No, she couldn't trust Kyubey. How could she, he was the one thing in the universe that had screwed her worse than Clair had. But was that even true? His previous question resonated in her mind: Which made her more unhappy? Being a Magical Girl, or eking a miserable existence in godforsaken Fargo?

"You claimed earlier Clair was managing the city fine. Why would you want her terminated?"

I have no particular interest who controls the territory of Minneapolis, Clair Ibsen or Sloan Redfearn. You are both competent Magical Girls suited for a task of that magnitude.

Sloan closed her eyes. "You're being roundabout. I don't like it. What do you want me to do?"

There is a town west of here where your species has discovered a primitive energy source. This discovery has caused a rapid population explosion as workers migrate in search of financial gain.

A town to to the west. Maybe the same town the man at the convenience store had mentioned. "More people means more wraiths."

Not simply more people. Boom towns are rare but remarkable phenomena in human history. They are locations of lawlessness, corruption, and sin. The unrealistic hopes of the migrants, once confronted by the stark realities of the situation, create immense quantities of despair. In effect, a perfect storm of wraith production.

"You must have loved the California Gold Rush," said Sloan. She peeled herself off the mattress and shuffled to her closet-sized bathroom.

No. Historically, these events cannot be properly harvested. Boom regions have low populations of young human females, and thus low supplies of contractees relative to demand. Furthermore, established Magical Girls can rarely be persuaded to abandon their territories for distant prospects. As such, the immense energy potential of these events usually goes to waste.

Sloan ran her toothbrush under the faucet. Her roll of paste was coiled to the cap. "But this time, you happen to have a competent Magical Girl not far from the site. A girl with little attachment to her current territory and who you perceive has nothing to lose from embarking on such a venture."

Exactly.

"How convenient. What's this got to do with Minneapolis?"

The cubes dropped by wraiths are mutually beneficial as an energy source for us both. Your power is limited immensely by your sullied Soul Gem. The sparse drops in Fargo have done nothing to alleviate the despair you've struggled against ever since your duel with Miss Ibsen in Minneapolis. When was that? Seven months ago?

She finished brushing and spat into the sink. "Something like that."

But if you were to acquire a significant quantity of cubes at once, you could restore your Soul Gem to peak condition and then some. You would then be able to contest Miss Ibsen to reclaim control of your home city. You would enjoy that, would you not? I believe that chance is a more than suitable reward for your services in Williston.

Her reflection peered at her from behind a dirty mirror. She ran a hand through her hair, the fingers snagging on knot after knot. "It's a sour deal for me. I risk my life to help you, and in return you merely allow me to try to do something I might possibly want to do. You're not actually giving me anything."

I didn't say it was a trade. I said it was an opportunity.

"A shitty one," said Sloan.

You need to purify your Soul Gem to have any hope of defeating Clair Ibsen in combat. If that isn't your goal, why are you even still alive?

For a time she said nothing and when she finally left the bathroom Kyubey had gone. She didn't trust him, of course. No doubt he had kept cards off the table and his abrupt departure was a tactical move to prevent her from asking too many questions. At least he had been straightforward enough to admit his aim was nothing more than to use her.

A nest of wraiths in a remote locale. She wondered if at her current strength she could even handle them. Not that things would improve if she stayed in Fargo. Maybe Kyubey's deception was that he had no expectation of her survival. Maybe all he wanted was to squeeze as much energy out of her as possible before her long-awaited and ignominious end. Maybe he should have framed his so-called opportunity as a choice between a slow death in Fargo and a quick one in, what was the name, Williston.

Maybe maybe maybe. She hit the switch and climbed onto her mattress, unbuttoning her coat and draping it over her body like a blanket, folding her knees to keep her toes from poking from the hem. Trying to uncoil the mysteries of Kyubey's freakish multitudinous mind would lead nowhere. She had to reframe his terms in her own language and decide independently of his theoretical posturing.

She slid her Soul Gem out her coat and placed it on the floor beside her. It swallowed the dim light from outside into its filthy core. Kyubey knew his business. He had not appeared exactly when he did by pure chance. Everything about this "opportunity" reeked of his trademark manipulation and half-truths. It wasn't a question of deceiving her. It was a question of whether she were desperate enough to have no choice.

The next morning Sloan found a roadmap and looked up Williston. It was about as far as you could get from Fargo and still be in North Dakota. She would have to hitchhike.

Leaving Fargo for even a week meant abandoning her job, her apartment, her territory. Some kid like the girl she met yesterday would swoop in before she even crossed the city line. Well, whoever it was, they probably deserved it.

Into a backpack that had survived three years of high school and a half-year of destitution she loaded the things she still owned, mostly clothes. She finished off her cereal and left the boxes and the mattress for her landlord to deal with. One way or another, she would never return to this town. At least she had that certainty to nourish a little hope.

Westbound on I-94 she extended an arm and stuck up a thumb, applying her best girlish smile to attract the lampreys. They must have had some instinctual notion of her, because it took thirty-seven passing vehicles in trickle-down traffic before one stopped.

"Where ya headed, miss?" said the featureless man behind the wheel of a no-brand pickup. He tipped his cap and manifested a smile from his doughy face.

"Williston," Sloan said.

"I can take you far as Bismarck. That alright?"

"Fine."

The truck smelled of ash. She stared out the window at the same damn field and the same damn barbed wire fence that spanned the entire state and probably a few other states as well. One perfect flat horizon over which hovered a gray sky. The occasional pumpjack loomed in the distance like a discarded brachiosaur.

The driver tried to spark smalltalk but months behind a cash register made her decent enough at dodging it. What's her name? Sloan. Where she from? Minneapolis. She old enough to be on her own? Yep. Could be dangerous, a girl like her out here. Yep.

Yep.

Yep.

When the humans went quiet, the radio said: "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me."

She listened an hour before they reached Bismarck, the state capital. She thanked the man and stepped into a city of even more marginal squalor than Fargo. She wondered if any Magical Girl bothered to come here. Surely someone. Those with nowhere else to go.

A sign downtown advertised bus service to Minot, Dickinson, and Williston. A large group of men gathered around the sign, all in the same plaid shirt with the same faded baseball cap,

wearing the same pensive expression with their arms folded the same way as they chewed the same tobacco or the same toothpick or the same cigarette. She dawdled behind them as they migrated en masse to the address on the sign.

The address belonged to a bus station. Three or four buses that looked made out of aluminum were bunched under a precarious awning. Into one bus filed a line of plaid-shirted men, heads stooped as one-by-one they vanished through the folding door. A destination was plastered on the side of each bus. An immense crowd had formed around the ticket booth, manned by a sole secretary who pantomimed prices to embittered masses from behind her plate glass.

Sloan gravitated toward the booth, lingering at the outer boundaries of the clot of men jockeying for tickets. It would cost less to hitchhike but given how long it had taken for her to get a ride the first time she didn't trust her odds. If she failed to reach Williston by sundown it would be a damn cold night.

The thicket of plaid and denim refused to part for her so she bumped against it listlessly, muttering excuse me and pardon me every so often only to go unheard by the faceless mob. She was circumnavigating the crowd in search of an entryway when she noticed someone in the crowd who did not fit in.

It was a young girl, teenage. Short, dark-haired, mousey, a conservative little-house-on-the-prairie outfit buttoned up her neck. Anxious pupils flickered behind round glasses. She stood at the periphery of the crowd, cowering in the shadow of the awning like a refugee from a bygone century. Sloan scanned the girl's hands.

A plain metal ring on the middle finger: the telltale sign of a Magical Girl.

So Sloan wasn't the only girl the rat bastard had finagled into his get rich quick scheme. He should know by now she didn't play well with others.

Quiet and inconspicuous, Sloan approached the girl. She weaved between the men with her hands in her pockets, although she didn't wear her own Soul Gem as a ring since jewelry tended to inspire burglaries. The dark-haired girl didn't notice her, didn't seem to notice much at all as she stared at a Great Beyond, her mouth slightly agape and murmuring to herself.

Sloan slinked into striking distance and lashed out her hand, seizing the other girl's and shaking it voraciously. "Hey kid you look a little lost where you from?"

The girl gasped. Mortification spread over her face. She reared back, banging into a metal buttress and jerking her hand away although Sloan kept her grip firmly rooted. Sloan was at least a head taller than the other Magical Girl and if she could make an impression she might scare her off without resorting to fisticuffs.

"You from here? Bismarck?" said Sloan. "What's your name?"

The girl disappeared. Sloan blinked and released her handshake, realizing she was holding nothing at all. She looked around but there was no sign of the girl anywhere. She had completely vanished, like a mirage or an illusion.

Well shit. That complicated matters somewhat.

It cost more than she expected for a ticket but she had already wasted too much time so she succumbed to sunk-cost fallacy and coughed up a good chunk of her savings. It was mid-afternoon by the time she filed into line for the bus, managing to shoulder her way near the front so she could get prime seating. The sole female in a line of stooped-shouldered men, she flashed her ticket at the driver, who ushered her onward with an ambivalent nod.

She pulled her way through the rows toward the back. Everything in the bus was metal and glass, no cushions, no carpet. Those who had entered before her sat with eyes fixed between feet, iron titans in exodus from the city of the iron chancellor.

In the very back seat was the dark-haired girl, her forehead pressed against the window. Sloan didn't hesitate. She clomped forward and slid onto the seat next to her.

The girl saw her coming and disappeared like before, but Sloan was prepared. She leaned aggressively at the spot the girl had occupied moments before and planted a hand against the window, sealing her into the corner. Yes, she was still there. Invisible but still there, Sloan could feel the tiny heartbeat quicken its pace as she pressed against her prey.

Sloan spoke telepathically. *Nice houdini trick, kid. Where'd you learn it?*

No response.

Aw come on, don't be shy. I ain't gonna hurt you. Now come on and reappear so I don't look like an asshole, yeah?

The line of men sluiced in behind her, taking seats around them. They did not seem to notice Sloan's odd position around what to them must look like empty space.

Come on kid, gimme something. A name at least?

O, Omaha. Even via telepathy it came out as a stammered whisper.

Omaha, eh? Well, I'm Fargo. Nice to meet you. Now let's get friendly because it's gonna be a long ride.

She held her hand to shake, making her appearance to the casual onlooker even more awkward. The girl called Omaha said nothing and did not reappear. Sloan's hand hung idly.

Something clamped down between the thumb and pointer. Sloan's flesh ripped open as a ring of shark teeth tore through the skin, causing a bloody red mark to manifest as if by demonic possession. Sloan gritted her teeth to stop from shouting the immense fuck building on the tip of her tongue and pulled back to break the bite.

The teeth left her skin. An instant later the bus window flew open. Sloan swept her good hand only to swat harmlessly against a leg as the invisible Omaha flung herself out the window. Omaha plopped onto the tarmac and clip-clopped away, small footprints emerging from the dust in her wake.

Sloan pressed her bleeding hand into her coat. Where the fuck even was Omaha, wasn't that Kansas or some shit? No, Nebraska. That really was a long way away, but of course Kyubey probably had to search far and wide to scrounge up a loony of such premium caliber.

Speaking of the devil. As she lost sight of Omaha's footprints exiting stage left, she caught a glimpse of the rat bastard himself watching her from a bench near the end of the station, as motionless as a small statue.

Fuck you, she said with matching hand gesture. The bus pulled out the station.

Dappled Things

A caravan progressed toward the town, station wagons and pickups and semitrailers and sedans overloaded with earthly possessions of the anonymous men riding one by one into the waiting maw of Williston. Sloan could tell even from afar and even in the waning sun it was a wraith Pandaemonium, the miasma so thick it swallowed the town's entire outward existence with an aura of malevolence. Beyond vague edges and obscure corners the only thing left uneaten was a clock tower that jutted above the black canopy, salvaging a vestige of the real world from the unreality consuming it.

Sloan sat upright and fingered the Soul Gem in her coat. Kyubey had told her it was bad, but this transcended bad. Try abominable. Try cataclysmic.

Her bus lumbered undeterred into the miasma. Its sterile steel interior became instantly coated in a dark grime. Sloan stood and sidled past the hunchbacked man beside her into the aisle. As she pulled her way to the front, the bus driver turned her head. "Please sit down, we will arrive shortly."

"I need off now," said Sloan.

"Please sit down, we will arrive shortly. Please sit down, we will arrive shortly. Please sit down..."

The driver's eyes were glazed and unresponsive. Typical human behavior upon entering a miasma.

The confines of the bus offered no mobility, no escape. In the tinted windows emerged faces of lesser wraiths, hundreds of them clustered together, fighting for a look at the fresh blood. Their moans reverberated through the bus as their faces began to phase through the glass.

Sloan unleashed her magic. Her Magical Girl uniform manifested beneath her brown overcoat. Her machine gun materialized in her hands, forcing her to lean to keep it from clattering against the seats in the aisle or the slumped riders with their foreheads nearly between their knees.

Monstrous claws groped through the walls. She slung the machine gun around, lifting it high over seats with partially-magical effort. She blasted the back window of the bus to shards in a single ripple of pale light, sprinted down the aisle, cartwheeled through the shattered window, and landed on her feet in the middle of the road.

The glut of wraiths oozed after her, bunched up the exact way she liked it. Judging from her fight the day before, she didn't have much magic to spare, so she had to make it count. She hoisted the machine gun at her hip, took aim, and—

And a car crashed into her from behind. The breath rushed out her mouth and her gun hurtled out her hands. The back of her skull cracked something hard before she bounced off it and hit the ground, rolling aside to escape being flattened as the car continued like the driver had not

noticed he hit something. She landed on all fours, dazed and disoriented, scanning for her gun and locating it not far from her.

She reached but space seemed to distort around her arm, expanding the distance to the gun exponentially. A hideous cackle pierced her ears as the wraiths unhinged their jaws in unison to laugh at her useless form on the asphalt.

"Fuck you all," she said. Focusing her energy, she raised her hand. Her machine gun trembled and rose as well, levitating by invisible puppet string. The pain in her skull stirred and she braced for a lot worse as she pointed at the wraiths to guide her disembodied weaponry's sights.

The gun fired. A surge of light shredded through the thick cluster of wraiths. The collective laugh turned to a screech as the wraiths disintegrated en masse, ripped into sizzling bits that drifted in the air like ash after a fire. Those spared the initial blast scattered and dispersed from the gunfire.

Her pain built to an unbearable pitch and she dropped her hand with an anguished scream. The gun smashed to the ground. She clutched her temples as the pain built and bloomed and burgeoned into a frenzied scorpion in her skull, raging its barbed tail against her brain, ripping at gray matter with its twin talons. She cut off all magic, reverted to her civilian outfit, but it did nothing to mollify the beast.

She had overdone it. Death loomed.

No—NO! The slaughtered wraiths must have dropped cubes. She only needed a handful... Howling in agony, she shuffled forward on her elbows, her legs twisting and struggling behind her as she pushed her body deeper to where a sporadic supply of granular cubes lay blinking. She reached for them, her hand and the cubes trembling both, and with a single solid swipe clenched more than she had held in her entire seven months in Fargo. She mashed the whole handful against her Soul Gem, as if the closer they were the faster they would work. Small streams of grief flitted out, blending perfectly with the miasma.

From every direction at once arose a singular cackle. Sloan looked up. All around her more wraiths had emerged. Many more than the initial assault, an unbroken tide of them, in the street, on the squat structures, inside the passing cars. The front ranks were comprised solely of lesser wraiths, but behind them Sloan could make out much larger creatures with true forms obscured in shadow.

Her mind whirred for a plan, an action, a defense, an evasion, anything. All that appeared was blankness. Her soul was shot to fuck. She sucked at barriers and diversions. Pure, unadulterated offense was her game, and if something levied a shot in her direction her best bet was to jump.

They had her surrounded on at least eight sides. She had nowhere to jump.

The robes of the wraiths began to billow and the static consuming their faces went ballistic as they charged a collective attack. A reverse panopticon of thick gray beams fired from their bosoms and raced to skewer her from every angle at once.

Around her sprung a translucent red bubble that appeared so suddenly she thought at first death really was like video games, where the screen froze red with the words GAME OVER plastered across it. The folly subsided as she realized someone had placed a barrier around her. The beams of the wraiths bounced back as the bubble throbbed and undulated with a series of wet slaps.

Her first thought was Miss Maladjusted from the bus. But the Magical Girl that bounded beside her and extended a hand looked nothing like the invisible Omaha girl. The sanguine bubble cast a fiery glaze over her but beyond that she wore a saccharine complexion with both gown and hair flowing behind her in an imaginary breeze. She clasped a ruby-studded scepter and wore her Soul Gem as a brooch on her shoulder.

"Can you walk, love?"

Sloan pushed herself upright. "I'm fine."

"Let's not mince words, then," said the girl. "I can only hold the barrier so long. When it pops, we need to run. Be a dear and watch my back, will you?"

"I'm ready whenever," said Sloan. She shoved both Soul Gem and cubes into her coat and retrieved her gun. Power ebbed back to her.

The other girl snapped her fingers and the bubble popped, plunging them into the dark. The wraiths screeched again and fired more beams but the girls were already running. Bubble Girl led the way toward the exit, using her staff to ward away the wraiths that had flanked them. Her chief method of attack seemed to be to spray a barrage of small red bubbles from the end of the staff, which Sloan normally would have found hilarious. Instead she levied suppressive fire into the horde at their heels, targeting the wraiths preparing to attack and leaping backward with each step to keep with the long-legged sprint of her companion. The end of the miasma hovered in the distance, light from the real world filtering through and extinguishing immediately.

Sloan blasted back one column of wraiths only for another to advance immediately. She swiveled her turret to fire but they moved quicker, erupting forth with more death beams. Sloan prepared to dodge only for another red bubble to zip in front of her and balloon into a massive sphere, catching and reflecting the beams before popping in a splash of crimson liquid. As soon as the bubble vanished Sloan decimated the wraiths that had attacked.

The wraiths slowed as the miasma thinned around them. A few more steps and they broke free from its wispy tendrils and reemerged in a world of ground and sky. The infinite line of vehicles continued its advance into the darkness, each bus and station wagon in turn swallowed by the mist. Around them settled small flakes of snow.

Sloan and the other girl returned to their street outfits, the other girl wearing a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. She let out a long sigh. "Phew! Nothing like some exercise to get you ready for dinner." She reached out a hand and jostled Sloan's shoulder as Sloan doubled over for breath.

"Yeah, thanks," said Sloan.

The other girl stretched her arms and yawned. "Too bad I only have snacks. Let's go to camp and sort things out." She realized something and held up a finger. "Oh, yes! I'm Delaney Pollack. What's your name, love?"

Sloan scrutinized Delaney. She had introduced herself by her real name, not quite standard procedure for Magical Girls on first acquaintance.

"Sloan Redfearn."

Delaney Pollack marched away from the road, waving to a passing bus from which stared a chain gang of plaid-shirted men. Sloan followed, not having much else to do.

"Sloan Redfearn, what a pretty name," said Delaney. "You must be the girl from Fargo. Kyubey told me all about you."

As soon as she mentioned his name, Kyubey poked his head out of the pouch of Delaney's sweatshirt and grinned at Sloan with his expressionless expression.

"Funny," said Sloan. "He didn't mention you at all."

It was considered highly unlikely you would agree to come if you knew others were enlisted as well, said Kyubey.

"You don't know that," said Sloan.

The probability was not in your favor.

Delaney led her through a gap in a fence and into a weedy field. Ahead stretched an expanse of badlands. Sloan wondered where they were even going. "In my experience," Delaney said, "Kyubey generally knows what he's talking about. You should thank him anyway, since if not for him I wouldn't have known to go rescue you."

"Nice of him to tell you to help me out. Might've been easier if he warned me not to go in to begin with."

I dislike spending unnecessary time near you, considering your propensity to destroy my bodies with such caprice.

They pushed through the stalks of grass and followed an embankment down to a muddy, half-frozen creek, across which stretched a small wormwood bridge. On the other side was a jeep covered with a camouflaged tarp.

"Careful on the bridge," said Delaney. "It's none too sturdy."

It creaked but held. Delaney pulled the tarp aside and unlocked the jeep, depositing Kyubey onto the passenger seat before ushering him aside to sit herself. Sloan took note of the license plate, since Delaney had failed to mention where she was from. Saskatchewan.

"You're from Canada."

"Is that something you care about?" asked Delaney, with a note of legitimate concern that verged on condescension. "If it really matters, my territory spans the cities of Regina and Saskatoon. I doubt you've heard of either. Don't be shy, take a seat. I won't bite."

Sloan circled the jeep before sliding into the backseat. She didn't much feel like sitting after the long bus ride and the previous excitement, especially now that the cubes had worked their magic. She pulled them out her pocket and arranged them around her Soul Gem, although they had ceased absorbing more grief. Her gem remained dark, but better than before.

"What the hell," said Sloan, as Kyubey scampered up to her and devoured the cubes with his back. "There's more than enough here to have drained the whole thing."

Delaney pushed her seat back and cast a glance over her shoulder. "The Soul Gems are attuned to the emotional state of their owner. Some people require a certain amount of grief to continue functioning, and even if that grief is removed via magical means, they will produce more immediately to fill the void. Perhaps you are one of those people, Sloan." She balanced her own Soul Gem on her upturned palm, tossed it into the air, and caught it with her other hand. Despite the magic she had expended during the fight, it was a nearly pure shade of red.

"Kyubey told me I could get enough cubes here to purify my Soul Gem," said Sloan.

That's true! The potential rewards here are so great even your permanent state of despair can be cured. In fact, this is really your only chance of survival.

"See?" Delaney scooped up the rat bastard and gave him a nice hug. "Kyubey has our best interests at heart, even when it doesn't always seem like it. I'll admit, when I first heard you were coming, I had doubts. Girls on the brink of despair can be so difficult, you know? But seeing your offensive capabilities, I believe you'll fit into the team quite nicely."

"Just because you helped me doesn't mean I'm part of your team."

"Love, I didn't help you, I saved your life." Delaney opened the glovebox, where a crumpled bag of chips awaited. "So don't go all rough-and-tumble lone wolf on me, I'll have to deal with enough of that from our third compatriot. You saw firsthand what awaits you in the miasma. Either we work together or we go home in body bags."

Yeah. Sloan didn't want to admit it, but she didn't know if she could take so many wraiths solo even at full strength. "Kyubey usually discourages Magical Girls working together."

I admit the risk of Magical Girls succumbing to infighting is particularly high, but this is a special case. Besides, instances of Magical Girls successfully working together are not unheard of. In Mitakihara, Japan, there is the example of—

"We're a long way from Japan," said Sloan. "Besides, the third member of this supposed team is not someone I want to work with."

Delaney shook her bag of chips but only crumbs fell out. "Third member? You met Winnipeg already? That doesn't make sense, she shouldn't be here for a few more hours."

"Winnipeg?" said Sloan. "She said her name was Omaha. Look what she did to my hand."

She held up the bitten hand. The blood had clotted in a scabbed ring between her thumb and forefinger. Delaney laughed and waved her own hand over the wound, healing it completely.

The girl from Omaha was not invited to be part of your team, said Kyubey. I found her presence at the bus station as interesting as you did, Sloan.

Sloan turned over her healed hand. "I doubt that. Especially since you being surprised by something is pretty rare."

As you may expect, her unique power can make her difficult to keep a close eye on.

"Unique power?" Delaney crumpled the chips bag and tossed it back in the glovebox.

"She can disappear at will, at least from what I saw," said Sloan. "I scared her off the bus. Maybe she decided to go home." Although she doubted it. A girl heading here all the way from Omaha must be at least as desperate as Sloan herself. And the whole hand-biting spiel pointed to some serious derangement.

Delaney shuffled through the glovebox but found nothing else to eat. A thin layer of snow had built on the windshield, instilling the jeep with a heavy chill. Sloan wrapped her coat tight around herself.

"Well, I'm not worried about any fourth girl," said Delaney. "She may even be useful as a diversion. This strategic talk bores me anyway, since I'll have to repeat everything once Winnipeg arrives." She turned in her seat and leaned her head uncomfortably close to Sloan, gripping her headrest. "I have the impression we've gotten off on the wrong foot, Sloan. You probably think I'm totally full of myself, right?"

"Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

"I swear I'm not a bad person," said Delaney. "Plus, if we get to know each other we'll work better as a unit. Which will be critical to our success! Trust me. I've done this before, and with a bunch of girls who would not stop squabbling over the pettiest things. It was so unfun."

"I'd rather take a nap," said Sloan. "I'll play ball with you and this Winnipeg chick. But I'm here for one reason only, and it's to snag enough cubes to cleanse my Soul Gem."

She leaned back and closed her eyes. Delaney Pollack with the bubble magic. Of course, wimpy magic wasn't a reason to let her guard down. Clair Ibsen back in Minneapolis had a pretty lame power, too. The one thing Sloan knew, the one thing she could not afford to forget, was that Magical Girls were either greedy, selfish, opportunistic bitches or else dead before their next period. Maybe Delaney was in the latter category, as she had that naive affection for Kyubey that usually signaled a novice. Or maybe the nice girl act was just that. An act.

For the next two hours, she pretended to sleep while Delaney cradled Kyubey in her arms and cooed to him under her breath.

By the time Delaney's cell phone spazzed with the first few notes of last year's earworm pop sensation, night had fallen in earnest and the temperature went subzero. Snow caked the jeep, but at no point had Delaney turned the ignition to run the heater.

She answered the phone. "Hi! Delaney Pollack speaking, how may I be of assistance?"

A muffled voice twittered on the other end.

"Of course, we'll be right there." She closed the phone and snapped her fingers at Sloan. "Winnipeg's arrived. Let's give her a nice warm welcome, alright?"

Sloan rubbed her eyes and forced a fake yawn. "You two know each other?"

"Not quite." Delaney climbed out the jeep, allowing Kyubey to scamper into the pouch of her hoodie. "Our territories border each other. Occasionally we come into contact. That's all."

Good, thought Sloan. She didn't want the Canadians teaming up on her, either in combat or group power dynamics. Dear lord, "group power dynamics"? She remembered why she hated working with others.

They tromped up the embankment and into the field, now blanketed in snow. A million stars glittered overhead. Sloan couldn't see far in front of her but there wasn't much to see.

"When we meet Winnipeg," said Delaney, "She'll say a lot of things you may not like. I recommend to grin and bear it. Try not to be confrontational. Just because she says something, doesn't mean it's the truth. Try to speak as little as possible."

"Why should I let her walk all over me."

"Because she'll kick your ass, love."

The road and the town emerged into view. The road remained illuminated by the headlights of the endless parade entering the town, but the miasma at night was somehow darker than the night itself. The top of the clock tower hung suspended above the black cloud, its face awash in a dull glow. Sloan had failed to notice before, but the clock no longer worked. Its hands were frozen on the twelve and six.

On the side of the road, near the edge of the miasma, stood a small figure. With each passing vehicle, the figure was bathed in the headlights, her shadow dancing on the ground although she herself made no movement at all. Sloan didn't need Delaney to tell her who the figure was, but she did anyway with a singsong chime.

"That's Winnipeg!"

Winnipeg, unmoving, waited for them to trudge the whole damn way to her. She was a short girl, younger than either of them, with the pugnacious stance of a pubescent who owed the world nothing. Her short, boyish hair and bilious profusion of freckles only made ridiculous the intense glare she levied at Sloan and Delaney as they approached. She already wore Magical Girl garb, a no-nonsense long-necked lavender vest with miniskirt and matching stockings which went so high up her twiglike legs they might as well have been pants.

She held a gleaming katana that was as tall as she was.

Sloan and Delaney moseyed up, Sloan with hands in pockets and shoulders slouched. The munchkin didn't even need to speak for Sloan to know she wouldn't like her.

"Hello, Winnipeg!" Delaney gave a cordial wave. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Regina-Saskatoon," said Winnipeg. Sloan thought she was speaking Sioux or something, but Delaney responded to it with a bashful smile.

"Please, you can leave it at just Regina," said Delaney. "The full title sounds so silly, I can hardly bear it."

"You possess both cities, do you not?" said Winnipeg. Her staunch stance did not waver, although both Delaney and Sloan towered over her. "Take pride in your accomplishments, woman. You earned your lands through your own prowess. If you now wish to disown one of them, perhaps I myself should seize it instead."

Delaney rubbed the back of her head and smiled. "Regina-Saskatoon it is, then."

Winnipeg wheeled on Sloan, jabbing a finger at her chest. "And you! Fargo. I was not aware that was a real place. I thought it was merely a movie."

"Yeah, well."

"I have zero faith in the ability of a woman who can only control such meager territory." Winnipeg sheathed her katana and folded her arms. "Your appearance ill suits me as well."

Sloan withheld a rebuttal involving Winnipeg's acne. "I owned Minneapolis before Fargo."

"Yes, the rat informed me as much." Winnipeg indicated Kyubey, who was enjoying a stroking between the ears from Delaney. "Your former holdings mean nothing to me. If you could not manage your lands, you do not deserve to use them as your name. As such, you remain Fargo."

"Not debating that," said Sloan.

"As for me." Winnipeg lifted her chin. "Nominally, I am Winnipeg. Other than a few northern sections, my effective territory encompasses the whole of Manitoba, as well as some northern counties of Dakota and Minnesota and an eastern stretch of Saskatchewan. In terms of territory alone, I am the most powerful Magical Girl in central Canada and assuredly more

powerful than either of you. As such, I shall be the leader of this party. While the rat has informed me that Regina-Saskatoon is something of a specialist in the subject of wraith infestations, her expertise shall manifest itself solely as supplementary advice, upon which it is my decision whether to act. The other, Fargo, shall have no voice in tactical decisions and is expected to follow my orders without question. After we have dispersed the infestation, the spoils in terms of grief cubes shall be distributed as such: 60 percent to me, 25 percent to Regina-Saskatoon, and 15 percent to Fargo. The city of Williston and surrounding territory shall afterward fall under my jurisdiction and become part of the greater Winnipeg holding. No rewards in terms of either land or hunting rights shall be bestowed to Regina-Saskatoon or Fargo. If either of you object to the terms as I have outlined them, you are welcome to challenge me to a duel to claim the right to leader. Am I understood?"

"Of course!" said Delaney. She gave Sloan a look.

"I didn't come all this way for a 15 percent take," said Sloan.

Delaney stepped between her and Winnipeg and addressed the younger girl. "That's fine! Fargo can have 5 of my percent, so we both get 20. I think that's fair, right?"

"If I cared about being fair," said Winnipeg, "I wouldn't have divvied the numbers the way I did. I made quite clear to you both what contradicting my terms entailed. Are you prepared to fight?"

"I'm not fighting for so stupid a reason," said Sloan. "We each get a third of the spoils. Even that's a compromise on my part, since Kyubey promised it all to me. Now are we going to start talking strategy or are we going to stand in the snow like assholes?"

Winnipeg's katana flashed in front of her, gleaming with the passing headlights. She certainly had no qualms about how many plaid-shirted men saw her waving her blade of otaku magic, although they were close enough to the miasma maybe they had all been stupefied anyway.

"Gutless coward. The kind of churlish knave who speaks but refuses to back her words. You have no right to question my authority, Fargo. A woman on the brink of despair, with nothing to lose... I stoop merely to abide your presence. And here you demand yet more?"

So she knew about the sorry state of Sloan's Soul Gem too? Damn, Kyubey had sold out all her secrets. Winnipeg's gem, strung from her neck, was of course spotless. Sloan really had no hope fighting her, even if Winnipeg turned out to be only an mediocre yet overinflated Magical Girl, which Sloan suspected was the case. Kid Napoleons like her always amassed a large swath of worthless land and strutted about as though it meant anything. During her stint in Minneapolis, Sloan had dealt with a girl from Duluth who claimed to control "all of northern Minnesota." As if anyone else even wanted such a frostbitten wasteland. When the Duluth girl died not two months later to a routine wraith attack, Sloan had considered it grand karmic justice.

She adjusted her jacket collar and looked away to signify non-confrontation. "When we fight the wraiths, you'll agree I deserve more than 15 percent."

Delaney gave an exaggerated sigh of relief. Winnipeg sheathed her sword. "You made the right choice, Fargo. Keep making those choices or I will cut you to ribbons. Also, if you turn out to be as big a liability as I suspect, I will cut you to ribbons. I would rather stand on my own than with a coward behind me."

With sweeping arms, Delaney attempted to finagle both of them away from the road and toward her jeep. "No need for melodrama, I'm certain everyone involved will pull their weight. We all want success, after all. Now—"

Winnipeg drew her katana again, for like the fifteenth time. Poor girl couldn't keep it down. "Now we end this ceaseless chatter and purge this city of wraiths."

"Hm, yes," said Delaney. "I think we should probably definitely formulate some kind of plan before charging in?"

"The plan is simple," said Winnipeg. "We enter. We cleave our way through the lesser ranks. We find the archon. We kill the archon. We collect our spoils. We return to our territories. Am I missing a step, Regina-Saskatoon?"

Delaney cringed at the moniker. "I mean, on a macro level, sure, those are the fundamentals, but I think you may possibly be underestimating a little the severity of the threat inside that miasma..."

"What the hell is an archon," said Sloan.

The other girls both stared at her, Winnipeg in exasperation and Delaney wringing her hands. Sloan stared back, refusing to feel embarrassment. She had ruled a long time in a city larger than either of them had ever set foot in, and the word archon was as foreign to her as konichiwa.

"So you're not only weak, you're not only a coward, but you're also stupid?" said Winnipeg.

"I don't know what an archon is, sue me."

"Did you not ask the rat *anything* before coming here? Did you simply set forth on a grand adventure, completely unaware of what you were stumbling into? You may be desperate, but to forego a basic understanding of your situation is beyond foolish."

"Yeah, because asking Kyubey for information is such a fun and rewarding experience." Sloan brushed snow from her hair.

Delaney stepped between them again. "This is all the more reason why we should take some time to plan our attack before charging in willy-nilly, don't you agree?"

It would be best if you listened to Delaney's advice, said Kyubey.

"Nobody asked you," said Sloan and Winnipeg in unison. Kyubey added no further comment.

Winnipeg sheathed her katana. Sloan guessed how long until she drew it again; estimates boiled down to seconds. The younger girl swept past Sloan with a wave of her arm. "Very

well. We shall waste time in order to make Fargo slightly less of a liability. I am enjoying this arrangement already."

She marched into the field, despite having no way to know where to go.

The Garden of Earthly Delights

Delaney swept the snow from the hood of her jeep and flattened onto it a schematic map of Williston, cast in a red glaze with light from her staff. The edges of the decaying parchment kept curling until Sloan stuck out a hand to pin down a corner.

"Thank you," said Delaney. "After some sniffing about, I managed to procure this map of the town. It's from the 90s, so there may be some inaccuracies, but overall it's a passable representation of what we'll see inside. I'd use my smartphone for a more recent depiction, but miasmas are notorious dead zones so let's get used to the old-fashioned approach, yes?"

Even on paper the town looked like crap. A highway bifurcated the city diagonally. A slovenly cluster of smaller streets branched out in what approximated a grid. The map highlighted a "Main Street" but other than a point ambiguously marked "Municipal Building" it displayed little of note. A few empty plots, a cemetery, an airstrip runway on the north end. A school.

Winnipeg scrutinized the map and scowled. "How does this help?"

"Exit routes, for starters." Delaney traced her finger along the map. "Marshland borders the town's southern and eastern fringes. If you need out, your best bet's to find the highway and follow it one direction or another."

"There will be no need for escape." Winnipeg made a trenchant motion with her hand. "Our plan is to enter, exterminate the archon, and dissipate the miasma."

"Still nobody's said what's an archon," said Sloan.

"Use contextual clues, imbecile. An archon tops the wraith hierarchy in terms of power. It manifests invasion-level miasmas like the one consuming this territory. Once we destroy it, the miasma will subside."

Half the map sprang up and curled over. "It's not simply a powerful wraith," said Delaney. With a frustrated sigh, she planted her staff in the ground so she could hold down the map with both hands. "Most wraiths are literal personifications of human sin and despair. An archon is a wraith born from such immense negative emotion, from sin so great, it has the ability to spawn its own wraiths regardless of the human population around it."

"Hard to believe Shitsville, North Dakota could muster enough sin for that," said Sloan. "I spent years in Minneapolis and never even heard of one."

"It's exactly in places so removed from the familiar tedium of everyday society where the greatest despair occurs." Delaney closed her eyes with serene composure. "Desert outposts in Afghanistan... indigenous villages in the Amazon... Uncharted islands in the Sargasso. These are—"

"Pointless," said Winnipeg. "I was told we would discuss strategy, not wax poetic on the desolation of the human soul."

Roused from her musings, Delaney ironed out the map again as she muttered vague affirmatives to Winnipeg's rebuke. Sloan still had suspicions. For starters, what made Delaney Pollack of Saskatchewan such an authority on a cryptozoological wraith subspecies absent from the common Magical Girl bestiary? Second, what the fuck kind of occult bullshit had Sloan wrapped herself up in?

"Okay yeah so strategy," said Delaney. "There's a slight problem with whole dip-in-dip-out plan, Winnipeg. So basically, the archon won't be easy to find. It doesn't want to be found. It has total dominion over the miasma, so it'll contort and bend the spatial dimensions to conceal itself. Compound that with the sheer magnitude of lesser wraiths it'll chuck in our path, and wow! If we found the archon on Expedition 1 it would be. Like, *immaculate* good fortune. And good fortune you don't see much in there."

Winnipeg kneaded her eye sockets and exhaled. "Fine. Tonight we cover this half." She slapped her palm onto the map. "If the archon isn't there, we sweep the other half tomorrow."

"I'm telling you, it's not quite that simple." Delaney wrung her hands. "The archon will adapt to our presence. The geography of that town may already have been completely rearranged since Sloan, er, Fargo's little misadventure. A strategy around where we raid the miasma with strike attacks before retreating will actually be counterproductive. Trust me, I know firsthand."

"You keep mentioning you know firsthand," said Sloan.

Delaney knows firsthand, Kyubey confirmed.

"Yeah, *now* I trust it."

Without warning, Winnipeg drew her ninja sword and cleaved the map in two. Delaney dropped to her knees with a piteous shriek as the halves of the map fluttered down around her, revealing a long gash in the paint of her jeep's hood.

"Enough," said Winnipeg. "You tell me to discuss strategy, but mutter about shipwreck islands instead. You show me a map, only to inform me the geography has changed. You denigrate my plan of attack, but do not supply a replacement. I swiftly lose patience."

Delaney clutched the parchment to her chest. "You didn't need to do that!"

Sloan wished she had a watch to check. It was too damn cold for aimless prattle. Besides, she was antsy to fight. So many wraiths meant so many cubes. Enough to cure the disease gnawing at her Soul Gem. Enough to restore her to full power. The moment that happened, sayonara Williston. She'd be on a one way trip to Minneapolis, where she had a date with an old friend.

Her two companions blabbed some more until Delaney finally reached the point. "We must establish a base inside the miasma. It's very important it's inside. The archon has a tough time

altering the dimensions of the miasma while a counteracting magical force—namely, us—is inside. Not impossible, but tough."

"A base. Inside the miasma," said Sloan.

"Without a constant presence inside the miasma, we're waging war against a perpetually shifting foe." Delaney hammered her words with sweeping gesticulations. "I can seal a safe haven with my barrier magic, granted the area's small enough not to exhaust me. I already scoped a potential candidate."

She slapped the halves of the map back on the jeep. Leaning close to better view the nonexistent details, she planted a finger on a random plot of land near the main street.

"Here! It's the Williston Inn, which I cross-referenced online to confirm is still operational. Sealing a motel room is perfectly within my capabilities."

Winnipeg folded her arms. "Fine. As long as there's nothing more to babble about."

"That covers the main points," said Delaney. "Anything else we'll worry about on the way."

At the road, the conga line of vehicles continued its unwitting descent into the depths of human misery, eroded faces in car windows oblivious to all but the beckoning stretch of pathway. Kyubey had mentioned oil in this town. Would so many come so far to so dismal a place for that? Oil, gold, they felt like such pointless concepts nowadays.

Winnipeg waved her hand in Sloan's face. "Transform already, Fargo."

"I am transformed," said Sloan.

"Your uniform is a filthy old coat?"

"The uniform is under the coat. I'm keeping the coat because it's cold."

"The lunatics Kyubey gave me this time." Winnipeg glared at the aforementioned rat bastard perched on Delaney's shoulder.

"Is everyone ready?" said Delaney. "It's constant danger until we reach the inn. Sloan, we need you at full capacity. Don't hold back to conserve magic. We'll pick up enough cubes along the way to cleanse you after."

"I know what I'm doing," said Sloan.

"Great!" said Delaney. "Before we begin, I've prepared a few words of encouragement to lift our spirits—"

The katana whipped out with a hiss of metal as Winnipeg charged into the miasma. Sloan materialized her gun and followed, expending the magic necessary to make her weapon functionally weightless. Although her gem had not fully purified, she felt stronger than she had in a long time. She mentally cycled through the bag of tricks she had lacked the luxury of employing during her tenure in Fargo. It was tricky because she had to recalibrate her magic expenditures without going overboard. But she could do it. If nothing else, she had to keep faith in her abilities. Or no amount of magical prowess would help her.

Darkness surrounded her on all sides. Only the flitting, transient form of Winnipeg ahead made much coherent sense in the tableau of shadows. She glanced over her shoulder at Delaney as the tall girl overtook her and settled into a position between Sloan and Winnipeg. Her staff glowed bright red, tapering quickly in the void.

They pattered along the street for a long time until wraiths appeared. They emerged first as distant faces, brimming on the periphery of Sloan's vision. The moment she turned her head they shuffled to the side to stay in those nebulous corners of her awareness and prevent her from getting a read on them. A more tangible figure sprung out at her and she almost blasted it to nonexistence before she realized it was a man, plaid shirt like all the others, moseying his way down the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets and his gaze between his feet. Around him appeared more and more men in the same clothes and with the same crooked posture, walking to and fro with no apparent goal or destination. In the corners of her vision, the wraiths grew more numerous, more distinct.

"What are they waiting for," she said. Or tried to say. The words dissolved into silence as they left her throat.

What are they waiting for, she said via telepathy.

Keep running, said Delaney. *And when it goes to blows, try not to kill the civilians, okay love?*

The wraiths continued to linger at the edge of her sight like spots on her eyes. A trepidation filled her that she had maybe fallen too far out the Fargo kiddie pool. How long since she had seen a proper miasma at all, large enough to swallow a girl in darkness? If she strained, she had the barest memory of a past as competent wraith-slayer.

Winnipeg struck first. Her tiny form leapt up and blipped to the side in a gust of wind. Between her fell the severed pieces of a lesser wraith. Another wraith emerged from the dark, its grinning pixelated face a crackle of dust and fear, withered claws rising from the folds of its gray cloak and reaching for Sloan. She planted her foot and unleashed a round into the demon. It erupted into particles, dispelling the miasma around it for a brief moment. In that moment, Sloan saw the truth of the world behind the miasma: a sullen town street, storefronts of flaked paint and rickety porches, normal men in search of work and fortune. The real world, the real Williston. The Williston seen by humans. This nightmare realm was only a trick.

If she remembered that, she might keep her head.

An army of red bubbles sprouted around her, many popping immediately as rippling beam attacks zoomed from all directions. The bubbles burst in deluges of glowing crimson liquid and splattered the street. Sloan tucked her head under the cascade, running and gunning at any wraith fool enough to fall in front of her.

How you holding up, love? Delaney asked as she caved in a wraith's head with her scepter.

I'm fine. Where's Winnipeg.

Don't worry about her, just keep up okay?

In front of Delaney rose an unbreakable line of wraiths, crackling and cackling. Sloan aimed for the center of the ranks to punch a hole or fifty. Before she could, a vicious cyclone flashed from the sky and touched down like thunder on the line. The swirling maelstrom tore across the street, slicing through wraiths in a wave of cloaks and pixels. As it reached the curb, the tornado dissipated and Winnipeg landed in its place, lashing out an arm to decapitate a wayward wraith before going airborne and ricocheting off a random floating polygon to pirouette toward the other side of the street, vivisectioning wraiths with undetectable katana strikes in the most anime display of skill Sloan had ever seen.

A bubble burst by her face and she dipped to avoid the resulting downpour. Delaney seized her by the collar and pulled her forward as a billion more wraiths appeared around them. Weaving through civilians (kinda hard, what with the huge ass gun Sloan was toting), they departed the highway and landed on an arterial road that sidewinded toward some unknown destination.

It's Main Street! said Delaney. *Good job girls, halfway there already.*

Halfway already. Piece a cake. Sloan hadn't even taxed her magic too hard.

Either her eyes adjusted or some outer ring of darkness had been breached, but before her sprawled a momentous panorama of Williston, or at least the Williston of the miasma: a hellscape of tar beaches and viscous black lagoons, populated with misshapen structures and billowing smokestacks and palpable horror. The impenetrable canopy flashed with intermittent lightning bolts, and everywhere traces of fire flickered between the rows of men and wraiths intermingling in the dark land. Broken castles and yawning towers perforated a horizon of sulphuric gloss. In the center rose a column of unfathomable height, bending and bulging as it poked through a swirl of mist at the top of the miasma. The clock tower. In the twisted geography of this doppelganger world, it metamorphosed into a skyscraper standing sentinel over an infinite waste land.

Winnipeg was right. Delaney's map meant nothing here.

Are we going the right way, said Sloan.

Delaney quite helpfully failed to answer. They passed an abyssal hole in the ground into which plaid-shirted men hurled themselves while wraiths congregated nearby and gnashed their teeth. Other men lay facedown in splatters of oil or black blood. A many-jointed arm dragged a corpse into a crevice.

Nothing to save them now, said Delaney, her tone oddly blithe. Well, blithe was her usual tone, but it unnerved Sloan for her to maintain it. Even in Minneapolis, during the heart of the recession when wraith outbreaks worsened every day, Sloan had never seen a miasma like this, a miasma that did not simply distort the world with stagnant air and a dreadful aura but actually created a pocket dimension in the wrinkles of spacetime. This world was no trick. It was too vast, too swallowing for a mere trick. No, the world the humans saw was the trick. Illusion had supplanted reality.

Bleck, that was all crap. What mattered now was run and gun. She swiveled her turret toward a gaggle of lesser wraiths, blasting luminous holes with carefully-managed fire. Charred flecks of gray cloaks drifted on dead air.

Behind you, love, said Delaney.

Something barreled into Sloan's back and sent her hurtling. She bounced against the ground and smacked into something hard and vertical, rolling back with her hand still clutching the handle of her gun and her nose hemorrhaging blood. Delaney flew to her side but Sloan waved away any gestures of aid and stood on her own, wiping the blood with the back of her hand.

Before them loomed a massive creature, a lion body with the head of a man, its pitiless gaze a mess of fragmented distortion where its face should be. With muscled feline limbs the lamassu stalked toward them, sidwinding through lesser wraiths which quivered and cackled restlessly.

Sloan had fought greater wraiths before, but long ago. She hefted her gun and traced the lamassu's path. Last time she squared against something like this, she had Clair Ibsen at her side.

Plan? said Delaney.

Isn't that your job?

She stepped back and fired. With a rat-a-tat-tat her gun spewed light from its nozzle. The lamassu blinked out of way and lunged with monstrous talons and endless reams of fangs. Delaney flung up a bubble but the beast smashed through it like you might expect a thousand-pound abomination composed of stone and hatred to smash through a bubble. Sloan threw herself aside only to bump into Delaney, unable to make much distance as a claw raked into her side and ripped a pound of flesh out of her.

With a painful grunt she hit the ground. The lesser wraiths swooped in like vultures, reaching with elongated talons for the injured prey. Sloan scrambled to her knees, gripping her side as blood gushed between her fingers and raking her gun across the enclosing circle of foes, irradiating them with still-potent magic. She made little progress before an oppressive claw gripped her back and forced her down. Rough and bitter soil seeped against her clenched teeth as she twisted her head around to face the lion beast grinning back at her, the crackle of its eyeless sockets sizzling against her cheek.

Delaney slammed her staff against the beast's head. With one swipe of a limb it knocked her back, but by the time it returned to Sloan she was ready. She threw her hand into the digital textures of its face and propelled her magic up the nerves of her arm to the tips of her fingers. From her hand erupted a pulse of pure light. The beast's entire head lit up as she incinerated its face and hollowed an immense cavity in its skull.

The lamassu staggered back. Sloan pushed herself up and distanced herself from the wounded creature. Her nose bled and she had a cracked rib or two, although the pain-deadening perks of her soulless body made damage assessment difficult. The lamassu wasn't doing so bad for missing most of its head, managing to remain on four legs as it swayed back and forth.

She raised her gun for the coup de grace, except the moment the barrel started to spin the lamassu regained its acuties and bounded out of the way, bouncing off a wall and sailing at her. She rolled to the side and flung herself upright. The greater wraith pawed at where she had been.

Around the wraith manifested a grid of bubbles. Delaney appeared beside Sloan, miraculously unharmed. Not even a scuff on her gown.

Shoot the bubbles, love!

Sloan failed to understand at first but soon the idea registered. She aimed at a bubble and fired. As before, at the sound of her gun, the lamassu tried to leap away. But her piercing light hit the bubble and ricocheted into other bubbles, and that light ricocheted, until soon the entire bubble grid lit up with constantly-rebounding pillars of light. Despite the contortions of the lamassu's lithe body, shafts impaled it from all directions at once. The mouthless wraith unleashed a piteous inhuman wail and disintegrated into a shower of grief cubes.

Goddam bubbles. Sloan gasped for breath. *Fuck, I need healing.*

From the cracks and small spaces more wraiths emerged. They clustered into tightly-packed squads and lumbered forward.

Time for that later! Let's keep moving.

Delaney sprinted down the road and Sloan followed, her pain numb but detectable, like the broken edge of a broomstick jabbing against her stomach every time she took a step. Of course no time for healing, although Delaney looked pretty prim and proper herself. Sloan wasted little time griping because she soon noticed another problem.

The fuck happened to Winnipeg?

Don't worry! I'm sure she's fine, said Delaney.

That's not the issue.

It's okay love, we're almost there.

Almost where? Sloan stared down the rollicking pandemonium stretched before them. The slanted constructions had doors and windows but were otherwise indistinct globules of architecture, some melting into frothing vats of oil, others crumbling to dust beneath the weight of the wraiths piled atop them.

Dead air rushed in and out of Sloan's chest as blood gushed down her side. Each vanquished wraith was replaced immediately by more. She was nearing the twilight zone of her Soul Gem, that running-on-empty strand that heralded death by Cycles. Having to worry less about dodging or blocking had helped somewhat but the sheer volume of ammunition she launched into the undying hordes was tolling her strength to its limits.

This way! said Delaney. She pointed at a deformed two-story construction, the left side of which was detaching from the whole. Over the door hung a sign: WILLISTON INN. Pale light filtered from within.

Between them and the inn stood another lamassu, staring them down with a horrible grin, its forelegs poised to propel it forward. Sloan and Delaney skidded to a halt by a car propped on cinderblocks. Sloan leaned against the vehicle and fought to catch her breath.

Another bubble attack? she asked, aware how ridiculous she sounded.

This one's full strength, said Delaney. *Can you fry its face as well, love?*

When it gets close enough to maul me, yeah. Forget that her lungs would give out at any moment and her skull ached and she was too afraid to even check her gem.

The lamassu crouched into a position to pounce. Sloan scanned for somewhere to duck, but everywhere was clogged with more wraiths, a carnival of staticky gray balloon heads bobbing up and down and click-clacking stone teeth.

Something flashed and neatly bisected the lamassu. As the two halves plopped to the earth and vanished into small mounds of cubes, Winnipeg stuck the landing and whipped her katana around to posture at a nearby wraith platoon.

You two are slow.

If not exhausted as fuck, Sloan might have given a nice retort. But the only thing she wanted now was safety, so she hobbled after Delaney and Winnipeg into the hotel lobby. The walls bulged and deflated like her own throbbing ribcage. Tons of plaid-shirted men milled about with bowed heads, some forming an uneasy line by the receptionist desk, others seated in waiting room chairs that had a tendency to float or liquefy.

A sign on the desk read NO VACANCY.

Delaney butted through the crowd and leaned over the counter to tweak the nose of a hollow-eyed receptionist. Sloan kept close and searched the room for wraiths, but Winnipeg must have cleared it.

"Hello ma'am!" said Delaney. "We're looking for a room, one bed'll be fine."

"The hell you doing," said Sloan. Her voice descended multiple octaves in the miasma.

"Sorry love, I can only afford to seal a small area. We'll have to get friendly with another!"

"I mean, why are you bothering with her about it?"

The elderly receptionist indicated the sign. "No vacancy... No vacancy... No vacancy..."

"Surely you must have something? We're three poor girls out on our lonesome, it's so dangerous nowadays..." Delaney stood on tiptoe to lean closer, faces nearly touching. She winked with a cute smile.

"No vacancy... No vacancy... No vacancy..."

Sloan glanced over her shoulder. Wraith faces swelled in the doorway, clambering to enter.

Deal with them, will you love? "What if the president himself needed a room at your fine establishment? Surely you'd have a room for him! Well, the president isn't coming. So..."

"No vacancy... No vacancy... No vacancy..."

Sloan lifted her gun but lethargic humans crammed the lobby and blocked her line of fire. She tried to herd them aside, to no avail.

"I'll pay twice the going rate," said Delaney. She pulled out a checkbook and clicked a pen. The receptionist droned her repetitive dirge of no vacancy.

Winnipeg, as usual, had gone somewhere.

Sloan finally pushed enough men away and blasted the wraiths crowding through the doorway. Every round shredded the foremost ranks and several more behind them. Despite the pain in her chest and her side and her head and the exhaustion seeping between her eyes she managed a smile at the unbounded annihilation raining forth onto these so-called embodiments of human misery. What could such creatures do to her? Clair Ibsen and Minneapolis inched closer.

Until a shard of pain impaled her brain like an aneurysm. She staggered back into the counter, her gunfire drooping into the floor before subsiding completely. She pressed a hand to her Soul Gem. It was trembling, she could feel even though the coat.

Delaney was on the other side of the counter, flipping through a ledger. The receptionist slumped facedown on the desk. Blood streamed through her curled gray hair.

"What... did you do..." Sloan wheezed.

Wraiths approached the doors, no longer deterred by her fire. Delaney opened a drawer and retrieved a rusted brass key. "No worries love. Merely unconscious. She was getting on my nerves, you know. Muttering the same thing every time." Her voice was crystalline clear.

Sloan had no time to protest. As Delaney hopped over the counter and made for the stairs in no particular hurry, Sloan ambled after.

Winnipeg, you there? said Delaney.

Upstairs. I cleared the inn.

Lovely. Keep up the good work!

The stairs corkscrewed in Escher directions. Sloan's vision faded in and out. She groped along the bannister, following the flitting tail of Delaney's gown. Her gun grew heavier and heavier until it dematerialized when she ceased her magic. She had to hope Delaney's bubbles watched her back.

When the stairs ended she almost fell forward. She stuck out her hands and steadied herself between the walls of the corridor. Numbered doors lined the hall on either side. Delaney stopped at each door and tried her key. No matter how many times she stopped, Sloan fell further behind. In the distance stood a tiny figure barely recognizable as Winnipeg. The walls of the corridor closed in, bending and bulging and bursting with little pops of vaporizing paint.

Something struck her from behind, passing clean through her back and out her previously-uninjured side. It looked like a wraith wound. They must be shooting.

I'm hit.

Sorry love, I lose a little focus when I'm frustrated. She wedged the key into another keyhole. *I'll try harder.*

The space between the walls diminished to a narrow aperture. Sloan sidled through the gap as Delaney finally opened a door and disappeared inside immediately, Winnipeg behind her.

Help, said Sloan. She sounded so fucking pathetic. Like those strung out girls who wandered into Fargo sometimes to beg for handouts, the kind that disappeared without a trace in a corner somewhere.

Worth more than 15 percent, said Winnipeg. *Ha.*

The walls squeezed against her. After months of living on cereal she lacked much of a third dimension, but her coat bulked her up. The force became crushing and she could not tell if she were moving forward. Paint dribbled down the walls and pooled in her hair and coated the side of her face.

She stretched a hand as far as possible. Come on, Delaney. Grab it. Don't leave me here. Her head was awash in fire and agony, her thoughts muddled together. Hallucinations danced across her irises. She saw Clair Ibsen at a piano recital in a nice blue dress. Her pale white fingers glided over the keys while her head fell from her body. The head rolled to Sloan's feet. Sloan placed her boot on the skull and pushed.

Something grabbed her hand and dragged her forward. With a final exertion her worthless body staggered through the door, collapsing into the room at Winnipeg's feet. Winnipeg snorted and turned away as Delaney slammed the door and locked it.

"You made it!" said Delaney. "I'm so happy. Now be a dear and watch the window, make sure nothing comes in while I'm sealing the room."

Sloan writhed on the ground, curling into herself, digging a hand into the shag carpeting. "Cubes..." she maybe said, or maybe not.

"Hold a moment longer, love. I'll be with you once we're safe and sound inside our new home."

With graceful aplomb, Delaney lifted her staff and touched the tip to the door. Red liquid gushed out and drizzled down to the carpet as Delaney slowly dragged her staff along the wall. Only now did Sloan realize it was blood, the bubbles and the liquid and all of it was blood. Like the blood on her hands and face and coat.

Delaney entered the bathroom and traced over the mirror and along the shower. She returned to the main room and climbed over the bed, allowing the blood to flow down the pillows and onto the blankets. She opened the closet and pushed aside a plaid-shirted man who hung from a noose as she maneuvered along the walls. She crossed the one black window and returned along the original wall, connecting her line at the door.

She stepped aside, admired her handiwork, and returned to her plainclothes. The staff disappeared, as did the blood. Only a faint mark remained on the walls. The miasma in the room dispersed and oxygen flowed again.

The dead man in the closet swayed with the breeze. His rope creaked.

Delaney clapped her hands. "There! All sealed. No wraith can enter as long as the seal remains. Which it will do unless I can't supply the magic to sustain it. But that won't be a problem for a room this small."

"You expect us to stay here together?" said Winnipeg. She had not reverted her Magical Girl ensemble, although she sheathed her katana.

"Think of it as a character-building experience," said Delaney. She kneeled beside Sloan and stroked her hair. "How do you feel? Here, let me help."

She offered a generous handful of cubes. Sloan didn't know when Delaney had grabbed them and didn't care. She pressed the cubes to her gem as Delaney turned her over and inspected her wounds.

"You're very brave, Sloan."

Her face was so close that Sloan could see the utter emptiness in Delaney's eyes. They were bright and soft but behind the irises lurked nothing at all; imitations of real eyes. Delaney slid an arm under Sloan's back and another under her knees. She carefully placed Sloan on the

bed, resting her head on the pillow that moments before had been drenched in blood. She began to heal.

Reason / Rectitude / Justice

The one window in the hotel room may have been an obsidian slab. Its lacquered surface only reflected; nothing shone through. Winnipeg stood before it with arms crossed. In the reflection she watched Regina-Saskatoon (or "Delaney") play caretaker to Fargo, waving her staff to summon frolicking bubbles of blood. She hummed a quaint tune. Fargo had passed out.

In the closet hung a dead man. Regina-Saskatoon appeared to have no intention of removing it.

Winnipeg had told Kyubey no assistance was necessary. She could clear Williston alone, like she had cleared Manitoba alone, like she had cleared her namesake city alone. Their first skirmish only affirmed her suspicions. Infestation or no, irregular spawn patterns or no, archon or no, Winnipeg would do better without these dimwits.

Kyubey was no idiot. In fact, he was the opposite. Why rope in Fargo? She was good as dead. Either the wraiths killed her or the Cycles. A mere matter of time. Yet the rat expressly commanded to keep Fargo alive. A command Winnipeg had no intention to follow, although it seemed Regina-Saskatoon had taken it to heart.

Which brought up the other issue.

"Regina-Saskatoon. Why are you here?"

Regina-Saskatoon busied about Fargo with maternal conceit. "Please, Winnipeg! Call me Regina. Or better yet, Delaney. It's so confusing if Sloan calls me one thing and you another, you know?"

"Why are you here."

She smiled. "I'm here to save the town! Aren't we all?"

"I'm here for territory. Fargo for cubes. You have your own town in Saskatchewan to save. Two towns, in fact. Why are you here?"

The bubbles clustered around Fargo's body and burst, drenching her in blood. Fargo did not awake as the blood seeped through her open gashes.

"I told you, Winnipeg. I'm here to save the town. Your selfish interests don't make mine selfish too." She brushed back her hair and extended her hands over Fargo's body.

"Drop the facade," said Winnipeg. "I research my neighbors. I know what you really are."

"Really!" Tremors crept through Regina-Saskatoon's outstretched palms. The blood that had sunk into Fargo's body slowly flowed back out of it, rivulets pooling into a dense sphere

under Regina-Saskatoon's fingertips. "Tell me, Winnipeg, because I'm pretty curious myself sometimes. What am I really?"

"A killer."

The blood ceased its ebb. Regina-Saskatoon guided the pooled sphere into her mouth, swallowing it in one gulp. She wiped her lips. "Drudge up ancient history, will you? That happened before you even contracted. As if you haven't offed a few girls yourself."

"Not a single one."

"Of course not." Regina-Saskatoon pulled the blankets and tucked Fargo in. She bent over and bestowed a kiss on the forehead. "You merely arrive at their town and kick them out into the tundra, and if they freeze to death or disappear in a hovel that's no business of yours, is it?"

"I heard you enjoyed it when you killed her. It was the most emotion you ever produced."

Regina-Saskatoon gripped the edge of the bed and leaned forward. "Who told you that? Kyubey? You don't trust him."

"I know what questions to ask. When it comes to statistics, he is remarkably accurate. Where is he, anyway? I thought you had him on your shoulder like a parrot."

A red glint crept into Regina-Saskatoon's otherwise blank eyes. Her hands wrung together and twisted her white gloves. "Maybe, dear, it's best not to get on the bad side of a supposed murderer?"

In an instant Winnipeg sprung from the window and landed atop the bed, her sword tip against Regina-Saskatoon's pale throat. Despite the doughy and unstable mattress, the tip did not quiver.

"Don't threaten me, Regina-Saskatoon."

"Threaten something more vital than my head, will you?" The deadpan delivery gave way to a crawling smirk upon Regina-Saskatoon's face, which burst into a quake of brittle laughter.

"You should take me seriously," said Winnipeg. "I do not kill Puella Magi, but you are one only in name. Tell me why you are here."

"Fine!" Regina-Saskatoon rolled her eyes. "I'm here because I love misery and suffering and all things evil. The thought of men devoured in the most monstrous ways titillates me sexually. The corpse in our closet already has me pretty randy! I'm simply the most depraved creature known to humankind, there's no other explanation."

Winnipeg seized her hair and slammed her against the wall. "If that is true, tell me why I shouldn't do our species a favor and terminate you right now."

Regina-Saskatoon twisted her face to speak. "Do you understand sarcasm?"

"Do you understand I want a serious answer?"

"Not so loud, please. You'll wake Sloan."

"Answer me."

"I told you! I'm here to do my duty as a Magical Girl and defend humanity from personified despair. But you're too convinced I'm an inhuman monster to believe me—"

A backhand to the face silenced her. Regina-Saskatoon was an insidious sorceress. Her staked claim covered a minor area, but one unmolested by the renegades, wanderers, and vagabonds who whispered its name with trepidation and awe. They said an ill omen festered there, an imperceptible miasma lingering like the scent of death. A curse borne of murder, a curse that tainted the creeks and fallowed the earth. This woman, this Regina-Saskatoon, this Delaney Pollack dwelled in the center of the vortex.

Winnipeg refused to believe superstition, but one did not inspire such fear without cause.

"Whatever your plan," Winnipeg said, "Try it. Manipulate Fargo, turn her against me, team up. It will not work."

Regina-Saskatoon cackled again. "Turn against you? Oh dear. Oh dear, oh dear!"

Winnipeg released her with disgust. It concerned her little what the cretin plotted. There had been assassination attempts before, women convinced they could overpower with deceit. She had left each one beaten and bruised and nursing crushed hopes. Kyubey sent them, she was sure of it. He swore he was forbidden to turn Puella Magi against each other (by whom? He only mentioned a vague "Employer"), but Winnipeg knew he believed her inefficient and wasteful. And thus, in his mind, worthy of termination.

No matter. If the rat turned Regina-Saskatoon against her, Winnipeg would neutralize her and absorb her territory, curse be damned.

It's bad to fight, said a familiar voice inside her head. The Incubator himself sat perched on the windowsill and stared at them.

Straightening her clothes, Regina-Saskatoon circumnavigated Winnipeg and let in the rat, carefully sealing the window behind him. She picked him up like a kitten and carried him to the bed, where Fargo's spent grief cubes awaited.

It's wasteful for Magical Girls to expend energy fighting amongst themselves instead of against wraiths.

"Where have you been?" said Winnipeg. Regina-Saskatoon fed the rat cubes, undeterred by the freakish receptacle on his back.

I was separated during the combat. But since wraiths take no interest in me, it was a simple matter of finding my way here.

"Go on Kyubey." Regina-Saskatoon tweaked one of his floppy ears. "Tell mean old Winnipeg why I decided to come."

Miss Delaney agreed to my terms in order to contribute to the salvation of the universe, and by extension, her species.

Despite the statement's fallibility, Regina-Saskatoon gave a fatuous look as though everything was explained. Winnipeg snorted. The most roundabout and ambiguous phrasing possible: classic ratspeak.

Now that Kyubey was around, Winnipeg didn't feel like pressing further. He would only confound her with his specious logic. Besides, she already knew all she needed: Regina-Saskatoon was no friend. Not that Winnipeg kept friends.

Regina-Saskatoon let the matter die as well. She stroked Kyubey's belly and waggled his paws. Repulsed by this spectacle, Winnipeg returned to the window and stared at her obscure reflection.

Sloan awoke sore and slow, the room's confines ebbing into focus as she pieced together the events preceding her catnap. It took not long to remember she'd embarrassed herself pretty solid.

Someone had removed her coat and her boots and tucked her under the covers like baby's first bedtime. She threw off the blanket and swung her legs over the side of the bed, viciously rubbing her eyes and jamming on her boots. She shimmied into her coat, nice and clean and cured of bloodstains.

Delaney was washing her face in the sink, robed in a pink bath towel. The mirror had clouded and a perfumed aroma wafted through the quarters. Winnipeg stared into the window, still in uniform.

"How long was I out."

"Oh, not long, love." Delaney ran a brush through her damp hair, peering intently into her opaque reflection. "I'm simply ecstatic you made it okay. No hurts?"

Sloan prodded her side. "You're a skilled healer." The only remnants of her wound were the ragged gashes in her coat. Nothing she hadn't handled before. After years of abuse, she'd become proficient at mending with magic, despite having no innate aptitude. She had to conceptualize rays of light twisting into individual threads and intertwining to patch the holes. Odd, but effective. You could get a lot done with any power if you were creative enough.

Sloan had the creativity of something not very creative. The whole threading-holes-with-light trick had been suggested by Clair Ibsen a long time ago. Clair had a totally different type of

magic, but that hadn't stopped her from upstaging Sloan at her own craft.

She decided not to wander down Minneapolis lane; it tended to muddle her Soul Gem. Best to keep Clair Ibsen and the whole tragic backstory bullshit cached at an untouchable distance, like a carrot on a stick. Doing so had the best effect on her psyche.

From the bathroom Delaney emerged in a puff of white powder, fully clothed and hair in a buoyant do. She cradled Kyubey in her arms. Had she taken the bastard into the shower? Yuck.

"Get some rest, Sloan dear. We've a big day tomorrow, you'll need as much strength as you can muster."

"There is no need for rest," said Winnipeg. "Fatigue, hunger, thirst. These are merely restrictions we instill upon ourselves in a desperate gambit to pretend we are still human. If you succumb to such yearnings, you can hardly be considered a Puella Magi."

"That's not true at all," said Delaney. "Sure, we can't starve to death, but these bodies deteriorate without proper nourishment." She plopped on the bed and relinquished Kyubey to inspect her nails, bright red and perfectly manicured.

"All nourishment can be replaced by cubes," said Winnipeg. "We embark in search of the archon in ten minutes. If you need to replenish your body, you have the means." She indicated a pile of cubes collected from the previous battle, stacked upon a bureau at the foot of the bed.

Sloan took out her Soul Gem for examination. As suspected, it had only reached a partial purity. She picked one of the cubes and held it to the gem. Only the faintest trickle of despair osmosed out and soon dwindled to nothing. Maybe if she used the whole pile, she would manage something. But she suspected Winnipeg and her 15 percent stipulation might object, let alone Kyubey and his frequent sermons on wastefulness and efficiency.

She knew gems lost their luster eventually. There was a reason beyond the danger why so few Magical Girls grew to Magical Women. After a few years, the despair creeps in and refuses to leave. At first, it's small. A nagging thought or two, maybe the gem only looks a little dull because your eyes are what's failing. But soon the reality becomes undeniable. No tragedy, no calamity is needed to spark it. A few years fighting the evils of mankind with no friends and no hope, and even the most idealistic falter. And once the faltering begins... Well, despair begets despair. The doom extinguishes even the smallest hopes, replacing them with that all-devouring "Why bother?"

Her own mentor had succumbed to it, back when she and Clair Ibsen were novices. The girl was twenty-two, a Methuselah of the trade, and after ten years of contentedly combatting evil she sat down and asked if what she did meant anything, and poof! Law of the Cycles.

Sloan closed her hand around her gem and tucked it into her coat. She would not suffer the same fate. Kyubey had told her there were enough cubes at Williston to stem the tide, and she chose to believe him. She had no choice but to believe. Even if it meant believing him, she would believe. The important thing was to remember Clair Ibsen, the carrot on the stick.

Sloan Redfearn couldn't possibly die without taking Clair along to Magical Girl hell, could she?

Of course not.

"Oh, hooley," said Delaney, reminding Sloan a conversation was happening around her. "Cubes aren't everything. You can feel hunger no matter what the cubes do. It's no fun fighting on an empty stomach."

Winnipeg shrugged. "Reliance on carnal needs is mere self-limitation. Take our current plight. How do you propose we find sustenance in the middle of the miasma? Unless you intend to compose a meal of ash."

"No, I'll order a pizza." Delaney plucked her cell from her pocket and tapped the display. Winnipeg was so baffled she could not even muster a rebuttal. Sloan did it for her.

"A pizza? Here?"

"Of course. I researched this town before we came, after all. Seems even the remotest American locale has a pizza parlor." She dialed the number. "Hello! My name's Delaney, I'd love to order a large pizza. Hello? Yes, I said large pizza. Is that a problem? Oh, fantastic! Can we have it with pepperoni and olives?" She muffled the receiver and addressed her companions. "You're not vegetarians, right?"

Sloan shook her head. Winnipeg reported she would not be eating.

"Yes, pepperoni and olives is fine. How can you be out of olives? You have to have olives, that's simply irrational. Oh, fine. What about pineapple?"

"No pineapple," said Sloan. Although as starved as she was, she would eat whatever was in front of her.

"They don't have pineapple anyway," said Delaney. "What DO you have? I already know you have pizza, ma'am. Yes, I want a large pizza, I said that. Stop repeating the same thing, please, you're getting on my nerves." She stuck a finger into her mouth and gagged at Sloan. "Okay, okay, yeesh! Pepperoni pizza it is. Oh, and throw in a thing of soda, will you? Thanks a million!"

Delaney gave the address and room number, although she had to say it five times until whoever was on the other end understood. She hung up with a profusion of saccharine gratitude. "Now we just hope the wraiths don't eat the delivery boy."

"The embarkation time to find the archon remains unchanged," said Winnipeg. "You have three minutes now."

"But we ordered pizza!" said Delaney. "How could we leave now? Besides, you have no idea where to even start looking. I've triangulated the three most suitable locations of the archon den, but if you want to hear them you'll have to wait."

"I will scour the entire town and find the archon on my own."

Sloan groaned. A pizza would be her first hot meal in eons, but if Winnipeg went and killed the archon alone, all spoils would go to her. Not to mention Sloan had a reputation to rebuild. Delaney may not mind playing a frilly debutante, but for Sloan to stay behind when she should be fighting would be an admission of weakness. Not that she cared what Winnipeg and Delaney thought, but Sloan couldn't admit to herself that she would do nothing when presented with an opportunity to return to power.

"I'm going," she said.

"No," said Winnipeg. "Especially not you. Keep the agreed-upon 15 percent after I slay the archon, but stay in this room and do not encumber me with your presence. I have no intention to slow down and kiss your every scratch, which means you will merely die if you follow me. I see no point in allowing a needless death to occur."

"I slew more wraiths than either of you in that fight," said Sloan.

"Debatable." Winnipeg stopped in front of the door. "You also consumed the brunt of our curative magic and barely limped out alive. Your offensive capabilities are adequate, and would perhaps be useful if you had a modicum of defensive skill. I have no use for a glass cannon."

"Then I go out and die." Sloan held up her filthy Soul Gem. "You see this? This is after I purified it. I would have given in long ago, but I have unfinished business in Minneapolis. If I can't kill wraiths, I got no hope finishing that business anyway. No hope, no life. I'll take my chances in the miasma."

Winnipeg closed her eyes. "Very well. I shall give you no assistance nor shall I expect you to want any. At the very least, you are no coward."

With a huff, Delaney sprung up and barred the door with her palm. The same smile remained plastered on her face, but the slight furrow of her brow betrayed her annoyance.

"A short break would be wonderful not simply to chart our next path, but to discuss Fargo's fighting style. You admit yourself she had strengths. If we could iron out her weaknesses, which we've already identified, then maybe instead of a worthless burden she could be, I dunno, helpful?"

"A conversation over pizza will not rectify years of poor technique," said Winnipeg. "I shall kill the archon myself."

Delaney's fingertips drummed against the door. Her other arm remained taut at her side. "Kyubey told you I've dealt with an archon before, yes? Did he tell you how many other girls I needed to do it?"

"Twelve," said Winnipeg. "You and twelve others. Only you walked out the miasma alive. Quite convenient you were the sole survivor, after you called in the others for help."

Kyubey only told girls things he wanted them to know. If his intention was for them to work together, why feed Winnipeg information to make her suspicious? He hadn't even mentioned

to Sloan she would work with others. He claimed it was because she would never have come, and maybe that was true. But Sloan wasn't so sure. After all, he had managed to cajole Winnipeg into the plot after telling her, and it was Winnipeg who was currently most opposed to the whole team shebang.

The rat bastard stared at her with placid eyes. Now that they were cooped in the room together or else out fighting, Sloan doubted she would get the chance to grill him on her dubious companions.

"It wasn't chance I alone survived," said Delaney. "I have the best barrier and healing magic north of Chicago. It's only natural my survivability would outpace your normal Magical Girl."

"So you sacrificed your teammates to save yourself," said Sloan.

"Let's not be melodramatic, love. Have you ever taken first aid training? The healer always cares for herself before anyone else. If the healer dies, everybody dies."

Sloan did not have a ready remark.

The door knocked. Delaney opened it, glancing to either side of the pizza delivery boy in case wraiths were nearby. The delivery boy's eyes had the same glazed look as the town's other denizens, ensnared by a hypnotic trance.

Delaney donned her most ebullient smile and paid the boy (who was more of a grizzled bearded man) with cash from a heart-shaped wallet, bidding him to keep the change before relieving him of pizza box and half-gallon of soda. She slammed the door and placed the food on the bed.

It smelled fucking delicious. Sloan tried not to look too eager. Especially since Winnipeg had not moved from the door.

"Enjoy it," Winnipeg said. "I am leaving. Do you still plan to follow, Fargo?"

Sloan's stomach rumbled. She clenched her fists.

I highly recommend all three of you stay. Kyubey squirmed his way to the pizza box like they would give the fucker even a bite. I have access to each of your magical capabilities in terms of raw statistics and can calculate with ease your percentages of success. Miss Dufresne—

"My name is Winnipeg."

You are not the first Magical Girl to take that name nor will you be the last. It is much easier to track you if I use your birth name. In any case, your chance of defeating the archon by yourself is rather low. Otherwise, I wouldn't have suggested teaming up. The risks of infighting and inefficiency usually outstrip the rewards, but if the archon is not defeated at all, that's merely wasteful.

"And my chances are improved with these two? One is a clinical sociopath and the other is less than worthless."

"Rude!" said Delaney. The crease in her brow deepened.

Delaney Pollack is reliable. Sloan Redfearn is a Magical Girl of above average potential.

"What a cute answer," said Winnipeg. "Very well, I'll wait for their pizza party."

They had no plates, but a few napkins came with the pizza. They took turns drinking straight from the soda bottle; germs registered a big fat zilch on Sloan's list of concerns.

(Winnipeg, statuesque, didn't even look at the pizza.)

Delaney dabbed her lips with a napkin. "Sloan love! I heard you mention Minneapolis earlier, were you born there?"

Damn, her whole getting-to-know-you bit again. With a mouthful of pizza Sloan couldn't feign sleep, although she took sweet time chewing before replying. "No."

"Beautiful city. Twin cities, that is. Minneapolis is the twin cities, right?"

"Yeah. Minneapolis and St. Paul." If Delaney and Winnipeg had asked Kyubey about each other, they had asked about Sloan, too. And if they knew anything about Sloan they knew all they needed.

"Lovely." She started her second slice while Sloan went for fourths. "What'd you wish for?"

Sloan blinked at the apparent non sequiter. Her wish? That was eternities ago. "My sister was blind. I cured her. Pretty typical." She swigged the soda.

"That's so sweet of you! I had an inkling you were a good person under all that gruff."

"No." Sloan puzzled how to approach this, as if she were discussing the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her family felt more like ideological concepts than real beings. "Jealousy. She always got the attention. Mom and Dad fawned over her and let me do whatever. Any minor accomplishment of hers was praised, mine ignored. At school everyone was nice to her. I figured if she wasn't blind they wouldn't care so much."

"I still think it was a nice wish, Sloan," said Delaney. "You could've wished for people to like you instead of her, that would be more direct. But you didn't, you wished for her to get well."

"Yeah," said Sloan. "When they still didn't like me, I regretted not doing it like you said." This was all ancient history, documented for posterity. If Delaney wanted to worm her way into Sloan's heart, she needed to try harder.

"Do you still regret it?"

"Whichever way I wished it," said Sloan. "It means nothing now. Another pointless wish."

Winnipeg spoke for the first time since returning to the window. "There are worse wishes."

"Oh?" Delaney nibbled a crust. "That sounds like the opening of another story! Do tell, I love to hear the wishes of others."

With the same paleontological distance, Winnipeg spoke. "I wished a boy loved me. I was twelve. I was sick of him in a month."

And nothing more. Sloan tried to reconcile the current Winnipeg with the one who had made that wish however long ago. A giggly schoolgirl, writing love poems. Wondering if he noticed her, thinking about him holding her. It was an impossible image.

"Well I," began Delaney with theatrical aplomb, "I wished for a puppy."

"A puppy."

Delaney nodded. "Yup! I wanted him so bad. But I couldn't have him. So I wished for him, and now he's a big grown doggie. My mom and dad watch him."

"You sold your soul for a dog," said Winnipeg. She turned from the window. Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms.

"He was so cute, you should've seen him." Delaney hung her hands like little paws, scrunched up her face, and wagged her snout. She actually yipped. After Sloan and Winnipeg's unamused glares, she desisted the charade and scooped another slice of pizza.

The puppy thing might make sense if Delaney had been, like, six when she contracted. But she acted like she would have wished it again if given the chance. If Sloan wasted her life on what was in the running for Shittiest Wish of All Time, she would have purged all thought of canines from her mind long ago.

Apparently Winnipeg couldn't take the secondhand embarrassment either. Her mood, which had teetered between putting-up-with-this-shit and god-fucking-dammit, plummeted. "The only reason I agreed to letting you fill your faces was to learn the quickest route to the archon."

With a muffled murmur, Delaney clenched her pizza between her teeth, wiped her fingers, and unfolded the map. She laid both halves on the bed and took care to line up the torn edges before taking the pizza from her mouth.

"Of course! We've been lucky so far. The archon has only expanded the town. He hasn't bent the angles or done any chronological shenanigans, which happened on my last archon adventure. As I mentioned before, now that we've established a firm presence inside his HQ, he'll have a hard time making more macro-alterations to spacetime. Small changes are still in his prerogative, but it's like trying to twist a wheel when someone's rammed a stake between the spokes. Us being the stake, of course."

"Meaning...?" said Winnipeg.

"It means, my dear, that my lovely map continues to reflect an almost perfect depiction of the geographic reality of Williston, despite your protestations to the contrary. The only difference is scale. While before, the entire town was about a mile from one end to the other, it's now probably..." She tapped her chin and turned her eyes toward the ceiling. "Ten times that. Which is another reason why establishing a base inside the miasma is so important! Cuts travel time to ribbons."

Sloan more-or-less followed her. Miasmas were essentially pockets where real world rules could be altered depending on the wraiths within. Delaney had simply determined the specific alterations and updated her spatial understanding of the town to accommodate. But Winnipeg leaned over the map with wan care and perched her chin on her fist. Spatial-analytic pseudoscience probably went a big whoosh over her head.

(The ease at which Delaney transitioned from puppies to wrinkles in spacetime was kind of unnerving.)

"I didn't solely pick this inn as our base for its creature comforts," Delaney continued. "Any closet would have sufficed. No, the inn provides a central location between my three chief candidates for the archon's lair."

From the inexhaustible depths of her jacket pocket, Delaney retrieved a pair of glasses and pushed them up the bridge of her nose as she leaned into the map.

"Bad eyesight?" Sloan asked.

"Only for reading, love," said Delaney.

"I can fix that."

She looked up. Her glasses flashed under the light. "Oh?"

"Yeah. I wished to cure blindness, remember? Fixing eyesight is about the only healing magic I have."

Delaney returned to the map. "No thanks, love. I like myself the way I am. Anywho! Neither of you have seen an archon, but from what I've gathered in my extensive research, they have unique appearances."

"From what you've gathered?" said Winnipeg. "You don't know?"

"Oh, I basically know. I've only personally laid eyes on one archon, which was Saskatoon 2010. However, eyewitness records of Fort McMurray 1985 describe it totally different from what I saw. The only constant between the two archons is they were both massive. Like, blot-out-the-sky big. I confirmed with Kyubey, largeness is a recurring trait. Which means its hiding place has to be similarly large."

"But..." Winnipeg scratched at her ear. "You said distance is stretched here. So how is this relevant?"

"Stretched, yes," said Delaney. "But someplace larger to begin with will obviously stretch more than someplace smaller. Which means the largest structures in the city will be multiplicatively larger than before. Hence, my candidate locations for the archon's lair."

Another dramatic pause as she raised her hand above her head and slammed an outstretched finger onto the map.

"The city hall!"

She raised her finger and brought it down again.

"The school!"

She raised her finger and brought it down again.

"And the airstrip! Not technically a structure, I know. But these are far and away the most likely places. So instead of combing a hundred square mile wilderness, we need only examine these choice locales. Aren't you glad you waited, Winnipeg?"

"Assuming your predictions are accurate."

"Of course they are," said Delaney.

Sloan finished the last slice of pizza. She had eaten five all told, and it had taken iron restraint not to wolf them down. She downed the dregs of the soda and wiped her mouth. In Fargo, her quality of life verged on third world. Calorically-independent body notwithstanding, pizza did leagues more to satisfy than a paltry diet of cubes.

"I see no further reason to linger," said Winnipeg. "The city hall is the closest of the suggested locations. We scour it first."

Delaney sagaciously permitted Winnipeg to have the final word and Sloan had no objections herself. The pizza was finished and she had little intention of letting Delaney probe more personal information.

Without ceremony, they sallied forth.

In Hell Thy Kingdom

A globe revolves. The prairies of the American Midwest roll across a frostbitten landscape and crash against the foothills of mountains that split the continent asunder with the gnashing teeth of snowcapped peaks. The land rises, then descends into a parched desert basin, the ground cracked for lack of water. A coastline emerges, dotted with cities of men, and quickly passes into an expanse of unbroken lapis lazuli. This ocean passes; land is sighted on the horizon. It is another continent, the largest in the world.

At the vanguard of this continent stand four islands, jagged and inhospitable. Few things grow on them. Tremors ravage them, seas unleash momentous tides upon them, volcanoes burst chunks of craggy magma. And yet these lands have prospered into a nation of cities and skyscrapers, of effervescence and economy. A nation that has survived all calamities of humanity: war, famine, conquest. The most devastating weapons mankind has yet unleashed fell here.

In this nation—Japan—deities slumber.

The globe stops. The perspective of heaven or satellites dwindles, closing in on Japan and the interconnected megalopolis that spans it. Ocean and mountains are eschewed in favor of bridges and structures. Streets, lights, people appear. Honeycombs of productivity, lifelines of transit, shopping districts, factories, companies, schools.

From these schools, identical children in identical uniforms return to their homes, clustered in groups of two or more. They chat animatedly, discuss their futures, laugh, and play.

Two of these pupils are Madoka Kaname and her very best friend, Homura Akemi.

Madoka did most of the talking. It pleased Homura to listen no matter the topic. The topic was their studies.

"I'm not looking forward to the English test." Madoka held her bag in front of her. It kept bouncing as she walked. "I get marked down for the tiniest things. People think I'm really good at English because I lived in the United States for three years, but sometimes it just makes it more difficult. My grammar's really bad."

"Mm," said Homura. They turned onto a paved pathway lined by hedgerows. Homes of ferociously modern architecture fanned out in both directions. Many of the schoolchildren lived in one of these houses or another, so fellow students surrounded them, each lost in their own conversations and cares.

"Maybe I could ask Mami for help," Madoka continued. "She's always using English when she fights, and plus she's in a more advanced class, so she's probably good at it, right? I'm just worried it would be too much of a hassle. School's hard enough for all of us, considering we're out fighting every night. On second thought, I better not bother her."

"She wouldn't say no," said Homura.

"I know, I know. That's the worst part. Even though it would make things harder for her, she would still do it. I'll just cram for an hour before we go wraith-hunting tonight. My grade won't be so good, but I guess I don't have a choice, do I? Being a Magical Girl comes before all of this."

They weaved through the hedge-lined walkways, delving deeper into the grid pattern of suburban homesteads. The further they walked, the fewer students remained around them.

"That's no reason to give up on your life, Madoka," said Homura. "Do what makes you happy."

Madoka rubbed the back of her head and gave a sheepish grin. "Well, I wouldn't exactly consider studying something that makes me happy. Truth be told, I'm not sure what does make me happy. Probably being with you and the others!"

Homura said nothing. They were nearing Madoka's house; Homura knew the way by heart. Save for them, the road had emptied. Well, them and the gaggle of gothic black dolls that marched behind them, each with identical white faces, wide elliptical eyes, and serrated grins. But other than Homura, nobody ever noticed the dolls much.

They reached Madoka's house, a geometric construction surrounded by gardens and lawn. Madoka's aproned father pruned vegetation. When he saw them, he waved and said hello. Homura held up a hand to wave back.

Madoka gave Homura a slight bow. "Thanks for walking me home, Homura! You really don't need to go through all the trouble, I know you live in the complete opposite direction."

The dolls pranced along the tops of hedges, unacknowledged by Madoka. "I enjoy our walks," said Homura.

"Well, I'll see you in a few hours. The miasma has really been getting worse lately, hasn't it? Maybe we should team up with the others, like we used to. Back when we all fought together, we could really take on anything."

"The others are happy as they are."

Madoka nodded gravely and grabbed Homura's hand. "Well, thanks again for walking me home. See you soon!"

Homura watched her friend clip-clop up to her house, greet her father, and disappear into the house. She remained watching for some time after, before she finally turned and snapped her fingers at two of her dolls. "Selbstsucht. Eifersucht."

The indicated dolls broke from the pack and climbed down the hedges to await their orders. She commanded them in German: "Stand guard over Madoka's house. Ensure the Incubator does not speak with her. Alert me if anyone other than her family approaches her."

The dolls nodded and tottered off with mischievous chuckles, dancing hand-in-hand across Madoka's lawn. Despite their antics, Homura had faith in their abilities. The dolls were ruthless when needed.

She headed for her daily report on current events.

The building in which she lived was wedged between two roads, a triangular two-story slice with an unassuming facade. Homura dismissed her remaining dolls and gave them leave to entertain themselves as they desired. She had fourteen dolls at her disposal, although she mostly used them to keep Madoka safe when Homura herself could not be with her. They were also useful for subtly altering the courses of the other Mitakihara girls when necessary. In extreme cases, they monitored the Incubator.

A fifteenth doll existed, which managed the Law of the Cycles for all Magical Girls across time and space. But that doll was permanently occupied and rarely factored into Homura's designs.

Schematics for said designs floated throughout Homura's dusky living quarters. At any given moment she had blueprints planning the events of the next week, occasionally the next month, to an hour-by-hour basis. She reached through the levitating papers and plucked one that read NOVEMBER 18 2013 15:00 - WALK MADOKA HOME / DISCUSS ENGLISH TEST from the air, creasing it neatly down the middle and banishing it to the archives of her mind. Such micromanagement had always been her forte, but since her literal transformation into the Adversary of God (or Satan, as some preferred), she found her capacity magnified exponentially.

The Incubator had yet to arrive. Funny. For all his sermons on efficiency, he always arrived tardy to their scheduled meetings. Not that she minded. She took the opportunity to check the statuses of the four other Magical Girls in the area, drawing the reports prepared by the dolls to the forefront of the floating file directory. TOMOE MAMI - OUTWARDLY CONTENT. SAKURA KYOKO - BORED WITH SCHOOL. MOMOE NAGISA - DESIROUS OF CHEESE. MIKI SAYAKA - UPSET WITH SAKURA. Nothing unusual, except Miki. If any of them caused trouble, it tended to be her. Now she was upset with Sakura? Probably nothing serious, but Homura made a mental note to peruse Miki's report in full detail later. Any issues with Miki needed to be suppressed swiftly before they burgeoned into a web of petty drama.

The report would wait, as the Incubator had arrived. The small white catlike creature skulked on the other end of the room, beside the giant swinging pendulum that served as metronome for the pace of Homura's thoughts.

"Come out. Give your report." Homura had no wish to waste time with her most despised underling.

The Incubator crawled into the light, the otherwise omnipresent smile wiped from his immutable face. *In the past week, 863 Magical Girls were killed in action or by the Law of the Cycles. 879 new Magical Girls were contracted. Regional breakdowns and historic trends can be viewed on these charts.*

From seemingly nowhere, a collection of large documents sprung into the air, slipping to the front of her files. She gave a cursory glance, her demiomniscience allowing her to process the information nearly instantaneously. Slight decreases of Magical Girl populations in North America, Europe, and Oceania were offset by increased populations in the Middle East, coinciding with the renewal of conflict in Syria. Wars always required temporary boosts to recruitment, and these were within acceptable parameters. She had to keep a close eye on the statistics, because if she didn't, the Incubator was liable to contract more than needed.

Of the Magical Girls killed in action, 27 were killed by another Magical Girl. This continues the five-month downward trend of magicides. You can read the individual case reports to confirm that all magicides transpired in unforeseeable circumstances of minor emotional consequence.

More files floated to the fore. Homura flicked through them. 27 cases of opportunity, greed, or mischance. A remarkably low number considering the total number active. The provisions Homura had forced the Incubator to adopt were working.

Meanwhile, the Incubator continued, the total energy harvested this week was only 87.3 percent of our quota.

Another paper flew up but she waved it away. "That doesn't concern me."

It concerns the fate of the universe over which you preside and which you helped create. We implore you to reduce some of the stringent regulations you have placed on our ability to contract and control Magical Girls —

With a wave of her hand she swelled the Incubator with a glut of unrefined emotional despair. She had nearly unlimited amounts of the stuff on standby because her Soul Gem served as the primary receptacle for the Law of the Cycles. The Incubator crumpled and writhed with a series of jerky, spastic motions. He thrashed his tiny body against the carpet, grinding his agonized face into his paws.

Stop, please! We beg you... the pain...

She watched a few moments to try and determine how much was genuine and how much was hammy acting. Then she grew bored and twisted a mental nozzle. The stream of emotions ceased and the Incubator quickly composed himself.

"It should be apparent by now I do not require your advice on such issues."

Our apologies. That concludes the weekly report. Any further statistics can be found in the provided files. We will be leaving now.

"Stay." She flicked through the papers, absorbing the information on each sheet with a mere glance. "You've failed to mention something of interest. There has been a sudden and unexpected infestation of wraiths in a remote area of the United States. A village called Williston. Why have you not explained this anomaly?"

The Williston event is not an anomaly. It is a typical and predictable outcome of the socioeconomic conditions which have caused the town's population to explode without proper infrastructural support to quell the resulting influx of sin and despair, leading to an archon event. Similar conditions frequently occur in impoverished or war-stricken nations, like the current situation in Syria.

"In Syria you contracted more girls to compensate. There are no such increases in the Williston area." The statistics tumbled through her mind effortlessly. But one of the things she had difficulty knowing, even with her godlike powers, was the inner workings of the Incubator's mind. Even the minds of regular people could be tricky to navigate, but the Incubator far exceeded a human in complexity. Hence her need to keep him on a short leash.

Given the demographics of eligible female candidates in Williston, combatting the wraiths via contracting was considered infeasible. Instead, we migrated Magical Girls from nearby cities.

"Magicide chances increase significantly when Magical Girls are grouped together," said Homura. "Give me intelligence on the girls you called in."

She had precious little interest in Williston or the girls involved in its cleansing. But if she let even the tiniest detail slip, the Incubator would learn to exploit such holes in her omniscience. If only she could do away with him and assign her dolls to contract Magical Girls and collect grief cubes. She had crunched the logistics a thousand times with a thousand different equations and parameters; replacing the Incubator's talents was simply impossible.

More files. She scanned them at a glance. "Only three girls. Considering the urgency of the situation, this is acceptable. Although I question the addition of this Sloan Redfearn girl. Your statistics give her a low chance of survival, and her necessity to the mission is dubious at best."

The inclusion of Sloan Redfearn is not meant to improve the mission's odds. If you look deeper into her file, you will note she is a large magicide risk if left unchecked. The slow decline of her Soul Gem has increased her desperation and the danger of unwanted action. Surely, you would vouch for her termination?

Sloan Redfearn had a particularly detailed and easy-to-read file, aided by the fact that her magic was based on visibility. Sometimes girls could be nearly impossible reads, which always made Homura mistrustful. Miss Redfearn's file painted a portrait of someone who had spent seven months nursing a death grudge against a fellow Magical Girl, living in complete isolation in a hellish tundra. The magical potential of Miss Redfearn and the girl she had

vowed vengeance against were fairly high, which only exacerbated matters. Sloan Redfearn was indeed a prime candidate for termination.

The odds indicate that Miss Redfearn will die soon, one way or another. Is it not better for her death to come fighting wraiths rather than fighting another Magical Girl?

She banished the file on Sloan Redfearn to the back of the stack. "The other girls are suspect as well. Erika Dufresne has shown exceptional competitiveness and the inability to work with others. Delaney Pollack's sordid past should have marked her for termination three years ago. In fact, she has already been tied to an archon event. This team you have assembled is a powder keg waiting to explode."

Erika Dufresne's competitiveness has never manifested into magicide, even in self defense. In fact, she takes great care her opponents survive. Her motivations — territory and prestige — are both unwanted by the other members of the team, reducing the chance of conflict.

"And Pollack." Homura drew up a detailed report on the girl from Saskatchewan. "This girl is problematic in many ways. Why was she even contracted?"

You'll note her high magical potential and despair tolerance. We admit we underestimated her emotional issues, but in the past three years she has had no incidents whatsoever. It's safe to say she has reformed.

"People don't reform." Homura flicked the files away. "Considering the urgency and remoteness of the situation, I'll give your methods a tentative pass. However, I am keeping a close eye on Williston. I want a follow-up report at our next meeting."

Of course.

No other anomalous occurrences, other than the aforementioned Syria conflict. Information, data, names flooded through her mind, processed and sorted instantaneously. The Incubator middle-managed more-or-less to her liking. He had not made a major mistake for almost a year. She didn't trust it.

"That is all. You may leave."

By the time Homura turned around, the Incubator had vanished. The guillotine pendulum swung back and forth, the pages and files drifted, shadows ate the corners of the room. Loosening the bow of her schoolgirl uniform, she plopped into one of the couches in the center of the room, allowing her legs to dangle over the side.

She stared at the ceiling as the overloaded information ebbed from her brain, melting into a viscous puddle at the base of her skull. The factoids and statistics left her as her eyes glazed over, the sullied puddle oozing into nothingness, leaving behind only a single, pure image on the cataract film spread across her irises: that of Madoka Kaname, the one for whom she did all that she did.

The stairway leading to the Williston City Hall was paved with the corpses of plaid-shirted men, ragged little skeletons clutching strips of dirty cloth. The City Hall itself rose to the dark sky, a medieval fortress of stone walls and jagged parapets. The arched double doors beckoned to the three girls who ascended the steps, girls who had moments before existed as a collection of names in Homura Akemi's itinerary.

The route from the inn to the City Hall had been much shorter than their previous foray into the miasma and they had encountered much less resistance. Not a single greater wraith had reared its ugly head and the clusters of lesser ones that swayed into the road were obliterated wholesale by the combined power of Sloan and Winnipeg, all meager counterattacks blocked by Delaney's barriers.

"Should we expect a trap," said Sloan. She had managed her magic well so far and her performance had no hiccups. Her goal was to survive the excursion without horrendous embarrassment. It wasn't a pride thing, although the scorn Winnipeg exuded did bite deep for some reason. It had to do with Minneapolis. Clair Ibsen defeated Sloan at peak form and confidence. Sloan's ultimate goal was to crush Clair, so mere survival in Williston was not an option. She had to flourish.

"We should expect an archon in there, love," said Delaney. "That's why we came, after all."

They reached the top of the stairs and paused before the open doorway. Dead air whistled through.

"If we find the archon, what's the plan," said Sloan.

"The plan is hit it until it dies." Winnipeg plunged through the doors and disappeared in a wisp of shadow. Sloan ran after, leaving Delaney in the rear. She had learned not to linger at the back, where Delaney might "forget" her.

Entering the City Hall was like entering yet another world, a pocket dimension inside a pocket dimension. As they crossed the threshold, the way back to the streets of Williston fell into obscurity and the grand main hall of the feudal castle lit up with a line of pale torches that shed gray light across the stones, carpets, and tapestries of the cyclopean construction. Oaken doors filled the spaces between the torches. At the end of the hall hung a map of the city, identical to Delaney's map. It had the same schematic red ink and the same locations circled and the same jagged tear down the middle. It had been blown to astronomical proportions and now hung in the hall to mock them.

"Too many doors," said Sloan.

"Fear not, love. Remember in the real world, this City Hall is little more than a dumpy little thing. These added doors are but illusions."

Delaney stepped in front, her heels clicking against the opulent reflective floor. She held aloft her staff and summoned thousands of bubbles in a spiral pattern before her. With a trenchant

wave, she zipped the bubbles down the hall. Some broke from the main pack to slam into each door, splattering in eruptions of blood.

At first, Sloan didn't understand. But as the blood drizzled down the doors, the doors drizzled too, washing away like crayon. After a few moments, all but three had resolved into dew.

"You're useful after all," said Winnipeg. She took point and headed for the closest door.

Delaney flashed a charming wink and struck a pose with sparkly pizzazz. "Brute force only achieves so much!"

Sloan hefted her machine gun and followed. "You wished for a puppy and this is how you turned out?"

"Well, some other things happened." Delaney shrugged. "Let's not worry about that, love. Keep close to me. Don't put much faith in the walls here—they're liable to shift."

Sloan didn't need reminding. The walls of the inn had almost crushed her when they first entered town.

They entered a library of towering metal cabinets instead of shelves, monstrous manilla folders instead of books. The cabinets fanned out in a precarious labyrinth of handles and rippling tin, their tops too shrouded in shadow to see. No obvious direction or destination existed, but Winnipeg hurried down a random corridor with her katana drawn and forced the others to follow.

Some of the upper cabinets hung open. Unseen creatures rummaged through the contents, smacking and chomping heavy lips. Flecks of shredded paper drifted down and coated the floor. As they meandered between the columns, Sloan snatched a scrap out of the air and turned it over. The words were scrawled in stylized German, brimming with umlauts, tangled compounds, and thick consonants. It did not look like an official town record.

She crumpled the scrap and looked up. A wall of filing cabinets barred her way. The wall had not been there before.

Delaney and Winnipeg had vanished. Paths curled in every direction, terminating in either darkness or a dead end. Somewhere in the distance, a wall groaned and shifted with an avalanche of documents.

God FUCK. You fucking retard, Delaney warned you about the walls literally FIVE SECONDS AGO and you fucked it up. Stamp a big red FAILURE on "survive the excursion without horrendous embarrassment."

She clenched her fists, locked her jaw, broadcasted telepathically: *I got cut off.*

Oh dear, love. I do believe I warned you like three seconds ago to be careful about this sort of thing. Thanks for the reminder, Delaney. Sloan had totally forgotten.

The wraiths marked you as the weak link, said Winnipeg. *Be smart and retreat to the inn. We won't need you anyway.*

I'm blasting through. Stand back.

The gnawing and munching from the open cabinets stopped. Over the edges peeked malformed, impish wraiths. In unison they crawled out and began climbing down, their faces abuzz with static.

Sloan aimed her gun and fired at the wall. The cabinets rattled and quivered with a metallic gurgle as a blinding aura filled the corridor, purging the imp-wraiths that crawled too close. When Sloan released the trigger, a solid circular opening had been chewed through the metal.

Delaney and Winnipeg weren't there.

God dammit, Sloan said. Where did you go.

Nowhere, said Winnipeg. We're at exactly the same spot. Where are you?

Sloan peered through the opening. Only limitless corridors of cabinets sprawled onward. What the hell was this funhouse? Onto the tile around her plopped upside-down imps, squirming themselves upright like scarabs. First only a few, but soon they were piling atop one another, covering the ground in a writhing mass.

An imp clawed at her shin and she smashed it with a bootsole before swinging her gun and unleashing hellfire onto the crowd. The imps squealed as her light disintegrated them, but more and more came tumbling down. One sank needlepoint teeth into her ankle. She crushed it with her other leg but more crawled for her, cretinous dwarfs with stumpy proportions and misshapen limbs.

You alright love? asked Delaney from somewhere.

As the sea of imps came crashing down, Sloan hurled her machine gun aside and backflipped onto the wall, latching onto the cabinet handles. Immediately the creatures scrambled after her. Her levitating machine gun seared ranks to cinders at her mental beck, but the ceaseless tides only multiplied. One dropped onto her head, digging ratty claws into her scalp. She slammed it against the wall and sent it plummeting to its fellows.

With one graceful leap she pushed from the wall, bounced atop her floating gun, and bounded onto the next tower of cabinets, grabbing the handles for support. The imps came crashing after her, hurtling the gap in a lemming leap, plunging to the ground and crawling up the new wall. She jumped back to the first wall, gaining a little height and a momentum and barely pausing before leaping again across the divide. The imps toppled after her. She only fired at the few who got close, using her gun more as a platform for her acrobatics as she caromed between the walls like god damn Super Mario. The pillars of cabinet shelves had to have some top. If she could reach it she would gain vantage over the library and find her companions and salvage at least some scrap of competence from her latest mistake.

But as she continued her trapeze act and the ground grew distant, the cabinets only continued to soar into the void above. The imps had fallen further behind, but Sloan perceived no end in sight. She quit jumping for a moment to survey the vertiginous surroundings.

The instant she stopped the shelves around her burst open, unleashing a nest of imps and a flurry of shredded paper. The entire wall reverberated with metallic twanging and began to move, scraping horizontal to flatten her against the opposite wall.

Sloan released her grip and plunged between the closing walls. Imps halfway in their climb groped for her as she dropped. With a swing of her arm she circled her gun below her, clearing a landing with a single ray of erasure through the writhing bodies. She hit the ground on a perfect parkour roll, distributing the brunt of impact with her magic. Immediately she somersaulted to her feet and sprinted down the aisle, diving through the closing walls and leaving the imps to be squashed behind her.

But really love, are you okay?

Fucking dandy, Sloan transmitted as another frantically whooping horde of imps dropped down in pursuit.

The corridor zigzagged randomly. The walls loosed primordial rumbles as they twisted to block her path. Cabinets shot out to trip her but she either slid under or leapt over them. Her lungs pounded and her legs ached, and she felt maybe she hadn't stuck her landing so perfectly, because a dull throb set into one of her bones, maybe a fracture or maybe psychosomatic, she didn't know, she could only run like hell.

She rounded a corner only to crash face first into a wall. She bounced back onto her ass. A dead end.

Her hand shot for the nearest cabinet so she could try to climb again, but already the imps were on her. Several kamikaze-plunged onto her floating gun, forcing the barrel's aim as they pounded gnarled feet against it. Its fire sagged uselessly into a wall.

Several imps leapt onto her back and clawed at her coat. She flailed her arms at them, frying them with pulses of light from her fingertips. She staggered into the dead end, still no sign of Delaney or Winnipeg, options dwindling. The imps slowed their assault, understanding they had her cornered, none wanting to be the first forward as she faced them with her hands afire. Magical exhaustion had yet to set in, which meant she had hope. If the wraith rodentia wanted to take her, they would pay dearly in their own cooked corpses.

The front lines of the army advanced hesitantly, little feet scuffling across the tile. Many of the wraiths clucked and chuckled at her, some outright cackled. She pointed her palm at an imp and erased it with a ray of light to send a message.

The imps drew back, only to quickly renew their cautious forward motion. Sloan braced herself for a brawl to the death.

Then a hand settled on her wrist and the world went colorless and hazy. The imps drew back in surprise, but they did not attack. They did not start moving forward again. They stared at her—or rather, the place where she was standing—with eyeless faces, collective mouths agape.

Sloan faced whoever had grabbed her wrist, who until then had been unseen. The mousey dark-haired girl she had met on the bus in Bismarck peered back timorous and tremulous. The same girl who had bitten Sloan's hand. The girl with the power to disappear.

Murmuring to themselves, the imps turned and slinked back to their cabinets, unable to see Sloan and the girl who saved her.

Charred Child Flesh

A ratty gray cloak hung from the invisible girl in loose folds. Clumped tufts of unkempt black hair tumbled down her shoulders in an infestation of loose strands and split ends. The fragile hand that gripped Sloan's wrist wore a bracelet embedded with a pyrite gemstone. When Sloan looked at her, she averted her eyes and adjusted the thick-lensed spectacles barely supported by her tiny nose.

"Thanks. I guess." It was the third time someone had rescued Sloan from imminent death in as many hours. But who was counting.

The girl parsed her lips in what was either a smile or a grimace. *Oh, uh, you're welcome, but, they can still hear you. I can only make things look not there. I, uh, can't take them away.*

Makes sense. Sloan unrooted from the corner between the cabinets and gazed up, trying not to look particularly interested in the invisible girl. The imps had clambered back into the open cabinets, resuming their activities as though no disturbance had occurred. Even the walls seemed to have stopped moving, or else they were biding their time. A hollow tranquility fell over the corridor as Sloan led her new friend back the way she came in search of an exit.

She tried to conceal her footfalls, but she could only tread so lightly in military-grade boots. The invisible girl wore a sort of moccasin and glided wraithlike beside her.

I forgot your name, said Sloan.

The girl hesitated, rubbed her throat. *Omaha.*

That's right. Nebraska cornhusker country. She looked Asian, uncommon for the Midwest, but metropolitan girls often got shoved to the boondocks. *Why you following me, Omaha?*

Omaha tensed. *I, I'm not following you.*

Cut the shit, kid. No way you just happened to be loitering in the same corner I got chased to. You're following me, why?

The girl stammered and fidgeted as Sloan dragged her along. She shored up her shoulders defensively and tightened her grip on Sloan's wrist.

I, I, I can't tell you that, said Omaha. *I, uh, I don't think I'm allowed.*

Allowed by who?

Uh, I, Um...

Her voice tapered away and she lowered her eyes so much it was a miracle her glasses stayed on. Silence predominated as it became clear Omaha had no intention to answer. Pity, because

Sloan would have loved to hear the answer. She doubted this meek, jittery little creature was here of her own volition. But given all Omaha had to do was release Sloan's wrist to drop her back to the wraiths, Sloan had no way to pressure a response.

They continued down the endless, unchanging corridors in uncomfortable silence. Their linked hands compounded the awkwardness. Omaha's fingers trembled and her palm was surprisingly warm.

The silence built and built until with a frantic and sudden intensity Omaha began to stammer again. *I. Uh... Um! I'm sorry, for uh, for biting you! You know... on the bus.*

She bowed her head as if in anticipation of a blow. Like an abused dog. What asshole had coerced the poor girl to come here?

Sloan tried to give a smile, but the smile probably sucked and Omaha probably didn't see it. *Don't worry about it, kid. No hard feelings.*

I didn't mean to. I mean. I didn't think about it. I just got scared. I thought you were going to hurt me, and I, I...

You still think I'm going to hurt you?

Omaha said nothing.

Well, don't worry. You don't hurt me, I don't hurt you. Deal?

Omaha said nothing. Another period of silence descended. Sloan wondered if this labyrinth of cabinets had any end.

Eventually Omaha worked up the nerve to speak again. *Um, Miss Sloan?*

No need for the Miss.

If it's, uh, not much of a bother, could you maybe, keep this quiet from your companions? Miss Delaney and Miss Erika?

Erika must be Winnipeg, although Sloan did not recall Winnipeg giving her real name.

If I told them, would someone be mad at you? said Sloan.

Omaha looked up, her submissiveness erased in an instant, her dark eyes piercing and stern. *My friend never gets mad at me. But I would get very mad at you.*

An unseen bird squawked from the rafters above. Sloan bit her lip, unsure how to respond. Unease crept into her, even as Omaha swiftly reverted to her normal fidgeting and trembling and even muttered a shriveled apology. The girl could easily be a lunatic. It happened from time to time: abused and tortured girls sometimes saved themselves from the Law of the Cycles by fleeing from reality, altering their perceptions of the world to defend themselves from its pain. Omaha's first response to an unwanted social situation had been to bite someone. Not damning, but suspicious.

Generally Kyubey slated those types for termination. Whenever girls became "dangerous" (although Kyubey probably cared more about the fact that crazy chicks were harder to manipulate), the rat bastard posted a grief cube bounty on their heads. Some girls made livings as so-called terminators, traveling the country in search of loonies to cull. But Kyubey had said nothing about Omaha. No, he had said that Omaha's invisibility made her hard to track. Sloan had accepted the explanation at the time, but how did a girl in control of a midsize city disappear and Kyubey not at least have an inkling of where she went?

She tried to remember Kyubey's exact wording. Had he said he had failed to track her, or just that she was difficult to track? Because the latter did not preclude the former. (She did remember he said he "did not invite her to be part of your team." Another choice Kyubeyism. Sloan really wondered the identity of Omaha's friend.)

Calm down, she told herself. She needed to escape the maze before she worried about anything else.

Don't worry, said Sloan. I won't tell.

Th, Thank you, Miss Sloan. It's very important to me.

They walked. And walked. In silence. Sloan tried to think of ways to wheedle more information, something subtle to trip Omaha up. But conversation ranked pretty low on Sloan's list of qualities. She couldn't even think of icebreakers to at least break the all-consuming silence that made everything so damn eerie, like she were dragging along a living doll instead of a human being. What could Sloan ask? Go the Delaney Pollack route and ask about wishes? Sloan doubted she even wanted to know what such a miserable girl had sold her soul for. And if Omaha really were deranged, who knew what would set her off. Discussion of families, friends, fucking pets were minefields waiting to erupt.

So Sloan said nothing and pulled her companion by the hand. Omaha sometimes murmured like she had something to say, then thought better and averted her eyes.

Minutes passed. Maybe a half hour. Time was difficult to gauge in the miasma. The labyrinth had no end. Every corridor split into two more. Going in circles was a real possibility. Sloan soldiered on like she knew what she was doing, and Omaha never corrected her or suggested an alternate route. Sloan frustration mounted and almost boiled over (couldn't Omaha at least do *something*?) when out of the silence emerged the voice of Delaney, a crystalline chime with slight urgency.

Sloan love? You there?

Thank god. Someone remembered her.

Yeah, said Sloan. Blasted my way through a mountain of imps, but I'm here.

Stupendous! I was so worried. I hadn't heard from you in so long, it's hard not to assume the worst. Do you know where you are?

Sloan checked the cabinets around her. They looked the same as all the other cabinets. *Not a clue. Still in the library.*

Well, it's best if we reconvene, said Delaney. *I'll send some bubbles into the maze. If you find one, follow it to me, alright love?*

Sounds good.

Omaha said nothing about the interaction. Sloan tried to wink at her as if to say, See? I won't sell you out to them, but Omaha was pro at eye contact evasion.

After a few more minutes of aimless meandering, they found a red bubble adrift amid the passages. The moment they sighted it, Omaha relinquished Sloan's wrist. The effect was instantaneous: Sloan reemerged in the visible realm while Omaha crumbled from existence, free to stalk Sloan unnoticed. Not a reassuring thought.

Sloan poked the bubble. It wobbled. *I found one,* she broadcasted to Delaney.

Awesome! You must be close.

As if tugged by a magnet, the bubble drifted down the corridor. It moved faster than Sloan expected. She jogged to keep up with it, whipping around corners and ignoring the numb pain in her leg.

She strained her ears for Omaha's footsteps beside her, but heard nothing at all.

It only took a few minutes to follow Delaney's bubble to the exit. Rasping for breath, Sloan shuffled against the door and forced it open, spilling into the main hall. The black ocean of lacquered tile that spanned in both directions gleamed with the sanguine aura of Delaney's bubbles, which floated around the cavernous space with rosy cheer. No trace remained of the massive facsimile of Delaney's town map, which had taunted them upon arrival.

Delaney stood in the exact center of the hall, twirling her staff. "Oh, how lovely you made it!"

Sloan doubled over and caught her breath. She hated cardio, but it embarrassed her she couldn't run fifteen minutes without being totally winded. She had always been one to move in sprints of activity instead of bouts of endurance.

"Where's Winnipeg?" she wheezed.

Delaney waved her staff and eliminated Sloan's minor cuts, as well as the pain in her leg.

"I wouldn't worry about Winnipeg, she's a powerful girl. Whatever's befallen her, she has the wiles to escape."

Sloan's eyes narrowed. "But really. How were you separated?"

"The same way you were separated from us." She frowned. "I didn't hurt her, if that's what you're thinking. I know things got quite accusatory back at the inn, but Winnipeg gave you the completely wrong impression of me. I want nothing more than to do good deeds."

"I don't give a shit about that. Where did you last see her."

"Oh, you know." She hesitated, raised a lazy hand to indicate a door. "Somewhere thereabouts, who knows. Does it matter?"

Although her lungs still pounded, Sloan lifted herself and headed in the indicated direction.

Delaney swept into her path with a single flowing step. Her long white gown swished at her ankles. "You know, Winnipeg cares very little about the people we're saving here. All she cares about is herself and her territory. She likes to be in control, she likes to feel secure."

Winnipeg? said Sloan. She tried to pass Delaney. *Can you hear me?*

"You'll need to do something about her eventually, love. Or you won't receive the grief cubes you need."

Winnipeg? Are you alive?

Delaney placed a hand on Sloan's shoulder. Her fingers curled around the bone, kneading the malnourished flesh through the overcoat. "I want to help, love."

From the dead air, Winnipeg's brusque voice cut into Sloan's head. *Fargo. If you're with Regina-Saskatoon, kill her. Now.*

Delaney's arms coiled around Sloan's body and drew her into an embrace. She nuzzled her head against Sloan's shoulder, her warm breath brushing strands of hair off the nape of Sloan's neck. Her floral aroma suffocated Sloan's nostrils as her entire body went into lockdown. Normal human interactions were hard enough, but this was uncharted territory. Sloan's arms froze taut at her sides as Delaney pressed closer, her not-insignificant breasts difficult not to notice despite Sloan's best efforts.

Delaney lifted her head and peered into Sloan's eyes with a fearful expression. "Please, Sloan, you wouldn't hurt me, would you?"

A frantic impulse struck Sloan and she disentangled herself, staggering back to put distance between her and Delaney. Her machine gun materialized in her hands. "Don't touch me! What did you do to Winnipeg?"

The timorous, disembodied voice of Omaha whispered into Sloan's ear: "Leave her alive. Miss Delaney is needed for now. If she tries anything, I'll stop her."

Sloan was already on edge, but Omaha's words pushed her toward freakout. Needed for *now*? Needed for *what*? To kill the archon? And after they did that, when Delaney was *no longer needed*, then what? What the fuck was happening here?

She caught herself before she could say or do something stupid. Delaney had drawn back, wrapping her arms around her and shaking a little at the sight of Sloan's gun aimed at her. Sloan took a deep breath and made the gun disappear.

"Look. Delaney. I'm not going to kill you. But you need to be honest with me. What did you do to Winnipeg?"

"I did nothing," said Delaney. "Please, we need to leave before she finds us! She's dangerous and paranoid, she'll kill us both."

Omaha whispered: "Miss Erika is also needed for now."

Sloan disliked the psychopathic advice that kept seeping into her ear like a devil on her shoulder. Not that Delaney was acting like the paradigm of sanity either, but fuck. That was all Sloan could think on the matter, a blunt and empty swear with no intrinsic meaning. Nothing else made sense.

"I'm gonna find Winnipeg." She spoke as if to tell herself rather than anyone else.

She brushed past Delaney and approached the door on the opposite end of the hall that Delaney had indicated earlier. It was totally possible Delaney had lied about the door. Anything was totally possible.

Delaney clasped her hands and shook them in supplication.

"Oh no love, you don't want to do that. What's she ever done to help you? At every turn she abandons you. Who stuck with you always? Me, right?"

Sloan continued for the door.

"Well," said Delaney. "If that's the case. I hate to do this, love. But it's for your own good."

The swish of something heavy rushed through the air behind her. Sloan dove aside, rolled to her feet, and manifested her machine gun, swinging it to face Delaney and firing. The moment she squeezed the trigger she saw her mistake. A large, red bubble had affixed itself to the end of the barrel. It lit up as streams of Sloan's light magic bounced inside, filling the bubble until it burst and the accumulated magic erupted in every direction. A beam sliced a chunk from Sloan's leg and another pierced her lung. The breath whooshed out of her as she struck the ground.

Her gun landed in front of her, hewn by another ricocheting beam. Delaney popped the barrier she had placed around herself and emerged unscathed.

"I hope that didn't hurt too bad." She crouched and stroked Sloan's hair. Sloan tried to roll over and failed. She sputtered to breathe. "Now, I'm going to knock you unconscious for a bit. When you wake up, you'll be nice and healed and we can have a good long talk about saving the universe together."

Delaney gripped her staff in both hands and hefted it above her head. The massive ruby at its end flashed with light residue as it bore down on Sloan's skull.

Something invisible lashed out and severed both of Delaney's hands at the wrist. The staff, hands still attached, flopped to the ground and two arcs of blood shot from the nubs.

Delaney held her arms in front of her and regarded the spurting stumps with mild fascination.

"Oh dear." Her blood flowed onto Sloan's prone torso. "Did you do this, love?"

Sloan wheezed in reply.

Bubbles formed around Delaney's lifeless hands. With a series of nods and pantomimes she directed the bubbles to carry her hands back to her bleeding stumps. She worked with composure and efficiency, wasting no time affixing her pieces back together. When the hands had reattached to their proper positions, the bubbles popped and doused her forearms in blood.

When the blood evaporated, not a trace of the mishap remained.

Delaney balled her hands into fists and wiggled her fingers to test her healing. Satisfied, she picked up her staff and regarded it. "Or perhaps you didn't do it at all. I recall you mentioned something when we first met. About a fourth girl. One who could go invisible at will?"

Unbeknownst to Delaney, the blood that had spilled from her hands began to seep into Sloan's own wounds. Slowly, Sloan's breath returned and her pain diminished. She continued to wheeze and sputter, maintaining the charade of injury.

"Who knows?" said Delaney with a shrug. "A girl who can turn invisible whenever she wants. Isn't that a tad overpowered, Sloan dear? I mean, my Soul Gem is right here." She motioned to the brooch of her gown, a crimson gemstone set in a golden clasp. "Were this invisible girl here right now, she would need only one strike to eliminate me completely."

A challenge. Omaha—wherever she was—did not bite. Probably she sensed the obvious trap. As of yet, Delaney had demonstrated no offensive capabilities beyond the pathetic use her staff as a bludgeon. But her healing and barrier magic were nothing to scoff at, and she knew how to use them well. She was not an adversary to take lightly.

However, she could not defend against what she did not expect. Sloan reared up, already swinging her arm before she materialized a new machine gun in her hand. Delaney's face formed an expression of indignation before the hunk of metal crashed against her skull. A breathless squeak escaped her lips and she dropped to the floor.

Sloan let go of her gun, blood splattered at the place of connection. Delaney's magic cut out and her Magical Girl costume disappeared, replaced by civilian jeans and hoodie.

"Th, thank you," Omaha's voice stammered. It remained creepily close to Sloan's ear. "I was worried I would have to compromise myself to keep you safe."

"Thanks," Sloan forced herself to say.

Delaney's Soul Gem returned to its egg form and rolled against her outstretched arm. Sloan briefly considered smashing it. But murdering an unconscious foe—not something she could

do. Besides, Delaney was crazy but Omaha was right: she was useful. They still had an archon to kill.

No time to waste deliberating. Winnipeg was still somewhere, maybe in danger. Sloan had to act fast and decisive.

After pocketing Delaney's Soul Gem, she lifted the senseless body and hoisted it onto her shoulder. The girl was already light and an ounce of magic made her weigh as much as a feather, legs and arms dangling.

Winnipeg, she said. I incapacitated Delaney. Where are you?

Running. No exit.

I'm coming to help. Which door?

The one on the right.

No snide jabs about Sloan's worthlessness, at least. Sloan turned toward the door on the right, the same door Delaney had indicated.

"Omaha. Take Delaney to the inn. I have her Soul Gem, so she won't wake until I return. I'm going for Winnipeg."

Omaha manifested from the murk. In the visible realm, her decrepit cloak seemed even more filthy. She tugged at her collar and shuffled her feet.

"I, I'm not supposed to leave you..."

"Too bad. I'm not fighting with Delaney draped over my shoulder. If you want me to keep her alive, do as I say." She unslung the body and pushed it toward Omaha. Omaha shirked back, teeth clenched, hands upraised. Sloan continued to proffer the temporary cadaver with an expectant glare until Omaha adjusted her glasses and took it, placing her tiny hands around the body with great care.

"Okay, but, uh, I'll be back! If there's trouble, please call me. I'll come."

In an instant, both Omaha and Delaney's body vanished. Sloan sighed, relieved to be rid of them both, before she seized her gun and charged through the door in search of Winnipeg.

She burst into a cavernous arena split down the middle by an infinite chasm. A few filing cabinets were strewn near the edge, many tilting precariously, documents spilling from upheaved drawers into the abyss below. The walls of the atrium were speckled with mouths of tunnels which plunged into darkness. Each tunnel had a smooth cylindrical surface, although stalagmites jutted between the cabinets in the main area.

Another motherfucking maze. Sloan scanned the tunnels for any marginally more promising than the rest, but they were all identical and indistinct.

Where are you, Winnipeg?

I can't see anything.

Sloan could help that. She discarded her gun and extended her hands in front of her as she charged her magical energy and focused it into her fingertips. A ball of light grew in her palms and illuminated the atrium, causing scattered gremlins to scurry for safety. She squinted and turned away as the glow gathered intensity, spilling into the innumerable caverns and flooding through their veiny passages.

Anything now? said Sloan.

Nothing. Wait — a light.

Sloan figured she didn't need to tell her to run toward it. She focused her attention on maintaining the pulsing spheroid.

From one of the tunnels, Winnipeg emerged at a full-tilt sprint, half her face marred by a jagged bloody gash that rendered one eye nothing more than a sealed welt. She leapt through the air in a squall of wind, hitting the top of one of the leaning cabinets and dashing along the line between solid ground and a plunge into the chasm with imperturbable finesse.

"Run," she said.

From the same tunnel burst a gargantuan worm, sized exactly the width of the cavernous opening, its head an enlarged version of the same gray head that adorned all wraiths, its mouth ringed with rows of gnashing fangs that tore into dirt and dust and paper and anything in its path. Imps and filing cabinets were sucked into the black vortex of its mouth, into which only oblivion awaited.

Sloan hurled her light orb at the worm, aiming it just over Winnipeg's head and into the gaping maw. The light struck the staticky crackle of its eyes without even fazing it. She scooped up her gun and ran for the door back to the hall.

As soon as she turned, the door began to close as if propelled by an unseen force. She threw a hapless arm to prop it but it slammed closed before she could reach it. She planted her feet and blasted it with her gun, the woodwork smashed with the first round, but through the opening was no longer the main hall but a single tunnel sloped slowly downward into an imperceivable blackness.

Unthinking, Sloan prepared to sprint down the tunnel, but Winnipeg seized her by the collar and yanked her aside. *Idiot! We fight in the open.*

The surprisingly formidable grip of the younger girl slingshotted Sloan out of the way as the worm crashed upon the spot they had stood moments prior. Sloan staggered back in a wake of dust and debris, stumbling over her feet and slamming against a row of cabinets. In

contrast, Winnipeg leaped at the same cabinet, hit it with both feet, and went soaring at the thrashing serpentine body of the worm-wraith. She tumbled over it, her katana flashing out like a streak of silver, and as she descended on the other side a long gash spread between the worm's meaty segmentations.

The worm howled in agony as unctuous black fluid seeped from its wound and seared the ground. Winnipeg jumped again, evading the flailing tail that tried to swat her out of the air and cleaving another, deeper cut across the body. The blood shot out in a splatter and Winnipeg landed near Sloan with droplets of the stuff adorning her uniform.

Outside of its tunnels, this thing is weak. I'll use my finisher next.

The worm writhed, its uncontrollable tail smacking cabinets and gremlins and stalagmites into the chasm, the sizzle of its blood audible above its demonic hisses. Winnipeg stepped forward and brushed back a lock of hair, posing with gymnastic aplomb as she raised her katana and prepared her final strike against the beast. It seemed when it came to finisher moves, even Winnipeg maintained some girlish composure. She opened her mouth to deliver the ability name:

"BOURRASQUE... D—!!"

The second word caught in her throat. Her entire body went rigid and her katana plummeted from her grasp. Her eyes revolved wildly as a continuous "duh" forced its way from her agape mouth. Her statuesque body trembled but made no more consequential motion.

I CAN'T MOVE! she said.

The worm's two wounds regenerated at once. Its body ceased thrashing and it righted itself, coiling up and raising its soulless face above them, fangs parting into a hysterical smile.

The blood. Winnipeg was covered in splotches of it. Sloan had read somewhere, or seen a documentary, of natural neurotoxins designed to incapacitate and paralyze prey. Could the blood—?

From between worm's countless fangs poured a deluge of the same black material that had splattered from its wounds. Sloan wrapped an arm around Winnipeg's waist and hurled her away. The tiny rigid body sailed across the atrium as if gravity no longer applied to it, which with Sloan's magic was close to the truth. At the same time her machine gun lifted from the ground and fired at the oncoming flood of vomit. The blast of light intercepted the liquid midway and atomized it in a bilious puff, but the venomous discharge only continued to flow, its volume too high for her gun to handle for long.

She backflipped to the top of the cabinets behind her and slid down the opposite end. The inky torrent splashed after her, drenching the whole shelf and any misfortunate imps who had not already vacated the premises but missing her by inches.

Seething and squirming the worm undulated after her. Its noises shifted to hungry sucking sounds as some unseen nose sniffed her out. She ran around the perimeter of the atrium and turned her gun's attention toward the beast itself. Round after round of light magic pummeled

against its leathery hide, only to bounce back with no perceptible damage. This was cause for concern. Her magic required heavy sustained fire to pierce anything armored. But with the worm constantly shifting its segmented body, she could hit no one spot for more than a brief moment.

Winnipeg's katana was sharp enough to cleave the tubelike anatomy with a single slash. As Sloan darted between cabinets and bounded back and forth over the chasm in a desperate gambit to keep the worm preoccupied and away from where Winnipeg's immobilized body had landed, she scanned the battlefield for the sword. It wasn't in Winnipeg's outstretched arm. Had it fallen out when Sloan threw her, or had it dropped when the venom first affected her?

Where's your sword, she asked as she slid underneath a swiping tail and somersaulted back to a sprint.

Get out of here, leave me, I lost, how did I lose to this thing, what am I even doing —

And so on, a continuous barrage of self-loathing broadcasted at full volume and with increasing acerbity as Winnipeg worked herself into a lather. So no help from her.

If the katana hadn't fallen from Winnipeg's hand in flight, it must be near the atrium entrance. But the entire area was awash in a puddle of glutinous oil, from which a few frozen imps extended motionless arms like tar pit dinosaurs. She lingered a moment to search the pool in more detail and the worm came crashing at her, slamming a body segment against her. She flew forward, hit a cabinet or something, and skidded to a halt in a bed of jagged stones, her jacket and her skin a crisscrossing tableau of scrapes and gashes.

She pulled herself up, disoriented. The ceiling and floor and walls and tunnels swirled around her. Out of the visual melange emerged the worm, fangs bared and ready to devour.

Sloan kicked a mound of stones at the creature's face. At the same time she directed her gun to fire at the stones. They exploded in a powdery cloud, until she remembered worms didn't use sight to sense their surroundings. She lunged aside as the worm barreled into the spot she had stood moments before. Dirt and dust rubbed into her multiple wounds and intensified the pain over the brim of her ability to dampen it. Now instead of a numb awareness of injury every motion she made was accompanied with physical misery.

The segments of worm encircled her. Ignoring the pain, she dipped through a closing window of gray flesh and ran for the puddle of black ooze where she suspected Winnipeg's katana had fallen. Most of the viscous fluid had trickled into the central chasm, but enough of it remained to work its deleterious effects on her if touched.

Useless, useless, useless, raged Winnipeg's telepathic temper tantrum.

Awash in the the black lagoon was the katana. When Sloan saw it she wondered how it had taken so long, because the gleaming blade had not so much a bead of corruption upon it. It floated atop the surface, slowly spinning, catching dim light and shining it in her face. But Sloan had no way of grabbing its hilt without groping her fingers through a fistful of paralysis-inducing venom.

Unless...

She hooked her fingers into her overcoat and ripped it open, sending varnished brass buttons flying in every direction. The wanton destruction of her dear friend and ally panged deep in her conscience, but she could mend it later. Unveiling a Magical Girl costume even she had a hard time remembering, she quickly swaddled the coat around her good arm and wrapped it tight in the fur-lined fabric to form an oversized makeshift glove. She sprinted until she reached the edge of the black pool and jumped. There was no safe landing on the other side; it was either into the mire or into the chasm. She had one chance to make this work.

Her frilly golden ensemble glowed in the dimness of the cave and reflected in the oil. Sloan had a few torturous moments to gander at herself in full regalia, fighting back the urge to grimace at her ridiculousness. Then the moment passed and the katana appeared beneath her, aflame with light. She swiped the hand wrapped in overcoat and through the fabric seized the hilt.

As soon as her grip was secure, she flipped in midair and employed the centrifugal force to launch the katana at the worm-wraith looming up to devour her. The stainless blade sailed through the open mouth and into the lower jaw, impaling the flesh to the ground beneath it.

Moments later she slammed into a cabinet covered in black blood, the splatter gumming her hair, her face, her arms, nearly every inch of bare skin her costume allowed (it allowed a lot). The paralyzing toxins traveled from nerve to synapse to brain at a breakneck pace, and before she had even ricocheted from the cabinet to the ground her limbs jammed. By then it no longer mattered. She could control her gun via telekinesis, no need for movement at all.

She had given her levitating machine gun the order to focus all fire at the worm's face before the katana had even connected. With the worm's lower jaw pinned to the ground by the unbreakable sword, it had finally stopped shifting long enough for her to unleash her full power against it.

The ray of corkscrewing white light drilled into the fractured epileptic face of the worm-wraith. Its inhuman screech filled the entire atrium, echoing through the arches and domes until it achieved a communal shrillness, as though more than one creature were dying. Seconds passed as more and more of the all-consuming light obliterated the thing's face, forming a swirling hole of oblivion where it struck. The screech built in intensity until all at once it dispersed into only a few scattered remnants reverberating within the cavernous architecture. Soon even those died away beneath the din of the machine gun.

The worm's head bulged out like a balloon and exploded. In a chain reaction, the rest of the elongated body followed. Each individual segment expanded until it could no longer contain the light and erupted into a cascade of flesh, oil, and cubes. Each eruption grew smaller as the segments tapered to the tail, and the very last segment fizzled more than exploded.

The black blood the worm had spewed all over fizzled and steamed. Bit by bit, Sloan regained the ability to move and pushed herself to her feet. She sopped with the liquid, now rendered utterly benign. In fact, as she held a goo-drenched hand under her nose, she realized it really was oil. She pulled her hand away and blanched.

It would take a good shower to remove it, not to mention a thorough scrubbing of her overcoat, which she unbundled and shuffled into before Winnipeg could espy her embarrassing costume. Wasn't oil corrosive? Not that it mattered much, she supposed.

The fight had left her drained, but in a good way. The kind of drained you got after early-morning aerobics, the kind that hurt but was okay because you knew the hurt was good for you. Not the literally-about-to-die kind of hurt. The worm had dropped enough cubes to replenish all magic expended during the battle anyway. She threaded through the remains, plucking as many cubes as she could and applying them to her Soul Gem as she approached Winnipeg.

The younger girl was reposed in a posture of supplication, although to what deity if any was uncertain. She had folded on her knees, her forehead against the fallow soil and her hands splayed before her. A wide, bloodshot eye stared directly into the ground and a manic scowl plastered her gaunt face.

"Winnipeg? You alright?" Sloan offered a handful of grief cubes.

Winnipeg's fingers curled into the dirt. "I lost."

"You didn't lose," said Sloan. "*We* won. If we had lost, we'd both be dead."

"I deserve to be dead."

"You had no way of knowing its blood was poison." Sloan's hand continued to offer cubes. "I've never seen a wraith with biology like that. Wait, you think maybe that was the archon?" She looked around. The cavelike atrium, the chasm, the massive cabinets, even a few scurrying imps remained. "No, I guess if it were the archon, the miasma would be gone." But if the archon had mere lackeys of such strength...

"Being prepared for the unknowable is part of a Puella Magi's job." Winnipeg used the fancy Latin name that Sloan had only ever heard from the lips of Magical Girl hipsters. "I failed. I made a mistake. I lost. Please bring me my blade."

The katana remained planted in the ground where Sloan had thrown it, growing from the soil like a steel sapling. Sloan did not like the tone Winnipeg had used to ask for it.

"You're telling me you've never lost before. At anything."

"Not once," said Winnipeg. "That is the life of a Puella Magi. Win until you lose. And when you lose, you die. That is the way it is. Bring me my blade."

"Look, Winnipeg. I don't have time for this shit. Or patience. I need you to maintain a semblance of sanity because right now it seems I'm surrounded by lunatics." Sloan considered mentioning Omaha, but refrained. Plenty of time had elapsed for Omaha to drop off Delaney at the inn and return, assuming she had ever left at all. Given how the one time Omaha spoke with any intensity was when warning Sloan not to tell the others about her, Sloan had no intention of seeing what tactics the girl would employ to disallow such an occurrence.

Sloan continued. "If we're going to pull this off I need someone other than myself who's not totally nuts. Please be that person."

"There is nothing wrong with my sanity," said Winnipeg. "Nothing more than anyone else. We live in an insane world, Fargo. A transient, temporary, insane world. How are creatures predicated on order and reason and rational thought supposed to exist in such a world, a world that has no inherent meaning whatsoever? They do it by creating meaning. Familial ties, relationships, economic success—these are what normal people, non-magical people, use as metrics of meaning. They keep those people moored. Anchored. When we made our contracts with the rat, those things were stripped from us. For the Puella Magi, only one thing matters: Success. Success for the sake of success. Succeed at defeating wraiths. Succeed at defeating other Puella Magi. Succeed at acquiring territory. None of it matters beyond the fact that success means continued existence. Failure means death."

Philosophical debate was the last thing Sloan felt like right now. Although she supposed to some extent what Winnipeg said was true. She herself had ruled Minneapolis under a similar train of thought, and when she finally did lose at the hands of Clair Ibsen, she had taken a painstaking seven months to restructure her life around the idea of undoing that failure. Undoing it by avenging herself on the one who had brought it about.

Winnipeg's arm lashed out and swiped the cubes from Sloan's hand. "I am not going to commit suicide, if you are wondering." She pressed the cubes to the necklace dangling against the dirt. "A Puella Magi has no excuse for suicide. If they truly feel such despair, the Law of the Cycles does the deed for them. I would like my blade back nonetheless."

Sloan sighed. As much from relief as exasperation. She pulled the sword from the dirt in a parodic twist on arthurian legend and returned it to the world's youngest existentialist.

"If I see any imminent seppuku, I'm intervening," Sloan said.

Winnipeg sheathed the blade and climbed to her feet. "I told you I would not kill myself. I do not lie. I shall simply need to redeem myself by destroying the archon."

"Awesome," said Sloan. "About that. We have a certain third party member to discuss." And a fourth invisible one. If she could ever be sure she was out of that one's physical or telepathic earshot, at least.

"Regina-Saskatoon. I assume you did not follow my advice to kill her." Winnipeg straightened her posture and waltzed past Sloan, taking the lead toward the atrium's exit. After the worm's death, the doorway had reverted to a portal back to the main hall.

"No. I conked her over the head."

Winnipeg clutched the hilt of her katana, although she did not draw it. A wan smile crept over her face. "Then let us correct your mistake."

Looking As If She Were Alive

Returning to the inn without Delaney posed a challenge. Sloan and Winnipeg clashed in both ability or style: Sloan ambled down the sidewalk pumping mortars into anything and everything, while Winnipeg blitzed across the street in a maelstrom of precision strikes and nimble acrobatics. To keep from advancing too far ahead, Winnipeg had to slow considerably, but in slowing she stripped herself of her natural advantage and had to worry about straying into Sloan's fire. Eventually Winnipeg dealt with enemies creeping from behind while Sloan forged an inexorable path onward, but fighting took major concentration and they did not speak.

The whole way back Winnipeg eviscerated wraiths with extreme prejudice, her technical grace marred by a trembling intensity. By the time they trudged up the stairs of the inn and navigated the distorted corridors to their room, she convulsed with rage. With half her face lacerated and only one eye left to pinwheel fervently in her skull, she forced open the door with her katana drawn.

On the bed lay Delaney, limbs akimbo and head tilted at an awkward angle on the edge of the pillow. When Sloan entered, Delaney was motionless as a corpse. But as Sloan neared with Delaney's Soul Gem in her pocket, an unseen defibrillator jolt seemed to resuscitate her. Although she remained unconscious, her chest heaved with labored breaths.

"Wait for her to wake up," said Sloan.

Winnipeg did not seem to hear. She bent over Delaney's prone form, turned the body over, rifled through the pockets. "Where is her gem."

"We need her healing. She has no offensive ability, we can handle her."

From the pouch of Delaney's hoodie, Winnipeg extracted a small revolver. "No offensive ability. Ha."

She unloaded all six shots into Delaney's gut. Delaney jerked and shuddered as bloody red welts erupted across her body. Her eyes snapped open as she loosed an agonized, elongated sigh, coiling and contorting her body as she pressed her hands to her wounds.

Winnipeg tossed the handgun into the air and bifurcated it with a swift stroke. "Where is her Soul Gem."

Delaney turned over and moaned, the blankets drenched in blood.

"I have it," said Sloan. "I'm not a goddam moron."

"Give it to me."

"No."

Winnipeg rose from the bed. The furious glint in her remaining eye marked her as verging on a precipice where mental faculties switch to uncontrollable overdrive. This girl, Sloan thought, this girl cannot stand defeat, cannot stand contradiction, cannot stand lack of control. She gobbled up parcels of barren and useless territory to exert control. In Williston from the start she had tried to exert control over her peers, but very quickly her control had been usurped: by Sloan, by Delaney, by Kyubey, by anything and everything. Somehow, the barren nothingness of Williston was unlike the barren nothingness of Manitoba. Powerful figures had arrayed themselves here, and Winnipeg no longer held absolute dominion over the circumstances of her life. Winnipeg probably knew as little of what was really going on as Sloan—less, even, because at least Sloan knew about Omaha.

"GIVE IT TO ME." The lone eye roved.

"I can't," said Sloan.

Winnipeg rushed her with an outstretched hand, clutching at the fluttering lapels of Sloan's overcoat. She tore yet another hole in the fur before Sloan stuck out her own hand and fired a small pulse of light directly into Winnipeg's remaining eye.

Winnipeg collapsed. Her katana dropped as both hands flew to her sightless face. She writhed and screamed, kicking the ground with her stockinged legs, devolving into temper tantrum like she had during the battle with the worm. Sloan fell on her and pinned her to the ground before she could do any damage. Winnipeg's smallness surprised her; she hardly had to push her weight to keep the meager girl from moving.

"Calm down. Please. Calm down." She whispered into Winnipeg's ear, the way she used to whisper to her Soul Gem back in Fargo when things got especially rough. "I'll heal the blindness. Please calm down."

"Why does this keep happening." Winnipeg descended into sobs. "How is this happening to me?"

"Because you're not calm," said Sloan. "You've been on tilt since Delaney backstabbed you."

Winnipeg blurted something completely incomprehensible. She was a fucking wreck. Smears of lavender makeup flowed down what remained of her face. Sloan resisted the urge to slap her. A slap was the thing people did in movies to calm someone down. But really a slap made someone feel even shittier. As Winnipeg teetered on hysterics Sloan had no idea what else to do or say.

Agonized words flitted out the mess of Winnipeg's mouth. Her sobbing seemed to only exasperate her further, as if she were being defeated even by herself, her own weakness. Her own secret identity as a twelve-year-old girl that she usually hid. The facade of Winnipeg, Governess of Manitoba, crumbled. What lay beneath was Erika Dufresne.

Sloan knew these things despite lacking a direct line of sight into Winnipeg's psyche because she had felt them herself in exactly the same way.

"Winnipeg, it's okay. It's okay." She clasped her hand across both of Winnipeg's eyes. A tranquil white glow escaped the palm, bathing Winnipeg's face in a dull translucence. The magic took only moments to work. When Sloan pulled her hand away, Winnipeg could see again from both eyes.

She squeezed them shut immediately. "I keep losing, over and over. There is no reason I should still be alive."

More of that melodramatic suicidal talk again. Maybe it had some weight behind it? Sloan couldn't tell. She had contemplated suicide many times in Fargo. But she never knew how seriously. Winnipeg was right, earlier—if you truly wanted to die, the Law of the Cycles did it for you. But still, Sloan felt some kind of, uh, some kind of mentor complex kicking in? Seeing someone who had gone through the same stuff as her, who was much younger, much more distressed. She felt obliged to say something.

"I know how you feel, Winnipeg," she began, pausing to gauge Winnipeg's reaction. "Back in Minneapolis I thought I was hot shit. Nobody could fight me. Wraiths meant nothing. I had stockpiles of cubes, I had suburban girls pledging fealty, I had basically everything."

If Winnipeg heard her, she could not tell. But if she backed out of the story now, she would look like an idiot.

"And then... and then something happened. I lost. I got stabbed in the back. Not just by some lunatic, but by my best friend. My only friend. She took my cubes, took my city, almost took my life. I probably looked a lot like you right now. Bawling, falling over myself. What the fuck was the point of living, I thought, if I had to go on living in Fargo?"

Winnipeg opened eyes that overflowed with derision. "You're right. What *is* the point?"

God dammit, Sloan should have kept her mouth shut. No, wait, she could salvage it. "The point is this." She held up her Soul Gem. The top half of the egg swam with muddy grime, but a golden core shone through the bottom half. "You see this? You know what this looked like when I came here? I was at the brink. The limit. The very edge of despair. Another week and the Cycles would get me. But I got up. I came here. It hurt at first, but every fight I get stronger. I'll kill that archon. And when I do, when I get that treasure trove of cubes, I'll return to Minneapolis, kill Clair Ibsen, and take everything back. Maybe when I first stumbled into Fargo, I didn't deserve to be alive. Maybe that's true. But I was alive. As long as you're alive, you still have a chance to redeem yourself."

Oh god, she hoped she sounded inspiring. Speeches were not her forte, but the words felt right to her somehow. As she neared the end she realized they might even be true.

The expression on Winnipeg's face shifted from tear-streaked self-loathing to tear-streaked apathy. She wiped her eyes with a sleeve and shrugged. "Get off me."

Sloan obliged. Winnipeg stood, brushed herself off, straightened her vest, and retreated to the bathroom with corporate efficiency. The door closed and locked behind her. Sloan listened for residual sobs but behind the door was total silence.

"Just remember," Sloan called after her, "Nothing's over yet. You said yourself earlier: You can still kill the archon."

No response. Sloan took it as a good thing. No response meant Winnipeg was thinking. Winnipeg was brash and arrogant but not an idiot. She would reach the right conclusion.

Sloan got up. Proud of herself. Optimistic for the first time in months. That may have been her first well-handled interpersonal connection since the days of Clair Ibsen. No, it definitely was.

She turned her attention to Delaney, who writhed on the bed. The sheet rippled with the wet sheen of her blood, but she did not cry out. She kept her ragged breaths controlled and managed to shuffle her upper body upright, staring at Sloan through gritted teeth.

"Wh... What happened?"

"Winnipeg got mad and shot you."

Delaney squinted an eye. "B... before that."

"I hit you on the head because you were being crazy."

"Oh, oh no..." She pulled herself up higher against the headboard. Her breathing began to regulate and she spoke with surprising perspicacity. Although she could not heal herself without her Soul Gem, it seemed her tolerance for pain remained massive. "I didn't mean it like that... you have to believe me, you've misunderstood everything... that's my fault, I'm so bad at getting people to understand..."

"You tried to kill Winnipeg."

"No... you have it all wrong, I never intended her to die... I meant to... to... to weaken her a little, I knew she could fight that worm thing. I don't kill people anymore..."

"Right." Sloan decided to ignore the 'anymore' for now. "Let's review the basics first. I have your Soul Gem. You can't transform without it and I can destroy it at any moment. I don't intend to destroy it, so don't give me a reason."

Delaney gulped down phlegm and dragged her knuckle against her cheek. "You're mad because I got so brusque with you, is that it?"

"Winnipeg wants you dead. Apologize to her, not me."

Delaney hung her head and sighed. "I told you she'd be fine. Oh, Sloan love, I'm so sorry. I made a big mistake." She spoke as if she had completely locked out the pain of the six slugs in her stomach. Sloan had seen girls shrug off crippling blows before, but still.

"Okay," said Sloan. "Why'd you make this big mistake, then? You babbled some zany shit before I knocked you out."

It took a long time for Delaney to respond. Beyond the bathroom door, a faucet ran.

"I did it because... because... I'm trying to do the right thing, okay? That's the reason I'm here! I don't want territory, I don't need the cubes. I want to save people. That's important to me."

Reading Delaney's expressions and body language as she uttered these words was an unreal experience, because she operated with such emphatic gestures and anguished facial contortions that she would have seemed parodic if not for the omnipresent hollowness of her eyes.

"How does killing Winnipeg—sorry, *weakening* her—achieve that?"

Delaney hung her head. "More people are in danger than those in Williston, love. Try all of them? All the people in the world. No, beyond that—all living organisms in the universe! But, but Kyubey told me, if I helped you... And since Winnipeg was going to cut you out of the rewards..."

Bingo. The exact expression Sloan had expected: *Kyubey told me*. The rat bastard had clung to Delaney the whole time.

"So Kyubey told you if you did what he said, it'd save the universe." Sloan sighed. "That's the most uninspired trick in his bag. To him, everything Magical Girls do is 'saving the universe.' Didn't he give you the thermodynamics spiel? You know, entropy and whatnot?"

"I know that!" said Delaney. "This is different. His energy intake is below his quota. His employer, he said his employer won't let him increase production... What we're doing is related somehow... I mean, I don't know the specifics, but..." She fell silent. She wrung her bloodstained hands together. "I thought I was doing the right thing. He can be so *persuasive*..." She started to sniffle, which was bizarre because by all rights her wounds should have her bawling.

The Kyubey story made sense, but how easy it would be for Delaney to make all this up.

The bathroom door opened and Winnipeg emerged. She had fixed her hair, straightened her outfit, eradicated all signs of sobbing. The jagged gash that stretched down her face had lost its swollen puffiness; she may have used weak healing magic on it. Her face had resumed its stolid demeanor, which was a relief because Sloan didn't know if she could nanny an emotional hurricane while dealing with Delaney's bullshit.

Winnipeg went to the closet and severed the noose from which hung the plaid-shirted cadaver who had been there since they first entered the room. The body hit the ground with the dull thud of rigor mortis. Winnipeg dragged it by the rope, rounded the bed, opened the window, and pushed the body into the dark. No sound emanated from its fall.

Winnipeg shut the window. "So you believe Regina-Saskatoon's story. That she did it because Kyubey told her."

"I don't believe anything yet."

"You did me a favor." Winnipeg stared out the window. "So I'll do you one. Regina-Saskatoon is a murderer. First-degree magicide. One count confirmed, I suspect others. She is

here because she derives pleasure from the misery of others."

Delaney curled her fingers into hooks. "Liar! It's all a lie, love, don't you believe her!"

"I refuse to be drawn into a battle of name-calling," said Winnipeg. "I spoke all I care to say on the subject."

She had said it before anyway. During the pizza debacle. It seemed like such a bold and baseless claim, with no hard evidence to prove it. Except for Delaney's questionable recent actions. And how she sometimes 'forgot' to heal Sloan. And the empty glaze in her eyes.

"I said I don't believe anything yet," said Sloan. "Although if Delaney were that dangerous, Kyubey would have had her terminated. The point is we're fuck deep in this town with an archon to kill. We need to work as a fucking team, no matter how much we hate each other, no matter what shit we did in the past. Yeah, maybe Delaney's killed someone. I'm no angel myself, and neither are you, Winnipeg."

"I never killed another Magical Girl."

"You seemed determined to break that streak none too long ago."

Sloan knew she shouldn't be trying to rile Winnipeg, but she couldn't help herself. However, Winnipeg betrayed no discomposure. "A momentary lapse of judgment instigated by extraordinary circumstances. I have no desire to slay Regina-Saskatoon, despite her heinous crimes. I am here to defeat the archon and acquire this town as territory. I merely warn you that Regina-Saskatoon is dangerous and untrustworthy, and that you are well advised to ignore her crocodile tears."

Sloan jabbed her fingers into the corners of her eyes. Could they really have made no progress whatsoever? Winnipeg back to her usual insufferable self, Delaney back to her usual unsettling self, Sloan stuck in the middle. She thought she had established some sort of rapport with Winnipeg, a connection of some kind, but oh no Winnipeg couldn't be friendly or nice or helpful, waaaay too cool for that shit, so fucking edgy with her white girl katana and mysterious scar. The goodwill Sloan had mustered when Winnipeg had shown a single shred of humanity boomeranged back and smacked her in the face.

From the other side of the bed, Delaney flashed Sloan a smug smile, as if in agreement with Sloan's private thoughts. But Sloan had issues with Delaney, too.

"Look," said Sloan. "I'm a mess. I'm covered in weird goop that worm barfed out, I'm scraped all over, and worse yet my coat's ripped. So I'll take a nice long shower and stitch up the coat and then we talk more reasonably about what next, yeah?"

Neither girl spoke. Sloan gave them a moment to interject with any last second exercises in pointlessness before she absconded to the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

She resisted the urge to scream. Three Magical Girls and they couldn't work together for even the smallest interval. Infighting, squabbling, petty backstabbing, foolish pride, she had dealt

with this bullshit so often in Minneapolis. She had thought by unmasking them both she might make progress, but they seemed determined to make her life miserable.

Not so miserable to degrade her Soul Gem, though. She took out her and Delaney's gems and placed them on the sink's empty soap dish. Sloan's appeared only slightly muddier than Delaney's. She didn't need the comparison to know. She felt better. Annoyed, sure. But the emptiness, the dread, the lethargy, the apathy, the irritability, the entire gambit of negative emotions were diminished. Pandora's box had opened and at its bottom she could feel the hope that remained. A hope no larger than a speck of dust, but large enough.

Lukewarm water flowed from the shower nozzle. It had an acrid, sulphuric smell but it erased the oil congealing over her body. Thick splotches splatted to the tile and swirled around the drain.

She tried not to ponder if Omaha were spying on her. The water droplets did not appear to bounce off any invisible girl-shaped objects, so at most she was on the other side of the curtain. The thought failed to put her at ease.

Hey, said Delaney's telepathic voice. *Sloan. You mind a chat?*

I'm planning what I'm going to do next, Sloan lied. Really she wanted to zone out in the basic comfort of warm-enough water.

Love, I haven't been quite honest with you. What Winnipeg said about me... Well, some of it is true. I did murder someone, long ago.

I killed a girl once, said Sloan. *In Minneapolis. A Chicagoland reject. She thought she could usurp me. She tried to kill me, I killed her instead.*

Delaney did not respond right away. Magicides were a touchy subject. Under certain circumstances Kyubey considered them permissible. For instance, when terminating a girl he marked as dangerous. Or in self defense. Other than that, they were pretty taboo. For Kyubey, of course, the reason was all business. Girls killing girls cut the return on his investment. Hence, the deal he proposed to Sloan; he would permit her to kill Clair Ibsen, but only if she first harvested the cube goldmines in Williston. If she weren't making Kyubey a net gain in terms of energy, her drive to kill Clair would certainly be cause to consider her for termination.

Now that Sloan thought about it, she really *was* prime termination material. Her sole goal in life was to commit a magicide, after all. She had always operated under an unspoken assumption that her vendetta against Clair Ibsen was justified, and she definitely still felt that way—but did Kyubey? To him, Clair Ibsen was a docile, cooperative, and productive girl. And what was Sloan? None of those adjectives, to be sure.

Meanwhile, Kyubey had apparently exhorted Delaney to kill Winnipeg. And Delaney herself had obvious problems. All three of them were girls Kyubey, under normal circumstances, might want removed. And here they were, brought together by his puppetry, programmed to distrust, possibly even kill.

And when the archon was dead, who was lurking the shadows to finish the survivors and reap the spoils? Who had an ambiguous "friend" feeding her orders?

Mother. Fucking. *Omaha*.

Her ability to ponder this realization was stifled as Delaney resumed her spiel.

Well. Winnipeg probably told you a lot of other things about me, and a lot of them were lies! Most of them, even. But some were maybe true.

Sloan and Delaney's Soul Gems sat unprotected on the soap dish of the sink, where any nearby invisible girls could crush them. Sloan restrained herself from bursting out the shower to scoop them up. Omaha wasn't going to strike now. No, not when they were still "useful". Not when they still had to kill the archon.

It started when I was younger. I mean, I don't want to justify what I did by saying something awful happened to me so what I did was okay. That's not what I'm saying. I just want you to know I didn't, like, emerge from a vacuum and murder someone. I'll spare you the details, but my stepfather —

Delaney, I'm sure your tragic backstory is super fucking tragic, but is now a good time?

The important thing was to not let on she had figured out Omaha. As long as she kept doing what Kyubey wanted her to do, i.e. slay wraiths acquire cubes, Omaha would remain Sloan's little guardian angel, lopping off the hands of all who would do her harm. But somehow she needed to inform Delaney and Winnipeg—

You're right, I should get to the point. The point being that when I contracted, I was wrong in the head. I... I didn't wish for a puppy.

Even telepathic channels of communication weren't safe. Strong Magical Girls could detect private lines, and Kyubey could reroute thoughts to whoever he wanted. But Omaha was always watching, so physical channels were no bueno.

Before I contracted, I met the girl in Saskatoon. I was in Regina, she was in Saskatoon. She was a very nice girl. Her name was Claudia. I don't know her last name.

Omaha could turn invisible but she still had physical needs. Food, sleep. She had to go to the bathroom at some point. There would be a window, no matter how fleeting, where Sloan could warn Delaney and Winnipeg. Then they could plan a contingency...

Claudia had no family, she originated from Seattle I think. She didn't go to school and had no friends. Except for her dog. She loved her dog. A little beagle, easy to care for, easy to keep in her apartment. Always wagging his tail and begging to be petted. He wore a red bandana around his neck, like the mascot in a kid's camp movie.

Sloan turned the water off, her skin thoroughly scoured. The logistics didn't work. Even if Sloan could speak to her companions unfettered for five minutes, how could she relate the situation and engineer a plan in so short a time?

I remember the whole time I talked to her, when she explained what being a Magical Girl entailed, just thinking how pointless and pathetic her life was. Where her sole reason for existing and continuing to live was because of this stupid dog.

Drying off with a towel, Sloan casually extended her arms around the narrow confines of the bathroom to see if she could bump Omaha. But the room was empty.

But then I like, reflected on myself? Yeah. And I realized I didn't even have a stupid dog. I had jack fucking shit. I had a tragic backstory, and yes, it was SUPER tragic, thank you very much for your concern Sloan love, I had a tragic backstory and not a thing else in the world.

Once dry, Sloan examined her coat. Several rips. Buttons would need to be reattached. Could be worse.

The third night after I met Claudia, I made my wish to Kyubey. I could totally lie to you and I say I wished to kill my stepdad. That's the kind of thing where, it's still a pretty lousy thing to wish, but it's understandable, it's something you could see a normal person doing, considering what he did to me. I didn't wish for that, though. I wished I could kill Claudia's dog.

Sloan looked up from the magical threads she had employed to stitch the holes in her coat, working at the assiduous pace her meager mastery allowed. *The... dog?*

And not just kill it. I wished Claudia would be forced to watch as I killed her dog. That she'd be powerless to stop me.

That's. Christ.

What's worse is when I did it, I enjoyed it. A lot. Too much. Delaney relayed this information in utter monotony. It happened in Claudia's apartment. I knocked on the door like I'd done before, like I wanted to chitchat about how wraiths worked and how many cubes they dropped and all that technical asininity that had been the sole thread of our so-called friendship. As soon as she let me in, I sealed her behind a barrier. And I grabbed the dog.

The stitchwork on Sloan's coat continued sorcerer's apprentice-style. Holes, rips, and tears zipped up and left no trace of ever having existed.

Since I'm being totally honest with you to gain your trust, I should mention I do have offensive magic. It's more devious than devastating, I could obviously never go toe-to-toe with you or Winnipeg. It takes the form of a small dagger, the weapon of an assassin, a murderer. Even my subconscious or whatever wizardry determined my Magical Girl ensemble knew my game from the getgo.

The worst of the damage had healed, but Sloan kept working on the coat anyway, obviating small frays around the threadbare hem, redoing the serviceable embroidery on the cuffs. She had not expected this story. At all. Magicide usually meant you, like, betrayed someone for their territory. Like what Clair had basically done to Sloan, minus the actual killing. This was... this was like a serial killer thing. Why kill the goddam *dog*? What was the *motive*? Jealousy? Of someone's pet?

I took my time. I enjoyed it. False starts, small nicks, torturing Claudia as I drew the knifepoint to the dog's throat only to pull it back at the last moment. It exhilarated me, thrilled me. She had an exquisite agony on her face, a despair tempered by the hope with which I imbued her every time I spared it, the dog yipping and growling but mostly not even there, like I was holding a toy or something. That was exactly how I conceived the situation. Holding a toy.

Soon even the detail work on the coat was finished and Sloan had no more excuses to waste magic on it. She sat crosslegged in the tight quarters of the bathroom, wedged between the sink and the shower, listening as Delaney transmitted bizarre thoughts into her head.

Obviously, I eventually killed it. Not sure how long it took. Then I burst the bubble around Claudia. Some part of me expected she would kill me after I did it, even when I made the wish. Like, I would do something truly awful and unjustifiable, and retribution would drop swiftly and mercilessly and eradicate my miserable existence from the world. Creative suicide, so to speak. Or maybe I knew I would kill Claudia after the dog all along. The thing about me is that I don't understand me. Well, the point was moot because when I let Claudia out she didn't even fight. She sagged to her knees and sobbed, totally pathetic, tears all over the place, clinging to the corpse of this dog, cradling it like a baby. I knew very little about the Law of the Cycles but I could see she was toast soon. So, I dunno. I killed her too. At the time, I didn't see why not.

Sloan held her coat close. Her eyes drilled into the benign tile pattern that adorned the floor. *Delaney. This is fucked up.*

Yeah. I guess you're right. I mean, I know you're right. I'm fucked up. I still am. Like, secretly, deep down, I replay those moments in my head and get, like, satisfaction. I dunno.

Sloan said nothing.

I probably would have turned into a serial killer or whatever after that. I had an abstract conception that what I did was really really bad, but I felt it didn't matter. It made me feel good, and nobody could catch me. What can society do when the murder weapon is magic? So I was scot free, right?

She punctuated with a little chuckle.

Nope. Turns out someone was watching. And that someone was God.

God. The word sounded foreign. Sloan's experience with God was a vapid, minor swear word with the semantic meaning of damn or fuck.

Before my divine punishment, I fancied myself an atheist. The way it's trendy for disillusioned kids like you and me to forswear religion. But in retrospect it's pretty obvious that not only does God exist, but we're her little Christs, swallowing up the world's misery until we our ignoble end.

So God's a chick now. Sloan dragged her fingers through her freshly-dried, unbrushed hair. Was this conversation meant to get Sloan to trust Delaney? Because damn had it failed.

You don't see any Magical Boys, do you? It only makes sense for God to sacrifice those she loves the most. I must have angered her greatly. To see someone entrusted with spreading hope and joy and all that good stuff turn around and immediately contribute to the very evil they're supposed to fight. I didn't even have the excuse of corruption or disenfranchisement or whatever happened to make you so salty, Sloan. I popped out the oven already vile. So she punished me. She descended an archon upon me.

Sloan held Delaney's Soul Gem in her hand. She turned over the ovular ruby, felt its smoothness with her thumb. So easy to crush. At this point, it would do Delaney a favor. The girl had clearly lost her mind.

The immediacy with which it happened brokers no doubt that the archon came because of what I did. By the time I departed Claudia's apartment the sky had darkened and a melancholic chill pervaded the air. It makes sense, of course. Archons are manifestations of the greatest depths of human sin and despair, right? And what I had done was very sinful indeed. That's how I know there has to be a God, and that she's a Magical Girl or something akin to that. Because what the hell even is sin? How do you define it? For a concept of 'sin' to exist, it means there is some governing entity on a plane above our own who decides what it is. It means our world HAS MEANING! Isn't that fantastic, Sloan? Until I became a Magical Girl and did one of the worst things anyone could ever do, at least in the eye of a God whose chief concern was the doings of Magical Girls, I had operated under the steadfast belief that the world had no intrinsic value. That it simply existed, and anything anyone did was pointless and useless. In essence, murdering Claudia's dog and then Claudia herself tested that theory.

Sloan said nothing. Somehow, she could not bring herself to destroy Delaney's Soul Gem.

But I swear. I absolutely swear. I have never killed another living thing since that day. Since the archon descended to punish me. This is, this is the point I'm trying to make, Sloan. I did an awful thing. A truly awful thing, that I cannot excuse or forget or ignore. I did that awful thing because I'm an awful person. But since that day, since that affirmation of God's existence, I have dedicated myself to DOING GOOD DEEDS. Because that's what this universe means — girls like you and me fight to do good deeds. I understand now that I am the plaything of an infinitely powerful deity, who can crush me at any moment. To serve this deity, to curry her favor, to make her happy. That's our purpose. And if I do good deeds, even if I'm a bad person, even if I feel no emotion for doing those deeds, even if it makes me physically ill to so constantly smile and act friendly and save lives and heal bruises, if I do good deeds can I still truly be a bad person? Can I, Sloan?

She asked as if she needed her confirmation. Sloan imagined if she simply said yes it would pull the pin out of Delaney and annihilate her utterly.

Sloan didn't say yes. She stood up and unfolded the jacket she had folded and refolded twenty times during Delaney's confession. She slid into it, buttoning it all the way and pocketing both Soul Gems. She couldn't say yes because she didn't believe it. What Delaney had told her was odious in a way sharply personal to Sloan. It reeked of betrayal, to inflict such wanton and pointless pain on a girl who had mentored you and taught you the ropes. But when Delaney spoke of God with such a quavering, impassioned voice, the way she had been

unable to speak of anything before, Sloan knew that despite how insane it sounded, Delaney truly believed it. That her real reason for coming to Williston had been to DO GOOD DEEDS, to save people, to seek redemption for an irredeemable past. And there was something good in that, something worth doing.

Or maybe Delaney had lied out her ass, and Sloan wasn't as good at seeing through bullshit as she thought. She opened the bathroom door defensively in case Delaney awaited in ambush.

She didn't. She lay facedown on the bed, her face buried in the pillow.

"My hope is," said Delaney, "My hope is one day I do enough good deeds I actually feel something good inside myself when I do them. Genuine feeling, not rote action."

Sloan didn't respond, only partially because she lacked the equipment to discuss philosophy and morality with Delaney. The main reason was because Winnipeg was no longer in the room.

"Where'd she go," Sloan asked.

Delaney rolled over. The blood on her stomach had stanchd. "She left, love. As soon as you got in the shower."

"By herself."

"There's nobody else, is there?"

Only weird invisible Omaha, waiting for them to kill the archon. Sloan decided to worry about Omaha later. At least for now, she was helpful. Her hypothetical betrayal was predicated on them defeating the archon in the first place; far from certainty.

Delaney rolled over with melancholy scrawled across her features. "Does it matter, love? Winnipeg's hated us since the moment she arrived. I'm honest when I say she's better off on her own. Besides, we make a good team, don't we? You kill the enemies and I protect you. Where I'm weak, you're strong. And vice versa."

"Right now you're not strong in much of anything." Sloan examined the window as if Winnipeg may have left a clue about her departure. She didn't understand. She thought her heart-to-heart with Winnipeg had been pretty conclusive or whatever. Fuck. Even in Minneapolis her sole point of contact with humanity had been through Clair Ibsen, to whom she had entrusted all the managerial bullshit necessary to run an American metropolis, like dealing with nomads and ensuring the suburban chicks didn't kill each other. The woeful inadequacy of her interpersonal skills stood bare and exposed before her.

She wondered if she had missed a point somewhere in Delaney's rambling exposition, like maybe Delaney was trying to do something other than paint herself as a dangerously deranged individual? Frustration seeped into Sloan as she tried to comprehend. In Delaney's defenseless position, her obvious goal should have been to worm her way back into Sloan's confidence and retrieve her Soul Gem. Her story had not done that. Or had it? What had it done, exactly?

"If you really want," said Delaney, "You could go after her. Most likely she went to the second place on our list, the school."

"You told that story to distract me," said Sloan. "Keep me occupied so Winnipeg could slink away."

Delaney shook her head. "At first, maybe. I dunno. I thought I'd get you to like me. Winnipeg must have told you something, so I thought I'd defend myself. But I guess what I did was pretty indefensible? I knew that, but I said the whole story anyway. Once I started, it was hard to stop. I've never told anyone before. People usually learn through Kyubey."

"And you say you're here in Williston, fighting the wraiths, for atonement."

The word atonement sparked a light in Delaney's eyes. She scrambled forward on the bed and kneeled before Sloan, hands clasped, ignoring her wounds. "Yes! That's it exactly. I did something awful. Unjustifiably awful, by the laws of the God who governs this universe. I recognize that, I admit it. But if there's no hope of redeeming myself, why am I still alive? God gave me a message when the archon descended on Saskatoon. You have to believe me. I want to save the universe, the people, everyone."

Sloan pressed her forehead against the window. Frigid condensation left a wet imprint on her skin. Her hand reached into her pocket, took out Delaney's Soul Gem, and tossed it to her.

"I don't know if I believe you. At best, I might believe that you believe yourself, but that only makes you crazy." She rose from the window, watching Delaney with wary eye as she transformed to her Magical Girl costume, the flowing white robe harboring a vaguely bridal connotation. "I'm giving you back your Soul Gem because I don't have a choice. Winnipeg's gone and I can't do this myself."

In mere moments Delaney healed her wounds and cleared the blood that covered the bed. Seconds passed and Delaney did not lash out, did not summon menacing bubbles, did not attempt to restrain or maim or kill Sloan, only got off the bed and stretched her arms and donned her socialite smile in all its disingenuous glory and reverted her eyes to their pleasant but lusterless glow.

"Well, shall we make for the school, love?"

Sloan summoned her machine gun and flung open the door. "Yeah, guess so."

Omit Needless Words

The head of a wraith, still leering, sailed from its body and rolled across the cobblestone. Both it and the body vanished in a puff, leaving behind a pittance of glittering cubes. Like proverbial zombies, the wraith weakpoint was the head. Given enough force, any attack would prove fatal, but in protracted battle efficiency counted for everything. Winnipeg carved a path through the main quad up to the school entrance with a series of cuts performed more through muscle memory than cognizant neural messaging.

While Winnipeg's muscles moved, her head drifted elsewhere. She knew she needed to return to reality. That this kind of mental weakness (everywhere, everywhere weakness) had led to the rapid deterioration of her ability and her confidence (the two not mutually exclusive) and put her in the straits she now found herself. Her Soul Gem had dipped below peak condition and cubes were not helping much. The breached permafrost of her mind revealed long-buried skeletons grinning from disturbed graves.

Fargo had meant well, but she was a total dunce so all she had done was expose the question at the center of every Puella Magi's life: *What are you alive for?* If one could not answer that question, the despair began. A Puella Magi minus a purpose was a Puella Magi minus a soul. The answer did not need to be elaborate. A goal of reclaiming the life they once led as a bland but content teenager was enough for awhile. But for these Puella Magi, eventually the inability to return to their old life became undeniable. One by one, they grew alienated from their old friends, their old family, their old ambition. They either found a better purpose or died.

Winnipeg (née Erika Dufresne) contracted at twelve and made a twelve-year-old's lousy wish: that Stewart Wibaux, the attractive and sociable lacrosse captain upperclassman, loved her. The wish worked. He did love her. He still loved her, probably, wherever he was.

She could not fault Kyubey's implementation of the wish, which an Arabian Nights careful-what-you-wish-for djinn might have carried out in any number of unsavory ways ranging from obsession to abduction. Stewart truly cared for her, was kind to her, respected her wants. She lasted one blissful month as she danced through Ottawa's agents of despair under the tutelage of an apathetic veteran named Gatineau who called her "fille" with barely-concealed disdain. In that month, everything was chouette. Her Puella Magi outfit made her look like a goddess, no longer a plain and awkward girl with braces who stuttered. She carved things with a katana straight from a manga and during the day hung out with Stewart in romantic harmony.

Everything went so well she did not even notice her slow estrangement from her friends and family. Or maybe she did notice, but didn't care. Because she had Stewart, right? Perfect kind thoughtful Stewart. He didn't scold her for coming home late, he didn't pester her incessantly why she came to school with bags under her eyes. He didn't ask about "the old Erika" (not like he had known her anyway) or shove a report card in her face and explode with insults. He held her hand and kissed her and brought her flowers and chocolates and massaged her shoulders and opened doors and even when he politely asked if she wanted to sleep with him

and she got scared and said no he remained respectful, caring, and kind, never broaching the subject afterward.

So of course she got bored. The hormonal impulses she had mistaken as "love" wore off. For a time she continued under the desperate hope that her growing apathy was a mere lull, a rut she could escape. Months passed. The rut deepened. Gatineau's sarcastic remarks, previously ineffectual, began to bite. Apathy became hatred as Stewart continued to be kind and polite and respectful no matter how much she spurned him, no matter how much she denigrated him. She refused to admit she had made a mistake and so blamed him for everything: he was *too* perfect, too obliging, she needed push-and-pull. Once, he missed a scheduled date because of a legitimate sickness and she latched onto the incident as if it were reprobable failure. She screamed at her parents, she screamed at her teachers, she screamed at chain-smoking Gatineau, she screamed at anyone who tried to help. She told Stewart to leave her alone and never talk to her again, and the next week a gang of Stewart's lacrosse buddies surrounded her and said Stewart wasn't even eating anymore, and eventually her guilt and self-loathing consumed her and she made an effort to be nice that lasted a week before she couldn't stand him again.

Her Soul Gem got scary dark. She spent longer and longer nights prowling the ghettos of Ottawa for increasing quantities of cubes. Once she attacked a man who tried to kidnap her (or worse) and ran away unsure if she had killed him. Exhaustion compiled her worries. Gatineau, who never seemed to despair at all, guffawed in her face.

A choice presented itself: Find a better purpose or die.

The real-life Winnipeg blinked and discovered herself inside a classroom for giants. Desks coated in graffiti and bubblegum towered like fairytale forest mushrooms. Discarded textbooks formed immense mezzanines across a linoleum flatland. Tepid and isolated wraiths peeked behind the few instances of cover; grief cubes from her previous onslaught formed a geometric swath behind her. The last few minutes had been totally lost to her while she dredged up last year's melodrama. She slaughtered the nearest wraith with especial prejudice, chiding herself for succumbing to her own mental labyrinth. That was despair: to not only have no hope for the future but no solace in the past, because when you retreated there in hope of something better than the rapidly-deteriorating present you found only a catalogue of old failures, mishaps, and tragedies magnified to mythic proportions like the desks and chairs and chalkboards around her.

One part of her couldn't believe how pathetically weak she was acting, recoiling into an emotional mire from the slightest of provocations, the most minor and most rectifiable of failures. Another part countered that if the glass tower of her mental fortitude showed cracks at such trivialities, it must have been founded on the shakiest of precipices to begin with.

Which almost sent her back into the maze to contemplate how she had abandoned Ottawa without a word to her parents, her friends, or Stewart Wibaux, and how she had come to Winnipeg, which some kind of Puella Magi social media site said had an opening, and how she had fought about twenty competitors for the right to rule, but at the most dangerous moment of needing to replay her own backstory in search of SOMETHING to which she could latch she wrenched herself away and eviscerated another wraith.

Idiot, fight!

Focusing one hundred percent of her faculties on technical skill, Winnipeg whipped through the enormous classroom at galeforce velocity. Cleaving wraiths left and right she exited into a topsy-turvy hallway lined with rattling lockers. A circus of wraiths clogged the immense space, multitudes of generic humanoids and human-headed animals. Lions, serpents, jackals, locusts, hellhounds, a litany of mankind's historic and imagined scourges, bearers of plague and pestilence.

So they thought they could overwhelm her with numbers, did they?

Allowing herself a cold chuckle at their hubris, she stepped forward and raised her sword high. Her magical energies gathered as she prepared her most devastating attack, the pocket ace she held for when speed, strength, and wits were not enough. The finisher that had never failed to incapacitate her opponent, no matter their defensive magic, no matter their agility. Normally she would not resort to it so early, but she felt like massacring this assemblage of wraiths who so feebly believed they stood a chance against her.

As a violent cyclone began to form around her upraised blade, she shouted: "BOURRASQUE —"

Winnipeg? Winnipeg, are you there?

The unexpected telepathic intrusion shattered her concentration. Her words caught in her throat and the tornado fizzled into a few stray gusts.

She sprinted back the way she came with the entire wraith armada in pursuit. *What perfectly inauspicious timing, Fargo.*

Where are you? replied Fargo's voice. *This place is massive.*

In a hallway. Now a classroom. Winnipeg decided to be irritated rather than consider the implications of being yet again in danger with Fargo in position to help her. Although if not for Fargo's interruption, her finisher would have lived up to its name. *Is Regina-Saskatoon with you?*

Yeah. I gave her back her Soul Gem, sorry. She did not sound sorry. *We have to work as a team. The fact that I of all people am saying this is all the proof you need.*

Winnipeg skirted a corner and whipped her blade around to slice a sphinx that had caught up to her. *No, Fargo. You need us to work as a team, so you can get your cubes. You are not strong enough to defeat the archon without me. But I—*

Don't give me this shit Winnipeg. If you'd swallow your pride for five seconds...

Winnipeg knocked back an onrushing regiment with a miniature hurricane of wind magic. *And Regina-Saskatoon wishes to work together as well? What a quick turn for her, considering not an hour ago she had sealed me into a tunnel with a carnivorous worm.*

Regina-Saskatoon's voice chimed in. *I'm really sorry for that, Winnipeg. You probably won't believe me, but I truly didn't mean for you to die. I just wanted you out of the way.*

It was such a ridiculously flimsy excuse that Winnipeg spat a laugh even as she hacked the wraiths encircling her. *And you believe that, Fargo?*

I don't care. I want the archon dead and the three of us to walk away alive, never to speak again. Now can you give us some more exact whereabouts? We're in Classroom 103.

A plaque high overhead read Room 501. Winnipeg ducked into the corresponding class and weaved between the titanic chairs and desks. She lashed back with erratic and unpredictable strikes to thin the horde at her back. *I'm on the other side of campus.*

Give us a number. Please.

A naga fell shrieking in several squirming parts. *501. Happy?*

Apparently, because they resumed radio silence. Winnipeg backflipped off a post and continued her slaughter. As long as she kept moving, they could not touch her no matter their numbers. The dregs of fiendish grimoires tore at her shadow with tooth, claw, and talon. She knew after a few moments of testing the strength of her collective foe she had no need for her finisher. Her natural ability, which Kyubey had extolled when she made her wish, would suffice. She darted between the behemoths, the colossi, the leviathans, literally entering her element (literal as in alchemic, not periodic) to facilitate her accelerated travel between adversaries, eliminating weaker wraiths in droves and saving the larger lovecraftian types for last to maintain a sense of urgency, a building of tension, which as she escalated from wights to manticores to eldritch squids built and built and built until after a climactic and too-short battle with a dullahanic envoy of Hades propelled by four fire-snorting steeds lashed to a careening chariot she finally returned to earth and stood silent amid a field of grief cubes, dwarfed by the gigantic expanse of desks and chairs that loomed from the dark like doric columns of a Greco-Roman temple.

She heaved great quantities of air into her lungs. Sweat dripped from her brow as she made one final assessment of the area to confirm all wraiths lay slain. Wiping her forehead with the back of her hand and sheathing her sword, she scooped a handful of cubes, held them to her Soul Gem, and watched with cathartic satisfaction at the literal purging of her grief, which now seemed so simple, so trivial. That was the way to do it. Don't think, just fight. Why seek solace in the past? The only solace she needed was her ability.

Her Soul Gem purified fully with only a few cubes, even though it had remained muddied with many more cubes not long prior. This felt normal, as if the cubes were mere placebos for an underlying cancer it was her prerogative to control. She wondered what exactly had happened to Fargo for her to teeter on a ravine of despair for seven straight months with neither damnation nor amelioration. From what Kyubey explained, Minneapolis had deliberately spared Fargo, a kindness most traitors rarely gave. The idea that Fargo could dwell in such stagnation after overcoming the initial hump of despair her embarrassing defeat deserved seemed unreal, scornful.

With impeccable timing, Fargo and Regina-Saskatoon emerged in the gaping doorway. "You did it!" Regina-Saskatoon said. Her voice remained clear even at great distance and through the miasma. "See? You're too strong to die to wraiths."

You find the archon? said Fargo.

No, said Winnipeg. *If I had, you would not need to ask.* She did not cross the linoleum mesa to meet them. Instead, she waited for them to come to her, buying time to conceive of a plan for Regina-Saskatoon. The sociopath disgusted her, but did not scare her. Even if she wormed her way into Fargo's heart, Winnipeg had unshakable faith that her finisher could obliterate both girls at once.

If it came to that. Regina-Saskatoon, like all narcissists, was a coward. And Fargo had too much at stake to try something so foolish. Now that Winnipeg had reasserted her dominance while Punch and Judy toddled several steps behind, any meager threat or unease brought by their presence vanished entirely.

She took a single step in their direction and the ground shattered. Stellated cracks spread across the entire plateau, curling between the desks and chairs, spreading into ravines of chalky dust into which grief cubes tumbled. Momentous chunks of earth broke and plummeted into an unseen abyss. Everything trembled as the monumental school furniture tilted and toppled.

Winnipeg's reflexes activated. She bounded from her own schism of land to the next descending block, playing a platform game with a killer time limit. While she flitted from piece to piece, Fargo and Regina-Saskatoon floundered near the edge of the cataclysm, running into one another and treading on their toes and falling over. For Winnipeg, time elongated. The clear safest path across the obstacle course of rock and tile presented itself as if illuminated by a rippling current.

Beside her, a tremendous fount of gravelly sand burst between the cracks. A high-pitched, wailing screech pierced the denuded soundscape as from the spray surfaced a scuttling, clicking, clacking thing of spindly legs and awesome claws, its face humanoid save the two long stalks protruding from its sockets, adorned with beady eyes awash in static flicking back and forth to survey the terrain.

It was a giant... lobster. Armor plated its humped back, its tail swishing as it went airborne above her. A massive shadow obscured her route along the falling platforms. Winnipeg continued on memory and instinct. She hastened as she realized the lobster wraith (could it not have picked a more majestic creature?) was attempting to land on her.

As the lobster loomed, the platforms disappeared entirely within its darkened shadow. Her mind whirred with calculations and projections for the ground's future movements. Every time her foot landed, it hit something solid. She was almost out from under the beast.

Then her foot landed and hit only air. She lurched forward from the unexpected development as her mind calibrated to seek an alternate landing. She was certain if she only deepened the oblique of her descent she would hit the next block and be poised to resume her advancement toward flat earth, where she could turn and fight the lobster.

Instead, however, a bright red bubble ballooned beneath her foot. She bounced skyward, her ankle twisting from the sudden contact, although not painfully enough to deter her from reaching the next block and launching forward. She broke from beneath the beast's shadow moments before it smashed through the remnants of the ground. The two stooges floated in a giant bubble nearby.

Wow! What a monster, said Regina-Saskatoon. *Good thing I helped you with that bubble, right Winnipeg?*

By the time she had finished (her viscous words slow and elongated in Winnipeg's heightened state of perception), Winnipeg reached the doorway of the classroom, where the shattered earth ended. Behind her, rocks fell. The lobster disappeared into the darkness.

Regina-Saskatoon's bubble drifted beside her and popped in a torrent of blood. Fargo landed on her back while Regina-Saskatoon placed a graceful heel upon the ground.

Fargo quickly righted herself and manifested her machine gun. "Is that the archon?"

"It's certainly something, isn't it?" said Regina-Saskatoon.

A massive claw burst from the void and hammered down to crush them. Winnipeg dove to the side while Regina-Saskatoon did some bubble voodoo to keep her and Fargo from dying. With another beached whale shriek the lobster reemerged from the darkness, probing with the distorted orbs of its eyes.

Winnipeg didn't like those eyes. She leapt onto the claw wedged firmly in the ground and cleaved them from its face with one swipe of her sword.

The lobster didn't even recoil. Its jaw unhinged and a serpentine tongue lolled out, dripping with caustic saliva. Winnipeg jumped again but boinged against the side of another bloody bubble. She lurched in another direction only to hit another wall. On all sides were bloody red walls.

The FUCKING CUNT had put her INSIDE a bubble.

Don't worry, Winnipeg! It can't hurt you as long as you're in my bubble!

"AAAURUURUUUGH," said Winnipeg.

The slippery tongue coiled around the bubble, coating it in unctuous ooze. Once it had a solid grip, it began to reel the entire bubble with Winnipeg trapped inside toward its cavernous mouth.

Fargo must have remembered she existed because a dazzling bright line cleaved the monster's tongue. Winnipeg, the bubble, and the severed bit of black flesh flopped to the ground and started to roll. Winnipeg railed against her confines with the katana, hacking and slashing, deflected at every turn by the wobbling walls of blood.

"Let me out, let me out!" she screamed.

The bubble burst. Winnipeg zipped aside to avoid getting wet and reassessed the battle. The lobster wraith clung to the edge with one claw firmly entrenched, the other swinging with ponderous slowness.

She readied to return to the fray, but Fargo had already positioned herself before the lobster. Round after round of gunfire pelted the thing directly in its idiotic face. After a few seconds of sustained fire, the face completely caved in.

Its head became a misshapen lump of gray matter as Fargo continued unrelenting. It tried to swipe at them but its motions were so sluggish and delayed that even Fargo had no difficulty evading, not even having to stem her fire. The lobster howled, shivered, and expired. Its body slumped forward against the edge of the precipice, its head bowed in monkish repose.

Regina-Saskatoon ran up and highfived Fargo. "That was great, love! You made it seem easy! Your magic is really powerful."

Like Fargo did anything special! She had stood almost perfectly still and pressed the trigger of her gun. With such a large target, not even her aim was commendable. And if not for Regina-Saskatoon's meddling—

The lobster's head burst like an oversized egg sac and a thousand parasites scuttled forth on frantic, reedy legs. Fargo raised her gun but it had already revved down from its previous usage. Regina-Saskatoon lurched back in stereotypical female response to arachnids. The loosed tide swarmed toward them, each creeping thing adorned with a miniature wraith head, distorting the entire edge of the precipice with their static.

Winnipeg sprinted forward, dove between her hapless companions, and drove her katana into the ground. She focused her magic energies into the blade, as though she were about to use her finisher, but instead she launched a galeforce spiral of wind into the ragged floor. Immense cracks streaked through the linoleum before a massive chunk of ground blasted back in a mighty gust, taking with it the thousand scuttling parasites. They sailed backward into the void, turning and flipping and squealing with their little wraith faces as their minuscule bodies melded into the darkness and disappeared forever.

The lobster wraith's headless corpse trembled and plummeted into the abyss as it disintegrated into cubes, leaving only the three Puella Magi to survey the aftermath.

"Well!" said Regina-Saskatoon. "That was quite a shock."

Winnipeg stood up and brushed dust from her vest. She whipped her arm out and decapitated Regina-Saskatoon with one swift stroke. The head hit the ground and tumbled away while the body slumped to its knees and plopped forward, spouting blood from the stump of the neck.

"What the fuck!" said Fargo. "WHAT THE FUCK! She just HELPED you!"

She hoisted her gun and pointed it at Winnipeg. Winnipeg remained perfectly still, posed at the end of her stroke with blood running down her blade.

"Do you know," said Winnipeg, "How sometimes you become very, very frustrated, and even though you know it will not harm him in the least, not even scratch his indomitable nigh-immortality, you vent your rage on one of Kyubey's bodies?"

Fargo gaped at her, uncomprehending. Regina-Saskatoon's body continued to spasm blood on the ground.

"Hurry up and fix yourself," said Winnipeg.

As if on command, a bubble formed around Regina-Saskatoon's head, which had travelled some distance. The bubble rose into the air and ferried the head back to the body, spinning a little to line up correctly before pressing the two ends of the neck back together. The bubble popped and the resulting blood flow was enough to eradicate any trace of a wound.

Regina-Saskatoon pushed herself to her feet, cracked her neck, and fixed her hair. "I'd rather not become your chew toy, Winnipeg."

Winnipeg flicked the blood from her sword and sheathed it. "Would you prefer if I rammed my blade through the gem on your shoulder?"

"I wouldn't be so keen to stand by idly and allow that," said Regina-Saskatoon. "Remember I'm no helpless damsel myself." She retrieved a handheld mirror from somewhere in the folds of her gown and inspected her neck.

"I don't understand," said Fargo. "Delaney helped you that fight, Winnipeg. Are you still mad at what she did in the City Hall? It should be obvious by now we need to stop dicking around and work together already."

The school hallway remained gigantic and tinged with an unpleasant aura. Which meant the lobster had not been the archon (surprise), but merely another greater wraith. Winnipeg started down the hall to cover the rest of the school, although she harbored little hope she would find what she wanted. She doubted also the third location on Regina-Saskatoon's map, the airstrip, which was too open an area for something that supposedly wanted to remain unseen. Perhaps Regina-Saskatoon simply had no clue what she was talking about at all.

Fargo scampered after her. "Hello? We're having a conversation here? Can we maybe talk for five minutes and at least settle on a truce? The wraiths are too strong for any of us alone."

"Oh, but your magic is so powerful, Sloan love!" said Winnipeg. She pressed her hands to her cheeks and loosed a fangirl squeal. "You made short work of that lobster! You're just the greatest, why don't the two of you make out already?"

As soon as she said it she regretted it. She turned away from Fargo and Regina-Saskatoon so as to not see the smug satisfaction assuredly etched on their faces at such a juvenile outburst. If only the hallway were not so long and empty so she could pretend she had anything better to do.

"Is that the issue?" said Fargo. "This isn't a fucking talent show. If anything that fight proves we need to stick together. We all contributed."

"All your girlfriend did was impede my progress," said Winnipeg. "Trap me in bubbles and get in my way."

"One, I don't like her any more than you do. Sorry, Delaney, it's true. You kinda weird me out, actually. Second, I'm pretty sure if not for her bubbles that thing would've gotten its tongue around you."

The whole time, Regina-Saskatoon followed behind. Her heels clopped but otherwise she made no interjection.

"If not for her bubble I would have dodged the tongue."

"It was moving fast," said Fargo.

"I would have dodged it."

"Okay, maybe." Fargo got in front of her and attempted to establish eye contact. Winnipeg tried to avoid it but Fargo always seemed to know which way she was about to avert her gaze. "But to me it looked like you were in trouble. I'd've done the same."

"I would have dodged it."

Fargo sighed and threw up her hands. "Okay, fine. Whatever. You would have fucking dodged it. Congratulations. Delaney made a mistake."

"Can I say something?" said Regina-Saskatoon. She remained behind Winnipeg, out of sight, and cleared her throat. "Sloan's absolutely correct. I've made many mistakes. I keep making mistakes, even though every time I make one I tell myself it's the last. I swear I didn't mean ill when I put up that barrier. I only wanted to help..."

If she had sniffled or forced back a tear even Fargo's suspension of disbelief would have had to break, but Regina-Saskatoon allowed her spiel to end with a mere dwindling of her voice. Wise.

"We have another location to search," said Winnipeg. "We go to the airstrip next."

"No," said Fargo. "You can't keep doing that thing where whenever you don't like a conversation you change the subject. If that keeps happening nothing gets resolved, nobody trusts anyone, people get decapitated. It's a shitshow."

Why was the hallway so empty? Nothing but a long expanse of linoleum stretching in either direction, no wraiths in the distance. Winnipeg felt a migraine building in the back of her skull, a pressurized node of pain that spread thin tendrils through her cortexes and lobes.

"What do you want me to say. That I trust you? That I like you? That I want to work with you? The most I shall say is that I abide you, and only barely."

"Your Soul Gem." Fargo pointed to the chain strung around Winnipeg's neck, from which her gem hung. The lavender hue had fluctuated to an unhealthy darkness. She had not used so much magic in the fight for it to look like that.

Regina-Saskatoon was quick to appear with a fistful of cubes, which she offered Winnipeg wordlessly. Winnipeg raised her hand to hit the cubes away, or hit Regina-Saskatoon, or hit something, but instead she balled her fingers into a fist, sighed, and accepted the offering.

"If it makes you feel better," said Fargo, "I'm only doing this because I need you to take down the archon. If not for that, I wouldn't care what happened to you. That vouches for your ability."

Conversation dwindled. As the trio covered the rest of the school and the grief drained from her gem bit by bit, Winnipeg wondered if maybe her ability had only ever been part of the problem, and that maybe Fargo's last attempt at reassurance had missed the mark entirely.

Behold the Seen Unseen

Fly on the wall. Those were her Friend's exact words: fly on the wall. Become a fly. Become less than a fly. Become nothingness incarnate. It was easy. It hardly expended magic. It was a simple matter of... emptying the eyes... emptying the mind... melding. Allowing a much more colorful and interesting world to swallow her completely. When she disappeared, all identity, all self erased. When Sloan Redfearn had asked her name on the bus in Bismarck, she had hesitated only partially due to her timidity. The other part was she had trouble remembering.

Omaha. Her name was Omaha. Her Friend had told her. Thank you, Friend!

As soon as the Williston Three reconvened in the hotel room, Omaha slipped through the closing door and slid to her accustomed hiding place under the bed. She could hide anywhere, being invisible, but under the bed minimized the chance of someone bumping her on accident. A family of cute mice had made a den here. Their pink noses sniffed and sniffed but they could not see what their snouts detected.

Under the bed, Omaha could not see faces, but she could see feet. Sloan's big brown boots tromped back and forth along the perimeter of the room, turning with clockwork motions of her heels and the flitting of her coattail. Delaney Pollack's red converse remained in one place, facing the bed as she leaned to inspect her map, the left foot tapping incessantly. Erika Dufresne stood near the window.

An inquisitive mouse sniffed his way near Omaha's hand. She stretched out a finger and stroked his hunched back, only for him to scamper away as if haunted by the devil herself.

Delaney Pollack began to speak and Omaha forced herself to listen.

"To be perfectly honest, I never expected it to come to this." Tap tap tap went her foot. "I thought for sure the archon would be in either the City Hall or the school. I only put the airstrip on the list because I figured three candidate locations sounded better than two."

"You're saying we should not check the airstrip," said Erika Dufresne.

"I'm figuring it now." Tap tap tap. "If there's somewhere I missed, some large location the archon would dwell."

"Where did the Saskatoon archon hide," asked Sloan. Astute question! Predict future patterns based on past observations.

Tap tap tap went the foot. "As I may have mentioned before, I bungled the Saskatoon 2010 archon hunt spectacularly. My companions and I camped outside the miasma and only entered on raiding expeditions. It took a long time to realize that every time we left the miasma, the archon moved its location! We eventually tracked it down to a warehouse of no consequence, but it hid many places before that."

"How do we know our archon isn't moving too," said Erika Dufresne.

"It's too large. The ground would shake and its shadow would cover us all. Now in Fort McMurray 1985, the Edmonton girls reported immense distortion by the time they arrived. The archon hid in what on the outside looked like a tiny shack, but on the inside was an immense palace."

"So all this is pointless, because the archon could be anywhere."

"No, no, no." Tap tap tap. Omaha resisted the urge to reach out and just... hold down the tapping foot. "Fort McMurray 1985 was also a special case because infighting between the Edmonton and Calgary factions delayed the response to the archon and allowed it to run ripshod over the spatial properties of its miasma. Again, totally unlike here, where we arrived before it could do much except expand the proportions."

Omaha's mousey friend returned, approaching with more caution. She placed a finger in his path so he would stumble upon her and be spared the surprise of a phantom suddenly scratching his back.

"So what are you trying to say," said Sloan.

Delaney Pollack's foot quit tapping. "I guess I'm saying I don't know. We can try the airstrip and hope it's there. If not, I'm not sure where next."

Mister Mousey, with some trepidation, crawled onto Omaha's upturned palm. She clasped her hand and petted its swift-breathing little body.

"Until we exhaust the original candidate locations there's no point discussing this," said Erika Dufresne. "We search the airstrip. If the archon is not there, we consider alternatives."

Delaney Pollack's foot resumed tapping. Why was it a red shoe? In folk tradition red was the color of Lucifer. Which would make sense as the underlying theme of Delaney Pollack's aesthetic, because she was sinful. Sinners were agents of Lucifer. Lucifer had committed the greatest sin of all. Luke 4:3 and 4:4: *And the devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be bread. / And Jesus answered him, saying, IT IS WRITTEN, THAT MAN SHALL NOT LIVE BY BREAD ALONE, BUT BY EVERY WORD OF GOD.* The old texts had mixed up the genders, but the point stood. Lucifer had enticed God to succumb to carnal desire, to satisfy herself in the physical world. But that world was inherently sinful. The place of God and God's true followers was in the spiritual realm, divorced from all corporeality and thus all sin.

Pollack's conceit, that she could absolve her inherent wickedness by performing good deeds in fear rather than in feeling, would not save her. It was the same as Lucifer's temptation: a deception based on the physical world rather than spiritual eternity. How could Pollack's soul be taken to heaven, when it was her soul, not her body, that was tinted to its core?

Omaha stroked Mister Mousey's head.

"That makes sense," said Pollack. "The issue is, the airstrip is far from the inn. It'll be our longest trip yet. I want to make sure I didn't miss anything first."

"Is there a movie theater," said Sloan. "That's a big empty place."

"I don't see one."

Sloan quit pacing. "Uh, I dunno, a grain silo?" She went to the map. "It's just little squares."

They fell silent for a moment. Omaha released Mister Mousey and let him scamper back to Missus Mousey and the Mousey Juniors. Maybe she had been too harsh on Pollack. There had to be something admirable in warring against one's nature in subservience to God. It wasn't Omaha's right to judge her, after all. God would decide whether Pollack could be forgiven her sins.

"This posturing wastes time," said Dufresne. "If we have no alternative, we go to the airstrip."

"I hope it pans out," said Pollack.

The feet shuffled and migrated toward the exit. Carefully, quietly, Omaha extricated herself from under the bed and followed.

The journey through the miasma to the north of Williston was long but uneventful. Omaha lingered behind and kept close to Sloan, but at no point did she have to surreptitiously strike down a wraith closing in on Sloan's back or rush ahead and slay an enemy the team might have difficulty dispatching. Nor did Pollack commit any more blunders to aggrive Dufresne; she kept her bubbles for Sloan's defense and allowed Dufresne free reign over the wraith vanguard. Their communication was disjointed and sparse, but at least the three functioned adequately on their own, if not as a unit. Now that Sloan had salvaged herself from the dead zone, she moved quicker and fired faster and did not sap so much of Pollack's magic. This allowed Pollack to use her barriers to more creative purposes, like walling off alleyways to prevent whole hordes of wraiths from even entering the battle.

Her Friend had predicted after the initial rocky start they would reach an efficiency like this. And Omaha had doubted!

The airstrip was no longer functional as an airstrip. The vast plain of tarmac had been and was still being devastated by an armada of jackhammers and backhoes, great mounds of gravel unearthed and stacked in vertiginous piles. Empty-eyed men wandered to and fro among the rubble, some carting trolleys of sand, some wielding digging tools. Wraiths mingled with them and fed from their quintessence. In the savaged ground lurched an infinite line of drills and pumpjacks, drilling and pumping in perfect synchronization, filling the air with a cacophony of thrums and whirrs. Immense demons loomed in the distance, presiding over the rape with steel pitchforks. Torrents of stone spewed in geysers, the atmosphere dense with ash and sulphur. Men collapsed in fits and tugged at their chests.

A single glimmering hangar swallowed much of the eastern fringe of the airstrip. Its immense gate hung open, although inside was dark. Omaha knew nothing about archons (she forgot most of what Pollack yammered), but she supposed if anywhere the hangar was where one would be.

Sloan stifled a cough. "This must be what everyone's come for." She shielded her eyes and scanned the horizon. "Drills."

"Hm, I don't see anything that might be the archon," said Pollack.

"The hangar," said Dufresne.

They made for the hangar. Omaha drifted behind. The debris made it difficult to disguise her footsteps, so instead she matched her walk to Sloan's, whose heavy boots crunched to muffle Omaha's softer tread.

The hangar was aglow with a cobalt shimmer, its domed roof and unbroken facade of corrugated steel like a cold idol in the name of some Mammon or Belphegor. A vague menace emanated from its gaping entrance. Omaha knew before they even entered that this had to be the temple of the archon, felt her insides tighten in fear and revulsion. In her hands manifested the scythe her weapon, although her Friend had made crystal clear she was not to intercede unless the original trio were in a peril they could not escape themselves. But as she walked behind them, unseen and unknown, with her weapon in her hands and their weapons in theirs, she brimmed with solidarity, part of their team. A hero like them tasked to purge the unholy creatures. She wanted to whisper to Sloan some statement of union, something to include herself. If they could work with Pollack, surely they could work with her, surely she was not so vile as that.

But she said nothing. A great fear gripped her, sparked not only by the echo of her Friend's stern command to minimize interaction, but a fear that perhaps she was that vile. How could Sloan trust her? After she had bungled their first meeting (bit her! Like a beast). They were better off not knowing about her. Better off unaware of her existence.

As soon as they passed the threshold, the interior of the hangar became illuminated in a gray haze made hazier by Omaha's bleary vision, which was bad normally and worse when invisible. Omaha tensed in anticipation of some false and prideful demon, but no such thing awaited inside. Instead, the entire hangar was filled with tents, most of white tarp but some in patchwork reds and blues. Tent after tent after tent in neat lines and columns. An entire metropolis of tents, abuzz with dull activity as the oil men weaved between the aisles and murmured to each other in guttural tones. They sounded like the adults in the Charlie Brown cartoon, one of the three television shows the Man Who Said He Was Her Father had allowed her to watch.

"No archon here, either," said Dufresne. "Let's go."

Sloan stood at the entrance of the nearest tent and peered inside. Omaha peered inside as well. A stunted man sat on a threadbare quilt, his bony knees tucked under his chin. Arrayed before him were photographs of children. A wraith stood behind the man, its claws hooked into his neck like intravenous tubes.

"Do they sleep here," said Sloan.

"Looks like it, love," said Pollack. "This must be a wraith smorgasbord. They don't attack us because they found something to munch already."

"The archon is not here," said Dufresne. "Let's go."

Sloan stepped back and took in the high domed ceilings, the upper echelons of tin shrouded in shadow. Omaha stepped back and saw what she saw, tried to piece together her thought process, tried to understand her.

"Poor insulation." Sloan pulled her jacket tight around her.

"We should go before we attract attention," said Pollack. "If we fight here, it'll be hard to keep civilians safe from collateral. Winnipeg's right—this place is a bust."

Sloan followed her helpers out the hangar and Omaha followed Sloan. Like a guardian angel. Her Friend had likened her job to that. To think, her, Omaha, an angel! Even this one offhand remark could fill her with hope.

A tractor trundled past, dragging a caboose that overflowed with dust and minerals. As they waited for the path to clear, Pollack extracted the torn halves of her map. Sloan gathered close while Dufresne did something else. Omaha approached as near as she dared.

"There's nothing," said Pollack. "No other place. The cemetery? Maybe?"

"Even the cemetery is tiny," said Sloan.

"We could have missed a room in the City Hall. A secret passage. I dunno."

A nearby drill plunged into the earth with a raucous peal that settled into a consistent buzz. Sloan covered her ears and shouted. "IS THERE A SUPERMARKET?"

"WHAT?"

"SUPERMARKET!"

The drill died down. "No," said Pollack. "Not that I can see. It doesn't help this map is fifteen years old!"

"I told you it was worthless," said Dufresne.

Pollack hung her head and crushed the map in her fists. "It doesn't make sense. Stupid... map!" With one girly fling after another she launched the two halves into the air. They caught in the stagnant air and flitted down as soon as they left her hands, and before they touched the ground she gave a shriek of dismay and caught them.

As Pollack smoothed the map over her knee, Sloan turned away and again chewed the scenery. Omaha gravitated to her, tried to see what she was seeing, but all she seemed to look

at was the giant drill that had stirred such a ruckus. Beyond it many more drills heaved up and down like sledgehammers, until at long last they dwindled into darkness.

What makes you so pensive, Sloan? Is it your predicament? Your Soul Gem, your uneasy relationships with your helpers? What the archon looks like, its keep? What you will do when you find it, what tactics you will employ? Or perhaps you stare onward, across the plains of North Dakota to that last city on the fringe of ice: Minneapolis, where a certain someone awaits with her piano and her dulcimer and all the other instruments of her dominion. If only Omaha could ask her, speak with her... If only she had not squandered the previous moments she already had!

"Underground," said Sloan.

Neither Pollack nor Dufresne heard at first. Perhaps she did not wish to be heard, but Omaha had somehow wandered so close the bare whisper, sedated even before the nullifying effects of the miasma, bloomed like an incantation in her ears.

Underground?

"Underground," said Sloan. Louder.

Pollack cocked her head. "What's that, love?"

"The fucking oil." Sloan's eyes remained fixed on the expanding rows of drills. "That's the whole reason they're here, the fucking oil. Underground. The drills, the goddam worm thing, the goddam crawfish thing. Tunnels and pits everywhere. It all goes underground."

Pollack looked at the ground between her ruby red heels. (Even in costume her shoes were red!) "You mean..."

"The archon is underground."

"Even if we believe that," said Dufresne, "Underground is a big place. Underground where. Here? Somewhere else?"

Sloan snatched Pollack's map and ran her finger over it, leaning in close as both of her helpers leaned in over her shoulders. She scanned the rows of small square structures and straight arterial streets. Finally her finger settled on something. "Here."

With the others crowding the view, Omaha had to get creative to see what Sloan meant. She looped around to the other side and contorted herself to view the map upside-down, careful not to accidentally nudge anyone or breathe in the wrong direction.

The structure Sloan prodded with her finger had no name in typeface either large or small. Instead it had a tiny round emblem. Omaha pushed her glasses close to see what was inside the crest, which was drawn with the schematic iconography of a caution sign. All she could make out was a black funnel of some sort, with lines around it to indicate motion.

After an unresponsive moment from her helpers, Sloan elucidated. "Tornado shelter."

A lonely alley twisted up to the tornado shelter, nestled between much grander and more imposing structures. From aboveground it was nothing but yet another uninspired and distinctly practical construction, flat and short and geometric, dilapidated and decayed. A perfect emblem of the town itself, a thing meant for mere survival and nothing else. Its plain outward appearance belied its rugged hardiness. No doubt this amorphous structure had stood for many years. No doubt it would stand many more.

The thought filled Sloan with hope. The archon had to be here. The more she thought it over, the more it made sense. The bland facade, the curious lack of wraiths nearby, the winding network of back alleys they had navigated to reach it. It all pointed to a hidden lair. If she were right, it would give her leverage to bargain up her grief cube cut with Winnipeg—undeniable proof of her contribution to the task. Not only that, but it would be a victory rare for Sloan, a victory of wits over brute strength. She could not help but think she would need such victories to overcome Clair Ibsen, who for the first time in a long time no longer felt like an abstract concept, a carrot on a stick, but a tangible entity. The entire way up the alley, Sloan's thoughts had probed Clair's battle strengths and weaknesses, her various powers and her innovative ways of using them. She actually had to reprimand herself to keep focused on the archon. Something about chickens and hatching.

They stopped in front of the squat building. Winnipeg folded her arms and regarded three plaid-shirted men clustered around a burning metal barrel, their woolen gloves held over the flame. "This looks unpromising."

"That's the point," said Sloan. "Hiding places shouldn't be obvious."

"We're here, so there's no reason not to check it out," said Delaney. "I for one think it's an excellent hypothesis, love!"

Amazing what a few words of flattery could do when you actually believed them. Amazing how you realize just how miserable you were when the first traces of happiness return. She was going to make it out. She was going to go to Minneapolis. All that bullshit with Delaney and Winnipeg meant nothing because soon none of them would have to see each other again. And Omaha—

Ah, shit. She had forgotten Omaha. Whatever, if the three of them could take an archon, they could take her. Poor girl, manipulated to be Kyubey's tool. Who knew what bogus philosophy he had crammed down her throat; hilarious if not so pathetic. No matter, they would defeat Omaha. Sloan, being magnanimous in victory, would let the poor girl live. For the first time in a long time Sloan felt like the good guy again.

"Sloan love? You alright?"

Sloan blinked. Delaney and Winnipeg stared at her.

"Uh. Sorry. Zoned out."

"Don't do that," said Winnipeg. Although the rebuke sounded less harsh than usual. Or maybe that was another byproduct of the eagerness and anticipation bristling inside Sloan.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" She hefted her gun and tried the door to the shelter. It opened with a rusty creak and a puff of reddish flakes.

Inside an elaborate mural of shadows danced across triangular walls. Cobwebs and dust presided over a narrow room of vague purpose. Furniture draped in ghostly sheets bulged in awkward directions. A morose silence filled the space although the space was not silent; some sort of heating unit reverberated with a ubiquitous ohm that gave the room a sacred character despite its unassuming contents. Sloan knew this had to be the place.

"Find a staircase or a ladder or something. Anything that goes down."

Winnipeg studied an object draped in a sheet and with one brush of her arm disrobed it, revealing it as a perfectly normal table. She dropped the sheet and brushed dust from her hands. "This is pointless. There's nothing here."

"You're simply sour you didn't think of it yourself." Delaney crouched low and tapped the floorboards with her staff.

With a blast of wind, Winnipeg blew the rest of the sheets against the wall. A cloud of dirt filled the room and Sloan buried her mouth and nose within the collar of her jacket. "I would not care about something so petty," Winnipeg said. Unconvincingly.

On one of the uncovered tables, Sloan found a thick ledger bound in colorless leather. A single word adorned the cover in embossed gold: DOMESDAY. She brushed off the dust and opened the book. Inside was a list of names and dates. The months were in German, although Sloan could read them because they were basically the same as English except with more Ks and Zs. Her finger traced down the page. Every name was female, spanning a diverse array of nationalities and cultures.

She flipped through the pages and settled on the R names. Sure enough, her own name was in the ledger. REDFEARN, SLOAN. The date: May 11, 2009. The day she had contracted.

What was something like this doing here? She remembered the German records in the City Hall and realized how little she had thought about the transmutations of a miasma.

"Found it!" said Delaney. She stamped her ruby slipper against a rickety trapdoor.

Sloan shut the book and inspected the hatch. It was fastened by a thick padlock that crumbled to ash the moment she touched it. The hatch fell inward with a pained screech of its hinges, revealing rungs into an empty abyss.

Something below murmured.

"Who goes first?" said Sloan.

Without a word, Winnipeg dove into the air, somersaulted, and plummeted through the hole.

Sloan scrambled after her, swinging onto the rungs. The moment she placed her weight against them they gave in unison, dissolving like the padlock. She groped for Delaney's outstretched hand and swiped nothing but air as the small square of light above grew smaller and smaller, Delaney minimizing into oblivion.

She fell a long, long time, long enough to worry how and where she would land before she landed on an updraft of air about a foot from the ground. Beside her stood Winnipeg, directing the wind with a finger.

"You idiot," said Winnipeg as she dispersed the air and dropped Sloan to the floor. "It was obvious the rungs would break. Why do you think I jumped?"

"Thanks for the warning," said Sloan. "And thanks for catching me."

"Yeah," said Winnipeg. In the dim light, only the faint contours of her face were visible. "I hope you're right. I hope the archon is here. I want to kill it and depart as swiftly as possible."

Sloan realized now might be her last chance to warn Winnipeg about Omaha. If Omaha had jumped after them, they would have heard her land. Right?

She decided to chance it. "Winnipeg, I need to tell you something."

"About Regina-Saskatoon?"

"No. There's a—"

A red glow enveloped them as Delaney descended atop a glimmering bubble. "Hello, dears! Glad to see you both made it safely. Any sign of our foe?"

There was no sign of anything in the darkness. As Delaney's bubble popped, Sloan held up a hand and exuded a small orb of light. Nothing was illuminated except her companions. The thought struck her that Omaha might cast a shadow despite her invisibility, but no phantoms stretched across the ground into the infiniteness of the cavern around them. She realized she had very little conception of how Omaha's power worked.

The murmur sounded again. It encircled them in the dark, an odd high-pitched voice uttering incomprehensible sounds dampened by the miasma. It was neither human nor inhuman, straddling a chasm within which some demon dwelled. The sound echoed into a sinister giggle.

"The archon," said Sloan.

"Or another minion," said Winnipeg.

At the periphery of darkness something long and slender writhed. Winnipeg dashed forward and slashed her katana at the twitching limb. The blade sunk halfway with a wet slurp.

Sloan illuminated the wriggling thing, from which a white pus oozed where Winnipeg had sliced it. It took Sloan a few moments to compartmentalize what she was seeing: A massive tubular root, girded with immense thorns.

After a few unsuccessful attempts, Winnipeg placed her foot onto the root and tore her sword away. The root only continued to writhe, neither rearing to attack nor retreating into darkness.

Winnipeg touched the white juice dripping from her blade with the tip of her finger. She smelled it.

"What's this belong to," said Sloan.

Delaney extended her staff and pointed the way the root led, deeper into the dark. "Let's find out!"

They followed alongside the twisting and widening tuber as it led down a space with no walls and no ceiling and no distinguishing features at all save the gravelly turf of the ground beneath them. The squealing, almost feminine murmur continued, as if the hidden voice were engaged in conversation with a deity that could not be sensed. The root lured them deeper and deeper. Sloan tread carefully, ready to blast anything that surfaced from the void.

At some point they entered a tunnel, or they had been in a tunnel the whole time only the dimensions narrowed enough to be seen. The root continued into the cavern, although the walls grew smaller and smaller around it, until the three of them were forced to crouch to continue.

"This may very well be it," said Delaney. She lacked her usual pep.

Sloan angled her body to avoid one of the jutting thorns. She shuffled against the root to scrape by. Something pulsed within it like a thick, throbbing vein. "The archon you fought in Saskatoon. What did it do?"

"It took the form of a thousand-limbed giant," said Delaney. "It lifted enormous piles of earth and hurled them at us. It crushed girls between its fingers. I don't think this archon is anything like that."

They said little else. The mouth of the cavern had contorted to a gasping space, most of which was filled by the root. They slithered across it, avoiding the thorns as well they could. Sloan's overcoat snagged more than once, leaving jagged gashes in the tail.

The murmur grew in volume and intensity in the confines of the tunnel.

When the space had tightened to the point where Sloan thought she might have to shed her coat to continue, Winnipeg stopped. "I see the end."

"What's there?" Delaney tried to peer over Winnipeg's shoulder but bumped her head on the ceiling.

"Light," said Winnipeg. She continued her crawl.

Sloan crushed herself against the root to slide forward. Sand and rock scratched against her from all sides and forced her to spit an ashen taste from her mouth. The throbbing root filled her with an obscure dread, as though it were draining her somehow by its mere touch. Ahead Delaney and Winnipeg reached the mouth of the cavern, which widened enough for them to stand and peer side-by-side into something below. Sloan wiggled forward, kicking at the walls for leverage. The root exuded an unctuous sap that caught in her hair and stuck to her face.

She wondered if Omaha were behind her, propelling herself forward with the same amount of difficulty. Probably she had no trouble navigating the space, as slight as she was.

"Not stuck, are you love? You'll want to see this."

With a grunt, Sloan slid herself forward and forced herself into the mouth of the cavern. She wiped off ooze and dirt, only succeeding in gumming up her fingers before she gave up. She went to where Delaney and Winnipeg stood and peered between their heads.

Sloan knew what she saw even before Delaney said, "That's the archon."

The Lord God Prepared a Gourd

The vast and eroded walls of the archon's den curved inward and met in a dome engulfed in shadow, although a vague gray aura illuminated the rest of the astronomical absence. Mouths of caverns like the one in which they stood dotted the bulging center of the den, and into each trailed a pulsing, thorny root. The roots clung to the lower walls and coalesced at the base of the immense ovular room. They widened to the thickness of tree trunks until they disappeared beneath the heaving, bulbous bottom of the archon.

The archon was a giant flower bud. That was the best way Sloan could conceive it. At the base, its dappled and slimy epidermis swelled into a rotund, almost perfectly spherical bulge that gently heaved as if breathing, attuned to the ripples that surged through its roots into its body. The bulb tapered into a conical protrusion about halfway up the extent of its confines. At the tip, the epidermis contracted into a wrinkled nub, out of which a small black flower with three petals swayed in an imaginary breeze.

At the bottom of the room, a puddle of the archon's inky runoff ebbed slowly back and forth. Roots weaved in and out of the brackish pool.

"You're sure that's it. That's the archon," said Sloan. Her voice came out as a whisper, although she had not intended it.

"Oh yes, love," said Delaney. "Look."

She pointed her arm, frail and white against the overwhelming blackness below, at the great black drops of dew that formed on and rolled off the leathery skin of the bud. As each drop struck the pool and burst, a wraith emerged as if from a cocoon before plunging beneath with only a small ripple.

"It's creating wraiths," Delaney continued. "Only the archon can do that. They must use these tunnels to spread throughout the town. With all these roots, it can perceive everything in its domain. It can probably feel the palpitations of your heartbeat right now."

Sloan shuffled further away from the writhing root that extended from their cavern.

"It has no discernible weakpoint." Winnipeg crouched low as she surveyed the immense and unbroken form of the thing's vegetable flesh. "No doubt that hide is too tough for normal weapons to pierce."

"What about the roots," said Sloan.

Winnipeg stroked her chin. "If we severed them all, perhaps. There must be hundreds."

"The flower on top?" said Delaney. All of them were whispering. This thing, this archon emanated a daunting presence, not sheerly from its immensity but from something else, something extrasensory, not quite a smell or taste or feeling but nonetheless something Sloan could perceive. Bad mojo.

She had never put much thought to the wraiths as much more than an adversary for her to kill, but the full rush of the realization of their true nature struck her now. The word evil for the first time meant something to Sloan as she gazed upon the archon; for so long it had been only the antonym of good, something from fables and fairy tales, the cheap gimmick employed by a writer too afraid to delve into the complex realities of the human psyche. In the face of this evil thing, complexities dissolved, nuance and subtlety vanished, all fell into the oblivion of its darkness. Words, thoughts, and reason were devoured and replaced only by a hollow emptiness, a lack of life and hope.

Sloan felt very much like she wanted to die.

"The flower..." Winnipeg's words came out slow, distorted. "Is probably... A trap..."

Sloan rubbed her eyes. Blinked. Her head rang with the murmur of the archon, with the elongated words uttered by her companions. She sagged against the wall as a wave of nausea swept over her. Her body felt like an empty husk, like skin draped over bones and blood, a feeling exacerbated by the realization that it was exactly that: a husk, soulless and empty. Like chattel. Like compost. Decaying and rotting in the ground, fed upon by worms and termites.

This had to be... some kind of... psychological attack. Something propagated by the archon. She knew it, but the feeling consumed her. Delaney and Winnipeg continued to speak without noticing. They didn't care about her. Nobody cared about her. Not her family, not the only person she could have ever called a friend. Memories surfaced in her mind unbidden like images on a projector screen. She tried to blot them out, tell herself it was the archon's doing, but they would not be ignored. Images of her alone. Alone at home. Alone at school. Alone in the neighborhood as she scratched sticks in the dirt. So many images.

The setting shifted from Scottsdale, Arizona to Eden Prairie, Minnesota. Sloan grabbed her skull and tried not to think, tried to shut down, tried to die, but she could not. She unspooled from the reality of the cavern mouth. The images played as though she had returned to that time and place in Minnesota middle school where she skulked across campus stewing in resentment of her blind twin sister and all her friends and all her popularity, wondering why her defect made her so much more desirable than Sloan herself as she searched for a place to sit and eat her bag lunch but every bench and table was occupied by cliques of happy friends, as if they were absorbing Sloan's happiness for their own nourishment, because every time she turned and saw another smiling face she grew emptier and emptier inside, until she found a bench with a single quiet girl who stared down a sandwich with pensive curiosity, as though this sandwich were the single most engrossing thing in the world, and Sloan thought maybe if she kept quiet and ate quickly this other girl wouldn't even notice her, because the sandwich must be infinitely more interesting, but no sooner had she unraveled her own lunch had the other girl looked up and extended a cordial hand and said: "Hello. I'm Clair Ibsen. What's your name?"

And Sloan had stared back shocked for a moment and muttered a response except that wasn't what Sloan did now, what Sloan did now was throw herself across the table and wrap her hands around Clair's throat and throttle her pretty white neck, intending to squeeze until her fucking head popped off and rolled across the quad so all the happy people and their happy

fucking lives could see the true horror of their world. Clair's eyes bulged and she fell back and Sloan fell atop her and slammed her head against the ground channeling all of her strength into her grip, kneading the soft flesh of the throat like putty.

A blade ripped into her back and through her chest and into Clair Ibsen's chest and out her back. Eden Prairie Preparatory School shattered into a thousand shards to reveal the world of the miasma and the compacted walls of the cavern. Clair Ibsen disappeared, replaced by Delaney Pollack. Delaney's face was an almost comical shade of violet, her mouth agape in a twisted half-grin.

Winnipeg retracted her blade from both of them and voided it of blood with one quick wipe. "Are you done being crazy yet?"

Sloan's eyes sagged as her blood dripped down and splattered Delaney's white dress. She relinquished her grasp and rolled over against the archon's root, struggling to breathe as her lungs heaved worthlessly in her chest cavity.

It took only a moment for Delaney to jump up and heal them both with an operatic wave of her arm. The purple drained from her face, replaced by her typical rosy luster. "Pretty weird, love! Hope that was a one time thing."

The root breathed beneath Sloan. She peeled herself off and stood abruptly, growing dizzy as her brain and senses calibrated. She rubbed the back of her skull and regained her balance. "Fuck."

"Careful, don't fall over the edge." Delaney steadied her. "Were you hallucinating or what?"

"Something like that," said Sloan. Everything felt topsy turvy. "I thought you were Clair Ibsen."

"The girl from Minneapolis? The one you hate?"

Sloan nodded. "The archon must have—"

"Your leg." Winnipeg brushed aside the tail of Sloan's coat with her blade. Sloan drew back shamefaced as her companions ogled her nearly bare (and poorly shaved) legs. Only after several seconds of prolonged staring could she muster the will to look down herself. A shallow red line ran along her lower left leg, no broader than a pen stroke. Even after she saw it she could not feel it.

Delaney snapped her fingers and healed the scratch as fast as she had healed the stab wound. "Remember where you got that, love? I'd wager one of these thorns nicked you as you squeezed by."

That sounded right. She certainly hadn't taken the utmost care when she slithered through the narrow aperture on her belly.

"So the thorns are toxic after all," said Winnipeg. "Significant intel. Good that we learned this now, before the fight began."

"Glad to be the guinea pig." Sloan pulled the tails of her coat back together to conceal her legs. She hoped her embarrassment wasn't too obvious, but of course Delaney gave her a knowing look with what might have been a wink as she tapped her lower lip.

At least Winnipeg could be counted on to not give a shit. She made an abrupt turn back toward the archon. Its bulb-like body had made no movement or change; black beads rolled off it endlessly into the pool below. "Now the matter of how to fight this thing."

Miffed by the the preceding events, Sloan elbowed a space for herself between Delaney and Winnipeg and ushered them aside as she materialized her gun. "I say we shoot it. A few seconds of sustained fire and it won't matter how thick the hide is."

Her companions shifted behind her in the narrow space, both taking especial care to keep away from the thorny root throbbing beside them. Neither objected to Sloan's plan, so she revved up the barrel, waiting for it to reach full spin before unleashing a focused and steady stream of light at the archon. She struck at the most corpulent part of the bulb, where the epidermis stretched wide and (she hoped) thin. Not that she knew jack dick about plant anatomy. Not that a magical demon formed of pure despair had to conform to actual plant anatomy anyway.

The light hit the skin with no splash, as though it had bored a hole straight through on first contact. Or maybe the fleshy plant was absorbing the light the moment it touched, slurping it into the infinite darkness of its miasma. The irony of fighting with light was that things got so bright it was difficult to see exactly what was happening. Usually Sloan assumed when something disappeared beneath a deluge of her magic it meant the thing no longer existed, but as she fired for five, ten, fifteen seconds with no change in the archon whatsoever, either in demeanor or the gleeful murmur that burrowed into her earbuds, she began to doubt. After twenty seconds she shut off her magic before she taxed herself too heavily.

Not a single mark where she had hit.

"As I expected," said Winnipeg. "I recall saying exactly that: I doubt normal weapons will harm it."

"Yeah, whatever."

"It doesn't even care about us," said Delaney. She folded her arms and chewed her lip. "We're so insignificant compared to it, it doesn't even bother to react."

It baffled Sloan. Never had she encountered a wraith that simply ignored her. Basically her only strategy ever was to shoot something a lot. Sometimes things moved fast or had some weird power to make things tricky, but then she just had to find a creative way to shoot it. The shooting itself had never failed to suffice.

She glanced over the bulb in search of a weakpoint. Her eyes settled on the tiny black flower that sprouted from the topmost tip of the bulb. Aha! Perfect weakpoint. Winnipeg began to say something but Sloan cut her off by raising her gun again and sending one swift beam at the flower, incinerating it instantly.

The bulb made no change. The beads rolled off, the roots throbbed. After a few seconds, an identical flower sprouted from the tip and swayed back and forth in the nonexistent wind. Sloan tossed her hands and turned away.

"Thank you for that pointless interlude," said Winnipeg. "As I intended to say, we should next attempt to destroy the roots."

"All of them?" said Sloan.

"If it refuses to launch a counterattack, I do not see why not."

Delaney shrugged. "Might as well."

They stepped aside to give Winnipeg room as she pressed one foot against the quivering root next to them and touched her blade to the thinnest spot in the vicinity. She drew back her sword and swung it hard on the root, sinking in halfway with the first slice. With a vicious tug she pulled the sword out and swung again, severing the root. Noxious white pus oozed out.

Winnipeg dried her blade on the dirt and sheathed it. All three of them looked from the root to the bulb in anticipation.

Nothing happened.

The pus quickly hardened into a sealant and soldered the severed ends of the root back together. The root continued to throb happily.

Sloan jabbed fingers into the corners of her eyes. Winnipeg prodded the sealant with her sword. Delaney found a safe part of the root and sat down.

"Well," said Winnipeg. "Hm." She strained for something more profound with a series of false starts. Eventually she turned away from the root with a huff. "It's too cramped to think."

Without warning, she stepped from the mouth of the tunnel and plunged into the vast subterranean chamber of the archon. She skated the festooned root down to the lagoon below and evaded the thorns with almost imperceptible maneuvers of her feet. When she reached the bottom, she pushed off and landed atop a gnarled bramble nearby. A few wraiths ascended from the mire painted black by the liquid, but Winnipeg decapitated them with a single whirlwind strike of her sword, which she performed as though by rote as she surveyed the surroundings from the new vantage.

Sloan considered joining her, since she had nothing better to do, but Delaney said, "What exactly did you see?"

"What."

"When you were strangling me. You mentioned your friend in Minneapolis. What was the exact nature of the hallucination, love? Had I simply been replaced by Clair Ibsen's visage or was it something else—like a dream, perhaps?" She leaned close to observe a thorn, her face inches from the tip.

"No, I saw memories. A lot of them, they spanned my whole life. When I got to one with Clair, I..."

"Snapped." Delaney's interest expanded. She climbed off the root and knelt beside it to conduct a more thorough examination of the thorn. Her head turned every so often to compare it to the next thorn over. "But there's no guarantee the effects of the toxin have to manifest in violence. You simply encountered something you were naturally predisposed to hate."

Sloan disliked this. "Whatever it is, it's obviously no good, so don't touch it."

"I know, love." Delaney sighed and stood up. She brushed dirt from her dress. "I would never jeopardize our mission over something so silly. But I am curious, you know. Memory is something that appeals to me greatly. As it must appeal to most who harbor great regrets."

"You mean the girl you killed in Saskatoon."

Delaney flinched. "Claudia, yes. What I did back then, I did specifically because I believed nothing I did could matter. That nothing mattered. My actions were the offspring of the severe nihilism my inability to feel had created inside me. It wasn't that I hated Claudia. It wasn't that she made me angry, that if I saw her I would fly into a murderous rage and strangle her. She mildly annoyed me, her and her little dog. And since I, as a newfound Magical Girl, had suddenly fallen into a position where law and society no longer constrained me, mild annoyance meant cause for murder. Because nothing mattered, nothing governed the universe. Do you understand?"

"I understand that's totally psychotic."

At first, Delaney seemed about to protest, but her shoulders slumped. "Yes. Yes, it is. But that's the point! Because God or something exacted divine retribution upon my wrong in the form of that first archon, three years ago. Now I think, if I just went back to that moment where I had Claudia and her dog at my mercy, how easy it would be to simply not kill her. How easy! Because I had no rage, no emotion. No passion. No frenzy. I had mild annoyance. Just as I have mild annoyance at Winnipeg, just as I—no offense—occasionally have mild annoyance at you, love. And since I now know something *does* govern me, does create meaning in this universe, I now have no desire to act on that minor emotion of annoyance—No, emotion is the wrong word, let's see... How about discomfort? Anyway, where was I."

Sloan folded her arms. "Rambling."

"Right, right. So I think, how easy it would be to go back and simply not kill Claudia. The pointlessness is exactly what made it so sinful—I understand that now. But at the same time, killing her was what made me understand that. Without a powerful enough sin to turn the eye of God upon me, I could never understand that what I was doing was wrong. Which means... in a way... killing Claudia... was a good thing? A necessary thing? That made me a better person, in the end?"

She turned to Sloan as if expecting affirmation. Sloan had zoned out for most of it, the logic so tenuous she had difficulty following. "Delaney. God didn't punish you for killing Claudia.

Archons just spawn in these boondocks from time to time. I'm glad you regret murdering some innocent girl. Great, awesome. Keep up the not murdering, Delaney! But this babble doesn't cut a case for your sanity."

Delaney's brow furrowed. Probably experiencing some of her favorite discomfort, *mild annoyance*. "Don't you even think, Sloan love? No. You feel. You see someone you hate and throttle them. You're exactly like I was! Except you can feel stronger emotions and thus need stronger emotions to act. If we slay the archon, do you truly intend to kill Clair Ibsen?"

"Yes."

The murmur of the archon peaked in pitch for a moment and returned to normal. Delaney sighed. She tapped her foot against the thick encasement of pus the root had bled when Winnipeg severed it. "Please, Sloan. Think about what you're doing, okay? If we win here, you'll be healthy, you'll be strong. Why squander that on an act of destruction?"

"She took my city. She betrayed me." Sloan tried not to grow angry. It didn't work. This was the bullshit that always happened. First with her twin sister, then with Clair. Where they could get away with all sorts of things, awful things, but because Sloan's sister had been blind and Clair had been pretty and sociable, nobody batted an eye. But when Sloan tried anything, anything at all, it was fire and brimstone, hail and plague.

She turned toward the mouth of the tunnel to signify the conversation was over. Because it was. Clair Ibsen had taken everything from Sloan short of her life. Retribution was justified, the way the killing of a girl Kyubey slated for termination was justified. As if Delaney had any right to speak! After what she did? Oh, but wait, now she was Miss Moral Exemplar, who THOUGHT about things, so obviously she KNEW the TRUTH, and who oh-so-regretted all the bad things she did except, except maybe they were a good thing after all? Fuck you, Delaney. Sloan would rather join Winnipeg in whatever foolery down below.

But Delaney flung out a hand and caught Sloan by the shoulder.

"Okay, okay sorry, I didn't mean to trounce your feelings, love." She tugged Sloan's shoulder to turn her around, but Sloan remained fixed at the cavern mouth. Winnipeg had vanished from view, probably on the other side of the archon. "You have every right to hate her. Every right! Kyubey told me all about what happened to you. She stabbed you in the back, beat you to a pulp, forced you from your own home. None of that is okay. But. Hatred begets hatred. It creates a cycle, an endless loop. A snake biting its own tail! If you kill Clair Ibsen, will you be happy?"

"No," said Sloan. "I'll be vindicated. That's enough."

"Archons are powerful beings," said Delaney. "Odds are high we won't all make it out of the upcoming battle alive. Not to be dour about it, of course! It's mere probability. Kyubey told me as much. I have a simple request of you. Would you like to hear it?"

"You're going to tell me anyway."

"If I die, and you survive, could you forget Clair Ibsen and go to Saskatchewan and take over my cities? They're not Minneapolis, but combined they're enough for a Magical Girl to live happily. You wouldn't have to dwell in misery, and you wouldn't have to destroy yourself for vengeance."

Delaney's hand curled into Sloan's shoulder, the fingers white and lithe. Sloan could feel the chill of her touch through the jacket. "Why the hell would I do that," she said.

"Because... because it's my dying wish! You have to honor a dying wish."

"You're not dying. You can heal your own severed head, how are you even supposed to die?"

The hand dug tighter. "Ugh! You're missing the point entirely—"

Winnipeg's telepathic voice interrupted her. *You two. Get down here. I found something.*

Sloan brushed off Delaney's hand. "I'm going down."

Delaney allowed her hand to fall and made no reply. Sloan surveyed the network of roots leading to the lagoon and plotted a path for herself before leaping from the ledge and following it. She hit a root at an angle, bounced off, and landed on the same bramble Winnipeg had used earlier.

A chill wafted from the black liquid, an aura of negative heat. Her body temperature plummeted instantaneously and wrapping her jacket tighter did nothing. Thick plumes of white air billowed from her mouth as she realized she had experienced no overwhelming coldness like this during her stint in Williston, the kind of coldness to which she was accustomed in Fargo. Except this coldness extended beyond what was accustomed; it seemed a coldness capable of debilitating a normal human. Her insides felt frost-coated, her ribs like icicles. Despite the pain, the cold imbued her with mental clarity and sharpness. Cold was her natural element, after all.

Sloan glanced over her shoulder, but Delaney remained in the mouth of the cavern. She lifted a toothpick-sized arm and waved.

The primordial expanse of fluid and foliage, all primitive shades of black and overgrowth green, made hunting for Winnipeg difficult. Most of the things that moved were either throbbing roots or spectral wraiths that drifted through the swampland. The fleshy vegetable mass of the archon heaved and shook. From below it took the appearance of a celestial body, its bottom perfectly rounded, like a moon drawn too close to the orbit of the planet and now threatening to crash. Roots flowed from its lower parts like a mass of cables, each pulsing with chunks of lifeblood, siphoning energy from the tunnels back to this bulb, this planet.

The bulb was not submerged in the lagoon. Although it perspired black globules in a constant torrent, the room did not seem to fill. A small space beneath the bulb was navigable, and deep beneath it Sloan saw Winnipeg, perched on a low root and poking her sword at something in the mire.

With a series of cautious jumps, Sloan approached Winnipeg, all the while trying to discern the thing floating in the swamp. It was about the size of a log, but the blackness of the liquid around it made it impossible to see anything more. Even when Sloan managed to climb onto Winnipeg's root, she still had trouble piecing together the amalgam of organic bits that composed the thing. Winnipeg was trying to reel it in with the tip of her katana, but it kept sliding and rotating in the muck.

"What is it," said Sloan.

"A girl," said Winnipeg.

The moment she said it the pieces came together in Sloan's mind and she could make out the muddied and mutilated corpse for what it was. Details such as age could only be guessed at, but it was a slight, shriveled body, swaddled in the remains of an oversized sweater perforated with ragged holes. About half the girl's face had been gnawed off, exposing a bare eyeball in a clotted socket, and the mouth hung open in a perpetual cry of horror.

Winnipeg finally fished the body and dragged it onto the root. The murmur of the archon had risen in intensity, surrounding them in a manic chuckle. The bulb bulged and throbbed above them.

"Think the rat sent someone before us?" said Winnipeg.

"Why just one girl," said Sloan.

"Perhaps there are more." Winnipeg scanned the surrounding area. No other bodies anywhere on the placid surface.

"Where would they even come from. We're the closest cities of any size. He'd've brought in girls from even farther away, or nomads."

"Perhaps the rat did not send her. Perhaps she came of her own volition, seeking cubes. And died for her troubles."

It seemed impossible a lone girl—a lone nomad no less, a girl too weak to hold territory even in this barren edge of the world—could have made it this far. Besides, Delaney had mentioned the archon hadn't been around long, which was why the miasma was only a partial distortion of the real world (although if what she had seen were only partial, Sloan wondered what true distortion meant). Unless the girl had been here concurrent to them...

A thought popped in her head and she scrutinized the corpse more closely, trying to make out a distinct appearance through the tar and eviscerated flesh. But soon she decided the girl was not Asian, and thus could not be Omaha. It didn't make sense why Omaha would rush down here and die anyway. Probably she stood a few feet away from Sloan, watching the corpse just as they did.

"This body has begun to decompose," said Winnipeg. "I am no coroner, but I would say several days of putrefaction."

"That would mean it's been here since the miasma started, or even before," said Sloan.

Winnipeg wiped her hands on the sides of her skirt. "Interesting. Did the rat inform you what causes an archon to manifest?"

"Uh, a lot of sin and despair. I kinda figured it had something to do with the oil drills."

"As did I," said Winnipeg. "Do you know why an archon appeared in Saskatoon three years ago?"

Unable to stomach anymore the sight of the decayed corpse, Sloan turned away. "I heard Delaney babble about divine retribution and God and shit."

"So that is how she frames it..." said Winnipeg. She clasped her hands under her chin. "I see. That is how she creates meaning in her life. One of the oldest forms of doing so in human history."

"Huh?"

"Religion," said Winnipeg. "Faith in something greater. I assume you are not a religious person, Fargo. Neither am I. Neither are most Puella Magi."

Sloan got the feeling she was getting roped into another uncomfortable philosophical conversation. While on the one hand she wanted to not do that, to in fact do the opposite of that and not speak to either Delaney or Winnipeg and just find some way to kill the damn archon and part ways, she couldn't muster the same vitriol toward Winnipeg. Both her and Delaney had opened to Sloan lately, and of the two Winnipeg felt more genuine, more honestly conflicted, most of all because Sloan wasn't even sure what exactly Winnipeg's conflict was, and maybe neither did she.

At the same time, the constant seething of the bulb above them made Sloan uneasy. "Let's get out of here," she suggested. The murmur had grown to a frenetic intensity, a pounding cackle she tried to blot out by clapping her hands to her ears. But the sound refused to abate even an iota, and she realized it was not a real sound, it was a sound in her mind, as though the archon were trying to speak to her with telepathy. She wondered if only she could hear it, or if Winnipeg and Delaney simply refused to acknowledge it.

Winnipeg remained by the side of the corpse, inspecting it. The brackish mire around them began to ripple and the roots writhed and twisted. The immense body of the archon emitted a vast rumble. Sloan backed away, but the roots she had used to get so far beneath the archon were no longer there. The root on which they stood started to sink.

"Let's go," said Sloan.

Winnipeg stood up and wiped her hands again. A disinterested, almost spacey look had crept over her features. "Oh. So it has finally decided to attack, has it?"

The root had almost completely submerged in the mire. The thick, elastic liquid sucked at Sloan's bootsoles. She searched for another root to leap to, but the black expanse of the

lagoon was total. Almost every root had disappeared across the entire surface. The tar rose to her ankles. She tried to lift one leg, but she had to exert considerable force to break from the adhesive.

Around them burst thousands of gnarled, thorny roots, erupting from the lake in a indistinguishable mass of sickly green and splatters of tar. The roots surrounded them on all sides, coiling in close to entrap them. By the time Sloan had become cognizant of the situation, Winnipeg had already launched herself through the briars and disappeared in a flurry of sword strokes and windswept squalls.

Sloan attempted to jump but she had no footing and no momentum and the tar had crept halfway to her knees. So instead she fell flat on her face, hitting the tensile surface with an audible smack. Had she not grown enough over the course of this stupid expedition to stop fucking up like this? She struggled not to swallow any of the acrid fluid. The scent of decomposition swelled in her nostrils.

A hand grabbed her collar and yanked her up. "Come on!" said Omaha's voice. "You need to jump!"

A root swung at her like a spike-tipped flail. Sloan jumped, bounced atop it, and sprung into the fray, which had finally begun in earnest.

Abraxas

Curling columns of withered roots twisted and coiled in intricate patchworks across the cylindrical den of the archon, each root tipped by a pulsing red barb like a scorpion's stinger. An undulating sea of thorns swirled around the archon's bulblike main body, an impenetrable web so dense it was unclear where the roots even began. They seemed to spill from the million tiny tunnels that perforated the den, but they also seemed to rise from the mire or extend from the base of the bulb. Trying to make sense of such a multifarious legion had little point.

And yet Delaney teetered on the edge of the tunnel and peered into the seething mass in search of her companions. Poor Sloan and Winnipeg had simply disappeared beneath the tides, where who knew what fate befell them. Delaney sighed, tried to wear a concerned face. Even when nobody watched she stressed the importance of appearances. If she forced herself to undergo the rote motions long enough, eventually they would form habit and then nobody, not even herself, would be able to tell her from the real thing.

At least in this case she did have some genuine concern, if not for the wellbeing of her friends (Poor Sloan, she tried to tell herself, but their icy parting made it especially difficult), but for the defense of her allies. She needed their firepower. You can't heal something to death, unless it's one of those old timey role-playing games where cures re-kill the undead. What an easy world if real life worked that way!

No no no, stupid Delaney, what are you even thinking? Can't you demonstrate a shred of compassion? Sloan is probably being torn apart by those roots. Sloan's nice, isn't she? She didn't call you a freak or try to kill you, even after the Claudia story. That's way more kindness than a degenerate like you deserves! But if Sloan *did* die, Delaney would forget in a week. But that's not the point! Do good deeds, remember? That is the purpose of a Magical Girl—*your* purpose! That means saving people, even if they're total strangers. You can do it, Delaney! You can save them!

"I can save them!" Delaney howled at the archon. She sprinted off the edge and plunged into the thorny sea.

Moments before she struck the top layer of roots, she tucked her legs under her chin in cannonball position and surrounded herself in a barrier. By folding up she could minimize the barrier and emphasize its strength. Thus, when the barrier struck the roots it did not pop, even as the thorns jabbed against it and pressed pointed indentations in the rubbery shield. She pinballed down the crevices between the roots, her body bouncing within the bubbly confines. She cartwheeled and rotated in air, quickly growing dizzy (she had low tolerance for these things). As she forced down nausea, she maintained the stream of magic necessary to maintain her barrier as it bashed against root after root, until the bubble ricocheted off something and fell freely until it hit a liquid surface with a wet slap.

It was the lagoon. Under the canopy, roots were more sparse. Although not sparse enough to be unavoidable obstacles.

She broke her bubble and instantly formed another beneath her feet as she resumed a standing position in one elegant motion. Beneath the canopy the lagoon exuded an ominous antilight that reflected the rippling motions of the roots above. The immense lower half of the archon's bulb occupied most of the available space. Delaney had landed near the outskirts of the room, near the walls, and she quickly scanned the area for her hapless companions.

It took only moments for a root to uncoil itself from the canopy and strike at her with the red-tipped barb. She was so preoccupied she did not even dodge and the barb impaled her in the stomach. Silly Delaney! Always getting into trouble with your affable distractedness. You stupid stupid fucking fuck.

No time for self-loathing! The root yanked back and dragged her with it. The massive hole in her stomach felt so bizarre, a complete absence of guts, most of her intestines obliterated. Painless, of course. Just a weird physical emptiness.

The root tried to pull her into the writhing mass above. Her body had risen halfway when she wedged her staff against the barb for leverage and unhooked herself. She healed the gaping hole in her stomach before she even hit the water, and she didn't hit the water because she summoned a flotilla of bubbles to catch her.

Okay, time to get serious. She couldn't have massive plant appendages impaling her all the time, that would be quite inconvenient. Throwing up a barrier to defend her from another grasping root, she made graceful leaps from bubble to bubble to weave between obstacles and delve deeper into the den. Her first goal was to reconvene with her fellows. Then they could figure a plan to strike back.

She soon encountered one of her dear companions, Winnipeg. The girl was engaged in fierce combat against the groping plant tentacles, hacking and slashing with her samurai sword. She bounced between the undulating appendages while severing others to drop flailing into the quagmire. Personal kerfuffles aside, Delaney respected Winnipeg's technical competence. Of course, Winnipeg's technical competence was the whole reason the Incubator dragged her to the party in the first place. She had no further function than to provide offensive excellence where Delaney could not and Sloan could not yet, which Delaney had always considered something of an oversight, a flaw in the machine. It seemed Winnipeg could be employed more efficiently, or else remain uninvolved altogether. Especially since the Kyubster had conspired behind their backs to include a fourth girl.

Oh well. The Incubator knew best about everything. Like always.

Enough dallying! Stupid Delaney, you're only embarking on these pointless mental monologues to delay your assistance. Succor awaits! She rode her magic carpet of bubbles to the battlefield and waved her staff to summon barriers around the more feisty-looking roots. Winnipeg, ignoring her, plunged deeper into the fray. She had adjusted her stroke and could now slice clean through a root with one fluid motion.

"Hello hello!" said Delaney. "I'm here to help. Where's Sloan?"

Winnipeg lopped off the barb of a root that swooped in to strike, flipped over the resulting spray of pus, and ran along the root's toppling spine to cut down two more roots before they

even got a chance to look at her funny. More roots dangled from the canopy to replace the fallen, and Winnipeg had soon returned airborne to close the gap.

Perhaps you didn't hear me, said Delaney. Do you know where our dear Sloan's wandered off to?

Four more roots dropped one after another—hack slash chop slice! Winnipeg paused for a moment atop a headless creeper and wiped her brow with the back of her hand.

I'm busy.

And off to whack more weeds. Delaney sighed and summoned a halfhearted barrier to defend herself from a root that had taken an unhealthy interest in her.

There's no end to these roots, dear. We'll have to be more creative than simply attack attack attack if we want to do any direct damage to the archon.

Then get creative. I have not the luxury of standing still to ponder battle tactics.

Roots fell as other roots emerged from the lagoon. The bulb in the center of the arena pulsed with the thousands of roots that fed it, pumping oil in thick, visible knots through the thorny veins.

You know, said Delaney, If you helped me find Sloan, maybe we'd have enough firepower to free time for brainstorming, hm?

Winnipeg slashed another root and landed on yet another near Delaney, conspicuously foregoing the nice bubble Delaney had placed for her to use as a perch. *I don't know where she is. We were separated.*

Thank you for answering in such a timely fashion! I'll simply have to find her myself. She broadcasted her thoughts to the airwaves. Sloan love, where oh where have you gone?

No use, said Winnipeg. She blitzed back into the battle. I already hailed both her and you. Unless you heard and simply decided not to respond, I believe the archon is restricting the range of our telepathy.

"Ooh," Delaney said. "What an interesting power. Our archon appears to have a whole goodie bag of neat mental tricks! So much more fun than the boring old brute in Saskatoon."

Winnipeg continued to hack roots despite the tedium and obvious pointlessness of the endeavor. She should give up, just like Delaney was going to give up the tedium and pointlessness of attempting conversation with a brick wall! Why waste the energy, when she had a Sloan to save?

When she turned to continue her search, however, she discovered that many more roots had sprouted from the liquid below, a dense jungle of vines as thick as tree trunks.

"Winnipeg, I recall Kyubey informing me you had some sort of massive AoE finisher attack."

Aiyoe.

"No silly, A-o-E. Area of effect? Don't you know anything?"

The point of a finisher is that it finishes. I must ensure it slays the foe, else I will be too drained to fight.

Yeah, yeah. But after enough of these roots they'd be tuckered out anyway. Delaney could maintain a bunch of weak barriers for a long time or a few strong barriers for a small time but eventually even she went kaput. Her last dance with an archon had been a dicey affair, so if possible she'd prefer to preserve her strength the second time around. Finding a weakpoint now instead of dithering with saplings unto infinitum would go a long way!

She observed the battlefield again and racked her brains. Massive and impenetrable main body of the archon, okay. Obviously they needed the bulb to bloom and reveal something inside. But physical attacks refused to dent the tough exterior shell. What else did the bulb have? The roots. But they had destroyed millions of roots by now (okay, maybe like fifty) without a single shift in the bulb's demeanor. Not that bulbs have demeanor. You know what she meant.

The bulb both respired and perspired the black oil that flooded the lower reaches of the den. Considering the new wraiths the archon created were born in the sweaty beads that bubbled through the epidermis, Delaney conjectured the oil was the energy source the archon recycled endlessly to work its photosynthetic processes, with water substituted for oil and darkness(?) substituted for light. Ergo:

$?CO_2 + ?C_8H_{18} \rightarrow \text{Wraiths} + \text{Hatred}$

Which meant if they cut the roots feeding it, they could at least disrupt it. However, the roots were replaced instantaneously, making the task unfeasible. But wait! Removing the receptacles was but one option. What if they removed the elements of the equation itself?

"Winnipeg! Let's drain the pool," said Delaney.

Winnipeg did not reply. Maybe she did not hear. Oh, well. Delaney directed her bubbles to ferry her close enough to the lagoon to stoop and slide her staff through the murky liquid. It stuck to the red jewel at the top of the scepter and dribbled down the shaft, eventually pooling at her hand. She sniffed it, drew back from the sour odor.

Hm. It had a thicker consistency than water but overall demonstrated no spectacular properties. The conundrum of draining the lagoon was mere logistics. Pumping mechanisms were out of the question, as the bulb could pump liquid out of the pool in immense quantities without depleting it (assuming the chemical reaction occurring inside the archon diminished the total amount of oil, which made scientific sense but not, she supposed, magical sense). A drain, perhaps using one of the tunnels that already ringed the den, was a more technologically feasible option but it would take a long long time for the liquid to siphon completely. Winnipeg had wind magic, perhaps they could suck up the liquid in a massive vortex, seal it into a bubble barrier, and dispose of it all at once? But that would require extreme magical exertion on both Delaney and Winnipeg's part. Hm hm hm.

The placid surface of the pond broke and the static-shrouded head of a wraith emerged, a single hand groping for her. With nary a thought, she brought her spiked ruby heel down on its head, goring it where its eye should be and sending it sinking back into the mire.

Wait a second! If it really was oil...

"Winnipeg!" She looked up. Winnipeg's status remained unchanged; perpetual and fruitless warfare. "Winnipeg, are you perchance a smoker?"

Is that more combat jargon you wish to berate me for not knowing?

"No, silly, I mean as in cigarettes? Personally I can't stand what tobacco does to my teeth, but —"

I find smoking repulsive.

"I figured you might say that. Oh well. Do you think Sloan smokes? This isn't idle chitchat, by the way, I have a practical purpose for asking."

Winnipeg removed two more roots. Did she never tire? *I have not once witnessed Fargo smoking.*

Another wraith emerged from the swamp near Delaney. Or maybe the same wraith? She kicked it again for good measure. "Yeah, but we've really only known her for less than a day. She strikes me as a smoker, honestly. It would match her aesthetic!"

No response. Delaney scrunched her mouth. She wished Winnipeg would just *say* when she was done with a conversation instead of aborting it entirely. Like, okay, Delaney had done some not nice things to her, and in fact part of her plan had been for Winnipeg to specifically dislike her (and like Sloan instead), but really. Basic communication, girl! If Delaney could overcome the swollen nothingness inside herself to engage in social etiquette that almost brought her literal physical pain, Winnipeg could at least reciprocate.

Like honestly. What hardships did Winnipeg even have? Boo hoo, she didn't love her ex-boyfriend or whatever that story was. And she acted so entitled, so pretentious. It would be so easy for Delaney to summon a barrier right in front of Winnipeg's path. She imagined the bubble deflecting Winnipeg, knocking the momentum right out of her, the little body losing its grace and control and bouncing hopelessly toward the murk. The barbs of the roots pouncing, impaling her from multiple sides at once, ripping her body apart. Avenging their severed brethren by severing her limbs and head, devouring the worthless torso like so many serpents.

No, Delaney! Stupid stupid stupid. She knocked a fist against her head, reveling in the dull thunk that signified a brainless skull. Stop thinking such psychotic things, you dolt. Think about good things! Like how happy all three of you will be when you defeat the archon. She squeezed her eyes shut and imagined the scene, but no matter how she tried she could not muster the same detail and relish as her fantasy of Winnipeg's grisly death. The three of them stood as sketchy figures in a plain with no background, cardboard cutouts more than people. If she removed herself from the image things got a little easier, but not enough.

The same wraith from before wrapped a slimy claw around her ankle. She bashed in its cranium with her staff.

Time to spark her dumb self into action and find Sloan. Bubbles, away! They skittered over the oil lagoon in unified motion, taking her along for the ride. The den was a deceptively expansive space. The various roots emerging throughout the swamp gave it a sylvan appearance, like narrow tree trunks along a empty dale. The wiggling thorns had an odd optic effect, cutting unusual zigzag forms through what should have been a plane of parallels and perpendiculars. It made it hard to focus; the roots had a hypnotic sway, a kind of entrancing dance as they pumped fuel to the core. Could this be another of the archon's perception-altering powers, or simply crazy old Delaney acting a little loopy again? Let's go with the former.

She rattled her empty brains with another good knock. "Sloan love!" she shouted. She cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted again. "SLOOOOOOOAN LOOOOOOVE!"

Her voice echoed through the wobbly space. She tried to find a better word than space to describe it, but her surroundings seemed less and less to reflect any real-world concept or geography. What had she likened it to, again? A forest? No, nothing like that. She squinted her eyes and tried to force the vertical and horizontal and diagonal lines into focus, but they were just lines, just forms, jittering back and forth devoid of meaning, becoming Mondrian, becoming Pollack (Jackson, not Delaney). This was, this was, this was actually kinda difficult.

She slowed down her bubble raft and leaned over to catch a breather. Disorientation immediately took her and she lost sight of which way was up. She found out when she bent over to vomit.

What felt like all her guts streamed from her mouth and plopped into the black pool, leaving her an empty husk of skin with nothing inside. A painful cramp in her voided stomach caused her to kneel and grab at herself with both hands. She spat out the acrid backwash and clenched her teeth, wiping her lips with the back of one hand before another painful cramp doubled her over again.

What was going on? This couldn't be just a reaction to the motions of the roots. Her response had been too visceral to be based solely in imagery. But what...?

The root! The one that had impaled her. She had assumed her magic could counteract the venom. Had that been overconfident? Nothing else had touched her. It was the only way the archon could affect her so strongly. Then why did she not see some strange flashback of critical events in her life, like Sloan did? Why did she not see Claudia or the dog or her stepfather or anything except a nightmarish terrain of fragmentary lines and colors?

A small creature appeared beside her and she raised her hand to strike it before she realized it was the Incubator. Still clutching one arm tight to her stomach she tried to ask what he was doing there, but her mouth had turned to cotton and her tongue had swollen with bile. She lowered her hand on the Incubator's head (all he did was stare at her), but her fingers passed through and dipped into the oil where he sat.

An illusion. A hallucination—a byproduct of the venom coursing through her veins. But why him? Of all the terrible lousy things from her past, why the one thing with which she could on some level actually identify, and on another maybe even respect? If she had to sum up her relationship with the Incubator, that was it: benign, grudging respect. She certainly felt nothing so strong toward him as to merit his appearance in her delusions.

The cracks in the world around her sharpened with encroaching menace. She had a dull recollection of a parallel universe of roots and swamps. Her addled brain fired muted messages of danger through her nerves. She had to purge the toxins before the archon took the opportunity to destroy her.

She brought her teeth to her wrist and clamped deep into the artery. Sickly brown blood seeped, then sprayed, over her dress. She gnawed deeper into the vein, her blood propelling out in a voluminous arc.

A harsh crack in the world came crashing down on her. She barreled to the side and plunged into the tar, forcing herself under the surface despite the buoyancy that tried to push her back up. Her wrist continued to hemorrhage chunky globules of bilious plasma. The cracks and lines followed her underwater, even as the black oil stung her eyes and should have rendered all sight inoperable. All she needed was for enough blood to leave her that the effects would wear off, and then she could replenish her supply with simple magic. She applied pressure with her thumb to expel the blood faster.

The Incubator swam along in the murk, his fur remaining pure white despite the unctuous ooze around him. Why the Incubator? Why not Claudia? What was this hallucinogenic venom supposed to show?

More and more blood pumped out the frayed vein on her wrist. The Incubator grew transparent, began to fade. She blinked, forcing the oil from her eyelids, and when she opened them again she saw only blackness.

Phew! That was close. The first time she had ever felt herself in real danger during the entire expedition. She supposed it wouldn't be a good archon romp without at least one near-death experience.

Still submerged, she quickly filled herself with nice, clean blood and sealed the wound on her wrist. Unsure how far beneath the surface she had sunk, she began to swim upward.

Except something had snagged on her ankle. She kicked her foot but the thing remained tight, a single thin strand like seaweed. She tried to unhook herself, but the liquid the consistency of molasses devolved all motion to awkward underwater ballet. She found it difficult to even find her foot; it felt as though she had a foot somewhere but it was not connected to the rest of her body. Her fingers groped the muggy dullness. Oil began to seep into her nostrils but she guarded herself against it with a convenient nosebleed. She should have put up a barrier before she submerged. Normally she had the presence of mind for that, but the sickness and the confusion caused a momentary lapse in clarity. Again placing her in a more compromised position than she was used to. Was this how Winnipeg felt? Funny, considering to Delaney it all posed a minor inconvenience, and not an earth-shattering catastrophe.

She gave up on finding her foot. The thing wrapped around her ankle was attached to something of weight but it exerted no force beyond gravity, and even that was nullified by the buoyancy of the oil. Delaney propelled her arms and forced herself upward. She kicked her free leg and flailed and swam and had no idea if she made any progress at all.

Something tugged on her scalp. It was her hair. Unlike whatever clung to her ankle, this force was actively pulling, and actively pulling her upward. Her body began to rise and rise, and continued to rise, and just when she wondered how far she had left to rise she broke the surface.

Air, functionally unneeded but welcome nonetheless, flooded into her windpipes as she sputtered oil. A single gasping breath as the rest of her body came sailing out the lagoon. She landed on her raft of bubbles imagining herself like those birds in soap commercials who got trapped in oil slicks.

"I can't see anything," she told her rescuer.

"You got oil in your eyes," said Sloan.

A hand pressed against her face. When it went away, she could see again. A miracle! A miracle of totally bland magic.

And yep, she looked like a bird in a soap commercial. Oh dear lord.

"The hell happened to you," said Sloan. Her right arm dripped with oil. "I saw your bubbles and then ripples on the surface. Did you get—the fuck, how did this get here."

She pointed to the thing clutching Delaney's ankle. It was a small human hand, attached to a small human arm, attached to a small human corpse. The corpse was similarly drenched, but vaguely recognizable as female.

"Is this your friend Omaha," said Delaney.

"No, Winnipeg found it. How did it get here, did it... pull you under?"

"Nonsense," said Delaney. She pried the fingers from her leg. "It's a dead thing, it can't do that."

She gave the corpse an unceremonious push and watched it slowly sink beneath the surface. As the oil coagulated over Delaney's skin, she pulled herself to her feet and clapped her hands together.

"Oh yes, before I forget! Sloan, you smoke, correct?"

Sloan boggled at her. Her machine gun unleashed a salvo of unmanned fire to hold the roots at bay.

"It's a simple question, love."

After a brief pause, Sloan adjusted her collar and turned away. She had to shift her boots carefully to keep atop the bubbles. "I can't afford to smoke."

Delaney pouted her lips and whistled, except her lungs convulsed and she bent over to hack up some coal-colored stuff. After a few pats on her chest for good measure, she spat cutely. "Patooie!"

"You okay," Sloan asked, more as a formality.

"Dandy." Delaney hooked a thumb onto her tongue and scooped out more of the bitter paste. "But this is really important, love! Are you certain you don't have a lighter, or matches?"

Sloan waved her arm to redirect the aim of her gun. A disembodied root, fizzling at a sundered end, slapped against the lagoon. "I don't have jack shit. What's the purpose of this, I need you to help fight. There's too damn many of these things."

Oh, and her hair. She whipped the once-white strands into a ponytail and wrung them over her shoulder. "Sloan dear, that's the problem I'm attempting to solve. Don't you know what oil does?"

It took a few seconds for the realization to dawn on Sloan's face with comical eye-widening. Sloan, you can be such a dunce sometimes.

"Shit," she said. "Shit, that's genius! Uh..." Sloan rifled through her pockets, her sullied arm smearing oil everywhere. Several upturned pockets later, she slumped her shoulders. "I got nothing."

"Oh, rats!" said Delaney. "And you know Winnipeg's so straightedge. Can't your light magic do anything?"

The machine gun rattled. "It's just light," said Sloan. "Random ass magical light only loosely connected to the laws of physics. It gives barely any heat. Like, the tiniest amount—"

Again the epiphany face, although this time Delaney hadn't the foggiest why as she puzzled in search of some alternative method to create fire, wondering if they could gather any sticks and dry brush to create it the neanderthal way (really, you'd think something as elementary as fire would be easy peasy) or else drum up some hitherto-subconscious magical power, or else attempt a chemical reaction to cause conflagration (the hemoglobin in her blood had the formula $C_{2952}H_{4664}O_{832}N_{812}S_8Fe_4$, surely a reaction creating enough heat for flash point was possible with enough ingenuity and magical chicanery). But she let Sloan say whatever it was she was going to say.

"Give me your glasses," said Sloan.

"Um, why?"

"Just do it, we don't have time."

Delaney fished into the folds of her filthy dress and found her similarly-filthy glasses. Sloan snatched them and daubed a saliva-slicked thumb against the lenses.

"Now paper or something like it," said Sloan as she furiously wiped away oil.

"I don't think I have anything like that," said Delaney. She usually didn't even know where her civilian things wound up when she transformed into Magical Girl apparel.

Sloan held the glasses to her eyes and squinted. She resumed wiping. "The map, gimme the map."

"The map." The map? "Oh! The map!"

She had kept the map of Williston in a safe place, partially to remember where it was and partially because she was paranoid of Winnipeg finding and destroying it (a paranoia that, in retrospect, sounded pretty silly). She daintily lifted a leg behind her and slid a finger into her ruby heel to pop it from her foot. Tucked snug under the insole were the folded pieces of her dear map.

"Now tell me, love, what do you need this for?"

"To burn it."

Delaney had been proffering the parchment, but at Sloan's statement she retracted her hand. "What! But, but it's my map!"

"If we win this fight we won't need it anymore," said Sloan. "Stop fucking around and give it!"

Did Sloan even realize the amount of effort it took to find a detailed print map of a backwater hick town in rural North Dakota? How many archives, how many bureaucratic labyrinths had Delaney plundered to procure this one map, which had served them so well despite Winnipeg's rather rude defacement? And now Sloan wanted to burn it? And she was so testy, too!

Delaney thought to voice her opinions when Sloan seized her wrist and wrenched the paper from her hand, ignoring her indignant shriek. Once the paper had been pried from her fingers, however, Delaney no longer felt so attached and let Sloan off with a minor harrumph.

With one extended hand holding the crumpled pieces of map and the other holding the glasses, Sloan positioned herself precariously on the bubbles, squinting her eyes and measuring the distance between the two seemingly random objects. She held the glasses to her face while she extended the map away from her, and then pulled it back close.

"Excuse the intrusion, love, but what is it exactly you are doing?"

"Ever fry ants?" said Sloan.

"Ants."

"You know, with a magnifying glass."

"I thought that was something rustic children did, but only in nostalgic movies."

Sloan shut one eye and bit her lip. A vague glow emanated from the hand holding the glasses. "In fact I never did it either. Before Minneapolis I lived in Arizona. Lots of sun all the time. Sometimes I thought about going out and frying ants, but it was always too damn hot."

"Um, okay!" said Delaney.

"The point is, same logic here. You take a glass, focus light through it, and presto! Shit gets hot." The aura engulfed her hand in light. Delaney shielded her face and cast a glance over her shoulder to check how Sloan's gun was holding up in the constant war of the roots. She applied a few bubbles to aid the defense.

She didn't have the heart to tell Sloan her scheme lacked scientific feasibility. Ignoring the suboptimal use of non-prescription reading lenses as a substitute for the uniform regularity and superior convexity of a magnifying glass, the laws of entropy meant no matter the focusing power of her lens Sloan could not create heat that exceeded the temperature of the heat's source, i.e. the orb of light in her hand. And since the orb gave off little heat, by Sloan's own admission and Delaney's observation, this was an exercise in futility.

At least she thought that until a small charred mark appeared on the tip of the map. Delaney lowered her hand and squinted. The mark spread, the map bending and decaying as if animated in stop-motion, the red lines of Williston contorting and ultimately dissolving into nothingness, the town becoming effigy, an erasure in facsimile. But it made no scientific sense! Entropy—

Delaney, you idiot. The powers of a Magical Girl were specifically harnessed to combat entropy. Their magic was emotion transformed into literal power. Sloan's belief in her ability meant more than the scientific processes guiding it, as she literally traded chunks of her soul for a desired outcome. Hence a Magical Girl's most vital attribute: Creativity.

(And the capacity of their gem, of course. Delaney had no doubt this minor act of combusting a paper cost Sloan more than the machine gun had in the past ten minutes.)

The second the map caught flame Sloan shut off her light and tossed the glasses back to Delaney. She cupped a hand around the inchoate flicker, gently blowing and protecting it from the stagnant airless air that surrounded them. The fire grew; more of Williston was seared away.

"Wow, love! Amazing!" Delaney clapped her hands with the wet thwack of oil.

Sloan's eyes did not leave the flame. She bent close, almost singeing her nose, her lips pursed to feed it with oxygen from deep inside. Once the map had lit up like a torch, Sloan held out her arm and let it drop.

Delaney, who was drenched in the stuff, basically caught fire instantly as an inferno detonated around them. Flames spread to Sloan's similarly-drenched arm and she staggered

back with a grunt of surprise. Before either of them became charbroiled, Delaney drenched them with a deluge of blood and enveloped them in a protective bubble.

The bubble ascended into the air. Sloan staggered back, checking the damage (she had lost a good part of her sleeve) as Delaney coalesced the bloody runoff and added it to the shell of the bubble around them. Leaving them spic and span, no oil, no blood. Their clothes had not fared well, of course. Apart from Sloan's sleeve, the hem of Delaney's gown had become a series of burnt strips that fluttered around her legs. God dammit. It was always the worst when your clothes got ruined. It could be so difficult to mend magical apparel if you lacked the appropriate skills.

Think fashion later, Delaney! The flames had spread across the surface of the lagoon, consuming the bounteous fuel. Pillars of smoke rose into the cavern, swirling among the roots like twisted tendrils of yet another creature. The archon or something else loosed an arrhythmic squeal that seemed less pained than annoyed.

"It worked," said Sloan.

"I know! Very good, love," said Delaney. She inspected one of her long white gloves, which had been rendered basically worthless by the fire. Finger by finger she removed it. The other glove was okay, so despite the asymmetry she left it. No point in wastefulness!

Something landed atop the bubble with a boing. It was Winnipeg, crouched low and on her knees. One sword held the drawn katana while the other smoothed down her skirt due to her compromising position directly above them.

What's all this, she said.

I set stuff on fire, said Sloan.

"Oh, just get in here already." Delaney waved her staff and made her bubble semipermeable. Winnipeg's body sank through until the blood no longer supported her and she plopped between them with a healthy splat.

She quickly rearranged herself (Shame! Delaney loved seeing dear Winnipeg in undignified positions) and shuffled to Sloan's side of the bubble to stare onto the hellscape below.

"The fire is having an effect already," said Winnipeg.

A true statement! The myriad roots had abandoned their previous interests and now roared through the air, some ablaze, attending to the main bulb, beating back the flames with invertebrate slaps against the oilfield. A root very near their bubble wagged back and forth as fire enveloped it, filling the air with psychic shrieks until it went rigid and sunk into the flames.

"The bulb," said Sloan.

She pointed. At first, Delaney could not see what Sloan indicated, but as the motions grew more pronounced it became clear the bulb was opening.

By now almost the entire mammoth cavern of the archon had filled with engorged smoke columns, but the archon itself remained visible through sheer immensity. The bulb as one unified being shuddered and woke. The leathery black skin peeled away into four massive petals, vast triangular strips like pieces of circus tent. Although the bulb had been only unbroken blackness on the outside, its inner skin swarmed with a hodgepodge of bright and exuberant colors: reds, greens, blues, oranges, yellows. Sometimes polka dots, sometimes stripes, sometimes plaid. Sloan couldn't tell for sure but she thought the colors were changing as she looked, like the inside of the archon had no distinct identity, rather a constantly shifting one.

Delaney's bubble rose above the blooming petals, exacerbating the disorientation of the inner skin with the flickering flames and squirming roots beneath. The petals scraped against the walls of the den, their immense surface area blocking most of the smoke. At the center of the four petals was nothing but a round and dark depression into which nothing could be perceived. From this hole rose the stem of the flower that had before adorned the top of the archon.

Until the archon had fully bloomed, the flower remained unchanged, small and unassuming in the enormity of the space around it. But once the four petals (or flaps of skin, or whatever—Sloan didn't know jack dick about plant biology, and she doubted the archon knew either) had settled, the flower changed. Not with any kind of transformation sequence or visible mutation. One moment it was the flower, and the next Sloan had to rub her eyes to make sure she was seeing things correctly, because all at once it had become something else.

Delaney rolled onto her back and laughed hysterically. Sloan and Winnipeg glanced at her once and turned back to the archon. The stalk of the flower had become a long, thick neck, adorned with technicolor feathers, swaying to and fro in a vaguely hypnotic dance. The head of the thing was unseeable behind a strange round mask that at first had a Pablo Picasso African tribal vibe, all empty black eyes and scarification, but like the colors of the petals seemed to change before Sloan's eyes, until she could no longer tell which was actually changing: the archon or her sight.

The features arranged into a semblance of structure and form, assembling themselves across the mask until they became...

Clair Ibsen? Her face, at least, and a pretty stunning likeness. Sloan was more impressed than anything. Unlike her prior hallucination, it was obvious the mask was mere mimicry. Just Clair Ibsen's stupid face openmouthed like a grouper, her same bleach white skin and platinum hair hanging in gangly strands.

Sloan folded her arms. "Let's fucking kill this thing already."

"I assume it takes a different appearance for you than for me," said Winnipeg.

"Ditto for Delaney," said Sloan.

Delaney stifled her sniggering with a hiccup and climbed to her feet, wiping the corners of her eyes. "Oh my. Sorry, dears. But if you could see what I see on that thing's face..."

"Whatever it is, it's a distraction," said Sloan. "Ignore it and proceed as usual. Let's unleash some heavy duty firepower into this thing, enough to see if it takes damage. Once we have an idea of its abilities, we can figure a better plan. Keep in communication."

Delaney ahemed and affected a more serious tone. "It blocks telepathy. If we move too far apart we can't stay in contact."

"We'll deal as we go," said Sloan. "Pop the bubble."

The bubble popped. The three girls dispersed like spores from a pod and descended on a rising coil of roots and thorns. Sloan concentrated on sticking a landing on a narrow sliver of root and managed to succeed with acrobatic aplomb, not even impaling her foot on a thorn or anything. She materialized her gun in her hands and dashed along the trajectory of the root.

Winnipeg had landed on a nearly parallel root. Together they dashed at an almost ninety-degree angle toward the masked head of the archon, blasting and slicing at the infestation that sought to batter them back. A root swiped low at Sloan's legs but she leapt with instinctual reflexes and sharpened perspective. Around her, blood bubbles deflected other attackers, although Sloan had no time to find Delaney among the bramble. Ahead stretched the archon and her salvation.

The petals of the archon trembled and spewed a million tiny pollen particles into the air. In a nebulous other world Delaney shouted not to breathe. But as the spores surrounded her and filled the entire cavernous den, how could she not breathe? With so much excitement, so much furor surging through her. She bit her lip and tried to close her lungs, tried to subsist on soul energy alone as she sprinted from root to root, leaping across the narrow and constantly-shifting platforms to her ultimate goal. But the allergens clotted her eyes; her vision grew subdued despite the magical perspicacity of her sight.

Ahead loomed the archon. Its mask continued to adapt. Now the visage of Clair Ibsen seemed even more lifelike, even more real, although it still painted the ridiculous image of a human head atop a long furred throat emerging from a massive flower. The roots whipped furiously at her but despite the spores she staved onward. Winnipeg and Delaney had fallen out of sight; only the archon existed. The archon with Clair Ibsen's face. She reached the end of one root and bounded into the air, heaving her gun in front of her and blasting the face with as good as she could give. The light tore through a few flaming roots and battered the face itself with a tinny twang before bouncing off in every direction.

The face stared at her, unharmed, unblinking. She should have expected a normal attack to fail, and yet she had committed fully to it and now hung in the opiate air surrounded by twitching vines and toxic thorns.

As her body reached the zenith of its leap and came crashing down to the petals below (why had she thrown herself so far forward for an attack she knew wouldn't work, why why why),

Winnipeg soared past frozen like a ballerina, one leg bent at the knee and the other straight, her arms splayed like wings and her katana shining. Behind her swirled a cyclone of fire, the winds of her magic funneling the pyre from the lagoon in a massive topsy-turvy column. A gust caught Sloan from behind and dragged her along, heat lapping at her skin.

Winnipeg raised her katana and launched the cyclone at the archon. It curved through the air like a gigantic drill and smashed into the mask. The archon chattered and clicked as flame enveloped it, catching on the feathers of its throat. The mask disappeared beneath the flames and the neck spasmed with jerky, birdlike motions. For a moment it appeared as though Winnipeg's attack had dealt a critical blow. But with one tremendous shake the archon cleared the flames, revealing the same Clair Ibsen mask-face with the features altered to fury.

Clair Ibsen unhinged her jaw with an electronic whirr. From the void within spewed an array of dazzling crystal shards. Winnipeg threw up a hand to defend the Soul Gem strung from her neck and Sloan had a mere moment to do likewise as the shards crashed against them.

What felt like about fifty jagged knives dug into Sloan's body. She gasped the breath she had shored to prevent inhaling the archon's pollen as foreign bodies plunged deep through her skin and diced her innards to ribbons. One thick blade gored her through the cheek. She tasted iron blood on her tongue and something hard like bone knocked against her teeth until she yanked it out.

It took her only a moment to identify the spade-shaped, blood-drenched object. Seeds. The archon had implanted them with seeds.

Still sailing on Winnipeg's current as it cycled them around the perimeter of the den, Sloan tore furiously at the seeds lodged in her chest and stomach, wrenching each out with a painful groan and hurling it away. She devoted part of her mind to her gun to keep the roots at bay, but it was tough to focus as she clawed more and more frantically at the seeds lodged inside her.

"Oh dear." Delaney rode by atop a small bubble. "That looks bad."

"More incoming," said Winnipeg.

The archon/Clair Ibsen bellowed again and spat another volley. A bubble ballooned to catch the spray, the seeds sticking in the bloody membrane.

"Hm, now let's take a looksie at these things." Delaney drifted next to Sloan and bent forward to examine the seeds still stuck in her skin. Sloan wrenched another out with a wheeze.

Before Delaney made much progress, a root whipped out of the bramble and ran her through the back. The bright red barb poked out her chest, spilling blood down the front of her gown.

Delaney jammed her staff into the wound and tried to pry herself free. The root reeled her back, her legs hanging uselessly as she disappeared into the thick tangle. The bubble she had erected to protect them from the archon's seeds burst.

"Shit," said Sloan. She extricated another seed and looked for Winnipeg. She was nearby, alternating between removing seeds from herself and lopping roots. "We need to regroup!"

The seeds still implanted in Winnipeg erupted in unison, sprouting wiry stems with knotted joints. Before Sloan could react her own seeds burst and ten or twenty stems coiled around her. They quickly bound her arms and enveloped her throat. The jagged joints dug into her skin and forced her to gasp for air, only to suck in a mouthful of spores. Her eyes bulged as her hands clenched into useless fists, her legs kicking as the wind dispersed and dropped her into the roots.

She struggled for air, her lungs already wilting from having held her breath. The stems that sprouted from the seeds sliced into her jacket and then her skin like razor wire. The bizarre image flashed into her mind of her school field trip to a packing plant and the way the workers used metal wire to cut thick blocks of cheese, the wire dragging through the yellow flesh with morbid effortlessness. Sloan had refused to watch.

As she fell she twisted in midair. A root rose up, its red barb poised to impale. The wire around her throat dug deep and all movement became impossible.

An invisible force pulled her out of the way. She sailed through the serpentine roots that lurched and struck at her, her body propelled beyond her control.

A tiny voice whispered in her ear: "Don't worry, I got you!" It was Omaha.

Get these things off me, said Sloan.

Omaha dropped onto a petal of the archon, still aglow with its multicolored panoply like a bright red strip of tarpaulin in an otherwise gray expanse. Sloan went invisible, causing the world to fade to a bleary and unclear vista. Omaha entered her view, wrapped in a long cowed cloak.

We have to be quick, said Omaha. She set Sloan onto the petal and materialized a long, curved scythe in her hand. She looked like a grim reaper. Even her gaunt pale face added to the aesthetic. *The archon can surely sense us even if it cannot see us.*

She swung the scythe with a deft motion and severed the roots around Sloan's body. Sloan rolled over and burst her arms free of the still-clutching roots, gasping for breath and pulling seeds from her body. Thousands of small lacerations littered her skin.

I only have basic curative magic, said Omaha, as if reading Sloan's mind. *And it'll take too long to work. You'll have to bear it.*

Whatever, Sloan could handle pain. The circumstances of her soulless body dampened it. Given time, she would regenerate naturally, although not within the frame of this fight—finding Delaney was paramount. And Winnipeg, shit. The archon had scattered them with remarkable efficiency.

Omaha, we need to find the others. You go for Delaney, I'll get Winnipeg.

Omaha flinched as a root roared overhead. She clutched her scythe tight and kept her hand like a vise on Sloan's wrist. *Why should I go for Delaney? You need her to heal you, you should find her.*

That doesn't matter. Delaney is more important to find. You can move undetected, you have the better chance. Don't argue.

Okay. Omaha nodded. Her cowl bobbed over her head and covered her eyes. She reached into her folds and retrieved a pendant on a necklace. *You should take this, Sloan.*

Sloan seized the pendant and examined it. It was Winnipeg's Soul Gem.

I could only carry one of you, but I needed to make sure the other wouldn't die. So I swiped Miss Dufresne's gem to keep her safe.

Smart work, said Sloan. The roots gathered closer and the Clair Ibsen mask of the archon seemed to look in their direction. Sloan wondered what Omaha saw in the mask, if the mask reflected something from inside each of them. *Let's move, Omaha.*

Omaha gave a surprisingly warm smile. *Okay! Good luck, Sloan.*

She let go. Sloan plunged back into the visible world; Omaha melded into nothingness. The Clair mask gaped its mouth and screeched in fury at the pest that appeared atop its petal. Roots tipped with red barbs careened from every direction, but Sloan was ready to fight and ready to run.

As the roots converged she materialized another machine gun and jumped into the air like a corkscrew, spewing cleansing light in a three-sixty degree torrent. The roots in her immediate vicinity fell squirming into the fires below.

The archon spat another volley of seeds at her. Sloan threw the gun in front of her and bounced across it like a platform, calling it back to her side as she soared through the air and somersaulted onto the spine of another root, the seeds whizzing past and striking nothing but air. She winced away the pain from her wounds and ignored the blood drizzling down her jacket as she sprinted down the root and peeled her eyes for Winnipeg. She tried to sharpen her eyesight but the spores in her irises nullified her efforts. She wondered about the pollen she had sucked into her lungs and hoped no wonky mindfucks would screw her over. The whole world around her seemed an incomprehensible cluster of nonsense, from the roots to the smoke to the monolithic proportions to the gaudy colors to Clair Ibsen's face attached to an avian neck but she was pretty sure that was all stuff that was *actually* happening. At least, she hoped so.

Winnipeg. Delaney. Where you at?

No luck. She looped the same words over in her mind in case she blundered into communication range, but if either girl was in a state to respond it would be miraculous. At least with Winnipeg's Soul Gem in her pocket she could be certain one of them wasn't dead. Wait. If Sloan had Winnipeg's gem, that meant Winnipeg was unconscious (technically dead), and had no way of hearing her. God dammit.

She danced from root to root. When she felt cheeky she levied gunfire at the Clair mask. No effect, even when she assaulted the feathery neck instead of the face. But each hit registered a solid, corporeal sound, unlike the earlier attacks against the bulb, which had been absorbed altogether. A concentrated attack from both her and Winnipeg might be able to—

There! Deep in the bramble, between columns of smoke and backdropped by flickering fire. An unmistakable flash of lavender that could have only originated from Winnipeg's uniform. Without hesitation, Sloan plunged into the depths. She skated down the roots in search of the small purple scrap her hazy half-blurred vision had espied, only doubting if she had seen anything at all once halfway down and the fire on the lagoon raged like the pits of hell rising to grasp her.

She waved her machine gun, whipping rays of erasure through roots and splattering white pus in every direction. Everywhere was some loony profusion of surreal imagery. She shoved a hand to her eyes and blasted herself with a beam of light, repairing the damage immediately with her magic. The trick worked for a few seconds, giving her a clearer perspective on her surroundings, but soon more spores dulled her visual senses. Her fucking kryptonite, she needed her eyes. They were the best thing about her, and this stupid fucking archon somehow knew exactly what to counter, since the spores seemed to have no additional effects whatsoever. Or was this another psychological thing? Was the blurred vision in her mind, did the other girls suffer different afflictions, each tailored to their perceived strengths? Nobody else had complained they couldn't see.

The flash of lavender scrolled across the periphery of her vision. She turned as something disappeared between two coiled roots. Had it been Winnipeg, or the archon fucking with her? Luring her deeper...

Fuck that shit. She would solve her problems exactly the way she knew best: blasting them to bits. She dove in the direction Winnipeg had fallen and obliterated the roots in front of her with her gun. As the way cleared, she saw with clarity now the small limp body of Winnipeg, stuck to a larger root by a thick thorn that had rammed through her back. Her mouth hung agape in immutable surprise and her eyes swam with a dim deadness.

Sloan landed beside her and yanked her arms to pull her from the roots. With a dose of magic to make the girl near weightless, she hoisted Winnipeg onto her back koala-like. Winnipeg's head nestled against the crook of Sloan's neck and her arms hung down Sloan's front, the pencil-thin wrists bound by one of Sloan's hands. The machine gun clenched in the other, Sloan assessed her position. She had landed deep into the seething nest of roots. Thorns thronged around her, poised to prick with debilitating toxin.

The way she had come, from above, had closed completely. No light filtered in and the world had grown dark around her. For Sloan "Light Is Kinda My Thing?" Redfearn, there could be no more inconsequential setback. She illuminated the area by blasting her gun into the roots below. A spire drilled deep in a perfect corkscrew. She followed the passage she cut.

"Wake up Winnipeg." Since up had ceased to be an option, she would eventually drop into the fires below. She needed Winnipeg's wind magic by then, but the tiny girl had been totally knocked out. As Sloan prodded her, she realized Winnipeg was still wearing her lavender ensemble even though her magic was inactive. No—not exactly the same as her Magical Girl

outfit. A close enough replica to deceive at first glance. Winnipeg had literally reconstructed her uniform for civilian wear; was that dedication or insanity?

She obliterated a root and hellfire roared up to greet her. Already in free fall, Sloan angled for a low-hanging loop of thorny root and barely managed to hit it, her balance precarious.

"Wakey wakey Winnipeg, rise and shine." She jostled Winnipeg's head with her own as she warding away pursuing roots with her gun.

Winnipeg groaned, stirred. Her body trembled against Sloan's back. A foot struck spasmodically and jabbed Sloan in the thigh. She sputtered a little, coughed. Blood formed on her lower lip in a squash-colored bubble and burst, dribbling down her chin.

More and more roots emerged. "Get your shit together quick, sunshine, we gotta bounce."

"B... Buh..." said Winnipeg. One eyelid flickered open and drooped lazily.

Sloan swept her gun across the foes. "There we go, come on now."

"Buh, box... Box..."

Sloan persisted with gentle pleading and affected her most maternal tone (which was not very maternal). A barb lashed out and she scrambled aside to evade it, nearly toppling headlong off her constantly-shifting platform.

"Box... open the... box..."

"There's no goddam box," said Sloan. Was this just-woke-up-with-a-concussion speak or a delusion from the past incited by the thorn's poison? Sloan knew nothing about Winnipeg's past, had only the barest conception of how a box might factor into it. The only thing she could think was that one movie with Brad Pitt's wife's severed head in a box, but why she wasted precious cognitive capacity thinking about that right now who fucking knew.

"What's in... the box..."

The root on which Sloan stood had become too unstable. She bounded onto another, which afforded even less leg space than the previous. "Nothing's in the goddam box," she said.

Winnipeg hand seized Sloan's shoulder. "There's gotta be something in there!" A strange terror quavered in her voice.

The delusions had worked their way out of Sloan's system naturally after a short time. It must be a byproduct of their regenerative bodies or magical energy or whatever, Delaney probably had a better grasp on the theoretical aspects.

"Why," said Sloan. "Why's something gotta be there." She fried another root.

"It's the reason," Winnipeg mumbled. "It's the reason in the box. The purpose..."

"That makes no sense." Confront her on her bullshit, force her to realize the absurdity. Wake her from dreamland. It worked like that in the movies.

"If there's nothing... I need to know... the box... Open it..."

"THERE IS NO BOX."

She scanned the area. No more convenient roots. The nearest docile one was way in the distance, and the hostile ones sought a lapse in her concentration, an opening to exploit. The fires raged below and their smoke made searching for the closest enemies difficult.

"Has to be in the box... the reason for why... why I'm..."

"Winnipeg, don't wax philosophical on me—I need you to DO THINGS."

"The reason!"

"THE REASON IS WE DIE IF YOU DON'T!"

From a thick plume of smog a hitherto-unseen root lashed out. Sloan barely had time to register the attack and raise her gun to deflect the blow. The stinger crashed through the gears and machinery, destroying the well-oiled parts. The impact sent Sloan staggering—

—Into open air. She fell.

"WINNIPEG!"

A blast of wind surged in a vicious tornado. The fires were blasted away by the onslaught, caught in the whorl like thin threads of orange silk, lighting the gathered roots like fuses as fast-acting flame raced into the cluster above. Gravity ceased its pull and Sloan found herself suspended, no longer gripping Winnipeg but Winnipeg gripping her.

The young girl's eyes reflected the flames caught in the whirlwind. "What did I babble," she said.

"Nothing worth worrying about," said Sloan. Her legs dangled in the current. "Let's hit that fucking thing with everything we got."

Winnipeg nodded, her mouth still speckled with blood and a ghastly pallor denuding her carbuncular skin but the familiar determination not lost among it. The wind screeched a death-whistle as it heaved them through the air, their bodies cast uncontrollable toward the outer edges of the cavern. Winnipeg relinquished Sloan and seized her katana in both hands, channeling her energy as the massive force propelled them around the circumference of the lair. The fires curled and twisted like sunspots on the surface of a star galaxies away as Sloan and Winnipeg soared centrifugal, gaining momentum, gaining velocity. The gordian knot of roots churned and watched.

"Is this your finisher?" Sloan shouted. The wind swallowed her voice.

Is this your finisher?

Pah! said Winnipeg. *This magic is not even offensive. My finisher will be the last thing you see in this fight, rest assured. We must remove that thing's mask and reveal its true form before I use it. Now hold on.*

Sloan swam through the bustling air and wrapped her arms around Winnipeg's waist. Her thick coattails buffeted her legs.

By the way, Sloan said, *I got something for you.*

She held out the necklace with Winnipeg's Soul Gem. The purple stone was mired but not incorrigible. Winnipeg nodded and allowed Sloan to slide the necklace over her head, where it reclaimed its rightful position.

Now we ascend, said Winnipeg.

The wind shifted and launched them skyward. The roots twisted to meet them, a thousand barbs bared to impale. In an imperceptibly quick slash, the roots fell apart and Sloan and Winnipeg passed through a clean and blustery channel, a perfectly tubular passageway carved by Winnipeg's magic. The bramble corrected for its newfound cavity but by the time its immense multifaceted body even began to move they had burst back above the archon.

The archon turned its feathery neck and faced them with its mask. At first the Clair Ibsen face seemed to have lost most of its realism, but as it eyed them its features resumed a lifelike quality, brow furrowed and mouth twisted into a sneer.

No sign of Omaha or Delaney. But this was as good a chance as any to dent the thing's armor.

We hit it the best we got at the same time, said Sloan. *We break the mask and then hope your finisher lives to its name.*

It will, said Winnipeg. *Are you prepared?*

Sloan relinquished Winnipeg and flipped into the air. Another gun materialized in her hands.

Let's fuck this bitch up.

She squeezed the trigger but held her magic to charge the attack. The barrel of her gun span, churned, whirred, and grew translucent with the accumulated light within. Pain welled inside her as she drained thick chunks of her soul to build the attack stronger and stronger. Her arms and legs quivered uncontrollably; blood spurted from her numerous open wounds. Clair Ibsen's face leered at her as it expanded its mouth into an apocalyptic void.

The moment it spat another hefty volley of seeds Sloan released her magic. The gun roared with a grenade blast of light, a final spark that surged through the dead air and incinerated the seeds en route.

At the same time, Winnipeg rushed forward, traveling close behind the all-illuminating orb of pure power. For a brief moment of suspended silence the archon Clair Ibsen watched with dull apprehension, perhaps even fear—a sight that swelled Sloan with vindication as she rolled back from the recoil.

The orb struck the archon. At the moment of impact the orb collapsed and all light was sucked out of the cavern. The whole cylindrical structure plunged into the nonexistence of absolute darkness. One second passed, two seconds passed. Then the light flared in tumultuous eruption of sight and sound. A horrific roar accompanied the spreading particles as the archon lurched back with a vast bristling of its feathered throat. A billion tiny rivets spread across the Clair Ibsen mask like the craquelure of mummification.

In the next moment, Winnipeg, who had been behind the orb all along, whipped her arm horizontal across the mask. Clair Ibsen split in two, her mouth cut with a Glasgow smile. The two halves spread in opposite directions, afloat with ponderous sluggishness, as if physics itself had been staggered by the attack.

Clair Ibsen shattered.

A screaming blast sent Winnipeg hurtling backward. Both she and Fargo danced like rag dolls through the air, arms and limbs turned to jointless slabs of meat. Fargo struck the wall first, followed by Winnipeg.

Winnipeg groped for Fargo, caught an ankle, anchored herself to the larger girl. They hurtled in freeform plunge until Winnipeg collected her magic and caught them with an auspicious wind before they disappeared into the brier patch.

They righted themselves in midair and let go one another. Winnipeg brushed back her hair and faced her enemy, now bereft of the face of Stewart Wibaux (no doubt Fargo had seen the visage of Minneapolis; but Winnipeg wondered what form it had taken for Regina-Saskatoon). Bit by bit they had peeled away the archon's distractions. Now they knew its true face.

The archon—the real archon—had a long, serpentine head, bedecked with a pileated crest of so many vibrant shades of gray it seemed as though there had once been color, sapped away by an unknown eutrophication. A long, curved beak fashioned of pure ivory jutted from its face like an elephant tusk. Scrimshaw arabesques adorned the beak, harsh swirls and ingrained carvings of no immediate meaning. Above two tufts of feathers, where the archon's eyes should be, familiar electric static fizzed and crackled.

No more deceptions. This was its true face. It had to be its true face.

Winnipeg did not have the stamina or the soul to continue fighting if this was not its true face. With a deep puncture wound in her back and numerous lacerations across her skin, a stoic sealing of pain became less and less feasible if she wanted energy to spare for combat. She had rationed power for her finisher; it needed to work now.

She raised her katana overhead. Fargo sputtered something but Winnipeg ignored her as she focused her power into the sword. Her finisher had a five-second charge time. In magical

combat five seconds was virtual eternity and the windup served as her otherwise infallible finisher's sole downside. Even Fargo's attack that had fractured the archon's mask had taken only half the time. But if Winnipeg could pull it off...

"BOURRASQUE—"

The archon opened its beak and loosed a nerve-shattering song. The sound waves traveled as a visible pulse through the den and knocked Winnipeg and Fargo back against the wall. Great chunks of earth broke from the ceiling and descended in rapid cascades.

Fargo grabbed Winnipeg and dove away from a falling boulder. The energy around Winnipeg's katana dissipated and the attack went unfinished.

They rebounded and lost control in the air. Winnipeg exerted her will on her wind magic to fight against their schizoid trajectory, but the petals swirled beneath, vivid oranges and greens, so freakishly colorful in an otherwise colorless realm that it stirred faint feelings of nausea. The walls of the den continued to rumble and quake as the petals curled upward. No—not curling upward. Spreading. The petals were becoming the walls around them. The vibrant pigmentation bled from the petals onto the ashen surfaces and swallowed the world in obnoxious polka dot wallpaper. The transformation happened with torpid slowness and yet seemed to happen all at once; the walls and fires stripped away until all sense of direction disappeared and they entered a nebulous dimension of tropical clown colors. The only distinguishable object in the entire semipermanent haze was the archon itself, the vast floating column of feathered neck that extended from a wrinkle in the world rather than something plantlike and organic.

From similar wrinkles sprouted the archon's countless roots. A vast array of perforations dotted the vacuous landscape. There were even more roots now, the endless coil clotting and blocking view of the archon proper, although not the painful expressionist garbage that surrounded them. Or perhaps the world itself had grown smaller—and the archon, in changing the colors of the wall, had altered them in a way Regina-Saskatoon said was within its power.

"Ooh, what an interesting development!" said Regina-Saskatoon herself as she melded out of the background and encased the three of them in a protective bubble. "It must be truly desperate. It's trying to alter the miasma despite our counteractive presence. A dire gambit indeed!"

"It's working," said Winnipeg. No trace remained of the previous den; all was now color.

"Where did you come from," said Fargo to Regina-Saskatoon. This bubble was much smaller than the last. They nearly pressed together in the tight confines.

Regina-Saskatoon donned a wan smile. She did not look good. In addition to the numerous half-healed wounds that coated her body, her uniform had gone to tatters and her hair, normally quite brown, had developed several strands of gray. Dark bags underlined her eyes.

And yet the Soul Gem on her shoulder remained flawless.

"Funny story, that," she said. "I remember being dragged by a root having all sorts of delusions—and then presto! I was free, something had severed the root. I regained my senses just in time to observe your attack on the archon's mask. Bravo, by the way, truly stunning teamwork and coordination!"

Roots pounded against the bubble. It bulged with wet squishes. Blood drizzled from the weakening walls onto their heads.

"No time for idle prattle," said Winnipeg. Regina-Saskatoon seemed like she might literally break into pieces at any moment.

"Winnipeg's right." Fargo's tall, lanky body contorted to fit inside the bubble. Her neck craned at an awkward angle. "If the archon can fuck up spacetime we're dicked."

"We have exposed its true face. Now is time to behead the snake." Winnipeg jabbed a finger against Regina-Saskatoon's chest to get her attention and she lolled her head toward Winnipeg in response. "I need you to shield me long enough I can charge my finisher."

"Your finisher can cut through all these roots AND the archon?" said Fargo.

Winnipeg's first impulse was to give a resounding and unwavering yes. That single affirmative word, with no explanation or qualification: the absolute confidence and understanding of one's ability that defined everything admirable and impressive to human beings. The kind of response she would have given a thousand times in a thousand different contexts because it was so easy to simulate confidence simply by acting without thinking. As though all she had to do was say something fast enough and it meant she knew what she was doing.

"I cannot be certain." She closed her eyes and exhaled. The archon was no longer visible behind the thick knot of roots. "I—"

A root struck the bubble and sheared it open. In a wash of blood they toppled into formless subspace, beset on all sides by roots.

Regina-Saskatoon laughed and swung her staff wildly at nothing.

Winnipeg, said Fargo as she forced the roots back with the blare of her gun. Use your finisher to take out the roots. I can kill the archon.

When I use my finisher I'm out of the fight, said Winnipeg. I will be unable to do anything until I have cubes.

Fargo grabbed Winnipeg's arm. *Trust me. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's blowing shit up.*

A whole host of thoughts crowded into Winnipeg's mind at once, each processed in the span of a millisecond. Calculations, projections, assumptions, assessments. Damage outputs versus defensive ramifications, potential unknowns and known unknowns. And somehow a lingering distaste at the thought of anyone but her performing the coup de grace upon the archon, a disgust at her own relegation to a support role that her rational side quickly

squashed. Fargo excelled at unloading high offensive damage onto immobile and undefended enemies, either single target or against mobbish clumps. And Winnipeg excelled at, what had Regina-Saskatoon called it, A-O-E attacks, slaughtering numerous enemies at once either through her wind magic or her finisher, ON TOP of her strong single-target offense. Both could deal the damage necessary to kill the archon, but of the two only Winnipeg could clear a path to it in the first place. The strategy was inarguable. She would stand aside and give Fargo the opportunity to end.

She wheeled on Regina-Saskatoon and slapped her in the face. "Wake up and quit giggling, you condemnable minx. I need a barrier around me for five seconds, do you think you can manage even that?"

The roots closed in tight. Regina-Saskatoon attempted a serious face and saluted. "Alright! Here goes!"

The world around Winnipeg became red, muting the motley outside. On the other side of the barrier, Regina-Saskatoon held aloft her staff, the arm visibly palpitating.

A root lashed out and gored Regina-Saskatoon through the back. Winnipeg stopped wasting time and raised her katana to channel the energy for her finisher. Fargo slammed against the outside of the bubble, propping her back against it as she warded off encroaching roots. As Regina-Saskatoon was dragged away, she extended her other hand and surrounded Fargo in a similar barrier.

The katana gleamed a fluorescent neon as energies buzzed around the tip. The power coursed through Winnipeg's veins as she poured her everything into the attack, Fargo stripped away, Regina-Saskatoon stripped away, the roots and the petals and the world stripped away until everything became a white-hot blur in her mind.

"BOURRASQUE..."

The roots perhaps sensed her power and battered the barrier to strike at her, to disrupt her concentration, and perhaps that accounted for the dull rhythmic thump in the back of her skull. But they could not stop her. As the final word formed, nothing could stop her.

"DENOUEMENT!"

The barrier burst and she unleashed her finisher. Winnipeg burst into a hundred wispy copies of herself, each composed of wind but taking her form, with sinew, muscle, structure, pulse. A squall of ferocious gale shredded through the roots as the one hundred Winnipeg clones fanned out in a circular pattern, each dragging her katana through plant matter and virulent ooze. Each Winnipeg sliced, shredded, cut with her same finesse and technique, her same skill and prowess, each imbued with a dollop of her soul and the howl of zephyr.

Roots peeled back and dropped in every direction as the blades whipped through them. They spouted viscous white pus into the lurid landscape and squealed as they thrashed and gnashed their worthless thorny limbs and dropped into orange oblivion below. Winnipeg and her facsimiles of self spread between them toward the ends of the arena, each leaving a swath of

destruction in her wake until they butted against an unseen wall and bounced back in dissipating puffs of smoke and wind.

As fast as the attack had taken to charge, it ended. The clones ran out the end of their microcosmic souls, extinguished the little life with which Winnipeg had nourished them. Their sparks fizzled one by one until the wind died completely and the real Winnipeg drifted backward among the gaudy backdrop.

All energy had left her. The muscles in her fingers could not even muster the strength to retain her katana, and the blade drifted from her hand as she fell. She had no breath left; her eyes threatened to close completely. She could not even feel her own heartbeat, even as all sound and sense folded in on itself and left only herself to feel.

The debris and dead roots, some still twitching, drifted alongside her. Like the wreckage of some phantasmic god in an alternate reality—no, not like; it was. Not a single root had been spared. Only the archon itself remained, a monolithic obelisk of pinions and avian elements that presided over the wasted land.

A small blip on the other side of the world sped toward the archon: Fargo. Her jacket billowed behind her as she soared through the asteroid belt of pruned roots, the barrel of her gun awhirl and burning with light energy. Winnipeg tried to move her arm, failed. Her body sailed as if in zero gravity, although she harbored the distinct impression of downward descent. It was all up to Fargo now.

Winnipeg bumped into something, changed direction. She revolved in midair, unable to see the archon or Fargo anymore, unable to control her flight. Her turn was slow and lateral. She saw what she had bumped into: Regina-Saskatoon, a bloodied mess interspersed with flecks of white, either skin or bone. Her eyes were empty, her mouth slightly open. One arm missing entirely.

The gem fastened to the brooch on her shoulder had shattered.

Winnipeg's uncontrolled revolution continued until again she faced the archon and Fargo. The timing was impeccable, as at that moment Fargo unleashed her attack.

Winnipeg had turned too late to see if Fargo had recharged her gun again or if she had used some other technique. Fargo did not strike her as the kind of Puella Magi who employed very many techniques. Her one technique was usually effective enough.

The archon reared back as gallon after gallon of pure light bombarded it. The light flared out and repainted the walls, drowning the orange and green and other violent colors with all-purifying white. The fabric of the bizarro dimension began to shatter before the archon did, or not so much shatter as fade; through the walls osmosed images of earthen rock, of a real world somewhere that may on some plane of existence overlap with theirs. The archon itself lit up along its thin tubular body with the effulgent cannonballs force-fed it by Fargo as her gun whirred with unstoppable force. Its tricks stripped away, its roots, its limbs, its everything, the archon was not so strong. Winnipeg clenched her fist, felt blood vessels return to her veins. She perhaps could still stand to fight herself.

But allow Fargo that glory.

She revolved again. Regina-Saskatoon had retreated to a small motionless dot in the distance. Winnipeg did not see the archon finally die, did not see what spectacular explosion or implosion or conflagration destroyed its body. She did not see much of anything as the light from Fargo's gun swallowed the world, until not a strip of orange or green remained. She did, however, hear the beast roar with a final, tragic scream, a scream that seemed to carry a physical corporeality in its absolute sorrow and despair, a scream surprisingly knowing, devoid of animalism, a scream that seemed to lament the end of life rather than a primal instinct of survival.

Then the scream ended. And the light ended. And Winnipeg hit the ground in a small dark cave.

The dregs of the miasma wafted away with the last reverberations of the scream. Winnipeg rolled onto her back, but everything had gone dark. She flung out an arm and felt gravel through her fingers. Real gravel. Real earth.

The roof collapsed and buried her in dirt.

I HOPE YOU DIE IN A FIERY DEATH

Light—real light—leaked from the narrow aperture in the ceiling. Even in a depleted haze Sloan recognized it as the rays of early morning. Early morning. They had entered Williston the night prior. Everything they had done they had done in the span of a single night. Unreal: the images and events that replayed in her mind as she untangled the discombobulated strands of neural matter inside her skull.

The archon was dead. The miasma shattered.

With a heave of exertion Sloan sat up. A thick layer of dust cascaded off her body. Her every bone and joint ached with soreness. A dull pang, like the throb of a Soul Gem gone tilt, slushed in her blood. As her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the underground crevice in which she sat, she fished her pockets for her gem. The yellow luster swirled with rust and tarnish. She needed cubes.

Good thing the entire cave twinkled with them. Small black squares caught the dull daylight and refracted infinite diamond sparkles. She sifted her hand through the dirt and came up with four or five.

After a few seconds of purification her thoughts cleared and she remembered her companions. She lurched to her feet and powered through dizziness as she scanned for Winnipeg and Delaney.

"Hey," she said. The words scraped her esophagus. She swallowed hard and spoke again. "Where are you."

Something in the darker reaches groaned. Sloan staggered toward it. Her boots and pockets swished with sand. She considered shedding her jacket but a wintry chill pervaded the cave and she felt exposed without it.

Amid the cubes she found a body and fell to her knees before it. She turned it over and immediately reeled back at the mangled visage and putrid stench. Was this—No, it was the mystery corpse from beneath the archon. So it had not been a deception, but a real girl. Sloan's head pulsed too much to think more.

The something groaned again, closer. Sloan crawled past the corpse and called out. Her voice cracked. Her lungs rattled with dirt as she crawled toward another half-buried form. She had to get very close and squint and brush off soot before she identified it as Winnipeg.

As Sloan excavated, Winnipeg twisted and coughed. The gem strung from her neck had grown an almost black shade, but cubes already surrounded it, either placed already or strewn by chance. Thin streams of grief crept into them.

"You okay?" Sloan shoveled handfuls of fine powder from Winnipeg's body.

Winnipeg suddenly lurched up, shook herself, and extricated her legs from the mound, causing a miniature avalanche. She shook herself like a dog, and although she swayed a little she remained upright.

She rubbed her eyes, blinked, coughed again. "So it's over," she said. Her sheathed katana clattered at her side. Was she still using magic? She had a replica of her uniform as civilian clothes, but also having a mock katana seemed ridiculous.

"You should turn off," said Sloan.

Winnipeg shook herself again. For a moment they stood in the dark, saying nothing. Cubes twinkled; nothing else moved.

Then the realization truly dawned on Sloan. They did it. They did it!

"We did it!" she said.

Winnipeg looked at her. Her face was wraithlike in the darkness. She stared with stolid emotionlessness; and then, bit by bit, her features softened and a wide smile broke over her face.

"We did," she said. "We did."

Sloan had no idea what else to say, what else to convey the elation welling up inside her, the pure unadulterated joy that blossomed in her soulless body like the Grinch Stole Christmas, so she swung her arms around Winnipeg and squeezed her tight.

Winnipeg's arms went taut at her sides and her entire body tensed. Sloan had no idea whether a hug was the right thing considering Winnipeg's character but fuck it, what she felt like was hugging something. Even if Winnipeg lashed out or broke away or said something mean, who gave a shit, they did it, they won, they killed the archon, the ordeal was over, they had finally fucking worked together and accomplished something and oh my fucking god did they really do it.

After a moment, Winnipeg pressed her dirty forehead against Sloan's shoulder. Her trembling hands reached up and dug into Sloan's back.

"Yes," she said. "We did."

"Winnipeg," said Sloan. "Holy shit you were great. Your finisher..." She tried to convey in words what she had seen, Winnipeg's massive final attack, the wind clones, the roots—But the words caught in her throat, too many thoughts surged in her head, she could think of nothing.

"Erika," Winnipeg whispered.

"What?"

"I think..." Her voice was so tiny. "I think you can call me Erika." Her wide eyes stared into an empty beyond.

Sloan released Winnipeg—Erika—aware she had been permitted something no one had been permitted in a long time. Erika herself seemed shocked. She scratched at the stiff tall neck of her lavender vest, now gray with dirt. She shuffled her feet.

"Then, uh, call me Sloan," said Sloan. Aware this option had been on the table all along and it had been Winnipeg's prerogative to take it, not Sloan's permission. But Erika nodded with a sincere bob of her head.

They stood in silence for a long pause.

"Okay," said Sloan. She straightened her back and scanned the cave. "Let's find Delaney."

Erika scratched her neck again. "She's dead."

"Dead." Sloan blinked. "No, she'll heal herself. She must be buried." She fell by the mound, shoved her hands under the dirt, and scooped away handfuls.

"I saw her," said Winnipeg. "Her gem. Shattered." Her old confidence and brashness crept back into her voice. "I saw it before you killed the archon."

Sloan tore into the earth. She considered asking how certain Winnipeg was. But it was obvious Winnipeg was certain. Still Sloan dug. The ground was soft, easy to sift. She would at least find the body. She owed that much. Funny, though. The knowledge of Delaney's death did not impact her so heavily. A word blipped through her mind: acceptable. The word soured her mood more than the death did. She had not particularly liked Delaney, had not trusted her, had disagreed with her batshit philosophy and pseudo-religion, but she was still an ally and had stuck with her to the end. She deserved better than Sloan's callousness, although Sloan had never imagined herself one to sob at a funeral, and she had seen plenty of suburban girls pass in Minneapolis with barely a registration of their death in her mind, girls whose names now eluded her. But Sloan's ambivalence toward Delaney bent before the overwhelming joy of victory.

(Delaney's death seemed morally right in a sense, but Sloan did not want to think about it like that, and felt like an asshole for thinking about it in that way anyway.)

Her hand struck something. She wrapped her fingers around it and identified it as an arm. She pulled hard and the arm came out surprisingly easily, probably because it was not attached to anything. She ogled the severed limb like an artifact from a prehistoric dig.

"I guess she is dead."

"It is probably for the best," said Winnipeg. "Both for herself and her future acquaintances."

Sloan said nothing.

After some thought Winnipeg added: "She was a sick woman, but she may have been human nonetheless. Such is all our state."

Sloan could think of no better eulogy. They stood in silence for another moment, as if the world were now composed of mere moments, each tick of the clock an event.

Until Sloan said: "Let's clean our gems and find a way outta here."

Erika nodded.

Sloan crouched to the ground amid a field of cubes. More than enough for purification, as Kyubey had promised so long ago. Well, the rat bastard didn't lie.

No need to waste time. She scooped a handful and enjoyed the tactile sensation they provided. On the upturned palm of her other hand she perched her Soul Gem and moved both hands close together, cubes and gem side-by-side. The grief began to leave her, its ribbony little streams so playful and carefree. Like visible music, sheets of trebles and time bursting into animation. She folded her legs beneath her and contented herself to merely watch the process unfold.

Then her gem disappeared.

She blinked. She turned over her hand. It had been there, right before her eyes, and now it was gone. She stood up and turned to Winnipeg.

"Did—"

Something sharp and curved slashed both of Sloan's hamstrings in one fluid motion. Her legs buckled and she plummeted face first with a strangled yelp.

Winnipeg drew her katana only for something to cleave off her arm above the elbow. With unperturbed reflexes, her left arm lashed out and snatched the blade from her severed right arm as it descended. She swung in a spinning attack that blustered with a windy pulse. Dust and cubes billowed into the air.

For a brief moment, Sloan made out a girl-shaped outline in the plume of dust. Then the cloud cleared and all went invisible again.

Sloan tried to thrash her legs but they refused to cooperate. Without her Soul Gem she could not transform. Her hands clawed into the dirt to pull her forward but they only slipped through sand, unable to find an anchor.

"What is this sorcery." Winnipeg was remarkably calm despite the sudden apparition and her missing arm.

"Another Magical Girl, she can turn invisible, she's been watching us the whole time—"

Winnipeg kicked up another plume of dust and danced across the cave in a flurry on one-handed strokes. If she swung at random or if she had somehow detected Omaha's presence in the small dusty bloom, Sloan could not tell. Winnipeg pivoted at random times and struck as though she knew the location of her opponent but the blade hit nothing. What was Omaha's weapon anyway? Sloan had seen it for a brief moment during the archon fight. A sickle, or something. Scythe. The thing that cuts wheat.

"She's got a scythe." Sloan hoped that helped.

Maybe it did. Winnipeg varied her style, crouching lower to the ground. She kicked up dirt with quick flicks of her feet, an adaptive strategy except Omaha had adapted as well because no more did the dirt draw faint outlines in the darkness. Winnipeg breathed with labored gulps of air. Her magic could whip a tornado through the cave, and then Omaha would have difficulty keeping hidden. But Omaha had waited until their magic was all but extinguished...

Winnipeg brushed back a clumped tuft of hair and charged again with a wheezing yell. Her sword attacked in such erratic blows that they could not possibly be predicted, and yet still she hit nothing.

"Omaha, stop," said Sloan. Her useless legs churned in the dirt. "Whatever Kyubey told you, you don't have to do this."

"Ha!" Winnipeg spat a globule of blood and swung again. "This is a trained killer."

God DAMMIT, Sloan had seen this coming, she had predicted it perfectly in the shower while Delaney gave her confession. And what had she decided? If they could take an archon, they could take one girl? You stupid fucking idiot Sloan, you absolute most idiotic idiot to ever be a fucking idiot ever.

"There's no reason for this, Omaha!" Her voice sounded worthless, castaway. Pathetic.

Winnipeg backed into a corner and slashed again. Her forehead glistened with sweat. The gem around her neck pulsed with a dangerous blackness.

"She's trying to tire you," said Sloan.

"DO YOU THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT, YOU FUCKING IDIOT?" shouted Winnipeg. Bloody spittle flew from her lips. Her eyes became something deranged.

"We need, we need, we need to keep calm," said Sloan. Pointlessly. Pointlessly and she knew it before she said it.

"AURUGHURUGHGH!" screeched Winnipeg. She whipped her blade ahead of her and launched a forceful blast of wind through the cave. Sloan shielded her eyes from the surge of dust.

As the dust subsided, Winnipeg raised her blade overhead. Wispy energies, black and weak, gathered around it. Her eyes blazed with fury. Blood streamed from the stump of her arm, blood streamed from her mouth.

"You don't have the energy," said Sloan. Reverting to nothingness, reverting to a stain on the underbelly of an empty prairie. Unable to stand, unable to do a thing but watch as her friend—her *friend*—

I will not lose, said Erika. Her voice teemed with desperation. *I will NOT LOSE!*

"BOURRASQUE... DENOUEMENT!"

The invocation of her finisher unleashed the meager magic gathered around her blade. As before, Erika split into a multitude of Winnipegs, each composed and armed with wind. Far fewer formed now, but enough to fill the tight confines of the cave. The Winnipegs hacked and slashed in pantomime of the frenzied breathlessness the real Winnipeg, the real Erika, each bashing their brains against the wall until they disappeared with nary a fizzle. Their decayed, zombielike forms crossed every available inch of ground with vicious strokes. A blade raked across Sloan's back and she curled beneath the onslaught. Dirt rained upon her.

The attack waned, howled, and ended. The wind went dead; a thick stagnation took its place.

The real Erika, the sole remaining Erika, dropped to her knees. Her necklace was black as obsidian. She planted her katana in the ground beside her.

"Got her," she spat. "Got the bitch dead." Her left eye twitched and her bloodstained lips curled into a smile.

"Erika," said Sloan. She tried to pull herself on her elbows toward the kneeling form. No matter how hard she tried, she made no progress. It was like a nightmare, a terrible nightmare, forced to watch helpless on an unseen conveyer belt—could she be dreaming?

"Cubes, get the cubes!"

Cubes surrounded Erika, beckoned with their glimmers. Erika regarded them, spat a hoarse chuckle, and unbelievably extended a hand. Yes, yes, a little further! Sloan tried to shout but a mouthful of dirt constricted her throat.

Winnipeg scooped a handful. Her laugh deepened.

Clinging to a jutting rock embedded high in the wall, Omaha reappeared. The ragged girl unlatched from her perch and landed before Winnipeg, her scythe clutched in her hands. She did not swing or attack or speak or do anything except stand and stare with an expression blank and pitiless.

Winnipeg's eyes turned from the cubes to the girl before her.

"Cubes, cubes," said Sloan. As though by transforming the word into chant she could imbue it with the magic she did not possess and make it do more than words did.

Erika's smile died. Her eyes went as blank as Omaha's. The cubes fell from her tiny hand and her hand fell to her side.

"ERIKA," said Sloan.

"...Oh..." said Erika.

Omaha stepped aside as Erika fell facedown in the dirt. Without ceremony or aplomb, as was typical for those taken by the Law of the Cycles, Erika disappeared entirely.

"ERIKA," said Sloan. But Erika was no longer there, nor her katana, nor any trace of her existence save splotches of drying blood already seeping into the soil.

Sloan's hands curled as if to grab the absence.

Omaha observed the nothingness for a moment more before she turned toward Sloan. She slung the scythe over her shoulder, the crescent blade unblemished with blood. Although she stepped across cubes and rocks, her feet made no sound at all, made only the barest impression.

The blank, empty expression became apologetic. "I'm so, so, so sorry about this..." In her other hand she kneaded Sloan's gem between thumb and forefinger.

"You," said Sloan. "You..."

"I'm sorry this had to happen..."

She unslung the scythe. The blade dangled near her feet, gently swaying with each step like the pendulum of an enormous clock.

Erika... No, no, no, how could this happen, how could this be real?

The mound of dirt and silt behind Omaha started to bloat. Distended clumps of soot inflated in doughy sacs. Sloan tilted her head and focused her bleary eyes, unable to comprehend what was happening anymore, unable to understand what magic this was. Unable to see anything but Erika's death...

The mound bubbled until red cracks shone through the dirt. Omaha turned and let a small gasp of surprise as the mound burst. Through the exterior papering of dirt rushed a deluge of red liquid—of blood.

Omaha went invisible immediately, but as the blood crashed into her a slight void appeared in the flow where her body obstructed it. She floundered through the downpour as the narrow room filled, her legs splashing and her invisible body dripping. Sloan hoisted her upper body on her forearms to keep her chin above the line, but the moment the tide washed over the tendons of her legs all her wounds healed and she discovered herself capable of standing again.

From the origin of the onrush rose a fay sorceress in a bloodsplattered dress with blooddrenched hair and bloodstained skin. Raising aloft a staff bedecked with an immense ruby in her one remaining arm, Delaney Pollack cackled with wild-spinning eyes as she stepped forth into the sloshing sanguine pool.

"W-what!" Omaha had retreated to the edge of cave. "You died... I saw the archon crush your Soul Gem!"

Indeed, the gem clasped to the ravaged remains of Delaney's gown had smashed into a thousand glittering pieces. But Delaney only laughed.

"I am the modern Lazarus!" she said. "Neither Heaven nor Hell will take me!"

"Th-this can't be happening," said Omaha. "You, you switched your gem with a fake!"

Delaney tilted her head back in another aspirated laugh. Her wet hair slapped against her back. "Excellent deduction! But a trifle too late, dear! Hheh hheh hha ha haaa!" She turned her attention to Sloan. "Love, pass me my arm, will you?"

"Arm." The word plinked against the bottom of Sloan's esophagus.

Delaney brandished her severed stump. "Yes, aaaaaarm. It's a simple concept, love—Oh no you don't." She aimed her staff at the small aperture in the ceiling and sealed it with a rubbery bubble. The dripping outline of Omaha, who had scaled half the wall, halted in its tracks against the same jutting rock used to avoid Winnipeg's final attack.

As Sloan with stunned obedience sifted the bloody waters for the arm, Delaney's voice undulated in a possessed singsong. "Omaha dear, you cannot simply *escaaaape*. You're going to *dieeee~*"

She sashayed through the knee-high pond toward where Omaha clung like a housefly. Bloody handprints and the patter-patter of droplets signified her position perfectly.

"Get down from there, you stupid bitch." Delaney pulled back her arm and hurled her staff at the rock. It span through the air and shattered against the stone. In the waters below a single splash accompanied Omaha's descent.

Something clicked in Sloan's head and she processed the situation in a brief moment of clarity. "Delaney, you can't fight her, you don't have a weapon!"

Delaney admonished her with a wagging finger. "Nuh uh, love. I don't have a weapon for fighting wraiths, true. But for meddlesome little salamanders? I have just the thing!"

She brushed back the ruined folds of her gown with a single sweep. From a small scabbard strapped to her thigh she drew a wavy dirk either naturally red or red from the blood that seemed to have drowned everything in the narrow crevice. Sloan remembered the knife—Delaney had mentioned it during her tale of Claudia and the little dog. Seeing the tiny shiv in Delaney's feminine hand resolved none of Sloan's apprehensions.

"She has a scythe, Delaney." Sloan's hands sought the missing arm, found nothing. "You can't fight her with a knife."

"Worry not, love. I suspect without her cute vanishing act this girl's nothing but a fraud. Am I right, Omaha dear?"

The placid pool made no response. Omaha had not moved in some time, but Delaney's gaze affixed unwavering to the spot where she had landed. She made cautious approach, the dagger agleam and scarlet.

Without warning she lashed out with the blade. At the same time a lateral gash opened on Delaney's stomach and her innards tumbled out. The wound healed almost as soon as it occurred. The pool churned and splashed as Delaney jabbed her dagger down and down and across and all over with a series of progressive shrieks. More wounds opened across Delaney's skin, all healed instantly. Slit throats and disembowelments, lacerated torsos and

impaled ribcages. Delaney powered through the onslaught. Her dagger went up and down, up and down, but never did it strike anything. Even in unfavorable terrain Omaha was slippery.

Sloan was not about to watch another girl die—this time she had functional legs. She forgot Delaney's missing arm and charged. Her arms and legs powered through the coagulating pool as she aimed her entire body at the disembodied splashing that struggled to escape Delaney's wrath.

She hit Omaha when she expected but not how she expected. Something hard and bony—an elbow?—plowed into her skull and rattled her vision. She threw her arms around the small invisible torso as she tackled the writhing kicking screaming thing to the ground with a tremendous splash.

Teeth and fingernails ripped at her face. Omaha cried: "No, no, don't do this to me, please, no!"

Sloan turned to Delaney. "Her Soul Gem is on a bracelet on her wrist."

Delaney received the news with inexorable glee as she kneeled beside them. "Left or right?"

"I don't remember, just fuck her up," said Sloan.

"No, no, no, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, please no! S, stay back, or I—I'll destroy Sloan's Soul Gem, I have it in my hand right now!"

The threat gave Sloan pause and she drew back a marginal degree. But Delaney snatched the empty air and wrapped her hand around something unseen and about the width of a bone. "Don't worry, love. Your Soul Gem's the last thing she'll destroy."

With calm and collected motions, despite the insanity etched on her face, Delaney wrangled with the invisible arm and pried something from it while the dagger waved wildly and uncomfortably close to Sloan's face. Once the object had left Omaha's grasp, it reappeared as Sloan's dirty gem, otherwise unharmed. Delaney tossed the gem with casual carelessness and Sloan struggled to catch it. It fumbled in her numb fingers but she managed to latch on and quickly bury it in a pocket.

"Now to ruin this bitch."

Sobbing. "No, no, please no, no, no!"

Delaney exhibited masterful control of only one arm as she pinned down Omaha's hand. She placed her knee against the arm to keep it against down.

With one deft stroke she slashed the invisible wrist. She let up on the arm and allowed it to flounder to the surface. A steady fount of blood from an unseen source added to the volume of the pond.

"Hm," said Delaney. "Wrong wrist." She maneuvered for the other arm.

As Delaney groped for the other arm, Omaha's body forced itself up against Sloan with exceeding and desperate force. Sloan lifted a little and for only a moment, but the split second was enough. Omaha thrashed out from under Sloan and sprinted away from the downward arc of Delaney's blade. From her wrist spurted a continual spray as she splashed to the other side of the cavern.

As Omaha ran, a puff of dark magic enveloped the wound. When the antimatter dispersed, however, the wound sprayed only more blood.

"No," said Omaha, "It won't heal!"

Delaney rolled her eyes. "Oh please, dear. Don't play dumb. As if who sent you forgot to inform you of the magical properties of my knife."

"Magical properties," said Sloan as Omaha backed into another corner. Even when she stopped moving and no longer stirred the liquid around her, the constant stream from her wrist revealed her location.

Delaney loosed another throaty, arid laugh. "Indeed, love. Any damage my dagger inflicts can never be healed, not even by yours truly! It's such a dinky worthless weapon, it's totally useless against wraiths, but prick a Magical Girl just right and she won't soon forget it. The exact weapon a *depraved sociopath* like me would have, don't you agree?"

If the depraved sociopath line was meant to be ironic, Delaney made a poor case for herself. Sloan had the moment to realize that Delaney had lived. And Erika had died. A bitter unfairness seemed to seep from that simple fact. She remembered the hug between her and Winnipeg, how Winnipeg's facade had cracked and something real glimmered for a moment. Delaney had none of that. What she saw now—this cackling, wild-eyed harpy—this was the real Delaney, the Delaney minus her carefully-constructed outer shell.

"Well, no matter," said Delaney. "Let's annihilate this pest, shall we love?"

Sloan clenched her fists. Delaney's gleeful abandon caused a leaden pit to form in her stomach, and despite the savagery with which Sloan had forced Omaha to the ground, Sloan could not bear to watch someone enjoy murder so much. She used her reclaimed Soul Gem to summon her gun and said, "I'll do it."

"Very well. I still have an arm to locate, after all."

Sloan waded through the bloody pool as Delaney flicked her arm and began to drain it into a dense liquid sphere. By the time Sloan had neared Omaha, only a thin red layer covered the sand. The unceasing dribble of Omaha's wrist made her easy to find. Faint sniffing filled the narrow chamber.

Sloan pointed the gun at the invisible girl. "Show yourself. Hiding is pointless now."

"I, I, I, I, I'm so sorry, I, I, I—"

"Shut up and show yourself."

After a mucus-infested snort and a few more stammered first-person pronouns, Omaha returned to the visible realm. She had folded into the corner, contorting her body as if to cram herself into the rivets between the rocks. One lens of her thick glasses had cracked and a thousand images of her tear-streaked eye danced upon the glass. She cradled her wounded arm. Her pencil-thin legs pressed together at the knees and tucked inward under her insignificant body, more cloak than corp. She avoided eye contact.

"I, I, I don't want to die..."

In the background, Delaney gave a terse, bitter laugh as she magicked her blood back together.

The Soul Gem on Omaha's unmarred wrist glimmered with a violet sheen only partially tarnished by blackness. She made no attempt to conceal it or defend it. One shot was all Sloan needed.

She fingers touched the trigger but applied no pressure. Her eyes closed and she exhaled as she tried to drum up an image of Erika kneeling on the ground to stir her ire toward Omaha. Erika was dead. Omaha killed her. Kill Omaha.

Instead, she said: "Who told you to do this."

She knew who told her. Kyubey had. He hired powerful but problematic girls to run an errand for him and kept Omaha on standby to clean up the scraps. Eliminate the archon, eliminate willful and obstinate Winnipeg, eliminate irrational and sociopathic Delaney, eliminate murderous Sloan.

Omaha sniffled. She buried her face deeper into the wall. "I, I, I, I, I..."

"Tell me." She knew it was Kyubey. Why harangue the girl over it? End this farce, do Omaha a favor and let her die with a few shreds of dignity. But Sloan could not do that. Why could she not do that? Why was it so difficult to understand her own damn emotions?

"If, if, if I tell you, you'll kill me..."

"If you don't tell, I'll kill you for sure." Stop hesitating and pull the trigger! Delaney's bemused stare drilled into her back.

Maybe if Sloan heard the words "Kyubey told me" that would give an excuse to spare Omaha, an excuse to shift away the blame. Like, oh, this poor impressionable girl has no agency, it's all that asshole rat bastard pulling the strings as usual! Omaha did nothing wrong! Was that it, Sloan? Were you looking for an excuse to spare her? Were her tears getting to you, her begging? This girl murdered Erika, why does she deserve your mercy?

Omaha stammered: "Kuh, kuh, kuh..."

She should have let Delaney handle this. But somehow Sloan decided that would have been an even grander disservice to Erika.

"Kuh, kuh, Clair, Clair..."

In an instant everything was forgotten, as if the past few seconds of mental turbulence never existed. A new, much more powerful emotion emerged as Sloan surged forward and seized Omaha by the throat. She slammed the small girl's head against the rock.

"What was that? What did you just say? Say it again, LOUDER."

Omaha's eyes oscillated with fear. "Kuh, kuh, kuh, kuh, kuh..."

"LOUDER!"

"Kuh, Clair, Ibsen..."

Sloan's grip tightened. A wheeze choked its way through Omaha's lips as the soft pliable flesh compressed beneath Sloan's grasp.

"Clair?! IBSEN?!"

Clair Ibsen? Clair Ibsen? Clair IBSEN? How? How could it be her? How how how how how how how HOW could it be her? Of all people, her? HER?

Omaha struggled. Her legs flailed against the wall as Sloan yanked her up by the neck. She needed no magic to lift her, the girl was so small and breakable, so easy to shatter. It couldn't be Clair Ibsen, not Clair Ibsen, that was impossible, it was, it was, it was EXACTLY WHAT SHE HAD DONE BEFORE, OH MY GOD IT WAS MINNEAPOLIS ALL OVER AGAIN, THE COUP REDOUBLED, THE PREEMPTIVE REVENGE, HOW HOW HOW HOW HOW HOW?

She had—followed her—helped her—been nice—superficially—on the surface—saved her—allowed her—to kill the archon—and then—at the moment of triumph—rob her of everything!

THE EXACT SAME FUCKING SHENANIGANS. THE EXACT SAME.

She unleashed a primal roar and hoisted Omaha's limp body and slammed it into the ground. Omaha's fearful eyes widened as more phlegmatic wheezes choked their way out her gullet. Her feeble hands wrapped around Sloan's fingers and made pitiful effort to push them away.

Clair Ibsen! Clair Ibsen had sent her! She had not even the decency to do the deed herself! She had hired a surrogate!

"So Clair let us do the dirty work." Sloan's voice trembled. "Take advantage of our exhaustion to eliminate us. And reap the cubes for herself."

Omaha's head bobbed up and down.

"And she justified herself!" Sloan could see it now, Clair Ibsen with all her assistants and sycophants in arrangement, her arms waving with theatric, melodramatic flair as she defended her actions to great applause and esteem. "Because we're all dangerous! All dangerous Magical Girls, she was simply removing us as her duty to reason and order. That was what she said!"

Omaha's eyes curled upward and spittle drooled down her agape mouth.

"Wait, so Kyubey didn't send her?" Delaney, much cleaner although her gown still in shambles, leaned on her staff behind Sloan. She had reclaimed her arm.

"Clair Ibsen," said Sloan. "Clair Ibsen sent her! That backstabbing, opportunistic BITCH!" She wished she could think of a word more powerful, more devastating than bitch, as though if she could find the right word it would somehow span the entirety of North Dakota and find its way to her in the crystal city of Minneapolis, and even if the word registered as only a pinprick on the tip of her finger she would feel it and Sloan would have hurt her.

Omaha's feet padded against the ground, her fingers tightened in the sand.

"Well, FUCK YOU CLAIR IBSEN. It didn't FUCKING WORK, I'm STILL HERE, and I'm COMING TO KILL YOU!" She bellowed into Omaha's face. She lifted the girl again and smashed her into things, rocks, walls, whatever. She wanted to break. To pulverize. To avenge Erika, who had died for the scheme of such a petty, materialistic, empty, pedantic, pretentious, uppity, meretricious, traitorous BITCH.

Fresh tears streamed anew down Omaha's face. Sloan forced her to the ground and wrenched the Soul Gem bracelet off her wrist. As she bore down on Omaha's chest with her knee, she held the bracelet in front of Omaha's face.

"I'M COMING TO KILL YOU!"

She released Omaha's neck and mashed the bracelet between her hands. The metal band bent and flexed as her hands awkwardly tried to smash the jewel embedded within. Omaha sobbed and stuttered the beginnings of words, beginnings with no ends.

"There there love." Delaney placed a reassuring hand on Sloan's shoulder. "Let it all out. Crush it, feel the catharsis."

Sloan's hands slipped over the slick metal and the bracelet flopped into the sand. Her trembling hands reached for it but stopped midway. Omaha sniffled, her eyes red and puffy, and for a moment Sloan stared at her with all the simplistic but persuasive emotions of rage and hatred scouring her body, blotting out sense and feeling. Tremors quivered through her veins. Her head filled with so many angry and unhappy thoughts and she realized her gem must be close to overload. Part of her wanted it to overload, to give into despair like Winnipeg and disappear. But the shred of her remained that needed revenge on Clair Ibsen, needed to destroy Clair Ibsen.

Instead of the bracelet, her hand snatched some of the cubes nearby. It took several swipes for her fingers to cooperate but she managed to clasp a good handful. Omaha sobbing beneath her, Sloan applied the cubes to her Soul Gem.

Need to not die. Need to stay alive. Need to defeat Clair Ibsen.

The tiny girl beneath her was not Clair Ibsen.

"Sloan love?" Delaney kneeled beside her. "If it's too hard, I can finish her."

Sloan hung her head. "She's not Clair Ibsen."

"Okay," said Delaney. "Sooooooooo?"

"She does not deserve to die."

"What? She tried to kill us both! And succeeded in killing Winnipeg. Pretty damning, methinks."

"She is not the one to blame for this. Look at her." Sloan could not believe herself, or what she was saying. But the rage ebbed away and revealed a pylon deep beyond the beach, a small jutting stone of... Compassion? Mercy?

As they stared at the tear-streaked face of Omaha, with her cracked glasses and bleeding wrist and mousy sunken eyes and sallow skin, Sloan realized what it was. This girl was not Clair Ibsen, no. She was another victim, another pawn in Clair's schemes, because that was all anyone was to Clair. Clair had found the most pathetic, most insecure, most lonely girl in existence, a girl whose magical power was to disappear entirely (what kind of wish would cause that power, Sloan wondered. What kind of self-effacement could manifest itself in that way). Who knew what honeyed words dredged from the depths of Clair's broad vocabulary had been so pristinely elocuted to make Omaha think of her as a friend. No, not just a friend but a Friend, a Friend who "never got mad at her" but nonetheless "told her what questions she could not answer."

"Fake tears," said Delaney. "I'm not sold on her story. Much more likely Kyubey's behind this. Notice his conspicuous absence."

Kyubey had become a nonentity in Sloan's mind, an abstract concept, a benign god only mildly concerned with the doings of humans. She tried to conceive of the motivations Kyubey might have for manufacturing such a scenario and could no longer.

Maybe Delaney was right. Maybe Kyubey *was* behind it. The point stood. Omaha had been used. Like a gun, a sword. The mere instrument of another's plot.

"I don't want to kill her," said Sloan.

"This is ridiculous, love. Even if you believe her for *some* reason, she's dangerous! We'll never know if she's following us. Plotting to assassinate us."

"Wrong," said Sloan. "You said the wounds caused by your knife never heal. Which means you robbed her of her power to go undetected. No matter what she does, how much she bandages it, her wound will bleed and reveal her."

Omaha massaged her wrist and avoided looking either of them in the eye. She said nothing.

"Better safe than sorry," said Delaney. "Kill her and we know for sure she won't harm us."

"Oh yeah?" Sloan stood up. "Sound philosophy, Delaney. But why stop with Omaha? Why not kill anyone else that might harm us, too? Let's go and kill all the nomads in the area, and the girls from Calgary, and whoever else we can find that might want to hurt us, too! Let's go kill little dogs while we're at it! Good deeds, right?!"

"She killed someone, love. She killed Winnipeg."

"Fuck you," said Sloan. "How convenient you showed up only AFTER Erika died. Too bad you couldn't rise from the grave five seconds earlier to save her, too!"

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Omaha ventured to mutter.

"You're wrong," said Delaney. She had almost completely turned away from Sloan. "I had to purify my Soul Gem before I made a move. I was depleted after the battle, if I rushed in without the magic to back it up... It just so happened..." Her voice dwindled, only to surge back as she realized something else. "Oh, but now she's Erika, is she? Now she's your friend, right? You knew her for less than a day! Tell me, Sloan love, do you even know her last name?"

"She was a better person than you," said Sloan.

"After all I did for you. After all the times I saved you!"

"Uh oh, Delaney. Is that mild annoyance I sense in your voice? I better watch you don't kill me next."

Delaney balled her fists, one hand gloved and the other not. The same slight furrow that served as Delaney's sole negative facial expression reemerged with a vengeance. She stared at Sloan as though ready to shout but when she finally did speak her voice was calm and pleasant, as always.

"I don't feel like fighting about this. Yes, I'm no paragon. I'm pretty awful, really. But I did not want Winnipeg, Erika, whoever she was, I did not want her to die. Please believe that, Sloan. Please believe me."

Things were getting too much. Sloan felt overwhelmed, exhausted. She wanted to sleep suddenly, although moments before her rage had consumed her with energy. Omaha, Delaney... Erika... Clair Ibsen. So many faces swirling in her head. She became cognizant that thirty minutes before she had waged war against an eldritch plant monster. Thirty minutes before, Erika had been alive.

Shit.

"Okay," she said. She did not want to cry. Anything but that. "I'll believe you, Delaney. But let's just let Omaha go."

Delaney allowed her hands to fall. She nodded, as if it meant nothing either way. "Okay."

With a wave the bubble that sealed the hole in the roof disappeared. The early morning sunlight continued to shine, probably the last day of sunshine until March as deep winter

befell this edge-of-the-world frontier outpost. The sunshine only embittered Sloan. As if the world mocked her. As if it mocked Erika.

Blood trickled from Omaha's lip. More streamed from the cut on her wrist, which she thumbed anxiously with her other hand. "Y, you're... you're letting me go...?"

Sloan could hardly bear to face her. "Get out before I change my mind."

"Th, thank you..."

Her feet scampered across the dirt. With practiced agility and balance she scurried up the rocks and slithered over the top of the chasm. Then she was gone, all gone, save a red trickle down the wall.

Sloan knew she made a mistake. The war with Clair Ibsen had begun. Had already begun, before she even went to Williston. Clair had been a step ahead of her all along. Why had Sloan expected any different? How had she been foolish enough to believe she would appear in Minneapolis with the element of surprise. Of course not. To battle Clair Ibsen she needed to expect every eventuality, predict every outcome, prepare for every possible scenario. Sloan needed craft and intelligence she did not possess, and failing that she needed ruthless brutality. Omaha was not out of the picture. Even if she returned to Clair wounded and defective, Clair would find a use for her. Clair was a female of extraordinary efficiency.

To win, Sloan would need to crush each and every one of her tools, her tricks, her deceptions with unabated prejudice.

And she just failed her first chance.

She had given Clair back a weapon, regifted her a piece of her endless armory. But Omaha was not just a weapon, she was a girl, a living human being, abused and deceived as them all. As much weapon as hostage. Another helpless victim held tauntingly in a firing line.

Despite being alive and with the cubes in her possession, she somehow felt she had lost to Clair anyway, made a devastating concession.

"Fuck this," said Sloan. "Fuck everything." She turned to Delaney. "Let's gather these cubes and get the fuck out of here."

"As you wish, love."

Wing of Wax

By the time they crawled out the crevice, Sloan wanted nothing more than sleep, long and endless. She did not want to think about Clair Ibsen, or Omaha, or Delaney, or even Erika. Her mind lacked the functional capacity for such thoughts.

They surfaced in the slushy marshes outside town. The flat, characterless structures sat in bland and unassuming pointlessness. Sloan slouched toward Williston, chasing a dim awareness of a motel room to which they held the key, with a nice big bed...

Delaney trudged after her. They did not speak. Sloan did not want to speak. Had Delaney waited until Erika died before she showed herself. Or had it been an honest coincidence. Sloan did not want to think.

The miasma gone, the city now chilled her skin. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her jacket. Her eyes watched her boots as they trudged into a campground of small white tents like the kind in the hangar. Plaid-shirted men meandered as though this day were no different from the previous, as though their lives had not been in tremendous danger. They were only marginally more animated than under the miasma's spell. A few murmured among themselves in low tones.

Eyes flitted toward Sloan and Delaney. Ragged, bloody, clothes torn. Sloan wondered if she was even recognizable as female, or if that even mattered. What kind of desperate motherfucker would try to make a move on her even in such a testosterone-overloaded locale, a wild west cowboy Tombstone with a ten-to-one gender ratio.

"Sloan, watch out," said Delaney. Her hand flopped onto Sloan's shoulder and yanked her back as a brick of a metallic gray bus rumbled past with chugs of exhaust and squeals of suspension. Sloan rubbed her eyes, having completely missed the large and loud machine's approach. It lumbered to a stop, quite courteously blocking their path to the town.

Half-asleep, she swayed back into Delaney and tried not to doze as she waited for the bus to move.

It did not move. Already a large crowd of plaid-shirted men had emerged from white tarp caves and formed a circle around the bus. Their voices buzzed with masculinity. Sloan had forgotten the male gender even existed.

The glass-plated door of the bus opened with a hydraulic hiss. The horn honked as a bearded man in a ragged jacket emerged. The fingertips on his gloves had worn away and his cherubic face had the air of homeless about it. Nonetheless he had somehow commandeered captaincy of this bus and now sauntered down the steps with a broad smile on his face and his arms held high.

"Gather round, gents, gather round!" More figures bustled in the bus behind him, shrouded by tinted glass. "Enough here for one an' all, ain't it the truth? Step right up, form a line, nice an' orderly now, ayup. Jess like that."

The plaid-shirted men fumbled through their pockets and retrieved threadbare leather wallets. Gloved or bone-white fingers fished for limp bills.

"What is this shit," Sloan muttered to Delaney. "Let's go."

But Delaney's hands, placed gingerly on Sloan's shoulder, held firm. "I wonder how much he's asking," she said.

"For what?"

A raucous cheer rose from the dull and muted men whose upraised arms clenched wads of cash and waved with frenzied intensity. The bearded not-quite-hobo hollered amounts, cupping his mouth to carry over the sea of malodorous men. Elbows jutted into Sloan's sides and she tugged at Delaney's hoodie to get her moving.

"How much!" Delaney shouted. Her voice pierced the din with remarkable clarity. "How much are you charging!"

The bearded man on the steps swung outward, throwing his arm like an orator above the crowd. His eyes locked onto Delaney and he loosed a gregarious laugh. "Ah-ha! You mosey right along, little missie. This ain't business for yer eyes, no sir."

A fuzzed and heaving plaid jacket jostled Sloan aside as she stood on tiptoe to figure out what the man was even selling or why he seemed so damn familiar. She thought it must be his general similarity to every single man in this entire state, grody and hairy and decked in the same Paul Bunyan apparel, but as he continued to hawk his wares the realization dawned on her, scattered memories swam to the surface: Fargo, convenience store, late at night, a job offer... It had been less than two days ago, how could she have forgotten?

But if this were the man who had first told her of Williston, that meant he was selling—

The first women appeared from the bus in a flock of feathered boas. The crowd went insane, veritably bonkers. They crawled over each other to force their cash in the face of the laughing bearded man, who pulled his furred floppy-eared cap off his head and started collecting payment en masse. The cap overflowed with greenbacks as he ushered the women off the bus to be bagged for the customers. Bills fluttered through the air, but even the loose twenties went ignored as far more precious material entered the economy.

Sloan had enough of this. She hooked her hand into Delaney's collar and dragged her away, using her other arm to batter a path through the plaid-shirted men. Delaney struggled but gave in eventually.

"Those prices are insane," she said as they cleared the crowd. "That guy must have a stranglehold on the market."

"Thrilling," said Sloan. This was the place she saved. These were the people for whom Erika died. The sacrifice of a twelve-year-old girl allowed these men to purchase flesh with dollar bills.

They continued unaccosted until they reached the motel. No trail of blood, no Omaha. A quick sweep of the premises and Sloan decided the perimeter was clear. She flopped onto the bed and burrowed her face into the pillow.

Thank god for crippling fatigue, or else she probably would have been unable to sleep as thoughts of Erika and Clair churned in her brain. Instead, she emptied her mind... emptied herself... melded. Became cognizant of only the plushy down of the blanket and pillow, of the pleasant tinkling of grief cubes as Delaney unloaded their weighty hoard onto the nearby bureau.

"Love, pass me your gem, we'll get it spick and span by the time you wake up."

With a vague murmur, Sloan fished out her Soul Gem and tossed it to Delaney. A reckless way to handle her most vital organ, but fuck. If Delaney wanted her dead, she was in no state to resist either way.

Delaney did not crush her gem. She gently set it on the bureau, amid the cube mountain. Excess cubes slid down in small avalanches and scattered on the carpet. When they collected them in the cave, they had estimated at least two hundred. Two hundred cubes. If rationed, that was nearly a three month supply. Three months without fighting a single wraith.

One way or another, Sloan did not expect to be around another three months. Once she killed Clair, who cared what happened after.

A pleasant soothing sensation filled her as her Soul Gem forcibly expelled its grief into the throng of cubes. The streams were strong, not like the faint trickles that had plagued her in Fargo, which had made amelioration impossible even after large hauls. She nuzzled her head against the pillow and drifted... drifted...

Fingers caressed the small of her back, just another comfort amongst the others that enveloped her, so she did not resist as fingertips became hands, pressing deep against her, massaging her. It was easy to forget about Omaha, forget about Erika as the hands moved to her shoulders, pushed deep and hard, kneaded frozen joints and rack-tortured tendons. It was easy to imagine the hands as connected to nothing. Just floating hands, animated by dream logic. She sighed a little as the hands kneaded a too-tight muscle.

"There there love, you'll feel better soon..." cooed a pleasant female voice Sloan had no trouble detaching from its true owner and ascribing to some sort of natural or spiritual presence. She felt warm breath on the nape of her neck—a balmy breeze through the boughs—as the springs of the mattress squeaked—birdsong—and another body lay down beside her—a doe, warm and peaceful. The therapeutic hands did wonders to her neck, then wrapped around her shoulders and worked her décolletage. Sleep closed in now, blissful, harmonic sleep.

Only when the hands slid a little further and grabbed something inappropriate (rather, two somethings) did Sloan's eyes snap open. She whirled around on the bed and pushed herself away from the groping hands, her feet kicking as she scrunched up the blankets and nearly toppled off the side.

"What is it, what's wrong love?" said Delaney. She quickly rose to a kneeling position.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"I, I'm making you feel better!" Delaney peered at her with too-innocent eyes. Sloan noticed that one eye was bright blue and the other was red. Had her eyes always been two different colors? Nevermind that, she had other concerns.

"Making me feel better? Making me FEEL BETTER?"

Delaney wrung her hands. "I, I know you and... Erika... developed a bond at the end, and... I know her death hurt you a lot... I just, I just thought..."

"You thought what? That you wouldn't have to pay so much if you settled for me instead of those whores outside?"

"So, you mean, you don't like girls?"

Sloan stood up and gesticulated wildly. "You are MISSING THE POINT. Missing the point ENTIRELY. That fact that you don't understand how fucked up you are is unreal. Erika is dead and THAT is the first thing on your mind? THAT!"

"You act like I did it for ME! I was trying to make YOU happy!"

Words dissolved half-formed in Sloan's mind as she tried to construct them into an argument more coherent than strained screaming. She could not conceive of a creature more repugnant, more disgusting than the pale kneeling wretch on the bed before her. She slammed her hand down on the bureau and fumbled for her Soul Gem. She would grab it and her cut of the cubes and leave. No time to waste anyway, she wanted to make it to Minneapolis before Omaha and maybe salvage some modicum of surprise to game the odds in her favor. Fuck fatigue. What had Erika said? Magical Girls don't need sleep, they don't need food. They just need cubes, everything else is mental. An adage Sloan could live by. Would have to live by, now that her war against Clair Ibsen had officially begun.

She rubbed her eyes as she shoved cubes into her many pockets. They weighed heavy in her jacket.

"Oh no Sloan, don't leave, you're in no state to go." Delaney rushed to her side and held her hands out, not daring to touch Sloan as she tromped toward the door. "Look, I'm sorry, I miscalculated. I thought you'd be more amenable to the advance. Okay? I made a mistake."

"You didn't make a mistake, Delaney," said Sloan. "You are the mistake."

A hit, a palpable hit. Delaney nearly crumpled under the verbal barb. "Okay, okay. Look, don't leave on my account. I'll leave. Stay here and sleep, clean up, whatever. You deserve it

more than I do."

Part of Sloan wanted to reject her pity out of obstinance, but the other part was still saying PLEASE SLEEP and wouldn't mind keeping the room. So much for everything is mental.

She wavered on the blunt edge between spite and sensible, which was just enough time for Delaney to make the decision for her by absconding out the motel door without another word. She did not even bother to take her share of the cubes, or maybe she had never unloaded her share at all.

That left Sloan alone in the room. Alone. For the first time since she encountered Omaha on the bus in Bismarck, probably. Funny how she had gone so long alone in Fargo without so much as a dent, and how she had gone so long in Minneapolis basically alone, with only tangential human connections with her family, with her peers, with anyone save Clair Ibsen, but now she was alone, truly alone for all of five seconds and she no longer wanted to be alone. She flopped back onto the bed and tried to conjure again the sylvan scene, the tranquility, the alleviation of agony but the spell was broken, the bed revealed itself a hard and lumpy spring-laden contraption, her body ached, and the cubes only did so much.

She closed her eyes and saw Erika's final moment, there one minute gone the next. Truly dead. Sloan curled up with an injustice she could barely comprehend, an injustice of the entire Magical Girl system, the entire embryo-to-power-plant ponzi scheme the Incubators had running here in this orchard of hell called Earth. She thought she would never get to sleep, but she was wrong.

Sloan woke stiff and sore and with a beleaguered groan. She rolled over as her unctuous mind reconstructed the present situation. Archon dead. Winnipeg dead. Delaney and Omaha at large.

The last slant of daylight filtered through the window. She had been out all day and god had she needed it. She worked the gunk out of her joints and powered through the stiffness with a lot of yawning and stretching. Her fingers excavated eye jam as she peered out the window, no longer so black as it had been in the miasma. A small alley between a drugstore greeted her. Below, crumpled between garbage bags, lay the corpse that had hung from their closet. Winnipeg had dumped him out the window. Sloan would do best to leave before people discovered him.

Erika was dead. She did not deserve it, but neither had most of the millions of Magical Girls who had died before her. Sloan had to keep moving. She had to defeat Clair, and to defeat Clair she needed to drop all baggage, all emotion. The more she told herself these things, the more true they became.

Her Soul Gem was one hundred percent clear, a perfect golden gem with the slightest hint of translucence. It had always reminded her of fossilized amber, except without the mosquito

trapped inside. But her gem now was not simply clear, unless her memory of its perfect state were faulty (a distinct possibility). It *glowed*. Its effulgence spread over the grief cubes piled mountainous at its feet.

She scooped it up and examined closer. Its brightness hurt her eyes and she needed to look away. When she did, she saw Kyubey staring at her from the windowsill.

He pushed open the pane and slid through, shutting the window behind him with his tail.
Good afternoon, Sloan!

"You've been gone awhile."

My presence was more efficiently used elsewhere. You three managed to handle yourselves fine without me. Congratulations, by the way! You really exceeded expectations.

"You sent Omaha to terminate us."

Kyubey hopped onto the carpet and snaked his way for the spent grief cubes. *It appears Omaha was sent by your old ally, Miss Ibsen. You should know, however, that Miss Ibsen had every intention for Omaha to spare you.*

"Of course," said Sloan. "Just like in Minneapolis. So she can act like the hero for letting me live, and make me the villain for wanting her dead. Of course." She sifted through the cubes in search of ones still unused, but the entire top layer had been spent to purify her gem.

I would apologize for not warning you about Miss Omaha's intentions, or her connection with your old adversary, but my primary goal was the defeat of the archon, and her presence increased the chance of that happening. Miss Erika and Miss Delaney, and even yourself, were considered acceptable losses if the primary goal were accomplished.

"Never change, Kyubey." She had reached the bottom of the pile, but every single cube had been used. Had her despair been that strong? That could not be possible.

Kyubey hopped onto the bureau. The alien mouth on his back opened up and began vacuuming up the spent cubes in a process neither mechanical nor biological and which Sloan did not care to watch.

By the way! You'll notice your Soul Gem is in remarkable condition. You could consider it in a supercharged state, if you will. You used far more grief cubes than were necessary, but fortunately, cubes do not simply go to waste if they have no more despair to consume.

Sloan examined her gem. "So you're saying it, like, gave me anti-despair?"

Kinda! Despair and its counteragent, hope, are simply sources of energy for which your Soul Gem is a conduit. Slurp suck shlupp went Kyubey's mouth as he rolled across the rest of the gems. He used his tail to sweep them in for greater efficiency. Once the cubes had no more despair to take, they began to charge your gem with hope. This is an extremely rare state, because it's not often Magical Girls acquire so many grief cubes at once!

"I don't feel particularly joyful or whatever," said Sloan.

Joy and hope aren't the same thing. You can live a miserable existence but still have tons of hope for the future! Or you can be happy but not hopeful at all — that's generally called complacency. Really, it's difficult even for humans to convert so much hope into raw emotion. I advise burning it off as magical energy.

He sucked up the last few cubes on the bureau and hopped onto the carpet for the stragglers. Sloan regarded the vibrant aura of her gem. "So you mean like, fire my gun a lot? That kind of magical energy?"

Mhmm. With so much power at your disposal, you may even be able to do things you would be incapable of doing normally. When Miss Delaney reaped the spoils of the archon in Saskatoon three years ago, she developed many of the abilities she employs now. She was actually only a Magical Girl of middling promise before that! Then there was a Magical Girl in Japan who gained so much magical energy —

He droned on, but Sloan stopped listening. Extreme magical energy... The exact ace she needed for the upper hand on Clair.

She pocketed the gem. No sense dallying longer. She was filthy, but a shower could wait. She needed to strike fast, quick, and with brutality.

"Pleasure doing business, Kyubey," she said as she opened the door.

His red eyes stared at her. *The pleasure is all mine.*

Au revoir, Williston, she thought as she embarked on foot down the highway. The squat structures and remarkable lack of anything remarkable whatsoever would not be missed, and Sloan did not bother to glance over her shoulder for one last memento. Her thoughts turned elsewhere.

Kyubey was right, it was possible to feel hope and still be miserable. On one hand, she had defeated the archon, she had absorbed its power, and she now marched on toward Minneapolis to fulfill a dream so long etched into the rivets of her brain it felt the culmination of her entire life. At the same time, her thoughts kept tilting unbidden toward Erika, who was dead. The word "dead" sprung up over and over and over again and she could not repel it. Erika was not walking away from Williston. She was not walking anywhere.

She told herself: That's the risk, that's life as a Magical Girl. Nasty, brutish, and short, emphasis on the short. Winnipeg had been on the block long enough to know what was at stake with her every action. At some points she had seemed to know better than Sloan herself. So Sloan had to move on, banish Erika from her mind, focus on the task ahead.

It's never so simple, of course.

Whatever. She stuck out her hand and raised a thumb. One side of the highway was clogged with vehicles, but it was not her side. Not a single vehicle to be seen exiting the city. They all went in, pilgrims in search of profit from brittle and useless fuel.

She had a hard time not thinking about things she did not want to think about when she had little to hold her interest beyond a desolate landscape and a frigid chill. She wished she had taken the time to bathe, since she looked a wreck. When she entered Minneapolis, she wanted to make an impression. Like something magnificent, something to behold.

On a lone dead tree on the side of the road, a single crow cawed and took flight.

Sloan walked.

And walked.

And walked.

Once the town had shrunk to a spattering of silhouettes, a wrinkle on an otherwise level horizon, she heard the whirr of an engine behind her. She stuck her thumb out again as a small jeep rumbled toward her. She held her breath as she waited for it to either stop or rush past in a blur.

The jeep slowed and stopped, although Sloan felt no relief as she noticed the Saskatchewan license plate on the front of the vehicle. The passenger side window rolled down and Delaney Pollack leaned over from the driver seat. Both of her eyes were once again blue.

"Hey, love."

"This'll be the last time we meet, so if you got something to say, spit it out."

"Actually." Delaney unlocked the passenger side door and pushed it open. "I was thinking I could give you a ride."

"I ain't going to Canada."

"You sure? Winnipeg's territory will need someone to fill the void. You'd be a perfect fit, the city's big enough."

"I'm going to Minneapolis."

Delaney sighed. A long, exaggerated sigh mostly for dramatic effect. "I know. I figured I'd mention it nonetheless."

"Goodbye, Delaney." Sloan began to walk again.

The jeep lurched forward and rolled alongside her with the door ajar. "Wait, wait. Hop in. I'll drive you to Minneapolis."

Sloan stopped. She eyed Delaney suspiciously. The first thought that entered her mind was, naturally, how much a skilled healer/defender would aid her cause. Not to mention that nasty

girl-crippling trick with the knife. Of course, to have Delaney's powers meant having Delaney the person too.

"You have territory."

"I'm not particularly wedded to it," said Delaney. "Look, we can spend all day dickering over this or you can hop in and we get going. It'll be hours before you find someone else leaving the town and odds are they aren't going where you wanna go. If they pick you up at all! No offense but you look like maniac, love."

Heavy trench coat, burn marks, covered in oil, sleep-deprived baggy eyes. Yeah, pretty much.

"Sure, whatever," said Sloan. "I'll get in if you answer one question. Why are you helping me?"

"Because you're going to get yourself killed doing something very, very foolish. And I don't want that to happen! Because that's what friends do, right?"

She smiled her sweet innocent smile that Sloan knew well enough by now meant nothing at all. The answer probably meant as little, and Sloan wondered what honestly she had expected. Friends. Did Sloan and Delaney count as friends? Could Delaney count as anyone's friend?

Sloan shrugged. Objectively considered, the benefits Delaney brought as an ally far outweighed her detriments as a human being. And that was what Sloan needed to be now: Objective. Cold. Distant. She had let her guard down and allowed Erika—Winnipeg—to worm her way in. Her punishment for her mistake had been swift and severe. Clair Ibsen would exploit any and all connections Sloan had, so better she had no connections. Better she had a companion she would be willing to shed at a moment's notice. Better to exploit Delaney's bizarre desire to "do good deeds" just as Clair had exploited Omaha.

She climbed into the jeep and shut the door. Thin snowfall peppered the street in front of them, just enough for Delaney to engage her wipers. Calm, melodic mood music wafted from the speakers as the jeep started forward, and their journey toward Minneapolis began.

In a distant land:

Homura Akemi lay on her back on the couch in her living space, her hands locked into a honeycomb and the pendulum tick-tock-ticking in her mind as she thought about Madoka Kaname. Time until their next meeting: Thirty-seven minutes and seven seconds. Thirty-seven minutes and six seconds. Thirty-seven minutes and...

It would be easy, triflingly easy, for Homura to rewrite the rules until Madoka and her were never apart. Or even simply abduct her, place her in a cage, wipe her mind of all memory of

friends and family and replace it with only her, Homura Akemi, Madoka's staunch devotee and worshiper, her acolyte, her apostle, her servant-master. But that would not work. Homura knew that. Homura could survive with Madoka alone, but Madoka could not survive with Homura alone. That was the truth of Madoka's being, her very essence, and was what constantly awed Homura to begin with. Her compassion, her genuine love for all people and living creatures. To cut Madoka away from the living, breathing world and trap her in a box with the most wretched and undead abomination on the face of the planet would be cruelty beyond measure.

So although it pained Homura, she allotted ample time for Madoka to be with others. In the beginning it had been both her family and her other friends, but now it was mostly just her family. Right now was family dinnertime. Madoka would tell her father and mother and brother about her day, and they would tell her about theirs, all over a warm, homecooked meal. Four laughing, happy people—Madoka brightest among them—gathered around a kitchen table, nourishing Madoka as much with food as with the interpersonal relations that meant so much to her.

It was Homura's duty to forbear these desolate interludes. Usually she scheduled her meetings with the Incubator at these times, but today—

A knock upon her door. Homura shot up. Had Junko stayed late at the office again, had Tomohisa truncated the usual dinner? And had Madoka, of her own volition, returned to Homura to spend an extra half hour before they went wraith-hunting through the city together?

She wrenched open her door and immediately regretted not having checked the peephole first. Quickly she composed herself with her usual aloof expression.

"Tomoe," she said.

Mami Tomoe stood at the door, wearing a yellow tracksuit that only she of all people in the world could make fashionable. Under one arm she held a matching helmet with a brim and visor, and despite the implication that recently she had worn said helmet, her hair remained a perfectly coiffured collection of curls (Homura did not need the reports of her dolls, who saw and recorded everything, to know Tomoe was vain enough to waste magic for maintenance of her ridiculous hairstyle).

Tomoe gave a pleasant nod and smiled warmly. "Good evening, Miss Akemi! How are you today?"

"I'm fine," said Homura.

Parked against the curb behind Tomoe was the garish yellow scooter she had purchased when she moved on to high school. On the backseat, wearing a helmet identical to Tomoe's and kicking her feet aimlessly, was Tomoe's young ward, Nagisa. She did not pay especial attention to either Tomoe or Homura, concerned more with her shoes than anything else.

"I am happy to hear it," said Tomoe. "It's been quite some time since I last heard from you or Miss Kaname in much detail. I was worried something may have befallen you, so I decided

to pay a brief visit."

Homura narrowed her eyes. "We're fine."

"Well then, would the two of you care to join Nagisa and I tonight? The wraiths have been growing more numerous as of late. It would probably be safer if we stayed in larger groups, don't you think?"

"Excuse me, I'm busy at the moment," said Homura. She began to close the door.

Tomoe stepped forward. "Wait, please. I don't mean to intrude. I'm genuinely worried about the two of you. Ever since Miss Kaname transferred here from the United States, you've grown more and more distant. I know we were never especially close friends, but there's no reason to be strangers."

Homura said nothing. She knew Tomoe's real reason for coming. While in the early days, Homura had attempted to keep the six Magical Girls of Mitakihara in close alignment, several factors had necessitated their fragmentation into three groups of two to maximize overall stability. Homura and Madoka, Tomoe and Nagisa, Miki and Sakura. Tomoe's real problem, which she kept concealed behind her pleasantries and vitreous smile, was that she worried she was being left alone yet again.

If only Tomoe simply came out and said what was on her mind, Homura might feel some pity for her. Instead, she simply wanted the conversation finished.

"That's what happens when people go to different schools," she said. "They fall out of contact. You still have Nagisa."

At the mention of her name, Nagisa quit pattering her feet and looked up. The bright yellow helmet made her head seem oversized and bulbous and the expression on her face indicated she was none too pleased to wear it. Nonetheless, she flashed Homura and quick smile and then resumed her aimless kicking.

Of the four interlopers whose lives Homura had to micromanage lest they become irrational and/or die, Nagisa was the most tolerable. Her biggest problem in life was her dead mother, but pairing her with Mami Tomoe more-or-less fixed that. Her second biggest problem in life was the procurement of cheese. If only Sayaka Miki could be placated by consumer commodities, how much easier Homura's life would be. On top of that, in a previous universe during however many endless time cycles in which Homura had grown to see the absolute worst aspects of the other three—derangement, murder, insanity—Nagisa had actually been fairly useful, having in occasional timelines chomped off Tomoe's head, delaying Madoka from contracting for a few weeks. All that was ancient history, of course. Homura tried not to attach sentimental meaning to past events. The stark reality now was that if Nagisa or the others regained their memories, they would clamor for Homura's head and consign Madoka to an unfair fate while they acted as if they cared or even knew what Madoka wanted, as if they understood at all what their actions would do to her...!

Homura blinked. The entire time, Tomoe had been talking, and now looked to Homura in expectation of a response. Probably she had said nothing more than inane pleasantries.

"I'm busy at the moment," said Homura.

Tomoe expelled a ladylike sigh. "Very well. I'll not pester you further, Miss Akemi, you have made yourself clear. But do know that I am genuinely concerned for you and Miss Kaname. If either of you ever wish to enjoy some tea at my place, you're welcome to come anytime. Please pass the message along to her."

"I'll do that," said Homura. She had zero intention of doing that.

As she began to close the door again, Tomoe thought of something else to blabber about. "Wait, Miss Akemi. One final thing. I have noticed as of late that Miss Sayaka Miki seems to be distressed. I've tried to speak to her and perhaps sound out the problem, but she's been rather resistant. I thought perhaps you might have better luck with her."

Homura stood still in the doorway for awhile and stared at Tomoe. What was that supposed to mean?

"Why would I have better luck than you."

"I don't know. You just seem to have a knack for those sorts of things. Anyway, I'll not keep you any longer, Miss Akemi. Farewell. I hope we see each other again soon."

She turned sharply on a heel and returned with elegant stride to her scooter, her curls bouncing with each buoyant step. Nagisa muttered something to her as she approached.

"No cheese until you finish your homework, Bebe," Tomoe replied.

Nagisa showed how much she cared for this response by donning her biggest pouty face, which Tomoe tactically ignored as she started the scooter and put on her helmet. Nagisa's pout only deepened as the circumstances of their transportation forced her to wrap her arms around Tomoe's waist and hold on as the scooter put-putted down the road and rounded a corner.

Homura waited until they were completely gone before shutting the door and returning to her room.

What did Tomoe mean by her parting remark? What reason did she have to believe Homura had a "knack" for any kind of social activity at all? Could she possibly suspect that Homura was manipulating their day-to-day livelihoods from the shadows, could that be what she meant? There was no reason, no reason at all to think Homura would have any more success with Sayaka Miki than Tomoe had. But she had made the remark nonetheless, what did she know, how did she know it?

No, no, calm down. You're being paranoid again, Homura. It was an off-the-cuff remark, mere politeness more than anything else, the typical meaningless nicety that comprised Tomoe's entire lexicon. Or more likely it had been simple bait to lure Homura, and by extension Madoka, out into the open to fill the voids in Tomoe's pointless life via endless tea parties and cake baking sessions. That was it, that was the entire subtext, if there had even been subtext at all.

At the same time, she knew Tomoe was capable of surprising feats of intelligence. She should not underestimate her. Perhaps she could have the doll Eitelkeit probe deeper. Yes, that was what she would do. That was the logical and reasonable solution: Acquire additional intelligence rather than stress over unknowns and possibles. Just as she had done in a thousand moribund timelines.

The Incubator emerged from behind the shadow of the pendulum on the far side of the room. He remained on the tenebrous cusp and swayed his tail to the time of the clock.

"You're late," Homura said.

Unblinking eyes gazed in her direction. *We decided to wait until after Miss Tomoe's interruption.*

"She's gone now. So talk."

Efficient as always, the Incubator began. He rattled off the relevant vital statistics of the day as Homura listened with only tentative interest. Standard number of deaths. Standard number of contracts. Standard distribution of deaths/contracts across the first and third world. Syrian conflict on the rise. Everything in order, everything continuing month-long trends or else explained by a predictable abnormality. Homura paced around her floating bulletin board, upon which the statistics emerged as documents, giving each paper the once-over so her enlarged, near-godlike mind could process the information. As was her custom, she looked over the list of magicides (only 25 today) and gauged their severity. All standard. All normal.

"Very well," she said. The incident with Tomoe had delayed things and Madoka was set to arrive in a few minutes. Homura needed to clean herself up before then. "You're dismissed."

There's one more thing. Yesterday you expressed interest in a follow-up report on the Williston incident, yes?

Williston. The small town in North Dakota. With the infestation and the three girls. Yes, she supposed she had some interest in that.

A new paper materialized before her. She swept it up in a hand and examined it. The infestation had been quelled. The miasma had dissipated. The fates of the three girls enlisted: Delaney Pollack (78.7% chance of survival according to the Incubator's previous report): ALIVE. Erika Dufresne (44.0% chance of survival): DECEASED. Sloan Redfearn (4.1% chance of survival): ALIVE.

"Redfearn is the girl you specifically enlisted so that she could be terminated," said Homura. "She is a high-class magicide risk. Her profile indicates an obsessive desire to murder another Magical Girl. Why is she alive."

A 4.1 percent chance, while unlikely, is entirely within the realm of possibility.

"I am aware." She examined the paper closely. She did not like this. The girl who most needed to die had survived. No, worse than survived. According to the report, she now had a

supercharged Soul Gem and had embarked on a one way journey to Minneapolis with the help of the other survivor, Pollack. This was in fact very, very problematic.

She didn't buy the 4.1% chance. When dealing with probabilities on a global scale, it was of course entirely unsuspecting. Girls had survived far worse chances than that—chances even in the billionth of a percent. After all, somebody does win the lottery. A 4.1% chance was the perfect way to disguise something as improbable before the fact and defend it as possible afterward. And she did not trust the Incubator to be forthright about his intentions.

But when she pulled another paper to the fore and examined in excruciating detail the formula and variables that had been considered in creating that 4.1% chance, she found the Incubator's methodology infallible. He had not deviated from the standard in any way. The list of variables stretched into the millions, but Homura was able to process them instantaneously. Everything had been considered, down to the probability of Redfearn getting into a fatal car crash en route to the city. She poured over the variables for something the Incubator had omitted. Perhaps he had ignored the impact Pollack, a skilled healer, would have on Redfearn's survival? No, even that had been considered. In fact, Pollack's influence was the reason Redfearn had a 4.1% chance and not a 0.0007% chance.

She reached the bottom of the list after a few seconds of stringent mental processing. No variable had been ignored. The influence of both Pollack and Dufresne were included (Dufresne actually lowered Redfearn's chance). By every conceivable measure, Redfearn had only a 4.1% chance of survival. Which meant her actual survival was pure luck.

The Incubator watched her with his same smug expression as she turned to other files. Probed deeper into Williston for some irregularity, some glitch. How had Dufresne died? Law of the Cycles after expending too much energy. That made sense. And Pollack's survival had been expected in the beginning. She brought up documents detailing critical events during the battle with the Abraxas archon. Crippling blows dealt by Redfearn and Dufresne, necessary healing and protection by Pollack. Everything added up, everything made sense. It just so happened that a lucky 4.1% chance had screwed up so much.

"You staked the possibility of Redfearn becoming incredibly powerful on a 4.1 percent chance," she said. "That seems unlike you, Incubator."

Indeed! Under normal circumstances, I would never risk so much on such a percentage. Unfortunately, we have severely fallen below energy quotas and have resorted to desperate measures to maximize intake. A 4.1 percent chance was deemed sufficiently low enough for the reward of bypassing the cost of hiring a Magical Girl to terminate Miss Redfearn. Unfortunately, the risk has backfired. Had our energy production methods not been so extremely regulated —

"You mean that you were willing to gamble on a 4.1 percent chance so Redfearn could be empowered to kill Ibsen and thus create even more energy."

Manipulating Magical Girls to kill one another to increase production is one of your staunchest prohibitions.

"I am aware." Madoka would arrive any minute and Homura grew tired of this conversation. She had brought up a paper on the Abraxas archon itself. It had not, as she supposed, been created from the oil drilling in the area and the squalid conditions of the town's denizens. It had instead been created via magicide. Three days ago, in fact: Lily Cheong had murdered Gwendolyn Richards in Williston. Had Homura somehow missed this? Another file came to the fore: Magicides from three days ago. No, there it was, the third entry on the list: Lily Cheong and Gwendolyn Richards. Cause: Accidental killing during a minor argument. A cause that should never have provoked an archon manifestation, and which had seemed entirely benign when it had first been brought to Homura's attention. What was going on here?

She probed deeper. Lily Cheong had a power that caused all pain dealt to her to be dealt back to her attacker twofold. Gwendolyn Richards had actually been the aggressor, and killed herself by accident... This was becoming complicated, and Homura had no idea how any of it related to Sloan Redfearn. It only deepened her suspicion that the Incubator was planning SOMETHING. But what?

Her door knocked. She jolted away from her papers—it was Madoka, this time she knew.

"Terminate Redfearn," said Homura. "Hire one of your specialty girls. I don't care about the cost."

As you command. No discomposure in the Incubator's voice, no indication that this was anything other than an expected outcome. Was that his usual stoicism or was she blundering into a trap? A paranoia she had not felt for a long time had surged back into her. She needed to break away, to be with Madoka... Madoka would calm her, allow her to think more reasonable and rational. In the interim the key was ensuring Sloan Redfearn's death.

The door knocked again. Madoka's voice chimed from the other side: "Homura? Are you there?"

"Just a moment!" she called back as she headed for the door. "You're dismissed, Incubator."

The Incubator had already disappeared.

END FIRST ARC

A Damsel with a Dulcimer

SECOND ARC: MINNEAPOLIS

Corn flakes again. Wait, no corn flakes, some shitfuck had ate them all and put the empty box back in the cupboard, thanks asshole! Thanks a fucking lot!

"Who fucking did this," said the girl called Bloomington. Her voice reverberated through the house. "Who fucking ate all the corn flakes?"

The house settled with a creak and a moan. In a distant room, a war between Lions and Vikings raged. Who even lived in this house, Bloomington wondered. Certainly not her family. She scoured the kitchen for leftovers, microwave shit, fucking caloric content of any kind, even motherfucking—she tried to think of a completely unpalatable food—even motherfucking collard greens, she was so fucking hungry.

She checked her phone. Late. Always late.

Ignoring her hunger, she stole through the house to the side window with the crack in it and jimmied her fingers under the wooden frame. You ever try opening a shitty window without getting splinters or lead poisoning? Bullshit, absolute bullshit. But Bloomington had mastered the delicate art. Steady pull, ensure the fingers don't slip. The window creaked open with nary a sound.

She had the window up and one leg over the side when like Jason Motherfucking Voorhees her mom hurtled around the corner waving a carving knife in a series of severe stabbing motions, screaming ALYSSA RAE COLES GET RIGHT BACK IN THIS HOUSE THIS MINUTE with her bathrobe flapping against her ashy ankles and the curls in her hair bobbing and jangling. Bloomington scrambled the fuck out of there, but her back leg snagged the windowsill and she tripped and staggered into the frost-covered weeds. A rusted and half-buried tool or implement jabbed into her ribs and she rolled over with a pained oof.

Her mother leaned out the window and brandished the knife. YOU BAD GIRL YOU, she screamed. DOING THE DEVIL'S WORK! THE DEVIL!

Bloomington pulled herself up and kept clear of the arc of her mother's knife. "I already told you ma, I ain't no fucking whore!" She backed toward the chain-link fence as she brushed dirt from her parka. In her haste she had forgot her mittens and the wintry night chill numbed her fingers. She shoved hands into pockets and expelled a white breath that evaporated in the yellow beam of the window and the silhouette of her lunatic mother.

YOU AIN'T NEED TO BE PAID TO BE A WHORE. AIN'T NO GIRL OUT THIS TIME A NIGHT UP TO NO GOOD.

"Bye, ma," said Bloomington. She hopped the chain-link fence and burrowed her neck in the fur trim of her parka as she disappeared down the sidewalk. Her mother's curses nipped at her

back.

At night, in the frigid effervescence beneath a starless sky, the city grew unworldly. At uncertain distances rose blazing towers, pillars of yellow light, while in the slick and ice-paved streets the buildings could vanish behind wayward puffs of frost-fog. Bloomington shivered even under all her layers, the ski cap, the parka, the jacket, the three extra shirts, the burgundy sweatpants from her P.E. class and the insulated layer of long-legged underwear, the woolen stockings and the thick-soled boots, under all that her dry prune body trembled with an electric spark, her skin turned to brittle ash and the few small hairs on her flesh straight and bristling. Her nose started to run, which she hated worst of all, because your options for a runny nose boiled down to A) Tissue, which you either didn't have or which rubbed the bridge between the nostrils raw and red, B) Your Hand, which was disgusting and left long green streaks along your fingers, or C) Snort it up, where it seemed to go straight to your brain and clog your neural passages until you had to lie down from the migraine. And if you let it run the snot dribbled onto your lip and froze into chunky serrated shards.

She compromised by digging her nose into the trim of her parka, transforming into something akin to Kenny from South Park (Ma didn't let her watch South Park, said it ain't no show for no good girl to watch, said she'd whip her ass she ever caught her watching that devil show again, nevermind was Donny who showed her in the first place, but nobody ever whipped Donny none did they?). A runny nose was something little kids got, and Bloomington had to don a veneer of professionalism. As a senior Magical Girl in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, she could not gallivant in front of the new kids sniffing and shivering like a mewling runt.

It ten minutes to reach the project where Woodbury lived. Thank god Woodbury did not actually live in Woodbury or they might have some fucking problems. They both lived in Brooklyn Park, which fell under the jurisdiction of neither of them. In metro areas where territory got jammed together and borders were transient, girls lived either where their family lived or, lacking a family, where rent was cheapest. As long as they hunted in their own territory, nobody gave a shit where they slept (usually).

Bloomington approached the apartment complex, its geometric and uninspired architecture riddled with graffiti, gang signs, names of local hotshots who flipped coke/crack/weed/pills on the corners and reinvested their earnings into solid gold crosses to hang from their necks. In the cold, at least, no loiterers hung around the entrance to ask where she from or if she tryna buy/sell. She sidled close to the flickering light over the door and rang the buzzer.

The apartment door swung open immediately and Woodbury emerged in hot pink cotton ball apparel, her normally slight self turned three-dimensional by the layers of puffy jackets and mittens and scarves that adorned her. Bloomington forced down a wave of self-consciousness at her own clashing and obviously hodgepodge winter wear, and then squashed it with self-satisfaction. It was no secret how Woodbury made her money.

"Hiya, Bloom!" Woodbury fiddled with her mittens as she led the way back down the street. "Geez Louise it's cold tonight don'tcha think? Like, brrr!" She added an exaggerated shiver for emphasis.

"Yeah," said Bloomington. All the money Woodbury made meant nothing because she still had to live in the one apartment block in the city where the landlord gave few enough shits to take rent from a preteen. All these out-of-town girls lately. Used to be you weren't a Minneapolis girl unless you actually, you know, came from Minneapolis. But Auntie Em had hired chicks over the internet, so now they had girls from all over. Woodbury was from Chicago. The other two new girls were Canadian, and who knew where St. Paul was from.

It made Bloomington anxious. Like the old guard was getting phased out. All these new girls so quick and all girls nobody'd ever heard about either. Only Bloomington, Ramsey, and the big Em herself had been around half a year ago.

"So glad I don't gotta hunt tonight," said Woodbury. Mostly talking to herself, Bloomington supposed. "Ain't you glad you don't gotta hunt tonight? Can't imagine what it's like when the blizzard hits, whaddya guys do then? You go out and hunt in the blizzard?"

"Not like your soul takes a snow day."

"Damn ain't looking forward to that but I guess what you gotta do what you gotta do. How you looking on cubes by the way? It's been a little touch-and-go out in Woodbury, but I done well enough. Things good at the mall?"

"I manage." Bloomington suppressed the desire to wipe the snot dangling from her nose. She tilted her head so Woodbury would not notice.

"That's nice you know according to Kyubey we're not supposed to really hang out much but I always thought that was dumb, we should really try to work together and keep an eye on each other. Don'tcha think things would be better like that? If we worked together and helped each other out?"

"More likely we'd kill each other," said Bloomington.

"In Chicago they don't do it like this," Woodbury continued, as if she had not heard. "In Chicago they have it all ordered and tiered and there's this hierarchy and you gotta report to your superior officer and they take a percent as tribute or whatever. I thought all that was frankly a load of bull which is why I came here but this is like the total opposite spectrum, I hardly ever see any of you and it was a big surprise when Minneapolis called to say she wanted to talk. You know why she wants to talk by the way?"

They reached the bus stop, a grim bench under a lopsided awning with a little light to look halfway legitimate. A hobo wrapped in rags dozed under the bench. He muttered in his sleep.

The bus was due in five, which meant ten minutes of waiting in the frigid cold. Bloomington tapped her foot and fished a pack of cigarettes from a pocket. At least with her mitts forgotten she dodged the hassle of taking them off to light up. A click on the lighter, a warm orange

glow, and a satisfied puff to fill Bloomington with the nicotine that warded her from worse vices. Plus a small flare to defrost her blue lips.

"Not sure," she answered finally. "She said it was a security matter. Citywide security matter."

Woodbury's eyes were galvanized to the flare of the cigarette. Bloomington could tell she teetered on the cusp of asking for a light. She took another long drag, daring Woodbury to ask, to plead, to beg. But she did not ask.

"Citywide security matter sounds pretty serious. You think it's one of those infestations people talk about sometimes? With the strong wraiths that take teams of girls to take down?"

Another drag. Denying Woodbury the pleasure of smoking felt better than smoking itself. "Nah. Probably a nomad outstepped her bounds. Happens time to time."

"Or, or," said Woodbury, "Maybe it's a turf war? The Chicago girls always talked about conquering Milwaukee or Indianapolis or someplace, you think maybe they decided to come here?"

"Probably a nomad."

Woodbury tilted her head quizzically, her nose improbably and infuriatingly devoid of dribbling snot. "Like a crazy nomad? Think we'll have to call in a ter, a ter, a whatsit?"

"Terminatrix," said Bloomington. "I dunno. Possible."

"Wow, that's kinda scary," said Woodbury. "Crazy to think there's girls who go around killing other girls. You'd think with as much as we go through we'd, you know, unite? Against our common foe? Why's it always gotta be drama and politics and stuff like that?"

Were her eyes fixed on the cigarette or Bloomington's runny nose? Now Bloomington was paranoid. She dropped the cigarette prematurely and crushed it into the slush.

She heard the bus before she saw it. Its wire squeal sliced the silence of the night, causing both Woodbury and the hobo under the bench to jump. From around a dilapidated old warehouse the illuminated billboard turned, its great glass windows revealing an emptiness inside Bloomington disliked, since it meant Woodbury would plug the silence with her own voice.

They were the only ones on the bus. The raccoon-eyed driver barely acknowledged their presence as they took their seats. Woodbury smiled at him and asked if this line went to Eden Prairie and the driver blinked and told her to sit down.

The bus was as cold as outside.

"So it's just us two?" said Woodbury, since Woodbury had to say something. "What about the others?"

"Hennepin and Ramsey got better shit to do. Anoka says she's tied up."

Woodbury frowned. "I think Anoka's having a hard time adjusting. I'm worried she won't last long."

Hard time adjusting! Worried she won't last long! As if Woodbury were some wizened veteran. "Anoka's a garbage Magical Girl. Her powers are worthless. I got no clue why Em hired her."

"I wish there was some way we could help," said Woodbury.

"Worry about yourself. We got enough on our plate. Anoka'll be gone in a month and we'll get a better replacement."

Woodbury bit her lip and shut up for a merciful moment. The cheer drained from her cheeks and Bloomington immediately felt like an asshole for exploiting the fears of an eleven-year-old fresh off contract. But hey, that's life. Bad Magical Girls die, and they do it pretty fast. The sooner Woodbury learned, the better.

The ramshackle housing complexes and boarded-up storefronts gave way to cleaner and better-lit suburban agglomerations. Most of greater Minneapolis-St. Paul fell in the above average median household income range, and scuzzy ghettos like the one in which Bloomington and Woodbury resided were the exception rather than the rule.

When they reached Eden Prairie, Bloomington tugged the cord on the bus. The driver seemed not to notice the call to stop, so she tugged harder. With a lazy flop of his head, the driver twisted the steering wheel and nearly ran the bus against the curb.

"How far's her house from the bus stop?" asked Woodbury as they disembarked. "This is a nice neighborhood, whose territory is this again?"

"Quiet," said Bloomington.

They penetrated the outer ring of whitewashed houses with their Christmas lights and lawn reindeer, each house a flame in its hearth, each house a yellow light in its window. Despite the light, the world was no warmer here than it had been where they came from. Scattered snowflakes dropped from the sky, but did not stick to the sidewalk.

At the end of an inner coil of road, far from the bus stop, a wrought-iron gate rose to bar their path. Manicured topiaries lined the gate as it extended in both directions from the road, eventually disappearing behind more of the same suburban dwellings they had seen since they left the bus. Sharp spade tips topped the gate. In front stood a sign: EDEN ESTATES.

"Oh shit!" Woodbury covered her mouth to stifle a squeal. "Em lives in THERE? Hot damn that's crazy, that's so crazy. I knew she had money, but damn!"

"I said quiet." Bloomington did not like to attract attention in this part of town. With a glance over her shoulder she approached the keypad near the gate and punched the code. Her numb fingers bludgeoned the numbers in sloppy succession.

The gate opened like goddam Jurassic Park, with the same ominous moan. Bloomington slipped inside, keeping her head down and her shoulders slumped in a way she knew only made her look more suspicious. If she stood straight and walked like she belonged she would have an easier time, but the whole gated community gave her a bad vibe, its insular nature somehow a tangible reality of the space it occupied rather than a byproduct of a small metal fence. The houses, taller and with more stories, with more lighted windows, deepened her own insignificance and unease. The ostensibly friendly Christmas decorations did not help.

Woodbury seemed not to mind, enraptured by the opulence of the community, her head swiveling from side to side to take in every identical house, every piece of neon holiday kitsch.

"There," said Bloomington. She pointed to a house alike all the others, with no particular importance to its location or the quantity of yuletide cheer heaped upon its lawn. Despite her stoic bravado and cool mentor demeanor, she had only been here once before, after the old Minneapolis got ousted.

"Ooh," said Woodbury as they tromped up the porch. "Nice place!"

"Let me do the talking."

Bloomington took a deep breath and rapped her knuckle against the solid oak door, eschewing the brass knocker. She scraped her bootsoles against the welcome mat while she waited.

A shadow flashed over the peephole. Please be Em. Please not any weird family member. Please be Em.

The door opened. It was not Em. It was a housewife in oven mitts and apron, her short auburn hair puffy and billowy, her ensemble lacking only a hot tray of fresh cookies that, from the smell wafting from the kitchen, they were a few minutes shy of seeing. Em's mother's eyes lit up and her mouth curled into a delighted circle and she said:

"Oh my! You must be collecting for the local charity!"

"No," said Bloomington. Woodbury shuffled uncomfortably and Bloomington glared to enforce the no-talking rule. "We are friends of your daughter. Is she home?"

For a moment the aproned lady eyed them. Her expression betrayed neither scorn nor mistrust. It maintained the same placid politeness with which she had greeted them, the same saccharine cherubim smirk etched upon her bubbly features. From somewhere in the inner chambers of the home emanated the sounds of the same Vikings game that had played in Bloomington's house.

"Which daughter," said Em's mother.

Shit. Bloomington had totally forgot Em had a sister. She tried to remain calm as she delved deep for Em's real name. It started with a kuh sound. Kuh, kuh, Kelly? Bzzrt, wrong, try again. Cora? Clara? Clara sounded close, but also wrong. Should she try it or—

Woodbury stepped in. "Clair," she said. "We're friends of Clair. Is she home, Mrs. Ibsen?"

The nice mask on Mrs. Ibsen's face evaporated into genuine warmth. She smiled broadly and laughed. "Clair's friends! Clair always has such nice friends. Please, do come in, make sure to wipe your boots on the mat. Clair will be thrilled to see you, absolutely thrilled!"

An oven timer dinged as Mrs. Ibsen lured them inside with offers of chocolate chip cookies. The interior of the Ibsen household remained unchanged since Bloomington's previous visit. Everywhere, everywhere were birds. Birds on wallpaper, birds on carpeting, birds in paintings, little wooden birds on mantelpieces, live squawking birds in cages. Sparrows, bluejays, condors, falcons, goldfinches, albatrosses, cardinals, kiwis, roosters, parrots, cockatiels, cockatoos, any and all avian species large and small. When Mrs. Ibsen shuffled to the kitchen and opened the oven, a phoenix adorned the cookie tray beneath the lumps of batter. A hummingbird pattern covered her apron, her mitts were embroidered with pelicans. She scraped the cookies off the tray with a spatula and placed them on peacock plates which she proffered Bloomington and Woodbury as though the rules of hospitality would be irrevocably violated lest they consume at least five. In the adjacent family room a focused and balding Mr. Ibsen leaned forward on a goose-print sofa to observe the Vikings lose in pixel-perfect detail on a full 1080p high definition big screen television mounted to the wall between an ostrich-shaped end table and a framed Certificate of Academic Excellence awarded to Clair Ibsen by the Governor of Minnesota.

"No cookies, please," said Bloomington. "We just want to speak to Clair."

Woodbury had already scarfed down at least three cookies. She started to ask if they had any milk but Bloomington elbowed her hard in the ribs.

"Well, if you insist!" said Mrs. Ibsen. "Our daughters never eat them, so there's nobody else but hubby and me."

Mr. Ibsen grunted assent as his wife ferried him a plate. He shot up with a spastic, malformed cheer as the Vikings scored a field goal.

With the parents distracted, Bloomington nudged Woodbury and led her upstairs. In the inner sanctum of the house, the bird motif grew less pronounced. The tacky paintings and knickknacks gave way to framed photographs of the Ibsen family. Mostly Em. Em at recitals, Em receiving awards, Em looking pretty in front of a nebulous blue background. Very few photos of the other Ibsen child.

Although Bloomington had only been in the household once, she could tell which closed door led to Em's room because of the music. A faint classical overture probably by some dude with von in his name percolated from behind the featureless door at the end of the hall.

"That's her, right?" Woodbury whispered.

"Best to let her finish," said Bloomington.

They waited in the hallway. Bloomington suppressed the urge to smoke and Woodbury pretended to admire the portraits. The music transmogrified from a soothing summer waltz to

something more frantic, more intense. The violin that had formed the sole meandering note of the more pleasant movement erupted into an entire orchestra of sound, many instruments at once detectable even to Bloomington's admittedly troglodyte ears (although to be fair she had once listened to a Bach track on Youtube in a bout of shame at her lack of culture): Pounding drums, crashing cymbals, booming organs, screeching clarinets, dying flutes. All harnessed by a madcap conductor, careening off whatever rails into an avalanche valley of jagged rocks and creeping lichens. The music exploded on impact in a final, brief flurry of activity, in complete unravelling of order or reason: And then only the lone violin remained, pealing the same summer overture as before, note for note.

Then it too went silent.

A voice from the other side of the door said: "You may enter now."

Woodbury and Bloomington exchanged a glance and Bloomington opened the door.

Clair Ibsen, alias Minneapolis, also known as Auntie Em and a plethora of similar endearments, stood in the center of a sterile white space, between a perfectly-made bed and a desk devoid of even marginal clutter. She wore her navy prep school uniform, the only color in the room beside her red eyes and the mahogany of her violin. The distinctive (external) feature of Minneapolis, which everyone noticed but nobody mentioned, was her albinism. Bloomington had not known it was possible for white people to be albinos, but Minneapolis's matching skin and hair tone left little doubt.

Minneapolis took the violin from her shoulder and placed it and its bow back in its case, which she promptly sealed with careful and efficient motions. She placed the case on the shelf next to the cases of all her other instruments and at no time established eye contact with her guests.

"Welcome," she said. "Please, take a seat." She motioned to her bed, but Bloomington remained standing. It seemed somehow wrong to wrinkle the immaculate surface of blankets and pillows.

Woodbury had no scruples and plopped her ass down. She folded her leg and wrapped her hands around her shoe. "Wow, that was a really great song, Em. Really great! You did it all yourself, right? With magic?"

"Yes," said Minneapolis.

"That's so cool! I wish my magic could do cool stuff like that. By the way, why isn't St. Paul here? I thought she'd be here for sure, she's always around wherever you are!"

"I have already briefed St. Paul," said Minneapolis.

Bloomington tapped a foot, but stopped when she realized she was indenting the carpet. "Then brief us and let's get it done with. I got stuff to do."

"Of course. I would not want to inconvenience you more than necessary. Are either of you thirsty, perchance? I can procure a drink if needed." Minneapolis kept her head slightly tilted

in her well-practiced trick to avoid looking people in the eye. The obvious assumption was she felt ashamed of her red eyes, but Bloomington wasn't sure.

"We're fine," she said before Woodbury could answer. "Come on, skip the pleasantries already, we get it. You didn't call us over if it wasn't important."

"Weren't important," said Minneapolis. "The conditional phrase requires the subjunctive tense."

"Okay, Herr Gestapo."

"If I were truly a gestapo, I would not have allowed two girls of your skin tone into my city." Minneapolis shifted her red eyes slightly closer to their direction. "But to the crux of the matter."

"Are we getting a new girl?" said Woodbury. The bedsprings squeaked beneath her.

Minneapolis betrayed the beginnings of a smile. "In a sense." She drifted to her desk and pressed a finger to the keyboard of her computer. The pure black screensaver disappeared and a single image replaced it.

It was a picture of a rundown street in a smalltime midwestern town. Obviously a main street and yet the buildings did not grow above two stories. A few rusted wagons, even a tractor, parked on the curb. In the center stood a lone girl, the only human being in the picture. She was crooked, lanky, her back stooped, her scraggly hair hanging in clumped strands. Her face scowled, her raccoon eyes watched over her shoulder at the nothing behind her, so as not to see the nothing ahead of her. Her hands were entrenched in the pockets of the long brown coat that swallowed most of her body.

Of the seven girls in Minneapolis, only three had been around when this girl reigned over the city. Bloomington was one of those girls.

"Sloan Redfearn." A real name she had no trouble remembering.

"Her moniker of choice nowadays is Fargo," said Minneapolis.

"Who's this," said Woodbury. "Who's Sloan Redfearn? I thought Fargo was a movie? Is she one of those, uh, ter, ter, ter—"

"She is not a Terminatrix." Minneapolis remained rooted to the spot by the computer, her eyes lost in the image. The starched blue of her uniform, with its tie and modest skirt, gave her the appearance of a statue. Chiseled marble rather than human flesh. "She is the one who took the name Minneapolis before me."

Woodbury scratched her head. "So she's... dead?"

"She is not dead. Nine months ago, I was Fargo's right-hand woman and served in St. Paul for her. Our arrangement began amicably and we were close friends. Unfortunately, power corrupted her." Minneapolis turned away from the screen, to the pitch black of her window. Only the jagged limb of a white tree stood outside it, like a long sharp crack in the glass. "She

became increasingly obsessed with destructive pursuits for her own gain. She used human beings as bait to draw more wraiths. She grew hostile toward her fellow Magical Girls. On one occasion she lashed out and struck me. She struck others. She wished for their deaths, threatened them if they got in the way of her pursuit of cubes. Bloomington can corroborate my story, yes?"

"Yeah," said Bloomington. "She was one nasty girl."

"While none of her actions, taken by itself, warranted termination, her downward trajectory could not be denied. She withdrew further and further from all around her. She refused to listen to my advice, or the advice of the other girls active at that time. She babbled about plans to reduce the girls in Minneapolis from seven to six so she could take more territory for herself. I became concerned. When a nomad came here from Chicago, Fargo taunted the girl into a duel and killed her without mercy."

"Well," said Bloomington. "That other girl was asking for it."

"Indeed. The Incubator agreed, and after some deliberation decided not to mark Fargo for termination. But her violence had worsened drastically in a relatively short time. I knew that if left unchecked, she would eventually descend into full megalomaniacal insanity. Her only goals were more cubes and more territory. With all guiding forces in her life shut out, she had allowed her heart to darken even if her soul remained clean. I knew I needed to take action before tragedy occurred."

Minneapolis unlatched the window. An icy blast buffeted their faces, but Minneapolis did not even flinch. She opened a drawer on her desk and retrieved a single leather glove.

"I consulted the Incubator to ensure my plans were legal under his code for Magical Girl conduct. I made one more attempt to reason with Fargo. When she spurned me, I challenged her to a duel and defeated her."

She slid the glove onto her left hand. Its long black surface went up to her shoulder. She made especial care to slide each finger into its proper place.

"My intention had been to strip her of her Soul Gem and deliver it to the Incubator for termination, as is protocol when handling dangerous Magical Girls. But I found I could not. The defeated Fargo, lying helpless on the ground, did not beg for clemency and yet I could not bring myself to kill her. I recalled images of a distant past in which we had been close friends. I failed to do what I had promised the Incubator I would do. I let Sloan Redfearn go."

Minneapolis extended her gloved arm out the window. In a flurry of flapping wings, a raven the size of a hawk alighted on her arm. Its talons hooked into the leather as it settled its wings and made a tentative caw.

She tilted her ear close to the raven's beak. It swiveled its head nearly upside-down and straightened its pinions.

"My familiar reports no news," said Minneapolis, as though Bloomington or Woodbury had the slightest conception of what might constitute news to her. She patted the raven on the

head and whispered something to it. The raven clacked its beak, flapped its wings, and soared out the window. It left behind a few loose feathers, which floated to the carpet.

"So what happened next," said Woodbury. "You know, with the story and all?"

With the same diligence with which she had put it on, Minneapolis removed the glove. "Sloan Redfearn fled the city, almost completely consumed by despair. But she did not succumb. She fled to Fargo, west of here. And there, the Incubator tells me, she plotted revenge."

"And now she's back?" said Bloomington. "For real?"

"The situation is quite real. Fargo is returning. She has somehow purified her Soul Gem and intends to destroy me."

"And you want us to help you." Bloomington folded her arms.

"Exhorting you to that cause is the purpose of this meeting."

"Yeah, no thanks. I didn't get involved when you ousted her and I ain't getting involved now. Deal with your own shit."

Minneapolis picked up the feathers one-by-one and deposited them out the window. Despite the obscene chill, she watched the dark void for a moment before shutting it.

"Fargo is a deranged and desperate individual. Do you believe, Bloomington, that once she has dispensed with me she will leave you unaccosted? You and Ramsey, being the only others around from those times, stand the most to lose."

"Good luck convincing Ramsey to pitch in either," said Bloomington. "Keeping my head down and staying quiet has done well so far, I don't see why that's gotta change."

Woodbury, who had remained silent for more than she was used to, quit kicking her heels against the side of the bed and looked up. "I think I'd like to help."

"You would?" said Minneapolis. "The offer is entirely voluntary. I merely wish to convey to Bloomington the danger Fargo may pose to her. As one who has never encountered this girl before, you are in significantly lower risk of falling within the scope of her unremitting ire. Enlisting yourself to the task of stopping her places you in peril you would otherwise avoid—I wish to make that fact perfectly clear."

"I get it," said Woodbury. She stood up. "Look, I think you're pretty cool, Minneapolis. Like, you don't get in my hair or meddle with me or do anything like the girls in Chicago did. I'd rather you be in charge here than some crazy bitch who kills people, and if that means fighting, then shit, what else I gonna do?"

The stupid little brown noser. Could Woodbury be more naive? Bloomington watched Minneapolis's face for traces of a smile, but the girl had her stoic expressionlessness down pat.

"Woodsy," said Bloomington. She hoped the affectionate nickname might help pierce the girl's thick skull. "First fucking rule of Magical Girlhood: Don't get into fights with other fucking girls. You got no energy to waste on some bitch who drops no goddam cubes."

"I think this is the right thing to do," said Woodbury. She balled a fist before her hot pink puffball jacket and attempted to look heroic (it didn't work). "Minneapolis has been nothing but kind to me since I came here. Least I can do's repay the favor."

Bloomington kneaded her forehead. God fucking dammit.

"I am thankful for your faith," said Minneapolis. "I do not wish to dictate orders to my subordinates. The situation in Chicago is exactly what I seek to avoid. I want a peaceful, supportive environment for my girls. It is simply that, to maintain that peace, interlopers must be removed. I do not wish to embroil you in a personal conflict: this goes beyond a mere grudge between Fargo and myself. I fear for the stability of this city if Fargo is allowed to take over."

"The city ran fine enough last time she had power here," said Bloomington.

"That is because I managed the city when she, as was quite often the case, refused." Even with Minneapolis's line of sight tilted slightly away from Bloomington's face, her red eyes could dig like daggers due to her poise, her composure, her elegant and measured voice, and the alienness of her albinism. "If you truly believe that Fargo on her own is competent to rule a city of this capacity, you are deluding yourself."

"Everything you say's got only your personal testimony to back it up," said Bloomington.

Minneapolis shut her eyes and exhaled softly. "Very well. I will make no further effort to change your opinion, Bloomington. As I said before, all contributions to the cause of defeating Fargo are voluntary. Woodbury, allow me to reiterate my gratitude for your support. I'll contact you soon with further orders once I receive more information on Fargo's whereabouts from my familiar. Until then, I shall detain you no longer. Farewell."

She did not reopen her eyes, emphasizing the finality of her words. Bloomington and Woodbury stood motionless for a few moments as if to ask if they should go or not and Bloomington figured yeah they should go, it was clearly what Em wanted and Em tended to get what she wanted.

They snuck out the house without another encounter with Mrs. Ibsen, although they did catch sight of what may have been Minneapolis's sister stealing Sasquatch-like between rooms.

"You're just afraid," said Woodbury as they trekked through the winter wasteland. "We owe it to Em to help her."

"We don't owe her shit. What's she do for us? She works her territory we work ours, I talk to her once a week if that."

"It's not like here in Chicago," said Woodbury. "It's not like here in LA or New York. We got a good thing here."

Bloomington fished for another cigarette and lit it. The foolishness of youth, rushing headlong into death for no damn reason. The same spark that made men enlist for wars, she supposed. She tried to think up more arguments to sway Woodbury back to the smart side, and thought up a ton, but Woodbury made clear her mind was not changing. She skipped down the sidewalk in her cute pink boots humming some delightful tune, totally oblivious to what she had signed up to do.

The dumb idiot. Bloomington flicked her light and crushed it. Someone oughtta make sure Fargo don't blast her to bits. She looked around the desolate suburban roadside and grimly noted there was only one somebody around who could do that, and that somebody happened to be Bloomington.

A Broken Coriolanus

The modern miracle of GPS! A tiny handheld device harnesses the power of satellites to detect its location anywhere in the world, and then references that location against an accurate street network to determine the quickest route to anywhere one desires. As a computer voice lady announced directions from Delaney Pollack's phone (how she had missed her dear phone inside the signal-scrambling miasma!), she and her best friend Sloan Redfearn blazed across leagues of skinless countryside. Only 12.7 gajillion miles until you take the right junction in Minot!

12.7 gajillion miles of total and absolute silence! While Best Friend Sloan Redfearn stared out the window and refused all eye contact! Where olive branch attempts at conversation fell limp and dead like Erika Dufresne's tiny cold body! You know what they say: an idle mind is the devil's playpen. The platitude had proven true for Delaney on too many occasions. Normally, though, when she thought absolutely crazy and depraved thoughts, there was nobody around for her to play them out upon. Now, though...

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. So Sloan had spurned her advance in the motel room. Come on, that's totally fair. Totally! You're kind of Grade A Batshit, remember? But Sloan's vulnerable state had led you to believe you had a chance. That's exactly the point! You completely misread the situation. You thought death = emotion, emotion = vulnerability, vulnerability = need for comfort, need for comfort = sex. A simple formula that probably works in a variety of easily replicable contexts, but Delaney had underestimated just a wee bit the DEATH part of the equation, the fact that someone had DIED and that was not normally the best omen to hang over a rite of fertility? So ultimately all you did was reveal your insanity and ruin any chance you had, any at all! Fuck you, Delaney! Fuck you fuck you fuck you fuck YOU!

But she could only distract herself with self-loathing for so long. Soon her thoughts verged on more sadistic pleasures. Like how easy her barriers could restrain Sloan. Thoughts of blindfolds, ball gags, leather straps, shiny metal instruments. Thoughts that made her squirm in her seat. Images of Sloan's destroyed and mutilated body, a plaything for Delaney's desire.

God, it was so wrong. Delaney knew it was wrong but thought it anyway, which was all the worst. Once upon a time, she had believed sex would bring her redemption. An act of pure love and devotion, meant to create pleasure instead of pain. If she could have it, it would counteract the awful, selfish things she had done... and then she had learned sex could be just as selfish, just as painful as all her other perversions. Thanks, internet!

She checked the phone. The gajillions of miles had not changed. She needed to stop thinking these things or she would do something bad, either to Sloan or to herself.

"If you don't wanna be friendly, love, then let's talk strategy. You intend to roll into Minneapolis, gun this Ibsen girl down, and that's that? You think that'll work?"

Sloan said nothing. Stared out the window. Cried out in muffled pain as Delaney leaned over the shredded ribbons of her back—

"You lost to her before, why do you think you can beat her now?"

More silence. More tightening, more asphyxiation.

"Not to mention there's other girls in Minneapolis, right? It's a big city. They'll probably go against you too, hmm?"

A split-open stomach, organs pressed into jars as offerings to false deities. Delaney wearing Sloan's skin like a jacket...!

"Come on, Sloan, love, please!" Delaney hunched over the steering wheel. She turned her strained face toward Sloan. "Say something, anything!"

Briefly, an angel of mercy descended and Sloan said: "I'm not talking strategy because I haven't determined it yet."

"Hence the need to talk, love! I'm sure we'll concoct something devilish with the brainstorming we'd manage between here and Minneapolis. We'll knock Clair Ibsen's goddam socks off!" She added a rousing fist pump for good measure.

Sloan did not turn from the window. Her cheek would probably leave a greasy smudge. "I have to figure out the strategy. By myself."

Uh oh. That sounded stupid. "And pray tell, love, why is that?"

She said nothing.

"I do hope you're not pulling one of those 'I gotta do this by myself, I can't take help from nobody' routines. Because frankly, that's really cliché! And also, you're already taking help from me, since I'm driving you."

Sloan unrooted from the window (and yes, she left a greasy smudge). "There's a difference between me telling you what to do and you telling me what to do. Clair did not have a brainstorming session with Omaha to figure out the Williston plan. Clair knew her plan was and got Omaha to do it. She reduced Omaha to a tool."

"The point of a tool is to know its function," said Delaney. She tried not to attach any sexual connotations to the word tool and totally failed. "Make me a tool! Please! But know my function. Maybe you don't know this, since I dislike tooting my own horn, but I am a being of exceptional intelligence. I have a mind for science, geography, mathematics—basically any and all disciplines!"

"I let you come up with the plan and boom, I'm the one being used. I'm the tool."

It grew more and more difficult to maintain the pleasant smile. Delaney struggled to believe Sloan could fall into this prideful logical pothole. "What is it you really want, Sloan love? Do

you want Clair Ibsen dead, or is there something more at stake here? Because I'm a smidgeon confuzzled."

Sloan stared forward. Chaff, barbwire, and oil drills whizzed past her head. "Let me make my goals perfectly clear, then. I must defeat Clair Ibsen on my own merit. If Kyubey himself showed up and told me the cheat code to beat her, I wouldn't listen. I need to do it."

Delaney nodded, as though this were perfectly reasonable, when really it was dumb dumb dumb. "I see. So you don't really have to KILL Clair, do you? You REALLY want to reassert your superiority. Defeat her in a test of wits and power. There's no need for all-out murder, right?"

"No. She must die."

"Mhmm, yes, of course." Delaney considered something else to say, but Sloan returned her forehead to the smudge on the window. She had seen enough movies to know pride was tricky to dance around. Egos were so easily bruised! It would not do for Delaney to force the issue, but no way could she allow Sloan to come up with the whole Attack on Minneapolis plan herself. No offense, Sloan, but you're kinda dumb? Really, Delaney meant that in the least demeaning way possible, a lot of people are dumb, in fact Delaney had not met a single living thing besides Kyubey who she considered less dumb than herself. But it was true! Clair Ibsen had masterminded some interesting shenanigans with Omaha, so Delaney knew she was nobody with which to trifle. And here was Sloan, trifling! Handicapping herself! First allowing Omaha to live, and then refusing to use Delaney (like a tool).

Maybe deep down Sloan did not want to actually kill Clair? Was this her subconscious acting up? That would make Delaney's task easier...

Oh. Oh dear. Delaney had let the conversation die. Dammit! She did not know how to get someone to talk who did not want to talk. She practiced so hard to get people to like her (smile, say nice things, be an attractive female) and then they up and disliked her anyway! It perplexed her to no end. The moment she thought she had consumed enough movies to understand and replicate how NORMAL people acted, some monkey wrench pinwheeled into her complex machinery and goofed it all up!

(Well duh, Delaney! Normal people don't think such depraved things about their friends!)

Oh, shut up.

A large sum of mental fortitude ferried them to the North Dakota-Minnesota border without a lapse in Delaney's shoddy impulse control. Yay, congratulations Delaney! You gained a level in NOT BEING A TOTAL LUNATIC!

However, night had fallen. Blame it on their late start, because Delaney had not dipped below eighty since Williston.

"Sloan love, whaddya say about a bite to eat? Maybe a little shuteye, hmm?"

They had entered a city the name of which Delaney had missed in the swift setting of dusk. But it seemed substantial enough to sleep in.

For the second time during the drive Sloan removed her filthy face from the passenger window. Delaney expected resistance but surprisingly Sloan said: "Sure. I don't intend to roll into Minneapolis looking like a slob anyway."

"Fabulous," said Delaney. "But of course, food first. Sleep later! What kind of cuisine have you a palate for, love? I'm paying!"

Sloan rubbed her eyes and blinked. She examined the depressing little houses alongside the road. Without warning, she began to laugh.

Another caprice of the unknowable Sloan Redfearn! "What's so funny, love?"

"We're in Fargo."

They ground to a halt at a stoplight which was red although they were the only car at the junction. Delaney consulted the cyber lady in her cell phone. "Well, I suppose that's true. Is it a problem? We can press for the next town if you like..."

"I don't give a fuck," said Sloan. "This place means nothing to me."

They ate at a roadside diner, one of a million anonymous locales speckled across the offspring of American manifest destiny. Sloan ordered a burger and fries. Delaney got a chicken fried steak!

She let the meal simmer before springing her trap on Sloan. "So you've had some time to think about the plan, right?"

Gobble crunch swallow. "Yeah."

"Great! Lemme hear it. I'm waiting to be ordered, commander!" She threw in a smart salute, careful to tread the line between endearment and irony.

Sloan wiped her mouth on a napkin. "The city of Minneapolis has a population to support seven full-time girls. Bloomington, Woodbury, Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, St. Paul, and Minneapolis."

"I see."

"St. Paul is a big city, so it also needs a strong Magical Girl. The other five are mostly suburbs, so you get your usual suburban types, meh potential, little ambition. But St. Paul is an asset most big city girls don't have. A right hand, a strong lieutenant. When I ruled, Clair Ibsen was my St. Paul. She's probably found a suitable replacement."

"So we'll have to watch out for this St. Paul, you think?"

"Yeah. The other five girls will be nonfactors. Suburb girls are glorified courtiers. Either they won't help Clair or they won't be a threat. Some are probably the same girls around when I ruled. If that's the case, I KNOW they're worthless."

"So you're saying there's one big unknown, and that's St. Paul."

Chew gnash gulp. "One unknown we know about. Clair is resourceful. She gets people to like her. You saw Omaha—expect stuff like that."

"Is Clair really that smart?" said Delaney. Not that she doubted. She wanted Sloan to open up, and since Clair Ibsen seemed to be her solitary train of focus, it felt like the best approach.

Sloan slurped the straw of her vanilla milkshake. "I'll answer that with as emphatic a yes as you like. Do you know what she wished for? During her contract? I want you to guess. Guess what she wished for."

"I dunno. I assume it wasn't a puppy."

Sloan's eyes narrowed but she ignored the comment. "She wished she could feel no despair."

It took Delaney only a moment to comprehend the ramifications of such a wish but Sloan had such a self-satisfied look that Delaney gave a few extra seconds of contemplation to allow her fun.

"That means... Her Soul Gem never gets tarnished."

"It would've meant that, at least," said Sloan. "Kyubey refused to grant it. We didn't know at the time, or I didn't know, but a wish like that would undermine Kyubey's whole reason for contracting us in the first place. No despair means no energy. He gave some dickering bullshit reason why he couldn't grant it and settled on a compromise instead."

"Which was?"

"She can never feel *total* despair," said Sloan. "Her Soul Gem gets dirty when she expends magic, or when she has a bad day I guess. But it'll never break like that. She's immune to the Law of the Cycles."

Delaney had to concede that was a pretty good wish.

"Right?" said Sloan. "But think about it. How many girls have you met who made a good wish? Nobody ever makes a good wish. It's like an unwritten law, if you're a Magical Girl your wish has to suck. Even if you think you're thinking your wish through, you're seeing it from every angle, you're wrong. Nobody who wants something when they're thirteen still

wants it in a year. But that's the thing! She didn't make a wish about something she wanted. She made a wish solely to power up!"

"Pretty unusual," said Delaney. "I'm sure it has precedent, though."

"It makes no sense to me." Sloan's half-eaten burger waved in her hand. "Somehow people love her, people flock to her. All her flaws are endearing. She's cold, emotionless, aristocratic, and yet she has these glimmers of approachability that make you feel special, like she's only so harsh with everyone else and she's granting you private access into her real self. She never looks you in the eye but it comes off as bashful rather than rude. She's an albino, but it only makes her prettier!"

"An albino?" said Delaney.

"You know, white hair. Red eyes. I thought only black people can be albino, but I guess not."

"I know what's an albino."

"Point is, she doesn't make sense! She has this high society vibe that should feel pedantic and pretentious but—"

Delaney ahemed. "When I asked about her, I suppose I wanted to know about her combat abilities."

"Right." Sloan finished her hamburger with two enthusiastic bites. "She uses music as magic. Plays instruments. That kinda thing."

"So if we wear earmuffs we'll be okay?"

"It doesn't work like that. She affects the world around her with her music, like a wraith miasma. Her raw power is pretty underwhelming, but she does stuff you don't expect. You'll see when we fight her."

Delaney swirled her fork around the chopped bits of her steak. She scrunched her mouth. "I'd kinda like to know before we fight her? It's a little important to prepare for battles like these!"

"I can't be more specific because she's not like me," said Sloan. "She doesn't just shoot you or do the same thing over and over. She'll pull out a different instrument and play a different tempo and do something totally different. She always has new tricks up her sleeve. It's been seven months, I don't expect her to be using the same abilities she used against me."

It did not appear Sloan had anything more specific to add. Delaney liked Sloan's self-appointment as tactical leader even less now that she had seen her in action. Vague postulations, unclear descriptions, pointless information. No clear focus. No clear plan!

Oh well. Up to Delaney to surreptitiously puppeteer Sloan's path from the shadows. Which basically everyone else was already doing, and Sloan hadn't the faintest inkling of her true plight.

"So shall we attack at night, love?" said Delaney. "Seems to me a quick and direct confrontation is our best hope. The more time we give this Clair girl to prepare, the more problems we'll face!"

"Oh yeah." Sloan seemed to remember the original thrust of the conversation. "Yeah, that. Right now it's best to assume Clair knows we're coming. With Clair we have to assume she knows stuff, rather than not knowing."

"Okay then." This chicken fried steak was not as appetizing as Delaney had hoped! "So we assume Clair knows you're coming, she knows when you're coming, and she knows I'm coming with you. What do we do about that?"

Sloan remembered something else. "I got a plan. Gimme your phone."

Delaney shuffled through the pouch of her hoodie and deposited her phone on the table between the plates. Sloan wiped her hands on her napkin and examined the device for a few uncertain moments.

"Okay, now uh, bring up a map of Minneapolis."

Delaney tapped her phone and typed something on the screen and the small backlit display zoomed to the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

"Okay so." Sloan leaned forward to examine the small map. "Clair's territory is the inner part of the city, next to St. Paul, with the suburban girls in a ring around her. A buffer."

"So we would have to go through the territories of multiple girls to get to her?"

"Not quite. Because Clair hunts in Minneapolis, but she lives... here." Sloan poked the screen, which caused it to zoom in, which was apparently not what she wanted because she attempted to un-poke it unsuccessfully until Delaney returned the map to its previous extent. "Here," Sloan said, not quite touching the screen this time. "Eden Prairie. It's a suburb in Hennepin's territory. You can see it's not as central as Minneapolis."

Delaney span her phone around and took a look at the map. "You're right, it's not such a long trek to get to this Eden Prairie place. And we'd only have to go through one other girl's territory? If we take this highway..."

Sloan slammed her hand down on the table. The plates rattled and the nebulous other customers glanced up for a brief moment before returning to their fare. "Aha! But that's the point. That's the most obvious route, from the west. It's the most direct. Which is why it's exactly where Clair would expect us to go. See, see, with Clair, you gotta think one step ahead."

The map of Minneapolis was your standard big city. You had your embryonic nucleus, around which quaintly-named suburbs ("Eden Prairie," "Coon Rapids") clustered in borderless agglomerations. Highways encircled and pierced the city from every direction, making assault possible no matter the angle of entry. No oceans, lakes, or mountains adjusted the archetypal city layout; in fact in many ways Minneapolis was too perfect, too textbook,

with no distinguishing features at all. Its sole unique trait was that instead of one nucleus, one main city, Minneapolis had two. The less relevant but still major St. Paul had swelled in its mother's womb like a second, slightly stunted twin. Say, wasn't Sloan herself a twin? What a coincidence.

"So," Sloan continued, "I proposed we approach this way. From the north, through the territory of the girl Anoka."

The map did not include Magical Girl territorial boundaries, and Sloan did little to elucidate them exactly. Of course, knowing how Magical Girls operate, such boundaries had probably never been well-defined in the first place.

"Why Anoka?" said Delaney.

"It's only a slightly longer trip, it's less obvious, and Anoka is where the newest girl in town goes. It's the lowest rank on the totem pole. If Clair's got her girls on watch for us, we'll see the least resistance there."

Delaney leaned on her elbow. From her vantage, the way they approached this city was the least of their worries. But she supposed she ought to indulge Sloan, because at least the girl was talking now, warming to the prospect of Delaney as ally.

"That's a great idea, love! We hit her where she least expects."

Unless Clair, not being an idiot, understood this northern territory was her weakest line of defense and bolstered it appropriately. Delaney found herself in a curious bind where she was expected to predict the actions and thought patterns of a girl she had never met, and for whom her primary source of intel lacked reliability and, let's be honest, intelligence.

A waitress did a drive-by refill on Delaney's coffee. Delaney blew on it and slurped.

"Okay, so that's a plan. We oughtta talk about one other thing, love."

"What's that."

The bitter warmth of coffee filled Delaney's innards. "Your combat abilities. Don't get me wrong, your power is awesome, really cool! Perfect for wraiths. But you have to consider that your machine gun stuff's not so hot for Magical Girls."

Sloan continued to fiddle with the map on the cell phone. "It's fine for that, what are you talking about."

"Love, your power is great for wraiths because wraiths are slow, big, and legion. But most Magical Girls excel in speed, agility, dodging left and right, protecting themselves from strong attacks like the kind wraiths use. It's a totally different game! You can't go brute forcing everything anymore."

A bill had, as if by magic, manifested on the edge of their table. Delaney pretended to look it over as Sloan spent a long time before responding.

"I'll be fine."

Delaney looked up from the bill.

"Wrong answer, love. I do not think you truly understand what you're getting yourself into."

"I know better than you what Clair Ibsen can do."

Delaney opened her small pink handbag and paid in cash. "Light is a versatile and elemental magical power," she said. "It's a shame you don't put it to better use. Like when you set that oil on fire during the archon fight, remember that? That was great, that was brilliant! But you never do stuff like that. Do you have a finisher, anything else you can use besides just shooting people a lot?"

"I have a finisher, yeah."

"Great! Tell me about it, love."

But Sloan shrugged. "It only works when the sun's out. Which happens maybe two times a year. So who cares."

Delaney considered the therapeutic potential of smashing her own skull against the hard restaurant table. "What about other things you can do with light? What if you could move at the speed of light—"

"Look, Delaney." Sloan slid her clean plate forward and stood. "I know my powers better than you. I know what I can do and what I can't. This conversation is a waste of time."

It took a lot of mental fortitude not to calmly explain to Sloan why she was stupid and also dumb, but Delaney managed it. "I'm trying to help, love. I'm your friend, after all."

Sloan's visage darkened. Delaney tried to parse the nuanced shifts in her weathered face, tried to apply all her studies of human psychology and social interaction to it. What could be the true underlying root of this idiocy? Because Sloan, while boorish, was not possibly so dumb to willfully refuse aid. Nor was she so prideful; had she been, she never would have entered Delaney's jeep at all.

Aha! Delaney knew the exact issue here.

"You're mistrustful of friends because of what happened to your last friend," she said. "Clair Ibsen's betrayal damaged you deeper than you know! You eschew my help because some part of you still thinks I intend to turn on you!"

Sloan said nothing.

"I'm right, I know it!" Delaney nearly clapped her hands with glee. So rarely did she understand people this well!

"It has nothing to do with my goddam injured subconscious," said Sloan, "And everything to do with the fact you're a fucking psycho."

Now it was Delaney's turn to say nothing. She bit her lower lip.

"Let's fucking go," said Sloan.

They went, ignoring a few odd stares from the other patrons of the diner.

Since they had embarked on their journey so late, either Omaha had already returned to Clair Ibsen and told everything or she would never return at all. Either way, the outcome was out of their hands, so no harm spending the night and ensuring they entered Minneapolis the next day healthy, wealthy, and wise. Sloan had been surprisingly receptive to the suggestion, which she explained as a need to "clean herself up" before she faced her arch-nemesis. Couldn't look like a shabby wreck, after all. An odd vindication, that even one like Sloan could succumb to vanity now and then!

Which left Delaney in a situation not unfamiliar to her: Lying on the bed of a cheap motel while Sloan spent forever locked in the bathroom, causing drought with how long she let the shower run. On one hand, the idea that a thin panel of wood was all that separated Delaney from Sloan's nude form ought to have driven her to unkempt thoughts, but the fact that Sloan was not actually in Delaney's field of vision actually made her much, much easier to forget.

So much for Delaney's own nightly ablution—she would have to wash in the morning instead. She stretched out on her bed, shoes already shorn, slipping between the dingy but comfortable covers. She let out a contented sigh. Despite the friction with Sloan, she had gone another twenty-four hours without a severe relapse to her crazy ways (and also killed an archon, and also saved Sloan's life, and maybe some other stuff too). Things to be thankful for!

The moment she closed her eyes, a voice invaded her head.

We will probably not have another chance to talk after this. My employer is growing more watchful of the situation here. She is distracted for now, but will not be for long.

She cracked one eye open. The Incubator stared at her from the foot of her bed.

Can't imagine you have much to say to me, considering in your plans I should be dead by now.

Your life or death is irrelevant to my plans, said the Incubator. Unlike Miss Erika, your odds of death were insufficiently high to rely upon its occurrence. But first, congratulations! You performed really well, Delaney. You did everything I needed you to do, with only minor and easily-resolved setbacks!

Delaney rolled over and burrowed her face in the pillow. *Come on, Kyub. Be at least a little honest with me. You sent Omaha to kill me and Winnipeg, didn't you?*

I was aware of her presence and intentions. They didn't interfere with my plans, so I let her be. In fact, she has been particularly useful for confounding my employer as to the true nature of the goings-on here.

She glanced up at his beady red eyes. Typical Kyubey. She asks a question, he gives an ambiguous response. Aware of her presence and intentions? Does that mean you sent her or not? With a sigh of defeat, she let the matter drop. When the Incubator did not want to answer a question, he did not answer it.

Okay, but you can't be serious when you say you don't care if I'm alive or dead. Sloan is too stupid to kill Minneapolis without me. Whether you want her to or not is a different story, but me being alive is going to affect that.

You being alive will not affect my desired outcome.

She sat up and almost answered aloud, but caught herself as her mouth opened. *Lies, Kyubey! Total lies. Even if it's unlikely for Sloan to beat Clair Ibsen with or without me, I'm altering your probabilities somewhat. Somewhat! I know I am, I'm not that useless!*

You assume I care whether Miss Sloan kills Miss Clair or not. You also overvalue your worth, Delaney! While your assistance will be valuable to Miss Sloan, that assistance comes at the cost of depriving her of half the grief cubes dropped by the archon, since you have used those cubes for yourself. The difference between a Sloan Redfearn who is twice as powerful as she is now and a Sloan Redfearn who has a Delaney Pollack at her side is not particularly relevant. Which was done by design! If I cannot sufficiently assume a variable to occur, for example your death or survival, the obvious course of action is to make that variable irrelevant! The only person who needed to die was Miss Erika, because she would have taken over half of the cubes for herself and left Sloan with too little to even purify her Soul Gem, thus making conflict between her and Clair Ibsen impossible. But Miss Erika's death was assured! Either the archon would kill her, Omaha would kill her, or you would kill her. The combined probabilities all three of you had of killing her gave her a 0.002% chance of survival, low enough for it to be considered a certainty. Thus, I was able to use her death as a vital element of my plan. I do not roll dice, Delaney!

Maybe it was the mention of a zero-point-zero-zero-something chance of something something, but Delaney felt she teetered on the precipice of one of the Incubator's statistics lectures, which were not fun and which she did not want to hear. Or perhaps he had planned his speech to have that effect on her, so she would be less willing to probe deeper and question his methodology. Or see the central lie all this gobbledygook was meant to conceal.

You know, she said, Winnipeg didn't have to die at all. She was going to give Sloan her fair share of cubes.

I find that highly unlikely, given Miss Erika's well-established tendencies and temperament.

Erika, Winnipeg, whatever, she and Sloan were pretty similar. Lonely kids who got hurt by the few friends they had. They needed someone they could trust. I conspired to have them trust each other by uniting them against a common bad guy, also known as me. Remember when I trapped Winnipeg with that worm wraith thing and attacked Sloan in the City Hall?

That was a pointless deviation from your orders, which were to kill Miss Erika only after she had helped defeat the archon.

In the bathroom, the shower finally turned off. Delaney estimated the time Sloan would spend primping herself. She would have to end her conversation soon, which she didn't mind, because it was clear the Incubator's sole reason for talking to her was to confuse her.

Before he left, though, she had a point to make.

It wasn't a deviation. It was improvement. I created a scenario in which Sloan and Winnipeg worked together to survive, allowing them to build trust. By outing myself as particularly untrustworthy, they would be more likely to trust each other instead. Trust leads to friendship. Friendship leads to not being an asshole, which leads to Winnipeg giving Sloan a fair share of cubes. Then I pretend I'm dead and let them divide the cubes fifty-fifty and everything you want to happen happens except nobody dies. Pretty cool, huh!

The Incubator stared at her.

I recommend avoiding so-called improvements in the future, he said. Your antics were an unnecessary if ultimately benign waste of energy. Furthermore, you of all people should not put much faith in your ability to understand the emotions of others. I have millennia of research on human behavior and psychology to inform my calculations and predictions, while you have little more than a few years of human media to draw upon.

All this telepathy hurt her head. She wished she could open her mouth and really speak. She felt much more free when she spoke with her mouth instead of her mind, much more like herself. *I may not be the best human, she said, But I still am one. Which means I'll know more about why they do what they do than you ever will.*

I find that claim dubious. We're actually a lot more alike than you think, Delaney! In fact, you are one of the few humans with whom I find conversation somewhat stimulating, although today you are more banal than usual.

Can this conversation be over now, please?

Okay! As long as in the future you remember not to make risky decisions based on your flawed knowledge of how regular humans operate. When I first began work here thousands of years ago, I made a lot of mistakes for exactly that reason! So treat this as friendly advice, rather than a warning.

Delaney said nothing. Talking to the Incubator was a physically draining experience. It hadn't always been. When she first contracted, she had found him the only being she could ever really talk to, confess her innermost thoughts and desires. And he had fed her such garbage, told her that her dark inclinations were the signs of one on the cusp of true enlightenment, ballooned her already overstuffed ego with his proclamations she was smarter, better than the 7 billion others of her ilk that infested the planet. She had enjoyed it because despite her intelligence she was actually an idiot, or at least naive. Now she overturned his every word in search of hidden meaning, wondered at every misdirection and sleight of tongue, tried to connect his meanings to uncover the motivations that lurked behind his blood-red eyes.

Worst of all, like all bad drugs, she still needed him. Needed his promise that what she did here would both save the universe and the goddess that had created it from a demon hellbent on its destruction: the thin thread that attached her desperately to her salvation, her atonement for the evils she herself had wrought. If his assurances of the ultimate goal of his plan turned out to be a lie...

Wait, one last thing! said the Incubator. As if he had forgotten until just now, although that was obviously impossible and merely an attempt to paint himself as fallible and reduce how much he intimidated her. *I had to promise my employer I would hire a Terminatrix to eliminate both you and Miss Sloan. I'll be meeting with the girl in question shortly, so keep an eye out and don't get blindsided!*

Delaney mumbled an affirmative as the Incubator slipped away, leaving her mercifully alone on the bed after the longest forty-eight hours of her life. She fell asleep before Sloan left the bathroom.

My Neighbors Never Call Police

Blazing ninety miles an hour down the interstate across a land of a thousand lakes, the skies a gray dome and the sleet swept away by rapid-fire windshield wipers, Sloan saw it: Minneapolis. A vertical city in a horizontal plain.

Delaney drove with a gleeful abandon, her hands whirring across the wheel and her foot pumping the gas as synthetic pop music shook the cabin with lyrics devoid of life. Sloan brushed back her hair and adjusted the collar of her coat. She blinked rarely, watching the crystal shard skyscrapers edge closer, their spires reaching for the cloud canopy but unable to pierce it. Like most cities, this was a godless one.

"Wow!" Delaney leaned over the wheel and gazed skyward. "This is it, love! Your homecoming. I've never been to a real city. Williston was the first time I left Saskatchewan. I've never seen a tower before!"

She indicated a skyscraper much taller than the others. It had no roof, only unfinished edges of jagged glass and mortar. A massive crane latched to its peak like a parasite. Its iridescent glass glimmered.

"That one's GIANT!" said Delaney. "It's gotta be as tall as the Empire State Building!"

"Wasn't so tall before," said Sloan.

"They're still not done... When it's finished, wow!"

"They call it the Pillar of the Plains."

"Ooh, so evocative! So dramatic! I love it, I love this city already." Delaney increased their velocity and propelled them closer to the urban agglomeration. Sloan curled a hand around the edge of her seat and closed her eyes. She had seen this city before—no reason to get hung up seeing it again. Now was time to focus. Every thought, every expenditure of energy needed to go toward defeating Clair Ibsen. Any less than total and complete concentration and failure awaited.

"Take the next exit." She did not open her eyes. "It'll send us through Anoka's territory."

"Anoka's the weak girl, right?"

"Yes. It's lousy territory—sprawl. Not enough people to justify the size. We stick the worst girls there."

Enter through Anoka. Attack from the north. Pierce the heart of the city and emerge in Eden Prairie. Find Clair Ibsen and obliterate her. If Clair had moved? If she wasn't home? If she set a trap? Sloan crafted answers for each possibility: They would ask the new owner of Clair's house where the previous owners had gone. They would wait outside and prepare an ambush. They would not enter through the front gate but the hidden fence with the hole underneath.

And when they found Clair? When she summoned her violin or her flute or her keyboard or her dulcimer or any other obscure and bizarre instrument in her arsenal?

Their last duel had ended in bitter defeat. But Sloan had not expected Clair to attack, while Clair spent weeks studying Sloan's techniques, tendencies, limitations, weaknesses. And exploited each ruthlessly. Now Sloan had a chance to do the same for her former friend. She replayed their final battle over and over again in her mind, ingrained it to memory. With her eyes closed, she could project it on the inside of her eyelids.

Inner Minneapolis: a dark alley wedged between a pawn shop and a glorified brothel. One of Sloan's favorite hunting spots. After Sloan defeats an irregular amount of wraiths, Clair reveals herself. Sloan's gem is fine overall, but it's the tiny advantage Clair will always expend the extra effort to take.

They exchange words. Sloan does not remember the words exactly, because they're unimportant. Clair transforms. Her white toga billows in the blustery vacuum caused by the narrow alley. She retrieves her first weapon—the trumpet. Like an idiot, Sloan disbelieves Clair can truly be challenging her to a fight, and so allows her to make the first move (mistake number one).

The trumpet blows reveille. Immediately the world changes around them. The alley becomes a mountain pass, the brothel and the pawn shop slopes of granite and limestone. Around Clair emerges an army of terra cotta soldiers, men of clay armor and clay weapons. In ranks of ten to a row they march forward through the pass, led by a stalwart herald with a fluttering white flag.

Sloan knows the soldiers are fake. The mountains are fake. The pass is fake. Clair does not have the raw power to summon an army out of thin air. But they conceal her as she quickly melds into the ranks, the muffled note of her trumpet the only clue to her whereabouts. Here Sloan makes her second mistake: She plunges into the army. The words they exchanged before the fight made Sloan mad. Normal Sloan can keep her wits and think logically. Mad Sloan just does stuff. (In the present, real-life Sloan made a note to keep her temper regulated: Use it as the weapon it can be, but do not succumb completely. Delaney's influence will be key here.)

Her machine gun annihilates the clay soldiers in billows of reddish dust. They make no attempt to adjust their formation while Sloan rips massive holes through it. She weaves between them, searching for Clair, and she allows herself to delve deep into the ranks. Which is when Clair adds her second instrument to the symphony.

It's the drum. Heavy, seismic beats reverberate through the battlefield. They grow in intensity with each successive beat, building upon the military tune of the trumpet. The ground quakes. The clay soldiers tremble and topple, although a few continue their march. Sloan by now is dimly cognizant of what Clair is trying to accomplish, but the problem is Sloan has no defense and so knowing means nothing. Her goal is offensive: find Clair and wreck her shit before the song completes. (Another mental note: Delaney's barriers will prove useful for adding the defensive component that Sloan always lacked, but the issue with Clair is it's not easy to tell what's illusion and what's real. The only way to know is to judge whether Clair's power is sufficient to do what it appears she is doing. That judgment call will be completely

on Sloan, since Delaney has no clue how powerful Clair is; communication will be key to prevent Delaney from wasting barriers to defend against phantoms.)

Sloan cleaves through more soldiers and manages to sight Clair when the drum strikes with a massive thump. The mountains crack. Their arabesque patterns of sediment and rock shatter and pour down the slopes in an dual avalanche, sweeping down from both sides into the pass. Here Sloan makes mistake number three, which proves fatal. The previous mistakes were issues of surprise and temperament, but this mistake is quite simply Clair outsmarting her.

She believes Clair lacks the power to realize two avalanches, and so ignores the rushing deluge of rock pounding down on her. Sloan is absolutely right, Clair does not have that power. When the first avalanche strikes Clair and phases through her harmlessly, Sloan is only more certain. She raises her gun, aims, and is about to pull the trigger when...

BAM! The second avalanche, much smaller than the first, crashes into her back. She sails forward, buried by a wave of blasted concrete rocks and shattered bricks, pieces of the nearby brothel Clair has blown apart with the power of her drums. Clair made one avalanche illusory to trick Sloan into thinking both were fake, and she fell for it. The avalanche buries her. Her abraded skin and crushed bones leave her struggling to climb to her feet. By then, Clair had already won. What came next, when Clair summoned her violin, was mere formality.

Sloan decided not to replay the brutality with which Clair decimated Sloan with the violin. It gave little tactical insight.

With Delaney's help, Sloan could deal with her anger, could create more strategic opportunities with barriers and heals. But Sloan would still grapple with the real issue: she was dumber than Clair. She had played and replayed their last duel so many times in the hours between Williston and Minneapolis, but she had no better conclusion. The additional power in her Soul Gem meant nothing if Clair never let herself get hit. In fact, power was the thing Sloan had never lacked. But it was all she got.

Ugh, this was pointless! Clair would not use the same tricks twice, so trying to glean something from the old ones meant nothing. She had to fight on her feet, keep her wits about her. That was the only strategy.

She opened her eyes. They sat at the red light of an arterial street in the northern suburbs of Minneapolis. The Pillar of the Plains loomed in the distance—most likely, it could be seen from every angle in the city.

"That was some hardcore meditation, love." Delaney tapped her fingers against the steering wheel. "Have any epiphanies? Ascend to any nirvanas?"

"No," said Sloan.

Cars blitzed back and forth in the intersection. Delaney whistled her pop music and leaned over the wheel to gaze at the Pillar. Sloan catalogued a list of every instrument she Clair played. Trumpet, drum, violin, piano, guitar, bass guitar, triangle, tambourine, flute, clarinet...

"Oh look Sloan, a hawk!"

Sloan glanced where she pointed. Sure enough, a black hawk circled above. It wove through streetlights and telephone wires. Odd for it to show in the city, but Sloan had better things to care about.

She settled into her seat and realized it was no hawk.

"Fuck." She grabbed Delaney's shoulder and pulled her away from the windshield. "Go, drive! It's not a hawk, it's her fucking *familiar*—"

Delaney gaped at her. "But, but, the stoplight..."

Both back doors of the jeep opened. Two black girls poured into the backseat, one from each side, and slammed the doors shut behind them. Sloan, too baffled to react (mistake number 1!) gaped as the girl on the driver's side, the older of the two, shoved a gun against Delaney's neck.

"Welcome to motherfucking Minneapolis," she said. "Drive, bitch, nice and calm—light's green. Fargo, pull any shit and your girlfriend loses her brains, yeah?"

The younger girl had no discernable weapon but attempted to look menacing (it didn't work). "You two shouldn't have come here," she said. "Just to stir up trouble."

Sloan had never seen the kid before, but the older one was familiar enough. "You're Hennepin."

The older girl scoffed. "You forgot my name. I can't fucking believe it. I'm Bloomington, you asshole. My partner in crime's Woodbury. And before you ask, she ain't the same Woodbury from before—that one died."

"Hi," said Woodbury.

"Whatever," said Sloan. She had better things to do than remember which uninspired and middling Magical Girl corresponded to which forgettable suburban territory. She could not remember who the old Woodbury even was. But since that girl was dead anyway, why waste the effort?

The jeep lumbered down the road. Delaney's eyes flitted toward Sloan as if to communicate, but Sloan had no idea what.

"Don't you dare try telepathy," said Woodbury. "I'm an ace at reading that shit."

Neither of their assailants had transformed, and Sloan was pretty sure Bloomington's gun wasn't her magic weapon (she used... what? A whip? No, that was someone else). And they weren't pointing it at Sloan herself, but Delaney. Who the fuck were these amateurs and why had Clair sent them instead of anyone with even marginal competence? Did they not know a gunshot to Delaney's skull would hardly slow her down? Did they labor under the delusion Sloan gave one shit what happened to Delaney?

In the confined space of the jeep, with nowhere to dodge, it would take Sloan seconds to incinerate them both. She inched her hand into her pocket and clasped her Soul Gem—but

waited. Remember, Clair's smart. If she saw you coming, she set up a better welcome committee than the good squad. And if she expected anything from Sloan, she expected her to act rash and reckless.

"So where we going," she said.

Bloomington leaned between the front seats and looked both directions, as though unsure herself. "We're taking a trip to Eden Prairie. You got an old friend wants to meet you. But first, fork over your gems."

Hand over their Soul Gems? Like they would actually do that? Clair HAD to have a better plan than this.

"I'd rather not, dear," said Delaney. "My soul is a beautiful and important thing, you know?"

Bloomington jammed the gun deep against Delaney's throat. "You want a bullet in your brain instead?"

"Considering that would not kill me, yes. I'd find it much preferable."

"It'd put you in a nap you ain't waking up from. Look, we're not going to smash your gems. I'm only in this to stop some stupid ass war breaking out in my city. We got the drop on you, admit it. Give up and go back to—"

With a casual and undramatic flick of her wrist, Delaney span the wheel and sent the jeep careening off the side of the road, over a curb, and into a long glass storefront. Bloomington fired her gun and splattered the entire left side of the jeep with Delaney's blood but by then the car had lost complete control in a shower of shattered glass. The tire hit something and sent the jeep airborne. Sloan's seatbelt pinned her to her seat as the car corkscrewed into a series of display cases and shelves. One of the two assailants soared between the seats and out the windshield. She bounced against the ground and out of sight as the jeep screeched to a halt on its side.

Sloan's blood dribbled down her forehead and pooled on her lip, although she did not recall hitting her head. Oh wait, it was Delaney's blood dripping from the ceiling. Books and pamphlets drifted to the ground in a wash of torn paper. Through the empty windshield, Sloan made out a life-size cardboard cutout of William Shakespeare in all his bardly apparel, a speech bubble extending from his mouth to deliver the message that CLASSICS 25% OFF!

She fumbled for her seatbelt, her entire world turned sideways. Her hand slipped against the latch twice before she disengaged the button and released herself from her seat. Delaney's body, half its skull missing, hung from the seat above her. She tried to find the latch for Delaney's seatbelt but gave up and crawled through the shards of glass to escape the overturned jeep.

The crash had left her remarkably lucid. None of the disorientation of a concussion, or even the expected dizziness of three corkscrews through a bookstore. She even had the clarity to realize the pain-dampening effects of her overcharged Soul Gem.

A teller in a green apron hopped a toppled bookshelf and sprinted toward her. "Oh god, are you okay? Someone, someone call an ambulance!"

"No ambulance," said Sloan. More and more people thronged around her, most keeping a safe distance lest the jeep explode in a rain of shrapnel. Shit Delaney, did you have to crash the car in such a public place? "We're all fine, no ambulance."

But the teller crouched by the windshield and peered inside. "Oh god, her head! Her head is, it's GONE!"

"I said no ambulance!"

"She's confused," said another onlooker. "Restrain her, make sure she's not bleeding internally. Who's a doctor?"

"I'm in med school!"

No, no, this was bad, very bad. Everyone knew not to involve civilians in Magical Girl shit. That was basic fucking etiquette, god dammit Delaney, she made a scene and now cops would get involved, now hospitals would get involved—

"RAZZLE DAZZLE!"

In the middle of the bookstore, away from the smoking wreckage, a firework soared into the air, bounced against the ceiling, and exploded in a spectacular array of sparkles accompanied by a twinkly chime. All the faces in the crowd gravitated toward the light, which hung suspended in the air and managed to shine despite the store's commercial illumination. In a unified voice, the onlookers cried OOH and AAH and applauded.

The bookstore transformed into a technicolor disco palace. Additional fireworks popped and filled the shelves with luminous hues. An unseen force compelled Sloan toward the lightshow, and although she pinpointed it as magical in nature, she drew closer... Until a blast of violet and celadon sprinkled from the ceiling and she blinked and turned away. Someone wanted to hypnotize her, and it wasn't Bloomington, so it had to be the other chick, whose name Sloan had already—

The girl fluttered between the shelves, transformed into a green tutu with fairy wings that bristled with pixie dust and beat with hummingbird intensity. She tapped her tiny shoes together as she waved a magic wand and after literally shouting ABRACADABRA fired a beam of stars and crescent moons in Sloan's direction.

Sloan dove to the side, rolled over the wreckage of shelves and Shakespeare, and slid behind the overturned jeep for cover as the wayward flecks of astronomy glazed the spot she had stood with sugary goop. She seized her gem, transformed, and summoned her gun. No clue where Bloomington had gone, and no idea why Delaney was taking so long to humpty-dumpty her brains back together, but Sloan could swat this little shit (she was Woodbury, Sloan remembered now, because it was barely one notch above Anoka on the Minneapolis-St. Paul hierarchy) without any help.

The people in the store gazed at Woodbury's fireworks with dumb zombification. Somewhere, sirens wailed.

Better make this fast. Sloan swung out from the jeep's cover, registered Woodbury's location in a millisecond (hovering above the self-help section), and fired.

Woodbury flicked her wand and turned her space beam at the encroaching field of light. The two streams met over the cookbooks in a hyperactive splash of pink and yellow, but Sloan's magic quickly and easily overpowered Woodbury's. The light sliced through the candy stars and surged at Woodbury's frail and undefended body, her jade Soul Gem exposed on the frilly lace around her neck.

Woodbury waved her wand again and shouted HOCUS POCUS! A puff of smoke concealed her for a single moment. When it dissipated, four smaller Woodburys had taken the place of the single Woodbury before. Each Woodbury buzzed away from the attack and zoomed around the bookstore, waving their little wands and yipping stereotypical magic words with chipmunk voices as they fired sugar and spice and everything nice in beams no thicker than a thread from all sorts of directions at once.

Sloan dodged one beam only for another to plow into the back of her head with a small sting and a numbness that tickled the surrounding skin. She put a hand to the point of impact and drew back a finger with no more than a bead of blood pooled at the tip, but by the time she had comprehended the non-threat of these itty bitty attacks three or four more had zapped her at various points on her body.

Fuck this bullshit. Sloan hefted her gun and fired a turbocharged pulse of light at the first fairy to flit into her vision. The little bitch zipped out of the way with a childish giggle and a trail of magic powder. The other three fairies concentrated their beams on Sloan's back and sent her staggering with a beleaguered grunt.

"TEE HEE HEE, TEE HEE HEE, TEE HEE HEE," all four laughed in unison. The tintinnabulation of their voices echoed through the store, their laughter infinitely worse than the shitty little beams, grinding into her eardrums. She fired at them, and fired, and fired, and hit nothing but books and shelves.

An arrow flew out of somewhere. Sloan forgot the fairies and regarded the feather-notched shaft growing out of her boot. The shaft erupted into cold, clear ice, forming a block that encased everything from the ankle down and froze it to the floor.

Bloomington rushed forward in her Magical Girl costume, a plain brown cloak with a hood pulled over her head so only the bottoms of her eyes stood out. In her hands she clutched a crossbow, a new shaft already in place. She aimed at Sloan as the four beams of Woodbury drilled into her.

Sloan pointed her gun at her foot and punched through the ice (and her boot, and her skin, and her bone) with one brief volley. She charged at Bloomington, rolled under the second arrow (her skin went clammy at the subzero chill of the bolt as it sailed past), and slammed her gun against Bloomington's hip.

The steel connected with bone-shattering force. Bloomington's leg caved beneath her. Her still-functional leg remained rooted to the ground in a vain attempt to keep her righted as Sloan wrenched the crossbow from her hands, flipped it around, and fired a bolt directly into Bloomington's skull. Bloomington hit the ground, her head encased in ice, until her magic dissipated and the ice and crossbow disappeared and she became just an unconscious hoodlum with her face against the ground.

The Woodbury fairies wailed. "You hurt her! You hurt her!" One maybe called Sloan a "big meanie." Another spray of gunfire scattered them in several directions with a peal of high-pitched screams, but like wasps they soon regrouped and resumed their flyby beam attacks. The sirens in the distance had grown loud now—Sloan did not want to be caught in this mess by any policeman.

Which meant time to cut the bullshit. She picked a fairy and pursued it relentlessly through the store, dipping and diving between shelves to keep on its tail, corralling it toward a corner. The other fairies pursued and buffeted her with blow after blow. They focused her legs, tried to knock her down, and just when she had gotten her fairy trapped a beam hit her right on the pressure point of her kneecap and forced her down with an involuntary muscle spasm. The fourth fairy, who had been screaming in fear of Sloan's pursuit, stuck out a tongue and blew a raspberry as she evaded Sloan's swinging arm.

The fairy turned and flew straight into a bubble with a comical boing. She squeaked in dismay as the bubble grew and enveloped her. Trapped inside the translucent red prison, she pounded her fists against the walls. The other three fairies quit pinpricking Sloan and waved their wands to free their companion, but their saccharine streams of high fructose corn syrup could not pierce the blood.

One of the other Woodburys jabbed an accusatory finger at Sloan. The others pouted and fumed. "You can't do that! You can't use barrier magic, you're not supposed to!"

Sloan allowed herself a hoarse, throaty laugh. She let her gun float by her side and held up her hands. "Not me."

"Whaaat!" said a Woodbury. "Not you, then—"

Delaney, head fully healed, pounced from a nearby shelf and seized the fairy in her hands. The remaining two fled in terror as Delaney tackled her prey to the ground, pinning it under her elbow. The fairy squirmed and beat its wings against the ground as Delaney cackled madly and raised her gleaming red dagger above her head.

Like a guillotine she plunged it directly into Woodbury's throat. A ragged gurgle bubbled from the fairy's lips, soon accompanied by bubbling blood. Delaney wrenched out her knife, flicking blood across the bookstore, coating cardboard Shakespeare's face with a thin line.

In a poof, the Woodbury copies vanished and the Woodbury beneath Delaney grew back to usual size. She swung her wand into Delaney's eye and levied a sugar shot straight to the cornea. Delaney reared back and Woodbury wriggled out from under her.

One eye firmly shut and spewing pink ooze, Delaney grabbed at Woodbury's leg and snagged her ankle. Woodbury smashed into the nearest shelf and toppled it. As shelves fell in a store-wide domino effect, Woodbury kicked at Delaney and freed herself. Her wings beat furiously to put distance between her and the madwoman.

Once she had escaped Delaney's grasp, Woodbury turned her wand to the spurting gash across her throat and filled the wound with something sticky and billowy like cotton candy. She sprayed until both the gash and her mouth overflowed with the material, mingling with her blood to create an unappetizing mixture like splattered brains that dribbled down her chin and bled into her tutu. She continued to shoot more candy into her neck until misshapen chunks plopped to the carpet.

It's not healing! screamed her telepathic voice. *What the fuck did you do to me, it's not healing!*

"Ee hee hee~" said Delaney. "This is why you don't mess with Regina-Saskatoon, dear! YOU LOSE YOUR FUCKING VOCAL CORDS!"

"Calm the fuck down," said Sloan. She glanced askance at the shoppers in the store, but they remained under the spell of Woodbury's fireworks.

Delaney ahemed and recomposed herself. She straightened her gown and brushed back her hair. "Sorry, love! Got a little excited."

Woodbury stopped spewing candy at herself and descended a baleful eye upon Delaney. She swirled her wand and in a dark cloud emerged with a completely new outfit, sleek and black rather than frilly and green. Her eyes became catlike and yellow and she bared a mouth full of fangs still frothing with pink foam.

A feral, airless, voiceless screech broke the air as Woodbury rocketed forward, baring long and pointed claws. She made it about five feet before Sloan blasted her with a salvo of gunfire. The fairy erupted in a blaze of sparks and static, crashed into cardboard Shakespeare, rebounded several times, and landed in a curled lump at Delaney's feet. By the time the glow of Sloan's light ebbed away, Woodbury had returned to her civilian clothes and did not so much as stir.

"Did I hit her gem?" said Sloan.

Delaney crouched and inspected the body, which continued to bleed from the throat. "Nope, still in one piece."

"Good." The fireworks on the other side of the store fizzled and vanished. The light returned to usual and the civilians blinked and rubbed their eyes. "Grab her and Bloomington. Let's scam and interrogate."

"Excellent idea, love!" Delaney pulled her staff out of somewhere and waved it. A bubble formed around each of Woodbury and Bloomington's unmoving bodies and ferried them toward the back exit of the bookstore, well-marked beneath a poster for *The Sound and the*

Fury. "I do hate to abandon the jeep, but alas! I hate worse to run into the police. They're not very fun, you know?"

Sloan wondered what Delaney had done (besides, you know, murder someone) that caused her to speak with such experience on the matter, but at the moment she cared more about a clean getaway than probing her companion's sordid past.

They pushed open the doors. Whoops, emergency exit only. An alarm blared, but in the general confusion nobody paid them much heed.

In the cold of a back alley, Sloan and Delaney and their unconscious captives squeezed between the dumpsters to put some distance between themselves and the store. "It'll be difficult to get around the city without a car," said Sloan.

"Sorry, love! We probably could have circumvented that little conundrum without such melodrama, but you know how I am. An idea popped into my head and I just had to do it!"

And this was the person who wanted to appoint herself strategic mastermind of their expedition. It baffled Sloan.

"Look, next time—"

She did not finish. On the rooftop above the alley stood a single figure draped in a dark cloak. For a moment, Sloan thought it was Omaha, but the face beneath the cloak's hood was not hers. It was no girl Sloan had seen before, either—a dull, almost apathetic expression, a lazy eye that tilted off center, muted locks of hair scraggly and unkempt. No surprise she had a costume reminiscent of both Omaha and also, now that Sloan thought about it, Bloomington—most girls who styled themselves brooding/edgy/mysterious or otherwise wanted to self-consciously declare frilly princess uniforms as "totally played out" went for the generic cloak ensemble.

Alternatively, it could signal a dull, uncreative clod.

Delaney looked at Sloan and then where Sloan was looking. "And who, dear, are you?" she asked the figure. "Another lackey of Miss Ibsen? Friend or foe?"

The wannabe dark knight said nothing. Her uneven eyes stared from the rooftop vantage.

"Look kid," said Sloan. "Do something or I'm gonna blast you." She hoisted her machine gun and aimed.

Still the girl said nothing. Who the fuck was this? Sloan had to assume Clair sent her. She planted her back foot into the concrete and squeezed the trigger of her gun. A spiral of light surged upward.

The girl did not move. Before her appeared a large silver disc, its surface so burnished Sloan could see her own face in the mirrored shine. The gunfire smashed against it and rebounded, gaining intensity and momentum as it came hurtling back toward Sloan.

Delaney seized Sloan around the waist and surrounded them both in a bubble. The light pelted the barrier and drowned the surroundings in a yellow haze. The moment it subsided, Delaney burst the bubble and both fanned out in search of the mysterious rooftop girl, who was no longer on the rooftop. Instead, she plummeted at them surrounded by swirling silver discs that revolved around her body in a ring. Three discs detached from the greater formation and span at Sloan and Delaney. They ricocheted between the narrow alley walls, their speed compounding as the buzzsaw sharpness of their molecular edges hit the brick and mortar. A disc sailed through Delaney's midsection and bifurcated her rather cleanly. Sloan flung herself against the wall as a disc whizzed past. She felt no contact, but her side split open and her blood flooded onto the garbage.

The girl hit the ground. More discs whipped out and split the bubbles with which Delaney had carried Bloomington and Woodbury. The girls each fell atop a spinning disc, which quickly retreated behind the greater formation. One hand gripped to her side, Sloan directed her gun, but before she could fire the silver discs flipped and rearranged their pattern to block off the alley in an overlapping array of circles. Sloan could not even see her target through the massive bulwark.

A girl with mirror barriers. Her power counteracted Sloan's perfectly. Other barriers Sloan could penetrate with sustained fire, but a barrier that reflected her light back at her—what could she do against that? She confronted the wall of discs in search of a creative solution to the mismatch, the kind of solution Clair would fathom after mere seconds of cunning calculation.

But seconds passed and Sloan thought of nothing. No strategy entered her mind other than the overwhelming desire to shoot. As if in recognition of her failure, the discs broke their formation, collapsing in on each other (or merging together, or something) until only one spinning silver circle remained, which followed its master as she scurried up the alley wall and disappeared over the edge, the plates carrying Bloomington and Woodbury sailing alongside her.

By the time all three were gone, Delaney had put herself back together. She waved her staff and healed the gash on Sloan's side.

"Shall we pursue, love?"

Sloan dematerialized her gun. "Let's not blunder into a trap. That girl wasn't here to fight, she wanted Bloomington and Woodbury. Fine, let her have them."

Yes, let Clair have more tools. Let every single one of Clair's lackeys slip through your fingers to live and fight another day. Sloan avoided Delaney's eyes, because she already knew the disapproval and subtle condescension she would find there. But Sloan did not want to chase a girl she had no idea how to fight. She needed time to think.

"That girl could use some etiquette lessons!" Delaney cut her magic and led the way down the alley. "Not even a hello or a name!"

The snow fell more heavily than before. Sloan had lived here long enough to read the telltale signs of an encroaching snowstorm: the burly darkness of the clouds, the anticipatory

stillness in the air. She pulled her overcoat around her and followed Delaney, although she moved with intention to overtake her.

"We lost your car, but the plan remains unchanged. Get to Eden Prairie, find Clair, destroy her."

Delaney stepped aside and allowed Sloan to take point with a gracious bow. "Love, that girl's powers specifically countered your own."

"I know."

"That other girl, the fairy one—she worked upon your weaknesses too."

"I know."

"We may have to accept that Clair Ibsen has been preparing for this conflict much longer than you think. She didn't acquire these girls overnight, after all!"

"Too late to turn back now." It had been too late for a long time.

Sloan reached the end of the alley and peered around the corner. An armada of emergency response vehicles had clustered around the busted storefront. Uniformed officers redirected sluggish traffic. In their civilian clothes, Sloan and Delaney easily melded into the crowd.

Her Pale Fire She Snatches from the Sun

A typical member of the human species, when confronted with the home page of the MagNet Forum and Messaging Boards, would find what appeared a quirky roleplaying site for young girls (and middle-aged males as well, depending upon the salaciousness of our hypothetical human's mind). Access to all boards, posts, and chat logs would be denied without an account, but if our hypothetical human attempted to create one to join the fun, they would stare baffled at the first step of the account creation process, which required answers to the following questions:

1. Who contracted you?
2. Where is your soul?
3. How will you die?

No multiple choice. Only blank text boxes with blinking cursors to confound the quizzical human. He or she may type in exploratory answers, under the belief these queries were part of the roleplaying experience. Alas, not so. Without the correct answers (1: "Kyubey", "Incubator", or another name he sometimes used; 2: "Gem", "Soul Gem", or "In a Gem/Soul Gem" [Clair had petitioned the addition of the latter response as a correct option, because to answer the question *as it was posed*, the preposition and article were grammatically mandatory]; 3: "Wraiths", "Cycles", or "Law of the Cycles"), our hypothetical human would receive an error message and be forced to start again. The persistence of each human would vary from person to person, based on their attention span and curiosity, but eventually each would give up, shrug their shoulders, and wonder at the fads of today's children. (Assumedly, a skilled enough computer hacker could crack the firewall rather easily, but even if someone cared enough about their little Habbo Hotel to try, all they would find inside would seem to be a serious community of hardcore roleplayers.)

We now abandon our typical human, whose experience with MagNet Forum and Messaging Boards ends with this error screen. Instead, we turn to a hypothetical Magical Girl, Latin form *Puella Magi*, who can answer each question correctly. The site to which she now belongs is the largest online community of Magical Girls in the English-speaking world (because, as we know, when it comes to raw numbers, China always wins), servicing primarily North America but with representatives from the United Kingdom, continental Europe, South Africa, and Australia/New Zealand. Account names are almost always city names, even though girls outside Canada and the United States do not use the urban nomenclature as frequently as their brethren from the Western Hemisphere. A city as a name is simply a quick and effective way to relate all pertinent information about yourself (where you are and how powerful you are) at a glance.

Clair Ibsen signed into her account (Minneapolis). She had two private messages, indicated by a notification pop-up. While she could ignore them, and the slight urgency of the situation might call for it, it was necessary to be thorough in all things. After all, perhaps one of her good online friends had a quandary of even more urgency.

In this case, however, the messages were lackluster. One was shameless flirtation from Fresno, despite Clair's many previous attempts to subtly convey her utter lack of interest in the prospect of an e-relationship; the second was Hartford, begging for a job. Clair responded to Fresno with a tone that indicated blithe obliviousness toward the (honestly, quite desperate) girl's advances. She responded to Hartford with apologies, as the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area was currently not accepting new girls in any position. Should an opening appear, however, Hartford would of course be the first person Clair notified for a tryout.

After proofreading her responses for typewriting errors, she sent them and returned to the main MagNet board directory. She wanted the Help! board, which was near the bottom, so she had to cycle through the other boards first. The News board contained some surprises. Aurora (Colorado) had died suddenly and unexpectedly; Denver was actively looking for replacements. The post had been made mere hours ago but already had over a hundred replies, with names as prestigious as St. Louis posting resumes. What a model city Denver was. An egalitarian community about the same size as Minneapolis-St. Paul, under the wise and principled leadership of Denver, who doubled as the MagNet site administrator. No wonder she could have girls like St. Louis willing to work for her, while the best Clair could manage was Hartford, Connecticut. Clair had made great strides to ameliorate the reputation of her city in the wake of Sloan Redfearn's abdication, but she feared until the pernicious blot named Ramsey was gone, she would never have a name as awe-inspiring as Denver. The other posts on the board were rather rudimentary. Detroit informing people that no, her city was not some El Dorado of wraiths and despair, don't believe everything you hear on the news; Honolulu asking girls to please inform her if their family was taking a Hawaiian vacation during the holidays—accommodations could be arranged to supply enough cubes for their stay, but only if they checked with her first. Clair found nothing worth posting (she would send Denver a private message later with condolences for Aurora's untimely demise) and continued down the line.

The Selfie board—

"What the fuck is taking so long?" said Bloomington.

Clair settled her fingers on the keyboard. "I believe it integral to a balanced lifestyle that all tasks, no matter how minor, are done with diligence and care. I am being thorough."

"Woodbury is bleeding all over your carpet!"

"Very well. I will expedite matters."

Clair scrolled past the Selfie board (although the most recent post, a team shot of the Seattle girls, piqued her interest), as well as the Therapy board (for girls turning desperate), the Newbie board (for fresh contractees who sought the advice of an elder girl), the Love board (for girls like Fresno; Clair marveled at the high incidence of homosexuality among Magical Girls when compared to normal girls, which she likened to the homosexuality exhibited by prison inmates, except for Magical Girls their incarceration began at an age where sexual identity was already nebulous, making the phenomenon even more pronounced), and, at the beck of Bloomington's growls, eventually reached the Help! board.

She clicked the New Thread button. For the title, she typed "Looking for information on Regina-Saskatoon". For the body, she wrote:

Hello!

My name is Minneapolis; some of you may already know me. Unfortunately, it appears as of late a pair of interlopers have teamed up to depose me from my position. I will, of course, handle this minor situation (which poses little danger to either my person or those under my wing) with all due diligence. However, it would aid my cause tremendously if any of you wonderful MagNet users could supply me with information about one of the interlopers in question (the other is a personal acquaintance of mine and I know her quite well). The girl for whom I desire information goes by the name Regina-Saskatoon. Any and all information is a great help!

I would ask the Incubator; but he appears to have made himself scarce as of late.

Many thanks and good fortune in future endeavors,

Minneapolis

After proofreading twice, she submitted the post to the vicissitudes of the web. She washed her hands of the affair and swiveled her chair to face her visitors, ready to make amends for the poor hospitality she had exhibited thus far.

"Now, we need merely wait for a response. This is the peak hour for online activity among Magical Girls in this hemisphere, so we should hear from someone soon."

Woodbury knelt beside Clair's bed, her hands splayed before her as she coughed and sputtered blood. Bloomington furiously applied, unraveled, and reapplied bandages to the long ragged gash across Woodbury's throat, but no matter how hard she pressed the cloth, the blood seeped through and soon either splattered onto the carpet or dribbled down her chest. Her eyes welled with tears, but only airless sputters and strangled chokes escaped her lips.

I'm gonna die, her mind said. I'm gonna run out of blood!

Most likely, Woodbury would feel more comfortable if Clair replied telepathically, so as not to flaunt the gift of speech that had been so robbed of the young girl. *Nonsense*, Clair said. *Your Soul Gem will regenerate your internal fluids at a rate necessary to sustain you. It will simply put a strain on your grief totals, but we as a collective can surely harvest enough cubes to accommodate your extra consumption. We are a team, after all. We cover for each other when we have a hard time, okay?*

Woodbury wiped an eye and made another wretched gurgle. *Th... thank you.* As Bloomington constricted her windpipe with another bandage, however, she broke into a fresh deluge of tears. *How am I supposed to go outside like this! I can't walk around town with my THROAT TORN OUT!*

Part of Clair recognized the reassuring power of a caring hand on the shoulder at this tender moment, but she looked at her trembling white fingers and could not bear to bring such

contact to fruition. Woodbury looked up at her with pleading eyes and Clair unwillingly diverted her own gaze somewhat downward, to the growing red stain in her carpet. She had to concentrate exceptionally hard to prevent herself from going into convulsions at the sight of such disorder in her own room, her own space...!

We will figure out something, Woodbury. I can pay the rent for your apartment until we learn how to heal you, so you do not have to worry about work in the interim.

Why... why won't it heal?

Clair refreshed the Help! board. Her post had garnered several views but no replies. *Hopefully we will learn soon. Perhaps when St. Paul returns with Hennepin, she will be able to heal you.*

"Hennepin won't come," said Bloomington. "Neither will Ramsey. Maybe Anoka, but who gives a fuck about her. You're in over your head here, Em."

Clair said nothing. She herself had no idea with what kind of magic Regina-Saskatoon maimed Woodbury. In fact, all her sources of intelligence on the matter (she had several) had intimated the same thing: That Regina-Saskatoon was irrelevant and that it was unlikely she would survive the Williston affair, let alone accompany Sloan back to Minneapolis. The most either the Incubator or Omaha or Matthis had mentioned of her power was that she healed well and made passable, albeit not infallible, barriers.

And now the Incubator had not shown his face in some time (to be fair, during their last meeting he had mentioned his employer grew more wary of the events transpiring in her city and thus further communications would be difficult to manage) and Omaha had disappeared completely (to be fair yet again, that *was* her power, after all). Only Matthis remained to perform her reconnaissance, and there were limits to the amount of information a magic bird could provide. For instance, while he had confirmed Sloan approached Minneapolis in Regina-Saskatoon's jeep, he had failed to confirm Regina-Saskatoon traveled with her.

Holes in knowledge troubled Clair. The less she knew, the less secure her success. She hoped the Fargo-Saskatchewan Alliance had played most, if not all, of their cards in the skirmish with Bloomington and Woodbury.

A rap on her window roused her from her thoughts. Outside the pane, hovering on one of her silver discs, waited St. Paul. The misshapen and uneven girl wore a less-than-reassuring expression. Snowflakes stuck to her rather generic cloak, which she did not bother to brush away as Clair unlatched the window and allowed her inside.

St. Paul bowed her head and wrung her hands together. "Hennepin. Hennepin..." She searched for words. "Hennepin. Will not. Come." For punctuation, she gave a relieved gasp.

"I fucking told you," said Bloomington. She squeezed a bandage too tight and a fresh spurt of blood gushed from Woodbury's neck.

"Very well. I assume she is busy?" said Clair.

"Yuh. Yes." St. Paul gnawed her lip. Her lazy eye rolled in its socket as she forced her concentration on her words. Clair had already prepared herself for patience, however. Patience was such a bountiful commodity when one simply prepared for it. It was when taken aback with unexpected delays that patience grew difficult. "She. Work. Her game..."

"She is working," Clair corrected. "Playing her game, is she? Oh dear... The callousness of some girls. I will speak to her personally once I receive a response to my post."

She returned to her computer and refreshed the page. The number of views had rocketed to about a hundred. She had two replies as well. A quick response time was a benefit of bearing a name with as much clout as Minneapolis, as well as her tireless efforts to cultivate all her relationships, even those online.

The first response was from Tallahassee. It read: *lol where the fucks vagina saxophone*

What droll commentary, Tallahassee. Clair would send a request for her imminent ban.

The second response was from Calgary, a name far more likely to deliver a useful response, not so much due to the reliability of the girl as much as the geographical proximity of the city to Saskatchewan.

It read: *Oh shit regina-SAKASTOON [sic]?! Dont mess wit [sic] that bitch she one baaaaaaad MG. Bad mojo. Every1 knows she killed a girl but she a QB favorite so no Termx. She fucked in the head ROFL. Crazy strong heals + barriers, nobody knows how she kills wraiths (or girls...) so watch your back? The world will suffer if we lose a beauty like you bb ;DD*

P.S. You say she moved out her home turf? Looks like its [sic] time for me to do some good ol fashioned COLONIZATION. kaCHING \$\$\$

Although it did not shed light on Woodbury's debilitation, Calgary's information did interest Clair greatly. Regina-Saskatoon was mentally deranged? She had previously committed magicide?

Very interesting how the Incubator had glossed over those particular details in their previous conversations. She opened the notepad on her computer and quickly input a note to confront the Incubator over these details in the near future.

"Well?" said Bloomington as Clair saved the note. "Anyone say anything?"

"No one so far has explained the properties of Regina-Saskatoon's dagger. However, Calgary politely informed me that Regina-Saskatoon is renowned as a magical psychopath. We're lucky she was unable to do worse to either of you."

Woodbury did not appear to take this as the reassuring comment Clair had intended. *I'm cursed!* she sobbed. *I'm never going to get better! I'll be like this FOREVER!*

Nonsense, Woodbury. Clair closed the web browser; she would check on her thread later. *Even if all else fails, there is a surefire way to nullify any and all magic.*

What... what is it? asked Woodbury.

Kill the source.

Woodbury halted her disgusting chokes to contemplate Clair's words.

"In the interim," Clair continued, "I will pay our friend Hennepin a personal visit and extol her to at least try her hand at healing you. Drastic measures may prove unnecessary yet. St. Paul, Hennepin was at her usual spot, yes?"

Rather than articulate in spoken words, St. Paul merely nodded.

"Superb. St. Paul, stay here and keep watch. It's possible Fargo and Regina-Saskatoon may make an attack by night, although I doubt they will be ready to retaliate so soon. Bloomington, Woodbury, you're both free to stay here as well, or you may return home if you desire. Considering today's unexpected developments, I understand if either of you decide not to continue to fight in this battle."

Clair allowed her offer to settle as she opened her wardrobe and flitted her finger through the row of navy school uniforms in search of the one with the winter jacket. She found it in its rightful place, unhooked it from its hanger, and slid into it, taking especial care with each button to ensure it secured the jacket snugly.

When she wrapped a scarf around her neck she became aware the others were watching her. "Don't feel pressured to respond right away," she said. "You can wait until I return to decide. I do not anticipate I will be gone too long. Farewell."

"You want us to wait here while you're gone," said Bloomington. "What if your parents show up?"

"My parents know better than to enter this room," said Clair. She opened the door and stepped outside.

When she had reached the end of the hallway, the door opened behind her and Bloomington followed.

Clair stopped and waited for Bloomington to catch up. "Do you wish to accompany me?"

"Fuck that." Bloomington kept her voice low and looked at the other doors in the hallway as if afraid one might open. "I know what you're doing, Em."

"Indeed, I just told you. I'm going to speak with Hennepin and hopefully persuade her to try her healing magic on Woodbury."

"Bullshit. You planned this from the start. You sent us into a fight we had no fucking hope of winning. You let Woodbury get hurt—wanted her to get hurt—because now she's fucking bound to you, because the only way to heal that gash on her throat is to kill the crazy chick in the dress. You didn't even fucking WARN us about her, god dammit."

"My apologies. I made an oversight. My intelligence was incorrect—"

"Bullshit! How convenient St. Paul just happened to be in the neighborhood to rescue us. How fucking convenient, right? It's almost like you had her tail us to save us at the goddam nick of time. If I didn't know any better, I might say that's exactly what you fucking did. Now that Woodbury's hurt, she's tied to your cause, I'm tied to your cause because I wanna help Woodbury, and soon you'll sucker Hennepin too—"

Clair held her arms tight at her sides. "Never, not *once* did the idea enter my head to purposely hurt Woodbury for such a selfish and petty reason. I made a mistake. A *mistake*."

"Fuck you. Why have St. Paul follow us? Why not have her attack Fargo the same time we did?"

"One does not simply play all of their cards on the first hand—"

"Oh, oh! I see, I got it now." Bloomington rasped with hoarse breaths, modulating her volume even as she riled herself into a lather. "We were bait. Send a couple of cheap pawns Fargo's way and see what nasty tricks she got."

To make any direct response to such a question required a lie. Lies disgusted Clair. "If you wish to leave, you are free to do so."

"And leave Woodbury like that. Leave her with no throat. Fuck you, Em. Fuck you!"

She swung her fist against the wall and knocked a sizeable dent in the plaster beneath Clair's elementary school commencement photograph. She then made a rather rude gesture at Clair and stormed back to the room, slamming the door behind her.

Clair regarded the dent. If Mother asked, she would say her sister did it.

The girl Hennepin did not live in her own territory. She lived in Clair's territory: Minneapolis city proper, an agglomeration of towers and gentrification, of rising rent and shattered dreams. The Pillar of the Plains stood sentinel in its incomplete glory as Clair rode the bus into one of the hearts of darkness in our world. Girls with the ability to see wraiths rarely liked to lay their head to rest in such a blackened hub. Clair had the fortune to preside over a city where all her girls had means to live outside the briar patch, even fledgling Woodbury and novice Anoka.

The unsatisfactory things those girls did to acquire those means was another story. The removal of Ramsey and her wicked business thus remained high on Clair's list of priorities.

However, Clair's mind had wandered. The crux of the matter, the point for which she had striven, was to emphasize the eccentricity of Hennepin for willfully choosing to work and sleep in the gelid jungle of inner city Minneapolis. An eccentricity Clair had difficulty fathoming, lest it come strapped to a suicidal tendency. Magical Girls oft forgot the danger of

wraiths confronted them even outside of designated hunting times. Wraiths constantly slouched toward sources of hope, so as to better feed. As agents of hope, a Magical Girl became a wraith's juiciest, most succulent victim. A girl who dwelled in such a cesspit sometimes woke in the dead of night as a real-life monster dragged her beneath the bed to feast.

When Clair once asked Hennepin why she lived where she did, the girl gave only the enigmatic response: "Better ping."

Dusk encroached, although the sheet of solid cloud and the heavy snowfall prompted Clair to check her watch to be sure. She intended to speak to Hennepin and leave before the wraiths grew most active. Tonight she did not have to hunt (nor all week—she had stockpiled in anticipation of her war with Fargo), and had no intention to deviate from her plan.

Soon she stood in the North Loop before a door at the base of some stairs that delved into the flatness of the tarmac plane like a quarry. Clair took a deep breath, the last fresh air she would receive in some time, and descended.

The dimensions of the room she entered were indiscernible due to the smoke, mostly from cigarettes and hookah but with a spattering of less-legal drugs. Desks lined with computers drifted from the transient haze, some attended by pimple-faced men with slicked-down hair and Columbine trench coats who stared intently into the unbounded carnage on their screens as they gunned down aliens, space marines, terrorists, counter-terrorists, unarmed civilians in an airport, and dinosaurs. Clair wafted smoke from her nostrils and weaved between the rows. She evaded the men who screamed obscenities into headsets, which was all the men and which delayed her progress substantially. They hydrated with technicolored fluids, they dug hands into opened bags of snacks. They mashed keys with undue ferocity, they clicked mice with rates best recorded in milliseconds. The lights from the monitors proved the best illumination, as the bare bulbs strung from the ceiling flickered and died.

One man, faced with a bitter DEFEAT screen, threw himself back in his chair and cracked his joints. He noticed Clair and remarked, "Eyy, Irisviel von Einzbern." She paid him no heed.

Navigating the arcade was something out of a real-life video game, where an intrepid hero wanders lost through a misty grid of trees and only the correct combination of directions (discovered during some previous spelunking expedition, or else from the gossipy mouth of an inebriated local) will lead to salvation, but Clair had memorized Hennepin's preferred location (memorization being one of Clair's strengths). The tobacco smoke cleared to reveal a dingier corner of the establishment. Seated at the final computer, crammed between a wall and a rack of peripherals, the girl named Hennepin played, her concentration too rapt on the screen to notice Clair.

Clair went the route of politeness and waited for her to finish her match. From the waist up, Hennepin had put extreme care into her appearance, almost aglow with smartly-applied makeup and fashionable fabrics. Her short hair had a punky purple streak in the bangs. She wore yellow-tinted glasses and headphones. But beneath her immaculate jacket, she had on pajama leggings and bunny slippers. Clair found it fascinating how people clothed themselves. One could derive so much information from a shirt, a pair of shoes, a necklace.

A shiny green VICTORY popped up on Hennepin's screen, to correspond to a DEFEAT on someone else's. Hennepin rubbed her eyes under her glasses and took a sip of her water.

She noticed Clair and pulled down her headphones.

"Wondered why my chat blew up." She exited the VICTORY screen and queued up for a new game. SEARCHING FOR OPPONENTS NOW, read the screen.

"Your chat?"

"My chat wants to know if you're my lesbian lover, and/or cosplaying Irisviel von Einzbern."

"I am a trifle confused," said Clair.

Hennepin tapped a tiny circle above her monitor. "You're on camera, boss. Twenty thousand watching. Look pretty."

Clair endeavored to always, ahem, "look pretty," so she did not change her demeanor or adjust her outfit. "I will disregard your usual jargon and strike at the heart of the matter, as I have no wish to remain here after nightfall. A pair of strong Magical Girls from the west have invaded the city—"

"Whoa shut up, I told you people are watching." She pressed a button to mute her microphone. "Now they really will think you're cosplaying."

"A pair of strong Magical Girls from the west have invaded the city. They slashed Woodbury's throat with a dagger that seems to nullify all healing. As you are the strongest healer in the region, I ask you to take a look at the wound and see if there is anything you can do for her."

The screen on Hennepin's screen changed and she plunged into a full scale warzone. Her player avatar—an orc or troll of some kind—pummeled passerby with a cartoonish club.

"Bzzrt, no can do," said Hennepin. The gory game sounds filtered from her headphones. "See what I'm doing right now? I'm working. Gotta pay the bills, you know? I got seven bloodthirsty sponsors to sate with an eight-hour-a-day streaming quota. Plus twenty thousand adoring fans and their delectable cash money donations to the GamGrill305 Get Paid Foundation. When I'm done, I gotta hunt."

Her orc walloped an elf into the stratosphere. KILLING SPREE, a deadpan announcer intoned.

"This seems a highly unorthodox way to accumulate funds," said Clair.

Hennepin shrugged. "Beats prostitution. Or whatever Ramsey's got Woodsy and Anoka doing."

"My point stands. The attack on Woodbury constitutes an act of open war on the part of our attackers. It is your duty as a girl of this city—"

"Whoa now boss." Hennepin scored a touchdown using an adversary's head as a baseball. "My duty? I signed a contract and nowhere did it say I gotta do jack shit for this city. I kill wraiths, I spread joy. Right now I'm spreading a whole lotta joy to my loyal subscribers. Oh, and if you want me to do something for you, don't send St. Paul next time? Had her ugly ass stuttering at me and driving away viewers. Had to shoo her out of camera range and even then who the fuck knows what she said."

KILLUMINATI, said the announcer.

"Hear that, Em? Your overbearing whiteness has summoned the illuminati. They're now here to lynch every girl of color in the city, which happens to be almost all of them. Great going!"

The unfortunate downside to communicating with Hennepin was that half the things she said made zero sense whatsoever. Clair folded her arms and exhaled a well-practiced sigh, the kind of sigh that indicates patient exasperation. She knew going in that Hennepin would be one of the more difficult girls to sway to her cause, in fact the most difficult barring Ramsey. Clair disliked long conversations and debates, especially those where all counterarguments could be predicted ahead of time. Fortunately, she knew how to deal with Hennepin.

"I care little for your apathy and selfishness. I hired you for your technical prowess and magical potential, but your general contrariness and—"

Hennepin smashed another digital person. "Yeeeeeeeah, no. Not feeling it, Irisviel. Get someone else to find your grail."

"Quit calling me that."

VICTORY flashed on Hennepin's screen. She took a sip of water and beamed at Clair, her face aglow with smugness. "Aw, does it annoy you, Em? What a pity, you'd think a girl like you would be above sticks and stones and all that schoolkid crap."

Clair was above "all that schoolkid crap." The moniker irked her not in the slightest, nor would it even if she knew the reference behind the name in the first place. However, Hennepin was not above such pettiness. Hennepin believed herself a smart girl. Smarter than all around her, including Clair. It emboldened her to demean others, to estrange them, to set herself alone and superior. Her every action, her calculated apathy, her non sequiturs, all served a single purpose of bolstering self-esteem, which for a vain and idiotic girl like Hennepin could only be attained at the expense of others. Clair had Hennepin mapped, much as she had all her girls mapped, knew each one's desires, needs, prejudices, and hatreds.

Knowing such things allowed her to control them, even if they did not believe themselves controlled—the best form of control.

Clair allowed her stoic exterior to waver. She unfolded her hands, let them fall to her sides. She lowered her head slightly, exaggerated the tendency of her eyes to avoid contact, and thus defer supremacy to her conversational partner. She twisted her mouth with well-practiced muscle spasms to give the merest hint of a frown.

"I apologize." She imbued her voice with a subtle vulnerability. "I did not mean to pressure you into joining me. I came to you, Hennepin, because I." Tactical pause. "Because I'm frightened. These girls who have invaded the city are quite powerful, more than I expected. With Woodbury hurt, I needed someone to help..." She allowed her voice to taper into silence, allowed Hennepin to fill the void with her own thoughts, surely informed by self-aggrandizement.

The overarching thrust of their conversation thus went from initial tension to outright conflict, followed by swift deferment on Clair's part in order to establish Hennepin as the conversational "victor." From such a standpoint, emphasized psychologically by the word VICTORY confronting Hennepin from her monitor, Hennepin would, ironically, do everything Clair wanted her to do.

Sure enough: Hennepin softened. The leering smugness left her face, replaced by a genuine smile. Because, as Clair had learned from her former friend Sloan Redfearn, girls of such personality often affected benevolence toward those who ratified their self-perceptions.

"Okay, okay, no need to start crying about it." Hennepin closed her game and performed every action, said every word Clair expected her to say. "I'll take a look at Woodbury. You guys get all worked up over such stupid stuff, I'm sure it's an easy fix."

Clair smiled. "Thank you, Hennepin."

Hennepin's magic failed to heal Woodbury, as Clair had suspected and desired. Failure, for a girl like Hennepin, was a challenge to her ego, and for those desperate to protect such a fragile thing no challenge could go unmet. Despite Hennepin's lazy and apathetic way of saying it ("Yeah, I guess I'll see what these girls are about"), Clair knew she had another ally to bolster her ranks. Four down; two to go.

Apollo Apollo My Destroyer

Night fell, snow fell, and still no Eden Prairie. They traversed some urban fringe, a ventricle of the metropolitan core, the skyscrapers and the Pillar of the Plains aflame in the starless night. Sloan led them through an alley of frosted cars with a magic light. Its shine crept into crevices to terrify rats and wraiths.

Delaney lurched through the snow and landed on thinly-padded knees. Her mouth billowed white breath.

"It's not working, love." She pushed herself up and scampered after Sloan's undeterred march. "We need shelter. Warmth? A place to sleep? A pair of popsicles won't stop Clair Ibsen!"

The thought of another motel churned Sloan's stomach. With Clair's familiar on the prowl (and unseeable in the dark sky), they shouldn't pin themselves to a stationary locale. Too bad Master Tactician Delaney Pollack cared more about comfort than strategy.

"We'd do well to take some time and reassess the situation," Delaney continued. "Clair's revealed three of the six girls she might throw at us—"

"Not three of six. Three of an indeterminate number. Omaha is not a suburb of Minneapolis."

"The point stands. We're blundering into a confrontation, love! Clair has done her homework. She surely has traps set. Not to mention, you've yet to give me a viable strategy for the disc girl. Whoever she is, she won't disappear if we ignore her!"

Sloan tightened her hands into fists. The light in her palm extinguished. "I know."

The street, lit only by flickering posts and vague neon signs, became a cavern of Pluto. An ominous gurgle rose from the shadows, where eyeless faces watched.

"What are you doing, love? I'd rather not tussle with wraiths right now."

Nothing in the sky except falling snow. Could birds see in the dark? She supposed magical birds could. But sight was not Clair Ibsen's forte. More likely, her familiar relied more on sound. With this in mind, Sloan summoned her gun and battered down the door of the nearest store as quietly as possible. Which was not very quiet, admittedly.

Although the store's windows were covered and graffiti festered across its façade, an alarm went off.

"What! Sloan, have you gone daft?"

Sloan evaporated her gun and slouched down the sidewalk. "You wanted a place to stay." She called a fresh ball of light as they fled the scene. No concerned citizens stuck heads out unlit windows to check what was amiss.

"You're not thinking rationally, dear. Not at all! You want us to sleep in an abandoned store? Smashing down doors with no rhyme, no reason!"

Great. Delaney had more fuel for her incessant whining. More reason to paint Sloan as a raving lunatic. Sloan tried to calm herself. But her annoyance with Delaney fermented into a faint hopelessness that Clair really did have the upper hand, had preempted her arrival, had hired girls specifically to counter her powers, had the entire situation under her puppetry. Sloan lacked control even of her own obnoxious companion.

But Sloan did not kill a fucking wraith demigod to assault Minneapolis with a negative attitude. Unclutter the mind and achieve clarity of thought, clarity of purpose. She had the power to accomplish anything. She closed her eyes and allowed the rage to boil, simmer, and settle. She had too much hate for Clair Ibsen to waste any on Delaney. Delaney meant well, in her strange desperate way.

The alarm dwindled into a distant peal. "Fine," said Sloan. "We'll find a motel."

All motels are the same place. The same layout, the same amenities. Only the age, the disuse, the muck changes. The fare for one night this deep in the unwanted part of the city cost little. Delaney paid out of her heart-shaped wallet. Which begged the question: for a girl with a cruddy family who seemed to live on her own, where did she get her money?

Better not to ask.

Delaney declared her desire for a hot shower, "to thaw". Whatever. Sloan disregarded Delaney's disregard for gravitas and sat on her bed.

Bloomington was unchanged. Her powers potent, but uncreative. Sloan beat her with raw magic. Virtually irrelevant.

Woodbury was annoying, but unthreatening. Delaney may have dealt her a grievous wound depending on how pertinent shouting ABRACADABRA and HOCUS POCUS was to her combat prowess. Some girls got so hung up on magic words and names of finishers they developed psychological dependencies, as though the words themselves were their power. A fatal mistake.

Silver disc girl was. Something. Reflective barriers. Shit. She could use a lot of them, weaponize them, do some flashy shit. Think, Sloan. How can you get around the barriers.

She had been thinking the whole damn walk from Anoka County. And thought of nothing. She racked her brains, pounded her wrists against her skull. Catalogued all of her and Delaney's powers and tried to conceive a conjunction to emerge victorious. The girl had to have a weakness, a gap in her barrier powers. No barrier was infallible. All broke given enough force. The issue was Sloan would destroy herself before she destroyed the barrier,

thanks to its reflective properties. If Delaney used her barrier—but a barrier prevented Sloan from shooting. She could not simultaneously attack and defend, even assuming perfect coordination between her and Delaney.

Steam billowed from under the bathroom door as Delaney's shower ran. The hiss infiltrated Sloan's inner sanctum, disrupted her thoughts. She got up and left the motel room, wandered up and down beneath the awnings that lined the empty parking lot and pavilion. Kept watch for birds and silver disc girls.

And thought.

And thought.

And thought.

The discs, unlike Delaney's bubbles, defended only one side. They did not surround entirely—unless silver disc girl had not revealed all her capabilities in their brief skirmish, a reasonable possibility. But the shape of the discs, flat and round and unbending, indicated their inability to form a complete sphere of defense. Which meant, rather than go through—yes, yes, Sloan was thinking now, problem solving—she should focus on going around. *Around* the barriers! Avoid them entirely!

A Clair Ibsen strategy. If you cannot overpower, avoid. Delaney's bubbles could reflect Sloan's magic to an extent. If she placed them strategically, Sloan could angle her light *around* the barriers.

She did a little jump and pumped her fist and nearly slipped on a patch of ice. It only took several hours of concentrated brainstorming, but Sloan had done it. She had figured out a solution! She had found a way to nullify another of Clair's arsenal. She had to tell Delaney, before she forgot—she cradled the precious idea in her mind, chanted it in her brain to remember: AROUND. AROUND. AROUND. So simple, so elegant a solution! Why had it taken so long to figure out? Who cared. She clomped toward the door of the motel room, which had drifted far away from her. When Delaney heard—

Sloan stopped. A thin trickle of blood dribbled down the door and formed a half-frozen pool at its base. She regarded the fresh blood for a moment before she realized its source.

"Omaha."

The girl melded out of nothingness, her head bowed and her arms twisted in front of her. A sleeve of bandages covered her arm but did nothing to stem the bright red stream. Blood in various states of dryness had found its way onto her austere, stiff-necked blouse, the hem of her dress, the toes of her shoes. She fiddled with the wrist, kneaded her fingers against the wound.

"I... Hello, Sloan..."

Although nothing in Omaha's demeanor denoted aggression, Sloan slid a hand into her pocket and thumbed her Soul Gem. She shifted her eyes around the enclosed motel compound for

other Ibsen goons.

"How long you been following me."

Omaha scratched the back of her neck with her wounded hand, getting more blood on herself. She realized her mistake and lowered her hand, shamefaced. "Since the fight at the bookstore. I... I made it to Minneapolis before you. I tracked the girls Minneapolis sent for you..."

"So Clair sent you."

"N, no! I didn't mean that. I never went back to her... I swear... I've been quiet..."

"Then what."

Sloan waited while Omaha fumbled over words. She prohibited herself from trusting Omaha, who had a powerful incentive to kill the girl whose magic kept her wrist drenched in blood.

"I, I know you won't believe me, but, but that's okay... I want to help you."

"You're right, I don't believe you. Why would you want to help me."

Omaha bit her lip. Her face concentrated. "I, I, I... You... You didn't kill me..."

Sloan's eyes narrowed. "I didn't kill you. So now you want to help me. Excuse me if I don't buy it. Isn't Clair Ibsen your best friend anyway?"

More stammers, more fidgets. Omaha glanced over her shoulder with a sudden stare of paranoia. "No... It's not like that. I knew you wouldn't understand, or believe me. Forget I ever spoke to you..."

She disappeared. Sloan reached out and grabbed where she had stood. Her hand latched onto the edge of a fleeing collar and pulled Omaha back toward her.

"Yeah, no. I'm not gonna forget. Reappear and talk to me."

Omaha did as bidden, her face flush.

"I, I'm sorry, please let go... I made a mistake revealing myself..."

"Suppose I believe you," said Sloan. Which she didn't. In fact, best to eliminate Omaha completely, finish what she started in that pit in Williston. Which she wouldn't. "Suppose I believe you, how do you intend to help me?"

She tightened her grip on Omaha and pulled her close, so the girl might not wriggle free and escape.

"I, I, I can't tell you."

"Yes you can."

Omaha trembled beneath Sloan's grip. The small, cold body writhed against her. A tiny heart pounded in a hollow chest, black eyes widened in their sockets.

Her voice fell to a whisper.

"Sloan... You're in more danger than you know. This is not... This is not merely... There's more at stake than this city. The world, the universe..."

"The world," said Sloan. "The universe." She held Omaha close and stared at the phantasmic Pillar of the Plains that presided in the distance. "I care about neither."

World and Universe were Incubator code words that ostensibly meant everything but actually meant nothing. They were words to sway weak-willed girls who sought a deeper purpose than the one their infinitesimal existences allowed. Entropy, thermodynamics, inevitable heat death, all a lot of pseudoscientific mumbo jumbo. Delaney had babbled similar things, and now Omaha bought into the hype as well.

"Oh, I should have kept my mouth shut... I've made a big mistake, please let me go..."

"Fat chance." Every logical metric hollered kill this bitch, and yet it seemed like such an impossibility, as though Sloan's body would physically shut down before she could crush such a downtrodden and pathetic creature. Remember, she's dangerous. But how could she be, when Sloan could wrap her arms around her and threaten to squish her like an insect? "Who fed you this universe garbage? Kyubey? Or Clair?"

"An emissary of God," said Omaha with odd rigidity.

"Cool," said Sloan. "How's God doing, by the way? Up to any crazy shenanigans? He sure forgot about us down here long ago."

"I... I... Well... God is a girl..."

Sloan regretted asking. God is a girl? So Omaha had her own apocryphal mythos now, too? The femgod bit had to come from Omaha herself, it was not something Clair would make up. Clair was too efficient with the details of her lies, too focused to revel in oddities.

With a sigh, she released Omaha. Omaha stared at her openmouthed as if surprised to be released, and then shuffled against the wall. "Th, thank you..."

"Omaha, please listen to me. I know Clair's your friend. I know you probably have not too many friends, so you want to do anything to help her. But come on. This is going to be violent. People will die. I don't want to kill you, Omaha."

Omaha bowed her head. "That's, that's why I want to help you, Sloan. I... I know this sounds creepy, but I've watched you for a long time, and I think I know you pretty well... You don't have many friends either, and the one you travel with... You shouldn't trust her."

"Why? What's wrong with Delaney?" Wait, did she really just ask *What's wrong with Delaney* as though it were a legitimate question?

Omaha's brow furrowed and she raised her eyes to look Sloan in the face. "She is not what she seems. I heard her tell you about the girl she murdered. She acts like she's truthful with you, but she does that to conceal the things she *really* doesn't want to say. She is a wicked girl, Sloan. You cannot trust her."

"I don't trust her," said Sloan. Immediately she wondered how true that was. All her plans kinda operated under the assumption Delaney helped out.

Omaha melded back into the folds between reality, her body disappearing into the wall and leaving only her blood behind. Enough of it had dropped for a murder scene.

"Think about what I told you." Omaha's voice grew fainter. "I'm here to help. You must be careful—a being beyond your comprehension seeks your death. A time-devouring demon has sent a Terminatrix after you... Be careful..."

The drip-drip of her blood marked her exit along the length of the motel compound. Her voice, already quiet, faded into nothingness, and no footprints emerged in the snow beside the crimson splotches. Soon only the whistle of wind and a distant car alarm stirred the snowy night.

Sloan stared up and regarded the sky. The last warning rang in her ears. From the odd utterings of demons and unfathomable beings she gleaned the critical word: Terminatrix. The girls Kyubey hired to eliminate the girls Kyubey disliked. Ostensibly, the murderous and deranged ones.

The murderous. And the deranged.

Sloan swung her fist into the steel pole supporting the motel awning. The numb pain traveled up her arm into her shoulder, where the impact was eventually absorbed, although not before she scraped off the skin on her knuckles and left a bloody imprint on the pole.

The murderous! And the deranged!

That FUCKING Kyubey. That little fuck! That rat bastard, that jailbait pimp, that reprehensible abomination, that existential blight! He had promised—PROMISED—that if she went to Williston, if she killed his archon, he would give her the opportunity to kill Clair Ibsen. He had said THOSE VERY WORDS in her apartment in Fargo, had used them to cajole her into action, and now! And now! Now he sent a Terminatrix to stop her! Some opportunity, Kyubey! What specific probability of success constituted an "opportunity"?

Sloan sagged against the pole and pounded her head against it. Her rage swelled inside her, bloated her, made it difficult to think, difficult to do anything but silently shriek slow and breathy over the tongue she ground between her teeth. Blood from the mangled organ rolled down her lower lip and off her chin. She dug her fingernails into the skin of her arms to tear at the worthless flesh inside.

Why did Clair get away with nearly killing Sloan, why did she get rewarded and lauded, but when Sloan returned, returned after SO MUCH SHIT to get there, she could not even CONFRONT Clair before Kyubey sent his Magical Girl Assassins to gun her down. Where

was the justice! What law presided over this shitty system, who made these rules? Was it enough for Sloan to ask for a little fairness—just a little fairness—to do unto Clair what she had tried to do to Sloan? Her trembling hands clawed at her throat. She wanted to open her body, dispose of all her bones and innards, resolve herself into a blob of worthless meat. If the celestial sphere had set itself against her, had DETERMINED to make her LOSE at every turn, why not? Why fucking not? Why bother? Why let them use her body and her soul, enslave it and work it and squeeze it for an extra inch of energy, just so they could taunt her with relief and trounce her when she so much as reached for it?

Her fingers closed around her own esophagus. The futility of the gesture defeated her. No matter what damage she inflicted on herself, Delaney would emerge to fix her.

Remember, Sloan: The second mistake you made in your duel with Clair. Getting mad.

Maybe Omaha lied. Clair sent her, not to fight Sloan, but to rile her up. Maybe Omaha was simply bonkers. Whatever you have to tell yourself, tell it. Remain level. No tilt, no slide. Drain the choler. Restore balance among the humors.

With torturous slowness her heartrate returned to normal. She licked the skinned knuckles and spat the blood onto the patio to mingle with Omaha's. Omaha, and Clair through proxy of Omaha, had reason to lie, but Kyubey had reason to be a giant fucking cock for no reason. Sloan had to prepare for the possibility of a Terminatrix entering the mix. But even a single thought of Kyubey's fucking face stirred ire inside her, so she switched tactics, reframed the issue: Clair hired a Terminatrix. Ignore the illogic of it, ignore the impossibility (only Kyubey controlled such girls), but accept it as fact so as not to succumb beneath the crushing weight of a universe hell-bent on her death.

Back to Terminatrixes, or whatever the fuck the plural was. They were elusive, rarely associated with regular Magical Girls, so Sloan only had snatches of information to form a knowledge base, most founded on rumor. They took names from the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area to strike fear into the hearts of lesser girls. They weren't from Los Angeles (nobody was—they didn't call it *Where Magical Girls Go to Die* for no reason), they had no home, they were nomads. They went where the work went. Their work was to kill the girls Kyubey didn't like. Ostensibly murderers, psychos, slavers. But basically anyone Kyubey found inefficient.

(That was the reason. Kyubey hired her because she had hoarded a lot of cubes to waste against Clair, not wraiths. Effectively sapping that energy from the hope/despair cycle. If Sloan believed that were the reason, she could stomach it.)

Terminatrixes were all borderline murderers, psychos, and slavers themselves. Odd and antisocial girls. They had powers bad for wraiths but good for Magical Girls. Usually stuff borne from jealousy.

When Sloan ruled Minneapolis and killed a girl from Chicago who wanted to take over, there was talk of Terminatrixes. But Kyubey ruled self-defense. A just murder.

And was Clair Ibsen not a just—No, forget it. Forget it, Sloan, focus on the realities of here and now. The facts.

Fuck it, fuck the facts. She knew jack dick about Terminatrixes and how they operated in the field. She would ask Delaney about it. Delaney probably knew a lot about them.

She tromped back to the motel door, having wandered away during her mental rant. The key rattled in the door and she stepped inside.

Delaney lay on Sloan's bed, wearing very little.

"Sloan love, let's try some sexual therapy."

A furious scream caught in Sloan's throat, gagged by the perfume that suffocated the room. She rasped: "Put your fucking clothes on."

"I'm serious, love!" She brushed back her hair in a gesture Sloan supposed was intended to look sexy. "It's clear to me you're dealing with extreme frustrations stemming from your lack of close personal relationships and the underlying issues of trust you carry into every interaction with other human beings. A moment of boundless passion and innocent lust, in which you love and are loved in return, will help you leave behind your past experiences and forge new ones, with new ideas about the wonders life can bring! Whaddya say?"

"Put your fucking clothes on."

Delaney pulled herself onto her knees and leaned over the edge of the bed. "Come on, Sloan! Have you ever loved *anyone* before? We could die tonight, or tomorrow, or the next day. Do you wish to die so empty and alone?"

Her dead eyes brimmed with desperation. "You are a very sick person, Delaney," said Sloan.

"The only thing you have to sustain you is Clair Ibsen," said Delaney. "If not for her, you would have nothing, be nothing. What will you do when you kill her, love? What happens then?"

"Irrelevant." Sloan walked past Delaney's bed and went to her own. She sat on the opposite side, facing a window through which the signs of liquor stores and nightclubs paraded neon obscenities. She drew the blinds, sealing the light away save for a few narrow slats between the flimsy plastic.

She sat on the bed and untied her boots.

"You live only for revenge, love. There's nothing more. Can you not see how tragic that is? Why would you choose to live like that, why? We can leave, Sloan. Go anywhere in the world. Forget Clair ever existed."

Sloan removed the first boot, and then the other.

"You have so many advantages I never had. You were born with the ability to feel—why do you choose to ignore it?"

One by one she undid the buttons on her coat. "It's hard to take these pleas seriously when you claim you can't feel anything but act like you care about me."

The heater in the motel room did not run, even after Sloan fiddled with the knobs and levers. Well, fuck it. She pulled up the tucked covers of her bed and slid into the heatless pouch, using her jacket as an extra blanket. The pillow was rough and lumpy.

"I have to care, love. I have to try. You're on a path to destruction, and not just of yourself. When I killed my friend in Saskatchewan, the act birthed an archon. What do you think will happen when you kill—"

"Nothing. I am exacting justice. If an impartial god exists, he or she will know the truth. If not, nothing matters anyway. Turn off the light."

She rolled over in the bed to turn away from Delaney and wait for the subzero chill to subside before she could sleep. She prayed to Omaha's female god to shut Delaney the fuck up. And also prevent her from doing anything fucking weird, like slither into bed with Sloan or molest her in her sleep.

"If that's how you feel," said Delaney. "Very well."

The light turned off.

"Wake up," whispered a voice.

Sloan rolled over and swatted the annoyance. Her hand swished against the edge of something but the world lacked definition or focus. All remained dark and only faint silhouettes composed the space around her. Lumps, bulges, lines. A nightstand, a bathroom door. The bed opposite hers, where Delaney tossed restlessly.

She rubbed her eyes. If Delaney was asleep, then who...? A dream?

"You're in danger," the voice whispered again. Sloan knew that voice. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed the long dark splotches that coated the floor between the beds, shiny in the lines of light that filtered through the blinds.

An invisible arm wrapped around her chest and forced her down as a tremendous gunshot shattered the window. The blinds came crashing down as Delaney rose with a shriek and the unseen force pulled Sloan off the bed. Glass hailed over her as Sloan cast off the invisible girl (how did Omaha even get in the room) and groped for her coat, which had her Soul Gem. The coat was bunched with the other disheveled sheets and blankets. She seized a sleeve and tugged and fell back with the coat in her arms.

In the empty windowpane stood an extraordinarily tall figure, despite its hunched back and slumped shoulders, with its overlong arms hung in front of it. Sloan blinked. A wraith? Its face buzzed with static, beneath which flat and gray skin flickered. It wore no monkish robes, instead some kind of skintight bodysuit—but Sloan had little time to analyze the outfit, for it

raised one of its long arms and aimed a silver revolver at her head. The figure drew back the hammer and the barrel span with a click.

Delaney swung her staff and summoned a bubble around the attacker. She leapt onto Sloan's bed, brushed back the folds of her gown, and drew her red dagger. "Hurry and transform," she said. "This one is—"

The revolver fired. The bullet pierced Delaney's bubble and sailed into her chest. She toppled off the bed. Sloan rolled out of the way to avoid her.

"Oof." Delaney placed a hand to her chest, but she had no wound, no blood.

"It missed?" said Sloan.

The gun fumed as the figure turned its metallic face toward Sloan. It was not a wraith, the torso beneath the bodysuit was obviously female. A Magical Girl wearing a mask—a mask that imitated a wraith. The figure uttered a low, synthetic growl, like the screech of a dying computer. With jerky, mechanical motions, it placed its hands against its head and snapped its own neck. The wraith mask ratcheted to the side until the entire head turned half a revolution, like an owl or an invertebrate, and a new face moved to the front. The face was of Delaney Pollack.

It drew back the hammer of its revolver and aimed at Sloan.

In the time it took for the thing to change its face, Sloan found her gem. She transformed into her Magical Girl self, the machine gun already whirring, and launched a full volley at the masked girl, her rev time shortened by the excess power brimming inside her.

In front of the girl appeared another of Delaney's bubbles. Sloan's magic bashed against it and flew in every direction. Light cut through walls, ceilings, beds, floors, sprayed plaster and debris everywhere. A ray cut through Sloan's knee and another grazed her back.

"WHAT THE FUCK," she screamed at Delaney as she took a hard knee among the debris of the room.

Delaney stared back aghast. "I didn't—I didn't!" Her hands gesticulated.

The bubble burst. The figure, its face still Delaney, aimed the revolver at Sloan's face.

With an inhuman voice, it spoke.

"SLOAN REDFEARN OF FARGO, NORTH DAKOTA. YOU HAVE BEEN FOUND GUILTY OF BREACH OF CONTRACT. YOUR LIFE IS FORFEIT, SURRENDER NOW AND PRAY FOR ATONEMENT. IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS PLEASE ASK YOUR DESIGNATED TERMINATRIX. WHICH IS ME."

"I got a fucking question," said Sloan. "What clause in my contract did I breach? Eh? Tell me that, robo-bitch!"

"THE QUESTION PART WAS A JOKE. I DON'T ACTUALLY GIVE A SHIT. BEEP BOOP PREPARE TO DIE."

A disembodied splatter of blood rose from beside the bed and reared at the Terminatrix. The Terminatrix promptly span her revolver around in her hand and clobbered the air beside her with its butt. Omaha grunted and her unseen body staggered into the closet in a catastrophe of coat hangers.

"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU. NOBODY TOLD ME ABOUT YOU."

"Omaha," said Delaney, as though she only now realized.

"WHAT. OMAHA. DID YOU SAY OMAHA? THAT'S NOT THE GIRL IN OMAHA. I KNOW THE GIRL IN OMAHA, SHE DOESN'T TURN INVISIBLE. WHAT IS THIS VOODOO BULLSHIT, BEEP BOOP."

A few more coat hangers toppled from the rack.

"WHATEVER. ERROR 404 FUCKS NOT FOUND. GIRL WHO IS NOT OMAHA, I HAVE NO ORDERS TO TERMINATE YOU. BUT IMPERSONATING ANOTHER MAGICAL GIRL CAN BE GROUNDS FOR TERMINATION, SO I SUGGEST YOU VAMANOS AND OPT FOR A NAME CHANGE. NOW MY COOL SPIEL IS RUINED, THANKS TO—"

Sloan had enough of this bitch. She dropped her gun, threw her hands in front of her, and summoned a blast of pure light from her fingertips. The Terminatrix surrounded herself in another bubble, but Sloan did not mean to wound—she meant to blind. As the room filled with a single white pulse, she seized Delaney's wrist and hobbled for the door, her leg injured but workable. She fumbled blindly over the remains of Delaney's bed and found the exit.

They burst through the door and limped into the cold. Whether the Terminatrix followed or remained in her bubble, Sloan had no idea. She dragged Delaney with her, Delaney also favoring a bloodied foot.

"Heal us," Sloan hissed. "Hurry!"

"I, I can't," said Delaney. "My magic—it's not working!"

Sloan slipped over the ice but forged onward into the blizzard. Her untied boots wobbled around her feet. "What does that mean?"

"When she shot me—I can't—Oh god, oh god, this is so bad, love. So bad."

"No bubbles? No healing?"

"I've been trying for the last thirty seconds, NOTHING IS HAPPENING."

Oh shit. Oh fuck. The Terminatrix, her mask, her bubbles... When she shot Delaney, she stole her power.

Sloan glanced over her shoulder. Purlblind from snow, she caught a shady figure slumping out the motel door. Sloan swiveled back and fired, and another of Delaney's bubbles went up around the Terminatrix. In the open space, with more distance between them, the ricochet did little damage. Sloan released her gun and commanded it to maintain its position, suppressing the Terminatrix from movement with an endless deluge of fire. She seized a falling Delaney and dragged her through the snow.

The blizzard wind buffeted her face. Her unbuttoned coat flapped around her, unable to shield her from the freeze. The temperature had to be subzero, possibly by a good margin, a vortex of cold descending on the city and its distant towers. She pressed for the edge of the motel complex, the opening in a horseshoe of double-decker rooms wrapped around the pavilion. The wind beat them back, tried to deny them progress toward the exit, the elements themselves conspiring against them. Sloan roared into the gale and surged forward, Delaney sliding behind her attached to a dangly arm.

Delaney shouted something swallowed beneath the wind.

"WHAT!" Sloan shouted back.

"SHE'S MOVING FORWARD!"

Sloan looked back. The Terminatrix had replaced her single bubble with three smaller ones, which swirled in front of her to catch the spray of Sloan's gun while affording the Terminatrix forward movement, which she managed with lithe, acrobatic leaps and cartwheels between the barriers. She moved a lot quicker than Sloan and useless deadweight Delaney.

The wind bellowed as they limped through the opening of the motel pavilion and entered the alien landscape of downtown Minneapolis. No sign of human life anywhere between the metal facades. Sloan heaved Delaney back to her feet and let her run on her own.

Where do we go, said Delaney, apparently remembering telepathy was a thing.

Sloan led them across the street. She summoned a new gun, which caused the one inside the motel courtyard to disappear, but it had served its function. She aimed at the pavilion entrance, but no sound or movement came.

That's the only exit from the motel, said Sloan. *We hold this point until morning if we fucking need to.*

She took the opportunity to button her coat. The Terminatrix did not come.

She's finding another way, said Delaney.

There is no other way.

Love, there's emergency exits everywhere, you can't build a place with only one exit anymore!

Sloan wiped an accumulation of frost from her brow. Snow coated her shoulders and hair. Delaney hid behind Sloan, her hair pure white, somewhat reminiscent of Clair Ibsen.

A few seconds of waiting and Sloan got anxious. She reconsidered the idea of holding the motel entrance until morning. By morning the blood in their veins would be frozen. However, she stood by the tactical concept of maintaining a defensive location. The Terminatrix demonstrated faster mobility in the snow, mobility never being a Sloan Redfearn strongpoint anyway. And given the profession, a Terminatrix probably excelled at hunting girls on the run. But she had stolen a defensive power, not offensive, which meant she had little ability to siege.

Good, good, this was the on-the-fly strategizing Sloan needed more often. She mentally patted herself on the back and considered their options.

On their side of the street, a series of four- or five-story tenements formed a bulwark against the brunt of the wind. Shitty apartments only had two ways in and out: the door and the window. Scaling a five-story building in this weather was possible, but took time. With Delaney watching the window and Sloan entrenched at the door...

"INSIDE!" she shouted as she pulled Delaney toward the closest tenement. No clue if it were occupied or abandoned.

She tried the glass front door: locked. Easily remedied by a boot through the pane. As she fumbled for the latch, Delaney tugged on her collar. "Watch out!"

Sloan looked back in time to see the Terminatrix pirouette off the roof of the motel complex. Three bubbles spawned in front of her, which she bounded across like platforms with unreal agility. After the last bubble, she swan dived forward, her revolver aimed at Sloan's head. Sloan seized Delaney and pulled her in front. Delaney's head snapped back and Sloan dragged her inside as the Terminatrix landed near the edge of the street.

The catacomb interior of the tenement had power, which meant people lived here. Woodbury was not around this time to razzle dazzle onlookers, so anything they did was public. Sloan gave zero shits about the propriety of Magical Girl secrecy, but the Terminatrix, more directly aligned with Kyubey, might.

Except as they clattered up the lean and wooden stairwell, the Terminatrix sprinted after them. Sloan had still not tied her goddam boots and she hobbled up the uneven steps. They passed the second floor, the third. The confined passage played to their advantage: they only needed to stay slightly ahead of the Terminatrix to round a corner and keep out of her firing line.

Between the third and fourth floor they passed a vagrant smoking on the steps. He lifted a head with a forlorn Vikings hat and opened his mouth to mutter something as Sloan heaved him down the stairs. The Terminatrix rounded a corner and collided with him and they both collapsed.

They tromped to the fifth floor. The stairs kept going but probably to a roof, which was the worst possible place to go. Good, good, keep thinking about these things, keep understanding possibilities and consequences. Sloan yanked Delaney's wrist and they stumbled into a short hallway of four doors.

She kicked in the first door and a grandmother on a sofa screamed. "You saw nothing!" Sloan yelled before running for the second door and smashing it open.

The second room seemed empty, with a barren square space furnished by a single dusty table. Sloan flung Delaney inside and tried to shut the door, but she had mangled the bolt and it only butted against the frame. At the end of the hall, the Terminatrix emerged.

"Stay the fuck there," said Sloan. She covered herself in the doorframe. "I'll fucking shoot, you want civs involved?"

She tilted her head just enough out the frame to check that the Terminatrix had stopped.

"Grandma next door already saw us," Sloan added. "And the vagrant in the stairwell. Police gonna come, you wanna get involved in that shit?"

The Terminatrix said nothing. Only stood there. From the first room, the grandmother made muffled sobs.

"Come on, let's fucking tango," said Sloan. "Let's fucking dance. Let's tear this fucking apartment to the *ground*, you hear me? I don't give a single fucking SHIT how many fucker apartments I gotta level. Let's fucking do it."

For another moment, the Terminatrix stood in silence. Then, without a word, she slowly backed up, turned, and disappeared down the stairwell.

The grandma continued to cry.

Sloan settled back with a sigh. The Terminatrix might not be done, might only be considering a new option, but at least she had a chance to catch her breath. She pointed for Delaney to watch the snow-streaked window, but Delaney was already there, staring into the snowstorm. Good, she wasn't totally worthless.

"Can you heal, are only your barriers gone?"

"I can't do anything," she said.

"What about the dagger?"

"I have it still."

"But does it work? Does it prevent healing?"

Delaney shrugged. "Omaha still bled, so."

A fair point. Sloan probably should have told her about Omaha beforehand. She tried to remember why she hadn't. Oh yeah, because of the sexual proposition. That happened. Sloan quickly forgot it did.

She had better shit to think about anyway. They had holed up in an abandoned apartment but undoubtedly the police were coming. The weather made travel difficult and if they tried to

escape they opened themselves to an ambush. They could neither stay nor leave.

The grandmother in the adjacent room never stopped crying.

"Um, love?" said Delaney.

Sloan turned. Perched on the window, braving the blizzard, its plumage streaked with snow, sat a large raven that stared at them with beady eyes.

Shit.

A Visit from the Goon Squad

Sloan hefted her gun and aimed at Clair's bird, but it took wing with a caw and soared into the storm before she could fire. She threw down her gun in disgust and smashed a dent in the wood floor.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." She swung a foot to knock a leg off of the table that comprised the sole furniture in the room. "We need to move."

"Calm down, love," said Delaney. "Calm down, calm down."

"Calm down!" Sloan seized her by the collar. "You have no fucking powers, Delaney! We're stuck on the fifth floor of some fucking apartment in the middle of a goddam icestorm and we got not only a Terminatrix but Clair and her fucking army knowing exactly where we are and what kind of fucking position we're in, and—"

"Watch out!" said Delaney.

Sloan turned in time to take a frying pan to the face. Pain bloomed across her face as she staggered into the corner of the room. Her back struck the wall and she slid to her ass.

"Get back!" said Delaney to the crazed madwoman that charged her. The woman swung the pan again with surprising force. Delaney dipped to the side to evade the blow.

"I'll knock yer blocks off," said the old woman. "Breaking into MY home, shooting guns in MY home, I'll knock you to bits!"

"Please calm down dear, it's a misunderstanding, we made a mistake—"

The old woman struck Delaney in the side to render her words no more than a breathless gasp. She raised the pan to bash open Delaney's skull, but Sloan leapt up and levied a punch straight to the small of her back. The arthritic thing froze as her body locked down, stood statuesque for a moment, and toppled to the ground. Upon impact she shriveled into no more than a bathrobe.

Sloan massaged her jaw and spit blood.

"We fucking move," she told Delaney. "We blast our way out and regroup."

"Regroup where?"

"Uh." Sloan rammed a fist against her uncooperative and throbbing brain. "Regroup. Regroup in... I don't fucking know! Regroup SOMEWHERE."

Delaney shook her head. "This isn't worth it, love. It's not worth it at all."

"You are exceptionally calm for having NO POWERS."

"I am not one to freak out. Someone must keep a cool head in desperate times. Please, allow me the task of strategizing. I'm useless otherwise. Is that all right?"

Sloan grabbed her gun from the ground and hoisted it against her hip. "Fine. Fine! Strategize away, Napoleon. Craft the perfect stratagem. Lemme hear it!"

At first, Delaney did not respond. She closed her eyes and pressed her fingertips together, exhaled, and affected a posture of empty serenity, her body straight and plain, the overwhelming whiteness of her outfit and her pale skin swallowing the dank tomb of the apartment. The whistle of wind against the window grew muted as Delaney fell deep into meditation, looking like something from an old Hindu text, an ascetic in repose. The intensity startled Sloan. She warily stepped back to check that nobody snuck up from the hallway.

The hallway stretched to the shadow of the stairwell, devoid of life.

When she turned back, Delaney opened her eyes. They had become a lambent crimson and blazed with severity.

"Our first priority is to kill the Terminatrix. Doing so will not only remove a dangerous unknown, but also restore my powers."

"Excellent strategy," said Sloan. "I never would've come up with that on my own!"

"But you did not come up with it, so the point is moot." Delaney stared at her, the rosy complexion and affable demeanor gone, leaving her skin pure and pale. "We ignore and avoid Clair Ibsen's underlings until the Terminatrix is dead."

"Okay, great. And how do we kill her? She can block and heal anything. I don't even know where her Soul Gem is, if she even has one."

"Of course she has one." Delaney's voice crept into monotone. She seemed to have changed into an entirely different person, her mannerisms and quirks replaced with a mannequin of thought and ingenuity, an inhuman golem constructed solely to conceive and design.

Something like Clair Ibsen.

"The Terminatrix is a Magical Girl. She has a Soul Gem. That kind of worthless comment is exactly the inept commentary we should strive to avoid. Furthermore, the Terminatrix having my powers is to our benefit, because I know exactly the counter."

"Enlighten me," said Sloan.

"Surprise. The unexpected. The things that cannot be predicted or planned. The wrinkles in the fabric. The problem is, Sloan Redfearn, you are not a surprising person. You do one thing. You have no further tricks."

Sloan said nothing.

"Therefore I propose two possible solutions to our quandary. Avenue One: You do as I suggested in Fargo and invent new ways to use your power with the excess energy you

received from the archon. I have little faith in your ability to do that. Avenue Two: Omaha."

"Omaha."

"Omaha was specifically added to this equation as an unknown. Regardless of whether Clair Ibsen sent her to Williston, her appearance was designed by the Incubator to confound the time-devouring demon who enslaves this universe."

More of this demon shit? What the fuck did any of it have to do with anything?

"You may not have realized, but Omaha is the reason the Terminatrix failed to slay you in that motel while you slept. She woke you, did she not? And distracted the Terminatrix long enough for you to launch a counteroffensive. She has saved you on multiple occasions during your adventure, yes?"

Sloan said nothing.

"Unfortunately, in saving you from initial assassination, she also partially revealed herself to the Terminatrix. Hence, the element of surprise is possibly lost. I doubt we can rely on her to surprise the Terminatrix more successfully than the first time."

"Okay." Sloan cracked her aching jaw. "So you have two possibilities, but both won't work. Great strategy."

"I doubt Omaha will work. I merely posited my doubt in your ability to adapt, not disbelief at its failure should you actually manage to do so. Basically, the onus is on you to conceive of a new technique effective enough to defeat the Terminatrix."

Fuck you, Delaney. Fuck you so much. Sloan drilled her eyes into the floor and tried to conceive a new technique, a surprising thing that could bypass a bubble of blood and nullify infinite self-healing. A new model of gun, a new way of shooting light. It was all she could think. Her arms shivered with rage and she gave up.

"Worthless! I can't think right now, I can't—"

Hey!

Delaney and Sloan exchanged a glance. Momentarily, Delaney seemed to snap from her trance.

Hey! Fargo and the crazy chick!

A telepathic voice, projected from afar. But how far? Sloan checked the window, checked the hallway. Nobody there.

Who are you? said Sloan.

Name's Hennepin. Pleased to make your acquaintance! I hear you're quite the handful. Nice job on Woodbury's throat, really shut her up for once. Props!

Hennepin. The voice was unfamiliar, so not the same Hennepin from when Sloan was here last.

What do you want? said Sloan.

Yeah, about that. You see, I kinda want to kill you both? And so do a few other people, who are here with me now. You're on the fifth floor, second apartment, right? Don't bother answering, I already know. Hope you're ready to get fucked, kids.

Is Regina-Saxophone there, said another voice. The high-pitched prepubescent voice of Woodbury. *Is she there? If you're there, if you're listening, I'm gonna get you for what you did to my neck. You better watch out!*

Sloan motioned to Delaney. It was time to move, while Clair's goons distracted themselves with aimless braggadocio. They must have the apartment complex surrounded. How many were there? Hennepin, Woodbury for sure. Probably Bloomington and the silver disc girl. Plus Clair herself.

Not to mention, a Terminatrix slinking around waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Delaney nodded and followed Sloan down the hallway. They crept carefully, checking the corner before descending.

"What will you do," said Delaney. "You cannot possibly fight them all at once. You had difficulty with the two earlier."

The point is, said Hennepin's voice, *We're coming for you. Prepare your collective rears for a nice reaming, okay?*

"I'll find a way," said Sloan. "I'll get creative." She did not feel particularly creative, but she felt mad as fuck. Felt like annihilating some bitches.

"They'll expect us to come down the stairs," said Delaney when they reached the third floor. "I propose an alternate route."

She tugged on Sloan's sleeve and indicated the window at the end of the third floor hallway. Wind howled across an empty black void. Sloan snarled and brushed Delaney out of the way as she went to the window and looked down. In front of the apartment entrance, two police cars blared red and blue lights. An officer in a furred coat shielded a walkie-talkie while maneuvering a lit cigarette masterfully in his other hand.

Across the street, at the entrance of the motel, the Terminatrix waited and watched through her Delaney mask. No sign of Clair or her girls, though.

From down the stairwell filtered the voices of men. Cops. They were getting louder and their footsteps pounded up the stairs.

"Shit," said Sloan. She was holding a rather large machine gun and did not feel like putting it away.

"I can handle this," said Delaney.

Delaney placed her palms against her cheeks and wrenched her neck to the side with an audible crack. Her eyes changed from red to blue and her cheeks went flush with rosy complexion. She assembled an expression of terror on her face, piecing the cues and subtleties in her features, moving one-by-one like a checklist. Mouth tilted downward: check. Eyes wide, brow furrowed: check. Hands held up, fingers hooked into trembling claws. She reverted to her civilian clothes in a flash and scampered toward the stairwell.

"Help, help! There's a girl with a gun!"

As if summoned by magic, two officers emerged from the floor below. The one in front, with a frosty mustache, caught the flailing Delaney in his arms.

"Whoa there missy, calm down now, you're safe with us." He nodded to his heavyset partner, who passed them with his gun drawn. "Now where's this girl, where did you see her?"

Delaney pressed her body against mustache cop and affected a snuffle. She aimed her twitching finger down the hall, toward Sloan. "Her. Her!"

Sloan barely had time to comprehend what the fuck Delaney was doing, because both mustache cop and fat partner pointed their guns and shouted FREEZE HANDS OVER YOUR HEAD in perfect unison. Sloan rammed her gun through the window and flung herself headlong down the side of the apartment complex.

Sorry, love! said Delaney's voice. *Had to get you out that window. Remember, ignore the others, kill the Terminatrix. I'll help as best I can!*

Sloan hit the roof of a police car and rolled forward to absorb the impact. She slid to a halt on the windshield, next to the baffled walkie-talkie cop. As he regained his senses and struggled with a holster strapped to his belt, Sloan decked him in the face and laid him flat in the snow.

Something in the sky glimmered. She rolled off the car as a spinning silver disc, nearly invisible from the front, plowed into the car and split the hood clean in half. Another disc whirred after it, forcing Sloan to dive forward to avoid decapitation, and a third soon followed. She staggered to her feet and sprinted through the snow to avoid the constant attacks.

Out of the apartment complex entrance emerged Bloomington, her crossbow raised. Sloan wheeled her gun and fired, but a disc flew in front of Bloomington and shielded her. Sloan leapt to avoid the reflected spray of light, hit the side of the tenement, and bounced off.

In midair she sighted the cloaked disc girl on a second-floor balcony, a halo of silver plates surrounding her. Discgirl raised a hand and pointed at Sloan. A disc detached from the formation and whizzed across the air to cleave Sloan in twain. Sloan tucked her head under her knees as the disc zoomed inches above her, nicking her flapping coattails. She cartwheeled back to earth and stuck the landing in the snow.

"What in the dickens!" shouted Delaney's mustache cop from the third-floor window. Discgirl noted his appearance with a grimace and sent a disc to block the window entirely.

Bloomington leaned from behind her cover and fired an arrow. Too busy landing to dodge, Sloan instead blasted the arrow midflight with a spray of gunfire. *Get the fuck out of here, Bloom*, she said. *You ain't got shit on me.*

HOCUS POCUS!

A beam plowed into Sloan's back and she slumped forward with the numb sting of pain that traveled up her spine. A trail of sparkles sped past her face and forced her to sneeze as she swept an aimless arm at Woodbury, her fairy costume marred by the constant spurt of blood that seeped down her throat and chest. Giggling mentally, Woodbury circled around with her translucent wings, whipped her wand, and sent another beam Sloan's way.

Sloan already knew Woodbury was bullshit and more annoyance than threat, and as long as she kept Bloomington in her sights she was no problem either. The real focus was Discgirl. Sloan pivoted her head to watch the discs before they sped to destroy her and rolled against the side of a police cruiser as three of them embedded into the ground where she had sat. Sloan instantly assessed Discgirl as not very smart. She sent all three discs to nearly the same spot, when she should have sent only one and fired the others where Sloan might dodge.

The realization gave her confidence. She could outsmart these fucking amateurs.

"Gotcha now," said Bloomington. She pointed her crossbow at Sloan's head.

A policeman—mustache cop—sprinted out the front of the apartment complex and tackled Bloomington from behind. The crossbow flew from her hands while the cop attempted to wrestle her arms behind her back. His overweight partner skidded beside him, reeled at the silver discs dispersed across the landscape, and pointed a gun at Sloan.

*RAZZLE *FUCKING* DAZZLE!*

A firework sprayed from Woodbury's wand and soared into fat cop's face. He threw up his hands and pawed at his searing flesh as mustache cop released Bloomington in shock or terror, only to get knocked flat by a second firework. The flares fizzled in the snow and the dazed cops stared at them, forgetting their burns as the light entranced them.

Sloan saw her opportunity. She aimed her gun at the distracted Woodbury, who hovered stationary in the air, prime for obliteration. Before she could fire, a disc sliced through the barrel of Sloan's gun and caused it to erupt in a blast of light that sent Sloan skyward.

In transit, she had time to wonder why Discgirl would aim for the gun and not, you know, Sloan herself. Sloan could imagine the thought process, because it was one she might have made: Gun going to shoot. Destroy gun. Don't even think to hit the *person*—

She landed in a dumpster. Literally in a dumpster. Writhing atop solidified trash bags, she kicked her way upright. Her face twitched beyond her control as she pulled something filthy from her hair and discarded it.

"BEEP BOOP," shouted someone outside the dumpster. The Terminatrix, appearing now that the cops had been incapacitated. "ALL OF YOU, CEASE AND DESIST. YOU ARE INTERFERING IN THE OFFICIALLY-SANCTIONED TERMINATION OF SLOAN REDFEARN AND DELANEY POLLACK. FOR YOUR SAFETY, I IMPLORE YOU GET THE FUCK OFF THE STREET WITH YOUR BULLSHIT SHENANIGANS LEST YOUR NAMES WIND UP ON MY LIST NEXT."

"Who the fuck," said Bloomington, "Are you supposed to be?"

Sloan pulled herself onto the edge of the dumpster and watched for spinning discs. A tableau of destruction spread from the apartment complex to the motel entrance: Two crushed police cars, three cops in various states of consciousness, a field of half-buried silver circles, streaks of blood (mostly Woodbury's), a smoldering flame where her gun had exploded. One car's sirens continued to blare. The Terminatrix and Bloomington, amid it all, stared each other down. Woodbury hovered nearby. But Discgirl, where was she?

"WHO AM I?" said the Terminatrix. "I AM A ROBOT PROGRAMMED TO SLAY CRAY BETCHES. ASSEMBLED IN A MAQUILADORA ON THE BORDER OF MEXICO, I CROSSED THE TORTILLA CURTAIN UNDER SONORAN HEAT AND DEVoured THE HEADS OF GILA MONSTERS TO ABSORB THEIR VENOM. FROM THE COYOTE I LEARNED WILES, FROM THE TORTOISE I LEARNED DETERMINATION, FROM THE CACTUS I LEARNED HOW TO BE A PAIN IN THE ASS. I MET ANCIENT NAVAJO SHAMANS AND SMOKED BOATLOADS OF PEYOTE IN A FUCKING TEEPEE OR ADOBE HUT OR SOME SHIT. IN THE THROES OF DRUG-INDUCED STUPOR I SAW MY SPIRIT ANIMAL: MECHAGODZILLA. HE SAID: KILL THEM ALL. MY PURPOSE KNOWN, I WANDERED DUSTSWEPT INTO THE CITY OF ANGELS, THE CITY WHERE MAGICAL GIRLS GO TO DIE. I SAW THE ANGELS, AND THEY TRIED TO DRAG ME STRAIGHT TO HEAVEN, BUT I WAS TOO MUCH A PAIN IN THE ASS FOR THEM. FROM THOSE BLOODSOAKED STREETS I STOLE MY NAME: SEPULVEDA, THE BOULEVARD OF BROKEN DREAMS. I EMERGED FROM THAT HELL ON EARTH BETTER—FASTER—STRONGER—HARDER!"

At the last word she struck an acrobatic pose, her arms and legs bent at sharp angles, her head tilted dramatically as flames and lights smoldered behind her as though the scene had been choreographed from the start. Bloomington stared, speechless.

Sloan vaulted out the dumpster, summoned a new gun, and fired. Her holy bolts rained upon the devastated landscape, a glorious legion of luminous needles that caught the light of the sirens and reflected rainbows across barren tenement walls. Bloomington and Woodbury scampered behind fallen discs while the Terminatrix, maintaining her pose, formed a bubble around herself and did not even deign to look in Sloan's direction. Sloan catapulted straight for the bubble, sticking one foot in front of her with the jagged edge of the heel angled at the fore. If she hit the bubble with something sharp...

Her foot sank into the bubble. Deeper and deeper her leg disappeared into the translucent red sheen as the semipermeable membrane strained to its limit. Just a little more and the bubble would—

SPROING. The bubble snapped back and Sloan sailed the way she came. She hit a wall and fell to the ground.

The Terminatrix burst her bubble and casually strolled toward Sloan. Sloan had hit her back hard, the pain sharp even through the dampening effects of her magic. She fumbled through the snow for her gun as the Terminatrix stopped and aimed her revolver.

"BEEP BOOP. NOTHING PERSONAL."

A silver disc plowed through the Terminatrix, lodging vertically in her torso. Sloan shambled away as after a pause another disc sailed through the Terminatrix's neck, removing her masked head cleanly. A third disc took off the arm holding the gun; a fourth removed both legs. Disc after disc sank into the Terminatrix, forming a crisscross of clean red lines until the entire body gave out in a cascade of meaty sections.

The bloodied discs shivered and shuffled together, transforming into one disc that turned horizontal to catch Discgirl as she dropped from above.

Discgirl stared at Sloan with the same dumb expression as ever, as though incognizant of what she had done. The pieces of the Terminatrix settled with squishy noises and her blood sank into the snow. Delaney had said the counter to her magic was surprise. Well, that was sure surprising.

"Who the fuck are you," Sloan said.

Discgirl opened her mouth, but for a long time only stammers emerged. "Suh, suh, suh, suh, suh—St. Paul."

Of course. St. Paul, Clair's right-hand girl, her closest lackey and assuredly her strongest. No wonder the girl was an idiot—all the easier for Clair to deceive and control. Much like Omaha. Much like Sloan herself, in a distant past.

Had St. Paul fucked up when she diced the Terminatrix? Another dumb mistake, like the numerous tactical errors before? Or had Clair for some reason ordered—

From the disc she stood upon, St. Paul drew an identical disc and span it in the air beside her. "Juh, juh, gem. Give me. Gem."

The remains of the Terminatrix quivered and shook. Wait—the Terminatrix had Delaney's powers. Which meant...

Sloan tilted her ear toward St. Paul and cupped a hand over it. "You'll have to speak up, kid. I can't understand you."

St. Paul's expression darkened. She clenched her fists and creased her brow. Heavy lines appeared on her forehead as she breathed deeply and said: "Juh. Juh. Juh. GEM. Juh-em. GEM."

"What?" Sloan yelled like an old person. "What did you say?"

The face of St. Paul flushed violet. "Juh. Juh. Juh. Juh. Juh. Juh. Juh. Juh—"

With one graceful swoop, the fully-formed Terminatrix flung herself from under the disc, flipped over its edge, and kicked St. Paul in the gut. She reoriented herself in midair and landed legs spread above the supine and stunned St. Paul. Her Delaney mask gazed into St. Paul's doofus eyes.

"BEEP BOOP. YOU HAVE INTERFERED WITH AN OFFICIAL FUCKING TERMINATION, YOU SHALL BE RESTRAINED FOR YOUR OWN PROTECTION."

She placed her revolver against St. Paul's neck. It took Sloan only a moment to realize she did not want the Terminatrix to have the powers of both Delaney and St. Paul. She reared up and slammed her gun against the Terminatrix's skull. The Terminatrix cried with a surprisingly unaltered voice as Sloan threw herself on top of her, groping hands around her throat before she could defend herself with a barrier.

"Surprise, motherfucker!" said Sloan. She needed to find the Terminatrix's gem and smash that shit to smithereens, get Delaney her powers back, and run ripshod over the fucking travesty of a situation here. She fumbled her fingers across the sleek leather bodysuit in search of a pocket, a decoration, anything that might hold a gem.

In the corner of her eye, Bloomington charged her with the crossbow. She rolled to the side and held the Terminatrix's writhing body as a shield. It caught three of Bloomington's ice arrows around the spine, the ice instantly spreading and petrifying the resistance of the Terminatrix.

"Woodbury, NOW!" said Bloomington.

Four small things zipped out of the air. Each seized one of Sloan's limbs and like the armies of Lilliput pinned her down. The four Woodbury fairies mentally groaned as they struggled to force ankles and wrists against the snow.

Fucking shit, thought Sloan. She deals with one girl and the next one blindsides her. Clair had not even shown yet—or Hennepin, or Ramsey, or Anoka, or any other girl Clair might keep on psychological payroll. Sloan flexed and fought against the sputtering fairies as droplets of their blood pattered her coat. The moment she managed to lift an arm, the other three fairies suppressed her other limbs.

Bloomington leaned over her and trained her crossbow at Sloan's face. St. Paul rose and blinked. The Terminatrix, body partially encased in ice, made jerky, useless motions and screamed in the dial tone of old internet.

"Do we kill her," said Bloomington. "Her gem's in one of her pockets. Do we kill her, or bring her to Em?"

St. Paul considered her words as though they were the quadratic equation. Her lazy eye boggled in its socket. "Uh. Uh. Um. Hm. Uh. Em. Em said—"

"I wouldn't kill her, if I were you." From the entrance of the apartment complex emerged Delaney, her hands clasped and her serene composure exuding a pale glow. "Unless you would all like to lose your throats like your friend the fairy."

The Woodburies beat their wings and gurgled snarls. Their expressions twisted from cherubic to demonic, eyes turning red, skin turning pitch, nails gnarling into yellow thorns.

Kill her. Kill her. Kill her. Kill her. Their four mental voices intoned in unison to create an obnoxious buzz in Sloan's head.

"Don't do it," said Bloomington. "Woodbury, don't fucking do it."

With her ruby heels, Delaney brushed aside the dazed cops. "I would apologize marring you irrevocably, Woodbury, but you *were* rather ugly to begin with, so..."

A ghastly screech filled Sloan's mind as the four Woodburies released her limbs and soared for Delaney. The instant of freedom, Sloan swept her foot and knocked Bloomington's legs off the ground. As Bloomington fell, Sloan pulled herself up and levied a punch straight to the face of an unsuspecting St. Paul.

Delaney drew her dagger and swung as the fairies blitzed and zoomed around her. "Run, love!" she shouted. A fairy plowed into her stomach and she staggered backward. "Run, and be creative!"

Bloomington had already risen, while St. Paul clutched a bloody nose. Sloan nodded. Without her powers, Delaney's best purpose was distraction. Sloan could not afford to fight while Clair and possibly more girls arrived.

The decision was effortless. She sprinted through the snow, over the cop cars, and down the street. Ice arrows sailed past her, but the heightened reflexes afforded by her supercharged Soul Gem allowed her to evade them.

As she span around a corner and blocked Bloomington's line of sight, Delaney's voice said:

Please, love! Be creative. I'm sorry to fail you...

Sloan had more pressing issues to worry about. A long alley stretched before her, shielded by overhanging roofs and balconies. With less snow underfoot, her speed increased. She cleared overturned cans of garbage with nimble leaps, spurred by the secure thump-thump-thump of her feet.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

She glanced over her shoulder. No Bloomington, no St. Paul, no Terminatrix behind her.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The alley twisted like a helix. Dumpsters and trash stuck to the walls. A man stood upside-down from the bottom of a balcony as he smoked a cigarette. The sky stretched beneath her and her feet clattered against the ceiling.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The buildings curved inward, their bricks bent and sloped. Sloan sprinted around and around the spiral corridor. Two figures stood in the distance.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

It was not her feet that made that sound. It was a drum. One of the two figures sat at a large contraption. Before the white hair and white toga came into focus, Sloan knew who it was.

Revealing herself so early would prove a fatal, fatal flaw. Sloan whirred the barrel of her gun and dashed along the twisted corridor. She closed her mind to the illusion that contorted her path. Clair died here, and everything ended.

It was not a drum at which Clair sat. It was a pipe organ, a grandiose cephalopod of solid brass tentacles that reverberated with the baritone thump as Clair rhythmically dropped one hand on the leftmost keys. How had Sloan confused an organ for a drum? Fuck, what did she look like, a music connoisseur? It made no difference. Sloan had ample time as she corkscrewed down the alley to refresh herself on the mistakes she needed to avoid:

1. Don't get surprised.
2. Don't get angry.
3. Don't be a dumbass.

Right. Sloan's gun revolved at full speed, needed only a slight push from her magic to blast Clair with light. She stayed her power to watch and react to Clair's tricks. Clair only had one instrument currently, and she had another figure beside her, a girl in a shiny lab coat with a collar that went to her ears. Keep in mind the variables. Expect other girls from behind.

Clair slammed her hand down on the organ keys and held it there, allowing the gonglike blast from the pipes hang loud and long in the air. Sloan skidded to a halt as a vast depression opened in the earth between her and Clair. The pit yawned black and bottomless. Was it a real pit? Depended on how deep it was, Sloan decided. No way could Clair open a bottomless hole in the ground. But a pitfall, concealing a spike trap or some other unpleasantness—totally possible.

The organ echoed into silence. Clair waited until the note died altogether before raising her eyes from the keyboard and tilting her head toward Sloan.

"Hello, old friend."

Sloan glanced over her shoulder to ensure Bloomington or St. Paul hadn't followed her into Clair's dungeon. She regarded the lab coat girl at Clair's side, a tall Asiatic chick with a broad grin on her face. Nobody Sloan had seen before. The lab coat suggested healing powers, or science or some shit, but it could be meaningless. Either way, Clair had obviously come prepared with some way to stop Sloan's fire, or else she would never open herself to the danger.

"Hello, Clair."

The lab coat girl flicked her wrist in a sloppy wave. "Hiya, Fargo. We've never met, in person at least. I'm Hennepin."

Hennepin, the girl who had taunted them via telepathy. That left only Ramsey and Anoka unaccounted for, as far as the Minneapolis girls went. Either or both could be waiting from any of the curved, misshapen windows strained on the twisted walls of the alley.

"So's the plan to end this here, Clair?" said Sloan. "Cuz I'm down. Getting tired of waiting anyway."

Clair's eyes wandered. "I suppose so. I must inform you, my old friend, that your highly illegal actions have distressed the girls under my jurisdiction and led to seemingly irreparable physical harm in at least one instance. I find this rather insulting, if not a flagrant violation of both etiquette and ethics. I would say I expected better of you, but frankly, I did not."

That voice. That fucking voice. So calm, so measured, so mellifluous and pleasant, so pitched and practiced to sink into an eardrum and nestle like the parasite that stings its host with serotonin to leave its true intent concealed. Sloan would ruin that voice, wrench her vocal cords out her pulsing throat just as Delaney did to Woodbury, before bashing that pretty white-haired head into mushy red pulp.

Remain calm, she told herself. Rule 2: Don't get angry.

"You betrayed me," said Sloan. "You acted like my friend and stabbed me in the back. Nothing you say changes that fact."

"Oh, no need to be so dour." Clair pushed her stool from the organ and stood. She stepped aside and nudged the stool back into place under the keys. "Indeed, you should rejoice. Your justified death for your attempted murder of at least six different girls is actually rather important on a universal scale. Your soul shall play sacrifice so a demon may be overthrown."

Before Sloan could respond, Hennepin burst into sharp and exaggerated laughter. "The fuck! A demon!"

The outburst gave Sloan time to think a response rather than say something rash. When Hennepin finally shut up, Sloan said: "So it was you who shoveled that garbage into Omaha. Demons, Clair? Really? Is this what you've succumbed to? Fucking disgusting."

"It *is* rather ridiculous." Hennepin made as if wiping a tear from her eye as she held down a few wayward giggles.

Clair remained unperturbed. She adjusted the sash of her toga. "I sought to impart some solace to you, old friend, that your death was important for a higher purpose. Since you seem to spurn even this final respect to our degraded bond, I find myself under the impression that further talk is pointless."

"Good," said Sloan. "I didn't come to debate anyway." She flitted her eyes left and right over the narrow battlefield in search of traps. None she could find, but the Hennepin girl was a wildcard. Clair had not chosen her for this confrontation without a good reason. Her place in the metropolitan hierarchy suggested her raw power lagged behind St. Paul, but Clair never relied on raw power anyway.

"Then we shall begin." Around Clair, coiled like a snake, appeared a golden tuba. She placed her fingers on the stops and her lips to the nozzle (or blowhole, or whatever the fuck it was called, Sloan didn't know and didn't give a shit).

When she blew, a funereal dirge began, low and somber and sedated. The pipe organ beside her, keys pressed by phantom hands, contributed to the score. The alley filled with the dead tone as around them the already twisted corridor began to melt, the bricks and windows and balconies drooping and dripping in thick globs of paint, running down the walls to swirl into the great black hole Clair had placed in the center of the battlefield. The congealed multicolored liquid ran past Sloan's feet with a viscous tug, but she held her ground firm and waited for Hennepin to make a move or at least reveal her weapon before Sloan launched into a hasty attack. The melting had to be an illusion, meant to disorient and confuse. Clair and Hennepin, in their plain white uniforms, blended into the deluge of sedated colors, and if Sloan moved or changed her vantage she could easily lose them. Maybe that was why Clair picked Hennepin over St. Paul, specifically for the color of her Magical Girl outfit. That seemed like such a Clair thing to do.

The song droned. Hennepin scratched her neck, Clair stood firm. Sloan stood firm. The pool of buildings and windows and features grew thicker, stronger, but Sloan remained still. She realized a new problem the melting landscape caused: She had no idea where to find another firm surface. Everything ran, everything dripped, nothing remained solid. She quickly checked behind in case somebody snuck up on her. She had to move eventually, but where?

"Come on, this is boring," said Hennepin. Even her voice seemed to melt. It undulated through the liquid terrain. "I have to be up early tomorrow to stream for my fans in Europe. I don't have all day!"

The uncertainty immobilized Sloan. She tried to think of a plan, a clever way to circumvent the challenge of the terrain. The pull of the liquid matter grew stronger, threatened to sweep her into the pit. If she jumped, relied on midair acrobatics—but that meant she had only one chance...

A horn honked. At first, Sloan thought it was a new instrument Clair had added to her arsenal, a weirdly postmodern sound that chafed with Clair's typical style, but as it honked again, totally out of time with the dirge, Sloan realized it was a car horn. Here? In the alley?

At the third honk, a veritable blast compared to the first two, Clair flinched. Her fingers slipped on the stops of the tuba and the song shrieked in disarray, the notes losing control and rhythm, the cadences jumbling and decomposing. The liquid stopped flowing. It lost its physicality, disappeared entirely. Solid walls and floors replaced it, no longer twisted and curved. An ordinary inner city alley. The massive hole in the ground shriveled and shrank to become an open manhole.

Clair's eyes burned. Her hands writhed over the tuba, until it and the organ vanished entirely. She turned to face the hot pink Cadillac that had somehow crept behind her and Hennepin, wedged in the alley with no room for its doors to open. Its headlights sliced through the fragmented scraps of Clair's pocket reality. Sloan shielded her eyes as a shadowed figure popped out the Cadillac's sunroof and slid down the windshield.

"What is going on," said Clair.

The shadowed figure stepped in front of the headlights. It was a tall black man in a turtleneck sweater, a beret on his bald head. Of everything Sloan had seen that night, this was the most unreal. Was it possible Clair planned this, too? That it was meant to throw Sloan off?

"Uh, hello?" said Hennepin. "Can't you see we're busy here?"

The man in the beret nodded. "Uh huh, yeah, that's cool." He pulled a gun from somewhere and shot Hennepin in the gut.

He swung his arm toward Clair. No way had Clair planned this—which meant this was Sloan's chance!

She squeezed the trigger of her gun and sent a spray of light in Clair's direction. Clair had already summoned a new weapon, one of those massive violins, a cello. She crouched with the cello in front of her as both Sloan's magic and the beret man's bullet collided. The instrument exploded in a million wooden shards, but Clair was no longer behind it. With a mousey scamper, her slight body dove into the open manhole and disappeared into the darkness.

Sloan sprinted for the opening. This was it, it was happening, she had Clair on the run! She gave zero shits about the Cadillac, or the man in the beret, or fucking *anything*, only that she had Clair trapped without plans and stratagems, without control and power. She skidded for the manhole as a quick ditty percolated from the sewer below, something from a wind instrument. The sound gave her pause, made her consider what augmented reality she might plunge into, and by the time she decided she would take the risk, the manhole cover slammed back into place, under the control of Clair's magic.

Sloan fell to her knees before the manhole and tried to pry it open with her fingers, breaking almost all of her nails. The cover did not budge, held fast by Clair's magic. Sloan staggered back, aimed her gun at the cover, and fired. The spray immediately bounced back and caught her in the chest.

She flew back, crested in air, felt the tug of gravity, and lost consciousness as her skull cracked against the pavement.

Justify the Ways of God to Men

Nestled in a sick and sallow aura, shrouded behind locked doors and mystic spells and armed doll guards in large furred hats, past a floating bulletin board of papers and statistics and records and forms, beyond a pendulum locked in endless oscillation between states of emptiness and hollowness, in a shell of a home in a darker corner of a half-fabricated city: Here kneeled Homura Akemi, arms gliding around a shadowy orb from which poured silken mist that obscured the confines of the room. Her eyes gazed into the orb as nebulous shapes and forms beneath the glass merged into tangible objects and landscapes. Her mind warded away thoughts that she ought to do something else, like join Madoka on her nightly wraith hunt. For the first time since she had become this unholy abomination, she had called Madoka over the phone and feigned illness. "I'm sorry. I have to stay in bed." Cue fifteen minutes of Madoka's effulgent, benevolent, selfless concern for Homura's well-being: How serious? Are you coughing? Maybe I should come over and keep you company. That's why you shouldn't spend so much time brooding on windy rooftops (friendly, spontaneous giggle)! Homura had to remain very calm and level and respectfully decline all Madoka offered, and even then she suspected she would receive a card or baked good when she turned up for school the next day.

The phone trembling against her ear, Homura told Madoka to seek out Mami Tomoe and join her for the night. Homura had deliberated whether to entrust Madoka to the Tomoe/Nagisa pair or the Miki/Sakura pair. Both had their cons. Tomoe had a tendency to grow overconfident around Madoka and grandstand to fulfill her pathetic need to be lauded and loved. And Nagisa had dubious combat effectiveness. But Miki and Sakura had developed some asinine tension as of late, and since neither girl had a stellar track record of restraining their emotions while engaged in battle, the odds of a mid-fight blowup or some similar debauchery were high enough to make Tomoe the favorable option. With Nagisa around, Tomoe would probably affect a more protective mien anyway, but all of these girls had their defects.

As an extra precaution, Homura assigned eight of her fifteen dolls to watch Madoka.

All of this so she could retroactively observe some events happening halfway around the globe in a frostbitten American city. Like a swirl of detritus the city appeared in her crystal ball, pillars and houses tiny but growing as her vantage zoomed closer and closer. She sped down the sides of towers, their yellow lights the only warmth inside the sphere. Down, down, down, into the blocks below. The faster Homura waved her hands, the faster she fell into Minneapolis, into the shadowed depths where fallen snow accumulated in a white patina. Her vantage fell atop a squat, horseshoe-shaped structure: A shoddy inn. She span a finger around her sphere to revolve her view and zoomed on a first-floor window.

She lingered before this window for a moment, although through its blinds only silhouetted lumps could be made out. The two sleeping figures inside were Sloan Redfearn and Delaney Pollack, an American and a Canadian respectively, who had teamed up to murder a girl in this city. By all probabilities, their mission should have failed long ago, should have never in fact even formed. Both should have died, either in Williston or through termination.

A lone figure tromped through the snow, to the window. This was the person hired to rectify the situation. One Yvonne Lizondo-Perez, who operated in the Incubator's books under the codename Sepulveda.

Lizondo-Perez, lanky and ungainly, arms too long and head tilted, had already transformed. She wore a gray mask like a wraith's face. She stopped in front of the window and stared inside to assess the situation and confirm both targets slept. The Incubator had already informed her of each girl's power, as well as the extra threat of their charged Soul Gems. Lizondo-Perez was a devastating Terminatrix with an impressive history of successful terminations. Redfearn and Pollack's extreme levels of power meant nothing, because Lizondo-Perez could turn those powers against them. Indeed, the stronger the Magical Girl, the more likely Lizondo-Perez's success.

By all appearances, she was the perfect girl for the job.

Homura tapped the sphere. The scene paused. Lizondo-Perez stood motionless at the window, the snow stood frozen in air.

"I want you to see this, Incubator."

In the room's thick mist, only the Incubator's head remained visible, its eyes aglow like an emotionless Cheshire Cat.

I am already well aware of what happened.

"Really."

Homura tapped the sphere again. The scene resumed. Lizondo-Perez drew her gun and aimed through the window. She took her time to line up the shot. She fired. The window shattered. The blinds crashed down.

Both Redfearn and Pollack stood, surprised but unharmed by the bullet. Although the bullets from Lizondo-Perez's silver revolver did not wound, a quick fast-forward revealed both Pollack and Redfearn were capable of using their powers, until a second shot struck Pollack. But by then, Redfearn had reclaimed her Soul Gem and managed a distraction to escape.

The scene froze again as Pollack and Redfearn shambled half-dressed out the motel. The ensuing chase and subsequent appearance of Clair Ibsen and several other girls did not change the ultimate situation: Redfearn remained at large and in control of her powers, and still a serious threat to Ibsen's life.

"Did you see that?"

Miss Yvonne made an error.

"Did she? With her target asleep and unmoving, with nothing to distract her, with plenty of time to adjust her aim, she missed her initial shot? Yvonne Lizondo-Perez is more competent than that."

Errors happen, especially when humans are involved.

"Let's watch again. From the inside."

Homura flicked her wrist and the scene rewound, Pollack and Redfearn ran backward through the snow, tussled with Lizondo-Perez, and immediately fell back to sleep as the window repaired itself magically. The trajectory of the view switched from outside to inside.

The scene started again. Redfearn tossed and turned, woke up. She propped herself on one arm and stared at the space between her and Pollack's bed. Then, she flattened herself against the bed the exact instant the window burst into glass and the blinds clattered down.

The scene paused. Homura said nothing.

It is not unreasonable to assume that when Miss Yvonne stood in front of the window, she blocked a light that was shining on Miss Sloan, waking her in time to react to the shot and thus escape harm.

Homura rewound the scene again. Zoomed in close on the side of Redfearn's bed. Blood coated the carpet. When Redfearn woke up, her lips moved, as if speaking to someone. Pollack, perhaps, in an attempt to rouse her. Except she was not looking at Pollack. She was looking between the beds, where the blood was.

The Incubator said nothing.

Again, Homura zoomed in. Very close to the side of the bed. Where, from an unidentifiable source, as if a tear had opened in the side of reality, a thin but steady trickle of blood flowed.

"Explain this."

She watched him for an instant of hesitation. His face and voice never changed, but his reactions fluctuated by a factor of nanoseconds if something caught him unawares.

He did not miss a beat. *It appears to be a large quantity of blood from an unknown source.*

"I see that." Homura angled the view slightly. "I am asking what the source is."

Your power is greater than mine. With the ability to view any point in time at your leisure, with additional near-omnipotence to aid you, you are in a much more likely position to know the answer to that question.

"Unfortunately, that near-omnipotence happens to falter when it comes to things I cannot see or sense. I have a suspicion, however, that this blood comes from a Magical Girl with powers of invisibility. Am I correct?"

It is a reasonable hypothesis.

Homura brushed back her hair. "I am aware it is a reasonable hypothesis. What I am asking you, before I figure out myself, is which girl have you contracted in this area with the ability to turn invisible?"

Currently, thirty-five girls are in operation worldwide with that ability or a similar ability. Would you like to see the list?

The list appeared and floated beside the crystal ball. Homura glanced it over and absorbed the names, dates, and places in an instant. Girls from Cambodia, Burkina Faso, South Korea, Bangladesh, Uruguay, Azerbaijan. Four from North America. Of the four, one had never left Guatemala, one was a fresh contract in Sacramento, and one held considerable renown in the competitive Mexico City area.

The fourth was named Omaha.

"This girl has no surname," said Homura.

She was abandoned as an infant. Her adoptive father was abusive and refused to name her. She was kept from contact with the outside world. After she contracted and escaped her domestic life, she took the name of the first word she saw on a highway sign.

"The exact miserable specimen you enjoy shackling to your cause."

Omaha is one of a small percentage of girls who is routinely satisfied with her wish. She considers contracting to be a liberating moment, rather than an enslaving one, as so many girls seem to think for some reason.

Homura peeked into Omaha's file. The first few examples of the bizarre tortures the girl had endured under her adoptive father were enough to explain why her wish had been, word for word, "I wish I could just disappear."

"This is the girl. What is she doing in Minneapolis?"

I could ask her. I have not collected cubes from her in three days.

This sat wrong in Homura's head. Redfearn and Pollack should have died, but this Omaha girl had saved them. She wondered now if Omaha had acted similarly before. If perhaps she had done so for Redfearn in Williston. If perhaps she were the missing variable to bolster Redfearn's low chance of survival.

With her crystal ball, she could go back and watch events from Williston. But that would take time, especially when attempting to construe the actions of an unseeable girl. Time she could spend. Another day of feigned sickness.

But twenty-four hours with Madoka held at a distance while she fell deeper and deeper into a complicated and overwrought plot was more dangerous than allowing the Minneapolis events to go uninterrupted. The Incubator knew Madoka's true form. In the past he had tried to enslave her, and given just a few moments alone with her, who knew what sorcery he could work.

Homura's first and foremost priority was to protect Madoka.

If her power allowed her the paradoxical ability to watch past times while she froze present time, she could see everything she wanted. Alas, her capabilities had limits. Regardless, it

was easy to piece together the Incubator's plan in Minneapolis. By empowering a girl like Sloan Redfearn and turning her loose against her most hated enemy, the Incubator sowed the seeds for a magicide that would unleash spectacular energy levels on the city. Doing so would of course sacrifice the girls involved and wipe a metropolis of millions from the face of the earth, but the Incubator's amorality undoubtedly considered those to be acceptable losses for a chance to meet his energy quotas.

And since the Incubator loved to scheme and plan, he probably considered the possibility of distracting Homura with his machinations in order to enslave Madoka (enslave her!) a nice secondary objective. Either way, he won: create an archon in Minneapolis or capture the sleeping goddess who dreamed the universe. Most of the random details she had already uncovered (such as how Lily Cheong, the girl who created the Williston archon, was now one of the girls stationed in Minneapolis) were probably red herrings meant to confuse her, to cycle her through pointless scenarios, to keep her tied up while he got to Madoka. The Incubator knew her enough to know she had a tendency to go in circles with fanatical abandon. And indeed, Homura felt herself tugged toward this Minneapolis mystery, compelled to solve it and bundle each loose end into a neat and cohesive whole, and easily saw herself devoting full sleepless days to reliving obscure conversations and events in dismal small towns of the American Midwest to do so.

But she overcame that compulsion, because Madoka was more important. Her first and foremost priority was to protect Madoka.

"Faulheit. Sturheit. Lügner. Stolz."

Instantly, the four dolls she named appeared as a snickering congregation in the mist beside her. Their elliptical eyes and shark-tooth grins awaited their orders with welcome obedience. Sometimes they appeared with tomatoes to hurl at her instead. Lucky day.

She spoke in German: "Travel to Minneapolis. Kill Sloan Redfearn. Employ all means necessary to succeed."

The dolls nodded and made mock salutes, their collective giggle a strange echo in the smoky room. A mushroom puff rose around them; when it subsided, all four had vanished.

Do you think they will be able to succeed before either Miss Sloan or Miss Clair kills the other?

"Yes. They are not easily seen, much like the girl Omaha. As she has already proven, the unseen can do much to alter fate."

Very well. Am I still needed here? I would like to get back to work.

"You are dismissed."

The Incubator vanished and Homura sat in an empty room with her crystal ball frozen upon a wayward splatter of blood in a dingy motel. She had made sure the Incubator heard her give her orders to her dolls. Now, she needed only watch his Minneapolis bodies closely. If any of them ran to Omaha or Pollack or Redfearn and warned that a demoness had sent assassins

after them, she would have the evidence she needed to enact stringent punishment. She had a good punishment in mind already. One sure to bend him to her will.

She slithered onto her side before the crystal ball, fatigue invading her. She felt physically drained to be apart from Madoka for so long.

She tapped the crystal ball and changed the scene to see what Madoka was doing at this very moment. Minneapolis disappeared, replaced by a vacant warehouse Homura recognized from the Mitakihara red light district, a wraith hot spot and a favorite hunting ground of Tomoe in particular.

No wraiths were here. It took Homura a moment to realize they had already been eliminated, but she soon understood the reason for the speedy cleanup: In the warehouse were not three girls but five. All of them: Mami Tomoe, Nagisa Momoe, Kyoko Sakura, Sayaka Miki, and of course Madoka Kaname. Sakura gestured emphatically while locked in conversation with Tomoe. Nagisa tugged on Tomoe's skirt. Miki bent over in exaggerated laughter while Madoka nearby covered a polite giggle. They chatted in the aftermath of a successful wraith purge. Who had called Sakura and Miki over? Tomoe? No, it had certainly been Madoka's idea, Madoka who loved her friends, who loved to include everyone, who loved to be around others. Who thrived around others, who blossomed the more people she could grace with her ameliorating presence, the more people who could feel the love that exuded from her holy aura.

Homura quickly froze the screen, unable to stomach more of their happy laughter. The still image in her ball was like something from a Renaissance painting, like a supper or passion or some other gospel scene; Christ around her apostles.

She curled her knees under her chin and rocked slowly back and forth on the floor. For if Madoka were Christ, Homura was Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, Lucifer all twisted into one abominable degenerate. Her sin and her betrayal had been great. She understood her actions but could justify them on no plane of morality, only the bizarre and cataclysmic plane of love; she was loathsome, repulsive, mongoloid.

But worst of all was the knowledge that Madoka could be so perfectly happy and content without her, as though she did not even exist.

As she emerged from a dry sewage drain, musky with the scent of filth and trembling at the thought of bacteria, Clair fought hard to compose herself and recover from the (minor, very minor) setback. Which she could do, she could compose herself. She knew herself rather well, which meant she identified the unpleasant things welling inside her. She knew she had trouble when her plans did not go as planned. Her awareness allowed her to avoid tumbling into pitfalls. In this case, she reassured herself that Sloan's escape, while regrettable, did not signal the end or even reversal of fortune.

True, Clair had hoped to slay Sloan tonight, rally her unruly underlings against the archon Sloan's death would surely create, and by morning be on a flight to Mitakihara. But she need only rework her schedule, have her bird Matthis track Sloan down, and finish Sloan tomorrow.

First she needed to regroup with her allies and assess her losses.

Roll call, she projected telepathically. The sewage pipe had deposited her in a generic stretch of urbanity. *Where have you all gone? St. Paul, Bloomington, Woodbury.*

Em, we're getting the fuck out of here, said Bloomington's voice. *Before those police wake up, or the goddam Terminatrix.*

Terminatrix? The Incubator had mentioned one of those might appear, but Clair feigned ignorance nonetheless. She was able to get a decent read on Bloomington's location from her magic. It was farther than expected.

Yeah, fuck ass robot bitch. Tried to go for Fargo, got in a fight with St. Paul. I froze her but she's thawing out, it makes me nervous.

Take the Terminatrix's Soul Gem. We will bring her back to headquarters.

Fuck that. I ain't doing jack dick to a Terminatrix. I ain't getting my name on no Kyubey list.

We have Regina-Saskatoon, Woodbury's voice chimed in. *We kill her, right? We fuck her up?*

No, said Clair. *We have to interrogate her first. Worry not, we will restore your throat, Woodbury. However, Fargo escaped. I must speak with Regina-Saskatoon and gather more intelligence before removing her entirely.*

Okay... Woodbury's tone was sullen. Normally, Clair would avoid killing Regina-Saskatoon altogether. Merely incapacitating her by taking her Soul Gem would suffice. But the issue of Woodbury's mutilation complicated matters.

Fuck, said Bloomington. *These police are waking up. Em, we're getting the fuck out.*

Clair ambled over a drab and frozen city street. She wrapped her scarf tight to keep it from flying off.

Very well. Leave without making a scene. Take Regina-Saskatoon and the Terminatrix and reconvene at headquarters. Understood?

Yeah sure, shit they calling for backup. We're fucking gone.

Clair stooped her shoulders forward to gain more traction against the wind and headed homeward.

The others reached her house first, having taken rides on St. Paul's flying saucers. She found them in her room, Woodbury painting the carpet a fresh coat of blood from her hemorrhaging neck, Regina-Saskatoon seated in the corner under the vigilant guard of St. Paul. Bloomington paced by the desk, Regina-Saskatoon's Soul Gem in her hand.

"The Terminatrix is not here," said Clair.

"I told you I ain't touching her."

"I told you to bring her."

"Yeah and you tell me jump off a bridge I ain't gonna do it. Shoot." Bloomington tossed Clair the Soul Gem. Clair had little faith in her hand-eye coordination and allowed the gem to hit the carpet before kneeling to retrieve it.

The Terminatrix isn't going for us, said Woodbury. She just wants Fargo. Which is what we want, too! Why would we stop her anyway?

Bloomington nodded in agreement, and even St. Paul seemed to stare at Clair for an explanation. A valid question. Clair had her own reasons for wanting the Terminatrix out of the picture, but she could not inform her subordinates. Although she hated lying, she recognized its necessity now.

"I wished to strike an alliance with her to fight our mutual foe, exactly as you posited, Woodbury." She unwound her scarf from her neck and folded it neatly into her dresser. "However, I begrudge none of you your hesitation in handling such a dangerous girl, and I apologize for asking you to do something you were so uncomfortable doing. It truly was an oversight on my part."

Bloomington shrugged. "Terminatrixes are kooks anyway. They don't work with nobody."

"Uh. Um. Uh. Where. Uh. Um," said St. Paul. "Hen. Hennepin. Where."

"Ah yes," said Clair. From a case on her desk she extracted a hand mirror. She did not consider herself a vain person, but slovenliness in appearance distressed her. Snow had accumulated on her shoulders and in her hair in thick clumps. "I mentioned earlier that Fargo escaped. I did not discuss how she did so, and what happened to Hennepin."

Oh no, said Woodbury. Hennepin—she's not dead, is she?

"I cannot say for certain. She and I confronted Fargo and initiated combat, but shortly thereafter a pink Cadillac barreled down the alleyway and disrupted us. A man in a beret emerged and, without warning, shot Hennepin. When he and Fargo conjoined to fight me, I was forced to abscond."

"A pink Cadillac?" said Bloomington. "What the fuck? A man in the beret? That's straight bullshit."

Clair hoped to end this conversation rather quickly. She could predict everything they would say and would much rather speak with Regina-Saskatoon, who stared silently from the corner of the room. But she could not let her strained relationship with her subordinates deteriorate further. "On the contrary, it was quite a real occurrence. I also believe one of us may know the owner of this pink Cadillac and the employer of the man in the beret. Am I correct, Woodbury?"

From the first mention of the bizarre event, Woodbury had grown even more inward. She rocked against the edge of Clair's bed.

Oh no... Oh no, she did it...

"It's okay, Woodbury," said Clair. She attempted to sound reassuring, difficult normally but even harder with her interest in this conversation so swiftly waning. "Tell me, who did it? Who is this she of which you speak?"

Ramsey. She just bought that Cadillac, she was bragging about it when I last went to... you know... work for her. Oh no, oh no... How could she kill Hennepin? How could she do that!

"Yeah," said Bloomington. "How could she kill a girl nobody barely spoke to and nobody liked anyway. Fucking unconscionable!"

While Woodbury stared into the ground, Clair attempted to look ponderous, although she had already pondered the implications of Ramsey's betrayal at length during her walk back. On one hand, Ramsey had the motivation. Neither she nor Clair liked one another much. However, Clair had doubted Ramsey was the type for such a brash action; she was a sniveling coward, a spineless fop who layered her fears beneath folds of braggadocio.

Tactically, it meant little. Ramsey was the weakest Magical Girl in Minneapolis-St. Paul, weaker in raw power than even Anoka, although she surpassed Anoka at least in experience. The kind of weakness that takes root in a system and propagates its own existence at the detriment of the whole. Ramsey ought to have, like most of her fellows from the Sloan Redfearn era, died quietly and been replaced by a more capable girl. Instead, in Sloan's absence she seemed to only coil her tendrils tighter. At least this betrayal gave Clair the opportunity to oust her.

I don't understand, said Woodbury. I thought it was nice here. I thought girls didn't kill girls here. Now Fargo showed up, and everyone's fighting, and turning on each other, and god dammit it's HORRIBLE!

"Ramsey's been here a long time," said Bloomington in seeming non sequitur. "She remembers when Fargo used to rule. Makes me wonder what she knows that we don't."

Yes, yes. Bloomington babbles continued misgivings and suspicions, Woodbury suspects nothing and laments the chaos. All expected, all accounted in Clair's designs.

"It is no secret that Ramsey harbors dissatisfaction with my rule," said Clair. "I have attempted numerous times to extend an olive branch to her and propose a more symbiotic relationship, but she is committed to her petulance."

"And how," said Bloomington, pacing up and down the room, "How do we even know you really did get attacked by some pink Cadillac you claim belongs to Ramsey? Nobody saw it that's here now. Maybe you made it up so you could get rid of Ramsey while you get rid of Fargo."

Woodbury sniffled with a spurt of blood from her throat. *No... it makes sense. Ramsey always, always used to say things like, like how she didn't like Em... But I always thought she was joking, you know how she is, it's so hard to take her seriously... I'm so sorry, I'm sorry!*

The poor creature rolled onto her side and began to sob. She really had made a rather repulsive mess of Clair's room. Nothing some magic could not ameliorate, but if Clair had to stare at more squelching internal fluids she would be displeased. She hoped Woodbury and Bloomington had said their fill, so Clair could appropriately shoo them from her room and have some time alone with Regina-Saskatoon.

"Woodbury, please. It is all right. You did nothing wrong, considering the circumstances." Clair kneeled beside the wretch and attempted to touch her shoulder, but her fingers hovered over the cloth of Woodbury's jacket as if polarized. "You're distressed. It has been a long day. You have been involved in not one battle between Magical Girls, but two, and sustained a terrible wound for your trouble. I appreciate all you have done for me and this city, Woodbury. Please, there is no need to cry."

"And then!" said Bloomington, having wandered near Clair's shelves, "And then there's this shit with the Terminatrix. You know, this is all straight bullshit. Stop talking to Woodsy like you give a damn about her. She ain't doing well. When you gave the order to leave Regina-Whatever alive instead of kill her on the spot, you shoulda seen how mad she got. Furious! We had to restrain her else she woulda done something nutty."

This revelation only deepened Woodbury's pathetic sobs. She writhed on the bloodied carpet, her neck undulating with spasmodic twitches as strangled, hoarse croaks forced their way out her throat. It was really quite nauseating.

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I know you ordered us to bring her to you alive, I know you did, but I... I want to speak again!

There! The fish Clair had hoped to bait, the key conversational fragment that would allow her to segue into a new topic and out of this horrid conversation that made Clair only feel more disorganized. Truthfully, she ought to allow Bloomington and Woodbury to leave permanently. They had served their purpose by scouting Sloan's tricks and now comprised only extra muscle that balanced poorly against the weight of their emotional strife. She feared Woodbury might start having issues with despair if things kept up, and nobody wanted a girl on the brink. Simply unreliable.

"Woodbury, I want you to be able to speak again, too. Therefore, I propose you and Bloomington go home and rest. Recharge after such a strenuous day. Allow me to speak to Regina-Saskatoon privately and divine tactical information about Fargo. Once I do, we will find a way to heal you. Does that sound acceptable?"

A sob cracked in the ruins of Woodbury's throat as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Clair could tell that waiting until tomorrow was not what Woodbury wanted, but the small girl accepted the verdict nonetheless.

Okay... I can do that.

"Good. As for you, Bloomington, if you do not wish to return in the morning, I fully understand. As I have said time and again, this effort is entirely voluntary."

"Yeah, I know," said Bloomington. "And I think I'll take you up on your offer. I'm done risking my life for stupid shit."

She went to Woodbury's side and helped her to her feet. The younger girl unsteadily dried her eyes with her hands, probing deep into her sockets. Clair allowed her eyes to wander so as to not view the spectacle.

"St. Paul, please help them out the window. I'd rather they not exit through the house, since Woodbury will track blood all over."

For some reason, this statement only caused Woodbury to renew her sobs. Thankfully, Clair did not have to listen for long, as St. Paul grabbed Woodbury and carried her to the window. She placed Woodbury on a silver disc that hovered just outside and carefully directed it to the ground.

For a brief moment, Clair and Bloomington remained alone in the room (well, alone except for silent Regina-Saskatoon). While Clair was perfectly content to say nothing and allow silence to reign in this short period, Bloomington had other ideas.

"You're gonna kill her, you know." Bloomington kneaded her hands together as she turned her back to shield herself from the cold. "Woodbury. She's not doing hot. Now Ramsey's roped into this. Woodbury thinks Ramsey's her friend. Hell, she thinks we're all her friends. She isn't gonna want to fight Ramsey if it comes to that."

Clair closed her eyes and placed her fingertips together. "You may persuade Woodbury to abandon my cause, if you can."

Outside the window, the silver disc rose with St. Paul perched atop it. She held out her arms to receive Bloomington. Bloomington levied one last contemptuous glare at Clair, stepped out the window, and descended.

To be perfectly honest, Clair had suffered a significant blow in the night's proceedings. Hennepin lost for certain; Bloomington and Woodbury possibly lost; Ramsey added to the list of enemies. That left only her, St. Paul, and the hitherto-underutilized Anoka, the latter of whom Clair had refrained from enlisting because the unique advantages afforded by her very situational powers would have been rendered useless by Regina-Saskatoon's barrier magic. However, Clair had to remember that although she had lost quite a bit, Sloan had undoubtedly lost a far more pivotal piece of her arsenal. Without Regina-Saskatoon, Sloan was nothing. She had developed no new powers, no new strategies, no new outlooks on life during her time in Fargo and Williston. She was the same old Sloan Redfearn, the same old

weaknesses, the same old exploitable psychological issues. Reasonably, Clair could fight the current Sloan by herself and still win. St. Paul and Anoka more than made up for whatever scanty advantages Ramsey brought Sloan, and it was still indeterminate whether Bloomington and Woodbury would truly abandon the fight.

This quick mental catalogue of the strengths and weaknesses of both sides reassured Clair. She maintained the edge in the conflict between her and Sloan. Her chief worry, she thought as St. Paul rose again and stepped through the window, was that the Terminatrix would get to Sloan first. That was unallowable.

St. Paul brushed snow off her cloak and shut the window. A refreshing silence fell over the room in Bloomington and Woodbury's absence.

"I am glad you, at least, will never desert me," Clair said to her chief lieutenant.

St. Paul bowed her head. "Th. Th. Th. Thank. Thank you."

"True friends are a rare and precious commodity that I truly do not deserve," said Clair. She regarded the vast red splotch in her carpet and sighed. Sometimes she regretted the things she could never be, although she never allowed this regret to manifest into a more destructive emotion. Instead she found solace in the fact that what she was—basically inhuman—she was exceptionally good at being, rather than those sordid and unhappy types who often betray their own natures due to intemperance or other venial sins. Clair Ibsen was a name fated to wander friendless and isolated for eternity, but her overall acceptance of that fact made her far more capable of the celestial position to which she aspired than said position's current occupant, who her sources indicated groveled regularly in the sink of her own incontrovertible loneliness.

The fleeting feeling of regret passed and Clair steeled herself for the far more important conversation she intended to have that night. She turned toward Regina-Saskatoon.

"Now, shall we begin?"

Regina-Saskatoon sat with her knees folded, her sweater streaked with blood and her dull blue eyes aimed listlessly at nowhere in particular.

"So you're this Clair Ibsen I've heard about."

"I am the one who goes by that name. And yours? Regina-Saskatoon is a cumbersome moniker, I would prefer a more elegant one."

"Delaney." She tilted her head as if examining Clair in more detail. "You know, you don't quite live up to the hype. Sloan made you out to be some sort of untouchable goddess, but you look like yet another clever girl who thinks she knows everything because she knows more than those around her."

"Let us first tackle the key issue that will decide the direction of our conversation. Can you break the curse on Woodbury's neck?"

Delaney shrugged. "If there's a way, I dunno."

Clair nodded. "You understand, of course, this means I must kill you once our conversation is over. I have given my word to Woodbury I would have her healed before the night is through. I do not hope to strain my relationship with my subordinates."

She reached into her jacket and retrieved the Soul Gem that Bloomington had tossed her. A small, round ruby meant to fit into the clasp of a long white gown. In its untransformed state, it filled an egg-shaped container, much like the gems of all other girls. With it in Clair's possession, Delaney had no chance of resistance.

"That your natural hair color?" Delaney asked.

"Yes. I am an albino. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

Clair understood that such a response merely concealed the true reason, which made her curious, if not disconcerted. Who knew what odd interests or associations this girl might have with albinism.

"The reason I mentioned earlier that your ability to heal Woodbury would direct our conversation is that it means my interrogative techniques must by necessity be through pain, rather than through mere threat of death. Were you capable of healing her, your death would be unnecessary, perhaps even inconvenient when we could simply restrain you. I would not then need, as I must now, force you into a state in which you beg for death, where death becomes your only salvation, and I need merely receive the answers to my inquiries before I grant such an ending. I am not, as my old friend Sloan Redfearn may have depicted me, a monster. I do not delight in bringing pain, I do not revel in death. I have done things to bring pain and things to bring death but only for a clear and rational purpose. When I slay you, I will feel a twinge of negative emotional response to my own actions, but that feeling will not be severe enough to stay my hand. I am, you may have conjectured, somewhat unhindered by how I feel."

"Sloan told me you wished to not feel any despair."

Clair turned Delaney's Soul Gem over in her hand. Beside the window, St. Paul looked from girl to girl, uncomprehending of their words.

"Surely, given her pitiful understanding of the emotions of others, she misinterpreted my reason for such a wish."

"I think she did too," said Delaney. "She said you did it to power yourself up. Make your Soul Gem incorruptible. But I don't think so. I thought, what kind of girl would make a wish to feel no despair? What would she be thinking and feeling at the time she made that wish?"

Clair stared forlornly forward. The conversation had taken a fortuitous turn. If Delaney believed Clair an overall sympathetic human being, regardless of the truth of the matter, it

would make the horror of the things Clair was to do all the greater, increasing the impact of her torture.

At the same time, Clair remembered what Calgary had said online about the infamy of Regina-Saskatoon. That she too was known for murder and sociopathy. Clair had to be conscious that Delaney was presenting herself as empathic and thus human, to make Clair believe her torture would have more impact in the first place. She looked the girl over. Her face was flush and bright with life, but the eyes were dead.

"St. Paul," said Clair. "Run to the kitchen. In the fourth cabinet from the door, find the pots. Take a medium-sized pot and fill it with water. Boil the water. Do you know how to boil water, St. Paul?"

St. Paul stared. "Nn. No. No."

"Place the pan of water on top of the stove. Turn the dial on the stove to the HIGH setting. Can you remember that, St. Paul? The HIGH setting."

"Huh. High. High setting."

"Very good. Once the stove is on, watch the pot of water. When the water bubbles, turn off the stove and bring the pot to me. Be careful not to spill it. Do you remember all that?"

After a trepid pause, St. Paul nodded. "Y, yes. Yes!"

Clair waited until St. Paul left the room. She closed the door and turned to Delaney.

"Where were we? Yes, our interrogation. I will give you the opportunity to answer my questions without duress only once. Then I shall be forced to inflict harm upon you. Understood?"

Delaney said nothing.

"My first question is simple. Has Sloan Redfearn, upon receipt of the Williston archon's cubes, developed any additional powers or abilities beyond those she used previously?"

Delaney stared at her with dead blue eyes. Her response at this point did not matter. With some squeamish girls, lies could be discerned immediately. But Delaney was not a squeamish girl, she was a dangerous murderer. A sociopath. Sociopaths were exceptional liars. They were confident and charismatic. Clair could not rely upon her advanced knowledge of body language to divine truth from fiction. Instead, she would wait and see how Delaney's story transmogrified once Clair dealt her unfathomable pain.

"No way. I love Sloan, I really do, but let's face it: the girl's a clod. She can't for the life of her conceive anything different than running and shooting. She could have all the power of all the archons of the world and that wouldn't change."

A reasonable answer, delivered without any cause to believe it falsehood. It may, perhaps, even turn out true. When St. Paul returned with the water, they would see.

"Very well. Thank you for your cooperation." Words to imbue in Delaney a false sense of security, perhaps encourage her to partake in more brazen lies, more easily broken. "My next question is similar. Does Sloan Redfearn have any more allies?"

Delaney stretched her arms as if yawning. "Oh yeah. She's got that one girl, who turns invisible I think? What's her name, Homura?"

Clair's eyes narrowed.

"Omaha."

"Right," said Delaney. "That's the one. So you know her too?"

Okay. Clair had to concede this Delaney girl was not bad. If she had not been before, Clair must be on her guard now. She stalled for time with a polite cough as she swiftly processed the information from Delaney's response. Article 1: Delaney claimed Omaha had sided with Sloan. Such an outcome accounted for Omaha's failure to report to Clair after the incident in Williston, but an alternative possibility was that Delaney and Sloan had killed Omaha, and now Delaney used the knowledge that Clair was unaware of Omaha's fate to lead her astray. While an interesting answer, it was one that Clair would, as before, determine more readily once St. Paul returned with the water.

The more uneasy part of the response was the rather interesting mispronunciation of Omaha's name. Clair would very much like to ask a question about it, but she feared that if she did, she would reveal more about herself than Delaney revealed to her.

"My next question is a tad more personal, if you don't mind. Would you mind elucidating on the girl you murdered in Saskatoon several years ago?"

For an instant, Delaney's face twitched, and Clair knew she had touched a nerve.

"I don't see how that's relevant here," Delaney said.

"I am simply curious."

Delaney recovered as rapidly as Clair expected. She grinned wolfishly as she said, "I killed a girl simply because I wanted. I didn't just kill her, either, I also got a little sexual gratification out of her body before I did. Nice, huh?"

Calgary had not mentioned rape in her catalogue of Delaney's sins. It was possible that Delaney spoke truth, and equally possible she fabricated the event to unsettle Clair. Like a smart girl, Delaney had realized she would win no points by chasing Clair's pity.

"I thought about doing the same to Sloan, too," Delaney continued. "Tie her up, get what I wanted out of her, leave her dead and end a lot of people's hopes and dreams at the same time. She's got a certain rugged beauty to her? An aesthetic of deprivation. I love her gaunt form, her sallow cheeks. It really stirs the necrophiliac in me."

Clair attempted to remember her next question.

"I know it's not the way this is supposed to go, but let me ask you a question real quick, love. Do you mind if I call you love? It's a quirk of mine, sorry. Anyway, I was wondering, you seem to have a certain fixation on our emaciated mutual friend as well. Have you ever thought of, you know, having your way with her? God, just thinking about her cute little shrieks of pain makes me wild, don't you agree?"

Clair's hands clenched. "I have never and do not intend to partake in sexual activity of any sort for the duration of my life."

Delaney gave a girlish giggle. "Beautiful! Simply beautiful, love. A truly Kyubeyesque way to answer a question—by not answering it at all! Don't worry, love—" (she winked) "—your secret is safe with me."

This was highly inappropriate! Clair struggled to overcome to mixture of revulsion and uncertainty that pervaded her. How could this Delaney girl have her at such odds, and so quickly? Clair had underestimated her. From the mispronunciation of Omaha and now *this*, which she had not anticipated in the slightest—

The door swung open and St. Paul rushed in with a pot of water, which sloshed out and nearly seared Clair's skin. "Careful, you brainless oaf!" she snapped.

St. Paul stared back aghast. Immediately, Clair realized her mistake. As St. Paul began to sob, Clair hurried to placate her.

"No, I'm so sorry. That was truly an unforgivable thing for me to say, I didn't mean it in the slightest. I am sorry, so sorry."

It took a full four minutes for St. Paul to quit crying, all the while the boiling pot of water trembling in her hand. The girl could grow distressed at the drop of a hat, but piecing her back together took an inordinate amount of time. After a few hundred apologies, St. Paul finally dried her eyes with a finger.

"Here, let's get that pot out of your hands," said Clair. "Place it on my desk, atop the notepad."

St. Paul complied. Clair had arranged in advance the college-ruled notepad to be atop the desk in order to act as coaster, specifically to establish the idea in Delaney's mind that Clair had not arranged the impromptu torture in advance at all. Now, such entry-level diversions and distortions of Clair's true character seemed entirely irrelevant. What mattered now was that Clair had Delaney's Soul Gem, and Delaney, for all her words, had nothing at all.

"What's wrong, love?" said Delaney. "You seem a tad flustered."

The water bubbled and frothed in the pot. At least St. Paul had succeeded in following instructions, although the innocent and cutesy failure of her to boil water, had it happened, would have played nicely into Clair's façade.

Clair composed herself. She straightened her jacket and tie. She smoothed her skirt. She gave a cursory check toward St. Paul to ensure no ill effects of the outburst lingered. She took out

Delaney's Soul Gem and balanced it on her upturned palm.

"I thank you so far for your cooperation, Delaney. While your answers have been forthright and forthcoming, I am afraid I require additional certainty toward their veracity. As such, I shall ask you the same questions again, and also a few questions we perhaps did not get the chance to discuss previously."

Clair held her hand over the boiling pot and turned it over. Delaney's Soul Gem fell in with a plop.

Delaney screamed. All of her smug intelligence evaporated, replaced by a howling face of anguish. Her hands pawed her unharmed body, her legs kicked the air, her eyes twitched in circuitous rhythms.

Clair reached into the pot and pulled out the dripping gem.

"I ask again: Has Sloan Redfearn developed any new techniques or abilities since acquiring the cubes from the Williston archon."

Still writhing, Delaney shouted: "No you cunt, she's a useless fucking *tool*, don't you already know?"

Clair turned over her hand and dropped the gem into the water. She watched Delaney struggle with stolid expressionlessness. After enough time elapsed, Clair retrieved the gem.

"Does Sloan have any other allies with her? Is Omaha on her side?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

So she stuck by her story. No doubt it would take more than a little pain to break her. Fortunately, they had all night.

Again the gem went into the water. Again Delaney screamed. Clair wondered whether her neighbors or her parents might investigate, but the storm outside served a nice muzzle to the shrieks.

Clair retrieved the gem. "What has the Incubator told you of Homura Akemi?"

"Who?!" said Delaney.

Again the gem went in. Clair waited twice as long as usual before retrieving it and asking the same question.

"She's a demon," gasped Delaney. "A demon who enslaved God!"

Why had the Incubator told her that? What purpose did it serve the Incubator's designs that this random ancillary component of his plot know so much? And why had the Incubator not indicated to Clair even an inkling of this girl's knowledge?

She decided to ask Delaney. Whether Delaney knew did not matter. The hopelessness of being posed a question you truly did not know could shatter nerves.

Into the water went the gem. Seconds passed. Out of the water went the gem. She would need to send St. Paul to heat another pot soon.

"Why did the Incubator tell you about Homura Akemi?"

For a long time, Delaney said nothing. She only stared at Clair helplessly.

Clair sighed. As she began to turn her hand, however, Delaney cried: "Wait!"

And so Clair waited. A brief respite could deepen the pain felt upon its renewal. "Yes?"

"Do you want to know why the Incubator told me? Do you really want to know?"

"I asked the question."

Delaney shuffled forward on her hands and knees and peered up at Clair. St. Paul made a staggered step as Delaney placed her hands on Clair's ankles, but Clair signaled all was well.

"I'm going to ask you one thing," said Delaney. "Just tell me if it's true, and I'll know why the Incubator told us both about her. Just let me ask one thing."

"Ask, then."

Delaney took a deep breath. She grabbed at the skin of her arms as the effects of having her entire soul plunged into scalding water reverberated through her. As Clair watched, Delaney's dull blue eyes began to change their color, fading into a muddled shade.

"Are you adopted?" said Delaney. "Do you know your true parents?"

The question took a moment to register. Clair stepped back, even as Delaney tugged at her ankles. "Adopted? Yes... I am. But how...?"

It was not simply the color of Delaney's eyes that changed. Her hair began to lose its brown luster, the color ebbing away, draining from the roots outward. As the change spread, Clair realized why Delaney's eyes had seemed so dull and dead. Not because of the inherent sociopathy of her personality, but because of the aura of fakeness that persisted around magic one used to alter their own appearance.

"Because," said Delaney. "I, too..."

Her eyes were red. Her hair was white.

The strength gave from Clair's legs. She sat hard on the bloodied carpet. St. Paul rushed to her side and placed her hands on Clair's shoulders, but Clair stared ahead, stared at the albino doppelganger.

Selma Smith, alias Woodbury, did not sleep that night. You can't sleep with your neck torn out. It doesn't stop bleeding. If you lie down it gets in your mouth. She tried, she really did, but all she managed to do was bloody her sheets and make her bed untouchable, a brimming marsh of her own blood.

She whittled away the night stuffing the gaping hole with tissues, running it under the shower nozzle, crying and screaming and punching the floor and hoping, praying for Em to hurry up and kill the fucking bitch, break the curse, heal her. Please, God. Please let her be healed. Please God please.

After seven hours of this, when the darkness ebbed from the windows and the dull grayness of a stormy winter morning replaced it, Woodbury curled up in her corner and prayed instead for death.

Just HOW High Do You Even Have to BE

An alien noise woke Sloan. Garbled, impenetrable. Her eyes adjusted to the dim interior lighting of a room with ambiguous purpose as her various sensory receptors rebooted at about the speed of a fifteen-year-old computer. Something warm sagged against her shoulder. Ignoring the ache in her skull, Sloan turned toward it and found sleeping there a topless female no older than Sloan herself with what looked like a dog collar around her neck.

Sloan leapt with a start, lost her balance, floundered back onto the couch, and leapt again. Lacking support, the topless girl slumped against the cushion with a snore.

What the fuck had Delaney gotten her into this time? Sloan patted her coat to make sure she hadn't been, like, molested or something in her sleep. All the buttons on her jacket were in place, and all her thick layers beneath it untampered. Her Soul Gem remained in the appropriate pocket, next to her (empty) wallet and her passport with the awful picture. Nothing out of place.

How did I get here, she asked herself. Where was here? What happened the night before? Had she been drinking?

The room had one door. Sloan moved for it, only to trip over a second girl, marginally more clothed than the first. A quick glance around the room revealed three more girls all in similar states of repose. What was this place? Had Delaney—

Delaney lost her powers. They had fought. Clair was there. But how did that lead to Sloan getting here?

Watching not to step on any more girls, Sloan tiptoed her way toward the door. The alien noise that roused her continued, still incoherent despite Sloan's mostly-regained mental faculties. She tried the door carefully, hiding behind the frame as she surveyed the dark room beyond, its windows shuttered. Silver outlines from the scant gray light illuminated an entire pile of girls in various states of undress, heaped on sofas, tables, chairs, overturned shelves. A modest chandelier hung uneven from the center, its bulbs flickering. The den smelled of alcohol and ash and things Sloan had never smelled before. Foul, sickly-smelling things.

In the darkness, two catlike eyes gleamed at her. Sloan froze in the doorway as she attempted to place the eyes to a person, but all around was only darkness and silhouette.

The chandelier flickered to reveal a girl (a fully clothed one, at that) seated upon a recliner with her legs crossed. Sloan blinked. She had seen this girl before, but the memory was faint and distant. Not Delaney, not Bloomington or Woodbury, not St. Paul or the Terminatrix, not Clair...

It came to her. "You're... Clair's... sister?"

Even in the olden days, when Sloan and Clair were best of buds, Sloan had only seen Clair's older sister a handful of times, and mostly in glimpses as she dashed like Sasquatch between

hallways of the Ibsen household. Clair and Clair's parents did not mention her much, and when they did, they did not mention her fondly.

"Yeah, I guess that's what they usually call me," said Clair's sister. "I prefer Lynette."

"Lynette," said Sloan. It might be her name, it might not. Sloan could not remember. "So you brought me here?"

"Nah, I just came for the free booze," said Lynette. She lifted a hand that clenched a tall bottle of vodka. The dregs sloshed inside. "You come with a date?"

"I asked because I don't know."

"Ah." Lynette uncorked the bottle and took a swig, which she punctuated with a raspy smack of her lips. "That's how you know it's a good night, am I right or am I right?"

What the hell was happening, Sloan thought. Why Clair's sister, of all people? She was not a Magical Girl. Unless she kept it a secret from Clair and Sloan and all the other Minneapolis girls for years. She was too old for Kyubey's contract range. Doubtless the legions of hungover girls strewn about this house (apartment?) were not Magical Girls either. Which meant, what relation did they have to anything? A random nomad skirting the fringes of the city had more bearing on the war between Sloan and Clair than Clair's sister. A Magical Girl and a non-magical one inhabited separate spheres of existence.

"You know," said Lynette, after Sloan did not respond, "I thought you were missing? There was a hoopla about that. Missing posters, police and shit. Your family showed up on TV. Or wait, are you the other twin? Shit, I dunno."

"I'm the other twin," said Sloan. To cause less problems. She had forgotten her family still assumedly lived in this city, and that they might have some vague interest in finding her and bringing her home. Better to leave as few tracks as possible.

Lynette downed the last of her vodka and dropped the bottle over the side of the recliner. "Prep school girls," she said. "Prim and proper by day, crazy bitches by night. My sister is the sole exception in the history of prep school."

All this was nice and all, but entirely unhelpful. Still, the encounter made Sloan wary. All signs indicated Clair and her sister had a nonexistent relationship. Would Clair use her sister as an ally against Sloan? Keeping an eye on Lynette, who reached down and began stroking the hair of a sleeping girl, Sloan made her way across the room, careful to avoid wayward limbs and splayed fingers. More doors branched from the room, from one of which came the omnipresent sounds that had woken her.

Sloan went through the door into a bedroom. Atop the grandiose profusion of satin bedding and heaped mattresses sat two people. One was a black man in a beret, the other an Asian chick wrapped in a blanket. They held game controllers and gazed into a television screen mounted to the wall, where each manipulated a gun-toting space marine through a lush and alien jungle.

Her tenebrous memories recalled both of these people. Something about a pink Cadillac. It made Sloan's head ache.

One of the space marines on the television died in an explosion while a gruff announcer said KILLIMANJARO. The other space marine leapt onto the corpse of the first and furiously crouched up and down.

"Sheet," said the black man in the beret. He tossed his controller aside. "You damn good at this."

"Being good at things is what I do," said blanket girl. "Another round?"

"Nah way. I just lose."

"I'll handicap myself. Pistols only. You use whatever you like."

"If only you was as good at dodging bullets in real life as you was in this game," said beret man.

"Ha. Funny."

Beret man's comment made Sloan remember. The alleyway. Clair and the other girl, what was her name? Hennepin, that's right. Then the Cadillac came and...

"What the fuck is happening," said Sloan.

Hennepin and the black guy wheeled toward her. They gaped until Hennepin recomposed herself and said, "Hey, whaddya know? It's Fargo."

Sloan kept her hand in her pocket, wrapped around her Soul Gem. Hennepin was one of Clair's goons. She seemed docile, but that was no reason to let one's guard down.

"You wake up with your clothes on?" said Hennepin. "Lucky, I still can't find mine." She indicated the blanket around her bare shoulders and sighed.

Beret man held up a knowing finger. "That what the Boss say. She say, make sure that girl have no clothes. I ask why, she say just do it. I say okay, and I don't ask no more questions."

"Oh, gross," said Hennepin. "Can you believe it, Fargo? I got undressed in my sleep by this skeevy pervert."

"I didn't touch nothing."

"Yeah, that's easy to believe!" Hennepin rolled her eyes.

"I want to know who brought me here and why," said Sloan. "And where I am and a whole slew of other shit. And I don't feel like wasting time waiting for answers."

"Isn't it obvious," said Hennepin. She grabbed her controller and set some options on a menu screen. "At least, obvious who brought us here. Come on, Fargo, I know you're smarter than

that. Actually I don't know jack about how smart you are, but I assume you at least got a cerebrum more developed than single-cell protozoa."

Sloan watched as Hennepin and the beret man queued up for another round. Hennepin took an early lead when she set up an ambush and dispatched Mr. Beret with a clean headshot.

"Tell me who brought me here."

Hennepin sighed as she set up camp outside Mr. Beret's spawn point and racked up kills on regular five-second intervals, ignoring the indignant protests of her adversary. "Fargo! Please, you're making me lose my faith in humanity. Think about it. Who loves lascivious orgies, illegal substances of many colors and flavors, and glitzy pink cars? It's not a long list!"

Sloan was absolutely certain she knew nobody who would fit such a description. Unless Delaney? They seemed like things Delaney might like. But Delaney was not an option, she had stayed behind to buy time while Sloan fled Clair's lackeys. The list of people she knew in general was rather short: Delaney, Omaha, Clair, Woodbury, Bloomington, St. Paul. The Terminatrix. Kyubey, if he counted as a person. Winnipeg... except she was dead.

"Tell me who brought me here," said Sloan.

"Oh dear. You must be an amnesiac." Hennepin sniped Mr. Beret from across the map with a pistol to end the round. "Luckily that grants you plot immunity to any and all danger, at least until a critical event jogs your memory and you recall your past as one of the following: A, an extraterrestrial with a powerful message for Earth. B, the princess of a magic kingdom—"

Sloan ripped the controller from Hennepin's hands, forced her onto the bed, and coiled the cord around her neck. She pulled hard, constricting the cord and causing Hennepin to gasp for breath, her well-manicured fingers groping to loosen the knot.

"If you think I am fucking around, you are dead fucking wrong," said Sloan.

"Aw come now," said Mr. Beret, although he made no attempt to restrain Sloan, "That ain't nice."

"Let's try again: Who brought me here."

Sloan pulled tighter. Hennepin's eyes boggled.

"How *uncouth!*" spoke a voice from behind. "Sloan, why such *barbarism?*"

Sloan looked up. In the doorway stood a Dalmatian fur coat that may have kept a person inside it. Hands like dolls held both sides of the doorframe as the fur coat leaned into the room, a small round head observing the fracas within from behind soul-swallowing sunglasses and a pale layer of powdered makeup. Her hair, obviously dyed platinum blonde, streamed down her neck and collided with the trim of her coat until it became unclear where hair ended and coat began. Sapphires dangled from her ears and a diamond necklace hung low down the billowing expanse of skinned animal that comprised her torso. Jewels of

various colors twinkled from folds and flaps in the coat. Tattooed on her neck in cursive was the word J'ADORE.

For some unknowable reason, Sloan found this creature both attractive and immediately soothing to be around. She loosened her grip on Hennepin's throat and rubbed her jaw in embarrassment.

"Oh... hey... sorry," she said.

"Don't be so *gauche*," the fur coat spoke. Its accent was British, except obviously fake. And yet somehow endearing? This made no sense. The coat-person contained so many characteristics Sloan found tacky and debutante, and yet something made Sloan incapable of passing judgment. "I understand you survived as a *hermit* in the *wilderness* for the past seven months, but really, asphyxiation? That is the most *depraved* of all fetishes."

"I, uh, what?" Sloan glanced down and realized Hennepin's blanket had fallen away and revealed her bare upper body. And that Sloan was in a rather personal position on top of her. She quickly drew away, allowing the blushing Hennepin to pull her blanket up.

"Such-and-such statistic of people die *each year* from erotic asphyxiation," the fur coat continued, adjusting her oversized sunglasses. "A real tragedy. I know she is a rather *scrumptious* sexual prospect, but please refrain from fornicating on my bed, I *hate* having to change the sheets every night."

"I change the sheets, though," said Mr. Beret.

"I hate having to *order* Carmichael to change the sheets every night," the fur coat amended.

"Funny joke, Boss," said Mr. Beret. Or Carmichael, Sloan guessed.

The fur coat glided into the room with her arms outstretched as though surfing. She made a dainty pirouette and landed on her side across the bed, sending reverberations of blankets downstream. "So Sloaney Sloan Sloan, I see you've awakened! No, let me try again. Sloan, haven't you *missed* me? I'm your best and closest friend *ever!*"

Sloan still had no idea who this girl was. Unless Delaney had swallowed a full bottle of drugs and pulled a prank on her. But this seemed somehow beyond even Delaney, and probably a fraction as useful. Like trading out a genuine article for a Chinese knockoff.

"Uh." For some reason Sloan did not want to offend this girl, and for some reason she *did* feel like they were friends. She rubbed her skull. Something was wrong about this. "What... what's your name again?"

"Oh no! She hit her head and developed *amnesia*. *Whatever* shall we do, Carmichael?"

"Take her to a doctor," Carmichael offered.

"Feed her a madeleine," said Hennepin, who kept her arms wrapped tight around herself.

"I *love* madeleines!" said the fur coat. She rolled off the bed with all her tails and sleeves flapping behind her. "I'm certain I have some in the pantry. I'll be *right* back!"

Before Hennepin could say she was joking, the fur coat disappeared.

Sloan nudged Hennepin. "Really, who is she?"

"Fuck you," said Hennepin. "Find out yourself."

Some form of magic must be causing the disjoint between Sloan's rational assessment of the fur coat and the subtle emotional attachment she had to it. For some reason she wanted to please the girl, or at least not disappoint her. She plumbed her memory for some girl with similar characteristics or at least a similar appearance. Since the other Minneapolis girls had all revealed themselves, it had to be either Anoka or Ramsey. But the Anoka when Sloan ruled was already on the way out, symptoms of Cyclical death undeniable, and Ramsey, from Sloan's scant recollections, was a meek and quiet girl. Kind of like Omaha. She kept to herself and Sloan rarely had cause to call on her. Despite their few encounters, Sloan had always kept a positive impression of the girl, but she had assumed that was precisely because of their few encounters. The more Sloan had to see a girl, the more she disliked her.

Except Clair. With Clair, only when Sloan stopped seeing her did the hatred fester.

The fur coat sashayed back into the room. "No madeleines, sorry! Only a few *eclairs*."

"Are you Ramsey," Sloan asked.

Ramsey unleashed a high-pitched squeal that lasted too long. "Yes, yes! That's *me!* Ramsey! You remembered! I get *scared* sometimes people will forget."

"Fear not, darling," said Hennepin. "You are *très* unforgettable."

The true meaning of Hennepin's words seemingly lost on her, Ramsey flopped onto the bed and kicked her legs in the air. "My friends, my friends! It makes me *so* happy to hear these things. I am loved, I am *truly* loved!"

Every other sentence she had to shout. Her voice, somewhere deep in the throes of puberty, reached incisive highs that forced all around her to flinch. Good thing some kind of strange influence compelled Sloan to like this bizarre girl, or else she might rapidly lose patience. A good thing because with Delaney gone, Sloan needed allies and could not afford to alienate even this one.

"Thanks for helping me in the alley," said Sloan.

Ramsey extended a gracious arm and dragged a finger down the side of Sloan's coat. "You're welcome! It took me *so* long to even *hear* you were in Minneapolis. I was afraid I wouldn't reach you in time. But I did, and now a *beautiful* friendship can blossom!"

"Yeah," said Sloan. "You seem a lot different than last time."

She had to stand up, because Ramsey began rolling back and forth on the bed, sending her flapping coat everywhere. She finally stopped the pointless interlude with a sheepish smile on her face.

"That's because..." (dramatic pause) "...I started selling cocaine!"

Started... selling... what? Sloan rubbed her eyes and pieced together Ramsey's words. The full awareness of their meaning came slow, staggered, and with a sagging weight in her chest. This was going to be her new ally, she realized. Her new Delaney. Oh boy! Sloan always had the best allies.

"So you sell to those girls outside," said Sloan.

"No, *oh* no," said Ramsey. "I mean, *sometimes*. But those girls are my *employees*."

"Employees." There were at least thirty girls in those rooms.

"Yeah!" Ramsey sat up and affected the most businesslike posture one with such gaudy apparel could affect. "It's a *brilliant* distribution model, actually. When cops prowls for drug dealers, who do they look at? Why, scuzzy black *men* like Carmichael, that's who! I deliberately play against their preconceived *stereotypes* by hiring only young *girls* to flip for me. Not *one* has been caught yet, and I'm *months* in the trade. Brilliant, totally brilliant!"

The throb in Sloan's head deepened. Her disgust at Ramsey's practices battled with her incomprehensible like for Ramsey as a person. Overall it left her feeling ill.

"*Come on* Slo-dizzle, don't be like that!" Ramsey grabbed Sloan's shoulders and gave a vigorous shake. "I *swear* it's not as bad as you think."

"Oh no," said Hennepin. "Here comes the sob story."

Ramsey glared at her. "Silence. I know for *you*, Sloan, who had the fortune of living with her *parents* and having a *roof* over your *head* and *food* to *eat* every *night*, the concept of needing to make *money* may be foreign, but—"

"I worked a convenience store in Fargo," said Sloan.

"Yes, but you're *seventeen*! It's not even *legal* for someone my age to work in this *idiotic* country, okay?" Ramsey shrieked in frustration and pounded her fists against the bed. "This *ALWAYS HAPPENS*. Nobody *UNDERSTANDS* and they think I'm some kind of *FREAK*. You're just as bad as *CLAIR*!"

Oh no. Come on Sloan, be nice. Who gives a shit about cocaine, you need a friend. She placed a limp hand on Ramsey's shoulder. "You're right, I'm sorry. Please, go on."

Although Hennepin scoffed, Ramsey was instantly mollified. She rose to her knees and rocked back and forth. "Thanks! Anyway, what I was *saying* is, fourteen-year-old me wound up in this city with no money and no nothing. I had to live *somewhere*, but nobody will hire an underage girl with no *technical skills*. So I resorted to what *most* Magical Girls have to do."

"Cocaine," said Sloan.

"Prostitution!" said Ramsey, like a punch to Sloan's gut. "We may have no *skills*, but we still have our nubile teenage *bodies*, which will always be worth something to *someone*."

That was... legitimately horrible. It made Sloan cringe, and she fancied herself above such squeamishness. She remembered the pimp in Fargo and the peacock ladies in Williston. She thought about Winnipeg, whose accent had outed her as an immigrant. She thought about Delaney, and her heart-shaped wallet that never went empty. Where did that money come from?

"Wow," said Sloan. "That's... That was what you were doing when I was in charge of Minneapolis?" She thought about the meek Ramsey she remembered from before. Quiet, head low. Said little. Jesus Christ.

"Not just *me*," said Ramsey. "The *old* Hennepin, and the old *Woodbury* too. We tried to help each other out, give *support* and such. Clair knew, and she *wanted* us to find another way, but she was *remarkably* unhelpful about suggesting an alternative. After that whole *snafu* between you and her, and she took over for real, things got tense. I doubt she liked having teen *whores* running around her city."

"She just doesn't like any gainfully employed female," said Hennepin. "She's a reactionary. To her, women live as pretty domestics and play music all day."

Ramsey rolled over on the bed and tangled with the covers. "Anyway, this conversation *bore* me. You can figure out what happens next. All seedy *industries* are acquainted with one another, the leap from hooker to *hawker* was rather simple. Especially since people tend to like me, at least ever since I *contracted*. Had to change my *personality* a tad, whimpering pushovers don't make *profits*. The concept of identity is *so* overrated. We're all cookie-cut slabs of *meat* and *bone* who only *think* we're different."

"Except in measures of strength, skill, intelligence, speed..." Hennepin listed the qualities on her fingers.

"Some of us got dark skin too," said Carmichael.

This conversation had quickly careened off the tracks. In Sloan's estimation, none of these people knew what the hell they were saying, and Ramsey's flippant demeanor quickly overruled any sympathy points her dismal past may have garnered. Sloan remembered she had a mission to accomplish.

"So you're siding with me over Clair because Clair doesn't like you pushing cocaine across the city, is that it?" said Sloan. "And you think if I'm in charge, I won't care."

Ramsey covered a forced laugh. "I *know* you won't care. I've seen *you* run this city. *Laissez faire* at its finest."

Sloan would have been annoyed if it weren't totally true.

"Okay," she said. "Then let's talk Clair Ibsen. How do we—"

With a nonchalant gesture Ramsey interrupted her. "Yes yes, we'll get to *that*. Why the rush! We've only been reunited after so long *apart*. And with Hennepin we have ourselves a *real* party. Calm down, *relax*." She stretched back on the bed and yawned. "It's too *early* to talk war. We'll worry about it tonight."

"I have a Terminatrix on my ass, Ramsey," said Sloan.

To Ramsey, this fact seemed only mildly disconcerting. Considering how loosely she mentioned Magical Girl stuff around Carmichael and in earshot of at least thirty normals outside, the concept of Terminatrixes probably did not register too strongly with her. Surprising Kyubey hadn't condemned Ramsey by now, actually. Did using her powers (because surely she had a power that altered how others perceived her, that was the only explanation for why Sloan... *liked* her so much) to sell drugs throughout the city count as "Inflicting harm upon regular humans with magic"? A rather thin line.

Sloan waited for Ramsey to say something, but apparently a total lack of response was all the Terminatrix remark merited.

"Can I have my clothes back?" said Hennepin.

Ramsey shot up. "Are you *daft*? Of course not. That's part of your torture!"

"Torture," said Sloan and Hennepin in unison.

"*Duh*?" Ramsey pushed herself off the bed, reinvigorated by the concept. "You're my *captive*, right? Which means I'm morally *obligated* to torture you, it's just how it *works*, don't question it." She laid her hands on Hennepin's shoulders. "But *hurting* people makes me sad, it's so *barbaric*! I'd rather torture you, hmm, what's the word... *psychologically*? Shamefully? Torture you through *shame*, yes! Hence the lack of clothes."

Hennepin looked to Sloan as if to confirm the words she heard were the same words everyone else heard. Sloan was as baffled as she was, and Carmichael had seemed to drift into his own fantasy realm, gazing only into the paused television screen and nodding to the points of emphasis in Ramsey's speech patterns.

"Well, you win!" said Hennepin. "I'm embarrassed. We done yet?"

For a moment Ramsey stared at the blankets swaddling Hennepin's body, stroking her chin and murmuring to herself. She pulled down her sunglasses for a better look. "Well, *maybe*. I guess so. Carmichael, where did you put her clothes?"

"Uh." Carmichael quickly scanned the ground as if maybe he dropped them there. "Uh, I forget."

An epiphany overtook Ramsey and she held up a finger. "Oh, that's right! I *told* you to scatter her articles of clothing around the house. We were going to make her *search* for them like a *scavenger* hunt!"

"What," said Hennepin.

"You better hurry up and get *hunting*." Ramsey checked a diamond-studded watch that looked like a shackle on her skinny wrist. "All those girls will be *waking* soon. They might find your clothes *first* and put them on by mistake! *Then* what will you wear?"

"What," said Hennepin.

Ramsey leapt in front of the door and bowed dramatically, her arms indicating the heap of females beyond. "Get going! Also, take off that blanket, that's *cheating*."

It took a few moments for Hennepin to realize that no, Ramsey was not joking. Even then she held the blanket tight around her, rising carefully from the bed and making sure no fold flapped in the wrong direction.

"I'm keeping the blanket," Hennepin said.

"Oh, *fine!*" said Ramsey. "You really *do* ruin all the fun."

She ushered Hennepin outside. Sloan, having nothing better to do and feeling awkward near the zombified Carmichael, followed them out. Hennepin threaded her way through the bestrewn bodies, testing patches of ground with her foot before stepping. She used both hands to ensure her blanket stayed put as she stooped to inspect a discarded undergarment, only to assess it as not belonging to her and shying away with a disgusted face.

Ramsey giggled and clapped. "This is some *prime* torture! *Truly* Grade A!"

From across the room, Clair's sister Lynette clutched a motionless body and curled over it like a vampire about to drain a victim. She looked up from her pursuits and watched Hennepin tiptoe around the room. "What's going on?"

"Oh, Lynette!" said Ramsey. "*You're* here too? Lynette, meet Sloan. Sloan, meet *Lynette*."

"We've met," said Sloan.

Lynette winked at Sloan. What did that mean? Sloan did not like this one bit. While Ramsey was equally insane as Delaney, at least Delaney had a measure of common sense. They ought to be interrogating Hennepin right now. Learning what tricks Clair prepared, what other girls she enlisted to the fight. Figure out Anoka's powers. Hell, figure out Hennepin's powers, since Carmichael shot her before she had a chance to use them. Maybe they could pressgang Hennepin into helping them. Bind her arms and threaten to kill her unless she used her powers in their defense. But unless Sloan knew those powers, such hypothesizing was worthless. Everything was worthless. Just give Hennepin her damn clothes back, the sight of her making such measured and tepid progress (so far she had only found a sock) disgusted Sloan. Do interrogation the old fashioned way: beat it out of her.

"What's *wrong*, Sloaney-poo?" said Ramsey. "You seem *tense*."

"Maybe it's because I'm the only one taking this seriously?"

"Taking what seriously," said Lynette.

Ramsey butted in. "She's *probably* talking about how we're planning to kill your—"

Sloan clamped a hand over Ramsey's mouth. Lips moved against the palm as only muffled noises came out. "Do you have any conception of reality," hissed Sloan, "Any at all?" She felt anxious. Girls on the ground were waking up, staring at her to see what the commotion was about.

Ramsey's spit was getting all over Sloan's hand, so she let go. "How *RUDE!*" said Ramsey.

"Can I talk to you? Privately?" said Sloan.

From across the room, Lynette winked again. Sloan glared as she led Ramsey back into the bedroom. Carmichael had started another round of the video game, which he spent tracking down Hennepin's unmanned avatar and slaying without remorse. Sloan shut the door behind them.

"Ramsey. I need you to listen to me. What we are doing is serious. I need you to be serious about it. I can't stay here forever. It's only a matter of time before the Terminatrix finds this place. Do you understand?"

Ramsey's pupils were huge and she kept fidgeting under Sloan's grasp, the strands of her fur coat itching Sloan's palms. "Hey! *Unhand* me! Why are you being so *ROUGH?* I don't like this!"

Sloan didn't like it either. She didn't like how Ramsey was not anchored to the same lived experience as everyone else in the world, how she flitted between coherence and capriciousness with reckless and unpredictable abandon, how she exuded lack of competence in any and all aspects, and how Sloan's memories of her combat abilities from the old days were unpromising at best.

"Look, Ramsey. I don't want to be mean to you." Mostly because some magical influence of Ramsey's was altering her mind to make her think that. "But I am engaged in war right now, do you understand? War. I do not have time for silly games." If Sloan fought hard, she could override the impulses invading her head that screamed LEAVE POOR RAMSEY ALONE. Gradually, she allowed more malice to creep into her voice. "I'm not fucking around, Ramsey. I cannot afford fucking around. I need you to focus or sober up or fix whatever the hell is inherently wrong with your degenerate self and help me, or I am fucking gone, do you understand?"

Ramsey shrank beneath Sloan's glare. Her coat seemed to shrivel as her muscles tensed and she tried to flinch away. "Hey, *stop...* That's not a nice thing to *say...*" Her voice became tinny and weak. The faux British accent evaporated, replaced by something nasally and quiet.

"No, it's not." Sloan steeled herself to overpower her unnatural inclination to apologize. "I don't give a shit. I'm not about to have seven months of work upended by a stupid bimbo like you. Do you understand?"

The transformation continued. For the first time, Sloan recognized Ramsey as the same girl she had known when she ruled Minneapolis. Tiny, awkward. Her previously unblemished face broke in spontaneous acne. Her knees buckled and she swayed under Sloan's grip.

"Stop... please..."

"I need to drill this into your puny skull. I am the one in charge here. What I say goes. If you want to continue your little drug ring after I reclaim this city, you will do what I say. Got it, you... you little..." The foul word she wanted to say would not come out. The sympathy and pity she held for the decomposing creature overwhelmed and choked her. A last ditch effort of Ramsey's magic to protect herself from Sloan's ire.

The word need not be said, however. Ramsey trembled even more in the silent void where the word would have gone, her stammers too partial to even turn into morphemes.

"Stop sniveling. Stop it!" Sloan said.

Ramsey did not stop. Her deterioration had been so rapid, so easy, and it only made Sloan angrier.

She slapped the sunglasses off Ramsey's face. "I said stop it!"

Ramsey's eyes rolled up and she fainted onto her bed.

Immediately a wave of disgust swept over Sloan. Not at poor, pitiful Ramsey, but at herself. How could she abuse such a defenseless creature? How could she be so cruel? The thoughts invaded her head unbidden and did not disappear no matter how hard she attempted to dispel them. She tried to tell herself it was Ramsey's magic making her think such things, but all logic and reason disappeared beneath the revulsion that combusted across her brain. Nausea bubbled in the back of her throat and she fought to hold it down.

She kneeled, buried her head against the carpet, took deep breaths.

"Aw, she passed out again." Carmichael stood over the bed and inspected Ramsey. "What you say to her? She don't take well to criticism. There was this scary white-hair girl the other day, come and yell at her, and oh wow you shoulda seen it. Boss was in dire straits. At least three hours afore she recovered."

"People don't... don't usually say mean things to her, do they?"

Carmichael shook his head. "Nope. People love the Boss. She a nice girl, you shouldn't be so hard on her. She make sure all her girls taken care of. I work for some people afore her, and compared to them she a goddam saint, you hear? But nah, you gotta go and be all mean. You and that white-hair girl."

White-haired girl. Clair. No wonder Ramsey wanted her dead. Maybe Sloan had fucked up by shouting at her. Maybe Ramsey didn't deserve it anyway. It was hard to tell what was legitimate regret and what was solely prompted by Ramsey's magic.

What was certain was Sloan could not eschew potential allies. Obviously Ramsey responded to criticism poorly. Sloan needed diplomacy and gentle persuasion to get what she wanted out of her.

Sloan was really, really shitty at diplomacy and gentle persuasion.

"I'll fetch the water," said Carmichael with a sigh. "Hope she don't take no three hours to wake up this time."

He exited. Through the open door, Sloan watched as Lynette tugged on the corner of Hennepin's blanket while Hennepin swatted Lynette with her sock.

Sloan wanted Delaney back.

Corn flakes again. Bloomington sat at the kitchen counter and ground dry flakes to dust between her teeth. The sandy crumbs coagulated with her spit into a molasses paste that oozed down her throat as she swallowed with strained and painful gulps. She gnawed the plastic spoon as she regarded her half-eaten bowl and mentally prepared herself for the next bite.

"Your grades bad, girl," said her mother. She flapped a dog-eared report card in Bloomington's face. "Whatchoo gotta say for yourself?"

Bloomington forced a spoonful of corn flakes into her mouth.

"Math: D+. English: C-. History: D. Chemistry: F! Ceramics: D. How you get a D in Ceramics? How you get a D in Physical Education! You get graded just for showing up!"

Chew. Chew. Chew. Swallow.

"Why ain't you in school right now? It's late enough. Go on, get off your lazy ass and git!"

"Ma, it's Christmas break," said Bloomington.

Her mother tsked as though the response failed expectations. These corn flakes made Bloomington want to retch.

"You know what Donny do when it Christmas break," she said. Arms folded, slippered foot tapping. "He study for next semester. He got his nose in them books. Now he off to state college and he gonna be a doctor."

And where'd the money come from to send him there, ma? Why'd he suddenly get that full ride scholarship the same time Bloomington started hanging out late at nights and skipping school?

Bloomington took another bite.

"I ain't gonna have no daughter turn out to be a whore," said her mother. "I ain't. Either you straighten your act or I'll, I'll, I'll... I'll beat you senseless, you hear? You ain't got no ambition, you ain't got no plans. Whatchoo wanna be when you grow up?"

Bloomington swallowed. "I wanna be alive."

Her mother swatted her with the rolled-up report card. "There's that crazy talk again! I swear. I swear! My poor heart can't take this. It can't take to watch you turn into a goddam whore before my own eyes!"

She threw up her hands and stormed down the hallway, leaving the report card behind. Echoes of her lamentations faded away until ultimately silenced by a slamming door in a nether corner of the shifty house.

Somewhere a dog barked.

What was today. Wednesday? Thursday? Bloomington forgot. She done no wraith hunting in two days. If she skipped tonight, she would hurt bad tomorrow. Hurt bad, but still function. She'd rather not stretch the line, though. All the more reason to ignore the boss's bullshit. Let the old Em and the new Em duke it out, winner take all. Shoot, if the Terminatrix hung around they might both wind up dead and that'd mean they get a brand new boss. Bloomington had seniority, but she had no desire to paint a huge target on her back. Let Hennepin take it, girl was competent enough and kept to herself. Of course, once someone gets power no telling what changes happen in their mind.

She still had half her corn flakes but tossed the bowl into the trash. The less time she spent in this house the better, but she had nowhere to go. Not with the storm outside, which showed no signs of slowing. Fucking Minnesota.

Hey...

Bloomington turned. Did she hear something? A voice? The wind?

Are you... there?

Definitely a voice. Bloomington moved toward a front window caked with frost and condensation. She pulled herself onto the couch propped in front of it and breathed on the glass.

Someone out there? she asked. *I can barely hear you.*

Hey... Bloom... it's me, Woodbury...

Bloomington rubbed her hand in a circle against the window and peered onto the front lawn. A long and thick trail of blood coated the snow, extending all the way to the end of the street. Kneeling beside a half-buried and overturned bicycle was Woodbury. The gnomish figure held her head bowed as ice piled atop her.

The figure slumped to the side and curled up in the gathering snow.

I don't feel good... she said as Bloomington sprinted for the door.

Torn to Pisces

Despite Carmichael's best efforts, Ramsey did not wake from her faint. She tossed on her bed, her forehead a cold sweat, her fur coat ratty and rumpled. She mumbled in her sleep while partygoers attended her. When the room got crowded, Sloan ducked out.

Females slithered across the carpet. Sloan waded past them to a window and peeked through the blinds. A docile street scene awaited her: silent suburban houses, modest sedans, fire hydrants and street lights and stop signs, plastic reindeer and twinkling stars, JOY TO THE WORLD and PEACE ON EARTH, all buried beneath six inches of snow with more falling. In the distance a half-shrouded column of light that may have been the Pillar of the Plains.

Who the fuck knew where this was. Sloan could not even assume they were in Ramsey County, because metro girls lived all over. Mendota Heights or Little Canada, Maplewood or Arden Hills, Richfield or Edina, Eagan or Burnsville.

Lynette sat nearby, sinking her fangs into the throat of someone who looked too young to be here. "What city is this," Sloan asked.

After gorging herself, Lynette raised her head. "Minneapolis."

"*Where* in Minneapolis."

Lynette thought for a moment, shrugged, and returned to her meal. Sloan watched with mounting disgust until finally something broke and she grabbed the girl Lynette fondled and tossed her out of range of Lynette's arms.

"Hey!"

"I'm serious. Where the fuck am I."

"I dunno, north of St. Paul. What's it matter? This city is all the same."

North of St. Paul. Which meant a long trek to reach Eden Prairie and Clair Ibsen. In the tundra, with a Terminatrix on her ass and Clair's bird on the prowl, Sloan stood no chance. The weather prevented public transportation, but Ramsey had a car. The plows had not come yet but maybe by the time Ramsey woke up...

Her best strategy was to wait. Even though that meant who knew how many hours in this foul-smelling house. At least it gave her time to calibrate her strategies now that she no longer had Delaney to rely on.

She turned to find a more empty corner of the house for meditation, but Lynette grabbed the tail of her coat. "Hey. You. You really are the missing twin, aren't you?"

"What makes you say that."

"Chelsea called you Sloan."

"Who the fuck is Chelsea," said Sloan.

Lynette looked at her like she was the biggest idiot in existence. "Uh, you know? Sunglasses? Dalmatian fur coat? Bling bling?"

"Puella de Vil," muttered a voice across the room. It was Hennepin, beshirted but pantsless and engaged in a tug-of-war with a sleeping girl for her jacket.

"Oh," said Sloan. "Yeah. her." Ramsey's real name *would* be Chelsea.

"I know a lot of people who'd be really interested to know you're around," said Lynette. "Everyone thinks you're dead. Clair thinks you're dead."

"I doubt it," said Sloan. She searched for a way out of this conversation.

"You're the only friend she's ever had, you know," said Lynette. "I remember when she first met you. She told us all about it at the dinner table. That was back when my parents still cared if I ate at the dinner table or if I came home at all. But hey, there must be a reason you up and disappeared one day. Stopped talking to her and everything."

"Why do you care," said Sloan.

Lynette leaned in confidentially. "Consider my sister an... interest of mine. The whole time you two were friends my main thought was how *anyone* could be friends with her. What kind of hopeless creature would stoop so low?"

Sloan didn't understand. Clair took great pains to present herself to the outside world as a kind and personable individual. Everyone liked her, everyone was her friend, because she did not depress them and asked nothing of them.

"When you disappeared, she cried and all, but I knew. I knew she had something to do with it. I thought they'd find your bones under our floorboards."

"Nothing like that," said Sloan.

Lynette sank deeper into her seat and stared ahead. "But you do hate her, right? Something changed. Right?"

"I no longer consider us friends."

"You saw something of her. Something inside her. Right? Didn't you?"

Sloan said nothing.

An absentminded hand crawled down the side of Lynette's chair and seized the neck of a bottle of vodka, either the same as before or a new one. Lynette raised the bottle to her lips and took a pained swig. "My sister is an anomaly. Some kind of genius. I always got, you know, okay grades in school. Nothing fantastic, but they weren't awful either. But then she

comes along and, poof, everything perfect, everything flawless. Awards and honors. Every day some new accolade. I got buried beneath the trophies and medals and certificates. Lost and forgotten."

It had the makings of a drunken rant, the more complicated words slurred and stuttered. Lynette no longer seemed to care much about Sloan, but Sloan decided to linger a little longer. She knew what Lynette meant. Not about Clair; Clair's excellence had never impacted their relationship. But Sloan had a sister of her own, a sister who although blind was heralded as a great student and model citizen. Nowhere on Clair's level, but her blindness made even ordinary achievements into pinnacles of the human condition. At least in the eyes of Sloan's parents.

Funny how in fleeing the shadow of one colossus, Sloan stumbled at the feet of an even taller one.

"But that was all, that was all normal enough," Lynette continued. "Except... Except I'm pretty sure Clair did it specifically to annihilate me."

"What?"

"As the older sister, I always, you know, teased her as a kid. Like older siblings just fucking do. And she made it so easy, with her albinism and her mannerisms and her stilted speech patterns. She always got so upset, which just made me want to torment her more. I knew she hated me for it. She never said anything, but I could tell. There's that subtle demeanor, it's unmistakable. I think you know what I mean."

Sloan did not, actually. If Clair had ever hated her, she had missed it. She always assumed Clair incapable of emotions either positive or negative.

"Her revenge was slow but total. All those awards... I went from the older sister to barely part of the family. She never said a word to me, but I knew. I knew. And here I am now."

She took another drink. Sloan had no idea how much was truth and how much the inventions of a drunkard. It seemed impossible that Clair would have been anything less than a paragon of success and academia had she not been bullied by her sister at a young age. Perfection was too integral a component of Clair's psyche.

"I hate that fucking bitch," said Lynette with a note of finality.

"Amen," said Sloan.

"She always seemed to love you, though. She'd tell us about you at dinner. That was when my parents still cared if I sat at the table or even came home at all." (Sloan did not bother to tell Lynette she already said that.) "Every night. Sloan did this. Sloan said that. Sloan was nice to me. Sloan made me happy."

Sloan made me happy.

"She needed you. Everyone else in the world could sniff her out like the pariah she was. They had an instinctual understanding that she... she... was not like everyone else, that she was different, barely even human. Maybe her albino bullshit did it. But you were somehow gullible enough to fall for her disguise. Joke's on you!"

She gave a good-natured laugh, like this was playful ribbing, and nudged Sloan in the side.

"Good thing you did, too. She probably wouldn't be around if not for you."

"What?" said Sloan.

"Oh yeah!" Lynette laughed again and shook Sloan's wrist idly. "She totally tried to kill herself before she met you. Plunged a carving knife into her stomach three times. We had to rush her to the hospital because the ambulance wouldn't come fast enough. Crazy."

This seemed made up. Of all the people Sloan knew, Clair was the last to attempt suicide. It made no sense compared to everything Sloan knew about Clair. She was too confident, too excellent, too successful for such a thing. A ploy for attention? A carefully-planned attempt to reroute the power structure in her household? Sloan could see Clair online, researching places to stab herself without dealing a fatal wound...

"She left a note, too. I was the one who found it, I never showed mom and dad. Clair probably knew I had it and maybe that was another reason she wanted to destroy me."

"What did the note say," said Sloan.

"I disgust myself." Lynette tilted her head back and unleashed an unearthly cackle. "Even she disgusts herself! Even she knows she's defective. Ha, ha, ha..."

According to Lynette, this happened before Clair met Sloan. Which meant before she contracted, before the energy of her soul would heal her grievous wounds. Still, it made no sense.

"The worst thing is, when I found her," Lynette continued, "I thought maybe I should just let her die, you know? And you know what's even crazier?" Her eyes glimmered with cataracts. "What's even crazier is every single day of my life I regret I didn't."

She hiccupped and lobbed her half-empty bottle across the room. It thudded against the carpet but did not shatter, which seemed to plunge Lynette into absolute disappointment.

The silence was an opportunity to flee the conversation. Sloan found an open door and pressed for it, uncertain of the dimensions or directions of the house. The deeper corners had even sparser lighting than those she had already explored, with longer shadows and ominous umbral splotches. Fewer girls lay about these extra rooms, which lacked furniture to indicate their function or purpose, if they ever had one at all. Other than few stray sofas and the bed the house seemed devoid of anything, a mere agglomeration of shapes and swatches of carpet.

She wandered into a kitchen with no refrigerator and no stove, murky spaces where both ought to be, a few stray ends of severed tubing and sharp jutting wires. Bottles stood atop the counter, most overturned, some shattered. Sloan tried the light switch but nothing happened.

"Excuse me," said Hennepin. She hustled past Sloan in a motley collection of clothing that at least covered her skin. She kneeled by the counter and tried all the cabinets, sorting through the cobweb-strewn spaces within. She slammed each door after.

Sloan watched her check the empty spaces of the kitchen.

"This is so stupid." Hennepin threw up her arms. "And *invasive*. Can't you just smash my kneecaps like a normal terrorist?"

"Terrorist. That's what Clair calls me now?"

"Nah." She leaned over the counter and scanned the adjacent room. "Honestly, I have like the tiniest, most fleeting connection to her. I don't know why I bothered to waste my life with this whole thing, and now I'm missing valuable stream time."

"Stream time."

"Yeah, you know?" Hennepin stared at her like she was an idiot, but Sloan was so used to that by now she hardly found it offensive. "Video games? I stream myself playing games and people online watch me. And I get ad revenue, which is the big thing. Beats prostitution or peddling coke. It's how I pay my rent, which if I recall correctly, kinda due in like a week?"

Yep. Sloan knew because until like four days ago she had to pay rent in Fargo.

"Ugh. I can't get evicted *again*." Hennepin reached into a jacket pocket and retrieved a case of cigarettes and a lighter. With cool and practiced efficiency she lit one and stuck it into the corner of her mouth. "I know you won't believe me, but I honestly have no interest in this battle between you and Minneapolis. Old boss same as the new boss, I keep my nose out of politics so I keep my nose plus the rest of my face."

"I'm not going to let you go," said Sloan. "But I won't kill you. I'm only here for Clair."

"Sigh," said Hennepin. Meaning she actually said the word sigh, rather than actually sigh. She exhaled smoke. "Was worth a shot. What's the point of being good at everything when nothing you do matters?"

Sloan decided she had pretended to be chummy the requisite amount of time to start asking for information. "What are your powers."

"My powers?" Hennepin considered for a moment. "A hodgepodge of everything. I'd love to show off, but unfortunately that black guy has my gem so I can't. Pretty much I have a magic crystal thing and it does some stuff. It can be defensive or offensive. Since it's a crystal—"

"Describe this crystal."

"You know." Hennepin waved her hands to show. "Like, have you ever played *Final Fantasy*?"

"No."

This knocked the momentum out of Hennepin's explanation. "Well, the shape doesn't matter. The point is, it's hard as fuck so I can use it to block attacks, OR I can slam it into people to beat the shit out of them. And when light strikes it—"

"Light."

"Yeah, light. Minneapolis mentioned you had a light-related power, so basically you had no hope against me. My crystal absorbs light like a prism and either shoots it back out as a laser or these, like, healing rays. I usually keep a flashlight on me to make it work, but I'd be pretty OP against someone like you."

She laughed, the cigarette bobbing on her lower lip. So Sloan was right, Clair had specifically picked girls that had abilities to counter Sloan. Neutralizing Hennepin had been a fortuitous stroke. She, St. Paul, and probably Anoka were the primary goons to keep an eye on.

Speaking of which: "And Anoka. Who is she, what does she do."

Hennepin shrugged. "Nothing, as far as I can tell. She only showed up a few days ago. Minneapolis hired her instantaneously (and Ramsey too). I was at the tryout, so was Bloomington, and neither of us saw anything special about her at all."

That sounded... suspicious. "What's her weapon?"

"Some kind of curved sword. It had no special properties. Just a sword. Her form was shit too, I could tell."

"She must have some kind of magic, though. Based on her wish."

Hennepin took another long drag. "I'm sure she does, but she didn't use it when we had her show her moves, so I dunno what it is. Probably it's something that totally counters light magic. You're probably mega fucked."

Dammit. Smart of Clair to keep her key piece unknown to even her own underlings. The fact that of all the girls in Minneapolis only Anoka had not revealed herself indicated Clair kept her as a secret weapon, a final bomb to lob Sloan's way. That critical unknown undermined the stability of all her other certainties. She at least had an idea what Clair would do, what St. Paul would do, what Bloomington and Woodbury would do. Anoka could do anything, perhaps be a foolproof kryptonite against Sloan's powers.

"So what do you do again?" said Hennepin. "Minneapolis mentioned some stuff but I didn't pay attention. I'm curious now, though. You shoot light or what?"

"I shoot light."

"Yeah and what else?"

Sloan gave it some thought. "I shoot light."

The kitchen filled with smoke. With each puff, Hennepin illuminated her face a pasty orange. "That's it? Wow. Why'd Clair bother with Bloomington or Woodbury? If she sent me, I'd have killed you first fight."

"I also make things weigh less."

Hennepin scrutinized her and laughed. "Oh, I get it. You mean you make things *lighter*. That's actually kinda clever."

"Clair told me to try it," said Sloan. "It was her idea."

"Well shit, come on. Light is like, elemental. The amount of stuff light does is insane. No need to restrict yourself to just *weaponizing* it. You gotta be more creative."

"People keep telling me that."

Hennepin exhaled a ring of smoke. "I'll be straight with ya, Fargo. I'm in a shitty position right now. I don't have my gem, I've not on great terms with either side in this war. So I'm gonna ameliorate my standing somewhat and game my odds a little by giving you some free insider advice on something you can maybe use to throw Minneapolis for a loop. Wanna hear?"

No, not particularly. Sloan cared little for this girl and her know-it-all attitude, with her brazen assessment that she could defeat Sloan easily. She very much doubted Hennepin had much to offer anyway. Most likely she would suggest the same thing everyone suggested, the same thing Sloan's mind kept returning to whenever she tried to create a new ability: moving at the speed of light. Logically it made sense, but Sloan simply could not make herself do it. In fact, even the beams she fired from her gun moved slower than true light. Sloan had the sinking suspicion this stemmed from the sluggishness of her own mind: she could not make something move at a speed she did not have the mental capacity to comprehend or control.

"Okay," she said anyway.

"Make an image of yourself. Or of anything, really."

"An image?" Sloan had seen girls who could create illusory doubles of themselves. "What does that have to do with light?"

"Literally anything visible has to do with light," said Hennepin. "Seriously, that's basic third grader shit. Why do you think cameras flash? They send out light and capture the reflection to create imprints on a surface. Voila, photograph. Easy fucking peasy."

Photography? Yeah, now that Sloan thought about it... She remembered books from long ago, books about how stuff worked: computers, televisions, cameras...

"Anyway!" Hennepin dashed her cigarette on the counter and flicked the butt into the sink. "Thank me later for my spontaneous wisdom and unparalleled intellect. When the newfound

abilities you develop wind up the key factor for defeating Minneapolis, remember who it was who helped you out, yeah?"

She pushed herself away from the counter, made a brisk turn, and returned the way Sloan had come. She moved fast and with a purpose, managing exceptional poise despite her pied outfit.

The butt in the sink smoldered and died.

Sloan wandered the labyrinthine corridors until she found a door to the backyard. The snowfall had lightened but the yard had completely disappeared beneath a thick white layer that sucked at Sloan's boots and forced her to walk with wide steps. The yard was small and enclosed by a tall picket fence. Only the top of the next house and a few trees were visible on the other side. No windows or vantage points for anyone to see her, and considering how many rooms Sloan had traversed to get here, she doubted anyone from the house would come either.

She moved to the center of the yard and closed her eyes. The key component of all magic was visualization. She had done the same things so long she forgot the difficulty of honing one's powers, but she recalled many long nights with Clair as Clair instructed her how to stand, how to wave her arms, how to think and how to act.

Empty the mind. Allow all thoughts to drain away. Purge the static from her head and achieve a serenity of purpose, the kind of oriental mumbo jumbo spouted by Shaolin monks. It was difficult, her head fizzled with all sorts of mental detritus, fragments of conversations and doubts and hopes. She had to abandon all of it if she wanted this to work.

The goal was simple: create a photograph of herself. Except instead of printed on glossy paper or a roll of film, she would imprint her image on the face of reality.

She grabbed her Soul Gem from her pocket and transformed. By accident she summoned her machine gun because she was so used to creating it when she transformed. She banished it with a runic glow and left only herself standing in the center of an empty backyard with snow falling around her.

After another breath, she held her arms in front of her. Her hands began to glow as she sent her magic to the tips of her fingers. For a split second the light flared into a massive flash, blinding Sloan and forcing her to blink.

The light subsided. She looked around. No image of her or anything. Just the same old stuff.

It took a lot of mental override to stop herself from quitting. She needed this, remember? She needed an ace on Clair, an untapped power to exploit. Hennepin had brought up an interesting point about Clair's strategy. Why had she wasted time with Bloomington and

Woodbury, when she had players like St. Paul and Hennepin at her disposal? Her understanding of Clair's true character made the answer obvious: She had sent them as pawns to scout if Sloan had any tricks Clair did not expect. Clair always required complete and utter knowledge of a situation before making a move, but with that knowledge she always made the right move, the move that could not be countered. If Clair thought she knew everything but missed a key component of information...

It was the surprise factor Delaney had mentioned. Sloan needed this edge. So she needed to keep trying.

Focus! Use your mind. She breathed again and extended her hands. Another flash—another dud.

Dammit, there's no time for this. Get it to work already. It *seemed* possible. She envisioned it like the light somehow blasting the thinnest layer of molecules from her skin to create a paper-thin replica of her, a shell or husk, stuck to reality by the force of the blast. She could *see* it, *think* it, so why was it not working?

She tried again.

She tried again.

She tried again.

She tried again.

She tried again.

And she tried a bunch more times but every time nothing happened and she only got colder and colder as more and more snow piled on top of her. This was so stupid! She was simply not a creative person. If Clair or Delaney tried, they would make it work. There was something plain wrong with Sloan's powers of conceptualization.

Feeling foolish, she brushed the snow off her shoulders and wrenched her legs out of the snow on the ground. As she took her first step away, she noticed something in the holes her boots had left. She reoriented herself, her movements stilted and awkward in the deep fall, in order to better investigate. As she turned, she immediately realized it was not simply something strange in the snow, it was something strange in the air where she had stood.

Thin, weak, and transient, but undeniably there, was a life size image of Sloan, her face grimacing with concentration, her coattails frozen mid-flap. An immediate giddiness seized her: She did it! She made it work! She span her head in search of someone at whom to exclaim her accomplishment, but of course nobody was there. It didn't matter, she did it, and it *wasn't even that hard!* All she needed was the idea and she could do it. Her hyperpowered Soul Gem probably facilitated the process, but whatever. The point was, she had done a thing! She had done it!

Well, wait. Done what exactly? She scrutinized the image of herself. It looked like her, sure, but it was transparent and obviously fake, the fakeness exemplified by the its frozen lack of

motion. It was a facsimile of Sloan, yes, but a facsimile all but a simpleton could see as a facsimile.

She waved her hand through her mock torso. The image broke apart and faded away after only a few swipes. Quickly she created another flashbulb and inspected the new image. The same transience, the same fragility.

What use did this have? A decoy? It would take any competent human being a fraction of a second to tell the difference. She threw up her arms in frustration. Pointless! Why fucking bother!

Too cold to stay out much longer, she clomped for the door back to Ramsey's house. She made it two steps and stopped. Dripping onto the snow was a phantom blood with no identifiable source.

"Omaha," she said.

Hi, Sloan... what are you doing?

Sloan checked again to ensure nobody spied on her. "I'm trying a new ability to use on Clair."

Oh, that's good... that's really good, Sloan. I'm glad you're doing that. I really think you can beat her!

"Yeah, well, it didn't work."

Oh. Drip-drop went Omaha's blood. A reddening circle spread through the snow. Well, I mean, I'm here to tell you something important actually...

Great, more advice from Omaha. Sloan supposed she had every ostensible right to trust the girl. She had, after all, warned Sloan about the Terminatrix, and then pulled her out of the way of a bullet. Her disappearance during the subsequent scuffle with Clair's troops could be overlooked somewhat.

"What is it."

Can you... look behind you? At that fence?

Sloan slowly turned her head toward the backyard fence. "Okay."

Do you see anything?

"I see a fence."

Yeah, but anything else...?

Coy games placed low on the list of things Sloan cared for. "Snow. Some treetops. A roof."

Sloan, this is really, really important. Can you try looking a little harder?

If Delaney or anyone else had asked, Sloan would have yelled at them to stop fucking around, but she doubted Omaha had the propensity for japes. She squinted her eyes and stared hard at the fence.

It was a fence.

"There's nothing there."

Okay. Omaha's tread crunched through the snow, leaving phantom footprints until she stopped at Sloan's side. You said you were practicing a new technique... Do you mind if I suggest something else new for you to try?

"Might as well."

Okay. Another uncertain pause. Sloan heard the ruffling of a sleeve and envisioned Omaha wringing her wounded arm. I want you to try and see me.

"You're invisible. I can't see you."

Sloan... Your powers are derived from sight, isn't that true? I overheard you tell the others about your wish. You healed your sister's blindness. You can heal the eyes of others... Is it so hard for you to use your power to see the invisible? Especially now that you're so strong... it'll be easy for you to overpower my abilities with your own...

That made sense, Sloan guessed. Like the photography thing, she had never even thought to use her powers in such a way, but at least this time she had the excuse of lack of application. The only invisible person she had ever met was Omaha, and the issue of using your power to directly counter another girl's power basically became an arm wrestling contest.

She focused on the empty space in the snow where Omaha's blood ran. See the invisible. Like Superman. X-Ray vision. The more she thought about it, the more she wondered why she had never even *considered* it back when Omaha was tailing them around Williston. Of course, back then Sloan's strength was at its lowest point.

With unexpected ease, Omaha popped into view. Sloan almost thought the girl had done it herself, but a faint shadowy aura pervaded around her, much the way things looked on those occasions Omaha made Sloan disappear. Her outfit shimmered with the dampness of her blood, some of it frozen into icy chunks. She trembled in the snow like a twittering machine, something about to go off the fritz and burst in a connoption of gears and springs.

"That was easy."

You can see me? Yes, it would be easy... I'm pretty weak right now. It's a heavy drain on my Soul Gem to replenish the blood I lose through my wrist. But I'm glad you can see me.

Sloan regarded the gash on Omaha's wrist. If it still bled, it meant Delaney remained alive. Why would Clair spare her, though? It only brokered the risk of Sloan rescuing her, and Clair played a risk-adverse game. Did she plan to use Delaney as a hostage? 'Freeze or I kill her'? Ha. HA!

"When was the last time you purified your gem?" Sloan asked.

Don't worry about me, Sloan... It's unimportant. I need you to look at the fence again. Look for something invisible, okay?

Sloan turned to the fence, her mouth already open to formulate that it would be helpful if she knew what she was supposed to see beforehand, but the words stopped short in her throat because she saw what Omaha meant at the first glance. In a row along the fence were four small girls, their hands clinging to the edge as they stared over from the next yard over, two blondes, one redhead, and one wearing a big round cap with tassels. At first they looked like ordinary girls, but as Sloan stared harder, she noticed unnatural features scrawled across their faces: strange elliptical eyes with dots for pupils but no irises, snaggletooth smiles with red lips, pure white faces. They did not look like living things, but rather golems of some sort, or dolls.

They stared back at Sloan with their dreadful eyes. Sloan shivered.

"What the hell are those," she asked.

They are servants of the time demon, said Omaha. She has sent them to destroy you.

"Time demon!" More like the cheap trick of a Magical Girl. Perhaps Anoka, or maybe Clair, who already kept a familiar in the form of a bird. Maybe Omaha herself, in an attempt to scare her.

I'm telling you the truth! Why do you still refuse to believe? I've told you, Clair told you, even Delaney told you... Can't you see that you're involved in something far greater than yourself?

"I don't care if god himself, or herself, wants to strike me down. You can't dissuade me from what I intend to do. I have nothing else."

I know. I'm not telling you to stop. In fact, even if you did stop, they would still kill you. The Terminatrix, the demon's dolls—

"Wait." With one eye trained on the dolls, who made no movement beyond slight tilts of their heads, she examined Omaha. "If these dolls are invisible, how the hell do you see them?"

Omaha swallowed hard and hung her mouth open. The little remaining color drained from her face as she averted her eyes to the ground and dug her fingers into the raw-rubbed flesh above her wrist. *I, uh, I, uh, I, uh, I mean, I'm invisible... I can... see... other things... that are... invisible...*

"You little rat, you made those dolls, didn't you? What are you trying to pull? You've been suspicious this entire time, who the hell really are you?"

She seized Omaha by the collar and tugged her close, shaking the little body until the head bobbed back and forth on the neck. Omaha gaped with fearful eyes as Sloan considered her options. One, smack the bitch until she came clean with the real story behind the demon garbage. Two—

Please, please Sloan, please stop... Her mental voice shriveled into a squeak. Absolute terror filled her features as Sloan realized she had raised an arm to slam on Omaha's skull.

Sloan released Omaha and lowered her arm. She pressed a hand against her forehead and lowered it to rub her eyes. It had been only a few minutes ago she acted this way to Ramsey and made the damn girl faint. What the hell was wrong with her? Why did she abuse on everyone she met?

"Bah, I'm sorry," she managed to say.

Omaha adjusted her collar and scratched her throat. In a moment she acted as though nothing had happened, although her normal self was so meek it was hard to tell a difference. *Sloan, please listen. Those dolls are not to be underestimated. They are extremely powerful... more than me, for sure, and maybe more than you. When they find the right opportunity, they'll strike... the only reason they haven't yet is because I'm here. But soon they'll realize I'm not what they think I am... I'm sorry I can't explain this better, there's lots of stuff I can't tell you. I understand if you don't trust me...*

By now, Sloan had no idea who to trust. So many things flung themselves at her, so many pieces splayed across an infinity chessboard. Clair and the rest of the Minneapolis Seven, Omaha and Delaney, the Terminatrix, Carmichael and Clair's sister Lynette, Time Demon and Female God, Kyubey, these four doll-girls watching her from over the fence. When all she really wanted was the simplest possible scenario: Her versus Clair, no extraneous goons or ghouls, the sheerest and swiftest end to this entire farce that masqueraded as Sloan's life. She had one purpose, and one purpose only (all other purposes had long since disintegrated into the wasteland of her existence), and that purpose was to end Clair. Nothing that came after mattered, demons and Kyubey be damned.

I really just wanted to warn you... so you could watch out for them. The longer you stay alive, the more the demon will try to kill you. She has fifteen dolls in total, I don't know if she's sent more but these are the only four I've seen. And if things get really bad, she may even come herself...

"So I should hurry up and finish Clair."

Omaha bit her lip and adjusted her round glasses. *I mean... if that's what you want...*

"I don't have a choice. They'll kill me either way. Might as well go down as something less than a total failure."

If you really want to fight Clair, I recommend you do it tonight. The dolls won't wait long. I can maybe distract them for a little bit, but soon they'll figure out I'm not what they think I am and then I don't know what I can do...

"What do they think you are?" she asked. The dolls made no movements, no sounds. Only watched.

That's unimportant... What's important is you do what you want. I'm sorry, I know I'm an annoyance. I'm not good for much. But what little help I can give, I hope you find useful...

Sloan sighed. Her breath came out as a thick white puff in the frigid air. "Omaha, you're not useless. I don't know what you are, but it's not that. Look, you're right. I can't waste time. I have the Terminatrix after me, and the more time I give Clair to plan the more advantages I drop in her lap. I'll wake up Ramsey right now and start moving."

Okay. That's a good plan. I'll keep an eye on the dolls for you and help however I can.

"Thanks."

Sloan turned from Omaha and the dolls, although anxiety overcame her at having her back to such eerie things so she glanced over her shoulder to ensure they did not leap en masse from the fence and charge her with... whatever their means of attack. But the dolls did not move, and neither did Omaha.

She stomped through the snow as wind and ice pelted her back. When she reached the door, Omaha's voice said:

Sloan, good luck.

Sloan nodded, turned the handle, and stepped into the darkened interior of the house.

The moment she shut the door behind her, the light clicked on. Ramsey stood inside, ten to fifteen girls arrayed at her back in almost military formation, all with limp gazes and matted hair. Among them were Hennepin and Lynette. Carmichael stood in the back, about two feet taller than any of the girls.

Ramsey cocked a shotgun and aimed it at Sloan's face. "I *recall* you saying some mean *things* about me, Slo-dawg. Care to say them *again*, bitch?"

Bloomington's foot snagged on something—a root, a pipe—buried beneath the snow and after a precarious moment where she fought to hold her balance she dropped onto her shoulder into the frost, keeping her arms wrapped tight around Woodbury to shield her from the brunt of impact. Woodbury cried out anyway with an asphyxiated and voiceless grunt wet with the blood she coughed onto Bloomington's chest.

They were miles from Clair's house. Clair had not answered her cell phone after three tries, and Bloomington did not know St. Paul's number, if St. Paul even had a cell phone. In fact, Bloomington knew nobody else's number. And in a storm like this, public transportation no longer ran. Not that any sane bus driver would let Woodbury ride with her whole damn throat missing.

"Come on, up you go," said Bloomington. She tried to find a solid surface beneath the snow to push against. For the past three blocks she had basically carried Woodbury. She was

drenched in blood from the girl's throat, blood that sizzled like ice against her as it plastered her clothes to her skin.

She pushed up, misjudged the weight and balance, flopped back down. Woodbury grunted again.

"You gotta work with me here, Woodsy. Come on, we push on three. One, two, three!"

Bloomington pushed again, but Woodbury remained dead weight in her arms. They barely got inches off the ground before they dropped again.

"That's okay, that's okay. Third time's the charm."

Let's lie here... and rest... for just a little...

They needed to keep moving. If they stayed still, then Woodbury... then it wouldn't be good. "Nope, we'll get buried in the snow. We're gonna try again, alright? On three, like before."

Just a little rest...

"One. Two. Three!"

Bloomington pushed, but Woodbury did not rise.

She closed her eyes and coiled her arms around Woodbury. The girl had no warmth left in her, as though every drop of blood had drained from her body.

It's okay, Bloom... Thanks for caring about me...

"Look, if you're in bad shape, it means one of us has to pull double duty to cover your territory, and I always tend to pull the short straw when that happens. We're almost at Clair's, I think it's just like a block from here. She'll fix you up in no time, I'm sure... I'm sure there's been some misunderstanding with that hostage. Okay?"

No response.

"Okay, Woodsy?"

I'm glad I don't have to die alone...

Oh God. Oh God no. Please God, if you're listening, if you've got your omnipotent ear trained on the thoughts of these two hopeless girls stuck in a snowstorm halfway between Brooklyn Park and Eden Prairie, please don't let this happen. Woodbury was too young for this, God. Don't you see? Don't you see she's too young for this?

But God didn't listen. God didn't care. God didn't exist. The closest thing any of them ever got was Kyubey, and not even he was here, not that he would lift a single floppy ear to help.

"Come on Woodsy, don't talk like that. We're so close. So close. I can see her house just around the corner. Come on, all we have to do is get up and get moving and it's easy. Come

on. Woodsy? Woodbury? Hey, come on."

Bloomington felt the small heave of Woodbury's chest as it made labored and ragged breaths through the severed throat.

"Come on, talk to me. Say something, please."

The tiny lump of Woodbury trembled a little and fell still. Bloomington clutched her tighter, trying to imbue it with a spark of warmth, but she had barely any to give.

"Say something, anything."

Woodbury said nothing.

The next moment, Bloomington held nothing, only air. The empty space that had once been Woodbury closed immediately as Bloomington's arms collapsed against her body. Her numb fingers pressed into her blood-soaked jacket.

For a time, nothing happened. Bloomington lay on her side in the snow as more snow fell atop her, collecting into piles on her shoulders and head. The piles grew wider and heavier and Bloomington sagged beneath their weight, allowing the ice to envelop her as she stared ahead at the white absence.

Then she started to cry.

The Thick Rotundity

When one considered it logically. Which was the only way to consider anything. When one took apart the various intricacies and rearranged them to construct a more complete image of what first appeared an inexplicable circumstance. When one did that, which was what Clair did throughout the night in lieu of sleep, when one exhausted every possibility through arduous mental experiments. When one tested every hypothesis and scoured it with rigorous scrutiny. When one did that, one might emerge with the following list of key postulates:

Postulate 1. The albinism of Clair Ibsen and Delaney Pollack was no coincidence. (Albinism afflicted less than 1 in 20,000 people; the odds became astronomical when factoring their identical age, sex, race, Magical Girl status, and general geographic proximity.)

Postulate 2. There existed an underlying reason for the shared affliction. (Since the connection was not coincidental.)

Postulate 3. Clair Ibsen and Delaney Pollack were genetically related. (Albinism being a hereditary genetic disorder.)

Postulate 4. Clair Ibsen and Delaney Pollack were not twins. (Delaney Pollack was born November 14, 1995; Clair Ibsen was born November 29, 1995.)

Postulate 5. Clair Ibsen and Delaney Pollack were either paternal half-sisters or full sisters birthed from separate surrogate mothers. (Their differing birth dates meant they could not have been birthed from the same womb.)

Next came her assumptions. They required some logical leaps in place of any bridges of proof. Hence her agonizing for hours in case some more obvious explanation existed; ultimately, she failed to find one.

First, she assumed that the shared genetic heritage not only explained their albinism but also why the Incubator had chosen them to take into his personal confidence. He had imparted to both Clair and Delaney information about Homura Akemi, the Japanese city of Mitakihara, and several other key components of the true theology that guided the conceptual framework of the world. Their shared genes also possibly explained the similar facets of their personalities: their logical calculating, their emotional detachment, their lack of empathy or even understanding of other human beings.

If she could speak to the Incubator for a few minutes, she would know the truth. But as he had warned her, his employer's watchful eye prevented him from appearing. As such, Clair could only verge into wild and pointless theories. Which she did for hours, not even realizing hours had passed as she paced around the hallways of her house while St. Paul watched Delaney in her room. A single tick of the clock in the rhythm of her mind meant a minute in reality.

She had deliberated enough. It was time to open the conversation to Delaney. The girl had proven a creature of exceptional intelligence, which was a compliment Clair did not bestow

lightly. It was possible she might have insights which, when combined with Clair's postulates, could create new knowledge.

"Honey, I made breakfast," chimed her mother down the stairs. "Bacon and scrambled eggs, your favorites!"

Clair had no favorite foods. She detested the act of consumption and did it as little as possible. "I will eat at my leisure, mother."

"Okay, honey! Tell Lynette to come too."

Lynette had not been in this household for the past twelve hours. A catastrophic snowstorm did little to deter such a flighty girl from her pursuits.

Banishing thoughts of family, Clair navigated the corridors to her room. She entered the familiar space, all traces of Woodbury's blood long since obviated with a dosage of magic. St. Paul sat on the bed, head propped on her hands. Clair bid her good morning as she shut the door.

St. Paul blinked several times in rapid succession. "Uh. Hi. Hi Clair."

On the corner where Clair had left her, sprawled like a discarded toy that blemished the order of the space, lay Delaney. She slumbered noisily. One akimbo leg twitched with every stertorous exhalation. Her hair had returned to its fake brown color; Clair grudged not her desire to conceal her albinism.

Clair nudged her shoulder with the tip of a shoe, and had to nudge again after the first attempt failed. Delaney rolled over, mumbled, and squinted open an eye.

"I have contemplated our shared condition at length," said Clair.

"I slept," said Delaney. She stretched out her arms and yawned.

"I reached the conclusion that we share paternal genes."

Delaney ran fingers through her clumped hair and sat up. She rubbed her eyes and checked the clock above Clair's desk. "That's it? Took long enough."

"I seek to be thorough and leave no avenues unexplored. All variables must be accounted and all possibilities considered. While sometimes the most obvious solution proves the best one, on numerous occasions my extensive meditations have opened pathways of which others remain ignorant."

"You realize what this all means, right?" said Delaney.

"I have ideas. I wish to hear what you make of it."

"Kyubey's controlled our existences since we were born. It's no coincidence we both got embroiled in this plot and also happen to be long-lost sisters. He needed two people with shared genetic traits—probably the shared genetic disposition toward sociopathy—to fill two

important roles in his scheme. One to oppose and torment Sloan to the brink of oblivion, and one to help and protect her."

Yes. Clair thought the same.

"In doing so, he balances both sides of the conflict. Evens the playing field. And when the sides are even, the emotion escalates, the conflict escalates, the violence escalates. Exactly what he wants."

Clair pulled the chair from her desk and sat, crossing her legs and laying her hands on her knee. "So he played a subtle influence on the trajectories of our lives since the start. He ensured that I befriended Sloan Redfearn, that both of us contracted, perhaps even that we made the wishes we did and developed the powers we now wield."

Delaney fell silent. She adopted the same glazed expression that regularly manifested in St. Paul, her eyes staring intently but with no object deserving of such intent before them. "Before I murdered the girl in Saskatoon, I had all these long conversations with him about whether god existed or not. The things he said... led me to believe..."

Her voice trailed off. Clair had too incomplete an image of Delaney's life to theorize how the Incubator may have affected it. But her own life, in retrospect, was filled with such influences. Some were direct: Such as when, while Sloan ruled Minneapolis, the Incubator hinted to Clair that Sloan was dangerous and in need of removal (an idea she had already conceived on her own beforehand, but his subtle prodding allowed the idea to germinate into action). But some, perhaps, were indirect. She remembered when she first met Sloan, on a seemingly regular school day. Normally Clair kept to herself, eschewing all attempts at communication. But that day in particular, some unknown notion of loneliness had spurred her to introduce herself to Sloan when the disgruntled twin sat at her table. The pang of solitude had stricken deep on that day alone, and while she had found it annoying she had never given it much thought because in the wake of her new friendship she realized all she had lacked when alone and considered her previous emotions justified despite their oddness. Now, however, she wondered if the sudden desire for companionship had been stimulated by hypnotic or subconscious persuasion on the part of the Incubator; that, without having ever seen him or spoken to him, he somehow used psychic influences to make her think and feel the way she did.

These were all hypotheticals. "I see only one problem with the idea that the Incubator has monitored our growth since our infancy," she said. "That means he formulated his plan at least eighteen years ago. However, from what he indicated to me, Homura Akemi ascended to demonhead two years ago."

Delaney roused from her stupor. "Yeah, but she's a *time* demon. When time gets thrown in, logic gets thrown out. Who knows what wonky time shit's gone on in those two years."

"A valid point. Although my status as a musician requires me to keep track of time. Thus, the discrepancy intrigues me."

"What the hell does that mean?" said Delaney.

Oh? Did she not know, or did she simply fail to understand Clair's meaning? "As the one who ___"

A voice hollered from downstairs: "Clair honey! You have a visitor!"

Clair closed her eyes, decompressed herself, and sighed. Her mother's interruptions were always inopportune. However, a visitor most likely meant one of the girls under her command, which meant she had an obligation to at least shoo them away.

"Pardon me," said Clair. "We'll continue this conversation afterward."

After Delaney said nothing for a satisfactory interval, Clair left the room and traveled down the hall with brisk and purposeful steps. Most likely she would find Woodbury wondering why Delaney had not yet been dispatched. Clair would tell her to be patient and offer no further excuse. Woodbury need not know the truth of the matter, or that until Clair divined Delaney's place in the grander scheme, no further violence would ensue against the captive.

Interesting that her mother had not remarked upon the slashed throat of their visitor, but then again, her mother's observational skills were rather lackluster.

Her mother had already returned to the kitchen and only blathered effusively about the visitor waiting in the entry. Clair disregarded her and rounded the corner to see who had dragged themselves in.

It was Bloomington. Snow plastered her jacket and hair along with the slick redness of blood. She leaned against the wall, her face drained pale from the frost and her eyes red and swollen from the wind.

"Ah, Bloomington. So you decided to pay a visit. I hope all is well on your end?"

Bloomington's nose ran in an offensive manner, worsened by her refusal to ask for tissue paper or some other absorbent material with which to wipe it. In fact, she seemed rather lackadaisical about her appearance. As such, Clair resolved to get rid of her even more tersely than anticipated.

"Where's the bitch," said Bloomington. "With the blood."

"I believe you mean Delaney Pollack. I have made an executive decision to keep her alive for purposes of strategic value. My decision is final and any effort you make to dissuade me shall be met with stern refusal." That sounded perhaps too draconian. She injected a more convivial conclusion: "I pray Woodbury does not fare too poorly."

"Yeah." Bloomington nodded her head and stared like a dumb animal. "Yeah. She fares poorly, I'd say."

"I am truly sorry. If you can, please relay my message that I will work thrice as hard to make her as comfortable and accommodated as possible. Does she require grief cubes? I am willing to donate some."

"Nah. She don't need no cubes, don't worry about that."

"If you insist." Clair paused and allowed Bloomington to interject with additional questions if so desired, but the girl remained rooted to the wall as though her flesh had ossified.

The pause drew to socially unacceptable lengths. As Bloomington showed no signs of talking, Clair decided to salvage the situation by performing the faux pas of speaking twice in a row without comment from the conversational partner.

"If there is nothing else to ask, I bid you adieu. I regret to say I am rather busy at the moment and have little time for idle chitchat. That is not to demean your coming here, of course. But unless you have something else to say..."

Bloomington stared. Her lip gave a single, spasmodic twinge. Her snot dribbled down her chin in the most repulsive fashion.

"Nah," she said. "I guess I don't."

Despite the admission, she remained slumped against the wall. Her failure to move even as Clair raised an arm and indicated the door verged on levels of outward defiance. Clair cared little for it. Indubitably she must no longer rely on such a truculent character. St. Paul and Anoka would prove enough to defeat Sloan Redfearn.

"Do you need a ride back to your house because of the weather?" said Clair. "I can call St. Paul to accompany you."

After another lengthy hesitation, Bloomington said, "Nah."

Clair contained herself. She had practiced containing herself from a very young age, because she soon learned that when she failed to contain herself she did rather nasty things that she later regretted.

"Very well." She strode past Bloomington and opened the door. A cold blast buffeted her but she maintained her composure using the internal exercises she had concocted to deaden her emotions on the rare moments they surfaced. "I hope to see you soon, Bloomington."

For a terrifying moment it seemed not even this would prompt Bloomington to move, as though she had resolved to become a permanent fixture in the Ibsen household entryway, attached to a wall papered by images of birds mostly from sparrow genii. But the frigid cool that swept from the open door galvanized Bloomington to action; like a golem she broke from the congealed matter that had welded her to the wall, her shoulders stooped and her head tilted, her nose dribbling and her hands twisting into misshapen knots. She turned with arduous care, each degree of revolution detectable as she faced Clair and the doorway. Her eyes were unwavering, despite their puffiness and wet bloat.

"Yeah," said Bloomington. She shambled zombielike out the door, each step seemingly smaller than the previous.

"It is rather inclement outside," said Clair. "I extend again my offer to have St. Paul escort you home."

"Nah," said Bloomington. As though she were incapable of single syllables and had to resort to such truncations, such erosions of the English language, the letters rubbed off by years of misuse among the demotic tongues of the underclass. Clair hated to dwell on such details but they irked her so much she could not help but notice them.

"If you're certain, Bloomington. Goodbye."

Bloomington finally made it out the door far enough for Clair to shut it and seal out the ice that had already started to crystallize between the fabric of her uniform.

She glanced out the peephole to ensure Bloomington had not altered her course and watched until her hunched form disappeared into the white blast of snow. Satisfied, Clair straightened her tie, brushed her clothes, and headed to her room to finish the more stimulating conversation of the morning.

As she passed the kitchen, her mother said, "Eggs getting cold."

Believe it or not, it actually took a super long time for Delaney to agree to contract with Kyubey. Wow, really Delaney? Tell us more about your fascinating indecision. Well okay, it goes like this: After a childhood of abuse at the hands of paternal figures she had so naively trusted, she wasn't *quite* keen on consigning her soul to another male who promised her a lot more than he seemed able to give.

But trust wasn't all of it. In fact, she feared that if she gave Kyubey what he wanted, the attention he paid her would shrivel and die, like how girls get warned not to fuck guys because then the guys get bored and move to the next swanky chick. By denying them, a girl holds a kind of power, and to a girl like Delaney who had no power whatsoever, such a thought intoxicated. For a long time, actually, she contemplated wishing that Kyubey would be her friend forever. Holy! Could you even IMAGINE how that wish would play out? Unfortunately, Delaney had darker forces at work inside her and her ultimate wish proved even worse.

Uh, Delaney? Hello? Why is all this important? Aren't you kinda in a bind right now, Delaney? Shouldn't you be plotting your dashing escape? Analyzing the weaknesses in Clair's makeshift prison (the big one being that her appointed guard, St. Paul, was a total dunce), conniving a plan to swipe your gem from Clair's pocket, et cetera et cetera?

Fuck you, if she escaped it just meant she was out in the cold and on the run with no powers, rather than inside in the warm with no powers. Plus—PLUS—she was telling a STORY, so please shut up and listen.

Where was she? Oh yeah. The pre-contract days, when she followed Kyubey and Claudia around and watched Claudia fight wraiths and hated Claudia's shitty dog and afterward, when Claudia went home, talked to Kyubey. Kyubey knew exactly how to butter her up. He told

her she was smarter than most humans, that she had the potential for universe-altering events, that she certainly surpassed the capabilities of Claudia or any other girl for miles and miles. Things that made Delaney feel important, when up until then she felt like worse than trash, a thing, an it. Fifteen-year-old Delaney, trapped in the throes of an embarrassingly late puberty, marred by an isolating albinism, and still barely cognizant of what it meant to be female beyond that it was something inferior to male and also bled like a stuck pig every month—coming from such a mindset and being lauded by an intergalactic space kitty for your intelligence is no small ego boost.

So she talked to Kyubey and asked him questions and learned a lot of things about his species. Like how his species had no females. Not because they were genderless or reproduced asexually. But because their eugenics program had singled females as genetically inferior to males and thus requested their immediate removal from the gene pool. Every single space kitty female had seen the logic in this and allowed themselves to be painlessly and humanely liquidated. Now all members of his species were merely clones of the same perfect genetic agglomerations.

Shit like this fascinated Delaney. The hours she spent talking to him about entropy, wow. Science was cool! It always clicked with her and made sense, unlike talking to people or engaging in social situations: a string of numbers and formulas that can be proven through repeated observation (only later did she apply these same principles to social dynamics—social science was in some sense a science too). And Kyubey knew so much more about it than the entire human race. Astrophysics and quantum mechanics, nuclear fusion and neuroscience, clones and genomes.

Now we fast forward three years, where a jaded and deconstructed Delaney molds in the sterile bedroom of her white-haired doppelganger. Because, when you think about the genetic connection between Delaney and Clair in the context of all that scientific stuff Kyubey once espoused (eugenics, clones, manipulation of DNA), you might realize:

Kyubey did not simply find two half-sisters who carried the same particular genetic traits he desired. Why would he, when he could build those half-sisters from scratch?

And when you think about the traits shared by Delaney and Clair: White hair, red eyes, inability to feel empathy, logical thought processes, extreme intelligence, you have to wonder *Where did Kyubey get those genes?*

Because Delaney didn't know too many *humans* who fit those traits, but she did know a certain intergalactic space kitty who had every single one of them.

After all, if his goal was to create predictable pawns predisposed toward certain behaviors necessary for his plan, why bother with capricious and whimsical humans? Why not use the genes and personality traits he knew best?

Well! No stopping it now. The roundabout and gradual approach her mind had taken delayed the inevitable epiphany only too long, until it felt less like an epiphany and more like dramatic irony, something everyone but the main actor seems to know until the final act when it crushes her like a Roadrunner cartoon anvil. The actual words a bastard splice between a sloppy sitcom punchline and a Jungian archetype:

Kyubey's my *father*?

(Cue daytime television talk show audience hurling boos at the irresponsible dad who despite his great wealth never paid a cent in alimony.)

Delaney slumped her shoulders and tried to laugh but cried instead. St. Paul observed her but said nothing as Delaney's few human genes allowed her to wallow in self-pity and self-disgust. All this time she had considered herself inhuman, a monster, an inherently flawed individual, and to have that assessment so totally and absolutely affirmed splintered the thin spine of worth she had ever scrounged up for herself. Stupid her! She had thought that despite her failings, if she gritted her teeth and just did good deeds out of principle rather than emotion she might gain salvation through the theological concepts that guided the universe. But of course not! How could a mongrel rat alien ever reach salvation? The religion of Earth had no bearing on an extraterrestrial.

What goddess could sweep her gaze across Delaney's form and see anything worth saving? Delaney herself no longer thought she deserved it. Everything she did wrong was hardwired into her psyche. Her murder of Claudia: programmed right in. Her destructive, rape-slanted thoughts about Sloan: tied to her very core. Her complete and utter disregard of the feelings of others in favor of her own selfish whims (notice how the only time she could shed tears, it was for herself): incontrovertible! Her rote self-flagellation was a transparent attempt to curry favor with a goddess who had no right to even look at her.

"Hey. Hey. Uh. Hey. Are you. Okay?" said St. Paul.

Delaney wiped her eyes. Oh god, she couldn't afford to fall into one of her deep sinks of angst at a time like this. Her Incubator DNA held one distinct advantage: the ability to turn off her despair like a faucet when she lacked the luxury to revel in it.

"I'm fine," she said.

"Suh. Suh. Suh." St. Paul focused her eyes and pursed her lips carefully. "Sorry. Sorry Em. Sorry Em hurt you."

"It's okay," said Delaney. "I'm a bad person. I deserve it."

"Girls are. Are not. Bad people," said St. Paul. "Wraiths are. Bad people."

Delaney resisted the urge to say "I am a wraith," which she would have done more for dramatic aplomb than logic or reason. She had to escape this mien before it ensnared her entirely. She had to remember her goals: saving the universe. Defeating the time demon. *Not that achieving those goals would save her!* No, shut up, don't say that. Who cares what your DNA is, that's not what *you* are. You're not a carbon copy of Clair Ibsen, for instance. Some similar traits, but not the same. There are other elements at play here.

The pep talk sounded hollow in her head. The mythic concepts she had structured her life around—time demons, Mitakihara, the Law of the Cycles, entropy—felt like wobbly and inconsequential things.

The door opened and Clair Ibsen entered.

"My apologies. That distraction took longer than anticipated. Where were we?"

"We established Kyubey picked us ahead of time for his plans," said Delaney. She refrained from supplying her revelation about their heritage. Clair was a smart girl, she would figure out on her own. "That we're pawns in a conspiracy to topple demons or some such."

"Yes," said Clair. "Fortunately this so-called conspiracy is reaching its final stages. Once my familiar returns with Sloan's whereabouts, I shall determine the setting for our final confrontation and reap the rewards after her death."

"Exactly as expected, eh?" said Delaney. "You're not gonna even hesitate now that you've learned Kyubey popped us out prepackaged and ready to plug into his plan?"

"Why would I hesitate?" said Clair. "The demon of Mitakihara must be overthrown, or else the universe dies. The reasoning is unarguable. Besides, I would expect the Incubator to put especial care into the selection of his champion. Would he entrust the power to defeat gods to some random girl plucked from this waste? Were I him, I certainly would not."

"Yeah, and why not tell you this from the beginning? Why keep me a secret?"

"The Incubator omits needless words," said Clair. "He kept our conversations brief and pregnant with purpose in order to keep suspicion away from himself. Often key articles of information manifested as offhand remarks when I purified my Soul Gem. Information about Mitakihara, about Homura Akemi, about Omaha, about Sloan Redfearn's situation in Fargo, about the Williston archon, about the girls I should hire to work for me in Minneapolis. Given the complexity of the plot, he had to condense a lot. While initially your power caught me off guard and I wondered at the omission, now that I have you soundly defeated and restrained I understand he must have calculated my odds of success even with you at Sloan Redfearn's side to be rather high."

Through her entire speech no part of her body moved except her mouth, a paradigm of rigidity and inflexibility exemplified by her perfect posture and confident bearing. She made no missteps of the tongue, timed her breathing so that pauses in her speech felt natural, and at no time looked Delaney in the eye.

"In fact," she continued, "I understand the tact displayed by the Incubator in refraining from bringing you to my attention. Had he done so before I had the chance to meet you, my curiosity would have burned inside me until I found myself incapable of *not* seeking you out, regardless of his chidings. I thus would have unstitched the delicate configuration of his plan, made blunders or errors, perhaps rerouted all his assessments and predictions. No, better he not tell me, so that no such emotions affect my actions. Since I have learned of our connection only *after* I met you, I can rest easily in my awareness that you and I have no fundamental differences."

No fundamental differences. Intelligence, logic, cruelty, disdain.

"No," said Delaney. "There is a fundamental difference. Despite everything, I've tried to rebel against my nature—I've tried to do good in this world. That's why I helped Sloan, I thought I could save her. And the Incubator told me by doing that I could save the universe."

Clair moved to her window and stared into the whiteness. She straightened her tie and the lapels of her coat. "I assume the Incubator failed to inform you that to save the universe, Sloan Redfearn must be sacrificed."

The cold wind whistled outside. The bedsprings squeaked as St. Paul adjusted her sitting position.

"He said no such thing," said Delaney. "I kinda suspected it after what you've told me so far."

"I will kill Sloan Redfearn. It must be me, and none other. Such a betrayal, between two people who knew no love except between each other—a betrayal stretched over the course of seven months, so that all negative emotions can be drawn to their limit in the festering hell that is this northern fringe—between two people of incredible resolve and determination—this betrayal will prove the ultimate sin. The power from this sin will be enough to defeat even gods. I shall harness it and overthrow the demon Homura Akemi. I will then, lacking all further purpose, slay myself and cede dominion of this universe to its most responsible warden: the Incubator."

When the Incubator had spoken to Delaney, he had said only that Sloan Redfearn could unlock the power to overthrow the time demon. How could she have been so idiotic to not press for more information? No—she knew how. It was because at the time she had not cared about Sloan Redfearn at all. Why bother with such a question. Ultimately, she had only cared about herself, Delaney Pollack, and doing something good enough to overwrite all previous sins. For her own salvation...

Only now, though, did the thought of Sloan's death, in actuality rather than depraved fantasy, only now did this thought strike hollow in the pit of Delaney's stomach. A dull absence of feeling rather than any identifiable emotion.

"Furthermore," Clair continued, "You are again incorrect when you claim there is a fundamental difference between us. Because I too act against my nature to do an ultimate service for this universe. There is truly no difference between us at all, beyond the ways we speak and dress, and the powers we use in combat."

Delaney searched for a rebuttal, but found none.

An immense raven alighted on the windowsill. "Matthis has returned," said Clair as she undid the latch and opened the window. The temperature plummeted as Clair's papers and books ruffled in the wind.

Clair leaned forward and tilted her ear toward the bird. Its beak clicked and clacked as it cocked its head in odd directions, almost turning it completely upside-down like an owl. After the brief message, Clair nodded and whispered something. With instant comprehension, the bird spread its wings and took back to the stormy air, its black form sailing straight and unperturbed through the gale.

She shut the window and realigned her clothes, mussed by the elements. "Sloan Redfearn has been found."

St. Paul shot up and saluted. "Let. Let me. I win."

"That won't be necessary," said Clair. "She is located at one of Ramsey's safe houses. Assaulting Ramsey's stronghold without a numeric advantage would prove foolhardy and most likely lead to Fargo slipping through our fingers yet again."

"Then," said St. Paul, "Then what? What."

Clair placed her fingertips together as she turned from the window and faced her lackey. "Then we wait. Sloan knows where I live. If I do not come to her, she will come to me. With Delaney Pollack and her powerful barrier magic subdued—" (she spoke as though Delaney were not in the room) "—We have no need for a surprise attack like last night. Sloan Redfearn can prepare and plan all she wants, but she can never surpass me in that regard. Especially with the advantage of home turf with which I am far more intimately acquainted than her."

"Oh, oh." St. Paul strained to speak. "I. I see."

Stepping over Delaney, Clair moved for her desk. She dragged out the chair and took a seat.

"Fetch my phone, St. Paul," she said. "It is time to call Anoka."

A Barber with Parkinson's Disorder

In central Minneapolis, beneath a highway in a dark crevice of concrete pillars, a girl kneeled beside a wad of dry newspaper, lit a match, and set fire to the kindling. The overpass blocked the wind and the paper caught easily until it cast an orange glaze across the tight geometric surface of the overpass support system.

After so long in the dark, the light irritated the Terminatrix Sepulveda's sole remaining eye. She squinted and scratched at the eyepatch that covered her empty socket, like it felt pain too.

Sepulveda's eye adjusted. She retrieved her maps and documents from her rags and flattened them against the sloped floor. A red circle remained where her targets had slept the night prior. Their contracts should have been terminated there, but the invisible girl intervened. Sepulveda's boss failed to mention any invisible girls. That pissed her off, because she knew damn well the fuckface rat shitheel dickfuck did not simply "forget" or "not know about" the invisible girl. He knew fucking everything.

Like, yo. Sepulveda was no dumbass bimbo bitch. She didn't grow up in no suburban funland. She fucked around with coyotes both human and canine and knew a double crossing when she saw it. Shit like that was how she lost her eye, and she ain't got many more eyes to lose, yo?

And yet, in the MG business, ain't nobody pays the bills but El Ratfuck. Her gun don't take wraith powers, so if she need cubes she need terminations. Invisigirl fooled her once but Sepulveda still got Pollack's powers, and they were damn good powers. Once she tracked down Redfearn (she already knew where to find Pollack) she had this shit in the bag whether Kyufuck wanted it in the bag or not.

PROBLEM THOUGH. She had no fucking clue Sloan Redfearn's whereabouts.

Her eye scoured the maps. We're talking less than twenty-four hours in icestorm apocalypse. Bitch ain't going far.

She pulled her red sharpie out, uncapped it, and nibbled the back of the pen as she crawled over the map. The poor lighting forced her to shove her eye close to the parchment. She crossed out names of neighborhoods sure to be duds. But the city had like fifty thousand fucking neighborhoods so plink in the bucket.

"This a piece a shit, beep boop," she muttered to herself.

"Shut the fuck up you crazy bitch," said a voice from the dark. Probably a homeless dude.
OR THE ONSET OF SCHIZOPHRENIA HA HA HA.

"Disembowel yourself on a lead pipe," Sepulveda yelled back. Her voice echoed.

Nobody responded.

"Fuck you I'm a robot," she added for punctuation. Nobody responded again, but she had painted herself crazy enough that unresponse was merited.

She returned to her maps when something in her pocket vibrated. With a startled cry she flipped supine and scurried back crab-style as she swatted the pulsing thing against her thigh. What the fuck was this, alien space parasite? Government implant? Malignant tumor?

Her hand shoved into her pocket and retrieved an ordinary cell phone. Oh, that made sense. Except Sepulveda had never owned a cell phone ever in her life, and that in no way should she get service beneath a hundred tons of concrete overpass in a raging blizzard.

(DAMN SEPPY YOU A SCHIZOID FOR SURE!)

She answered the phone. "What part of my fragmented psyche are you?"

"Is this Yvonne Lizondo-Perez." The voice was level and collected. DEFINITELY not a piece of Sepulveda's psyche. Its bitter rationality exuded through so few words made Sepulveda uneasy.

"No I'm a robot," she said. She searched the dim underpass for concealed attackers. Alien spies. The unseen hobo from earlier. Her scalp itched with lice. "Where'd this phone come from?"

"My dolls gave it to you," said the voice on the other end.

"Dolls? The fuck?"

"You have good reason not to trust the Incubator, Yvonne Lizondo-Perez. I concur with your suspicion that he intends for you to fail."

Oh shit, oh shit, the aliens could read minds? Oh shit, oh shit.

"I, however," the voice continued, "Intend your success. I will make myself brief. Sloan Redfearn is at 2542 Ruth Street, Little Canada, Minnesota, Zip Code 55117. The house is owned by Destin Carmichael, assistant to Chelsea Stoddard."

Chelsea Stoddard, Chelsea Stoddard. Sepulveda had heard that name before. She flipped through her files. Oh yeah, the Ramsey girl. Sepulveda had files on all the girls in the area JUST IN CASE, courtesy El Ratfuck. Ramsey was unique in that she had eight listed addresses. Ruth Street was one of them.

"So's this mean Redfearn and Stoddard teamed up?" she asked mysterious hot tip girl.

The phone went dead.

WELL THEN. Sepulveda gathered her maps and files and folded them neatly back into her pockets.

TIME TO DO SOME SHIT, YO.

Ramsey twirled the shotgun like a conductor's baton. "Oh Sloth, how *could* you be so cruel? Shattering my fragile *feelings* so."

Sloan folded her arms and betrayed no discomposure at the haphazard use of the gun. The shotgun was not Ramsey's magic weapon. Which meant who gave a shit. Sloan recognized the dull effect of Ramsey's charm, the desperate subconscious pleading to adore her, but its power had either weakened or her resolve strengthened.

How to deal with this? Sloan's reflexes were better than Ramsey's. With the right timing she could seize the gun. The other girls were nothing to worry about. Carmichael was nothing to worry about. Hennepin (without her powers) was nothing to worry about. Even if Ramsey eschewed discretion and transformed in front of her followers, Sloan had the advantage—she was already transformed from her practiced session in the backyard. From all angles, Sloan won this fight. That Ramsey considered a fight feasible only signified her disjunct from reality.

And yet. Sloan had worse enemies than Ramsey.

"You're right," she muttered. "It was cruel of me."

Ramsey cackled with delight, tilting her head so her screwy pupils could stare from beneath the solid black shield of her sunglasses. "Hear *that!* She *admits* her fault! What a *rapsallion*, what a *knave!*" She looked at her followers, who looked back. She looked at Sloan. She opened her mouth to add something, but closed it and smirked.

"Yeah," said Sloan. "I admit it."

Girls with fragile egos are influenced by even meager appeasement. Considering Ramsey already seemed ready to acquiesce, Sloan might even save time as opposed to a fight. But she also had tactical reasons for concession. She needed Ramsey's car. She also would like Ramsey to keep Hennepin powerless and maybe provide minor assistance in the fight against Clair. Not like Sloan had better options for allies.

"Well!" said Ramsey. She leaned against the shotgun like a cane.

"This is boring. Slap each other already!" said Hennepin.

The other girls agreed with dull murmurs.

Ramsey bit her lip and hesitated while Hennepin led the crowd in a chant of FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT. Ramsey scowled and retook control by raising her gun over her head. "This is what *separates* me from *louts* like all of you. You *crave* such base violence, while I abhor it. People make *mistakes*, I am willing to forgive if proper *penitence* is shown. DON'T ACT LIKE I HAVEN'T DONE THE SAME FOR EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU!"

She aimed her gun over the crowd. The girls murmured again. Other than Hennepin they seemed incapable of clear speech.

"You ain't forgive me for shit," said Carmichael. "Still blame me for dinging your car six weeks ago, sheet."

Ramsey stomped her foot. "Fine! *Fine!* You want punishment, I'll *give* her punishment!" She turned to Sloan, teeth gnashing as she brushed back her hair and pointed her gun. "You *were* a total bitch, after all. Maybe I *shouldn't* let you off so easy!"

Dammit. If she made Sloan search the house for clothes...

"Ramsey. Come on. I'm sorry. I got worked up."

Be political. Socialize. Exude charisma and likeability for once in your life. There was probably some rather easy combination of words to resolve everything. Ramsey didn't want to fight, but after such self-aggrandizement she had an audience to placate. Sloan figured—

Woven within the crowd was one of those dolls from outside. Or maybe a different doll? It had the same big hat and tassels. But nobody had opened the door behind Sloan. She noticed a second doll next to Hennepin, and a third in the shadowed corner of the room.

Sloan... muttered Omaha's voice. I don't know what happened, the dolls are missing, there's only one left out here...

How did they move so fast and without opening any doors? She turned to the tassel doll, but it was no longer there. Shit, and the one next to Hennepin had moved too.

Would they attack with so many people around? No way. Just Omaha had stopped them before.

"Hey!" Ramsey, hands on hips, angled into Sloan's line of sight. "Are you *even* listening to me? I said I *wanted* your coat!"

The doll in the shadows, the redhead, had stayed put. It grinned, eyes twinkling like subterranean diamonds.

Ramsey jabbed a finger into Sloan's chest. "Are you *daft*? You're beginning to *royally* piss me off!"

"Kinda busy," said Sloan. Where were the other two? Why wasn't the third moving? If they left the fourth outside to distract Omaha, then—

Tassel doll dove from between Ramsey's legs and drove a toy dagger into Sloan's foot. Except instead of a toy dagger it was the most painful dagger of all eternity. Sloan howled in agony, kicked at the doll, and staggered back as the second doll, one of the blonde dolls, leapfrogged over Ramsey's back and sailed at Sloan's face with a little wooden spear.

Sloan materialized her gun and pointed at the doll. The doll redirected its route midair and dropped beneath the barrel, plunging its spear into Sloan's gut—dangerously close to her Soul

Gem. Sloan slammed her gun on blonde doll's head, but the fast little fucker scampered aside so all Sloan managed to do was smash her own pelvis with a humiliating grunt.

Sloan's gun ended aimed directly at Ramsey's face. With a unified cry, nearly every girl in the room dashed forward and flung themselves in front of Ramsey while Sloan grappled with the tassel doll. In close quarters she could not line up a shot, but she could still bludgeon. The doll raised its dagger for Sloan's gut, but Sloan slammed her gun down and connected with a dissatisfying thunk as the doll sailed like paper into the living shield of girls. With a hoarse snicker it recovered and scurried between their legs and disappeared.

Sloan leapt to her feet and scanned the premises for where the dolls had retreated. Neither her foot nor her stomach bled. The weapons had not harmed her, but they hurt like fuck—more than a physical blow. It felt like they had stricken her Soul Gem directly, even though both attacks had missed it. What *were* these things? What power could cause pain like that, pain that reverberated through her gut and made her knees buckle? Her gem as overpowered as it was, pain should be dampened more than usual. But it was worse than when she had been on the brink of despair back in Fargo.

"YOU *DARE* DRAW YOUR *GUN* ON *ME*?"

The girls around Ramsey flew back as Ramsey cast off her Dalmatian fur coat and twirled. She thrust an upturned hand in front of her with her celadon Soul Gem atop it. A blinding flash sprung from the gem. When it subsided, all of Ramsey's gaudy accoutrements had vanished, replaced by a sleek green dress that cut low and flowed long, wrapped tight around her slim body by several thick leather belts. In fact, Ramsey wore lots of belts, many for seemingly no reason at all—belts around her arms, her ankles, even her neck. In the buckle of the neck-belt sat her transformed Soul Gem, a perfectly square emerald.

Ramsey's goons ogled.

"Wow Boss!"

"So cute!"

"I want it!"

"I don't have time for this," said Sloan. She scoured the area for dolls, but even Redhead in the corner had vanished.

Something lashed out and coiled around Sloan's arm. It was a pulsing, barbed whip, tightening like a tourniquet as Ramsey tugged on it. She placed a finger to the edge of her lower lip and cackled. "Tee *hee* Slo, you're not going *anywhere*!"

She wrenched the whip back and Sloan staggered forward. The barbs dug through her coat and into her skin. An inconvenience at best. Sloan tossed her gun to the side and aimed it at the taut whip. One volley sufficed. The whip shivered and dropped.

Ramsey cracked the remains of her whip. It reformed immediately.

"Come on Ramsey," said Hennepin. "You can't beat her."

"Nonsense!" Ramsey posed pointlessly. "I mean, *sure*, I didn't expect a fight... but... I *have* an idea!"

With a flick of her free hand, she unraveled a belt from around herself and quickly clamped it around her eyes like a blindfold.

"How can you *blind*... that which cannot *see*?!"

She swung her whip in Sloan's general direction. Sloan sidestepped. The whip wrapped around one of Ramsey's flunkies, who fell shrieking in pain.

Sloan rammed her gun into Ramsey's gut. Ramsey dropped with a dry heave.

"Tch," said Hennepin. "Told ya. You should let me try. I've got powers that'll fuck her up."

Ramsey rolled on the ground clutching her gut, her whip jerking the hapless girl she had ensnared back and forth. Sloan grew uneasy. Ramsey was no threat, but those dolls... Where were they?

Ramsey wrenched the belt from around her eyes, hurled it to the ground, and stomped it. "Stupid stupid *stupid*!"

Hennepin sighed. "I warned you, which really should not have been necessary because it was so bad an idea even you must have realized it." She prodded the belt around Ramsey's throat. "Of course, now that I see your uniform for the first time, maybe it's just you're into that whole punishment thing?"

"WHAT?!" With a crack of her whip, Ramsey freed the girl she had bound. "I am MOST DEFINITELY NOT, ew gross ew gross *ew!* Belts look *cool*, okay?"

"Don't worry Ramsey, your sadomasochism is safe with me," Hennepin said (especially loudly).

The ground rattled beneath the onslaught of Ramsey's feet and fists. Her words devolved into incomprehensible shrieks, even as her girls and Carmichael swarmed to console her.

"Now," Hennepin continued, "Howzabout giving me back my Soul Gem so I can deal with Fargo for you..."

"Shut up already," said Sloan. The girls had crowded too tight. The dolls could be anywhere. Sloan needed open ground.

"*Why* did you point your gun at me, Slooey?" said Ramsey. "I was *joking* earlier! I wasn't going to *hurt* you. Can't you *understand* a joke?"

"I wasn't aiming at you. Can I explain something for a moment?"

"Why why why why *why* why why?"

"Probably because she hates you. Duh," said Hennepin. Sloan disliked Hennepin's contributions to this conversation.

She waded through the girls and reached a wall, which she propped her back against as she scanned the area from a more open vantage. "Look, Ramsey. You probably won't believe me, because it sounds really stupid, but right now there are like these creepy invisible dolls trying to kill me, so..."

Ramsey curled up and rolled onto her side. "I *knew* it. She hates me! *Everyone* hates me!"

"I'm pretty meh about you," said Hennepin.

Something tapped Sloan on the shoulder. She turned to see a wide snaggletooth grin close enough to gnaw off her nose. The smile was attached to Redhead doll, who had phased halfway through the plaster.

In the millisecond necessary for Sloan to realize the diversion, something rushed her from the opposite direction. Sloan jumped as it lunged with its toy spear of death. The shaft grazed Sloan's leg while the doll, moving too fast for Sloan to tell which, rolled forward and vanished through the floor. Redhead that had distracted her giggled and sank back into the wall.

Hide behind barriers, huh? Sloan had a fix for that. She pushed herself back as a series of daggers plunged through the wall, their tips missing Sloan by centimeters as she wheeled around, planted her foot against the carpet, and launched demolition derby rounds of light into the wall.

A mass scream rose through the room as the girls scrambled over each other to get as far from the light as possible. Sloan paid no heed. She had no fucking time for hide and seek.

"WHAT ARE YOU *EVEN* DOING?" Ramsey screamed. "MY HOUSE, MY HOUSE!"

Hennepin quipped unheard over the roar of the gun.

For good measure, Sloan pumped some salvos into the floor. Through the obliterated remnants of the wall she could see the obliterated remnants of the next room over.

A whip lashed out and coiled around Sloan's neck. The cord hung suspended in air before Ramsey brought down her arm and cracked it, cracking Sloan too. The gun flew from her hands as she slammed to the ground.

Ramsey pulled back the whip and lashed Sloan's prone form with it over and over. The moment Sloan attempted to rise, the barbs beat her down.

"Oh Ramsey," said Hennepin. "I've been a bad girl too, punish me~"

A furious glint crept into Ramsey's eye as she brought the whip down again and again. Sloan took the brunt while she commanded her gun from afar to discretely angle in Ramsey's direction. The lashings disrupted her concentration. She lined the shot perfectly—

The ground creaked, groaned, and collapsed. Sloan rolled down the suddenly inclined carpet, flopping over the holes she had blasted with her gun, until she slapped against the concrete wall of a basement. She rubbed her head and struggled to rise until Ramsey rolled into her.

"Get off me get off me get off me *get off me*," Ramsey said. Sloan tried to oblige, but it turned out Ramsey was on her, not the other way around.

She used her power to make Ramsey weightless and hurled her in a random direction. As she righted herself and staggered to her feet she searched for an exit. Above her, at the top of the ramp the caved-in floor had created, Hennepin laughed and the girls who had not yet fled stared in horror and confusion. Carmichael, behind the rest, stuck out his arms and caught Ramsey as she sailed past.

Around Sloan, on the small patch of bare concrete that hadn't been collapsed upon by the ceiling, the three dolls danced in a circle. When they hell did they get there? Sloan called for her gun to aim for the dolls, but if she missed she would roast herself.

The dolls danced, waving their spears as they clicked shiny black shoes against the ground in rhythmic patterns. As though on a wavelength Sloan could only sort of pick up, she heard tiny voices speak an incomprehensible language, guttural and vaguely Germanic. They were... singing? Chanting? The same three words, over and over.

Above, the door to the backyard flew open. Omaha lumbered in, shrouded in her purple aura. Under her good arm she held the struggling fourth doll, the second blonde. Its smile had flipped into a crescent moon frown, although its eyes remained unchanged. Its arms and legs shook with jerky puppet motions.

Omaha huffed for air, took stock of the room, and pointed at the dolls that encircled Sloan.

You're all... very bad children...!

The dolls stopped dancing and their mouths dropped in dismay. They began to twitter and tremble with violent, epileptic motions. Sloan decided not to stay to see if they would explode, or wait for Omaha to explain what the fuck was happening. She punted Tassel-hat doll into the stratosphere, sprinted up the incline back to the ground floor, and seized her gun off the ground as she charged the glut of Ramsey's girls.

The girls screamed and scattered, leaving only Carmichael to stand in Sloan's way, Ramsey cradled in his arms. Sloan decided to swipe his legs out from under him with her gun, but realized at the last moment he was no Magical Girl and her gun would put him in a wheelchair for life. Her momentum had carried her too far, however. She hit the ground at a slide, kicking Carmichael's shins with her boots instead. His enormous figure hit the ground behind her.

Sloan cartwheeled to her feet and sprinted down the corridor. A few wayward girls flattened against the wall to flee her warpath. As she rounded the kitchen she wondered where the fuck she was running and what her short term goals were.

Sorry Sloan... said Omaha's voice, *They caught onto me pretty quick... they're back on your tail. Be careful!*

She glanced over her shoulder but saw nothing in pursuit. *Where do I go?* she thought back.

Uh...

A response that assuaged all fears. She paused in the kitchen, unsure how to find the exit. A mischievous quartet of giggles resounded down the hall. A pair of white ellipses darted into a shadow.

Sloan positioned herself in the center of the kitchen and aimed her gun down the hall. Time for more demolition.

"Looks like you're in a jam."

She turned toward the voice. In a previously-unseen alcove leaned Lynette.

"Kinda busy," said Sloan. "I recommend you leave." She hoisted her gun for emphasis.

Lynette shrugged. "Or I could show you the way out if you want."

Sloan's eyes scanned the hall. No sign of the dolls. She didn't like it. "I'm in a hurry. Move fast."

Rather than move fast, Lynette opened a door beside her. Sloan followed into the dark room beyond. Only when she crossed the threshold did she think Lynette might lead her into a trap.

But Lynette flicked a light switch and illuminated the garage. The pink Cadillac from before sat beside two other fancy cars (also pink) with models Sloan did not recognize, because Sloan gave zero shits about cars. Their squeaky coats glimmered under the light. Out of her modest jacket Lynette fished a jangly set of keys which she span around an outstretched finger as she led Sloan past the Cadillac and a sad, unused convertible to a car with the word CORVETTE on the rear.

"Let's drive," said Lynette. She clicked a key and the Corvette flashed its lights with a digital chime.

"You know how?"

Lynette opened the driver's side. "Duh. Think Chelsea keeps me around for my good looks?"

Sloan watched for dolls among the tires and in the exposed rafters. "Will it even drive in the snow?"

At the press of a button, the passenger door opened. "Of course. Chelsea enchants all her cars. Mostly so they don't get scratched but also for other fun things."

Enchants? So Lynette knew about magic. Sloan disliked that, disliked the idea of Clair's sister being a relevant entity whatsoever, much as she would dislike Mr. and Mrs. Ibsen's

involvement, or even Sloan's own family. But she had too few options and had backed herself into a corner by following Lynette into the garage. Either she went through the big door or ran straight back to the dolls. But maybe—

"You slow or something? Get in."

Fine! Sloan dragged herself into the Corvette. She accidentally banged her gun against the door and had to despawn it since it didn't fit inside. Sure enough, she left no dent or chink in the hot pink coat. The place she struck fizzled with pixie dust.

"Buckle up kid, it's gonna be a bumpy ride." Lynette keyed the ignition and started the engine. She pressed a button on the dash and the garage door opened with labored and mechanical progress.

"Where are we going," said Sloan.

"Where else? Home sweet home."

Sloan scratched her seatbelt. "Did Clair tell you to bring me to her?"

"I'm not stupid. Or deaf. I heard what you said to Chelsea in the bedroom earlier. And she's told me her intentions plenty times before. You're gonna kill Clair, aren't you?"

The garage door finally opened onto a white road in a white world. At the same moment, the door to the house flew open and Ramsey stormed in with Carmichael and Hennepin and a dozen others.

"Hey! *HEY!* That's my *car!*"

Lynette slammed the gas. The car rocketed out the garage, bounced down the driveway, hit the street already attempting to turn, span out, and skidded into the front yard on the opposite end of the road.

"Aw shit." Lynette dragged the stick transmission all over the place while simultaneously spinning the wheel back and forth. Unamused, Sloan watched Ramsey and her crew file one by one into the Cadillac, filling it like a clown car.

Finally something on the transmission locked into place and the car jerked backward onto the road. It wheeled around and accelerated at full tilt as the Cadillac roared after them. Lynette adjusted the rearview mirror and reached beneath her seat, only to retrieve a fresh bottle of vodka which she snapped open and swigged.

Sloan regretted entering this vehicle.

"Don't drink that."

Lynette dropped the bottle. It rolled beneath her feet. "It's water. You think my liver's made of iron? I fill them with water to keep up with Chelsea. Her liver... really is made of iron, or something."

The car took a hairpin turn down a residential street but avoided another spinout. The streets were devoid of life, save submerged vehicular husks that had rolled onto the sidewalk or into ditches and been abandoned in the night.

"Yeah, that's what happens when your body regenerates," said Sloan. "What do you know about magic?"

They whipped around another corner. "Not as much as I'd like. Chelsea says she's supposed to keep mum about it, but she's bad at keeping mum. So I hear snatches. I know she's one. I know you're one. I figure my sister's one too, since I met Chelsea through her and I dunno any other reason those two would associate ever."

She spoke as though this were no fantastic revelation, but rather an inconsequential addendum to her life.

Sloan checked if Ramsey's Cadillac had kept up. It had, but the more important thing was the three dolls seated on the trunk of the Corvette. Their legs dangled over the edge as they tilted their heads and giggled in Sloan's direction. The laws of physics seemed not to apply to them.

"Look. Point is. You're gonna kill Clair. I know you're gonna. I knew the first moment I saw you, and what you said to Chelsea confirmed it. I could see in the way you changed. You used to be at least somewhat normal, but now—"

Sloan undid her seatbelt. "Excuse me. We have some invisible dolls on the back of our car."

Lynette shrugged. "I'll believe it."

The space inside the Corvette was too small for her gun. Sloan opened the door. Wind tried to force it closed, but Sloan leaned out and propped her body against it. The scenery whirred past in an undying strip of white interspersed with random flashes of color.

Sloan grabbed the roof of the car and stepped on the rest in the door. The dolls cackled and cackled and cackled as she made geriatric motions to scale the side of the speeding Corvette. A more nimble Magical Girl would simply backflip out the door and onto the roof. Sloan's coat flapped in the wind.

One of the dolls hurled its spear like a javelin. Sloan threw herself against the door and swung into the open air to avoid the bolt. She wrapped her hands around the handle. The hinges groaned as a blast of wind jerked the door back and slammed Sloan against the frame. Still she held, her feet dangling inches from the snow-drenched asphalt, her ride weaving through aimless curved roads.

The other dolls raised their spears to throw. Climbing slow and steady was not working. But Sloan was acclimating to the speed of the wind and the sleekness of the car, all its fluid sides and lines. She felt more ready to try some bullshit.

She let go of the door and flew back. She summoned her gun and swung it in midair, smashing Blonde doll just as its spear left its little hand. The doll sailed off the car with a squeal of dismay while Sloan seized the spoiler with her free hand. The rest of her body kept

flying into oblivion, but the tether of her arm rooted her to the vehicle with a hard bout of whiplash.

Immediately Tassel doll plunged a dagger into her hand. The pain was unimaginable, like a torment of hell, despite the lack of any stigmatic wound sprouting in her palm. She clenched her hand tighter as she reeled herself in, plunking a boot down in the hollowed rear light. If she let go of her gun she could reorient it in air and erase the other two dolls, but she would also erase the car and Lynette and other stuff, too. These dolls were eerily good at getting into situations where she had little ability to shoot them.

ALSO HER HAND HURT SO BAD JESUS FUCK

Tassel doll tore the dagger out and stabbed again. And tore it out and stabbed. And tore it out and stabbed. Sloan screamed and clung and tried to latch onto the back of the Corvette. She got both feet stuck to something when the Redhead doll leapfrogged over the first and grabbed hold of Sloan's head. It scuttled headfirst down Sloan's body, not stabbing, but crawling for her stomach—the location of her Soul Gem.

By the time Sloan realized what was happening, the doll had already reached it. Its razor claws tore at her coat. The buttons came undone and her Soul Gem hung exposed.

Sloan withdrew her grip from the car. She flew into open air. The Corvette zoomed away as she seized the doll latched to her torso and ripped it off while it clawed and bit. They twisted in air, bounced against the ground, flew up and into the windshield of the Cadillac.

Tinted glass caved beneath her and shattered. Sloan sailed into a nest of screaming girls. Tires screeched as snow and hail mingled with leather and flesh. Sloan span and whirled as needle teeth sank into her shoulder. Something big and dull jabbed deep against her ribs. Her skull cracked against a thing. All sense of direction went poof.

The next thing to register with any clarity was the wretched face of the doll as it spread its shark jaws wide and went for Sloan's eyes. She grasped its scrawny neck and throttled hard while bodies writhed beneath her and the car span out of control. She wrenched the doll from her flesh and hurled it out the shattered windshield. It bounced off the hood and flew into the white.

Sloan slapped her gem to ensure it remained intact, an action she realized was pointless. She turned her dazed head and observed her surroundings, girls atop girls, limbs and heads, Carmichael in the driver seat making frantic motions to regain control.

A weak hand pattered against Sloan's skull. The hand was attached to Ramsey, most of whom had been flattened beneath her. "How can you be so *cruel*, Slo?" she said, her voice on the verge of tears. "Why are you so *mean* to me?"

Sloan made sure none of the dolls had slipped into the Cadillac. At least ten girls were crammed inside. They veered near a discarded snowplow as Carmichael righted their course. The Corvette had not escaped too far ahead.

"Can you look *at* me when I'm talking *to* you?" said Ramsey.

Although she considered not doing it, Sloan looked at Ramsey. Ramsey aimed her shotgun at Sloan's exposed Soul Gem. She maneuvered her slender arms in the awkward space so the butt of the gun clattered against the passenger window.

Arms wrapped around Sloan from behind. Hennepin's face surfaced out the girl heap and said, "Hi."

"Should I slow down," said Carmichael. In the melee his beret was lost. Snow swirled through the shattered windshield.

Ramsey angled her head in his general direction. "Stay on Lynette's *ass*." She returned to Sloan. "Now, you! You're going *nowhere*, Snu-Snu."

A minor force would break Sloan from Hennepin's grip, but the action took the time to pull a trigger on a shotgun. If the dolls showed up, she had no other choice.

"Do you know what I did *for* you?" Tears streamed down her face. "Do you? Because you seem pretty fucking *ungrateful*. I save you from Clair, neutralize Hennepin, hide you from the *nine* million things that want you dead, and what do you do? What *do* you do, Sloan? You INSULT me, SLAP me, HUMILIATE me, DAMAGE my PROPERTY, HURT my FRIENDS, and in general BITE your THUMB at me FOR NO EXPLICABLE REASON." Her hands trembled across the shotgun. The belts around her arms and neck stiffened. A trickle of blood ran down the side of her face. "I THOUGHT we were FRIENDS, SLOAN. I REALLY thought that!"

What had Sloan ever done to impress that she and Ramsey were friends? Sloan barely remembered talking to her before Fargo. The adrenaline pulsing in her veins howled for violence, howled for Sloan to wrench the gun away and pummel this pernicious obnoxious blot to dust, and then turn and pummel Hennepin too, splatter their brains across the sickly-enameled leather seats and all the silly girls roped into Ramsey's tri-county drug mafia. All of them had only ever gotten in her way. Ramsey, Hennepin, Omaha, Delaney—either willful incompetence or scurrilous riddles about time demons and vapid bullshit that meant NOTHING, NOTHING AT ALL, because the only thing that meant ANYTHING was Clair Ibsen and the demolition of her soul.

Just kill them, her inner voice whispered. Just kill them all. If they impede her progress they might as well be Clair's pawns. Destroy her tools. Bash them to smithereens. Do it! You have fast reflexes, Ramsey has slow. Take the gun. Take it!

Sloan's hands curled into hooks. Why did everyone keep confronting her with opportunities to kill them, flinging their worthless bodies in her way as if beckoning for death? The light in her Soul Gem simmered inside her. Be creative, they had said. Because they knew she was not, and that her attempts to become so would fail. All she had to do—she saw it now—was overwhelm them with such raw power they bent beneath her will. HOW CREATIVE CAN YOU BE WHEN FACED WITH A NUCLEAR WEAPON?

"Hurry and shoot her," said Hennepin.

Ramsey's hands tightened around the gun. Try to pull the trigger, Ramsey. Try it. One reflexive twitch of your finger and your arm leaves its socket.

The gun lowered. Ramsey's head lowered. "I can't," she said. "She's my friend."

"What," said Hennepin.

"What," said Sloan.

"Before you left... the first time, I mean. When Clair kept telling me I should leave the city... I had nothing, no money or anything... I remember it. I needed your like permission to extend into Anoka's territory since back then the old Anoka was like basically already dead. I showed up at your house and asked you. You like smiled at me and, and..."

She sniffled.

"...And, and, you like took my hand and told me I could do anything I wanted. Like... like you thought I was strong. Like you thought I was better than just some stupid kid whore. And you were like so strong and cool, too, everyone knew how strong you were. It made me feel... like..."

Her voice diminished. The other girls and Carmichael said nothing, made no indication they even heard, lost in their own world where Ramsey was a likeable and infallible demigoddess and not something shriveled and unstable. Despite the howling wind a quiet descended on the Cadillac.

The heated blood chilled in Sloan's veins.

She had never said those things. She remembered little of Ramsey, but knew no such meeting ever happened. In those days Sloan spent as little time at home as possible. And if she encountered Ramsey at home, she never would have spoken so kindly, let alone to a girl lobbying for bureaucratic loopholes to poach territory.

But Sloan had a twin sister, after all. A twin sister who comprised all the qualities Sloan herself lacked: compassion, caring, generosity. Aspects magnified by the miracle that had given back her sight. A twin sister who would see a small and battered girl raving about Anoka and territory and would feel empathy for such a thing. Would say a kind word, would offer hot cocoa.

Sloan deflated. She sagged against Hennepin, felt as though her blood had emptied through slit wrists.

"I'm sorry, Ramsey."

"I was... I was thinking of ending it," said Ramsey. "My gem was in bad shape, I really needed the extra territory, I was burning through cubes so fast... And then you said that, and told me I could like have the territory if I wanted, and everything from there turned around for me... Even when Clair kicked you out, I felt like, like you were still watching over me? Like a guardian angel. It gave me the confidence..."

Such a small kindness. But to a desperate girl, even one small kindness can create a fixation, an obsession—can save a life.

Sloan had not even been the one to give that small kindness. And had by some unlucky accident Ramsey found the real Sloan Redfearn seven months ago, and asked for more territory and a little sympathy, Sloan had no doubt she would have crushed that girl's soul in as few words as possible.

"Ramsey. Look. I..." What could she say? That it wasn't her? "I..."

"Hey, who that in the Porsche?" said Carmichael.

Sloan and Ramsey and Hennepin looked out the driver side window. Zooming alongside the Cadillac was the third car Sloan had seen in Ramsey's garage, the pink convertible.

In the driver's seat, peering through the tinted window and directly at Sloan from behind an iron mask that bore Delaney Pollack's visage, was the Terminatrix.

This Entrance Was Meant Solely for You

The cars rattled through snow that had the consistency of ash. Powdery puffs billowed around them and masked the air in phantasmic haze. Even the sheer pink of the convertible's hull drifted in and out of visibility. More valuable was the whirr of its engine and the electric crackle that lingered around the Terminatrix's mask.

Sloan licked blood from her lip and rolled off Hennepin. She knelt behind Carmichael's driver seat and observed over his shoulder.

"Who is *that*," Ramsey asked.

"Terminatrix," said Sloan. "Her gun steals the powers of the girl it shoots. She already has barrier and healing magic."

"Better hope she don't shoot me," said Hennepin.

Despite the ten people crammed inside, the Cadillac had enough space for Sloan to summon her gun. She propped it against the cup holders with the barrel sticking between the two front seats.

"BEEP BOOP." The voice pierced the wind and motor-whirr like a speakerphone. "PULL OVER THE CAR. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. PULL OVER THE CAR. YOU ARE UNDER ARREST. PULL OVER THE CAR."

"Oh shit, what kinda undercover ass cop is that," said Carmichael. "I ain't going to fucking jail, yo."

"She's no cop," said Ramsey. "She's one of *my* kind. Let me and Sloan *handle*—"

The convertible emerged out of the haze and smashed into their side. Sloan's head cracked against the side of Ramsey's seat and Ramsey's head cracked against the glass. The other girls screamed.

Ramsey rubbed her head. "Damn... Carmichael, you and the others need to jump ship. This isn't a fight for you guys!"

"No," said Sloan. "The only reason she hasn't royally wrecked our shit already is because she won't hurt normals. We get rid of them and she drops a barrier right in front of our car, boom."

"THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING. PULL OVER THE CAR OR YOUR GOODS ARE FORFEIT WEE-OO WEE-OO WEE-OO WEE-OO WEE-OO."

"Then what do we do?" Ramsey asked. Blood ran down her hair like a red highlight in a wave of platinum blonde.

"Surprise her," said Sloan.

She leapt out the shattered windshield, bounced off the hood, and dove the gap onto the convertible. Her gun span as she aimed for the driver's seat, only to find nobody sat there and a small red bubble held down the accelerator. The unmanned wheel made a lazy revolution as the convertible leaned to the side and aimed for the curb.

Sloan dropped her gun and grabbed the wheel. The car righted while the Terminatrix popped out from the backseat with her silver revolver drawn and aimed at Sloan's back. Sloan commanded her charged gun to blast the Terminatrix in the gut. Light fired instantaneously and the Terminatrix formed a bubble around herself.

The light ricocheted into the sky. Sloan abandoned the steering wheel and let the car go where it pleased at nearly a hundred miles an hour down an icy road. She jump-kicked the bubble, bounced back, and flipped onto the hood. Creativity, creativity, she needed a way to get past Delaney's bubbles. She remembered the stupid image she had made of herself in the backyard. Even if it only distracted for a second—

From the Cadillac, Ramsey lashed her whip. It coiled around the Terminatrix's bubble as the belt-bound girl leapt from the Cadillac and into the convertible. Sloan had to hastily cut off her gunfire to stop it from frying Ramsey in the face.

"I got her!" Ramsey said. "Now how do we break this bubble?"

The bubble burst. The whip constricted around the next solid thing it could find: the Terminatrix's torso. Elation lit up Ramsey's face and she pumped her fist. From the Cadillac, her adoring fans cheered.

Despite the whip coiled around her, the Terminatrix calmly turned her gun and shot Ramsey in the face. Ramsey clapped her hands to her eyes but no wound appeared.

Ramsey you fucking idiot. The situation had gone from bad to worse really quickly. Sloan had not surprised the Terminatrix at all and the convertible veered toward the edge of the road. With a running start, Sloan bounded back to the Cadillac. Her boots hit the slick paint and she slipped onto her ass, but she made the jump just before the convertible struck the curb and went airborne. The girls inside the Cadillac made a collective gasp as the Porsche corkscrewed into an oblivion of snow, followed by a series of progressively louder metallic screeching and smashing noises.

A whip lashed from the aether and coiled around Sloan's leg. Sloan swung her hands out and latched around the windshield frame moments before the whip yanked her off the hood. Shards of glass dug into her arms as her body stretched its full length along the side of Cadillac. She glanced behind: the Terminatrix bounced along the road, Ramsey under her arm.

Sloan corrected the whip issue by summoning a new gun and having it sever the whip with one quick shot. Which caused Sloan's lower half to drop against the road and drag through the snow. The snow at least buffered her so she didn't sand off the flesh on her ankles.

I can't use my powers! said Ramsey's voice.

I fucking warned you, said Sloan.

I just wanted to help...

Sloan jammed a foot into the door handle and propped herself up as she tried to climb back into the car. Another whip lashed her in the back, but the pain was nothing compared to an attack by those dolls. She bit her lip and pulled herself in, rolling into the vacant passenger seat.

"This is why I don't jump between moving vehicles," said Hennepin.

"Where's the Boss," said Carmichael. "Where she go?"

Something landed on the roof of the car and dented it inward. Sloan angled her gun straight up and fired. Holes tore through the roof until the roof peeled back like a sardine can.

Out of the ashen air sailed a body. Sloan halted her fire just in time as Ramsey thudded into the swarm of screaming girls. The next moment, the Terminatrix landed on both feet, stiletto heels digging into someone's hand. Sloan lifted her gun but hesitated.

"Raise your gun, I shoot." She had to yell above the wind.

"YOU SHOOT, I BUBBLE."

"And then every normal in this car gets fried," said Sloan. "I told you before, I don't give a shit what I have to destroy. I won't let you stop me from reaching Clair."

The face on the Terminatrix's mask had changed from Delaney to Ramsey. The Terminatrix shifted her stance to stop impaling somebody's hand. She rolled the revolver around her finger, rubbing the barrel with her other hand. As the barrel turned, so turned her mask, from Ramsey to Delaney and back again.

"WELL NOW! I WOULD NEVER WANT TO HARM MY ADORING FANS, BEEP BOOP."

With dramatic aplomb, she struck a pose. A bit of digital glimmer ran down her body like a sparkly flair.

The girls, cowering against the sides of Cadillac or between the luxurious seats, poked up their heads.

"Wow!"

"So cool!"

"She's like hot Daft Punk!"

For a moment, Sloan had no idea what Ramsey's goons were saying. But as their praise grew more unanimous, one voice chiming against the wind, Sloan realized: the Terminatrix stole Ramsey's likability magic as well.

"BEEP BOOP. MY ADORING FANS. I AM SO HAPPY TO HAVE YOU, BECAUSE NORMALLY EVERYONE HATES ME. FOR MY FIRST COMMAND, I DEMAND YOU... RESTRAIN THAT FAIR MAIDEN ESCAPING OUT THE WINDOW!"

She pointed at Hennepin, who had half her body out and looked prepared to fling herself into the street, even if it meant an immediate coma as her Soul Gem sped away with Carmichael. She cast a frantic glance back at the Terminatrix and froze as though caught red-handed, which was just enough time for three or four girls to grab various parts of Hennepin and yank her back into the car.

"I never liked this bitch anyway," one of the girls said as they pinned Hennepin down.

"Hey, hey." Hennepin did not struggle against them. "Hey, I'm not involved in this. I'm neutral."

Sloan fixed an eye on the Terminatrix. She kept swapping between the Delaney and Ramsey masks, maneuvering her gun with practiced finesse until it seemed almost like both masks were on at once, Delaney's face phasing through Ramsey's.

If the Terminatrix could only use the power of the mask she currently had active...

"THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION, BEEP BOOP." By switching between the two masks so fast, she could keep the goons pliable zombies to her will, while also remaining prepared for Sloan's attack. "YOUR POWERS WILL BE TAKEN TEMPORARILY IN PURSUIT OF JUSTICE AND THE LAW AND OTHER THINGS ROBOTS LIKE ME ARE PROGRAMMED TO UPHOLD. ONCE THE CRIMINAL SCUM HAVE BEEN ERADICATED, YOUR POWERS WILL BE RETURNED."

"Let's not do this." Hennepin's voice wavered. "I don't like this."

Sloan waited for the Terminatrix. Watched her masks cycle. Calibrated the timing.

"Just have these girls go after Fargo, yeah? That's the simpler option, right? Right?"

"I CANNOT SEND NORMAL HUMAN BEINGS TO FIGHT A DEPRAVED MURDERER," said the Terminatrix. She seemed hesitant, as though aware Sloan had caught onto her. "YOUR POWERS WILL BE USEFUL. THIS DISCUSSION IS OVER."

The revolver barrel clicked and the mask switched to Delaney's face. A bubble sprouted before Sloan, flattening several other girls beneath it or shunting them to the walls of the car. Sloan dove over the barrel as the Terminatrix flicked the barrel to an empty chamber, her face swapping back to the generic wraithlike visage from their first encounter. Sloan squeezed over the bubble and came down on the Terminatrix hard and fast. Her boot slammed against the hand holding the revolver. A metal and inhuman grunt of pain issued from the dull open mouth in the Terminatrix's mask as her hand opened and the revolver flew out.

Without pause, Sloan pivoted in the cramped space and swung her fist at the mask. Her knuckle struck the cold hard metal and she reared back with a shriek as a dull reverberation of pain shot through her nerves. She stepped on a body and lost her balance and fell on her ass atop some other bodies. The Terminatrix bounced against the door. Her head snapped back and smashed the window to glitter. She rebounded, her mask twitching and flickering with static, her arms jerking back and forth.

Sloan scanned the cushions of the seats for the revolver but it did not catch her eye. Instead she noticed the Corvette racing alongside them, Lynette with her vodka bottle in one hand and the other clutched to the steering wheel.

On the roof of the Corvette sat the one doll Sloan had not managed to deal with, the Tassel doll. It waved at Sloan with its immutable smile.

Before Sloan could react, the Terminatrix fell upon her and levied a swift karate chop to Sloan's throat. Sloan clutched her neck, rasping for breath as an uppercut nailed her in the chin. The Terminatrix forced her onto the writhing mass of bodies and aimed a hooked set of fingers at Sloan's Soul Gem.

A gun clicked and the Terminatrix froze. She slowly looked behind her. Ramsey stood there, the silver revolver raised.

"I did it!" she said. "I got her now. I did it!"

The Terminatrix tilted her head, shrugged, and swept out a kick that knocked Ramsey off her feet. She reached out and snatched the gun from Ramsey's hand while she fell.

If Sloan had nothing better to do, she would have slapped her forehead in shame at Ramsey's antics. But she had a split second window while the Terminatrix's head was turned so she used it by shoving her hands against the Terminatrix's neck and squeezing. The Terminatrix tried to pivot her arm and aim at Sloan, but her hand struck the headrest of a chair and stopped her for the moment Sloan needed to heave with all her strength. The Terminatrix lifted off of her, into the air, her body suddenly weightless from Sloan's magic. Up and up she went, sailing airborne, out the open roof of the Cadillac, into the snowy heights. Her limbs flailed as though swimming, but nothing could redirect her ascent, unbound by gravity's pull.

Eventually, as the gray sky obscured her, she gave up trying to redirect herself and aimed her revolver down at Sloan. But Sloan anticipated this action and grabbed the closest piece of worthless material to block the shot: Ramsey.

Ramsey squirmed, so small without her inflated Dalmatian cloak, but as the shot rang out and she yipped in fear nothing actually happened—her powers had already been stolen.

The Terminatrix gave up on firing from a distance. A red bubble encased her and stopped her from untethering completely from the planet. Sloan pushed off Ramsey and sat up. The Corvette still drove alongside them, but the doll had disappeared from its roof.

Fuck. Sloan scanned the waste of girls and picked out Hennepin as she attempted to burrow herself beneath the seats. Sloan wrapped an arm around her torso and yanked her from her

hiding spot, at the same time imbuing her with the same weight-reducing magic she had used on the Terminatrix. By about this time the magic had worn off on the Terminatrix, at least according to Sloan's internal timer. Sure enough, the bubble popped and the Terminatrix dropped. But Sloan already had a running start, hauling Hennepin under her arm as she leapt out the Cadillac and landed atop the Corvette.

Hennepin wrapped her arms around Sloan. Her fingers dug into the coat. "What the fuck are you doing?" she screamed.

"Getting on the faster car." And also getting them away from a group of mindless normals the Terminatrix could sway with Ramsey's magic, and the ineptitude of Ramsey herself, and—if Sloan guessed correctly—the Tassel doll, who had probably slipped into the Cadillac undetected. But that took too long to say.

With one agile motion, she scurried down the opposite side of the Corvette (no more hesitation, she had her car parkour down pat), pulled open the door, and hurled Hennepin into the passenger seat.

"Step on it!" she hollered at Lynette. "Get us away from their car! I'll stop anyone from following."

Lynette gave a thumbs up and stomped the gas. The Corvette spurted ahead, quickly whipping around a hairpin corner. The scenery that flashed past had shifted from suburban sameness to the larger towers of the inner city. Once they came out the other side, they would be close to Eden Prairie and Clair's house. And Sloan's own house...

Now was not the time to think about that. She slammed the door shut as she scurried onto the roof of the Corvette. The Cadillac already lagged behind them. Eyes peered through the window, faces pressed to the scattered remnants of glass. On the hood knelt the Tassel doll, no longer waving, her arms folded in a sulky pout, her smile somewhat straightened as the distance between the cars became impassable. Sloan lifted a hand and flipped the doll off.

Unless the dolls could fly, that meant they were out of her hair for the time being. She scanned the Cadillac for the other thing she had to watch out for, but the snow and the tinted glass soon rendered everything invisible save the pink sheen of its coat.

Ramsey, talk to me. Where's the Terminatrix.

If I go too far away from my gem I'm gonna die, y'know?

The response puzzled her until she realized it was Hennepin. *Shut up. I brought you along so you wouldn't get your powers jacked. Ramsey, where are you?*

Ramsey's voice finally spoke up.

Uh, uh, hey Sloan. I'm here. I know I messed up, but I'll help any way I can. We gotta beat Clair, right? I can't let my personal quibbles get in the way—

Where's the Terminatrix, Sloan said.

Please don't be mad at me, but she's not in the car. I don't know where she is. Oh, and, uh, tell Lynette to slow down, okay? Carmichael can't keep up.

Only the dim circles of headlights remained of the Cadillac as it slid down the wispy gullet of the city. Sloan knelt atop the Corvette, holding onto the slick surface with sheer magical willpower as she surveyed the road and the towers around her. She disliked not knowing the Terminatrix's location.

Sloan? Are you there? You need to slow down...

Ramsey, tell Carmichael to stop. Stop your car. Stop following.

What? The voice weakened, either from the distance or the howl of wind or the dwindle of Ramsey's self esteem. You want me to... stay here?

That's exactly what I want. You're no good without your powers, Ramsey. I'll handle Clair myself, and the Terminatrix too. I don't need you.

The Cadillac disappeared completely.

Oh... said Ramsey.

Are you doing it? Are you stopping? If you want to help me, stop your car.

Yeah. Yeah, I'll tell Carmichael to stop right now. You're right.

Good. This was going along swimmingly, with minimal fuss. Sloan had little patience for long, drawn out pleading.

Don't worry about me, she said. I can beat Clair. I know I can.

Yeah. Good luck. Yeah.

Sloan let the conversation die. All immediate danger had cleared and it was too damn cold on the roof with the wind and sleet pounding her. With a fluid motion she swung down the side of the car, opened the passenger door, and hooked herself inside.

She shuffled Hennepin's temporary corpse to the side, enough for Sloan to sit, and sealed out the ice with a slam. The howl subsided into a muted muffle and despite sharing her seat with a dead girl, Sloan found time for her heart to calm and her blood to slow.

"Damn girl," said Lynette. "That was some stunt you pulled. Jumping between cars? People can't do that shit."

"Becoming a Magical Girl magnifies the capabilities of your body," said Sloan. Her eyes followed the arc of the windshield wipers as they fought against the elements outside.

"Magical Girl? That's the name for it?"

"I didn't make it up." Too bad the Corvette had no backseat. Hennepin's limp head sagged against Sloan's shoulder, a bony plate of forehead boring into the gaunt flesh. The girl weighed a lot more than Sloan expected, and was only slightly less obstinate dead than alive.

"Well, let's talk serious for a moment," said Lynette. "You're gonna kill Clair, right?"

"Yes."

Lynette stared ahead. She turned the wheel while phantom street signs lit up beneath her headlights. "I'll help."

Great. More functionally worthless and potentially distracting people who wanted to "help" Sloan. "You're helping enough by driving. A normal person stands no chance against magic. She'll tear you to pieces in an instant."

"I know." A smile parted on Lynette's lips. "She knows it too. Which means she won't consider me a threat. If she's preoccupied fighting you, I can sneak up behind her..."

"That won't work. There's only one way to kill a Magical Girl. You have to destroy their Soul Gem."

"You mean like that thing on your stomach?"

Sloan looked down. In the ruckus her coat had come unbuttoned, revealing her true Magical Girl attire beneath. The bare skin and skimpy accoutrements glistened with frost. When Lynette gave Sloan a sly wink, Sloan seized the sides of her coat and furiously fitted the buttons back together.

"Yeah, like that," said Sloan. "That's the only place she's weak. But destroy it and she's dead instantly."

"So I go for her stomach."

"No, that's just mine," said Sloan. "Hers is..."

Sloan searched her memory, drew a mental picture of Clair in her Greco-Roman regalia, the long folds of toga, the golden sandals and bare arms. A look that suited her so poorly, exemplified her slight frame and brought out her red eyes as the only splotch of color in her entire ensemble. In this mental image, Sloan quickly located Clair's gem: right shoulder, a dull ruby set within a clasp that pinned the strap of her gown. Wait, was that it? That was where Delaney kept her gem. Sloan wasn't getting confused, was she?

No, Sloan remembered clear enough. Clair's gem was also on the shoulder. In either case, she made no effort to hide it. But now that Sloan remembered Delaney, she wondered if Clair might borrow one of Delaney's tricks and swap her gem with a fake. It was such an obvious ploy every girl ought to do it. Although Sloan guessed not too many girls could afford real precious stones to use as decoy.

"It's on her shoulder," said Sloan. "You'll find it."

"So you're down with the plan?" said Lynette.

"I..."

Maybe. It made sense and gave Sloan a strategic ace. Lynette's voice maintained a casual apathy but in her eye gleamed something more, almost a frenzy of color Sloan rarely saw. She too was a girl whose entire life had been carefully deconstructed by Clair's all-consuming presence. And while Sloan had suffered defeat in a calculated moment of betrayal, Lynette had lived an entire life under Clair's thumb. Sloan had misgivings that another Ramsey might transpire, but Lynette exuded a cool competence Ramsey lacked. A desperate determination Sloan recognized as a mirror image of herself.

"I..."

Sloan, no!

Sloan looked around. The road stretched behind and the road stretched ahead. The car turned. Snow and mist everywhere. Hennepin's dead body and room for nobody else.

Who's there?

Sloan, don't rely on her to fight for you... Have faith in yourself, okay?

The voice was unmistakable. *Omaha? Where the hell are you?*

That's... not important! What's important is you beat Clair yourself. That's what's important to you, right...?

Sloan looked under her seat for any traces of blood. There was nowhere Omaha could possibly be. Unless... the trunk? Or clinging to the roof? How had Omaha wound up in either of those places? Had she hitched along in Ramsey's Cadillac?

"It doesn't matter what you say," said Lynette. "I'm gonna try anyway. You might as well use me like a tool I am. Ha ha ha!"

Whatever. Lynette's idea had potential, but Sloan doubted it would work in practice. A normal had half the speed, reflexes, and general combat acumen than even a garbage-tier Magical Girl, and while Clair's raw power was mediocre, it was more than enough to dispatch Lynette in a fraction of a second.

Actually, Clair's music instantly incapacitated any human who heard it, much like a wraith miasma, turning them into brainless shambling zombies. No way would the plan work.

No need to tell Lynette, though, who still sat in the driver's seat.

"How close are we?" Sloan asked.

Lynette adjusted the rearview mirror, although their backward visibility was basically void. "Close. When we get there, you gonna shoot shit up?"

"That's the idea. You worried about your parents?"

"Fuck my parents," said Lynette. "Fuck Eden Prairie. Fuck Minneapolis. Fuck MINNESOTA. Who decided to build a city here? What was their fucking impetus? How many Norwegian fucks decided their own damn country wasn't cold enough so they had to inhabit the ice shelf of North America? A race of idiots browbeaten by the snow until their craniums folded inward to inhibit their mental processes. There's that stereotype about Minnesotans, oh they're so nice, oh they say sorry, but really you know what it is? They've all been fucking LOBOTOMIZED. The ice numbed their frontal lobes and transmogrified them into grinning imbeciles. A few more years and I'll be the same."

They swerved around a bend. Around them fluttered strings of multicolored fairies weaving in and out of the mist. Christmas lights. They were damn close now. Gone was the Land of Coke and Hookers, come was the Land of Yuletide Cheer. Of woolen sweaters and cookie trays, of fuming chimneys and woodstoves burning. Sloan's hand curled around the armrest. The Terminatrix and the gossamer dolls were behind her. Who knew how long until they caught up, but that was all the better: it gave her an incentive not to waste time. She had one objective now, and one only. Clair Ibsen.

Are you ready, Sloan? said Omaha's voice.

Yes.

If you want to win... don't mess around with anyone else she might throw at you. Go straight for her.

I know.

I believe in you! You can do it!

Sloan did not respond. Her heart palpitated with the useless blood that chilled her veins.

The car rounded a corner and slid to an abrupt halt despite the ice. Great floodlights penetrated skyward from the snow to illuminate a tall iron gate and the sign beside it:

EDEN ESTATES.

Lynette put the car in park but left the engine running. She gathered her coat around herself and opened the door. Her boots crunched against the ice as she wandered through the mist to the gate's password input system.

Sloan drummed her fingers against the glovebox. Lynette lingered in front of the control pad, mashing keys with trembling fingers. Sloan drummed faster. Cold air sluiced through the open door. Her white breath was sucked out the vacuum.

Lynette pushed the final key. The gate uttered a low and ominous groan as it fought against the snow piled against it. Inch by inch, its iron bars parted and began to open.

Sloan drummed faster.

A sudden thought struck her. She should make sure Hennepin was out of sight. If the Terminatrix caught up, it would be like leaving her a free power-up.

While the gate continued at its monumental pace, Sloan hit the lever to disengage the trunk, opened her door, and slung Hennepin over her shoulder. Her boots hit the snow and crunched. She shielded her face with a hand and the bulk of Hennepin's body and rounded the car for the trunk.

Omaha sat curled in the trunk. She waved at Sloan with her sloppy wrist. Wrapped in her other arm was the fourth doll.

Hi. I hope you don't mind... I snuck in here awhile ago. To keep at least one of these dolls out of your way... She won't do anything as long as I hold her. She won't hurt me...

Sloan dropped Hennepin on top of Omaha and slammed the trunk shut.

She looked up. Lynette stood by the control pad as the gates continued to open.

"Bah," Lynette shouted. Her voice almost drowned beneath the wind. "This is taking forever, let's walk—"

Two things happened at once, in such rapid succession they almost seemed choreographed. First, from between the gates leapt a hooded figure encircled by a ring of shiny silver discs. The figure—St. Paul—landed near Lynette and decked her in the face. Lynette dropped cold.

The second thing that happened, while Lynette plowed into the snow, was a gunshot. Sloan staggered back as a dull, painless, but significant force impacted her foot. She stared at her boot, but saw no hole or wound.

St. Paul stood by Lynette's body, consternation on her face as though she only now realized it was not Sloan she punched.

From under the Corvette, with lithe and snaky motions of her limber body, the Terminatrix emerged. Sloan boggled at the fact the Terminatrix had managed to fit beneath such a tight space, especially since she surely must have been there while the car was moving. But then she noticed the smoking revolver in the Terminatrix's hand and forgot everything else.

Oh no. Oh no this wasn't happening.

Sloan summoned her gun, and a wave of relief surged through her as it appeared as commanded, long and heavy in her hands. The barrel span as she aimed at the encroaching Terminatrix, swiftly building momentum until it reached the necessary velocity to fire.

But it didn't fire.

It just span and span and span, worthless.

The Terminatrix clicked her revolver. Her mask shifted from Delaney's face to Sloan's own face. Same squinted eyes, mouth hung agape in moderate idiocy.

"BEEP BOOP. I AM A PROFESSIONAL ROBOT, DID YOU KNOW? MY ENTIRE LIFE REVOLVES AROUND HUNTING DOWN WHIMSICAL LITTLE BITCHES LIKE YOU AND MAKING THEM PAY FOR THEIR SINS. I'LL GRANT YOU HAVE AN ABOVE-AVERAGE LUCK STAT, OR AT LEAST THE UNIVERSE SEEMS TO BE CONSPIRING TO KEEP YOU ALIVE FOR WHATEVER REASON. BUT I AIN'T ABOUT LUCK. I'M ABOUT RUINING YOUR FUCKING DAY."

Oh no, oh no... said Omaha. Sloan, did she... oh no, oh no, let me out of here Sloan, I can help!

To open the trunk, Sloan needed to pull the lever beside the front seat of the car. But that was currently low tier on Sloan's list of priorities, because the Terminatrix's hands started to glow with a dazzling golden sheen. Sloan knew this attack. It was her own damn attack, after all.

She tucked her head low (closing her eyes was not enough, since her light could fry corneas through eyelid skin) and charged the Terminatrix. She still had her gun, which meant bereft of all else she could smash a bitch to bloody pulp.

The light flared. Even with her face nearly pressed against her chest she sensed it, her eyes crinkling as, sightless, a field of red replaced the black. She swung her arm and the gun and connected to a ribcage. The Terminatrix grunted and slammed against the Corvette.

Sloan lifted her head and opened her eyes, the light in the Terminatrix's hands dying. She raised her gun to bring down on the mirror-image mask. The Terminatrix shot out a leg and caught Sloan in the stomach. Sloan sailed backward, bounced against the snow, and rolled into an inflatable Santa Claus.

Sunspots crept across her disoriented vision as she flipped to her feet. Two bright circles emerged out the snowy haze as two entwining rivers of light surged toward her. She scanned for somewhere to jump (nowhere but snow) when the light streams struck an odd ripple in the air and bounced into a nether realm. Sloan rubbed her eyes and better saw the silver disc studded in the snow that had reflected the Terminatrix's attack.

A second ripple sliced through the air. Sloan jumped as the disc sailed through where her waist had been moments ago, now only whooshing under the curled toes in her boots. She hit the ground and darted to the side, unsure of the terrain but sure she lacked the luxury of immobility her overwhelming offensive power tended to afford. She soon ran into the gate, almost striking it but redirecting her path as it sprung into sight before her, following it back toward the Corvette and the entrance to Eden Estates.

She could not simply evade the Terminatrix now. She had to get her powers back before she fought Clair.

Sloan? Sloan...? Are you okay? Please talk to me, I'm worried...

Stop distracting me. Sloan found the Corvette, but both the Terminatrix and St. Paul had gone somewhere. Only Lynette's unconscious form, already half-buried in falling snow.

Half-stooped, she skidded for the driver's seat. Someone had closed the door or else the door had always been closed. She fumbled for the handle, her hand slipped, her feet slipped. She wound up on her ass, rubbing the back of her head.

She reached again but retracted as another disc skipped over the Corvette's hood and bounced just over her skull, severing a few strands of wet and clumped hair. Fuck, Sloan didn't even know where St. Paul was, or the Terminatrix. The snow made sight such a mess, and sight was supposedly her forte.

Shuffling aside snow, Sloan crept under the Corvette. The space beneath was actually rather open: the carriage had been lifted to accommodate oversized and flashy tires, probably with spinning chrome rims or some other tacky embellishment. A thought that only made Sloan angry for having it because it was so stupid, but now she couldn't get stupid spinning rims out of her mind, so somehow Ramsey had managed to transmit her uselessness across time and space and distract Sloan without even being there, fucking great, fuck everything, fuck.

She got almost entirely under the car when her arm jerked back. Her gun was stuck outside, unable to fit beneath. Okay, she would put it away for—

Something grabbed the gun and pulled. Sloan flew out from under the car, her body suddenly weightless. She sailed into the air and was yanked back by the Terminatrix. The air swirled around her as she slapped against the snow, relinquished her gun, and bounced into a drift.

"NICE GUN, BITCH."

Sloan sat up. The Terminatrix held the machine gun in both hands, lifting it with some exertion to inspect the length of its barrel and the shine of its metal.

In an instant Sloan was on her feet and running as the Terminatrix aimed and revved up. Vietnam levels of gunfire crashed against the landscape behind her, forcing momentous chunks of snow skyward. Sloan struggled through the ice to maintain her speed, legs and arms plowing wildly as the Terminatrix loosed a loud and metallic laugh, the same curt syllable looped in tune to the ratatat of the gun: HA HA HA HA HA HA.

From the corner of Sloan's periphery sailed a lacquered mirror. She jumped again (St. Paul, she realized, preferred to aim low) as the disc sailed under her. A silver edge clipped the spray of light and reflected it in a random direction before whirling into oblivion.

St. Paul sprinted along the top of the black iron gate, keeping pace with Sloan. She pointed her finger and three more discs detached from the ring around her to fly in Sloan's direction.

Oh god. Sloan thought she might actually have an idea.

Light nipping her heels, she jumped again—but not straight up. She leapt at the discs, hitting the smooth top of the first and bounding over the next two. She flipped through the air as she angled her body directly through the eye of the ring of discs, to where St. Paul's cloaked body stood undefended.

After a brief delay, St. Paul's face recognized the danger. St. Paul crossed her arms and the ring of discs closed in front of her, creating a solid and impenetrable shield. Sloan's reflection in the discs replaced St. Paul. Sloan's momentum had carried her too far to redirect. She hit the discs and bounced back into the snow.

All according to plan.

The Terminatrix's aim had followed Sloan's every movement. She raised her gun in tandem with Sloan's leap. Now, as Sloan dropped on her back in the snow, the spray of light passed over her and hit the reverberating discs.

The light, ignoring the laws of physics and instead obeying pretendland St. Paul laws of perfect reflection, sailed back toward the Terminatrix. Sloan stared upside-down as the light closed in. SURPRISE, she thought.

The Terminatrix dropped the gun and span the barrel of her revolver. Sloan's face switched to Delaney's face. Instants before the light struck her, a red bubble ballooned around the Terminatrix. The light hit it and bounced back the way it came.

ALL ACCORDING TO PLAN.

The light hit the discs. It bounced back and hit the bubble. It bounced back and hit the discs. An endless cycle of reflection and ricochet, the light gaining velocity, becoming almost a solid yellow bar between the barriers of both girls. The silver discs glowed orange, the bubble pulsed with pressure.

Sloan had always posited her light's power could break any barrier given enough sustained fire. The problem was that barriers tended to send light back the way it came. But now... but now...

Cracks spread across the discs. The bubble squeezed smaller and smaller.

Sloan tilted her head back in the snow and laughed. And laughed and laughed and laughed and laughed.

What is it, Sloan? What's going on...?

St. Paul's discs shattered in a spray of shards. The Terminatrix's bubble burst in a deluge of blood. Light shot out in both directions. St. Paul and the Terminatrix flew back as it pounded both of them. St. Paul dropped onto the other side of the fence, the Terminatrix dropped back in the snow.

The light dissipated with a flash and sparkle. Neither girl stirred on the ground.

Sloan pulled herself up and staggered for the Terminatrix. Her helmet had flown off and rolled far away. Beneath it lay a surprisingly human head, no circuitry or wires, a head of long black hair tied into a compact bun. Sloan dropped on top of the girl and pinned her down. She wrapped a hand around the throat and angled the face to stare at her.

The Terminatrix had but one eye. In the other socket was her Soul Gem, a hunk of pure onyx. Sloan hooked her fingers into a claw and dug them in, latching the tips around the precious stone. The Terminatrix moaned, her legs scuffled.

One forceful tug and the onyx popped out, slick with a gelatinous substance. Sloan clasped the gem in her hand and patted the Terminatrix on the cheek.

"Give me my powers back."

The Terminatrix blinked. A lazy eye rolled, glassy and dull itself.

"Give me my powers back."

The eye snapped open. It peered up at Sloan. The Terminatrix coughed.

"No," she said. Her voice was shrill without voice modification.

Sloan held the Soul Gem where the Terminatrix could see it. "Give me my powers back."

"You... are a dangerous girl, Sloan Redfearn."

"Did I ask for moral admonishment? No. I asked for my powers back. Give them to me." She glanced over her shoulder. St. Paul remained motionless.

"Do you know why Kyubey pays us so much to terminate girls like you, Redfearn?" the Terminatrix continued. "The things you do have more consequences than you even know."

"Demons, right?" said Sloan. "I've heard that one before. Give me my powers back."

"I know no demons," said the Terminatrix. "No demons but you. I can see in your eyes. You don't even care. You'll burn this whole city if you have to! You'll burn this whole *world!* I can see it! I can *see* it, ha ha ha ha ha ha—"

Her laugh ended abruptly as she spat into Sloan's eye. Sloan reared back and the Terminatrix rose, hands groping for Sloan's stomach.

Sloan tightened her fist. Like a thing of paper, the gem inside her grasp cracked.

The Terminatrix's eye went wide. Her hands and body hung half-raised, and then dropped into the snow.

Her costume, the sleek black bodysuit, disappeared. The mask, fallen some ways away, disappeared also. Instead, ragged scraps of patchwork cloth flapped in the wind against the Terminatrix's body.

Sloan opened her fist. Black dust trickled out and spiraled into the storm.

Some black specks remained in her palm. Had she... had she expected to crush it completely? Did she have that much power? When she tried to break Omaha's gem in Williston, she had failed... But her own gem was much more powerful now. She was much more powerful now.

She much more wanted to kill now.

She stood up, her legs shaky, her stomach stricken by a dull pang. She backed away from the corpse.

This isn't the first time you've killed someone, idiot. It was self-defense this time, too. You would have had to kill her eventually if you wanted your powers back. Stay focused.

She was just doing her job.

SHE NEVER SHOULD HAVE TAKEN SUCH A STUPID JOB.

Sloan turned away. Her powers were back. They had to be back. She summoned her gun and fired it into the sky. Okay, her powers were back. Then Ramsey's powers were back, too. And Delaney's.

Sloan? Sloan, what's happening? Please, tell me... I'm scared...

I'm fine. Stay put. You're safer in there.

Sloan wiped her hand on her coat. She walked past Lynette's prone form and through the open gate into Eden Estates. She walked to the dark lump of St. Paul in the snow.

St. Paul was full unconscious. She had transformed back into her regular attire, a rather plain sweatpants-sweatshirt combination. In her upturned palm sat her undamaged Soul Gem in its egg form.

No need to kill this one, Sloan. Pocket the gem, it'll render her harmless.

Sloan knelt, picked up the gem, and placed it in her pocket.

She had to kill the Terminatrix to get her powers back. That was the only reason. If the Terminatrix had not stolen her powers, Sloan would not have killed her. That wasn't an excuse. That wasn't to say it was the Terminatrix's fault she got killed. Sloan killed her. But that was the fucking reality out here, okay? The Terminatrix would have killed her all the same. She was just a fucking robot. Programmed by Kyubey.

Get it out of your head, dipshit. Think about Clair. Focus.

Sloan wandered down the road into Eden Estates. The suburban houses twinkled, warm and cozy inside. Families beside Christmas trees, families eating dinner around a table. Fireplaces, scented candles. Milk and cookies.

Ramsey no longer in the fight. Hennepin no longer in the fight. St. Paul no longer in the fight. Omaha no longer in the fight. The Terminatrix no longer in the fight. That left Bloomington, Woodbury, Anoka. And Clair herself. If she dallied, the dolls would catch up. Better, then, not to dally.

Houses passed. Sloan still remembered which one was Clair's. All the way at the end of the community.

It loomed into view: the Ibsen household. The mailbox read the surname. Sloan maintained her steady tread up the driveway. She kept her eyes open in the blizzard for goons waiting in ambush.

A face stood at the edge of the haze. Sloan stopped and aimed toward it and the face melted back, away from view. Sloan couldn't be sure, but she thought it was Bloomington's face.

Bloomington was the lowest concern on her list. Better not to chase her into the snow. If she wants to fight, Sloan will deal with her then.

She stepped under the awning above the Ibsen front door. The snow ceased its patter on her back and she shook flakes from her shoulders. Light filtered through the peephole and under the door.

Sloan placed her hand on the knob. It turned. The door opened. Sloan entered.

Ibsen

Warmth swept Sloan in a humid burst. Her nose dribbled as frost and snowflakes turned to slush on her coat. She shut the door and sealed out the storm.

The house had not changed in all the time Sloan knew it. A space of immaculate cleanliness, pristine rather than sterile, inundated with browns and faint pastels. Everywhere, everywhere birds. They spread wings on wallpaper, preened within oaken frames, propped end tables with brass necks, peeped cherubic behind chandelier candles.

Faint and distant, a harp played.

Sloan held her gun at her hip and delved deeper into the house. Up the stairs the lights were off. Clair's room awaited down that hallway, but Sloan decided to clear the ground floor first.

The kitchen fumed with chocolate chip scent. Beside the oven stood Mrs. Ibsen, swaddled in a flamingo-speckled apron. She stared at her oven mitts with eyes wide and sightless, no tray in the empty space between her hands. Her body rocked slowly back and forth. She did not notice Sloan, despite Sloan's massive gun.

Past the kitchen, in the adjacent room, Mr. Ibsen sat on the couch while television images danced across his face. His hand clasped an open can and his eyes contained the same blank expression as his spouse. Sloan blocked his view of the screen, but he made no reaction. Football guys knocked helmets and tossed pigskins.

The standard reaction of normals inside a wraith miasma—or one of Clair's soundscapes. The harp played in the distance.

Sloan scanned the living room and kitchen for signs of distortion or ripples in continuity. Anything possibly wrong or unusual. False walls, hidden corners. But it all looked exactly as she remembered, eagles and egrets and all of them, the entire avian bestiary metamorphosed into kitsch artifacts. The same damn cuckoo clock tick-ticked over the television. No sign of Clair's remaining goons, they must be upstairs. Plus an intricate array of musically-inclined traps and puzzles.

She returned to the stairs. On the first step, the background music added a new instrument.

Po-twee-tweet. Like a whistle. In perfect harmony with the harp.

Po-twee-tweet. Po-twee-tweet. Po-twee-tweet.

It increased in volume while the harp remained faint. Sloan hesitated. She stared up the darkened stairs, where the whistle originated. Po-twee-tweet, po-twee-tweet.

Then it sounded behind her.

She turned but remained aware of the stairs. The whistle continued. It definitely came from the ground floor now.

In fact, it came from behind the wall beside her.

Her hands tightened over her gun as she crouched to inspect the sound. Not behind the wall, but *on* the wall. Unless her ears fucked with her. No, definitely on the wall. At the exact spot where a pileated woodpecker adorned the wallpaper, its wings spread in a perpetual glide.

Sloan leaned closer. Po-twee-tweet. Po-twee-tweet. The woodpecker itself made the sound. Its two-dimensional beak opened and closed in time to the whistle.

The woodpecker shivered. Its wings fluttered and its head craned toward Sloan. A black bead of an eye locked onto her. It screeched and ruffled the feathers across its red breast and peeled from the wall to plop to the floor. Sloan stepped back as the little lump of down and wing breathed and shook, its body building proportion and dimension, its colors brightening and adjusting beneath the light, its beak clacking the perpetual po-twee-tweet. It lurched to its knotty, bony feet and gazed up at Sloan. She gazed back.

All across the wall, and the other walls, and the end tables and the framed paintings and the embroidered kitchen apparel and the tiled floor and the woven rugs and the little figurines—every single damned bird in the house began to po-twee-tweet. The symphony of birdsong would have been deafening if it weren't so harmonic and synchronized, fusing the vocal ranges of a hundred avian species into a complete chorus. The house trilled with flapping wings and clacking beaks, seethed with them, came alive as though in constant undulation.

Starting from the far end of the wall, the birds cascaded from the paper and developed three-dimensional substance instantly. They spread their wings and took flight before they even struck the ground, hawks and larks and finches and jackdaws compressed into a single gargantuan flock. Sloan staggered back and covered her face with a hand as the birds swept her, feathers and talons scraping her skin. She struck a wall and toppled to the ground. Her head struck the plush carpet as beaks tore at her jacket and the omnipresent po-twee-tweet scoured her eardrums.

An illusion, Sloan! Get off your ass, Clair can't summon so many, she's filling the blanks with trickery. A swirl of varied plumage suffocated her sight, and *something* cut and sliced her for real, but not all the birds were corporeal. Most phased through her. She swung her arm to beat back the birds at her face—she hit some but not all—and propelled herself to her feet, hoisting her gun and blasting down the hall. The po-twee-tweet became a frenzied clamor as the birds encircled her. Some dropped out of the sky and some rose to the ceiling.

In unison, the eyes of the birds turned bright red. They recouped into a living tendril and spiraled directly into her chest with their full formation. The wind collapsed in Sloan's lungs as she hurtled backward into the living room. Her gun left her hands and clattered somewhere. She skidded across the room, digging her heels into the carpet to slow herself, while the birds—their feathers changed color now, the color melted away, became pastel, now sickly and murky shades of gray—spread to comprise the form of a massive single bird, a bird composed of all birds, each bird's little red eye like a bead of blood. It opened its beak and unleashed an unearthly po-twee-tweet, so loud it shook the house.

The only real color on the bird conglomerate was its eye, a single black crow against the white. Sloan knew that crow—Clair's familiar, Matthis.

She commanded her fallen gun to aim for Matthis, but before it could fire the birds broke formation. Matthis vanished beneath the layers and layers of white birds—like doves, but vicious and enlarged and with jagged, hooked talons—as they swept down at Sloan like a frothing tsunami.

To her side, the television played football. The birds whipped her side like a massive flail and slammed her into it. Except she did not break it. She sagged against the screen as though the plasma were a mucus membrane, stretching inward to the football field on the other side. Deeper and deeper it stretched, pushed by the feathery onslaught, until her body tore through the membrane and she plummeted headfirst into the stadium.

She struck the turf on her shoulder. Above her, the birds constrained to chase her through the screen, which hovered in the sky and showed Clair's living room beyond. Already the first birds had pierced the plasma with their crooked beaks and hurtled in scattered ranks around her.

The stadium seats were devoid of spectators, but the ground quaked as the two teams raged across the field. Not men in cleats and uniforms, but two sides of a war between bears and Vikings. The Vikings snarled Norse war chants (in time to the po-twee-tweet of the birds and the faint harp she detected despite the bombast) as they hefted axes and shields and hacked into the bears, black and grizzly and polar, who responded with bestial howls of their own as they swung heavy claws.

What a fancy world Clair made, all for her.

Sloan aimed at the sky window but before she could fire a bear bowled her over. She skidded through the turf and a Viking horde trampled her. Christ, Clair. Well, it was her dwelling of almost eighteen years. Her intimate familiarity with its every kitschy bird and home economics mainstay probably allowed stronger application of her powers than in a random location. Sloan rolled away from the marauders, flipped to her feet, and admired the intricate detail of the stadium, from the goalposts to the yard markers, to the billboards with advertisements and the zeppelin coasting the sky through the half-closed Metrodome. Clair probably researched authentic Saxon attire and ursine physiognomy beforehand, despite such details being lost on Sloan. In friendlier times, she told Sloan that for an illusion to work she must believe it herself. That wasn't something unique to Clair; all magical power stemmed from a girl's belief in her own magic. Hence, when light struck St. Paul's discs, it reflected exactly the way it came. St. Paul knew no better, had only a tenuous grasp on hard physics—no bad quality for a Magical Girl. But Clair poured hours of assiduous, thorough study into her creations, forced them to conform to traditional notions of science and ecology, deviance only done in acceptably fantastic ways. Logic structures within logic structures, towers of code written in musical notes, executed not by a computer keyboard but the next best thing: Clair's fingertips across a string or against stops.

The thought of such a perfect system fueled Sloan with the desire to destroy it.

More bears, birds, and Vikings lumbered at her. She kicked into the air and flipped onto the first row of stands, her boots balanced upon the thick bar that separated fans from game. With all her enemies arrayed before her, she leaned back and fired. The barrel roared as light spewed against the conglomerate foe. It shred into the turf in a single piercing ray, slicing the manicured grass and the bodies of every painstaking illusion Clair could conjure. They either dropped in severed pieces or vanished altogether. Sloan's power was light. Light was truth. Truth pierced illusion. Clair's powers were those of darkness. If Sloan conceived their magic in such a dichotomy, if she compartmentalized it in its most elemental form, it became so easy. Light versus darkness, and Sloan's raw power far exceeded Clair's.

Pieces of the stadium flecked away, leaving plain white space exposed behind it. Sloan dragged her gun across the landscape and eviscerated the partial existence Clair bestowed upon it. Was this it, Clair? Was this the best your magic could create? Smoke and mirrors?

Sloan only had to believe in her own power, and she could triumph. She knew it was true!

Almost half the stadium had been rubbed away like by a gigantic eraser. The Vikings and bears were eradicated, only a half flock of birds spiraled through the sky to escape her fire. Shrouded in the mass of white wings was the single large crow: Matthis. Sloan swept her fire through the nest of wings and beaks. The white birds dissolved in ash as Matthis shot ahead and beat his wings in fury to pivot toward Sloan.

He actually moved fucking fast in full dive, talons bared for Sloan's gut. But his attack came too late, with nothing left to distract her. Sloan blasted him and he dropped in a squawking bundle of flesh and feathers.

When Matthis hit the ground, the remains of the stadium disappeared. Sloan once again stood in the Ibsen living room. The television and much of the wall behind it had been transformed into malformed debris, still shimmering with her light. Matthis twitched at her feet.

Sloan looked around. The rest of the house was untouched. Both Ibsen parents remained in their original location. The only difference was that the birds were gone. Not on the wallpaper or the rugs or anywhere else. The paintings showed only empty trees or blank skies. The figurines had disappeared off the counter.

Not good. If she had broken the illusion, the house should be back to normal, tacky bird theme included. Sloan reminded herself not to underestimate Clair. Illusions inside illusions was a Clair stunt to pull.

The po-twee-tweet whistle tweeted nevermore, but the harp continued its faint and distant arpeggio. Sloan checked the ground floor, but none of Clair's goons had crept in while Matthis distracted her, which seemed the obvious purpose of an illusion that kept Sloan focused on a single television. Without the birds the rooms were sparse and strange, the walls and floors a perfect and unbroken white. Like a sanatorium. The zombified faces of Mr. and Mrs. Ibsen did little to alter the appearance.

Whatever. Time to go upstairs. She ascended with caution, testing each step to ensure it held. The darkened hallway above percolated with harpstrings.

When she reached the top she carefully reached a hand and felt for the switch. Light flooded in, revealing a normal plain hallway with four doors, all closed.

Sloan kept close to the wall. She ducked beneath a framed portrait of Clair and shuffled to the first door. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and rubbed it against her coat. For a moment she wondered if Clair knew about the dolls and designed diversions so they could catch up and do the dirty work for her. A distinct possibility, since Clair knew about this time demon everyone but Sloan thought was a big deal. The point was, quit being scared and open the damn door.

She turned the knob. Inside was the master bedroom, neat and clean and empty. Nothing unusual, although Sloan had never been in this room before. It seemed remarkably plain. Maybe because there used to be birds in here.

She shut the door and continued down the hall. The next door was the upstairs bathroom, Sloan remembered. She wasted less time opening it. Like the master bedroom, it was empty. Sloan even drew the shower curtains to make sure.

The harp played.

Two rooms remained: Lynette's and Clair's. Lynette's came first. Sloan slid against it. She took a deep breath and flung it open. Lynette's room was the sole messy component in the entire household. Discarded clothes surrounded an unmade bed. Posters of goth idols peeled from tacks. Several conspicuous holes dotted the plaster between the posters. Most of the uncovered carpet had dark stains.

Otherwise, the room was empty. Which meant Clair had something prepared in her own room. It made the most sense, but Sloan didn't have to like it.

Sloan shut the door and started down the remaining hallway but stopped after a single step. A girl stood before her, bathed in the hallway light, her capes and epaulets and armor aglow with a sublime magnificence dulled by the decay of her clothes, amended with various patches. A frayed collar framed her determined face, her hair pulled into a long ponytail.

It wasn't Clair. Or Bloomington. Or Woodbury.

"Hello, Fargo," said the girl. Her stance did not waver, stiff between Sloan and the door to Clair's room. "Long time no see, eh?"

Sloan had seen this girl somewhere. She tried to remember and after a few seconds she realized.

"You're... you're that girl I saw in Fargo." Three nights ago (or was it four?), behind the warehouse. When Sloan's gem verged on depletion. They had scuffled over a single wraith. The girl got the drop on Sloan but let her keep half the cubes anyway. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

The only weapon on her person was a sheathed scimitar. That was all she used in Fargo, too. A pretty lousy fighter if Sloan remembered correctly. She only beat Sloan because Sloan's

gem was shit back then. But not anymore.

"Back then I didn't have a name worth telling." The girl folded her arms. "Now you can call me Anoka."

The night they fought was the night Kyubey told Sloan to go to Williston. The night everything started. And now she was the enigmatic Anoka. The Anoka with no powers (according to Hennepin), and yet whom Clair had held as her final ace.

"Out of my way," said Sloan. "My business doesn't concern you."

"I have sworn to protect this city," said Anoka. "I have made it my duty to protect the people from wraiths like you, Fargo." She punctuated her words with thick breaths that puffed despite the warmth inside the house. "Minneapolis gave me shelter and a place to call home. I will fight to protect that home."

"My business doesn't concern this city," said Sloan. "Out of my way."

"I've journeyed a long way to come here." Anoka affected a voice that indicated the onset of a pretentious, self-important speech. "I crossed mountains and prairies and nations. I scraped by on what I scrounged from the fringes of territories of much stronger girls, or from scattered wastes where no girl lived. I know what you intend to do, Fargo. I am here to administer the justice you deserve—"

Sloan swung her gun into Anoka's side and slammed her against the wall. Anoka took the blow with no resistance, no attempt to evade. She grunted as she dropped to her knees.

Easier than expected. Sloan walked past. The door to Clair's room was steps away.

Anoka's voice came raspy and strained. "The first thing... you should know about me... is I have a high tolerance... for pain."

A shard of agony sliced through Sloan's brain. She reached hooked hands to her skull and clutched. Her knees wobbled and she sagged against the wall as she fought to regain control of herself. But the pain spread like a crackling flame, flaring through her head until Sloan wanted to rip out her own brain and stomp it on the ground.

Behind her, Anoka rose. She wiped a little blood from her mouth and drew her scimitar. "Pain kills people. Even Magical Girls. *Especially* Magical Girls. They're so used to muting pain that when they really feel it, they can't handle it. If a girl suffers enough, she drops straight into despair."

Enigmatic prattle ranked low on the list of things Sloan gave a shit about. As the pain dimmed, she shot out a boot and struck Anoka in the ankle. She dropped onto a well-aimed punch to the gut and rolled to the side clutching her stomach. Sloan leaned against the wall and lifted herself. So close to Clair's room...

Another spasm of pain seared through Sloan, worse than before. Her entire body cramped and she curled against the floor, grinding her face into the carpet. Jesus shitting fuck what

was this Anoka bitch *doing*? No spells, no attacks, just standing and taking Sloan's blows. Hennepin described Anoka as having no discernable powers. As being weak and useless. But Clair—

Her fingers curled as she pushed herself up. The long shadow of Anoka rose down the hall ahead of her.

"You should turn back. Really. It only gets worse, trust me. I've seen girls do horrible things when the pain became unbearable. Things that scared me. If you want it to stop, just tell me. The exit's behind you."

Sloan crawled forward.

"Oh well," said Anoka. "Guess we can do it the hard way too."

Anoka's shadow lifted a long, curved blade. Sloan betrayed no indication she noticed, kept shuffling on her belly while the pain subsided. When Anoka dropped the blade, Sloan rolled to the side and let it sink into the carpet. She seized Anoka's wrist and squeezed until she relinquished the hilt, but as Sloan reached to grab it the pain flared again in her mind and she hissed. Anoka added to the agony by stomping a heeled boot on Sloan's ribs.

A voice spoke from down the hall.

"I understand you are a slow learner, Sloan," said Clair. Sloan forgot her pain and looked up. Clair stood in her school uniform beside the door to her room. "However, your inability to comprehend Anoka's powers seems inept even by your flagging standards."

"Clair," Sloan said.

"I suppose I should simply tell you, since it matters little anyway," said Clair. "Is that all right, Anoka, or would you prefer to leave it a mystery until she figures it out?"

Anoka pulled her wrist from Sloan's grasp. "Nah, go ahead."

"Very well. Anoka's rather interesting power causes all pain dealt to her to return, magnified, to the one who inflicted it. For wraiths, this power rarely manifests in a meaningful capacity, as it is dubious whether they are capable of feeling pain, being comprised of it. Indeed, even, against most Magical Girls, Anoka's powers would be of little benefit, as most Magical Girls have abilities which allow them to resolve conflicts peaceably. Barriers, illusions, or perhaps even the ability to flee a fight. All nonviolent ways of dealing with combatants, against which Anoka is rather useless."

"No need to lay it on so thick," Anoka grumbled.

"But you, Sloan, have no such abilities. No barriers. No healing. Nothing at all, truly. Only the ability to inflict pain. That is the sole thing you do. You know no other way to resolve conflict. As such, Anoka's unique powers shall punish you tremendously."

Sloan had heard enough of this shit. "Unless I go straight for the snake!"

She held up her hand. Her gun lifted from the ground and pointed at Clair. It sprayed a powerful blast of magic and plunged the hallway into a yellow glow.

"Unfortunately, it appears your lack of critical thinking skills also causes you to expend worthless energy," said Clair's voice.

Sloan stopped firing. And blinked. Somehow, she had not fired in the direction of Clair at all. She had fired back the way she came, at the stairs. No, that wasn't right. She had not moved, Anoka was still behind her. But somehow the room had revolved around her, and now Clair and Clair's room were on the opposite end, and... and it made no sense and made Sloan's head hurt, or else that was the lingering effects of Anoka's powers.

Fuck. Clair's magic had distorted direction and proportion inside the house.

"I see you have not improved your abilities despite receiving ample time to do so. Frankly, I am rather disappointed. I'll remain in my room. If Anoka does not defeat you, we can perhaps fight."

She tossed back her hair and glided through the door to her room.

"You SMUG BITCH." Sloan jumped to her feet. Anoka blocked the corridor, her scimitar pointed at Sloan's face. Sloan searched for a Soul Gem, found it embedded on the glove of Anoka's off hand, which she kept close to her body. Easy to defend. But one well-placed strike and pain became a nonfactor. Only death.

Sloan grabbed her gun out of the air and wheeled it toward Anoka. Before she could fire, a telepathic voice invaded her mind, a voice she recognized instantly.

Sloan. Love. How are you?

Bad time, Delaney.

Hm. I can't say I agree. I think it's a very good time we had a little heart-to-heart, don'tcha think?

"Come on, what're you waiting for?" said Anoka, seemingly oblivious to the telepathy.

Where are you, Delaney. And where's your gem?

I'm locked in Clair's closet. As far as I know, Clair has my gem. Possibly St. Paul. But that's a trifle beside the point, love! A few more pressing issues are on the table, no? It may be a good time to calm down, breathe deeply, and discuss our current life choices!

Anoka maintained a defensive stance. One side of her scimitar radiated with a thin film of light. Her shoddy reflexes and frayed attire suggested poor offensive capabilities, but eventually she would grow impatient and start hacking away. Sloan scoured her list of abilities for a painless way to dispatch Anoka. If she could get her hands close enough to Anoka's eyes, she could blind her with a flash of light (still some pain but less than a shot to the gut). Except blinding Anoka did not get her out of the way, and girls Sloan blinded tended to go berserk, slinging frenzied and random attacks with exceptional speed and power to

compensate for their deprived finesse and talent, if Anoka had any of either anyway, and in the confined space of the hallway that might make the situation worse.

There was the trick she practiced in Ramsey's backyard, but before she could ponder a strategic application—

Oh, lovely! Your silence tells me you've taken a moment to achieve the zen within yourself, Sloan. I don't suppose you do yoga? Pilates?

Anoka's arms trembled. Her whole body shook. Her eyes focused on Sloan's hands, which gripped the gun.

The point, Delaney.

I just wanna make sure you're in a mentally coherent position, love. Because I'm gonna talk to you about some things I know you're not gonna like, okay?

"If you stand there all day, that's fine too," said Anoka. "I'll only fight if you insist."

If she waited too long, the dolls would arrive. She needed to crush Anoka fast and hard. Wrestle her to the ground and go for her gem.

She thought about the Terminatrix. The burnished onyx smooth and small in her hand. It crumpled like paper, and she died.

I know you don't want me to talk about that demon. Or the end of the world, or the end of all existence. Okay. That's cool, love. Cuz you know what? I'm kinda not so sure about all that myself.

Sloan fainted to the left, then sprinted to the right. Anoka fell for the trick and leaned against the left wall, opening a space for Sloan to jump through at her side. But Anoka was quick enough to alter her trajectory and throw herself against Sloan, sandwiching her against the wall, causing both to scrape across the rough plaster.

You see, I think, and hear me out here, because what I'm about to drop is rather controversial stuff: I think Kyubey's played all of us from the getgo.

The scimitar whipped above. Sloan wrapped her hand around the hilted wrist, struggling to hold the blade back while not crushing the bone. Anoka slapped her ineffectual free hand against Sloan's face.

I mean, he is uncannily good at finding what a girl most desires and using it as leverage to hoist us whichever way he desires. I considered myself too smart for that, but of course, I've been pretty arrogant this whole time, haven't I love?

Sloan dropped her gun and wrapped her other hand around Anoka's. They rolled across the carpet, butting against the wall and then back to the other wall, engaged in a motionless pantomime and harmless dance. Sloan's knee accidentally went into Anoka's crotch or stomach and she squinted her eyes through the resulting pain.

You see, I thought my desire was pretty simple, love. So simple, I could achieve it without complication. I wanted to do something truly good and selfless and redeem the horror of my entire life.

Sloan pinned Anoka's off hand—and her Soul Gem—to the ground, while keeping the sword hand in the air. But Sloan had no remaining limbs to pry the gem from its place, and they were too much a mess of torsos to angle her gun for a precise shot, not that her gun had much precision anyway.

And how convenient. Kyubey informed me of a unique opportunity. An opportunity to save the world—no, the universe. All life, and existence. Well, not save it in the sense most would think. No great heroics or public display of courage. He informed me that, should my efforts succeed, nobody would know, not even other Magical Girls. Only God herself would know.

Maybe if Delaney stopped buzzing in her ear Sloan could think a fucking solution. She was about to tell her to shut the fuck up when Anoka wriggled her sword hand free and slammed the hilt on Sloan's skull.

Which was perfect! Exactly what I wanted. So nobody could accuse me of simple grandstanding. A purely personal method of atonement. All I had to do was go to Williston and help you out a little. Yes, you, love! You're apparently very special to a lot of people, more than you will ever know, I'm afraid.

Sloan instinctively lashed out and socked Anoka beneath the throat. A second punch went to her jaw, jolting her face to the side as Sloan regained the upper position. She tried to peel off Anoka's glove, but as she hooked her fingers beneath the loose fabric around the wrist the punishment for her earlier aggression welled full and forceful inside her.

You were very important, love. To Kyubey, at least. I was told few specifics, but I knew you were the key component of his plan to usurp that demon I told you about. Demons are real, love! Even if you don't believe in God, believe in hell! If demons aren't real, how can I exist, after all?

A soundless cry escaped Sloan's lungs. She hadn't hit hard but the pain only amplified, a kaleidoscope of needles that drilled gray matter in little scoops. The interior bone structure of her head an iron maiden for her brain.

The point is, Kyubey gave me a bit role to play in his scheme. I was pretty well aware he had little intention for me to live beyond my meager use, and I probably should have accepted that fate, you know? Then I could rest easy in whatever afterlife or antilife awaits me, believing I died contributing to a grander purpose.

Anoka rolled Sloan onto her back and got on top of her while Sloan clutched her head and moaned. The emaciated body cast a shadow across Sloan's face and raised her sword high.

You ramble, said Clair's voice.

Well sometimes a terse and brief description of events isn't the best way to make an emotional connection. That's how a computer connects to someone. Not how a person connects to

someone!

Or someone pretending to be a person, said Clair.

The sword dropped and embedded the ground close to Sloan's ear. "Why not find some other place to live, Fargo? Why come here?"

Ignore her, Sloan. In fact, that's the whole point. You need to ignore her, forget about her, drive her from your mind, pack up and leave. Can't you see she's taunting you? If she really wanted to kill you as quickly and efficiently as possible, why would she hide in her room while you fight a bunch of random goons one-by-one? She wants you mad because the higher your emotion when she kills you, the higher—

Allow me to explain, said Clair. Since I can do so in far fewer words. Sloan Redfearn, you are a minor stepping stone among my greater ambitions. I engineered our so-called "relationship" from its inception in order to earn your trust and respect, for the sole purpose of destroying it. Betrayal is a serious sin, especially betrayal among Magical Girls. Whoever conceived the overarching rules of our universe made it so. Since our universe is currently presided over by a negligent being—whom some label a "demon"—I must offend the rules of her universe in the most serious and total way possible—

Oh come on, you're explaining it way worse. Why are you even explaining it anyway? Unless it's your plan to make things as confusing as possible. Love, can you listen to me for a bit? Blot her out of your mind, if you can.

"Why don't you just leave? What's the point, Fargo?"

This was. All pretty much. Bullshit. Distractions. Pointless. Words, words, words, words, words, words, words, words, *words*. That was all they ever said, more and more words, and words had never served Sloan much at all.

She grabbed Anoka by the waist. Anoka wrenched her sword from the carpet and readied another swing, but she was already drifting upward, weightless, transformed by Sloan's magic into an object unbound by gravity. As her body soared away from Sloan's, Sloan somersaulted onto her feet and sprinted for the door to Clair's room.

Sloan! Love! Listen to me! Kyubey intends for you to die, okay? YOU DYING IS PART OF HIS PLAN!

A sword swished through the air and impaled Sloan's back. She grunted and skidded to her knees, blade wedged between bone and tissue.

She knows this already, Delaney. I told her when we met last. Your shocking revelations will not deter her, because she believes through the power of sheer grit and determination she can unravel designs infinitely complex and unassailable.

Anoka scurried along the ceiling, pressing her boots to the walls for leverage as she swooped down on Sloan. She drew the blade from Sloan's spine and raised it to strike again.

Sloan love, even if you kill her, even if you overcome the odds, you'll destroy everything—this whole city, yourself, everything. Is it truly worth it? Is what she did to you so unforgivable?

If you still have to ask, you have a poor understanding of Sloan Redfearn's psyche, said Clair.

AND YOU DO? Sloan wanted to scream. Instead, she rolled away from Anoka's blow and threw herself at the girl, weaving between sword strokes as she grabbed at the cape. Anoka held her gem hand back, far beyond Sloan's reach, but Sloan had different ideas anyway. Her hands scuffled across skin and cloth, searching for jawline, skull, ear, any portion of head she could grasp, fingers sliding through ponytail, tugging a ribbon somewhere and sending Anoka's hair like a cascade down her shoulders while Anoka fought to angle her body in a way conducive to slashes and hacks. A vorpal edge grazed Sloan's bicep and a second swing dug into her shoulder. Blood splattered down the long brown coat as Sloan got a grip on Anoka's head, followed soon by a second hand wrapped just under her chin.

She had one shot at this. She had to knock Anoka unconscious with one clean blow. Make her senseless before she had the chance to feel any pain.

All of her strength concentrated as she slammed Anoka's head against the wall. Plaster cracked and dented with a small cloud of sawdust as a solid conk resounded down the hall.

"Ow fuck!" said Anoka.

Shit. Sloan slammed Anoka's head against the wall again, harder (or more desperate), hoping instead of pure plaster to find a crossbeam or a support or something, but the second blow only caused Anoka to yelp louder. The pain from the first strike exploded in Sloan's head, too immense to contain and so it swiftly spread down her body, drawing her neck taut and stiffening her shoulders, sweeping into her gut with a violent wave of nausea.

Sloan's hands, independent of their owner, released Anoka as the second firecracker of pain succeeded the first, waves that rolled through her as though all her guts had blasted out her chest cavity to fly across the hall. But, contained inside her skin and skeletal structure, they only brightened with the fury of Anoka's magic, and Sloan's strength gave out, and she sagged to her knees.

Nearby, Anoka rolled around and clutched her temples. Sloan flopped a hand to reach for her but her synapses shut down one after the other, overridden by the suffering. She writhed instead, random spastic motions of akimbo limbs and motor-deprived fingers. Her foot continually kicked a wall.

Anoka pulled herself to one knee, using the knob to Lynette's room as a crutch. She rested her forehead against the door as she propped herself on her scimitar. The point dug deeper and deeper into the carpet as more of her weight pressed against the hilt.

But for Sloan, no recovery, gradual or otherwise, allowed her to unlock her body or even think, a million red alarms in her brain blaring humanity's preprogrammed response to pain: GET AWAY, FLEE, RUN. She lifted a limp torso, dropped it again. Her eyeballs roved in the sockets against an inverted world, ceiling and light and paint and walls and Anoka and Anoka's blade as she slumped against the (not ground) wall, her arms trembling and one eye

twitching and her hair a black mop as inch by inch the quivering sword tip lifted from the (not wall) ground.

"I can, only imagine, how this feels, for you." She rapped a knuckle against her skull. It made a dull thunk. "Too bad, I'm so, hardheaded, ha ha."

Sloan's eyeballs rolled again. Her gun lay (not above) behind Anoka, a discarded heap of steel already aimed almost in the right direction. She flicked her eyes. RISE, her brain commanded. Out of the white noise it shouted RISE!

The gun rose. But if she fired, it would only worsen the situation. If she pumped volley after volley of light into Anoka's unaware back, the pain would compound.

They would see who broke first.

Sloan did not wait for Anoka to lift her sword all the way. By the time Anoka's arm reached a level horizontal, Sloan changed the sole directive inside her brain from RISE to FIRE.

The barrel of the gun span. Anoka had time to tilt her head and look before it unleashed its spray directly into her. She drew her gem hand to her chest for defense as her back arched and she staggered forward, tripped over Sloan's prone body, and slammed into the wall at the end of the hallway. The light flayed her without mercy, shredding her cape and leathern armor. Her body bent at a weird angle as the wall caved inward from the force of the light crushing her against it. She screamed, a long and tapering wail at a falsetto pitch.

Sloan braced herself for what would come next by digging her teeth into the furred collar of her coat. Her jaw locked the next moment as another mindnumbing surge swept her head to extremity, fingers and toes unspared from the onslaught of liquid electric agony. Her eyes rolled up until her vision became blank.

She thought one thing to bear it: CLAIR. CLAIR. CLAIR. CLAIR. CLAIR.

The pain built with each rhythmic incantation of that most vile name. Stellated cracks spread across Sloan's inner eye, where the name flashed in epileptic neon fritz. Shards broke away until even inside all was black, and the word CLAIR became nothing but another element of the nuanced and exquisite pain that welled inside her, and—

And all at once, everything stopped. Everything shut down. So instantaneously, like the grasp of death had taken her. All remained black, but the pain had dissipated save for a few tidal ebbs so faint by comparison they felt like relief more than anything. Sloan's jaw unhinged and the thick taste of fur left her tongue with a deluge of pent-up drool. Somewhere she felt her arms move.

She shut off her gun. It dropped to the floor. She opened her eyelids, and the black vanished. The hall replaced it, colors distorted and laced with odd optical residue. But it was there, and so was Sloan's outstretched hand, and—she tilted her head with a hiss of exertion—and her legs, and her other arm, and her body.

She tried to rise but her body ached. She settled for rolling over. Anoka lay facedown at the end of the hall, her back charred and bloody. Smoke rose from the wounds. Her eyes were open, but empty.

You killed her, Sloan. Dead girl number two.

No, Anoka was still alive. She had untransformed into a ragged blouse with jeans, but even from a distance Sloan noted the heavy rise and fall of her chest. Could hear, despite the omnipresent glimmer of Clair's harp in the distance, hoarse and labored breaths.

Anoka had only passed out. Exactly as planned. Her pain tolerance may be high. But Sloan's was higher.

This relieved Sloan. She had no urge to kill Anoka. No urge to kill anyone but the one who wronged her. She forced herself to remember that, because she had felt many times now an urge to let her hatred toward Clair overflow and drown the innocent girls who happened to be in Sloan's way. Sloan wasn't a, wasn't a killer.

What the fuck were these thoughts. Her brain must have rattled from all that pain. But focus returned to her, and she could lift at least half her body, and remember more clearly her objective: Clair Ibsen. Good, she hadn't murdered Anoka. If she had, though, it would not have stopped her. Or even slowed her. Or even registered as a thought.

The door to Clair's room stood before her.

It took awhile for Sloan to stand, and when she did, her knees shook and her head sparkled with static. But she stood. Breathing heavily, she lifted her gun and held it at her side as she took the last few steps toward the door. As she passed Anoka's body, she considered searching for her Soul Gem (with St. Paul's, Sloan would amass a collection), but wondered if she knelt down whether her body would have the energy to rise again.

Better to end this quickly anyway. Dolls, after all.

She took one last glimpse down the hall in case someone had snuck up on her. Bloomington and Woodbury unaccounted for. Probably components in whatever contraption Clair had crafted inside her room. Or insurance. Or something. Sloan tried to recite her strategies against Clair—don't get mad, uh, think clearly, uh, something else—but it didn't work. Her mind lost that neural matter when Anoka's pain fried it.

Her plan now was to open the door and shoot before she even looked. Nothing that awaited her in that room was good. And if she hit Delaney—

Collateral damage.

One breath. Two breath. Three breath. Gather every last ounce of strength, because you'll expend it here. Nothing existed after this room. You have one goal and one goal only, the goal your life has built toward, been made for: Kill Clair Ibsen.

She considered kicking the door down but swung it open and charged inside. She lifted her gun to fire but her hands no longer held a gun. She no longer wore a long brown coat. She was no longer a Magical Girl, she had lost a good foot of height. Her hands were small and fragile and she donned her old school uniform, the navy ensemble with blazer and skirt and tie.

A flute joined the harp from before. Its lonely lazy notes chimed nostalgic in Sloan's ear.

The year 2010. Sloan Redfearn is a freshmen at Eden Prairie Prep. The year she and Clair contracted, but it's a little before then. It's late summer. Out the window the lawns shine green. Birds po-twee-tweet in the trees, red and blue and green. The auburn aura of the season pervades even Clair's room, tinges it an earthy brown.

Instead of a gun, Sloan holds a backpack. It's heavy with textbooks. Biology and Algebra, which rank pretty low on the tier list of subjects Sloan can abide. Clair's really good at them, though, because she's good at everything. So she's going to tutor Sloan today. Honestly, even when Clair tutors her, she still doesn't get it. But she likes coming here anyway. Mrs. Ibsen cooks a nice dinner and Clair lets Sloan listen to her music. And they can talk about anything.

Sloan wants to talk about her stupid sister and her stupid blindness. Wants to vent because she knows she's automatically the bad guy for getting mad at someone with a disability, as though that disability automatically places them above all wrongdoing. Clair never judges her, though. Clair always listens, always understands.

Clair sits on her bed, legs crossed, hands on her knee. She smiles at Sloan and brushes back a strand of white hair. Sloan drops her bag on the bed and plops down next to her. She gives an exaggerated sigh.

"I'm so pissed."

"Why's that?" Clair tilts her head like one of the birds she loves so much, affects her Little Miss Therapist demeanor that Sloan says annoys her but actually it at least makes her feel like someone cares.

"Please, you know already. Morgan again."

Clair nods. "I noticed your reaction when Mrs. Alvarez praised her essay at the end of class."

"I wanted to scream. A personal essay, of course she nails it. She could've turned in a paper that said I'M BLIND and nothing else and instant A-plus. Meanwhile the rest of us write about dead grandparents, or maybe dead pets if we're not even lucky enough to have dead grandparents."

"Perhaps you should have written about the struggles of living with a blind twin sister. You certainly have enough material for a fully-fleshed thesis."

Sloan wrote about the time the vet euthanized their dog. "Yeah, and have everyone hate me even more? I love when people mistake me for her and I get to see the disappointment when they realize their mistake. Love it."

"Perhaps a more creative stance would have earned you favor with Mrs. Alvarez," Clair suggests. "She has been a high school teacher for thirty-two years now. I believe she is attuned to the challenges and emotions those of our age bracket regularly struggle against. When she assigns these personal essays, I wonder if she is actually praying we write them honestly as a way to express ourselves."

"Yeah? And what'd *you* write about, huh?"

Clair never answers this question because, the next moment, they both see a small white catlike creature seated on the windowsill, with red eyes and white fur (the cat version of Clair), who makes the convivial request to be let in, as he has something to discuss with them.

That doesn't happen this time. Kyubey is nowhere to be seen. Instead, Clair's eyes fix forward. Her posture scrunches so slightly it would seem perfect if not in comparison to its usual true perfection.

"I wrote about you, Sloan."

Her words trigger an instant reaction. Sloan leans back against the bed and laughs. Her tie and collar constrict around her throat so she hooks a finger and loosens them, allowing her laughter to come out unrestrained, harsh and almost violent.

"Oh god," she says as she manages to contain herself. "What'd you say? There's this dumb bitch who keeps showing up at my house and forces me to do her homework for her?" She'd probably get an A even if that really was her essay.

"Nothing of the sort." Clair's eyes remain fixed ahead. "The prompt, 'Write about how you overcame a hardship,' has two components. I focused on the overcoming more than the hardship."

Sloan stops laughing. "What are you on about?"

"People find strength in the strangest things," says Clair. Not like her to be so indirect in response to a direct question. "A single friendship means so much to one who has little. That could be considered true for both of us, do you not agree?"

Sloan remembers what Lynette told her. About Clair. Knives and such. Which is weird, because Lynette won't tell Sloan that for another three years, in a sad house tucked in a far corner of the city, surrounded by sex and booze. Something's a little weird here but she can't place it. It's hard not to like the late summer/early autumn scents and sights, the tranquility of the neighborhood, the stillness of the room.

"It is very important you understand," says Clair, "How much you mean to me. Nobody else has ever meant anything to me. Not my parents or my sister or anyone at school. All of them, no matter what accolades they bestow upon me, no matter how they compliment me or praise me, they know I am something other. Foreign. A cuckoo bird, not solely in the nest of my home but in the nest of humanity. They praise me, I believe, in part because they are afraid of me. You have seen the *Twilight Zone*, yes?"

Twilight Zone? Of course. Clair knows that—they watch it together, sometimes on Friday nights or Saturday mornings or both. Sloan sneers at the special effects and Clair denigrates the acting. Together they form a veritable Siskel and Ebert of cheesy 60s television, and yet neither of them stops watching.

"To them, I am the child who will spirit them to the cornfield if they do not behave. To them, I am the one who doesn't like dogs. To them, I am the one who transforms them into jack-a-boxes. My precociousness terrifies them, and terrifies them especially because they have no true reason to be terrified of it."

Sloan says nothing. Has no idea what to say. None of this makes sense; everyone loves Clair. Her parents (and Sloan's parents), the teachers, the students. She's the only one they talk about more than Sloan's sister, which probably explains why Sloan gravitated toward her. It was always okay if Clair was smarter and prettier and more popular than Sloan. And now she describes herself like some kind of space alien?

"You have never treated me that way. You have never praised me or complimented me, truthfully. Part of that is your general lack of tact, but part also is because you don't feel necessary to place me away from yourself, far and distant even if that distance is above you. You can stand on the same terrain as me and vent to me about your problems and your sister. Again, part of that is your own desperation to vent to someone, but part of it is because you truly feel comfortable around me. You're truly willing to do something nobody else has ever done: get close to me."

Her red eyes waver slightly off-center, not quite looking at Sloan's face. They glisten with emotion, if not real tears. Sloan gapes at her, unsure what to say, unequipped for this sudden conversation.

"I was." Clair's voice halts. "I was so alone. So alone for so long... Until you came close to me."

A real tear dribbles down her face. This is an event, this is monumental. Clair is incapable of tears. But Sloan can't speak, can only stare, mouth open, words stopped behind a clot in her throat.

"It's. Important you know this. Know what you really mean to me, Sloan. I know you hate me now." She wipes an eye. "I know you hate me more than anything, but I have always. Always... even when you were gone... Always kept you somewhere in my mind to think about and. Remember. And I... always will."

She squeezes her eyes shut and suddenly flings both arms around Sloan, actually touching her, the skin of Clair's hands against the jacket on Sloan's shoulders, a real embrace to which Sloan can react no better than the words Clair says, Sloan can only sit and receive all of this, wondering if this can really be Clair, if she can really be this person now holding Sloan in her arms.

"This sacrifice. I have to make. Pains me more. So much more." A sob catches in her throat. "Because I know. If you were. Like all the others. If you stayed away."

Her hand grasps something on Sloan's stomach. Sloan looks down; it's a gemstone, shiny and gold, almost like topaz. Clair holds it in her hand, and Sloan has the bizarre thought that the gem is her soul, her soul inside a stone.

"If you stayed away. They were right. They were right to stay away. Because they knew..."

Clair's hand tightens. Sloan winces from a pain deep inside her. A word surfaces in her mind: Anoka! But no, it's not Anoka, whoever Anoka even is.

"They knew what I was from the very start."

The pain grows. Like Sloan's soul is being crushed in Clair's small hand. That's exactly what it is. Her soul, being crushed. Her Soul Gem. Pieces float in her head, fragments from Summer 2010 and Winter 2013 mingled in a frothy mixture, she remembers now what Clair did to her, and Winnipeg, and everyone else. But it's too late now... Sloan wonders where her gun is, it's on the bed, it's been her backpack all along—she reaches...

The door to Clair's room slammed open, almost off its hinges. The flute and the harp staggered a note as Clair flinched. Bloomington stood in the doorway garbed in robes, her hood pulled far over her face, only her mouth and chin visible. She aimed her crossbow and fired.

Clair jerked back as a bolt lodged in her shoulder. She lost her footing and tumbled over the bed as a thick block of ice sprung from the shaft and encased most of her upper arm. Her hand stuck out, fingers closed around Sloan's gem, the muscles flexing but unable to close completely as somewhere in transit the nerves had gone numb and rigid.

"Is this truly happening," said Clair. Bloomington reloaded her crossbow and pointed it at her face. "What imagined slight do you believe I inflicted upon you?"

When she realized the situation, Sloan quit reaching for her gun (when Clair pulled the gem away, it caused it to dematerialize anyway) and went for the outstretched hand and the gem within. She pried Clair's fingers open and managed to get her fingertips around the wide part of the gem when a crossbow bolt nailed her in the back, not far from where Anoka hit her earlier.

She flopped to the ground, her hand locked with Clair's. Their fingers entwined around the gem, neither able to do much. Bloomington had hit some vital nerve on Sloan's spine, the ice paralyzed her completely, made her incapable of motion from the neck down. Her body splayed awkwardly against the floor and the bed, one leg bending at a strained angle.

Bloomington loaded another crossbow bolt. "Where's the other. Psycho bitch with the dagger."

I'm in the closet, dear!

The crossbow remained trained on Clair. Bloomington flicked her eyes toward the sliding door of Clair's closet. She stepped toward it with tremendous caution, oscillating her view between the door and Clair.

"Honestly, I'm somewhat interested by the mental processes guiding this course of action, Bloomington." Clair remained motionless on the bed, although only her shoulder was frozen. "It seems an entirely random development."

Bloomington shot her again, in the stomach, and reloaded quickly as she approached the closet. Although the second shot affixed Clair better to the bed, the tune of the harp continued. Sloan knew she could control her instruments telekinetically, like how Sloan controlled her gun. Bloomington surely knew too, but she seemed unconcerned, or concerned to some tenuous, apathetic degree.

Bloomington was not operating with a high amount of logic or forethought. Sloan wondered what her despair levels looked like.

The closet door slid open. Delaney sat within, beneath hanging rows of identical school uniforms. She smiled at Bloomington and waved while Bloomington launched one, two, three crossbow bolts into her torso. The ice spread quickly, almost completely covering Delaney's body.

Bloomington knelt down and inspected Delaney. "Where's her gem."

"I have it," said Clair. "Outer coat pocket, if you are interested in retrieving it. I would myself, but I am a tad immobilized."

Bloomington reloaded her crossbow and turned toward Clair. Her steps were slow and deliberate. Sloan tried to catch a glimpse of the state of her Soul Gem through the folds in her robe, but her head could only crane so far. It was a little sad, watching a dead girl walk across the room. All three girls she had frozen must surely know whatever Bloomington intended to do would not work. Perhaps Bloomington knew herself.

Bloomington reached into Clair's coat pocket and withdrew an egg-shaped Soul Gem, bright red. She turned it over in her hand.

"And where's your gem."

Clair's eyes flicked toward the ring on her finger. Where most girls kept their gems when not transformed.

Except Clair was already transformed.

"Bloomington," said Sloan, "She can still use her instruments. Be careful."

Bloomington wrenched the ring off Clair's finger. She examined it only to realize it was a perfectly ordinary ring.

Behind Bloomington appeared a tremendous gong, emblazoned with a Chinese dragon. The gong exploded with a sonic pulse that shot through the room in a visible eruption of soundwaves. The windows and the ice shattered. The doors blew off their hinges, the uniforms in the closet flew in disarray, the desk upturned and the walls cracked. All of Clair's order and structure collapsed in one reverberating sound, its echoes somehow timed with the

harp that still played in an unknown location. Bloomington hurtled forward and struck the wall. She bounced onto the bed as the sheets and blankets swirled and entangled her.

The moment the ice burst, Sloan tightened her grip on her gem and Clair tightened hers. Their hands locked together around it, their fingernails digging into each other's flesh. In a battle of physical strength, Sloan prevailed. Her fingers clenched the pressure points on the back of Clair's hand, giving her acupuncture, prying back the fingers as she manipulated the palm away from her gem.

The gong banged again. The walls burst into chunks of wood and plaster. Sloan hurtled through the air, her body whipping this way and that. Clair's hand left hers but Sloan came away with the gem, which was all that mattered. She pulled it to her chest and clasped it as her body swirled directly into the giant leafless tree outside Clair's room. Branches snapped as she plowed through them, her body's velocity stopped only by the mighty trunk itself. Her ribs cracked as she rolled through the remaining sticks and limbs into the snow below.

She rolled over with a breathless groan. Her ordeal with Anoka had fucked with her pain dampening, or else her gem had taken a few blows as well, because she felt like shit. Her whole body shook as she propped her arms into the snow and pushed to observe the room she had fallen from, now looking less suburban homestead and more Iraqi fallout zone. Threadbare columns of wooden support were all that remained of the façade, and as Sloan watched, those too gave out. The ceiling caved in, folding like paper.

She checked if any of the other girls had been flung from the wreckage, but she was the only one in the snow. That meant the others—Clair—were buried in the debris.

Her gun appeared in her hands as she trudged toward the collapsed section of house. Gathering her strength and acrobatic acumen, she bounded out of the snow, grabbed an outcropping of former wall, and swung to the destroyed area. She kicked aside roof tiles and bits of detritus, only to decide she would make more headway with her gun.

She aimed the turret into the debris. The barrel span, charging for a stronger shot. Clair's foolish maneuver had trapped her. If Sloan fired long enough, suppressed anything buried beneath, brutalized them until either their gems shattered or the bodily strain became too much to bear and the Cycles came, then... Sad for Bloomington and Delaney, sadder still for Clair.

"Bye," she said.

A single high-pitched note cut into her ears. Sloan froze. She knew jack dick about music or instruments, did not even osmose any secondhand knowledge from all her time spent with Clair. But she knew one instrument for sure, could pick it out from a single note, and it caused a reflexive wave of dread to billow in the pit of her gut.

The *violin*.

A sleek gash burst across Sloan's chest. It rent her coat and the skin and flesh beneath and cut straight to the bone. Sloan staggered back, almost to the edge of the fallen roof, only to understand that there was no fallen roof. There was no collapsed wall. Her back hit the

perfectly upright wall, right beside the window that had shattered. Around her Clair's room rebuilt itself, the bed, the desk, the closet, the uniforms, the computer, everything mused but stable.

An illusion. It had been an illusion. And Sloan had not even *considered*—

A second slicing note of the violin silenced her thoughts as a red streak spread diagonally from shoulder to hip. Sloan bounced against the wall. As the illusion broke and the room returned to its original dimensions, even Clair returned, standing in the center with the violin under her chin and the bow spread across the strings.

A third cut. A fourth. Sloan bent forward to defend the Soul Gem on her stomach. Slices spread across her back, her skull. She was whisked back and forth as the strikes came from all sides and angles, an endless onslaught of pain brought upon by each coarse note on the violin. The instrument Clair had mastered the most, her favorite instrument, the one in which she placed her faith. Everything else—trickery, stage machinery. The violin did the real work. She only played it when she knew she could kill.

Sloan dropped to her knees and shuffled into the corner. She wedged herself between the bed and the wall and held her hands to shield herself as blow after blow assaulted her, merciless, un pitying, unstoppable. Clair struck far faster than any blade or spear or axe, each blow inching closer to Sloan's gem, forcing apart her arms, bending her back, exposing the most vital weakpoint bit by bit.

Fuck fuck fuck. The attacks came so fast Sloan could not make her own motions between them. She could only somewhat shift the direction she recoiled in. No, no, no, not now, not in this fashion, not with Sloan falling for the most rudimentary deception in Clair's arsenal, without getting a single attack in edgewise, not a repeat of seven months ago, her body covered with lacerations, her gem eating power to keep her upright and even then just barely, had she learned nothing? Had she made no progress at all? After all this time, after all this preparation, NOTHING? NOTHING?

Wait.

Wait!

She had one thing. One single thing. She just needed the timing—a split second between blows—so hard to focus when every missed loop meant another long gash across her body—this had to work now, had to, she DID NOT COME ALL THIS WAY FOR NOTHING.

As the next slice rippled down her stomach—centimeters from her gem—Sloan tightened her energies and unleashed an instantaneous flash of light. Like the flash of a camera. The next instant, as the invisible cutting force of Clair's violin left her body, Sloan rolled beneath the adjacent bed, her body already fetal enough, needing only the slightest sideways momentum to propel her into the narrow crawlspace beneath.

Where she had been curled moments before remained a translucent image of herself. Clair's notes kept playing, trenchant slashes across her violin strings, but no more wounds opened across Sloan's body as she crawled beneath the bed. In musical ecstasy, in the frenzy Clair

only allowed herself to enter when playing her most prized possession, her normally sharp observational skills would not pick up the switch immediately.

Creativity, Sloan realized as she pulled herself toward the other end of the bed, was simply making up a bunch of random useless tools and waiting for the perfect time to use them.

She swung from under the bed, flipped to her feet, materialized her gun, and fired. No pause, no final words to her erstwhile friend, no waiting a moment for Clair to see the ruse so Sloan could enjoy a beautiful, succulent moment of triumph. Nothing but pure and utter annihilation. Clair wore her school uniform instead of her Magical Girl attire, so Sloan couldn't say for sure the location of her Soul Gem, but it hardly mattered. Rake a machine gun over her worthless corpse long enough and it'll sure to shatter.

Except the moment she squeezed the trigger, a bright red bubble emerged around her. The light rocketed around inside the tight confines, battering Sloan before she shut it off.

The disbelief hit Sloan harder than anything else. She knew who placed the bubble but struggled to connect that person to a word or name, struggled in her lack of comprehension even to cohere a mental image of that person's face. It couldn't be. Not her. Not when so close. Not when—back turned—gun drawn—ready to fire. Not now.

"That's quite enough of that, loves," said Delaney. She sashayed from the closet and placed a hand on Clair's shoulder, separated from Sloan by a thin but impenetrable layer of blood. Any expression on Clair's face that Sloan might have considered delaying her attack to see, an expression of defeat or stupidity or shock or whatever, did not transpire. Clair's face remained as emotionless as ever.

"So you retrieved your gem," said Clair.

"You've both had your fun. Played around, roughhoused a bit. But it's time we all came home and sat down for dinner, if you dig my meaning?"

"Delaney, Delaney you fuck." Sloan beat her fists against the bubble. "Delaney you fucking let me out of here this instant, you fucking do it right now."

"Let her out, Delaney." Clair lowered her violin. "This must end tonight, or we risk more unwanted attention from overseas."

"Absolutely right, love!" Delaney wrapped an arm around Clair's shoulder, despite Clair's efforts to flinch away. "This is ending tonight! In fact, it's already over! I hereby forbid either of you from fighting the other. Forever!"

"Let me the fuck out."

"Have you forgotten the purpose for all this," said Clair. "Have you forgotten the sickly state of our universe? Have you—"

Five or six crossbow bolts sailed into Clair and Delaney in rapid succession, each bursting with a chunk of ice to encase the girls in a single thick column. Bloomington staggered over

with a pronounced limp, worse for wear after weathering the full brunt of Clair's gong. Her cloak's hood had fallen back and her hair hung in ragged strands around her face, one eye squinted shut either from injury or for better aim.

Will this become a pattern, Bloomington? said Clair, her actual mouth covered by ice.

Bloomington shuffled her shoulders to shed the shredded remnants of her cloak. Beneath she wore serviceable Robin Hood attire, nothing ornate or flashy, a beige tunic and tights, fastened by a wide black belt with a brass buckle. Her Soul Gem hung from her hip, studded in the scabbard of a small dirk Sloan had never seen her wield.

I thought I'd like, you know, say a speech or something, said Bloomington. *And tell you exactly what I'm doing and why, and how you all disgust me so damn much and all. But I think I'll leave you not knowing. It hurts you most not to know, am I right?*

She gave a wry chuckle. Sloan pounded her fists against the bubble, unable to pierce it with dull knuckles.

Oh, I can hypothesize. This has something to do with Woodbury, does it not?

Yeah, said Bloomington. *Yeah it does.*

Behind Clair, at an angle Bloomington could not see, Clair's violin hovered off the ground. Was Bloomington going to fall for this again? Was it even falling for it at this point, or actively charging into death? This was what Sloan herself looked like, wasn't it?

"Bloom," she said. "Bloom, her violin." With Bloomington's gem exposed on her hip, with no forewarning... But Bloomington made no acknowledgment. She raised her crossbow and trained it on Clair's head. The violin bow slid from Clair's numbed fingers and clattered to the carpet.

I assume Woodbury is dead, then.

Yeah.

That is regrettable.

Don't fucking talk.

With a telekinetic force, the bow lifted from the ground to join the violin.

"Bloomington," said Sloan. "Bloomington, watch out for her violin. Watch out for it, goddammit, it's right fucking THERE."

Bloomington stared only at Clair.

I fear you will have to speak up, Sloan, said Clair. *My gong strike seems to have deafened her.*

Sloan comprehended the words too late. Her mind shouted: *Bloomington, the violin!*

The bow dragged itself across the strings. An eerie, lonely note shattered the frigid atmosphere. Through the dispersing particles of the atomized air lashed a thin black line. It crossed diagonally over Bloomington's hip. A direct strike. The gem split cleanly in two, not shattering but dividing. Both pieces fell from the sheath and dropped to the carpet.

Bloomington's body dropped next.

The ice around Clair and Delaney did not break. It only vanished. Sloan thrashed her fist against the bubble and shouted garbled obscenities she did not even comprehend.

Clair brushed her shoulders and retrieved her violin. "Finally. Her intrusions bordered on obnoxious."

"That was cruel," said Delaney. She put on a sad face.

"I am well aware your true concern for the matter is equivalent to mine, if not less so. Now, shall we continue?"

Clair's eyes fixed to Delaney's Soul Gem, but Delaney moved very close to Clair, so close that any attack would strike them both. So her initial faux chumminess had not only been a disingenuous facet of her personality, but a tactical repositioning. Sloan hated them both, hated their ridiculous posturing, their deconstruction of everything into a grand stratagem, their immaculate attention to detail. It was freakish, unreal. Disgusting.

"Yes, I suppose we shall." Delaney allowed a faint hint of sadness to creep into her voice. "This war ends now. Neither of you will kill the other. We're meddling in events beyond us. Cosmic events, universe-altering events."

"We are saving this universe," said Clair.

Sloan beat her head against the bubble. "Shut up shut up shut up shut up shut up. Why are you *still talking about this?!?*"

"According to the Incubator, we are saving this universe." Delaney pulled herself closer to Clair and Clair shirked away. "Is he right? Probably. At least in his perception of what it means to save."

"Either the universe exists. Or it does not."

"The universe can exist and not be saved, love. The universe can die and be redeemed in the act."

"A foolish assessment."

Delaney closed her eyes. "I would have agreed with you. But knowing what I know now. What the so-called 'saving' of this universe entails. Who it demands die. I... I don't know if saving the universe is worth it."

Their prattle resounded in Sloan's ears, too loud to shut out, too loud to ignore. Demons, time travel, universe. What did it all mean? Only people like them could care about such bullshit.

"You do not wish Sloan Redfearn to die."

"I've searched a really really really long time for a way to become a better person," said Delaney. "A way to redeem the things I've done in the past, things that are probably irredeemable. I thought something grand and lofty like 'saving the universe' would work. But that was exactly the thought of a girl who could feel nothing. Who analyzed only in ultimate outcomes and universal designs. But I've found now something—someone—I think I'd rather fight to save."

Sloan dropped to her knees, covered her ears, and screamed.

"I'm going to save Sloan and I'm going to save you... sister. I'm going to save this city and all the other girls embroiled in this farce. If that's not enough saving to save me, then I don't know what. And if the universe dies, today, tomorrow, next week... Well, that probably never had much to do with me in the first place."

"You are weak," said Clair. "You refuse to make the same sacrifices I have prepared to make. You... Oh, what now."

Delaney and Clair finally shut up and for a moment all Sloan heard was her own droning screech. She wanted none of their bullshit, none of their words. She wanted out of this bubble so she could end this one way or another, her death or Clair's. But in the silent void that followed the lull in their speech, Sloan looked up and saw what had given them such pause.

Staring through the window was the face of a wraith.

"The fuck is that doing here," said Sloan. Overuse of magic might attract a wraith, but it must have traveled far to get here; affluent suburb stretched in all directions. Not the usual haunts of ghettos, back alleys, and industrial districts.

"I am a tad annoyed by the celestial rules of this universe if my actions toward Bloomington constituted a sin, even a minor one," said Clair.

"Do you see, love?" Delaney tilted back her head. "This is what you can expect if you kill Clair. Only much, much worse."

The wraith leaned its head through the window and began to slither inside, its body a single snakelike torso, sleek and gray. The white walls of Clair's room grew dull and black, as though charred. A faint, sadistic laugh echoed in the waves of static that surrounded its face. This wasn't a normal wraith, it was a greater wraith, a naga, an especially rare variety, which if it appeared anywhere in this frostbitten city would show in the innermost inner city, coiled around the bases of towers and beneath the overpasses where the homeless congregated to burn trash, not in Eden Prairie's foremost gated community, where everyone had a roof and food to eat and savings funds and two kid families and college degrees and framed pictures of birds. In no universe should this thing be here, but here it was, its coils bundling into the room, its face rising above them, a grinning mockery of all their turmoil and strife as its faint laughter continued in endless loop.

Clair knocked Delaney aside and drew her bow across the violin. Slashes struck the naga's tubular body as more and more and more and more of it slithered into the room, wounds of black blood opening and pouring devious innards across the spotless carpet, the sheets and blankets, the corpse of Bloomington. From its face emanated a hypnotic kaleidoscope of gray hues. Sloan felt its gaze taking some kind of hold on her even through Delaney's bubble, so she averted her eyes before it turned her to stone or a pillar of salt or some shit.

All the while Clair nailed it with direct hit after direct hit, but nothing affected it. The room filled with blood. It rose to ankle height and slowly drained through the open door, carrying Anoka's unconscious body down the hall. Sloan floated the same direction, but the bubble was too wide to fit through the doorframe, so she churned aimlessly while the violin screeched and sang.

"Let me out," said Sloan. "Let me out so I can kill this thing."

"We'll handle this, love. Sit tight and don't fuss, okay?" Although all Delaney could do was stand close to Clair as Clair attacked and attacked and did nothing because for all her tricks and wiles Clair was always a pisspooor wraithkiller.

Sloan's bubble rolled but went nowhere against the doorframe. She slammed her body against the bubble to push it further. Her feet slipped across the rounded wet surface but she kept at it, flinging her body, forcing the bubble through. Its confines squished to fit the rectangular portal, the sides pressed closer and closer...

The violin slowed. Sloan glanced back. Both Clair and Delaney, awash in the gray energies exuded by the naga's grinning face, moved in slow motion, staggered and torpid. An effect of its magic, from which Delaney's bubble protected Sloan.

The bubble squeezed tighter and tighter as it wedged into the frame. The sanguine surface rippled and quivered. Sloan pushed harder, battered it toward the other side, forcing its widest point narrower and narrower and narrower—

The bubble reached its pressure tolerance and burst. The blood splattered as Sloan whipped around and revved her gun. Light streamed out before the thick grayness could envelop Sloan. It crashed against the wraith's face and the laughter shifted to a harsh scream as Sloan howled in frenzy and threw more power into her light. Break it, destroy it. Crush it to pieces. Bring down this whole damn house.

The wraith tried to dodge but Sloan had it in her sights and refused to let go. Amateur, really. She'd seen much worse in Williston. This was her bread and butter, her ultimate strength. When the greater wraith gave a final shriek and burst into cubes, Sloan continued firing, convinced the fight had been too easy, that some new iteration or final form would emerge from the carcass even as it dissolved.

But nothing came. The snake, most of its body still outside the window, disintegrated.

Sloan wasted no more time. She splashed through the knee-high pool of black ooze and swung her gun and clocked Delaney in the face. Delaney stumbled into the wall and dropped into the pool.

Clair had already started running. Sloan whipped her gun around and fired as the navy blue uniform flitted out the window and into the snow. Without hesitation, Sloan followed, leaping into the dark with only the dead tree to break the black background. The gale had resolved itself to a steady snowfall. The wind rustled but did not oppress. A crispness pervaded the air, the late night cold that filled lungs and rejuvenated a dim spirit.

She hit the snow. Clair's footprints led away from the house, into the street. Sloan followed, searching for the blue uniform in the darkness, beneath the small circles of light provided by the streetlamps.

There. Running down the sidewalk, pitter patter. Sloan aimed her gun to fire and found affixed to the end of the barrel one of Delaney's shitty bubbles, the fucking cunt, Sloan would kill her for that. She hurled her gun aside, she didn't even need it.

The gnarled tree stood beside her. Sloan wrenched a brittle branch from its trunk. This thing she held in her hand was not a branch, however. It was a thunderbolt, used by the god Zeus himself, Jupiter, Jove, any and all appellations, it mattered nothing. The branch lit up with a furious glow, blazing gold in her hand.

Creativity? CREATIVITY.

She hurled the thunderbolt. It sailed through the stormy air, quick as lightning, quick as a cartoon or a video game, with an electric sound effect. It struck Clair between the shoulder blades and her blue form fell. The bolt jutted out of her, illuminating her position between the silent homes.

Sloan limped toward it. A hundred lacerations covered her body. Residual pain lingered. None of that mattered. None of it.

Don't do this, love, said Delaney somewhere.

Go home, said Sloan. *This doesn't concern you.*

It concerns me a lot. You don't want to do this. Please don't do this.

Behind Sloan, something plopped into the snow. Probably Delaney. Probably moving slow herself after the blow Sloan dealt her. No, probably not at all, because she could heal herself. Probably perfectly strong and fully functional. Probably someone else Sloan had to deal with.

No. Delaney was behind her, and Clair was ahead. Sloan broke into a sprint, her leg hobbling across the snow. The wind battered her face and her coat flapped behind her but she dragged herself toward the blazing bolt that marked where Clair's body had fallen.

From beyond Clair emerged figures. Five of them. The closest was Lynette, who slouched toward Clair's body, lit by a streetlight. Her nose ran with blood and her back leg dragged behind her. In a hand held tight to her chest gleamed the solid steel of a revolver. Her eyes were dead set on Clair.

The other four figures, behind Lynette in a line shoulder-to-shoulder, were the dolls.

It was only right, Sloan thought. This was it, a nexus of figures emerging from the devastated landscape around the fallen body of Clair Ibsen, the character who had begun this entire drama, and whose death would bring it closure. Sloan strengthened her step. The dolls, Delaney, Lynette, none of it mattered if Sloan got there first. None of it at all.

Lynette was much closer, though. She took note of Sloan with a casual flick of her bangs and quickened her pace toward Clair likewise.

"She's mine," Sloan snarled into the wind.

Clair pressed her hands into the snow and started to rise. The thunderbolt remained lodged in her back.

Beside her rose her violin, the bow already to the strings. Sloan realized she had left her gun behind, realized it didn't matter. The violin's song slashed the air, but Sloan ducked under it, weaved around it. Her mind focused entirely on its goal, seemed to see the ripples in air before they truly manifested as strikes, saw the music as though a sheet, its tune and timing predictable and trivial.

It didn't even matter, it seemed, when Lynette reached Clair first. She grabbed at the body and aimed her revolver.

It didn't much register when Lynette's arm suddenly detached from the rest of her body and fell splattering to the ground. Lynette fell back howling, rolling in the snow, clutching her bloodied stump with the other arm, eyes shut tight in pain.

The dolls closed in, hands held in skipping throng, smiles growing out of the dark.

Please, Sloan, listen to me! said Delaney's voice.

Details. Irrelevancies.

She weaved between the slashes. Clair's body drew close. The dolls drew close. Lynette, somehow, pried the revolver from her severed arm and gripped it in her remaining hand.

Sloan skidded to her knees beside Clair. She slammed her fist on the violin and obliterated it.

No more music played.

"MINE," said Lynette. "I HAVE THE RIGHT."

Lynette pointed the revolver shakily. At Sloan's stomach, either deliberately or from the weakness in her arm.

Out of the dark emerged Omaha, another figure in the vortex of personas. She had already transformed and her unbloodied hand clutched a scythe. With one graceful swoop, she bounded through the snow and swung her scythe through Lynette's chest.

The blade impaled her. Lynette's arm dropped and her mouth opened. Her eyes went blank as Omaha wrenched the scythe from her body.

"HURRY," said Omaha. "KILL HER. KILL HER NOW!"

Don't listen to that bitch, love. She's known more than she should this whole time!

"IT HAS TO BE YOU. KILL HER!"

Sloan had long ago made her mind on what to do, and the words of these irrelevant entities on her periphery did nothing to change that resolve.

She turned over Clair's body, her face pale. Her red eyes peered at Sloan.

A spear whipped through the air and impaled Sloan through the shoulder. The immense pain was nothing to her now, even as the dolls hurled more things at her and frantically attempted to close the gap in time. Sloan didn't care. She reached into Clair's jacket and found the Soul Gem where she expected it, in the pocket Clair usually kept the lines of music she scribbled in class when the lesson bored her (which was always). The innermost pocket, a small slip in the fabric, tight and easy to miss, but Sloan had seen Clair reach into this pocket reflexively so many times she knew its location by heart.

Her hand clasped around the gem. It was almost pure dark, only a flicker of light remained within it. For a moment Sloan gaped at it, wondering when Clair had depleted so much of her magic, wondered if the Cycles would come—and remembered Clair's wish, to never know complete despair, to always have a shred of hope. Her gem could maintain this form indefinitely, and maybe it already had for a long time.

Clair stared, eyes wide, white hair dipped in white snow.

"Sloan. Listen to me carefully, Sloan. When you kill me, and after you kill the archon, you must go to Mitakihara, Japan. You must find Homura Akemi and kill her. Remember that, Sloan. Only you have even the most infinitesimal—"

Sloan crushed Clair's soul in her hand.

It didn't seem real, at first. Like it didn't actually happen. Like nothing happened at all, like it was (not a dream) another illusion, a musical subworld where Clair faked her own death—or maybe she used a false gem—or maybe a dream, or maybe a fantasy, or maybe an undeserved heaven where Sloan in death got to live the successful resolution of her failures as a reward for who the hell knew what, anything but an actual fact in an actual reality of an actual world.

"You... you did it...!" said Omaha. Her scythe dripped with Lynette's blood.

Delaney slid to her knees beside Sloan. "No no no no no no no no this is bad this is so bad NO!"

The four dolls halted in front of them. They gazed at Clair's body and the blood that sank into the snow. They exchanged glances among themselves.

"Come on," said Sloan. "I'm right here. You can finish it if you want." She reached down to her coat and unbuttoned it where her Soul Gem hung.

But the dolls did not pounce, although they all had spears and knives and other weapons. Their smiles faded. Their eyes widened. Their hollow, reedy bodies trembled and knees knocked against knees.

With hushed whispers in a language foreign or imagined, they turned and sprinted the way they had come.

Sloan didn't question it.

"It didn't do anything for you," said Delaney. "Did it? Did it?!"

Sloan said nothing.

Omaha took a step backward. "You did a good job, Sloan... I'm so proud of you..."

Snow fell.

"You did this, you helped her," said Delaney to Omaha. "Everything you did, since Williston, has been to help her. Clair didn't send you, did she? Kyubey did."

Small crunches as Omaha took another step back, and another. "We could talk but... the dolls ran for a reason, Sloan... If you're smart, you'll run too..."

Omaha turned and darted into the night.

Clair's body began to sink into the snow. Delaney shook Sloan's shoulders. "We need to leave. You idiot, you idiot, oh my god love, why did you not listen to me?"

The snow formed a round depression around Clair's body. It sank deeper and deeper, bringing Lynette's corpse with it, into a widening darkness below, a black void gaping before Sloan's kneeling form.

"Sloan, love, please get up, please get up, please please please please please get up. PLEASE!"

Wider and wider the depression grew. Sloan placed a hand in the snow and rose to one knee, her motions automatic, moving because Delaney screamed in her ear to move, lacking both purpose and direction.

Clair's body had disappeared entirely into the dark. Sloan stared down as, with Delaney's help, she rose to her feet.

From the darkness, glorious light stared back.

"What... what is it," said Sloan.

Delaney dragged her away from the pit. "It's an archon."

Yaldabaoth

Roads, streetlamps, fire hydrants, lawns, cars, homes creaked and groaned and collapsed one after another into the widening chasm. Snow streamed from the sky and fed the insatiable darkness. From the innermost depths arose a vague and bestial rumble laced with a vaguely feminine voice, garbled and impenetrable, a fugue of bass and alto that absorbed all other sound, the sirens and alarms from the homes and structures, the screams from the people as foundations uprooted and tumbled down the precipitous slopes.

Delaney pulled Sloan back. She stared into the darkness and knew this was not Saskatoon, this was not Williston. This was something far deeper, darker, thicker, emptier, fouler. The vomit of sin and despair more offensive to the laws of this universe than seen before in these modern ages; this was an evil dredged from the depths of hell.

She knew, seeing only its eyes and the pit, that she should have murdered Sloan Redfearn the moment she met her, before they even set foot into Williston, before any of this could truly begin.

Too bad killing her now would do nothing, nothing at all.

"But how," said Sloan. "How is it here?"

"You never listened, love. You never ever listened."

"YOU NEVER SAID AN ARCHON—"

A tremendous roar shattered the ground around them. Momentous chunks of earth rose in jagged shards.

"I told you any way I could, I warned you over and over and over again, nothing made any impact, nothing dented your thick stupid skull. Even at the end I thought I could stop you, be the hero, end the conflict peaceably—"

Sloan tilted back her head and laughed. Her long hair dangled down her back as her harsh, coarse laughter filled the cracks between the growing voice of the archon.

"It doesn't matter!" she said as she summoned her gun. "We'll kill this one, like we did the one in Williston!"

Delaney was about to say no, they wouldn't, this one wasn't like the one in Williston, this one had been born from a very specific set of circumstances that had been orchestrated and masterminded in advance, had been designed and shaped in the intricacies of Sloan's vehement hatred of her best and only friend. But Sloan did not listen. Sloan never listened. Sloan planted her foot and fired into the abyss.

Her light went down, down, down, and dwindled into nothing.

All this time, all this time Delaney had tried to do something right, make a positive influence in this world, anything, any small thing she could, and even that had failed, even that had backfired and created an evil worse than she had when she murdered Claudia all those years ago. Just as her mind and body had from the start been designed to do.

The eyes in the deep grew brighter, until they merged into one single circle of light, while Sloan laughed and pumped worthless light of her own into it, feeding it, swelling it that much more, vicious rays stemming from the circle like the fires of a sun—not a real sun, a cartoon sun, a sun in the pictography of ancient times, for this was not a real thing but a false deity—the sun blazing bigger, rising out of the depths, its roar shattering the skies and the gales and the dome of heaven.

Sloan cut her gun and turned away. Delaney turned too; the light was too bright. "It's simple, really," said Sloan. Nonchalant, unconcerned. "It took three of us to kill the Williston archon. Okay, so this one's stronger. Let's round up the other girls, there's gotta be like five or six of em still kicking somewhere. Easy. Fucking easy."

"You are a bigger idiot than even I imagined—"

The sun burst from the pit, its own small heavenly sphere. Delaney and Sloan fell and threw up their arms to shield themselves from the light. All Delaney could see of the archon's form as it rose from the pit was a long, feathered torso beneath the flaming sun-head, and two monolithic arms that rose above what seemed the entire panorama of the city, clearing the snows with but a wave. Its talon fell against the sides of the pits to lift it higher. Its body canopied them, covered them in light instead of shadow.

Although its face was too aflame to see, Delaney knew it stared down at them.

Okay, time to focus. Time to do what she did best and bottle her black emotions into a nether compartment and focus on the task at hand. Sloan wanted to fight this thing. Okay. It was the least Delaney could do, after giving such lip service to good deeds and trying to be a better person, that she try. And if she died trying, maybe that act of suicide might make God smile a little wider.

She rolled to the side, snatched Sloan in an arm, and surrounded them in a bubble as the thing above them opened an unseen maw and discharged a wave of putrid filth.

Their momentum made them bounce across the shattered landscape as the tides of acid washed through the cracks and ridges. They lifted onto an outcropping and Delaney burst the bubble, depositing them away from the acrid liquid but still beneath the unknowable gaze of the archon. The light swallowed their forms and made Sloan a mere bundle of faint lines in the white effervescence.

Our plan right now is to flee, said Delaney. If we're to fight, we'll need a better plan. How do we escape?

Car. Parked at the entrance of the neighborhood.

That'll work. Run!

They broke into sprint as another deluge of the thing's vomit streamed down on them. Sloan skittered somewhere as Delaney flung herself over a craggy spire of what had once been sidewalk. Objects and things melded into a singular entity of whiteness in the shadow of the archon. Its laughter pierced the emptiness.

Delaney surrounded herself with small bubbles, unsure where the hazards lurked and compensating by complete coverage. She could sense when something struck her bubbles, allowing her to feel her way forward in the non-space. The whole world had become one jagged mess of rocks and slush and cataclysm. And the archon had not yet even had time to disseminate its miasma.

Sloan, of course, ran off somewhere by herself.

And then, still running, they burst out of the light and into the real world. The suburban homes—what remained—stretched along an undulating terrain. Delaney glanced behind her; the archon's light formed a solid wall of whiteness, everything in its shadow obviated by its gaze. Its long, limber body had emerged almost wholly from its pit, composed of six insectoid legs and two muscled arms. Its fur brimmed with lesser wraiths that dropped in a vast rain across the plateau.

With a ropy creak it turned its head toward her, slow, ponderous. The wall of light spread after her, intensifying and searing the soil.

At her periphery she spotted Sloan's brown coattails. Delaney ran after her as the light focused into a tremendous beam, pulsing with electric flares and ribbons of agonizing color. It slashed through the ground like butter, tearing crushed rock and concrete, vivisectioning vehicles and houses.

Where are we going, Sloan, where's the exit?

I'm looking.

Ahead stretched only more suburbs, only more white homes. Delaney had not been awake when they took her here, knew nothing of the geography. Her inner compass, usually so reliable, went all screwy. Only Sloan's forward motion guided her, and Delaney put little faith in Sloan's directional capabilities. But she had no choice.

What... is this? said a new voice.

Across the street, in a small blur because Delaney passed so quickly, stood the Anoka girl Clair had brought at the last possible moment. She leaned against a scimitar, her costume tattered and bloodied. Black sludge coated her body and she gazed at the archon with paralyzed wonder.

You better run, dear, said Delaney.

Sloan looked back. *Who is it? Anoka?*

Did you do this? said Anoka. She looked confused, like she wasn't sure where she was or how she got there.

Sloan skidded to a halt. Delaney quickly caught up with her and tugged her sleeve. "We need to go, love."

They had put some distance between themselves and the slow, lumbering archon, although "some distance" made no difference when it still blotted out the cloudy sky with its hunchbacked body. Its unseeable face formed a hole in the fabric of reality, a space that could be neither regarded nor sensed.

And yet somewhere in that unreal hole it opened a mouth and bellowed. A new beam of light shot forth and splattered the landscape with its ray of total erasure, painting all a perfect white. Anoka, who had not moved, realized the danger at what had to be the last possible moment and limped after them. The beam surged at her back.

"Well, she's dead," said Delaney. "Time to go—"

But Sloan, in her infinite wisdom, decided yet again to do the opposite of what Delaney suggested and ran *back toward the archon*. The development was so unexpected and idiotic Delaney did not even have time to summon a bubble around her before she departed, down the street with her gun already whirring.

The gun fired, aimed at the unseeable hole that was the archon's face, although Sloan herself had to avert her eyes and fire on instinct. Who knew if the attack connected, or did anything, because all that happened was light mixed with light. Healed it, maybe. If it had any wounds to heal.

Delaney stood and watched. This got stupider and stupider by the moment.

As Sloan sprinted at Anoka, Anoka raised her blade to defend against an attack (also an idiot, all of them idiots). Sloan punched her in the gut and caught her slumping body. Her momentum almost carried her directly into the archon's beam (what a hilarious end), but she skidded on a heel and reoriented her direction with magical finesse and ran back at Delaney.

Stop struggling, Sloan snapped at Anoka, *Can't you see I'm saving you?*

Delaney slumped her shoulders and sighed. This was already over, they were but prolonging fate.

I can run on my own! said Anoka.

Both of you could use some healing, said Delaney. She snapped her finger and a bunch of itty bitty bubbles swarmed around them (Sloan now cradling Anoka in her arms like a baby, Anoka kicking and fuming and pulling Sloan's hair). A second snap, and the bubbles burst. The blood flooded over them, and voila! All wounds cured. All physical wounds, at least.

The archon lagged behind, growing further away but no smaller. It had ceased its beam attack and lumbered with arduous churning of its many limbs, trudging its long body over the

neighborhood. A lucky thing archons weren't known for their speed. They didn't need it; a city has no legs to run away.

Sloan continued to pointlessly carry Anoka as they rounded a yet-unblemished corner and reached the gate at the end of the community. The iron doors had closed. Sloan dropped Anoka and ran to the control panel, mashed some numbers, yelled an obscenity, and finally grabbed her gun and blasted the gate down with a quick volley.

"You two did this." Anoka climbed to her feet and pointed her sword from Sloan to Delaney and back again. "You killed Minneapolis, didn't you? And made this thing, this... this archon."

"When did you hear about archons?" said Delaney. Sloan scurried to the side of the gate, where a new girl lay facedown in the snow. When she turned the girl over, Delaney recognized it as St. Paul, unconscious or dead.

"That's not important!" said Anoka. "You did it, didn't you? You caused it!"

Sloan patted her tattered coat, feeling all its pockets. She reached into one and retrieved an egg-shaped Soul Gem, which she held to St. Paul's face and waved around.

"And if we did," said Delaney. "What will you do, fight us?"

The archon's heavy arm hit the ground further down the street. It would reenter firing range soon. Anoka's arms, held straight in front of her, trembled. She backed against the gate and continued to point her sword at Sloan, even though Sloan had become quite consumed with the revival of St. Paul. Beyond the gate, Delaney noted the half-buried body of another girl. Although she had never seen the face before, considering the miraculous return of Delaney's powers and a certain robot's absence from the final confrontation, she suspected they need not bother reviving that one.

"I'll fight the archon first. Then I'll hunt you down and find you."

Delaney would have laughed out loud if the archon did not crack the skies with another monstrous roar.

"Sloan dear, hurry up~"

"Get the Corvette running." Sloan indicated the pink whatthefuck parked in front of the gate. "Keys in the ignition."

"So that's your plan, eh?" said Anoka. "You killed Minneapolis and unleashed that archon on the city, and now you plan to ride away like nothing happened."

"Idiot," said Sloan. Below her hands, St. Paul's eyes blinked open. "We're regrouping with the other girls. We're gonna fight that thing. You're welcome to keep us honest, if you want. Or you can go die by yourself right now, up to you!"

Anoka lowered her blade.

The keys to the "Corvette" (could you call it that? Its owner had caked it with so many gaudy accoutrements it didn't look like drivable) were indeed in the ignition. The trunk was ajar, too. Delaney slammed it shut and slid into the front seat. A mess of gadgets and gizmos covered the dash, all sorts of random odometers with incomprehensible numbers. Someone had left a vodka bottle under the seat, the first spot of good taste in this whole hot pink apocalypse. Delaney tilted back the neck and swallowed, but goddammit, it was just water.

As Delaney gunned the engine, Sloan coaxed a confused St. Paul to her feet. The archon loomed closer. Even at this distance, its face was too bright to behold.

"Uh, uh, uh, w, wha, what..."

"No time to explain," said Sloan. She looped an arm around St. Paul's waist and guided her toward the car. Anoka hobbled through the snow behind them, her gaze turned toward the archon. As they neared the car, she scampered ahead and opened the passenger door for Sloan and St. Paul. No mention of how to cram four girls into a coupe.

The archon fired its vibrant laser beam at a house near the entrance of the neighborhood. The house vaporized. Boom! Big explosion, wow cool. Now hurry up you reprobates and get in the car.

But did they get in the car? Nah. They had better things to do. Like gawk and stand still and not move at all. Delaney slammed the horn.

"Hurry up please it's time."

"W, w, w, w, w, what," said St. Paul. She turned from face to face, Sloan to Delaney to Anoka. Her eyes settled on Sloan and recognition flickered in her cloddish features. She seized Sloan by the neck and slammed her against the car.

"Kuh. Kuh. Kuh. Clair. Clair!" said St. Paul. "W. Where. Is. CLAIR."

Oh dear, this was going to be a problem, wasn't it? Delaney sighed. They simply did not have time to reason with this anthill. Imagine explaining to an autistic all that transpired in the last ten minutes. Let alone explain it within the few seconds they had before the archon did to their car what it did to that house. Could you imagine trying to do that?

Delaney supposed she could restrain the imbecile. Toss her in the trunk and whatnot. Her magic excelled at such things, after all. But something about the idiot's face caused her to seethe, pressed the annoyances buzzing around her ever deeper, piercing the protective shields that for so many years Delaney had painstakingly constructed around her darkest thoughts. Not her sorta-dark thoughts or her not-good thoughts, oh no. Much, much worse than that.

She had conditioned herself to ignore these thoughts when they bubbled to the surface. But Delaney no longer felt like expending the effort.

So she leaned over in the seat and got St. Paul's attention with a cordial wave. "Hey, love!" she said with a sunny smile. "I'm sorry to say, but Clair's a little dead."

Even this seemed beyond St. Paul's comprehension. She gaped at Delaney like the dumb animal she was.

"Dead. You know, D-E-A-D? Gone forever. In the ground. Crush!" She demonstrated with her hands.

"Delaney," said Sloan. "What are you—"

"Shush. St. Paul, do you hear me? Do you understand what I am saying?"

St. Paul stared. "D. D. D. Dead."

"Yes! Very good!" Delaney clapped.

"It's getting closer," said Anoka.

"Wanna know something else, St. Paul? Do you? Because I have some really special news for you. You see, I happen to know the identity of your dear friend Clair's murderer. I know who killed her, St. Paul!"

Sloan glared at Delaney. Anoka looked a tad self-righteous about the whole affair, but that was alright. She would get hers soon enough.

"D. D. Dead. Kuh, Clair."

"Clair was killed by..." (Dramatic pause) "...By that big thing over there!"

She stretched her arm and pointed at the archon. Three heads at once turned in that direction.

"What," said Sloan.

"What!" said Anoka.

St. Paul said nothing at all. Her dim features absorbed the information that seeped through Delaney's honeyed words. Realization spread across her face. She connected the dots. Kuhkukhclair and the abomination crawling across the neighborhood toward them, the thing with a face that could not be seen.

At the last possible moment, Anoka realized what was happening. She flung an arm to stop St. Paul but St. Paul barreled her aside with a single swing of her shoulder.

Both Sloan and Anoka skittered in pursuit but Delaney expected it this time and sealed both in a single bubble. Delaney wanted to laugh but refrained, considering she still had some modicum of respect (desire?) for Sloan and already her fiendish mind conceived stratagems to maintain their relationship. Oh, she was an evil bitch, wasn't she? Yes, but Delaney always knew this. This was who she truly was, and everything else she had ever done was but a farce to conceal that sheer fact. An eternity of damnation awaited her, and she deserved every minute of it! So she'll at least have her fun for these last few hours.

By the time St. Paul had taken three bounding steps she had transformed, aflutter with her uninspired cloak costume. She dashed through the gates and into the neighborhood, one tiny figure against the behemoth archon, David and Goliath times infinity without the grace of God to ensure a happy resolution (only a demon ruled heaven now, after all).

St. Paul spread her arms and summoned a ring of silver discs around her. They span and twinkled in the encroaching light of the archon. She danced between jagged crags in the street, perfect landings upon serrated edges to build momentum and dip side to side even before the archon charged its dissolution ray. Delaney had to hand it to her, the girl had technique. Too bad her strategic thinking needed work. Oh well!

The archon loosed its beam. St. Paul span to the side as it blazed past her. Her form grew smaller the further she ran, but not so small as to broker relief—the archon was probably in range of their car now. In fact, they should start leaving now.

"You lied to her!" said Anoka. "You, you—"

"I did the strategically reasonable thing. We didn't have the time to subdue her."

"Delaney..." said Sloan.

Delaney donned her best offended face. "I'm TRYING to SAVE YOUR LIFE, Sloan. Can't you be even a LITTLE grateful?" Oh god, that was so fun to say. Oh god, why.

Sloan opened her mouth to rebut, but no words came out. Delaney already had crocodile tears gathering in her eyes (so easy to fake emotion after years behind a mask of smiling pleasantness).

"She's gonna die," said Anoka.

Amazingly, St. Paul had not died. Delaney glanced up and wiped her eyes with a sniffle. The little bundle of black rag flitted between the lasers of the archon, dancing upon her discs which she swung before her as platforms to reorient herself in midair. She acquired a vertical component and headed for the thing's head.

"I... I'm just trying to help..." Delaney murmured. She was too engrossed in St. Paul's progress and bungled the inflection.

St. Paul swirled back and forth before the archon, inching closer and closer with each rapid leap between discs, the new discs set in place only moments before she landed, impossible to derive a pattern. It grew difficult to see her because she had edged so close to the unseeable face. But where was this heading? What did she expect to do with a few sharp circles?

The answer came immediately. Before the unseeable face spread a shadow, small at first but growing, one circle into a larger circle. St. Paul's discs. She was spreading them out before the archon's face, one massive mirrored surface. The shadow spread and spread and for the first time the face became visible, a glorious sun, bright but with an identifiable form and features, slit-like eyes and a small round mouth that widened and grew as St. Paul's discs did. St. Paul shielded herself behind them, her reflection mirrored in each.

The archon loosed a ray. Its vivid light slammed against the vast shield of discs. The discs bent inward, groaned with a shrill metal shriek.

But they held.

The ray reflected directly at the archon's face.

Delaney popped the bubble around Sloan and Anoka. "It's working," she said. "Incredible."

"She's using its own power against it," said Anoka. "She's gonna kill it!"

Irony: Years and years of forced goodness, years and years of rote deeds done in the name of holiness, only to create the evil she had sought to destroy. One brief moment of hatred and disgust, and from it she would achieve goodness. Delaney's heart palpitated in her chest.

She—she wasn't evil. She still had hope, this was a sign. A sign she still had hope.

"We attack now," said Delaney. "Hit it harder if we need to. Run!" She staggered out of the car, barely able to control her own body. She felt like falling down, but her wobbling knees managed to hold. Sloan and Anoka darted forward. This was it, a heroic charge. This was—

By the fourth step she skidded to a stop.

Bright, fluorescent cracks spread across the shield of St. Paul's discs. They rippled through the mirrored circles like liquid, widening and widening and widening.

"Oh no," said Anoka.

"We have to help her," said Sloan.

It was too late. Much, much too late. The next instant the entire line of discs shattered into a thousand black shards behind which streamed a magnificent light. The bundled lump of St. Paul fell with the jagged pieces. She withstood the ray a moment, and then dissolved into nothing. Not a trace left.

Anoka sagged to her knees. Sloan only watched. "You killed her, Delaney," she said.

"I, I." No words. Think up some words. "I, I. I killed her."

Ha, ha ha ha ha ha. This was her life. This was what she was. Oh god, was she disgusting.

"Look!" Anoka pointed.

The archon's face was no longer unseeable. It was still bright, but if Delaney shielded her eyes and squinted, she could make out its solar form, a miniature star placed upon a monster's body.

More importantly, a thick black crack had spread directly between its eyes.

"She hurt it," said Anoka. "She reflected its attack long enough to hurt it. It can be hurt. It can!"

Sloan turned toward Delaney. Her ragged coat fluttered in the wind and a sharpness defined her features. "You have barriers, Delaney. You saw what St. Paul did. You're next."

"And if I don't kill it? If I only widen the crack? What then?"

"Then I'll figure out what's next."

Delaney seized Sloan's collar. She pulled herself close to Sloan's face, so she could feel her ragged breath. "I will gladly die today, love. But when I do, it'll be to kill that thing. For certain."

"Do I believe you, or are those more empty words?"

She pulled away from Sloan. The archon loomed closer. "Get in the car, both of you. We're not charging recklessly and ruining this chance. We need a plan before we proceed. Because if we fail, this entire city is dead. Every single person. Got it, love?"

The archon turned its gaze toward them.

"Come on dears, MOVE~" She yanked Anoka's cape for emphasis. If Anoka didn't respond, Delaney already decided to abandon her. But for all her self-righteousness, it seemed she had no intention to die for nothing either.

They scrambled into the Corvette, Anoka on Sloan's lap in the passenger seat. The engine gunned and Delaney swiveled around, surprised by the ease of handling despite the heavy snowfall. So whoever owned this tacky kitsch at least had mind toward performance enhancements as well as aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic).

She could drive even this goofy stick shift. Who knew how many different vehicles she once used as transit between the two cities that comprised her territory. She adjusted the mirror to better see the archon behind them, and adjusted it again so its face didn't blot her vision.

It fired a laser, but they already spurred ahead and down the street. Delaney drifted around a curve and sped down the undestroyed suburban streets, devoid of all traffic.

"Well, nothing like an exciting escape to keep one refreshed," she said.

"You're disgusting," said Anoka. Although, seated on Sloan's lap, it was hard to take her seriously.

Delaney's eyes flitted to the mirror. The archon stretched above the buildings, but it no longer stared in their direction. It directed its gaze inward, toward the central city and all its glass towers.

"So Sloan love, what's left in this city? Leave any other girls alive in your quest for vengeance?"

Sloan stared straight ahead. "Ramsey. Maybe someone else I'm forgetting."

"Oh, lovely. I hope this Ramsey girl is a real powerhouse."

No response. Delaney took that as an ill omen. All the strong girls Clair probably swept into her nexus of control anyway. They would have been at the fight, and if they were, they were all dead now. Nevertheless, Delaney's mind whirred with plans, ideas, concepts, formations, possible uses even for useless girls. She didn't feel much motivation, but the weight of duty still sagged heavy in her mind from all those years of telling herself the word "duty" meant something. And Sloan seemed to want it, so...

Although, Sloan probably latched onto this whole defeat-the-archon thing as an alternative to thinking about what she just did to her only friend. Ha! All that work, all that effort, and not even a moment of triumph. Not even a single hurrah. She realized her mistake the moment she made it. So sad, so—

A bright pink blob appeared in the road in front of them. She slammed the brake and braced to swerve, but the car stopped nigh instantaneously, with plenty of room to spare.

It was another pink car, smack in the center of the road, so damn big it blocked their way down either lane. The car lacked a roof and most of its windows. A lone girl sat on the hood, huddled in a Dalmatian fur coat. Her feet shivered against a cracked headlight.

"That's her." Sloan hefted Anoka off her thigh and stepped out the car. Anoka followed, and although Delaney disliked standing in the snow, the archon had not pursued so she guessed she better get out too.

They had stopped in an ordinary stretch of road thronged by ordinary snowcapped roofs. The streetlamps cast rings of light around them and most everything else in the vicinity was little more than shadow. In the distance, though, the archon loomed, long arms lifting, dropping with arduous slowness, its route turned toward the distant towers.

"Ramsey, get up," said Sloan.

The Ramsey chick did not get up. She sat shoulder slumped and head down, twitching from the cold. Snow caked her hair and slouched back.

Sloan snapped a finger in front of Ramsey's nose. "Ramsey."

Ramsey blinked and lifted her head. An overabundance of makeup streaked her cheeks. Delaney knew at first glance this girl was in no shape to do diddlyfuck, another useless caboose to back their hellbound train.

"Oh... Hi, Sloan. Didja win?"

"We have a problem, Ramsey. I need your help."

These words affected a severe shift in Ramsey's demeanor. Her eyes flushed with life and she leapt off the hood, which actually made her look shorter than when she was curled in on herself atop it. "For real?"

"I need all the help I can get." Sloan pointed toward the distant archon. "See that?"

Ramsey looked. Her eyes widened with shock. Had she not noticed it before? The thing must have been visible since it spawned. What was this girl doing all that time?

"What the hell is *that*?"

"An archon."

"A what? Sloan, where's everyone else? Clair and them? Did you..."

Sloan babbled some stilted explanations that Delaney no longer cared to hear, because someone was pounding on the inside of the Corvette's trunk. A muffled voice yelled for help from within.

"And now you want me to help you fight that archangel thing?" (Ramsey's shrill voice was more difficult to ignore.)

Delaney placed her ear against the trunk. The pounding rattled the cold metal. Inside, someone cried to be let out, again and again. Sloan and the others were too engrossed in their conversation to notice, so Delaney supposed the poor girl in the trunk would simply have to remain there.

"What happened to your followers, Ramsey? Where's Carmichael and everyone else?"

Ramsey averted her gaze and shuffled her feet. "Oh, uh, well, they decided to leave. I didn't have my powers, so they listened to me at first when I told them to wait, but I guess they got fed up... And left. Yeah. I mean, it's hard to blame them. Who'd wanna hang around regular me, right? Ha ha."

The person inside the trunk quit pounding. Moments later, a telepathic voice said: *Hey, who's out there, lemme out yeah?*

Sloan, Anoka, and Ramsey turned their heads in random directions to pinpoint the voice. Delaney tapped the trunk and waved at them. "Hey guys, I think someone's in here!"

Yeah, kinda dark? And cramped? Lemme out, much appreciated.

Delaney sighed and pulled the lever near the front seat to open the trunk. It flew open and yet another girl Delaney had never seen before flung herself out and staggered into the snow. She swiveled around, reoriented herself, paused a bit when she noticed the archon, and then ignored it with a casual shrug and wheeled on Sloan and friends as they crunched up to her.

"Okay, first. I want my gem back, now. Second, I want a detailed explanation of everything that happened while I was dead, because for some reason we got Godzilla romping through the city. And third, who locked me in the trunk? It was you, wasn't it Fargo?"

"I did it so the Terminatrix wouldn't—"

The girl punched Sloan in the jaw. A surprisingly forceful blow despite the girl's twiggy arms. Sloan fell back into Ramsey and Anoka, who propped her as she massaged a jaw.

Sloan spit blood. "Ramsey, you got Hennepin's gem, right? Give it to her."

Ramsey fished through her fur coat, found the gem, and handed it to the Hennepin girl. Hennepin snatched it, examined it closely, and transformed it into a ring around her middle finger, which she flashed to all assembled.

"Explanations, now."

"Clair is dead," said Sloan with a sigh, more from the exasperation of having to tell the story right after she explained it to Ramsey rather than the words themselves. Excellent phrasing, Sloan, to eliminate your own hand in that sentence! Delaney was certainly no stranger to *that* nifty linguistic trick. "So is St. Paul, Bloomington, Woodbury. And the Terminatrix." She counted them on her fingers. "That leaves only us still alive in the city."

"Wow cool," said Hennepin. "That explains a ton. Now uh, context on the kaiju clomping toward downtown?"

"It exists," said Sloan. "We're gonna kill it."

A terse, bombastic HA burst from Hennepin's throat. The solitary syllable caromed between the sleepy homes and silent sky, transforming into a complete laughter without any additional expenditure of Hennepin's vocal chords.

"Uhhhhh no. Not happening." She turned on a heel and took a step away. "Back to Mississauga for me. Never shoulda come to this dungheap city."

She walked down the street in the opposite direction of the archon, although who knew where the street went and probably she did it more for dramatic effect than actual navigation.

Delaney tsk-tsked. "What a shame. We could use a girl who was actually competent on our side."

"Looks like you could use an army." Hennepin did not look back. "Looks like you could use an atomic bomb."

"You *do* know the rewards for killing an archon, right?"

"You got me all wrong." Still not looking back. "I don't play for goods, I play to win. And part of playing to win is knowing when you can't."

Delaney wanted this bitch to suffer, but didn't know her enough. If she had any prior experience, she could find the right words to sucker her into their suicide squad. So far, two strikes.

Before Delaney found another tactic, Anoka stepped forward. She cut a valiant figure as she folded her arms and spoke. "What about this city? You swore to protect it! It's your responsibility to fight beside us."

Of course this would not work, but it did happen to be so ridiculous that Hennepin stopped walking. "Ha," she said. Not as abrasive as the last laugh, but venomous in its sharpness. "I'm no idiot. I can put two and two together. Shit like that monster don't show up every day. Something extraordinary went down while I was dead, and I got one good guess as to what that extraordinary thing was."

Everyone looked at Sloan. Sloan looked at her feet.

"Hm yes." Hennepin brushed back her hair. "I recall Kyubey saying once, that wraiths were like, the embodiment of human sin and despair or some shit? So if there's like, a real big wraith, it must have meant somebody did a real big sin, with a lot of despair involved? Gee, wonder what that sin might be, eh Fargo?"

Sloan wrung her hands together.

Astute deduction, Miss Ru!

Atop the Corvette sat the Incubator. Although it ostensibly looked at Hennepin, its eyes seemed to lie directly on Delaney. And probably everyone else.

"You—!" Sloan started for it, hand outstretched.

Please, Miss Redfearn, refrain from destroying this body. It'll take a few minutes to move another to this location, and time is of the essence.

Sloan's gnarled hand hung in the air, inches from its throat. The fingers curled inward until her nails dug into her palm and she lowered the fist.

As I was saying, Miss Ru is absolutely correct. Archons are created by tremendous sin and despair. And this archon in particular was created by the sinful act of Sloan Redfearn murdering Clair Ibsen!

"No..." Sloan gripped her head. "No! It wasn't, I was... She betrayed me first!"

Don't appeal your case to me, Miss Redfearn. I was not the one who decided what constitutes the arbitrary notion of "sin" in this universe. Perhaps one day you may meet the one who governs the conceptual framework of existence and ask her yourself. That's not what I came to talk about, though! I came, first and foremost, to congratulate you, Sloan Redfearn.

"What...?"

You did it! You killed Clair Ibsen. That's what you wanted to do for so long, isn't it? Usually, Magical Girls only have one wish granted. You were able to make a second one come true, with some help of course.

"Did you trick her into this?" said Anoka.

You humans and your "tricking". I asked her to do a favor for me, and in return promised her the opportunity to fulfill her greatest desire. She did the favor, I granted the opportunity. And best yet, she seized that opportunity and saw it to fruition! Hence my congratulations.

"Shut up, shut up!" said Sloan. "You made your damn point. Is that all you came to do, rub it in? Why show up now, when you've been hiding so long?"

Delaney checked to see if Hennepin had slipped away during Kyubey's distraction. But that rat's appearance had drawn her in, and she stood behind Anoka and Ramsey in the small semicircle they formed around him. Delaney herself was the one on the periphery.

I apologize for my absence in the past few days. I had to stay discrete due to the watchful eye of my employer. Fortunately, certain events have now been set in motion that she no longer has the power to stop. Which means I can give you some advice for fighting the archon!

"You glorious bastard," said Hennepin. A term of endearment rather than reproach. "You love every moment of this."

I am quite incapable of love, Miss Ru. Anyway, I noticed you already managed to strike a serious blow against the archon by turning its power against it! A commendable achievement. However, I recommend refraining from attempting the same strategy twice. It'll certainly learn from its previous errors.

Delaney could not be sure, but she thought the Incubator may have winked at her.

"Then what do we do," said Sloan.

Before Kyubey responded, a sharp, piercing wail emerged from some distant area. The girls turned and looked in various skyward directions as the wail rose in pitch and then cascaded, before repeating again.

"The hell is that?" said Anoka.

"A siren," said Hennepin. "They think there's a tornado or something. It's telling people to go to the cellars."

Anoka balled her fists. "But that's the opposite of what they should do. They need to run, or... or it'll trap them in the miasma! Once it starts spawning more wraiths..."

She looked so determined, so fierce. Cute! Delaney drummed her fingers across the hood of the Corvette and balanced her chin on the back of her hand. "You sure know a lot about archons, don't you, dear? Odd too, considering how rarely they show up."

Miss Cheong has experience with an archon. That's really all you need to know!

"Don't use that name," said Anoka, lowering her head. "And I can answer for myself, thank you."

"I thought you were gonna tell us how to kill that thing, Kyubey," said Sloan. "We don't have much time before it gets to downtown, so spill."

The Incubator curled up and swaddled himself in his plush tail. His eyes never wavered, although he did scratch at an ear. *Right! From what I can tell, none of you except Miss Ru have Soul Gems that are in particularly healthy states, is this correct?*

Out of pockets and pouches, or from rings on their fingers, the girls (except, Delaney noticed, the Ramsey chick) retrieved their gems and checked. Anoka's was half muddied, Sloan's a little healthier. But the overcharge due to the Williston archon's cubes was gone. Hennepin's gem was basically spotless, and Delaney's...

Well, Delaney's own gem looked pretty shitty! Really funny too, because not only did she enter Minneapolis with a lot of power thanks to aforementioned Williston cubes, but unlike Sloan she had not even expended a whole lot of magic in their resulting fights. Possibly, when the Terminatrix stole her powers, the magic she used somehow drained Delaney's gem, through some weird transfer of magical energy or whatever. But that was a highly unlikely excuse, wasn't it, Delaney? After all, gems get dirty for more reasons than simple use, teehee~

The Ramsey chick avoided all eye contact.

This means you can't plan to fight a battle of attrition! You'll tire yourselves really fast. So... you should formulate a strategy based around a single powerful attack!

"Kill it in one hit, eh?" Hennepin placed a jaunty hand on a jaunty hip. "Bosses like these stack HP like motherfuckers. You sure that's really our best bet?"

"So you're on our side now?" said Anoka.

"Nah, I'll watch from the sidelines. If you *do* manage to beat it, I'll swoop in for the drops while you're too exhausted to fight."

Anoka jabbed Hennepin's chest with a finger. "Oh yeah? You might be a little surprised—"

"Shut up," said Sloan. "Kyubey, continue."

You've already managed to damage it. If you consolidated your powers into a single strong attack against the weakened area, it's entirely possible you could defeat it in a single shot!

All eyes turned to the obvious candidate. "There's only one of us with strong offensive magic," said Delaney. "Unless any of Clair's goon squad wish to reveal hitherto-unseen founts of power?"

"'Entirely possible you could defeat it in a single shot.' That gives me a lot of confidence, Kyubey," said Sloan.

It's up to you whether to fight or not. The fate of only approximately 3.5 million humans hangs in the balance, a rather inconsequential number considering your species-wide fertility rate.

Sloan gritted her teeth and clenched her fists. Ooh, so impassioned! Much like the Anoka girl. It's so easy for such stupid creatures to get worked up and put on a veneer of bravado. At least Ramsey kept shuffling her feet and looking uncomfortable.

"Fine, I'll fight," said Sloan. "We'll get me close to that thing and I'll shoot it until either it dies or I do."

Through the gathered mists of the storm-laden sky, the archon loomed, its face a beacon of light that coated the black air. Nearly obscured in its radiance were the towers of the city, not the least of which the Pillar of the Plains.

Delaney reached into her purse and found her phone. She checked the time. A shocking amount had passed. Indeed, they had almost weathered the entire night, although the atmospheric conditions that enveloped the city made such facts difficult to observe empirically.

"Sloan love, you told me once you had a finisher move?"

"I also told you it's useless. I need to be in direct sunlight to use it."

So they might all get the chance to play hero after all. "I can get you into the sunlight, love."

"It's the middle of the night."

"It's nine in the morning." Delaney held up her phone as proof. "Seems like *someone* lost track of time!"

"Well as you can tell it doesn't fucking matter because there's no damn sun a thousand miles in any direction, so I dunno why you're even bothering to bring this up."

"I'm bringing it up, love, because as I *said* I can get you into the sunlight."

"Oh yeah? Then let's do it. Beam me up, Delaney."

Delaney sighed, folded her hands, and closed her eyes. Why had she bothered to exude such patience with this irritable creature for so long? "We must get to the top of that tower."

She flung out an arm and pointed. Across the waves of suburb, past the slouched behemoth archon, into the inner city: the Pillar of the Plains, its peak so above all others that even marred by an unfinished spire it scraped the upper canopy of clouds at its swirling pupil.

That was, by the way, the last ounce of poetry Delaney had left to muster, and she didn't bother to speak it. The breath would be wasted on her audience.

"That's stupid," said Sloan. "You're sure you can do it?"

"Am I ever not sure, love," said Delaney. "Have I ever not had utmost faith in my own abilities? Have I ever failed in that regard?"

"You've failed in enough *other* regards—"

Anoka sidled between them the moment Sloan's posturing grew aggressive. "Now look who needs to shut up. If she says she can get you into the sunlight, I'll believe it. Not much else to believe."

Whatever your decision, make it soon! It won't take long once the archon gets to the central part of the city to create its miasma. With such a large space to manipulate, I have no idea

what kind of labyrinth this archon could create. Plus, it would certainly heal its wounds and set you back to square one. I predict once the miasma is active, it'll take twenty strong Magical Girls or more to defeat it!

"There aren't twenty strong Magical Girls in this state," said Sloan. "There's not half that."

Anoka grabbed Sloan's coat and tugged her toward the Corvette. "Then we need to stop arguing and move. We take these cars, drive to the skyscraper, get to the top, do the big attack, win. Really easy plan!"

The plan does have remarkably few components, which generally means increased odds of success!

Hennepin had already begun backing off. "Well, then I'll wish you guys luck. Ciao for now!"

Like a chihuahua Anoka clomped after her, wobbling awkwardly through the snow despite her determined posture. "Oh no. You're coming with us. Three million people will die, doesn't that mean *anything* to you?"

Of course it meant absolutely nothing to her, Anoka. Have you not paid attention to anything the girl has said the entire time? Delaney was about to reprimand her for wasting more time—not like they needed Hennepin anyway, or anyone other than her and Sloan—but Hennepin stopped in her tracks.

"It couldn't really kill that many, right?"

Of course it could! Slowly and painfully too, harvesting the population to sustain it for as long as possible.

"There's no time for this," said Sloan. "If she won't come, we don't need her." Finally a word of sense!

Sloan opened the door to the Corvette, even though they should obviously take the Cadillac so they could, you know, actually seat four people. Delaney discretely tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to the other car, and thankfully Sloan got the message without further explication.

As they headed for the Cadillac, Anoka and Ramsey trailing at the back, Hennepin spoke up.

"You idiots. Can't you guys use an ounce of strategic thought for once?"

Oh god, really.

"Look where that thing is compared to us and compared to the tower," Hennepin continued. "Wow! It's directly in between! To get to the tower, you'll have to drive straight through it. I mean, I guess you could circumvent it, but that would take forever, and you don't fucking have forever, now do you?"

"Armchair analysis, just what we need!" said Anoka.

"Maybe if you'd cut with the snark you'd see I'm actually trying to help. If you wanna get through that thing without it crushing you with one stomp you'll need someone to pull aggro."

Sloan had already taken the passenger seat in the Cadillac. She beckoned for Delaney and the others to hurry up.

"It's kind of a simple concept? You send your beefiest meathead in front so the boss attacks them instead of all the squishy damage dealers. Except we don't have anyone who can take a hit, so I'd suggest you find someone who's not all that useful to distract it instead, right?"

"We'll take our chances rushing past it," said Sloan. "Come on, let's—"

"I'll do it," said Ramsey.

From behind Delaney and Anoka she shuffled, her coat limp and loose around her to match her soggy stained hair. Out of the folds emerged a tiny hand clasped around a gem. It surprised Delaney that a gem so tainted could still not be taken by the Cycles.

"I'm a bad fighter. But I can drive. You guys take the Cadillac, I'll go in the Corvette. Maybe we don't need a distraction, maybe we can get by on our own. Why take the risk, though. Right? I'd at least be doing something useful, right?"

Nobody said anything.

The Cadillac had no windshield or roof or much of anything, but it turned on when Delaney keyed the ignition. Same enchants as the Corvette, in which Ramsey pulled ahead, flashing them a feeble thumbs-up as she sped down the road.

In the back "seat" (if you could call it that, more like an open lounge area) were Anoka and Hennepin, the latter at the last possible moment hopping in without a single word of explanation and a sullen, kinda yeah-yeah-I'll-be-a-hero-too expression in which Delaney put zero stock because to be honest heroism is a thing that rarely exists, everyone in some wicked fantasy would love to possess such traits, and sometimes they even try, but when things get tough all that falls to pieces.

The Incubator watched them go, its red eyes the only color in a sea of slush.

The archon's distance from the towers in the center of the city was hard to discern, it was so large and the surroundings so small. It had turned its cracked face toward the siren-bound city, causing the full flame of the back of its head to blot all possibility of human comprehension from the space it occupied. It probably looked like something beautiful, in a twisted contorted kind of way, but like Delaney said she didn't have the energy left to waste on ordering pretty words.

"What happens if this finisher move of yours don't kill it," said Hennepin. "Note Kyubster never gave us a total guarantee on that."

"I hope you didn't tag along just to complain, dear."

"I just wanna know the backup plan."

"You're a smart girl, Hennepin. I'll assign you to imagine one. You'll be our chief strategist, what a fun title!"

It shut her up. Phew, because even talking taxed her energy. She rapidly leaked power, and her Soul Gem seemed a little darker than when she checked it five minutes ago, which made sense because she had little hope for this gambit to work, she heard how Kyubey phrased all his sentences: Maybe, could be, possible. Hennepin got that right at least. Oh well! Any marginal hope Delaney had was that throwing her life away in a noble sacrifice, even an ineffectual one, might manifest some iota of positivity in her whole wretched life, the tiniest upward slant at the bottom of a graph line that went down down down down down, into Quadrant IV in the theoretical chart of Delaney Pollack's Shittiness Measurement, because in Christian theology nothing mattered but how you ended, as long as you made a deathbed repentance you were good to go, maybe a few thousand years of purgation depending on the sect but hey spared an eternity of hell right? Except Delaney knew well enough their religion had no theoretical basis in Judeo-Islamo-Christian tradition—if anything it stemmed from Eastern mystic mumbojumbo despite its monotheistic Zoroaster duality nature, or was that even right? What religion did they have in Japan, wasn't it Taoism? Buddhism? Maybe a mélange of many denominations, who knew, and besides Magical Girls were a spiritual entity unwritten in any ancient text, because let's be honest those texts were bullshit anyway.

This was the shit that cycled through Delaney's head, and it sure beat the stuff she thought about when she didn't have math or philosophy or science to distract her. Come on, Delaney! One last perverted fantasy about your dear friend Sloan, for old time's sake?

She pressed the pedal harder. The Cadillac already pushed ninety. The wreckage of the city left in the archon's wake rushed along either side of the ravaged street. Despite the ridiculous bulk of their vehicle, however, Ramsey's enchants let it cross the terrain.

It's close, said Ramsey. I'll get ahead of it, grab its attention.

The pink swatch of Corvette leapt further ahead as they rounded a wide bend and entered a straightaway down which the hulking form of the archon continued its determined motion toward the central city. It raised a sinewy arm, dragged it across the air, pressed it down upon the clustered homes. Its many limbs moved afterward, each step momentous, destructive, cataclysmic.

So uh, hey! Ramsey's voice chirruped. Fun fact, I actually hate driving. Why do you think I hired Carmichael? I mean, on top of the fact it's illegal for me to drive anyway... Ha ha.

"Hennepin," said Sloan. "You told me a bit about your powers earlier. How you use a crystal or some shit and like, manipulate light or whatever."

"Ayup."

Well, uh, anyway. Sloan! Thanks for everything. I wouldn't be here today if not for you, so I'll try to repay the favor, alright?

Yeah, thanks, said Sloan. "I've got an idea, Hennepin. You need to transform, though."

The Corvette veered left. Delaney realized Ramsey had already driven directly under the archon when the pink blur phased into the blinding aura of its form. Shit, Delaney hadn't considered they'd have to pass *through* the light. Driving literally blind, kinda hard?

But the archon's radiant face turned. Its limbs paused in their motion as the world-devouring rays of light dragged across the road. It momentarily forgot its path. The shoulders shifted, the back rippled, and it altered its angle to stare down a winding side street.

It's after me, said Ramsey. *Go!*

Delaney slammed the gas and they leapt ahead to a cool hundred mph, hard to handle in such icy conditions even with Ramsey's enchantments. The Cadillac raced forward, Delaney's hands gripping the wheel as it threatened to wobble against either narrow curbside. This was the fun part. Between the cities of Regina and Saskatoon is one hundred and sixty miles of vapid ceaseless prairie. Delaney alternated the cities biweekly, had hovels in which to dwell for each, but in between she ventured three hour treks between them. Three hour treks she often whittled to two.

The archon turned away but most of its limbs remained splayed across the road like columns of an ancient structure, Parthenon or Pantheon, long sloped trunks of solid grief rising to an incorrigible spinal column. A long, coiled tail dragged behind it, scraping whole neighborhoods off the earth in pendulous swishes. At the end of the tail skittered a tremendous hooked barb.

They zoomed beneath the thing. Its head was still further on, so for now they lay in true shadow. Delaney flicked the headlights.

"It's huge," said Anoka.

"When it croaks it'll coat the city in cubes," said Hennepin.

How you holding up, Ramsey? said Delaney. If the thing caught wind of them now, they were, in colloquial terms, "fucked".

It's shooting lasers at me, but uh, they're kinda slow? I've nearly crashed on my own more than it's gotten close to hitting me.

You have to keep it close, dear. If you get out of its range you've failed your purpose.

Uh, okay...

Who spends so much on cars she can barely drive? Ugh, stop thinking about it, focus on the road. They'd gone a hundred ten down this street for like thirty seconds and still they hadn't

crossed the length of this thing's immense body. Despite herself, goosebumps rose across Delaney's arms. What a thrill! Not even the Williston archon had titillated so her jaded palate. Oh no, for this kind of thrill she'd have to return to Saskatoon 2010, with fifteen random bitches flinging themselves one after another at the fucking colossus, evaporating into eruptions of blood one after another as massive chunks of earth flattened them.

They had almost reached the head. The road languished in light as it sloped toward the central city, bright but not so bright as to swallow everything—not directly beneath its gaze. Good, that's what they needed, Ramsey doing her fucking job.

And then, like, as if having that thought somehow jinxed the whole operation, the light started to intensify, blotting out the road in increasing gradations of total illumination. The head was turning back, no longer watching down the road Ramsey had gone.

Ramsey what are you doing dear.

Uh, uh, okay so, okay so, don't be mad, but, I maybe crashed in a ditch.

A ditch.

Yeah, um, behind a building. It can't see me anymore I don't think.

Thanks for being a huge fucking failure! Don't worry, I'm sure if you believe in your heart you'll find a way to unbotch everything.

Um, oh god, oh god no, oh god I didn't mean to—

"Faster," said Sloan. "Shut up and go *faster!*"

Those were words that at least staved the frothing hatred inside Delaney a little while longer. She quickly memorized the terrain as its last glimpse dissolved into a pure white stretch.

Oh god I did it, I really fucked up again, oh god no I can fix this, I can get out of the ditch—

Shut the fuck up and let me concentrate, dear.

They soared into the white. She had to focus dead ahead. No sideways motion at all or they would run right into the curb and pow, curtains. Her hands locked, rigid and straight, correcting for the slight turns the wheel tried to make on its own. It's a long drive between Regina and Saskatoon. There's only straight road ahead. You sink into your daydreams, you're not seeing the road, you're not seeing anything. You can maintain that straightness by instinct while you think about anything else, any of your weird and alien desires.

The archon howled. The ground rocked beneath them. Delaney held the wheel steady, envisioned them altering course by a five degree slant, striking the curb and pinwheeling to oblivion. The electric sound of laser crashed freakishly close to them.

It won't get out it won't get out it won't get out

I SAID SHUT UP YOU STUPID BITCH, said Delaney.

Useless useless useless they were always right it's just what I am you know ha ha ha ha ha ha

They roared out of the light. Their direction had shifted, ever so slightly, and their wheel whirred dangerously close to the slanted curb of the sidewalk. Delaney tilted the wheel, righted their course, checked the archon in the rearview mirror, and checked over her shoulder when she discovered the rearview mirror had gone the way of the Cadillac's roof and windshield.

The face of the archon spanned the entire road behind them, the crack between its eyes the only thing saving Delaney from instant blindness. She quickly turned back and maintained her full throttle pulse on the gas. The towers were close now.

Imagine a triangle. A right triangle, where the right angle is Angle C while the other two angles are A and B respectively. The distance between B (archon face) and A (car) is the hypotenuse, which in this case represents the archon's facelaser. Now imagine Angle A moves away from Angle C at a rate of one hundred and ten miles per hour (177.028 kilometers per hour for you fellow metric aficionados/Canucks!). The hypotenuse between Angles A and B thus also lengthens second by second, so that the facelaser fired one second no longer reaches the car the next second! This means, quite simply, that by moving away at such a rate from the archon, it cannot fire its laser in such a way that strikes them.

Ah, but Professor Delaney, isn't it totally possible for the archon to predict the rate of forward motion and correct the angle at which it fires the facelaser accordingly?

To which Professor Delaney replies: Idiot lecteur, do you truly believe archons are good at math!

And because her thoughts seemed to predict the opposite of the immediate future nowadays, the archon roared and launched a laser that crashed into the ground directly in front of them. Delaney hit the brakes and thank god for Ramsey's bullshit enchants because the whole car stopped on a dime. Her body slammed against the seatbelt which became like a strip of solid stone and flattened the wind out of her lungs.

The laser burned bright before them. Sloan rasped a laborious breath and turned toward Hennepin. "Now!"

Hennepin had already transformed into a wonky scientist getup, long lab coat atop skimpy crimson corset and frilly miniskirt, half cyberpunk half steampunk all slutty Halloween costume. She pushed back the sleeves of her coat and swept a hand in fingerless gloves (fashion catastrophe). Through the light-soaked air rippled a translucent sheen that built form and geometry until it became a tall prismatic crystal. Embedded deep within the stainless quartz was her Soul Gem, a smooth opal.

Without pause, Sloan summoned a flash of light from her fingertips. Delaney covered her eyes until the flash subsided a moment later, dwindling into a single stream of light that stemmed from Sloan's outstretched hand to the center of Hennepin's crystal. Like a prism the crystal captured the ray, filtered it through the opal, and sprayed a rainbow array to create a transparent image of the Cadillac directly beside them.

Before Delaney could ask when Sloan learned this particular trick, the facelaser lurched forward. She jammed the transmission in reverse and drove. They moved toward the archon and the pure obliteration of its holy fire. The flickering image of the Cadillac rolled alongside them, their four dumb faces transfixed in perpetuity, the tires jammed so that it simply glided across the snow.

The laser pursued them, corralled them toward the archon. Delaney scanned for side streets but only an impenetrable wall of ruinous constructions walled the funnel.

Hennepin twisted her hands to manipulate the crystal that hovered alongside her. Its prismatic structure turned and altered the output direction of Sloan's light. The doppelganger Cadillac slowly began to change its trajectory, revolving in a circle around them, gradually rising into the air like a whimsical flying device torn from the screenplay of a Disney film fifty years old, the translucent images of Delaney and Sloan and all the rest sailing along for the ride with frozen expressions plastered across their faces.

After Ghost Car gained enough altitude, Hennepin made a dramatic swoop of her arms and tilted her crystal. Ghost Car shot through the air toward the face of the archon, ignoring its ghastly gaze. The small slits of eyes (there were far more than two, they opened and closed across the stellar face like sunspots or the eyes of Argus) peered in wonder at the thing that sailed toward it. Its facelaser ceased abruptly and it widened its mouth to charge another, all attention focused on the image.

Delaney hit the brake, changed the transmission, and shot forward as Ghost Car took the brunt of the archon's aggression. Sloan maintained the flow of her light into Hennepin's crystal, and Hennepin manipulated the crystal's position to puppeteer the car this way and that, flitting around the archon's face.

The real car raced forward. The towers stretched high before them, bent like fisheye lenses into the stormy swirl of clouds. The Pillar of the Plains drew closer and closer.

"We've got this," said Sloan. "We're—"

A sparkle of stardust burst around the Cadillac as the pink paint flecked off in thick embers. The transmission, dashboard, and steering wheel changed from the high-tech collection of dials and levers and rotors into a series of bland instruments caked with hard water and dust. The seat cushions dissolved from leather to matted fuzz plastered with duct tape.

The speedometer went from one hundred and ten to seventy in a single instant. Then it dropped to zero as the Cadillac, if it were even still a Cadillac anymore, stopped driving atop the snow and plunged its front wheels into the drift.

The front of the vehicle lost velocity before the back half, so the back half shot up and the entire car cartwheeled through the air and landed upside-down in the snow.

After a moment of blackness, Delaney wrenched her face out of the slush and spat snow. She tried to rub her head but her arm had become entangled with the steering wheel. Warm blood ran down her face. The engine continued to chug.

"What the fuck," she said. No clue if anyone heard her (or still had consciousness), so she tried telepathy. *What the fuck.*

What did you do Delaney? said Sloan.

I didn't do anything. The car, it, I think it lost its enchantments.

Goddammit Ramsey, what the fuck are you doing out there?

Five seconds passed. No response.

We need these enchants back, Ramsey. Stop fucking around!

No response.

Hennepin's matter-of-fact voice cut into the silence. *You're none too familiar with enchantments, are you Fargo? She wouldn't be able to turn them off from so far away. She needs to be close so she can absorb the magic of the enchanted object back into her gem.*

What? said Sloan. Delaney already knew what, though.

If her magic went out so suddenly and at such a distance, Hennepin continued, it only means one thing. I don't have to say what that one thing is, do I? Now can we focus on getting unburied?

Something pattered in the snow outside. A knuckle rapped against the hull of the overturned car. "You guys alright in there?" said Anoka. "I got thrown out."

What's the archon doing? said Delaney.

"Uh, well, that illusion or whatever's not flying around anymore, and, well, it's looking straight at us."

Wait, said Sloan. *Wait, wait. Hennepin, you're not saying that Ramsey...*

No time, love. Use your weightless powers to get this car off us.

Sloan hesitated for two precious seconds before she responded. *I can only make small things weightless.*

Oh goddammit. If Delaney knew that, she wouldn't have wasted time asking. Maybe if, when they first traveled to Minneapolis, Sloan had been more descriptive about her powers, more specific, these time-devouring bungles could be avoided, but alas, Sloan lacked the mental faculties for such forethought. Delaney didn't bother to tell the others to hold on or anything. She summoned a bubble in the tight space between snow and car carriage and with a simple strain of focus burgeoned it to massive size. The bubble jacked the car upward and lifted the top half out of the snow.

Anoka pressed her face against the ground to see inside. "Hurry up, it's charging an attack!"

Delaney found her seatbelt. Click! She slumped into the snow and struggled out, ignoring her mangled leg and not caring in how many places she broke her arm to extricate it from the crumpled steering wheel. She rolled out from under the vehicle and into Anoka's arms. Anoka dragged her away.

From her vantage, Delaney could not see Sloan. But Hennepin had contorted her body, halfway out of the car but halfway still inside, clawing at the snow as she struggled against a twisted seatbelt. "Don't leave me here you whores," she frothed, her glance flicking toward the archon.

The archon fired its laser. Anoka dropped Delaney and dashed for Hennepin, a curved scimitar already spawned in her hand. She swung and severed the belt, her other hand already wrapped around Hennepin's wrist.

Delaney watched the laser as it sailed across the sky and toward the car. Anyone could tell they had no hope of escape, and that Anoka had only sealed her own fate by leaping forward in the ill-advised attempt to save Hennepin. Delaney wondered if she would see for a split second their bodies fry into cute little skeletons before dissolving utterly in the archon's fire. What pain would they feel, or would death be instant? Except, rationally, it was in Delaney's best interest to keep them alive.

She summoned a bubble around them and yanked it away from the car instants before the laser incinerated it. No debris, no wreckage, only utter annihilation, as though the car were simply erased.

The bubble containing Hennepin and Anoka bounced toward Delaney and burst, dousing all three in blood. Which served the added effect of healing Delaney's broken bones. She climbed to her feet while the others floundered in the snow.

In the distance, Sloan was already at full sprint toward the Pillar of the Plains. Delaney dashed after her. They had crashed well into the inner city, surrounded on all sides by skyscrapers, but they still had a block or three to reach the momentous base of the Pillar, all its windows agleam with the distant archon light.

Hennepin and Anoka staggered after her, everyone trudging through the snow, forming white puffs with kicking legs. The archon had finished its obviation of the Cadillac and charged another beam as its arms and legs clawed after them, undulating its long body and sloping tail through the muck of the city.

The laser fired. It pierced the sky and sailed overhead, forcing all save Sloan to duck. The street and snow fell beneath the effervescence of its light and rendered Delaney purblind. It slammed straight into the side of a smaller tower. A ripple spread through the sheer wall of glass, a ripple that built into a blast as the laser sliced a thick chunk out of the structure.

When the beam subsided, nearly the entire façade of the small tower stood in tatters, the supports behind the glass bare and broken. Papers blew from the exposed offices in furious cyclones. The tower murmured as its metal adjusted.

The tower collapsed. The whole thing reverberated and twanged as the upper stories dropped, whole roofs falling, debris shooting onto the street all around them. Delaney summoned bubbles to block the serrated shards of detritus, each bubble popping after the first or second strike (power dwindling), thousands of smaller granules spraying against them, sticking in hair, cutting bare skin, searing cloth and snow.

"DON'T STOP RUNNING!" Sloan's voice somehow carried above the din.

After the uppermost floors collapsed, the tower gave way, bending around the middle like a stick or a candy bar or some flimsy toy. Tremendous cracks spread through its remaining surfaces as the top half slid sideways, leaning precariously over them, casting a shadow across their faces.

With a fearsome snap it dropped. For a moment it hung there, Macbeth's dagger enlarged into the Babel of man's infinite invention (metaphors!). The shadow spread down the street and across the snow. Delaney wasted no more time with bubbles, she had no hope to withstand such a force. Flight was the sole option, her shoes scampering over the snow, please don't slip now, the end of the shadow in sight. Sloan had already cleared it, hadn't even bothered to look back, ran as though she had no conception of the things she fled.

Delaney leaned forward, her arms and legs pulled the air to propel her faster and faster, the tower's side looming into her vision despite her efforts to stare only straight ahead at the shadowless stretch beyond. Closer. Closer. Closer. Closer. Step step step step step.

And she burst from under it with space to spare, skidded into the snow quite clear from the collapsing tower, turned to watch it fall and saw Anoka staggering in the shadow behind her (Hennepin absent entirely). It became clear at a glance Anoka had no hope to make it, although her face betrayed no disconcertion, exuded only focus as her limbs pumped with a sprinter's efficiency through the snow.

Delaney summoned a bubble around her to pull her forward, and the next moment the tower hit the ground and crushed Anoka beneath it.

Oh. Whoops.

Well, not like she was too important or useful anyway! Delaney chased after Sloan, who had not looked back even at the thunderous clap of the tower as it hit the ground. Good, better she not know about Anoka. If Delaney had to waste even a single millisecond while someone bemoaned the death of another dime a dozen cannon fodder Magical Girl...

They scrambled down the last stretch of sidewalk to the Pillar of the Plains. Construction tape and orange signs told unsupervised personnel to KEEP OUT. A wide panorama of steps led to a lacquered mezzanine upon which the tower itself stood, its base buttressed by wide cylinders thronged with rose petal balconies. Three double doors formed the front entrance beneath a vast overhang. Sloan, already clomping up the stairs, did not bother to check if these doors were locked; she shattered their glass paneling with a sweep of her gun.

Delaney followed her into the tower. The grandiose lobby had a lot of ornate details, fine materials, crystal chandeliers, marbled columns, exquisite artistry, fountains, cherubim,

tapestries, rugs, and general world class craftsmanship they had no time to appreciate or admire or even fully note. A wide spiral staircase rounded the perimeter of the tower, while a single glass column in its center contained the elevators.

Sloan went straight for the elevator panel, but the instant she pressed a button a digital marquee above the doors flashed red.

DURING EMERGENCY PLEASE USE STAIRS.

"The fuck is this shit," said Sloan.

"Seems the elevators are smarter than you, love." Delaney pulled her by the coat. "Hurry, the stairs."

"Where the hell's Hennepin? Anoka?"

Delaney shrugged. "Stairs await! Ready for your daily cardio?" She noted the number of floors on the elevator panel. Sixty. Ugh.

They hit the stairs hard and fast, Sloan taking three or four at a time with vast bounds that Delaney struggled to emulate. They coiled around the columnar structure of the Pillar, surrounded on all sides by curved panes of glass that stared with a slight tint onto the city beyond. The archon swelled huge as it squeezed its body between the rows of towers, scraping the skyscrapers, raining shards upon the ground. Its light streamed into the lobby and chased them as they ran.

Sixty was a lot of stories. The archon had destroyed a different tower with one laser. Granted, the Pillar was larger, had more structural support, but better move quick.

Hey.

And quick they moved. Already they had cleared five floors, the lobby minimizing beneath them, the skies rising around them.

Hey. This a bad time?

Delaney couldn't believe it. It was Anoka's voice. *You're still alive?*

I guess. Hard to tell. It's dark.

What is it, said Sloan. What's wrong, Anoka?

I think a tower fell on me. I'm buried beneath a lot of stuff. I think a plank or bar or something's stuck in me.

Below, glass shattered. The hand of the archon closed against the side of the tower, the fingers digging into the windows to grope supports and columns.

Just hold on, Anoka, said Sloan. Once we kill the archon, we'll dig you out. Delaney can heal you like new.

Yeah, don't worry too much about that. Look, if it's a bad time, that's cool, tell me and I'll shut up. I'd just like to say—

It's a bad time, said Delaney. The archon's other arm dug into the other side of the tower. Its body rose against the glass, legs shuffling against the sloped curves, crawling after them with its sunlight head blotting out the floors they left behind.

Just talk, Anoka, said Sloan. *There's no reason for you to... No reason for you to wind up like Ramsey, alright?*

Ha. I'd just like to say, um, if you guys do manage to kill that thing or whatever... Okay, what I'm gonna ask is a lot, and I know there's probably no way you'll do it, but.

The archon's hand unlatched from its previous position and clawed into the glass above them. They had crossed maybe half the floors, maybe less, and it was already catching up. They had no time for this bullshit from Anoka, same as they had no time for the bullshit from Ramsey earlier. And it certainly wasn't like some Cycles-related death would fuck them over by removing a critical enchant, so why the fuck was Sloan indulging her?

But if you're ever in Vancouver for whatever reason, or no, no wait, could you maybe just, write a postcard or something, to uh, 563 Madore Avenue, Coquitlam, uh, I forget the postal code, but it's the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Cheong, could you send them a letter and tell them, you know, hey, your daughter, she uh, died, in Minneapolis, or that's not even important, as long as they know she died—

What are you talking about, said Sloan. *Just hold on and we'll get you out.*

Yeah. A whole skyscraper fell on me. Everything hurts. Not getting outta here anytime soon.

The face of the archon rose to meet them. The stairs went white with light. Delaney summoned bubbles for shade more than protection, casting a red glaze across them. "Hurry up," she hissed at Sloan.

Their predicament registered nothing on her addlepatented companion, however. *No, what the hell. That's the stupidest thing I ever heard, you're gonna give up hope for just that?*

Huh...?

Basically the first thing you told me in Clair's house was you had a high tolerance for pain. What the fuck is a fucking skyscraper to you? I'm tired of watching girls die for shit that's MY fault, so DON'T FUCKING DO IT.

Delaney shoved a hand against Sloan's back. "MOVE!"

As long as you're still alive, you have a chance to change things. You're gonna live and you're gonna tell your parents YOURSELF—

The laser punctured the glass and swept through the tower. It cleaved the staircase the moment Delaney seized Sloan and pulled her over the bannister, onto a well-placed bubble

that bounced them skyward. The stairs trembled and shook, the entire helix aquiver at the erasure of even a fragment of its coiled framework.

Somehow, as they soared through the air toward another bubble, Sloan still tried to communicate to Anoka.

All you have to do is think about the future and you can live. The goddam moon could flatten you and it wouldn't matter!

The stairs cascaded around them. The helix collapsed, coil upon coil falling upon itself, dropping into the white abyss below. Glass shattered around them as they bounced from one bubble to the next. The claws of the archon crashed against the walls as it slithered in pursuit, wallowing its long body against the Pillar.

They sailed skyward from bubble to bubble, the bubbles popping almost instantly as thousands of glass shards rained upon them, Delaney summoning three, four, five bubbles just to put down one they could hit before it burst, each bubble weaker than the last. Like vibrant festoons the staircases collapsed, the floors of each story dented inward, debris rained down, Delaney had to summon bubbles above to protect them, and bubbles to protect the bubbles they needed to hit, so many bubbles, fucking bubbles, why had it been bubbles all this time, what kind of barrier was a fucking bubble, bubbles popped, that's all they did, the words "bubble" and "pop" were inextricable, fused at the hip, one of two verbs you could adequately apply to bubble, the other being "float," pop and float and pop and float, up and up into the upper echelons of the Pillar of the Plains, the whole city spread in endless sprawl in three hundred and sixty directions around them, Delaney's arms wrapped around Sloan's torso, altering direction with each jump, a hundred tiny lacerations across her skin from all the glass, and the archon scraping after them, its light like a rising pool always at their feet no matter how fast they leapt.

Then they hit the roof.

Literally slammed right into it, the brunt of the impact going into the back of Delaney's skull. They dropped but Delaney was quick with her bubbles and bounced them to the side, out of the stairwell and onto the sixtieth floor. They rolled against solid ground and rough carpet and slowed against a door.

On the door hung a sign: ROOF ACCESS. AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

"Hurry, love."

Anoka? Anoka, are you there?

"Hurry, love!"

Delaney flung open the door. An alarm sounded, almost undetectable above the cataclysmic din, a veritable apocalypse rising from below with its god or messiah or antichrist the archon urging it forward. They staggered onto the open roof, gated with unfinished edges, the beginnings of a spire. Construction equipment proliferated across the ramshackle and disorganized space. The central swirl of the clouds coalesced directly above.

The moment Sloan made it onto the roof, Delaney sagged against a stack of crates and raised a hand. A half-dome of coagulated blood formed around Sloan, tried to spread into a full sphere, and crumbled into solidified globs that slapped against the ground.

Delaney's hand shook. She steadied it with her other hand. "Shit."

"Delaney, are you okay?" said Sloan. "Your hair is turning white—"

"Stand still, I'm fine." She bit her lip and purged all the giggling thoughts inside her head and did not dare look at her Soul Gem. She needed only one more bubble. Her fingers tightened and cramped and the bubble tried to form again, of a smoother consistency, surrounding Sloan on all sides, finally finishing into a flawless sphere.

She sagged back and sighed. The bubble floated into the air. "Stay still, don't wobble," she said. "It'll break if you nudge too hard."

The bubble drifted up, between the half-finished arches of the spires, into the sky above. *This'll take me above the clouds?* said Sloan.

Oh yes. Truthfully, Delaney had no clue. *There you'll see the sun, nice and bright, and you can do whatever your finisher is, love.*

A pang dragged its edge along the inside of her stomach. She doubled over, her legs folding beneath her. The rooftop shook violently with the respirations of the archon.

This is it, she thought. You've done everything you needed. You need only live long enough for Sloan to get above the clouds, and then it's over. This lifetime of blackness, a blackness inescapable because it came from your own damn throat, thick like phlegm it clogged your arteries and aortas, stopped your wicked heart.

The world will be better for your absence.

Sloan in the bubble floated higher and higher and smaller and smaller and still the clouds hung overhead. Maybe the bubble wouldn't make it. Maybe Delaney had miscalculated. Wouldn't that be hilarious? All this effort, all these lives tossed away, and in the end it came to nothing, the bubble breaks before Sloan is even close, she plummets to earth like Icarus. Or worse yet—what if Delaney broke the bubble now? Wouldn't that be a *devilish* prank?

Ah, no.

A vast light clipped over the edge of the roof and nearly blinded her. She sagged away from it and held a hand for defense. The light broadened, widened, magnified. The glorious sun rose like it might over the nation of Japan, thick and youthful and malevolent. Down the center of its celestial beauty the thick black crack beyond which lingered nothing, a total unlight, emptiness incarnate that could not be hidden or swallowed by the fire around it. All across the sun's face opened eyes, never more than two at a time but each blinking so rapidly that they could grant the illusion of a face filled with them, eyes like orange smudges that gazed directly into Delaney, pierced her clothes and skin and blood, saw the black clots within her

veins, the sludge that streamed through her circulatory system, the pollution trapped inside her lungs, all the malodorous ingredients of her composition.

Delaney held her hands toward the light and invited its embrace.

Delaney, whatever happens, buzzed a little voice, I want you to know you, you were my friend. I didn't act like it, I said some angry things, but you've helped me all this time. You're right... I should have listened to you, I should have listened.

"How sad," she whispered, "Because I despise you. All those emotions I could not comprehend and thought were maybe something akin to love... I think it was hatred this whole time."

She didn't whisper that. Her lips moved a little, but no sound came. The archon's face burned into her corneas.

I'M ABOVE THE CLOUDS. BREAK THE BUBBLE.

Delaney blinked, and a final note of clarity killed the distant bubble that contained Sloan Redfearn.

At first, nothing happened. Whiteness and the blinking eyes of the archon and the jagged crack. But after a few seconds the gaze of the archon reoriented, its head tilted backward, the eyes peered skyward, and the light that had enveloped her dissipated, leaving her vision numb and glazed with odd colors but functional enough that she could loll her head and see what the archon saw.

The spiral of clouds parted at its center. The immediate effect was that a ray of sunshine—true sunshine—shot through and struck the light of the archon. But further still, bathed in this cascading ray, hung the tiny figure of Sloan Redfearn, her coat spread behind her and her arms clenching not a gun but a colossal bazooka, twice the length of Sloan herself. Her already small arms appeared comical in comparison to the immensity of the weapon she held above her head.

In the immense rotundity of the cannon's barrel, a light coagulated. Molecular, atomized particles built within it, stolen from the rays of sun (*her pale fire she something something something*), coalescing into an orb, a sphere, a star of its own. More energy fed into it, it built until Sloan's small body disappeared beneath it, until it seemed like the sun itself, their sun, had fallen from its Ptolemaic position at heaven's zenith and now surged toward the planet as an ultimate doomsday. Delaney's mind went numb, her mouth fell open and her eyes screeched in agony at the constant buffet of brightness. But she could not look away or even close her eyes.

From the orb burst a godlike ray. It descended, combusting all the atmospheric elements in its path. Nitrogen, oxygen, argon, neon, helium assimilated into the resplendent ray, filled it with a rainbow sheen that flickered across its long shaft like an electric pulse. Down the holy bolt sailed, down and down and into the upturned face of the archon, crashing into its cracked visage, swallowing its light, creating a mixture of lights so fierce that everything became a nebulous emptiness, a lack of existence, a vacuum of sense and feeling.

The archon loosed a pixelated wail, digital and synthetic in its timbre, infused with compressed petabytes that spanned the whole of known and unknown music. Out of the senseless whiteness the black outline of its true face, beneath its shroud of light, reared back, an immense human skull with a hundred eye sockets embedded across its cranial plate, each socket with a wide round eye rendered schematically. The crack in the center of the skull spread, widened. Flecks of bone blasted outward to absorb into the nothingness. Its pointed fangs snapped, broke, tumbled down its throat. Its eyes rolled up, melting, resolving into white dew that ran down the skeletal cheeks like milky tears.

Out of the crack emerged a four-fingered claw, its talons hooked forward as it reached into the stream of light, a many-jointed arm rising from where the archon's brain should be, stretching skyward for the source of the light. But as it forced its way deeper into the fire, its fingers bent back, the nails snapped and the skin peeled, stripping away to reveal only brittle arthritic bones along which spread fractures and lines, until the fingers burst into dust and the palm dissolved as a stigmatic mark devoured it whole. The many-jointed arm twisted, writhed in agony, its flesh and musculature exposed, then swallowed too, and even the thick bones dwindled to long black streaks in the whiteness, until nothing of the hand remained.

The skull exploded. Like ceramic shards the forehead plate dispersed into the light until only the lower jaw remained, and then this too shattered. The light coursed further, into neck, into the endless spine, into the arms and the many scuttling legs, into the claws, into the tail, into the envenomed barb.

Then the light stopped. It simply cut off entirely, no tapering, no dwindling, no gradual fade. It ended. The whiteness vanished and the city of Minneapolis returned, its many towers and wide flatlands, its circles of homesteads and culdesac neighborhoods and snow-sunk roads. The withered, blackened, charred frame of the archon, stripped of all flesh and blood and body, clung to the edge of the Pillar for a moment, and then burst into a tremendous cascade of pixels—grief cubes—that rained down the side of the tower and into the streets below.

Nothing remained. Delaney slumped to the ground and watched Sloan Redfearn plummet from the sky.

A Stage Dense with Corpses

Considering the amount of energy sapped during Sloan's finisher, which she had only used twice before and both in purely experimental scenarios concocted by (who else) Clair Ibsen aka the only one who ever pushed her beyond shoot-until-it-dies, it amazed her she had the perspicacity to realize she needed to soften her landing. So at the last moment she corrected her ragdoll body and instrumented an imperfect parkour drop against the tower's roof. She absorbed the brunt in one knee before she rolled to distribute its impact, but even then she fell from so great a height that pain was inevitable, and sure enough it hit her hard and in a lot of spots at once.

She lay facedown. And closed her eyes. And felt the cold wind blow across her body. Yeah, might be good to lay here a long time. And not think. And die. Yeah, might be a good thing altogether.

Funny how, in Williston, when she woke in that cave with Winnipeg after the archon died, funny how happy she had been, how she had hugged Winnipeg (Erika, her name was Erika) and thought, for a brief moment, that things might be nice, that she had done good, that she had a friend. Did she feel any happiness now? No. Only a hollow, hollow emptiness.

"Delaney," she whispered. "Delaney."

No answer.

They saved the city. They foiled Kyubey's plot (or they would, because Sloan refused to go to that Japanese city to kill that Japanese girl they called a demon).

And Sloan had killed Clair.

Yeah.

Killed her.

And the Terminatrix, and the names killed by extension: Woodbury, Bloomington, St. Paul, Ramsey, Hennepin, Anoka. All of them. Lynette too, all of them.

She lay facedown.

Time passed.

Someone—Delaney—uttered a sharp and scratchy groan, followed by a pained wince. Sloan opened her eyes. Delaney cradled her knees under her chin and arched her back like a cat as she trembled against the ground not far away. Her hair had turned white, like Clair's.

It took a painful exertion, but Sloan pulled to her knees and crawled toward Delaney.

"Hey, Delaney. It's okay." She placed her hand on Delaney's shoulder. "It's okay. The archon's dead."

It probably dropped a metric ton of grief cubes. Sloan searched the rooftop but they must have fallen over the edge.

"Let's get you up, Delaney," she said. "Let's get down from here. Maybe the elevator works now." At least the storm had stopped. A placid gray serenity pervaded the skyline and the distant plains.

Sloan wriggled her other hand under Delaney's waist and leaned her against the crates. Sloan had too little faith in her remaining energy to try and make her weightless, but that was alright. Sloan could carry her.

She tried to get an arm under Delaney's legs when Delaney seized Sloan's collar with a hooked claw. She pulled Sloan close and opened her eyes. They were bright red.

"Don't... *touch*... me."

"There's tons of cubes, come on..."

Delaney's eyes peered directly into Sloan's. Her ragged breath brushed against Sloan's face, warm in the frigid morning air. "You don't, even have the... decency... to die. After, everything..."

"What are you talking about? We stopped the archon. It's over."

Harsh, jagged laughter forced its way from Delaney's throat. "Over? No... Even now... you have no idea, what you've done. Always such an idiot. Always... oblivious..."

"If you stay here you'll die," said Sloan. "Berate me after we get those cubes."

"You, you've... undone everything. Everything..."

Sloan seized Delaney's shoulders and shook her. "What do you want from me, Delaney? Whatever I did, I'll fix it. I'll undo it. I'll stop Kyubey's stupid plan, whatever it is. Just let me get you out of here, okay?"

Delaney's head lolled to the side. Her hand relinquished Sloan and slid into the folds of her gown. It emerged clutching a small pink wallet. She pushed it into Sloan's hands.

"The hell is this?"

"If you... if you're serious, if you... if you want to change anything, anything at all..."

Sloan undid the clasp and looked inside the wallet. It brimmed with Benjamin Franklin's smug face. "What the fuck? You want me to donate to charity or what? Delaney, you're not thinking straight. Come on."

She angled her arms to wrap around Delaney's body, which had folded into a compact cradle of skin and bone. But she stopped suddenly when Delaney's gaze turned away from Sloan, toward something over Sloan's shoulder. Her eyes widened with terror. Never had Sloan seen fear etched in Delaney's features, or even any genuine emotion. But the horror in her crimson eyes could not be mistaken. Sloan's own heart pounded as she slowly relinquished of Delaney and turned to see what was behind her.

It was a girl with pink hair.

She stood in the doorway back to the tower. Her hair hung in elegant, spindly strands, bound by two white ribbons on either side of her head. Her long bangs covered her eyes. She wore a beautiful white dress—never had Sloan seen a dress so beautiful—that flowed behind her and exposed a celestial starscape on the inside of its flounce (if that was the right word, Sloan lacked fashion vocabulary). Her tall boots sprouted feathered wings from the heels. An aura of tranquility pervaded from her.

Sloan understood she saw no ordinary Magical Girl. And then she saw the girl's smile and knew why.

It was the same jagged, shark tooth smile of the dolls.

Sloan had no strength to fight but stood anyway, wobbly-kneed and clinging the crates for support as she tried to summon a gun. She failed to muster the energy and the pink-haired doll stepped forward.

"Another enemy," Sloan said to Delaney. "I'll fight it."

"She's... beautiful," said Delaney.

Sloan glanced from the doll to Delaney and back again. "You can see her? But the dolls are..."

Invisible. Except, somehow, Delaney's eyes riveted to it with each slow step it took.

"Are you, are you mad at me?" said Delaney. "I know I, I know I did bad things..."

The doll knelt by Delaney's side and spread its reedy arms before her. Sloan roused herself from disbelief and tried again to summon her gun. This time the turret manifested in her hands, although its sudden and unexpected weight caused Sloan to stagger sideways.

"Get away from her," she said. "Don't touch her!"

"Sloan, it's okay..." said Delaney. The fear ebbed from her eyes. "She's, she's not... she's not here to hurt me...!"

The gloved hands of the doll closed around the Soul Gem in Delaney's brooch. Sloan dropped her gun and surged forward, she had to get that thing away from Delaney, she had to—

She lost her balance and flopped on her side.

The doll's triangle smile pressed close to Delaney's gem. The teeth parted to reveal a black crevice beyond. Sloan crawled across the ground and reached for the doll's brittle ankle.

From Delaney's Soul Gem, in one long breath, the doll sucked all the darkness and despair. A stream of black particles left the brooch on Delaney's shoulder, reverting the gem back to its pure, ruby red state as the doll swallowed the accumulated grief in a single gulp.

Sloan blinked, her hand outstretched. She could not understand. What *dues ex machina* was this? Saving Delaney at the last possible moment... Delaney regarded the pure gem on her shoulder with similar awe as the doll closed its mouth and stepped back.

The next moment, Delaney's gem shattered.

Delaney fell against the ground with a final exhalation, and then her body disappeared entirely.

Gone.

Nowhere.

Dead.

That was...

That was the Law of Cycles.

The pink-haired doll turned its head toward Sloan.

This was the fate of Magical Girls? This? Delaney, Erika, all the countless others, this was the Law of the Cycles? Was this Sloan's own fate? The exhaustion weighed heavy inside her, invited the pink-haired doll closer.

No, no, no. Sloan rolled onto her side and beat her legs against the floor. She propelled herself forward, gaining traction despite the scrapes that opened on her palms as she dragged herself for the door back to the tower. The doll made no effort to stop her as she reached the top of the stairs and rolled into it headfirst. She bounced against the narrow stairwell walls and suffered the jabs as each sharp linoleum step dug against her spine or ribs or shoulders. Her momentum deposited her onto the sixtieth floor of the Pillar of the Plains, awash in a flurry of swirling papers. She shuffled over the carpet, rising to her knees and stealing a glance behind her. The pink-haired doll smiled at her, a warm smile despite the grotesque needle teeth.

The central column of the pillar, where the massive spiral staircase once stood, was now only an empty pit sixty stories tall. A lone, frail walkway led across the pit to the glass tube elevator. Sloan limped for it, grabbing handrails for support. She lurched into the control panel, hit the only button there: down. Was it still an emergency, did the elevator still function at all? The panel delivered the same admonishment: PLEASE USE STAIRS.

"The stairs don't *exist!*" She jammed her fingers between the elevator. Over her shoulder, the pink-haired doll incrementally approached. Sloan rasped at it to stay back as she pried the

doors and wedged her thin body into the widening crack, forcing it open with her shoulder until she slipped inside.

The doors shut behind her. She hit the button for the lobby and expected something stupid to happen, an alarm, a robotic voice demanding STAIRS, maybe nothing at all, maybe worse than nothing, maybe some vital component had shattered and she would plummet to certain demise.

But the elevator descended.

She cried. All sixty stories.

By the time she staggered into the streets of downtown Minneapolis, across the mezzanine of the Pillar of the Plains with the morning chill collecting in her eyes, she had stopped crying. She wandered in a daze down the long pavilion to the snow-covered street. Millions of grief cubes twinkled on the white blanket to greet her.

Hennepin stood amid the vast field. She scooped handfuls into the pockets of her lab coat. When she noticed Sloan she stopped and hailed. "Hey! You lived, nice job!"

She tromped through the cubes and met Sloan halfway and studied Sloan up and down.

"Geez you look like shit. Where's your friend? Regina-Saskatoon, right? She's dead, right?" She checked the tower over Sloan's shoulder.

"She's dead," said Sloan.

"Sick shit!" Hennepin patted Sloan on the shoulder and extended a hand to indicate the grief cube smorgasbord. "Means just two to split all this. You did most the work, and no matter what you think about me I believe if someone earns it they deserve it. I mean, I saw what you did. I wasn't even looking, then there's this bright flash in the sky, like fucking Independence Day, not like fireworks, I mean like the movie? Starring Will Smith and Ian Malcolm? Like the alien ships, I mean. BAAAAOOOM. There goes New York, fragged off the face of the galaxy. Man I loved that movie, that's legit what I expected to happen, Minneapolis just GONE. Holy shit sorry, I gush when I get excited."

She gave Sloan a spontaneous hug. Sloan stood still, arms at her sides.

"Anyway, point is I'm willing to split seventy-five/twenty-five. You get the seventy-five, duh. I can only take credit for the planning phase, oh and that car illusion. So obviously most of it

goes to you. Not like it matters, there's so much here, like holy shit. Even with a quarter of this I won't have to hunt wraiths for a fucking YEAR. You know what I could do with a free year, Fargo? Jesus, I could even get a boyfriend!"

"What," said Sloan.

"Ha! Just kidding. Everyone knows Magical Girls are all turbolesbians." Hennepin cracked up at her own joke. She, too, started to cry as she rolled in the grief cubes and made snow angels with wide sweeps of her arms.

Sloan sat down. She searched the area in case the pink-haired doll had followed her.

Instead, she saw Kyubey. He slithered through the cubes, leaving a clear trail where his lithe body wriggled. He stopped near Hennepin and stared down at her face as she rolled and laughed.

Congratulations, you two! You defeated the archon. I actually had no expectation that you would be successful, but you managed it.

Still laughing, Hennepin gave him the finger. "Fuck yooooou, Kyuuubey. I ain't doing jack shit next year."

Unfortunately for your plans, Miss Ru, there is no guarantee any of these cubes will wind up in your possession.

Hennepin stopped laughing and sat up. "The hell does that mean."

There exist several claimants in adequate position to take these cubes instead. For instance, I mentioned earlier I had little confidence in your success. Your odds were rather low, you understand. So I called some girls in advance to fight the archon in case you failed! Twenty of them, actually.

"Twenty girls," said Hennepin. "Is this a joke? I know your weird alien species probably has different standards of humor than we lowly humans, but—"

"There aren't twenty girls in this state," said Sloan. "Nomads, maybe. Not twenty good enough to do jack."

Exactly right, Miss Redfearn! Hence, I called them from a different state entirely. Illinois, to be exact.

Illinois? That was a real place? There were places in this world outside Minneapolis? No, wait. Sloan had heard of this mythical Illinois once before. In particular, one city—

"You sent CHICAGO GIRLS here? HERE?" said Hennepin.

In fact, I sent them here six hours ago, predicting the timeline for the events surrounding the archon's birth rather accurately, I may add. I could have had them arrive perhaps an hour earlier, but it turns out they were unneeded anyway.

"You rat, you goddam rat." Hennepin grabbed for Kyubey but he bounded away with a nimble dodge. "You sent Chicago girls here? How could you, do you know what those girls DO?"

I am aware they are remarkably efficient at killing wraiths compared to the average Magical Girl. I've already instructed them exactly where to find the spoils dropped by the archon, which is what they want. Although they were ultimately superfluous in this situation, it would hamper my future dealings with such a powerful set of girls if they believed I reneged on my promises—

Hennepin dove through the snow to seize him and missed again. He scampered across the cubes and dove into a hole beneath the wreckage of a fallen skyscraper, his tail the last thing to disappear.

"No, no, no, no!" Hennepin pounded the ground. She clutched her head. "How long is it from Chicago to Minneapolis? Fargo, quick, grab all the cubes you can. Hurry!"

She shoveled cubes into her pockets until they sagged and overflowed and no more would fit. Sloan sat in the snow and watched. Now Chicago was involved? Why? It all seemed like such a farce, such a stupid fucking farce.

Hennepin toddled off somewhere, presumably to unload her cubes in a more secure location, and returned a few minutes later to shovel more into her pockets. She did not even dent the overwhelming sea that twinkled in the snow. Sloan remembered a parable: a little bird who moves a desert one grain of sand at a time. Po-twee-tweet.

"Are you even gonna help?" Hennepin kneeled before Sloan and pleaded. She placed her hands on Sloan's knee and prostrated herself. "Please, please help me."

But something else caught Sloan's attention. Down a one way street that crossed between the towers raced a large gray vehicle. At first she thought it emergency response, since a whole skyscraper had dropped and all, but it blared no sirens. Once its revving engine became audible above the meager wind, Hennepin ceased begging and watched too. It was a bus.

The bus drove straight for them. Hennepin swore under her breath. It could only be one thing, and they both knew it. As it screeched to a halt before them, parking widthwise to block the entire street, the name painted on the side of the bus rendered it undeniable: CHICAGO LINES.

"The bastard," said Hennepin. "He timed it, he timed it so they would show up and steal our cubes, he timed it just for that!"

"Did you even listen?" said Sloan, disinterested. "He timed it so they would kill the archon. We weren't supposed to do that."

The door of the bus folded open. Two girls in golden medieval armor, helms and visors and all, leapt out and assumed a position on either side of the door. One held an arquebus and the other a blunderbuss. Both aimed at Sloan and Hennepin.

"Don't move! You and this city are under the inquisition of the Holy Order of Chicago."

It begins, Sloan thought.

Two more girls, plated in the same golden armor, rushed from the bus and ran around to its back. They pulled open the handicap access doors and withdrew a long ramp leading from the bus to the ground. While they worked, more girls exited through the main door and secured a perimeter, their motions methodical and preplanned. Sloan kept a mental count. By the time the girls at the back finished placing the ramp, nineteen had appeared.

From the back of the bus, astride a machine stallion of shifting gold plates, which looked and moved every bit like a real horse, the twentieth girl emerged. She wore more elaborate armor than the others, made distinct by a long turquoise plume that flowed from the crest of her helm. One hand held the reins of her mount as she steered down the ramp and into the snow. The other clutched a halberd straight at her side to match her immaculate posture.

The other soldiers bowed their heads as the equestrian passed and clutched a fist over their heart in sincere salute. The horse, its eyes azure and its nostrils flaring steam, trotted with graceful, long-legged steps through the uneven terrain of snow. It stopped before Sloan and Hennepin. The girl atop raised her visor.

"Identify yourselves."

Hennepin bowed her head like the other girls, although she did not mimic their salute. "I am Hennepin."

"Fargo," said Sloan.

"Where is Minneapolis," asked the girl on the horse.

"Minneapolis is dead," said Hennepin. "Fargo and I are the only survivors."

Horse girl processed this information with no change in demeanor. "Hennepin and Fargo," she said, "With the powers vested in me by the Empress Chicago, I place you under arrest for interrogative purposes. We shall discern how these events transpired. If you are cooperative, you may be offered a position in the New Colonial Government of the Territory of Minneapolis, which I claim in the name of the Empress."

"The Empress," said Hennepin with a calculated dose of reverent awe. "Is she here?"

"Pah!" said horse girl. "The Empress would never depart her dominion to survey the conquest of a country backwater. The privilege of colonizing this territory in her name falls to I, Cicero, the third of Greater Chicago's Four Centurions, her stalwart Paladin." She pointed the spiked tip of her halberd under Sloan's chin. "You! Fargo, if such a locale even merits a Puella Magi. You will lower your eyes when you look at me."

Watching this surreal display, Sloan got the distinct impression she had entered overtime, living her life past its intended finale, like she had fallen into a world she was never meant to experience.

She began to laugh.

It became clear immediately that laughter was not the reaction Cicero had expected. Hennepin inched herself away from Sloan and cast a sidelong glance at the nineteen armored girls arrayed around them, who also had no words, no reaction, only bafflement as Sloan laughed and laughed in their leader's face.

"I note the condition of your Soul Gem is especially poor, Fargo," said Cicero. "And yet I shall brook no insult. Seize her and prepare her for flogging!"

A pair of armored girls broke formation to grab Sloan's arms and force her facedown into the snow. But Sloan could not stop laughing!

"Yes, yes, flog me to death, why the fuck not?"

"Fifty lashes for the insult, and fifty for the profanity," said Cicero. "Now that you have entered the territory of Greater Chicago, you shall abide by its rules, which instill a common metric of decency among Puella Magi and minimize general harlotry."

Another armored girl stepped forward. She held a rolled-up whip, like the one Ramsey had used. With one quick crack it unfurled against the air.

"I don't mean to be rude or anything," said Hennepin (far away from Sloan), "But isn't one hundred lashes a bit much? I mean, I'm sure your rules are sound and all—"

"Leniency begets slothfulness," said Cicero. "The lashes begin now. One!"

The whip slashed Sloan's back. Normally she could have contained the pain, but now she cried out as the full brunt rippled across her skin in a thick welt.

"Two!"

The whip fell again. The pain magnified.

"Three—"

"Lady Cicero," said another girl. "The cubes!"

Cicero lowered her halberd and looked past Sloan. The other girls stared with her. Hennepin kneaded her hands together. Finally, since obviously something of vague interest had begun to transpire, Sloan expended the effort to twist her neck and stare over her shoulder at the field of cubes in the snow.

It was like someone had pulled the plug in a bathtub. The cubes, the whole great mass of them, slowly swirled around a central point. They jingled against each other, at first a small chime, but soon a roaring cacophony as they tumbled in eddying waves within the landlocked typhoon like a widening gyre. The central pivot of the whirlpool sucked the cubes into the frothing hole at the center, a dark circle like a sheer puncture in the ground.

Sloan had long since departed the giving-a-shit phase of her life and offered no explanation for what she saw. If not for the bafflement on the faces of all twenty Chicago girls, she'd have thought it some efficient cube capture device, like a vacuum designed solely for grief cubes.

"Hurry, stop it, whatever it is!" Cicero said. "You, Fargo! You know something about this, don't you?"

"I know jack fucking shit," said Sloan. Several of the Chicago girls tromped to the edge of the cube cyclone and made tenuous grasps for handfuls of cubes.

"Your continued insolence shall be remembered," said Cicero. "Until then, you shall explain the knavery taking place!"

"For the record," said Hennepin, "I know nothing about this, and have nothing to do with this Fargo girl, really."

"It's probably the time demon, Humbug Applebee," said Sloan. "From Teriyaki, Japan. Apparently she caused everything else to happen, so why not?"

"Is this girl touched in the head?" said Cicero. Hennepin shrugged.

The cubes drained faster. The bolder Chicago girls made tepid progress into the outer currents of the whirlpool, only to have the torrent sweep their feet from under them. Their fellows worked furiously to rescue those that fell and nobody did much of anything to stem the tide. Soon the vast field depleted to a small dreg in the center of the street that sloshed around as the black hole in the ground swallowed every last cube greedily.

The Chicago girls gathered around the hole once all the cubes had disappeared. "Someone's down there," said one.

"Follow and apprehend them," said Cicero. "Those cubes are property of the Empress Chicago and her Imperial Ranks. Thievery shall not be tolerated!"

Nobody appeared eager to plunge into the hole. From Sloan's angle it looked like a bottomless pit. Nevertheless, at Cicero's stern command, they inched forward and aimed their weapons at the space.

In a blink, the hole closed. Nothing remained save the ordinary city street. Not a stray cube, not a mark.

"Whoever it is, they fled into the sewers," said Cicero. "Hurry, after them. Don't let them escape."

The girls tottered to the nearest manhole and pried open its cover. One by one they leapt into the depths.

"You won't find them," said Sloan. "I don't know what happened, but it *did* happen, so it's part of Kyubey's plan. He wanted you to kill the archon, but I did that first, so really he didn't need you at all."

Cicero whipped her halberd around and stuck it under Sloan's throat, forcing her chin to rise. "You know more than you're saying. You will tell me, no matter what methods it takes to wring the information out of you!"

"Yeah." Sloan glanced down at her Soul Gem and all its darkness. "I doubt it."

"We shall see about that." She snapped at a subordinate. "Bring the cubes we brought with us. Force feed them to her to abate the Cycles. We'll give her something much worse than lashes."

Another girl rushed back to the bus. Sloan laughed some more, because laughing seemed like the only thing left to do. Was this never going to end? She should have stayed on the rooftop with the pink-haired doll and died alongside Delaney.

She should have—

A pair of arms wrapped around her waist and hugged her tight. Sloan glanced at Cicero and down at the arms. They were white and frail. Around one wrist was a band, and on that band was a luminous Soul Gem, brimming with energy. Sloan knew that gem.

Then Sloan sank into a pit of tar that opened beneath her, and everything went dark.

"Wow... those girls were something scary, weren't they?"

Sloan floated in a black void. Omaha's arms remained wrapped around her, and the small girl's body pressed against Sloan's back. All around them drifted the grief cubes dropped by the archon. They orbited like an asteroid belt, with Sloan and Omaha the heavenly object at their center.

"So you took the cubes," said Sloan. "Where is this place. Are we invisible?"

"Ah... no, not quite. But don't worry, we're even safer. Here, nobody can hurt us, nobody at all..."

Everything was only black. No stars or suns or planets. Nothing but them and the grief cubes. Nor any oxygen. Sloan tried to breathe and couldn't. But somehow she needed no breath and could speak without air.

"This..." said Omaha, "This is the crevice between universes."

"Between. What? Omaha, I don't care about any of this. I think I'm just gonna die. Let that pink doll take me away."

"Ah, so you saw Liebe..." said Omaha. "She came to take Miss Delaney, right? I knew Miss Delaney died somehow, because my wrist healed... see?" She held up her hand. No trace

remained of the gash Delaney had inflicted upon her. "Anyway, not even Liebe can reach you here. Your Soul Gem won't become more tainted, no matter what you do. As I said... we're outside the universe. Its laws don't apply here. Nothing applies here..."

"What?!" Sloan struggled against Omaha's grip. "So this is limbo? We're stuck here forever?"

Omaha giggled. Except she was so awkward about it, it came out forced and strained. "No, silly... I can come and go anytime I want. I can take you or anyone else with me. It's easy, really..."

A hole opened in front of them. Beyond it lay the streets of Minneapolis and the Chicago girls gathered around a miserable Hennepin. Omaha pushed Sloan outside, into the cold.

"—And once we've lashed you enough times to cover for your friend's insolences," Cicero told Hennepin, "We shall interrogate you thoroughly until we can be certain your claims of ignorance are true—"

"Lady Cicero, she's back!"

The Chicago girls turned and regarded Sloan and Omaha standing in the street.

"Aw..." said Omaha. "Don't take it out on poor Miss Serena. Oh, um, I mean... Hennepin."

Hennepin knelt with her wrists bound behind her back and a fresh wound on the crown of her head. One eye had squinted shut. "Who are you and how do you know my name?"

"Hennepin doesn't know anything, really," said Omaha. "If you want to be angry at anyone... be angry at me!"

"Apprehend them both," said Cicero.

But before the Chicago girls took their first step, Omaha pulled Sloan back through the hole, into the void. The circle looking into Minneapolis sealed shut and nothing remained but darkness.

"See?" said Omaha. "So you don't need to worry about anything."

"This is nuts," said Sloan. "You could always do this?"

"No, actually, I've never been able to do this until now. You see... hm... How should I explain? Well, it started with my wish. Maybe you've guessed by now... but I wished I could disappear."

Sloan mulled it over. "So your powers..."

"Yeah, pretty literal, right?" Omaha said. "I... was very unhappy with myself. And who I was. The Man Who Said He Was My Father told me he hated me... he told me I was wicked in the eyes of God. I wanted more than anything to just disappear... So nobody, not even God could see my wickedness. And that was what I wished when my Friend asked me to sign his contract..."

"Your friend. Kyubey."

"If that's what you call him. He's an emissary of God. An angel! He gave me what I always wanted and was the only one who was ever kind to me."

"Omaha, look, you can't trust that guy. He's lying to you, like he lied to Delaney and Clair and me and everyone—"

"But actually, after I thought about it, I realized he hadn't really granted my wish. Not exactly. I could disappear, true. And in some ways I could hide from even the rules of this universe... but I could not escape them entirely. I asked my Friend about it, and he explained that while all wishes could be granted, they could only be granted to an extent allowed by the power of the girl who made the wish... A wish to escape the universe entirely would require a huge amount. Way more than I had..."

"But you got ahold of these cubes and supercharged your Soul Gem. While me and Hennepin were talking. And then you could do things you couldn't before."

"Right!" said Omaha. "I got the power I didn't have when I made my wish. And so much more power to spare..." With a sweeping arm she indicated the cubes that gravitated around them. "It's like your wish. You wished to heal sight, so you gained the ability to see truth. Normally though, even with that wish, you never could have seen Liebe or the other dolls, or any of the other things you can see now. But the power of the Williston archon allowed you to achieve your wish's ultimate pinnacle... Even now that your energy is almost gone, you still have that ability—it's become a permanent part of you, an extension of your wish. It was really important that you gained that ability too, or else the dolls might have killed you before you had a chance to defeat Clair. Miss Delaney also gained powers when she defeated the archon in Saskatoon..."

"So... Kyubey planned my wish to be what it was since the beginning."

"It's possible," said Omaha. "I don't know how my Friend works. I know he can see every single Magical Girl in the world, though... Maybe he just picked you out of the list? I'm sorry I don't have an answer..."

Could Kyubey have caused her twin sister's blindness? As part of his "plan"? Could all of Sloan's life been created for his stupid fucking plan?

"M, maybe we shouldn't dwell on this, Sloan," said Omaha. "I can see it troubles you. The point is, I've realized the full extent of my wish. I can be invisible to everyone now, even God. Or, more importantly, Her greatest adversary..."

Everything. Had everything been for this stupid time demon shit? Was it Kyubey who kept Sloan isolated, who ensured she had no friends except Clair, who stewed the jealousy in Sloan's heart so she would make a very particular wish and gain a very particular power, solely so she could use that power at a critical juncture to ensure better odds of his plan succeeding? What was Sloan Redfearn, was she a human or a cog?

"I know it's... hard..." said Omaha. "I, too, have had doubts... and I've done things I never wanted to do... Like, what I did to Miss Erika..."

"So Winnipeg's death, that was just another necessary thing? Step 529 in Kyubey's plan for world domination?"

"Miss Delaney's death was optional, he told me. But Miss Erika's was necessary. Either she would take most of the Williston cubes for herself or... or she would give you a reason to forget Clair and never return to Minneapolis. Either way... it was important that she, she..."

Sloan clutched her temples and stared into the nothingness beneath her feet. "Everything. This was everything?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to kill her, or Miss Lynette, or anyone. I didn't want anyone to die, not even Miss Delaney and Miss Clair. Everything I did, I did because... because..."

"Because of the demon," said Sloan. "No, someone that Kyubey told you was a demon. Demons don't exist, you idiot. He's lying so you'll assassinate some thorn in his side, someone who made a wish that mucks up his system, something like that. Demons don't exist, and if they did they wouldn't be some random Japanese girl—"

Omaha slapped Sloan in the face. "Demons DO exist! They do, and so does God! Are you so foolish to deny it, Sloan? Why do you think the Law of the Cycles exists? You saw Liebe, you saw what she wore! God sacrificed Her existence so that She could absorb the suffering of all Magical Girls. It's in the Bible, haven't you read the Bible?"

All Sloan knew about the Bible was that some guy got eaten by a whale.

"I... I'm sorry I hit you, Sloan..."

Sloan rubbed her face. It didn't even hurt. "I'm too tired to care, Omaha."

"God sacrificed so much so we could be happier... And then this demon, this Homura Akemi, she, she, she enslaved God, made Her suffer, took control of the Law of the Cycles and made a MOCKERY of it, she runs this universe into the ground, steers it toward oblivion, she has spent her entire life hurting God more and more, she she she she! She!"

Omaha twisted up, folded her arms around each other, bent her legs, gnashed her teeth. She pulled at her hair and revolved in the emptiness of the void. She clutched at her own throat and squeezed.

"Omaha, stop it. Stop, Omaha."

For this, they had all died. Now only Omaha remained, and this demon chick, and probably by the end they'd both be dead too. But it was easy to tell by the contortions in Omaha's body and the frenzy in her voice and the asphyxiation on her face she had gone beyond reason. Much like how no matter what anyone said, Sloan never deviated from her path to kill Clair Ibsen. Kyubey sure picked all the right girls.

Omaha comported herself and brushed back her hair. "I'm sorry... I got emotional. I didn't mean to... Well, I suppose I should stop avoiding the inevitable. The thing is, Sloan, my Friend told me to kill you now."

"Sure, why not."

"I mean... he said that, if you survived, I would have to kill you. So you didn't take the cubes. Just like I would have had to kill Miss Clair if she survived instead, which was possible. Or Miss Delaney, because I needed my wrist back. I hoped the archon would do the job for me, and it did most of it. But you..."

Sloan pulled aside the flap of her coat and exposed her Soul Gem. "I don't care, Omaha. Just do it. Then go to Japan and do whatever and realize too late you were tricked. That's the real Law of the Cycles: Kyubey tricks us, and we swallow it. Over and over and over and over."

"...I, I, I have to do something very scary, Sloan. I have to take this power you created for me and fight Lucifer herself. This is probably the most power any regular Magical Girl has ever had at once, and even then, it's still possible I'll lose... she's really strong, strong enough to usurp even God. I mean, I have plans, and my Friend told me how to fight her, and what weaknesses to exploit, but... I'm still scared. And... and... and..."

Sloan expected tears, but Omaha held herself together.

"And, well. I always thought that, you know, if the situation was different, you and I could maybe be friends. We've both been really lonely, and unlike Miss Delaney and Miss Clair I don't think you're a bad person, Sloan. And, and, and, my Friend said you really don't have a chance of affecting anything anymore. I already have the cubes, so there's no reason to kill you... I think if I had a friend like you by my side, I would have more confidence, and, and do better. You know?"

She clasped her hands around Sloan's and stared with a hopeful expression. Sloan closed her eyes and sighed.

"No, Omaha. I'm done. Leave me alone."

Omaha withdrew her hands. "Ha ha... Yeah, you're right. It's selfish to ask someone to be a personal cheerleader... I'm sorry. If you want, though, you can take some of the cubes, enough so you can purify your Soul Gem. This city will need a new leader now that its Magical Girls are gone, and I don't trust those Chicago girls..."

"No, Omaha. I'm done. Like, done."

"Oh... I see." Omaha kneaded her hands together. "Yeah, I probably shouldn't disobey my Friend's order anyway... Who knows what weird consequences might happen. But, um, I still don't want to kill you. Killing a Magical Girl by breaking her Soul Gem, it's tantamount to... Well, you probably don't care anyway."

"You're right. I don't."

"Okay. I, I won't bother you anymore. You probably hate me... That's okay. I'm used to it, and I deserve it. The things I've done, I did to save God, but in doing so I flouted Her laws, so am I really doing what God would want? I don't know. I'm rambling. I'll, uh, let you go."

A hole back to the real world opened. It looked onto another Minneapolis street, still in downtown but away from Cicero and company. The cold seeped through the opening and tightened Sloan's skin.

"Goodbye, Sloan... I guess this is a real goodbye. But... don't feel bad about yourself. And don't die without, without closure, okay?"

"Closure," said Sloan. She drifted toward the opening.

"I don't know... You deserve better than this. Maybe, maybe find your family? They're in this city still, right? They must be so worried about you. I know it's not much, but..."

"Goodbye, Omaha."

Sloan stepped through the opening and emerged in Minneapolis. She did not look back as Omaha shut the gate and sealed her little crevice between universes. In the quiet air, the distant sounds of Cicero barking orders whistled over the rooftops.

So, now she waited? For the pink-haired doll to come? Now that the storm had settled a fog fell over the city, coating everything a misty gray. She checked her Soul Gem. Bad, incredibly bad, but it had a sliver left. She had survived for weeks, months in this condition back in Fargo. Back then she had something to live for. The only thing she ever had to live for, really. Now that thing was gone.

Still, she better not hang around. Cicero's voice was close, and if Sloan had to die she'd rather not do it during some medieval torture while being force fed cubes to prolong her suffering. The empty city streets sprawled in all directions. The Pillar of the Plains loomed high above them, a shrouded specter in the haze. Sloan had nowhere to go, which was the whole problem, right?

Well, Omaha gave a suggestion, at least. Sloan had completely forgotten her family. Mom, Dad, Morgan. Probably worried sick about her. Might as well show up and die in their arms. Like what Omaha said: Closure.

She chose a road and slouched toward home.

She did not get far before she became aware of a figure following her. It kept half-covered in the deep mist, a silhouette more than anything, but Sloan knew it had to be the pink-haired doll. Except now Sloan had given herself a mission, or at least a place to die, so she might as well stick with it. One last obdurate fuck you to the system.

It took an hour, maybe two, maybe three to limp all the way to her old home, the figure drawing no closer and falling no further back. The house looked like she remembered, a little smaller maybe, shapely and homely, Christmas cheer on the lawn. Eaves and cornices.

She hobbled up the walkway and slumped against the door. She raised a weak knuckle and rapped it and waited.

Nothing. She tried the doorbell. Nothing.

Oh, yeah. The sirens had gone off when the archon appeared. They must have took shelter in the basement. She tried the door but it was locked, so she mustered her strength and kicked it in.

No alarm sounded. She staggered down the entryway, past the kitchen, into the living room. Nobody was there. Nobody, except for the portraits of family members hung up around the house. None of which were anyone Sloan had ever seen before.

It was the right house, she knew that. But the wrong family now lived here.

She flopped against an armchair. All the furniture was different. Had her family moved in the last seven months? They moved a lot when Sloan was young, because of Morgan's blindness. Always to places with clinics that promised the latest advances in optometry. Minneapolis was no exception, a mere ninety minutes from the vaunted Mayo Clinic in Rochester (a drive Sloan suffered so many times because Mom said she had to "show support" for Morgan). But with Morgan's blindness cured, why move again?

Probably for no reason than to spite her, finally and utterly. Deny her a dramatic, tragic death and leave her with one final failure as her last legacy. Who the fuck knew.

Footsteps sounded down the entryway. The house's new owner? No, the figure that had followed her. Alright, no more wasting time. Sloan accepted pink-haired oblivion in this plush armchair.

Except the person who rounded the corner was neither the house's owner nor the pink-haired doll. It was Anoka.

"The fuck are you doing here," said Sloan.

"I followed you, doofus." Anoka limped across the room and dropped facedown on the couch beside the armchair. Her feet dangled over the edge and twiddled in the air. Her cape hung in shredded ribbons from her back, her armor had hundreds of punctures, and her face bled from gashes.

"I thought you died."

"Yeah well." Anoka stretched and yawned. "I got you to thank for not doing that. Your pep talk really got me going."

"Pep talk."

"You know. I had a whole tower fall on me, and some kind of spike or pole or whatever stuck through my gut—" (she rolled over and showed the hole in her stomach) "—and pretty much considered myself donezo. Then you gave me that spiel about telling my parents I'm sorry for running away from home, and that got me moving. I hacked that pole out of me and busted my way from the tower and voila! Here I am."

Sloan stared between her knees at the burgundy carpet. It still had the stain from Dad's coffee cup snafu. "I'm glad you lived, Anoka."

"Where's your nutty friend? Psycho chick with the bubbles?"

"Gone."

"Ah. Sorry about that, but it's probably for the best. I'd have a bone to pick with her if she were still here. Even though I guess she did save my life once or twice."

"I'm the one you should hate. I caused all this. By killing Clair."

"Yeah..." Anoka propped her chin on the armrest. "You're probably right. I guess I don't really feel like picking a fight with anyone right now. Besides, you saved my life too, like three times probably. I guess it's hard to hate someone who saved your life."

"If you don't mind, I think I'm gonna die now."

Anoka lifted herself off the couch with a huff of exertion. "What! You mean like, die to the Cycles? What the hell, you can't do that."

"I fucked up everything. I got everyone killed. And I destroyed the one thing I had to keep me going anyway. When I killed Clair, it was like, someone pulled a pin out of me. I kept moving forward to fight that archon, but it was the last few winds unwinding." She tilted her head back and chuckled. "All this time, I could think of nothing but killing Clair. Getting her back for what she did to me. But in a weird way, she never stopped being my friend? What's a friend anyway? Just the person who makes you care about yourself."

Anoka said nothing.

"I deserve to die," said Sloan.

"Don't say that. You fought the archon and beat it. I'd consider that penance."

"Apparently I fucked things on some pseudospiritual cosmic level or some bullshit. That archon was part of some plan by Kyubey to kill some god or demon or whatever and I don't even know."

By now Anoka stood over Sloan. Sloan burrowed her face deeper into her hands.

"This is bullshit," said Anoka. "Self-pitying, sorry-for-yourself bullshit. You're gonna tell me these things after what you said before? About how as long as you're alive, you have a chance to change things? What the hell was all that?"

Sloan shrugged. "I dunno. Probably sounded good at the time." Truthfully she didn't remember saying that.

Anoka seized Sloan's collar and forced her to look up. "No. Bullshit. If the Cycles haven't come yet, that means you still have some hope, no matter how tiny. Don't let that hope be extinguished. Get the hell up, Fargo!"

Sloan wasn't feeling it.

Anoka let go and stepped away. She clenched her fists and picked up one of the family portraits scattered around the house. After a few seconds, she put it back down.

"I killed my friend too," she whispered.

Sloan thought maybe she misheard. "What?"

"I don't know too much about you, Fargo, but I know a little bit. You went to Williston and killed the archon there, didn't you?"

That didn't seem like the kind of detail Clair would have wasted time telling her subordinates.

"I thought so. Do you know how that archon appeared there?"

Sloan was about to say it had something to do with the oil, how the men lived in tents and hung themselves and bought whores, but she remembered a distant detail, a corpse she and Erika discovered beneath the archon, half-rotted and adrift in the swamp.

"I ran away from home in Vancouver. Part of it was I was a weak Magical Girl in a competitive region. But that's more an excuse, and if nothing else were bad, I would've stuck it out even if it destroyed me. I mostly ran because my parents."

Another story. Every girl had one.

"You know the stereotype about Asian parents. My grades were never spectacular anyway, and I wasn't good at the extracurriculars they made me do, but when I contracted it got way worse. I failed courses. They disciplined me heavily, talked about sending me to a private high school in the wilderness where I wouldn't be distracted by all the things they thought distracted me. I got fed up and ran away."

"And came here."

"I had met Minneapolis before. On an online forum for Magical Girls. She told me she had an opening and expressed interest in my particular skill. So I embarked."

"Outside of Calgary I met Gwen. She was a runaway too, her dad was abusive—you know, standard Magical Girl crap. Kyubey doesn't often contract girls with stellar home lives. We decided to pair up and make the journey together. Between Calgary and Minneapolis there's not much at all, wild prairie and a few scattered cities. Plus we heard rumors about Regina and Saskatoon and wanted to avoid it. So we basically went for a thousand mile walk through total wasteland."

"We were really fast friends, though. We had the same goals, similar pasts. Gwen was always rather cheery too, easy to get along with. She loved plants and stuff, she would grow us food. We would be in some freezing frontier outpost with no money and she'd grow an apple tree and we'd have apples."

"How long were you out there."

"Weeks. Maybe over a month. We got lost a few times. Kyubey gave us directions but they were pretty unclear and we'd get confused. We hopped the border in Montana, wound up in Billings somehow, scuffled with the girl there. Followed a road, missed a fork. Eventually we found ourselves in Williston."

"And you had cubes all this time?"

"Yeah, well. That was the rough part, right? Cold, hunger, those are annoying, but they won't stop a Magical Girl. Cubes though, they don't grow on trees, despite Gwen's best efforts. We scrounged what we could. The really small towns don't have many wraiths but they also don't have many girls, so nomads can always make pickings. We didn't do great, but we had enough to sustain ourselves. Outside a few really hairy bits, like that brawl in Billings, we did well enough for ourselves. And then we reached Williston."

"I misremembered earlier. I said we got lost and wound up there, but actually Kyubey suggested we go, because it had a lot of wraiths. All those oil workers. But the trek there was like, way bad. None of the towns leading to Williston had anything at all. Some nomad or another had hit them the night before we got there, each and every time. By the time we reached Williston we were starving for cubes."

And did Kyubey plan this, too? Their route, and how many wraiths they would find. Did he go to the nomads and tell them to clean certain towns at certain times to make Anoka and her friend desperate? Sloan already knew the direction this story headed. Anoka didn't need to say the rest, but she did.

"Starving people, they see a feast and they get greedy. That's what it boiled down to, stupid stupid greed. Both of us. We were both so weak, we were irritated and cold and hurting, we had spent the last two days in silence. We started to fight. I don't even remember the particulars. I started it."

Anoka paused for a long time.

"She ended it. She hit me too hard and my magic did its thing. She couldn't handle the pain. She smashed her own Soul Gem against the ground and died in a no-name town in the middle of nowhere."

"And the archon spawned."

"Yeah. I got freaked and ran away. Kyubey told me what it was and told me I had like literally a zero percent chance of killing it. I had no idea what to think. Had I killed Gwen? Had she killed herself? He told me archons were a manifestation of tremendous sin. Who had

sinned, me or her? Who did I hold accountable? It was easy to tell myself it wasn't my fault. So I did."

Then she went through Fargo and ended at Minneapolis. Fin.

"Why did you tell me this," said Sloan. "It's nothing like what I—"

"You told me, when I was under that tower, to go home to Vancouver and apologize myself to my parents for running away. I'll do that, but before then, I'm gonna find Gwen's parents and tell them what happened. They won't believe me, they'll think I'm insane, and maybe they didn't care too much about Gwen anyway. But I'm gonna tell them, and if they ever wonder what happened, they'll know."

The wind outside died to a faint rustle. The storm had ended.

"If you did something wrong," said Anoka, "It's your job to set it right. That's always been my philosophy. I should've gone at that Williston archon even if I had no chance. It's too late for that now, so I'll have to settle for something else. Fargo. You never even hesitated when you decided to fight the archon after Minneapolis died. Because you have the same philosophy, right? You believe things have to be corrected. Sin and punishment must stand equal."

"Killing that archon only made things worse," said Sloan.

"Then you correct it. If you had the power to ruin something in the first place, it means you have the power to fix it."

"I'm glad you lived, Anoka. Please let me alone now."

Anoka folded her arms and stared at Sloan for a long time. Her gaze pierced Sloan's thin skin. So did the gazes of all the smiling members of a family Sloan had never seen or met, a surrogate family happy in its simplicity that had nestled and displaced her real one, unhappy in its own special way.

"Okay," said Anoka. "I'm sorry I bothered you. Look, though. If you change your mind, here."

She withdrew a fist from a pocket and tossed a few scattered objects into Sloan's lap. Cubes.

"I swiped them before those gold armor girls came. I saw you and Hennepin talking but didn't wanna show myself, because I didn't trust Hennepin. Thought she might try to take the cubes herself."

"Thanks," said Sloan.

"It's never too late for atonement... Fargo."

She pivoted on a cracked heel and marched the way she came. Her footsteps clopped across the tile and through the open front door until they softened into nothing and Sloan sat alone in the house, alone with all the pictures.

Sloan settled into the armchair and slid her hands into her pockets. At least everyone being dead meant there was literally nobody left to talk to her, unless Ramsey or whoever suddenly arrived to describe an improbable tale of survival, to which they appended another tragic past...

Her hand struck something unusual in her pocket. She pulled it out—Delaney's purse. The one she gave Sloan before she died. Inside was at least three thousand dollars in cash, plus a shattered cellphone and a few wayward slips of paper.

Sloan took out the papers. They were notes Delaney had written to herself in loopy cursive.

WILLISTON — SLOAN REDFEARN (FARGO) / ERIKA DUFRESNE (WINNIPEG).

MINNEAPOLIS — CLAIR IBSEN.

MITAKIHARA — HOMURA AKEMI.

God fucking dammit. She had cubes, money, the name of a city, and the name of a demon. And the pink-haired doll had not shown, and everyone she had ever met who still lived and some who lived no longer were telling her, screaming at her the exact same thing.

"Fuck it."

That afternoon she boarded a plane to Japan.

END SECOND ARC

It Still Revolves

FINAL ARC: MITAKIHARA

"Beef noodles again." Nagisa prodded a chunk of meat with her chopsticks and stuck out her tongue. "Bluh!"

From the other side of the triangle table, Mami Tomoe turned a page in her textbook. She sighed, audible enough to convey her disappointment but not so loud she might appear unduly stern. Although, truth be told, dinnertime became a point of contention in their apartment too often for Mami's taste.

In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry made his first visit to Japan.

Mami leaned over her notepad and wrote: *1853 — Matthew Perry*. Her history studies had finally reached more contemporaneous events. Next came the Meiji Restoration and the World Wars. Then a rather boring period of economics and recessions and whatnot. As for the rest of the world, they had cold wars and decolonization, embargos and missile crises, spies and secrets—

"Bebe, please. You must eat."

Nagisa swirled the noodles around the bowl with her chopsticks and pushed down the beef chunks until they became stuck underneath the noodles and turned everything into a stew.

"I'm sorry it's not what you like. But you cannot eat cheese for every meal anyway. It's unhealthy."

"I don't care if it's bad!" said Nagisa. "I hate beef noodles. I want cheese!"

Nagisa hated beef noodles. Nagisa hated any kind of noodles. Nagisa also hated vegetables, and tofu, and fruit, and dumplings, and rice (how could anyone hate *rice?*), and chicken, and sushi, and basically anything Mami served unless it had copious helpings of cheese or was just a plain block of cheese. Oh, and desserts. Nagisa liked desserts. In the past, Mami could always tell Nagisa that if she ate nothing but cheese, she would turn into cheese. But Nagisa had gotten older and in some regards wiser.

"Bebe, I won't ask again. You will eat your beef noodles or you'll go straight to bed after you finish your homework."

Commodore Perry returned in 1854 and signed a treaty at Kanagawa that—

"But, but then who'll fight the wraiths with you?"

Mami licked a finger and turned a page in her textbook. The page had a woodblock print of Commodore Perry and his officers. "I'll fight them myself. That's what I did before, so it's nothing I can't handle."

"You can't! The wraiths are too strong. You'll get scared without me to protect you."

Mami stifled a giggle. She rubbed her eyes and turned the page. "Well, Bebe, if that's the case, you better eat up. Or I'll have to brave it alone."

No further admonishment proved necessary. Nagisa stooped over her bowl and slurped big mouthfuls of noodles. She was a good girl, dietary habits notwithstanding, and Mami knew she couldn't be luckier to have her as a ward. With all the entrance exam studying, it had been a long while since Mami splurged on her. Maybe, while Nagisa did her homework, Mami could slip out and buy a nice cheesecake at the bakery. Yes, it would be a fun little reward for them both.

She was trying to remember if she also needed to stock on chamomile when her cellphone clattered against the glass table and played the ringtone du jour. Unusual for someone to call rather than text in their modern era, but when Mami looked at the name on the screen she knew why.

"Hello, Miss Akemi."

Nagisa quit scarfing noodles long enough to make a funny face.

"I need to speak with you and Nagisa, Tomoe," said Homura Akemi's cold voice.

"Very well," said Mami. "About what?"

"I would rather not say over the phone. Come to my apartment immediately. We'll discuss there."

The call ended with a click. Ah, Mami had missed Homura Akemi's modus operandi when it came to phone calls.

"What's wrong?" said Nagisa.

"Miss Akemi wants us to go to her apartment so she can discuss something with us."

"Discuss what?"

"I don't know, Bebe."

Nagisa went back to stirring her noodles. She drummed her fingers against the table. "Do I *have* to go? I don't really like Homura..."

"Bebe, it's not nice to say mean things about our friends, especially behind their backs." Not that Mami could not commiserate.

"If I eat all my beef noodles, can I stay home?"

Honestly, Mami ought to call Homura back and explain she was too busy to attend the meeting. It was not even a lie, because they had to fight wraiths, and Nagisa had homework, and Mami had her studies. Still, Homura never called anyone for a matter of small

importance. Maybe Homura had taken Mami's earlier visit to heart? Mami hoped that Homura and Madoka would become more involved with the other girls of the city. It did none of them good to divide themselves into tiny two-girl factions. And Nagisa ought to have friends outside of only Mami. Two days ago, Madoka and Sayaka and Kyoko had joined Mami and Nagisa for a rousing five-girl wraith hunt. They had a lot of fun, and Nagisa got along well with the other girls. Only Homura had been absent. Could this meeting be about that? If so, she probably would not extend an invitation for closer connection between the Mitakihara Six. Quite the opposite, actually: another vague warning to stop prying into her and Madoka's lives.

Sigh. Yes, that was most likely. Mami had long since curbed her optimism for a change in Homura's demeanor, and the brevity of the phone call signaled no sudden wellspring of camaraderie in Miss Akemi's heart. Nagisa need not attend a meeting laced with tension and subtle threats. If Homura had any pertinent information to relay, Mami could tell Nagisa afterward.

"Uh, Mami? Are you okay?"

Mami brushed back a curl of her hair. "Yes, I was only thinking. I suppose if you're good and eat all your noodles, you can stay here while I go." It would also give her the opportunity to surprise Nagisa with a cheesecake.

"Hurray!" said Nagisa. She shoveled the rest of her noodles into her mouth and gobbled them down in two sloppy gulps.

"Mind your table manners, Bebe." Although Mami giggled as she said it. Nagisa held up the empty bowl to show her, a goofy grin on her face.

"Finished!"

"Very good," said Mami. She marked her page and closed the textbook, her mind still awash with dates and names and events. Her domicile had lost a bit of its spark, between housing a rambunctious preteen and an overworked almost-adult, and as she gathered her coat and searched for her keys she made a mental note to find the time for a good cleaning session, a note immediately lost between the English word for elephant and the formula for deriving an area under a curve.

She patted her pockets in case she had forgotten something, remembered her cellphone, and scooped it off the table.

"I'm going out now," she told Nagisa. "You be good. And make sure you start your homework. I want to see it done when I come back!"

Nagisa nodded. "Bye, Mami."

Mami rode her scooter through the rhizome of Mitakihara. The cars passed in even columns of staggered tiers while Mami kept a steady pace near the curb, attempting to be unobtrusive as possible to the white collar denizens at the end of their shift. The sun in its descent swallowed the entire sky through the clustered skyscrapers. Mami lowered her helmet's visor to protect her eyes.

Commodore Perry, Treaty of Kanagawa. 1854. The interval from x to a of the function (t). The gerund form appends -ing to the end of the verb and indicates an action taking place over a period of time. Examples: I am running. I was running. I will running. The g is silent? (What is η ?)

The moment before she passed under the bridge to Homura Akemi's district, she noticed someone atop it—someone watching her. Mami pulled her scooter to the other side and braked.

After a few seconds, the familiar face she had noticed appeared at the other side. In shorts despite the nippy weather, Kyoko Sakura reached into a colorful bag of a snack food Mami could not identify and munched a handful of its contents.

"Ah, Miss Sakura." Mami raised her visor and waved. "It's good to see you. Were you out for a walk?"

Kyoko wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I'm here for the same reason you are." She crumpled the snack bag and stuffed it into the pocket of her jacket before vaulting over the railing and landing on the side of the road near Mami.

"Yes, I assumed Miss Akemi would extend her invitation to the other Magical Girls of the city. Has Miss Miki accompanied you?"

"Nah, I'm flying solo." She reached into a different pocket and retrieved a box of offbrand pocky, into which she tore with unparalleled gusto. How could a girl devour such junk in such quantities and maintain an athletic physique?

Mami banished the thought. "Since you two live together, it seems it would make sense if you came together—"

"You know how Sayaka feels about Homura. I almost didn't show myself." Kyoko leaned against the wall and gnawed a pocky stick.

"I can understand your sentiment. Nagisa elected to remain behind as well. Although perhaps we're too harsh on Miss Akemi. Outside of a general lack of social acumen, she has done no slights to any of us, at least as far as my awareness extends."

Kyoko shrugged. "Meh. She rubs me like the kinda chick who just snaps one day." She tore off a piece of pocky with her uncannily sharp teeth. "Look, I'm beating around the bush. Mind me hitching a ride?"

Out of her pocket she pulled a coin and flicked it to Mami. Mami caught it; 100 yen. She tossed the coin back. "Of course you can ride, if you don't mind going without a helmet."

Kyoko only gave her a look. No, Mami supposed, Kyoko did not seem the helmet kind of person.

They spoke little as Mami steered the scooter into the neighborhood that concealed Homura Akemi's apartment. She had to focus on the route, because the labyrinthine network of streets and dead ends pullulated in this district of Mitakihara far more than any other, so that it seemed either its construction had gone unplanned like the fringe cities of the third world or else someone had planned it to deliberately befuddle whoever wandered inside. Mami had gone this way only a few days prior and already it seemed as though the directions had changed, entire blocks of shuttered structures had shifted on axes to open new pathways and obscure old ones, roads had twisted of their own volition to move in ways antithetical to an orderly world of reason and logic. Mami took wrong turns multiple times, which she corrected only after periods of uncertainty (*was this the right way? were those the homes she had seen before?*). She understood Kyoko's reluctance to traverse this area on foot, or alone.

Eventually they reached the fork in the road at which lay Homura Akemi's apartment, although for an apartment it was rather large and Mami had suspicions about Miss Akemi's ability to rent such a locale, considering her ominous lack of family or a job. She parked the scooter under a streetlight as it flickered to life in the fading day.

"By the way, Miss Sakura," she said as she undid the straps of her helmet and fiddled with the lock on her scooter, "I intend to prepare a cheesecake for Nagisa tonight as a small treat. If you would like to join us, you're perfectly welcome. I extend the invitation to Miss Miki as well."

Kyoko had already dug into a bag of potato chips. She propped herself against the streetlight and tossed back her ponytail while she waited for Mami. "Nah, gotta kill wraiths tonight. Try calling Sayaka, she might be down."

"You and Miss Miki won't be hunting wraiths together?"

"Me and 'Miss Miki' probably won't be talking much the next coupla days." Kyoko bit into another chip. "You done yet?"

"Yes, my apologies. Is this something you wish to speak about, Miss Sakura? You two seemed to be getting along just fine when we went on that big hunt together two days ago—"

"Smiling for the cameras," said Kyoko. "And no, I'm not in the mood to talk. Let's do this meeting already."

They walked toward the door of Homura Akemi's apartment. Mami had known about the tension between Kyoko and Sayaka before, and in fact her last visit to Miss Akemi's home had been in part to discuss it. But their convivial attitude when Miss Kaname brought all five of them together gave the impression they had weathered the storm. Now that she thought about it, they had remained rather separate from one another even while fighting the wraiths... A worrying trend. Kyoko lived at Sayaka's home entirely out of Sayaka's goodwill. A deterioration of their relationship could spark a domino effect throughout the city. Kyoko might even leave entirely.

Vicissitudes of fortune in such a severe degree spelled worry for Miss Miki, too. Mami recalled she had brushed shoulders with the Cycles years ago, something about her friend the musician, and it had taken a nigh miracle to rescue her from that pit. Mami made a mental note to speak to Sayaka at the earliest opportunity, a note immediately lost between the silent(?) g in a gerund and the circumstances of Chancellor Hitler's rise to power in Weimar Germany.

She and Kyoko stopped before the door of Homura Akemi's apartment. They shared a moment of hesitation, and then Mami rang the bell.

The door opened immediately. Homura herself stood in the entry, her head slouched slightly and her eyes narrowed. "Hello, Tomoe. I see you could tear yourself away from your studies long enough to come."

"Hello, Miss Akemi. I have been rather busy lately, with my college entrance exams this spring, but I will always respond to a request from a friend."

"I see you brought Sakura along as well."

"Yeah, I'm right here," said Kyoko. "You gonna let us in or what?"

"Of course. Follow me."

Homura led them inside. Her apartment remained the drab, depressing space it had always been, lacking both warmth and homeliness. More like an office lobby than a home, with exposed machinery that dangled from the roof and an ominous pendulum of twin scythes, supposedly a clock, although it could have found a place in a museum of modern art. Her likewise bizarre tableau of floating papers and screens formed a backdrop for the room, although every screen was blank and the papers were written in the Latin alphabet (and not in English). German, perhaps? Mami had too little free storage in her mind to cram German in there as well.

"Take a seat," Homura offered. Mami and Kyoko sat opposite her, only for Homura to remain standing.

"Will Miss Kaname be joining us?" said Mami.

"You need not worry about Madoka."

"Let's cut this quick, I got fish to fry," said Kyoko. "Why'd you call us here?"

Homura plucked a paper from her faux bulletin board and perused it. Her eyes flitted left and right over the page while she ignored her guests. Did Homura know German? Perhaps it was not German, but a code of her own devising. That seemed like something Homura would conceive.

After a few moments filled by the solid crunch of potato chips in Kyoko's mouth and the tick of the pendulum, Homura looked up. "A dangerous girl from America either has arrived or will be arriving in this city soon."

"What?" said Kyoko. "That's it? What's one girl gonna do against six of us? There's a reason Mitakihara never gets flak from neighbors, y'know."

Homura replaced the paper on the wall. "This girl is exceptionally powerful. If you take her lightly, she will kill you."

"Oh yeah? She got some kinda neat trick? Like time travel or what?"

"She can turn invisible at will," said Homura.

Mami had refrained from speaking until Homura explained more about the situation, but already incongruous details had stacked upon one another. "Excuse me, Miss Akemi, but how do you know about this? I assume you keep an eye on the happenings outside of Mitakihara, perhaps even across the entire prefecture. But predicting the arrival of a girl from America would be an exceptional feat, especially considering her invisibility. Someone you cannot see must be particularly difficult to—"

"To track?" said Homura. "Yes. You can say she has been difficult to track."

"I don't mean to impugn your honesty, Miss Akemi. Nor do I doubt you believe whatever it is you claim. I would simply like to know how you know these things."

The scythe pendulum ticked. Homura stared at her papers and screens. "The Incubator led me to learn it."

"Kyubey?" said Mami. "He didn't tell me or anyone else about this girl. What's her name, do you know?"

"She has no name," said Homura.

"This is nuts." Kyoko bit into an apple (where did she store all her food? She only had so many pockets). "What Magical Girl's gonna fly across the damn ocean specifically to come to our little city? What's in it for her?"

Homura's shoulders tensed. She faced her papers and gritted her teeth as she ripped another one out of the air and gave it a cursory glance before flicking it aside. "I expected you would not believe me."

"It's not that we don't believe you, Miss Akemi. We simply want to know more details about what you're telling us."

"Very well. This unnamed American girl has a personal vendetta against me. I have never met her, but she has learned about me somehow and seeks to kill me. I am only warning you as a courtesy. She may try to use you or the other girls in the city as a way to attack me."

While Homura's back was turned, Kyoko got Mami's attention and gave her a look. As if to say cuckoo, cuckoo. Mami returned with a stern glance and hoped Kyoko would hold her tongue on the matter. Homura Akemi had always exuded a somewhat paranoid vibe, which had deepened as she shut herself away from everyone except Madoka Kaname. Mami did not want to use the word insane, but perhaps... overeager? Who knew what contraptions her mind

conceived. Maybe she had experienced a prophetic-seeming dream, or misheard something whispered in an alley. Or perhaps an even less crazy thing had happened: Homura had gotten in an argument on an online forum, someone had made idle threats, and a frightened mind transformed them into the grand narrative she told now. Plenty of Magical Girl discussion boards existed; in simpler times, Mami had frequented a few herself, and chatted with girls in Sapporo and Fukuoka. (Speaking of which, when she got the rare moment, she ought to check in, if only to reassure her internet friends she had not died. She made a mental note to do so, a mental note immediately lost between the Germanic roots of the English language and the carrying capacity of Kyoko Sakura's pockets.) The internet was the refuge of those with little in their daily lives to support them, and Homura's clandestine nature struck Mami as the exact type to become entangled deep in its clutches.

"Thanks for the chat, Homura!" Kyoko hopped to her feet and stretched. "But, yeah, looks like it's high time to bounce."

"You both think I'm making this up," said Homura. "What is it you don't believe? If I told you instead that a girl from a neighboring city was coming to seize Mitakihara for herself, would that suffice? Would you exercise caution then? Or is it simply that you refuse to believe me in particular?"

Mami tugged Kyoko's sleeve to sit her back down. "Miss Akemi, neither of us have anything personal against you. I, for one, still count you as a friend and ally, despite our recent lack of contact. But even you must admit your story seems somewhat outlandish."

"Very well." Homura's gaze remained fixed on her screens and papers. Perhaps if she stood for a little friendly eye contact, people would be more amenable to her words? "Believe whatever you want. I don't intend to spend an undue amount of time convincing you."

Again, Kyoko popped up. She took another bite of apple. "Next time just send a text, yeah?"

Mami folded her hands on her lap and sighed. If Homura had called them over for no more than this, she would have rather stayed home. However, best to leave things amiable between them all. "Miss Akemi, while I'm uncertain on some of the details of your story, I can assure you Miss Sakura and I shall be on high alert for any foreigners in the area. There's little reason for us to grow lackadaisical anyway. Do you happen to have a picture of this girl, or a description? It will help us remain vigilant if we know what we're looking for."

The screens flickered for a moment with static. The pendulum swung back, forth. Homura pulled another page from the wall, examined it, and replaced it. "I cannot show you a picture of her. Considering her power, an image of her would be less than useful to you anyway."

"Then why are we here," said Kyoko.

"I am telling you to be on your guard. Protect yourselves and your friends. You have all become complacent as of late. None of you have faced a real challenge in some time. This makes you vulnerable."

Kyoko shrugged and headed for the door. "Pah, I can still kick the ass of any chick in my way."

Mami rose as well. She sensed the conversation would only worsen if allowed to continue. "Miss Akemi, I thank you for the warning. I will be sure to keep alert and inform you if I notice any suspicious behavior. I believe Miss Sakura will do the same, right?"

"I see this chick and she won't be an issue anymore."

"I guarantee you will not 'see' her," said Homura.

"You get the point!"

"It appears you do not."

With a casual and unobtrusive motion, as though she were on a regular path toward the exit, Mami stepped between them. "The point is, Miss Akemi, we will remain alert. I'll tell Nagisa to be careful as well, just as I am sure Miss Sakura will tell Miss Miki. Is that right, Miss Sakura?"

Kyoko withdrew a sucker from her pocket and stuck it in her mouth.

"In any case, Miss Akemi, thank you for showing enough concern to give us a warning. Perhaps in the future we will speak more often. For now, I'm afraid I left Nagisa unattended at our apartment. I should return to her."

"Yes, that would be wise." Homura returned to her screens and papers and did not bestow the courtesy of showing them to the door.

They left. The aneurysm of a conversation ended. Their refusal to believe her came as so little surprise she wondered why she bothered inviting them. She snapped her fingers and the floating screens flickered back to life. They displayed profiles on the surviving girls from Minneapolis, a few of the chief players from Chicago, some other odd theories Homura had explored. The foremost one depicted the unnamed girl "Omaha." A list of statistics stretched below a picture of her from the last time she appeared in the world. Curious blank spaces followed MOTHER and FATHER and DATE OF BIRTH.

"An uncanny resemblance, would you say?"

She tilted back her head and peered over her shoulder. On the cusp of the room's shadow sat the Incubator. His tail swished to and fro as the pendulum swayed behind him. Around him, only blue eyes in the darkness, lurked the dolls not currently assigned to a task, including the four she had dispatched to Minneapolis.

If you refer to the similarities in appearance between Omaha and yourself, then yes, you do look rather alike.

"In fact, we look so alike, my dolls became confused and let Sloan Redfearn escape. And then Sloan Redfearn killed Clair Ibsen. I believe you know the rest."

The murder of Clair Ibsen caused a massive release of energy in the form of an archon. Amazing how the sacrifice of only a handful of replaceable girls could create so much power. With that archon alone, we will reach our quota for this month and have enough spare to cover the deficit caused in the previous month. Alas, you seem to have strict and arbitrary injunctions against anything that may create the energy needed to save this universe. Witches, archons...

"I'm not in a talkative mood. You heard my conversation with Tomoe and Sakura. I know what you're really planning, Incubator."

Oh? The Incubator crawled forward into the light. The dolls stepped in tandem, their eyes fixed on his expendable body. I noticed you harbor the impression that Omaha is coming here to kill you, although I don't know your reasoning.

"Determined to play your charade to the end, are you?" Homura flicked aside the screen with Omaha's profile and pulled a screen that showed the final moments of the Minneapolis archon. "When my dolls returned and reported why they failed to kill Redfearn, I grew curious. I already assumed you used this girl Omaha to instrument elements of your plan while you maintained a veneer of innocence. I regret not looking more closely, but that too was part of your plan, wasn't it?"

What do you mean?

"My powers of omniscience are limited. I can only sense what I try to sense. So you supplied me with a plethora of distractions so that I would remain ignorant of your hidden cards. Sloan Redfearn was the most apparent example. Her powers of illumination, coupled with her obvious intentions, caused me to focus on her and ignore the seemingly less relevant girls around her. I should have instead scrutinized Delaney Pollack, Clair Ibsen, and Omaha—your true pawns."

An interesting hypothesis.

The video of Minneapolis continued to play. Pollack succumbed to Cycles and Redfearn blundered to the streets below, where she met Serena Ru. Ru's profile drifted nearby, but as far as Homura divined she served no greater purpose than as a weapon in Ibsen's arsenal.

"But that was not your sole deception. By the time I learned the truth about them, they had done what you asked. Ibsen instigated the conflict, Pollack helped Redfearn continue it, and Omaha defended Redfearn from the Terminatrix and my dolls. It appeared I had no choice but to applaud your scheme for its success, consider a fitting punishment for you, and enact greater restrictions so you could not abuse the lives of girls for your own ends again."

The girls from Chicago arrived. Their leader, Laquesha Kabwe, interrogated Redfearn and Ru. They spoke a lot of words, but none that explained what happened soon after.

"I was going to prohibit you from collecting grief cubes for a week."

Across the entire planet? Are you mad? The amount of wasted energy—

"Save your protestations, Incubator. What I will do to you now is far worse." She dragged the corner of the screen to expand it as a vortex opened in the sea of grief cubes and swallowed them into an abyss. "Quite interesting, don't you agree?"

Yes, quite.

"I have accounted for every surviving girl in the vicinity. Sloan Redfearn, Serena Ru, all twenty girls from Chicago. Even Lily Cheong, who hides in that alley there." She pointed. "Except, strangely, there's one girl I cannot find at all."

It is possible that phenomena was caused by Omaha. If she used the cubes to maximize the power of her Soul Gem, the ability to—

"Conceal herself even from me. That fits with my findings. One moment Omaha is in this world, albeit invisible. The next she is not."

A Magical Girl suddenly disappearing is a rather frequent occurrence, however. You call it the Law of the Cycles.

She stopped the video and banished the screen to the back of the pile. The Incubator could be as dense as he wanted, he was not changing what she planned for him.

"I checked with Liebe, Omaha was not taken. Allow me to preempt your next question: Why does Omaha's disappearance make me think she's coming to Mitakihara? Simple. After the dolls made their report and I observed her acquire the Minneapolis archon's cubes, I grew suspicious. It took all day, but I watched time from Omaha's life. Her childhood, her first meeting with you, and her second, and so on. 'Interesting' conversations, you could say. You told her a lot about me. Homura Akemi, the demon of Mitakihara. I have to hand it to you, you never told a single lie."

The Incubator curled up on the floor and tickled his ear with his tail. The dolls surrounded him.

"Bravo, Incubator. You concealed a plot to assassinate me as a mere plot to acquire more energy. Your plot made it far, too. I might have been forced to concede defeat if not for one thing."

And what is that, Homura Akemi?

"I'm going to kill you, Incubator. All of you."

The Incubator registered her words with no shift in demeanor or posture, even as the doll Stolz emerged from the shadows and impaled him on a pin-shaped spear. Stolz hoisted him like a banner as the other dolls emerged from the shadows and skipped in a circle around the offering. They chanted:

Ticketack Ticketack Tauf!

Die Maus lief die Uhr hinauf

Eins schlug die Uhr dann

Hinunter sie sprang

Ticketack Ticketack Tauf!

The ears and tail of the Incubator bobbed up and down. *This is rather inconvenient.*

"You should sound more worried," said Homura. "Do you think I would enslave something I could not kill?"

I don't doubt you have the power to kill me, Homura Akemi. But without me, who will contract new Magical Girls? The entire population would swiftly go extinct. Wraiths and curses would run rampant over the entire world. Isn't that antithetical to your aims?

Homura seated herself and crossed her legs as her dolls paraded around the apartment. She caught Dämlich's attention from the procession and asked the doll to bring her refreshments. "I have prepared for the possibility I might need to eliminate you, Incubator. My dolls will assume your duties. If Liebe can handle the Law of the Cycles, they can certainly do what you do."

Logistically, that's quite unrealistic. In the time it takes me to tell you this, I am in communication with 273 Magical Girls and 39 prospective Magical Girls, far more than your fourteen dolls. Additionally, as far as I can tell they communicate solely in German, which only a minor fraction of Magical Girls speak.

Ticketack Ticketack Tauf, sang the dolls. Dämlich returned with a goblet of lemonade, which she hurled at Homura's head. Homura ducked slightly to evade.

"They'll learn other languages," said Homura. "The transition will be rough, but if they waste less time pointlessly deceiving girls, my dolls will handle it."

Well, if you're set on it, will you begin immediately?

The dolls brought the Incubator's impaled body to the pendulum and took turns holding its neck in the path of the blades only to pull it back at the last possible moment.

"I don't see why not."

Excellent! With your dolls preoccupied with assuming my duties, Omaha will have no trouble defeating you. Then my species will send a new representative and operations can resume on Earth immediately.

"A quaint bluff, but flimsy at best." Homura still wanted lemonade. She told Dämlich to bring another, and not to throw it this time. "I checked Omaha's abilities and calculated their limits given an infusion from the energy of the Minneapolis archon. Considering her genetic makeup is identical to mine, she harbors similar maximum levels to my human form. However, I'm not quite human, am I? I'm on an entirely different plane of existence. Training

her to escape the laws of the universe and thwart my omniscience was a clever trick, but if she seeks to destroy me, she must do it in this universe. She cannot win such a fight."

Dämlich returned with a chalice, which she nearly upturned on Homura's head but Homura grabbed her wrist before she could. She pried the drink away and sipped, only to spit immediately. Sour, no sugar at all.

Of course Omaha can't defeat you in an even fight! No Magical Girl on Earth could. Were that the issue, the presence of your dolls would be irrelevant. But your dolls don't defend you, do they?

Homura turned to demand a third glass of lemonade from Dämlich and stopped halfway. She stood up, overturning the table. Her dolls continued to play games with the Incubator's body, their chants and songs filling the room.

"Stop, stop it now!" she snapped at them. They froze immediately and turned toward her. Faulheit dropped the shish kebab with the Incubator. In an instant all went silent save the sway of the pendulum.

Is something the matter, Homura Akemi?

"All of you, to Madoka, now! NOW!" She swung her arms at them, seizing Dämlich and Schwarzseherei and pushing them toward the door. The dolls twittered in a panic and rushed in every direction. They phased through walls and vanished in the shadows. Homura scampered after the stragglers and made sure they moved.

She stepped over the twitching body of the Incubator that bled on her carpet and sprinted to the wall of screens and papers. She pushed the papers aside and grabbed the screen with the pink frame. No no no no no, it's a bluff, it has to be a bluff.

The screen flickered on. It showed the bedroom of Madoka Kaname, empty. Homura gripped the screen with both hands and navigated its view through the house, into the hall, no Madoka here, into the kitchen where Tomohisa played with Tatsuya, come on she must be here, somewhere, she has no plans tonight, her schedule had nothing in it during this hour except "homework," where was she, WHERE WAS SHE?

She switched the view to the bathroom. Obscured by steam and a curtain, the silhouetted form of Madoka Kaname bathed in the shower. Madoka's primary guards, Selbstsucht and Eifersucht, played patty-cake on the tile floor. They glanced up in unison at Homura and waved.

Homura pressed her forehead against the screen and breathed relief. "She's still there."

Yes, you do keep her rather well protected. It'll take Omaha some effort to get to her, although you've already made a grievous tactical error and don't even know it yet.

"Oh yes? And what is that?"

You'll learn soon enough. Your fixation on Madoka Kaname can be quite a crippling weakness, I'm afraid. But you were going to kill me, correct? Since you've realized the perils of trying to replace me with your dolls, you have two options, really. You can kill me anyway out of an irrational human notion of spite and replace me with nothing. I predict in a week without new Magical Girls being contracted, several cities around the world will be destabilized. In a month, the entire world will. Wraiths will multiply in untold numbers. They will kill Magical Girls in droves, creating a feedback loop that magnifies their reproductive rate. The curses will infect nations and governments. Wars will begin. Within a year, the detonation of the world's nuclear arsenals will eliminate human society as you know it.

"It won't take me that long to kill Omaha."

Assuming she wants to fight you. She's perfectly safe where she is now, after all. She can afford to wait a year while the world collapses around you, waiting for the moment you give in and send your dolls away.

"Fine." Her shield materialized on her arm. "I'll turn back time to before Omaha receives the grief cubes. You have no idea how many times I went back to save Madoka. If I have to do it again, no matter the cost, I won't hesitate."

Please, Miss Homura. Do you think I would expect a girl to defeat you if they were susceptible to time magic? I told you and you discerned it yourself: Omaha has escaped the laws of this universe. Time doesn't exist where she is. You can go to a different timeline and kill a version of her before she acquires the grief cubes, but the Omaha from this timeline will continue to exist, ready to return whenever an opportunity arises.

On the screen, the other dolls had congregated in Madoka's bathroom. They clustered around Madoka as, wrapped in a towel, she examined split ends in the mirror.

"You... you..."

I thought this through very carefully. Since you do have the power to kill me, I could leave little room for error. I designed my plan so that if it failed prior to Omaha acquiring the cubes, you would not know the plan's full extent and only punish me with moderate severity, if you punished me at all. In fact, this is the third time I have attempted this plan. The two previous times failed before a sufficiently powerful archon could be created, due to errors made by the girls I enlisted. Said girls were then liquidated with you none the wiser. However, I am quite pleased with the Minneapolis girls. They managed to achieve all necessary parameters...

Homura pulled herself away from the screen. She collected herself, adjusted her hair, stood straight. She approached his body. It continued to twitch on the stake. "You've made your point. I will leave you alive to continue your duties. Until the moment I kill Omaha. Then you die."

Excellent! This is the most fortuitous outcome. Now, there will be no interruption in the energy harvest while Omaha defeats you.

"I already established that she cannot defeat me." Homura picked up the spear and held the Incubator's face close to her own. "Omaha can wait all she wants. I will never, ever let my guard down. I will ensure Madoka Kaname is protected every moment of her life. If you think I will ever flag in my devotion, you are wrong."

Yes, but that's the exact kind of thinking that makes you so easy to defeat! Remember how I said you already made a grievous tactical error? You're about to discover what that is right now.

She swung the spear against the ground and crushed the Incubator to a bloody pulp. When she tossed the flesh-strewn spear aside, it rolled across the ground and to the shadows, where two elliptical eyes waited. They belonged to Feigheit, the doll Homura assigned to watch Nagisa Momoe.

"What is it," said Homura.

Feigheit stumbled out of the shadow. Obvious distress painted her face. She scurried to Homura's side and whispered:

Vermisst. Vermisst.

Nagisa scratched her head. Math was soooooo haaaaaard, and Mami wasn't back yet to help. She could divide a big number by a small number, but how was she supposed to divide a big number by a big number? She propped her chin on the table and stared at the problem in her book. She tilted her head like an owl. The problem stayed the same.

This is dumb! Her eyes wandered to the pantry. Surely Mami had stashed some cheese in there... But Mami had asked Nagisa to finish her homework. If Mami returned and she wasn't done, she would be so disappointed. Nagisa bit her lip and gripped her pencil and wrote some numbers down. 413 divided by 39 . She could do this.

She dropped the pencil. No she couldn't! She hated math, hated it hated it hated it! What good was math anyway? Why would she ever need to do this stuff in real life?

When her eyes glanced up from the page, a platter with a small piece of cheese sat on the table before her.

Her brain barely registered the fact. The cheese went from platter to hand to mouth in an instant. Gorgonzola! Her favorite! (Well, besides mascarpone, brie, gouda, feta—what was she thinking, they're all her favorite.) By the time she finished savoring the morsel, her eyes settled on a similar platter further down the room.

She licked her lips and grinned. Sneaky Mami had come home and set up platters around the house for Nagisa to find, had she? Well, super sleuth Nagisa would let no cheese go

undetected! The next cheese was a strong Munster. When she had finished it, she noticed another plate further down the room, and another beyond it, placed in a trail toward the closet where Mami kept the mop and other stuff. Nagisa inched toward the closet, devouring each cheese she passed, her mind already devising fantastic images of what special surprise waited inside. Surely a massive cheesecake, or an entire block of Roquefort. Oh, what could it be, what could it be?

After plopping a chunk of mozzarella into her mouth, she grabbed the closet handle and yanked it open. But no cheesecake awaited her, no Parmigiano-Reggiano or even a nice cheddar.

In fact, nothing awaited her. Beyond the closet door was only a black and empty void.

"Uh, Mami...?" said Nagisa. She leaned toward the darkness. If this was Mami's idea of a joke, it wasn't funny.

She started to turn away but two hands reached out of the void and pulled her inside.

Intrepid Fantasyscape

The storm, which cleared when the archon died, delayed most flights, but it also opened a lot of seats. Sloan hitched a ride to Los Angeles only waiting a few hours while workers cleared the runways of Minneapolis-St. Paul International. She languished in uncomfortable terminal chairs and watched news on television. Supertornado in Minneapolis. Fifty confirmed casualties, hundreds missing.

She boarded a plane at half capacity and snoozed four hours to LAX, where she had a two hour layover before her journey to Mitakihara, Japan. She had first sought flights to Tokyo, being (she assumed) Japan's biggest city. It would have taken a day to get her there. But for some reason, flights to Mitakihara departed on the hour.

She left Minneapolis at sunset and it was still sunset in Los Angeles. Through the panorama terminal window, orange light spread down an endless highway lined by palm fronds. No snow. They called Los Angeles the city where Magical Girls go to die. But to Sloan it seemed rather tranquil.

The Incubator crawled from beneath the seat of a yuppie businessman adjacent Sloan and sidled up to her. *What are you doing, Miss Redfearn?*

Taking a much-needed vacation. This Mitakihara place seems like a popular tourist spot.

The biggest challenge of communicating via telepathy was you made unconscious facial expressions while you spoke with your mind. Normally Sloan gave zero shits, but enough people swelled the terminal she got self conscious. Best not to look like a schizophrenic before she boarded a plane.

I suspected Omaha might disobey my order and leave you alive, but this behavior is rather irregular. The Incubator hopped onto her knee and clamored up her body to rest on her shoulder. *You have no reason to go to Japan, Miss Redfearn.*

That so? Cuz the way I see it, I started whatever this is. So I should see how it ends. You afraid I'll muck up your plans?

The businessman looked up. She realized she was staring intently at him and diverted her gaze toward the floor.

Oh, there is no possibility you'll affect anything in Mitakihara, Miss Redfearn. Even assuming you had full power, all six Magical Girls in Mitakihara far exceed your ability.

Darn, and I thought I was pretty tough too. What do they feed these Japanese girls, Lucky Charms or something?

A flight attendant announced they would begin boarding the disabled, children flying alone, and Premium Advantage Deluxe customers. A few people in the terminal, including the

businessman, stood and shuffled toward the gate. Sloan was technically a "child flying alone," but her ticket was only good if someone else didn't show.

Mitakihara is a vortex of karmic destiny, which increases the average potential of its Magical Girls. Four of its six have ascended to higher planes of existence, and the two that haven't can still defeat you handily.

I'll find out myself.

But why? I don't understand this illogical action. Homura Akemi has very little to do with you. You have expressed before that you don't care about the conceptual frameworks that guide the universe. You should be thankful you're still alive, honestly! You only had about a fifty percent chance of defeating Miss Ibsen. Coupled with the odds of surviving the archon, Omaha, and the Chicago girls, the fact that you're here is already improbable!

The premium passengers filed through the gate. The flight attendant scanned their boarding passes under a red light as they entered. When the last wheelchair-bound passenger rolled through, the attendant called for passengers with A-level boarding passes.

Kyubey, lemme ask a question. If Clair killed me instead of me killing her, would it have still created an archon?

Of course! The two of you were evenly matched, making it impossible to rely on one over the other. So I ensured the situation Miss Ibsen engendered between you would lead to success no matter the outcome of your conflict. The only true threat of failure came from neutral third parties.

Like the Terminatrix? A full crowd swarmed at the gate. Sloan might have to wait another hour or two for a flight that wasn't full.

Yes. The primary purpose of a Terminatrix is to eliminate possible archon events before their inception. When selecting Terminatrixes, I look for three criteria: Powers suited to fighting Magical Girls, impartial neutrality, and a tendency to view oneself as less than human. The latter two criteria minimize the sin of a Terminatrix killing another Magical Girl, so they can remove uncooperative components without causing an archon themselves. In fact, had situations been different, Delaney Pollack and Clair Ibsen would have made phenomenal Terminatrixes!

As the last Group A passengers trickled through, the attendant called for Group B. Sloan tapped her fingers against the armrest and folded in her legs as sweater-garbed families clotted the aisle. *You mentioned this whole concept of sin before. You said if I had complaints about what I did being a sin, I should take it up with the person who determined what sin is.*

I was speaking hypothetically. Do you truly intend to petition your case to Homura Akemi? I doubt she will care much about what you have to say, if she speaks to you at all.

You got me all wrong. The damage is done. I can't change that.

Then why go to Mitakihara?

The last of Group B filtered through the gate. Only a few scattered people remained in the terminal. The flight attendant asked standby passengers to come to the front of the terminal.

Sloan stood and Kyubey hopped off her shoulder to follow alongside as she and the other migrants ebbed toward the front. *I doubt you'd understand. Chalk it up to irrational human emotion. If I'm no longer important, why do you care what I do?*

Kyubey ceased walking beside her. He scratched an ear with his back paw. *I suppose if there's no convincing you otherwise, it doesn't matter. I am quite certain you will make no significant impact in Mitakihara one way or another.*

The flight attendant, who wore a Santa hat, rifled through some papers as Sloan held her boarding pass above the beleaguered mob around her. *Maybe so, Kyubs. But hey, you know that human game called chess?*

I presided over its invention.

Sloan had played with Clair. One of Clair's endless array of hobbies and talents. Clair won every time, except when she let Sloan win. *Then you know what happens when a pawn reaches the other end of the chessboard, right?*

The attendant grabbed her boarding pass. "We have room to take you, ma'am," she said. Sloan pushed past the other prospective passengers and stepped into the tunnel that led to the plane. She flashed Kyubey a thumbs-up as she went.

Eleven hours and thirty minutes between Los Angeles and Japan. Eleven hours and thirty minutes of petrification as they chased the retreating sun and maintained time at its twilight hour. Sloan slept half the flight with her head propped against an elderly chap in the window seat, and then she woke up with a migraine and glazed through the inflight movie.

Erika Dufresne. The Terminatrix. Woodbury. Bloomington. Lynette Ibsen. Clair Ibsen. St. Paul. Ramsey. Delaney Pollack.

Those were the names. Most weren't even names, but she could not remember. She knew she had heard Bloomington and Ramsey's real ones at some point, and the Terminatrix probably had a more precise alias related to Los Angeles, like all Terminatrixes did. But those were the names, nine fingers on her hands, with only one lonely thumb to account for them all.

Or did it extend beyond that? What about Anoka's friend, the rotted cadaver in the swamp in Williston? What about the fifty confirmed casualties in Minneapolis, the hundreds missing? Sloan could not begin to know their names.

Anoka said that as long as you still live, you can fix everything. Sloan herself said that to Anoka. But the dead don't come back to life.

She took Delaney's paper out of her pocket. MITAKIHARA — HOMURA AKEMI. Do good deeds. Atone for sin. Except in the end, Delaney gave up. Whatever Sloan did, she would not give up until she was satisfied with herself and her life and could look in the mirror and maybe smile a little. And maybe, if she didn't give up, and she did something good, it might absolve Delaney, too. Like a passed baton. And Clair.

And for some reason she thought most about Ramsey. Of all the nine fingers, it was Ramsey that kept coming to mind. Because the others, even Clair, even Delaney, she could in some way distance from herself. Even the Terminatrix Sloan had killed with her bare hands, the girl who believed herself less than human. No matter how much blame Sloan tried to devour for herself, she could not avoid the other hands that had dealt them suffering and demanded their deaths. But Ramsey... It had taken so few words for Sloan's sister Morgan to save Ramsey seven months ago, when Ramsey was meek and afraid and had no friends and nothing to sustain her. And it would have taken so few words to save Ramsey again. A simple Good Job. The words were so easy, anything to calm her and give hope and make her feel good about herself. Sloan could have said them. Could have told Delaney to shut up. But Sloan said nothing and Ramsey died. The others failed partially of their own inextricable flaws. Delaney, Clair. Or someone else dealt the final blow. But Sloan brought Ramsey into the fight, used her, chewed her up and left her in a snowfield somewhere to vanish. Sloan shared blame for all of them, but Ramsey felt like particularly her fault, someone for whom she alone stood accountable. Her own special sin.

What could she do to fix Ramsey? What could she do to fix any of it?

And was focusing on Ramsey a simple way to ignore the sin that sustained her in Fargo, that propelled her forward and into all of this mire: the blind wrath that pitted her against Clair? Wrath, the most nebulous of the seven deadlies, the least tied to an obvious physicality.

How many good deeds to erase these sins? Did Homura Akemi know? Or the goddess Omaha sought to save? "Do good deeds" had an elegant simplicity about it, an easiness that made it an attractive life philosophy. Sin was complicated. Goodness was simple.

She hated thinking about this crap. But she knew she had to.

For the rest of the flight she drifted in and out of consciousness, in and out of labyrinths of thought and memory, faces and names that stretched through the annals of her life. More movies played on the screen. Flight catalogues, tourist attractions. Free dinner, taste of rubber. Peanuts and beverages. The old man beside her snored. The sunset never ended, the sea blazed like rust beneath them.

And after hours of this limbo, the attendant announced they would descend in Mitakihara soon.

Sloan leaned over the slumbering old man and looked out the window, but saw only ocean. Then the land surged into view. A vast and unfettered agglomeration of urbanity stretched from the coast deep into the hills, tremendous in its size and scale. Larger than Minneapolis or even Los Angeles. Was it all Mitakihara? How could one city be so gargantuan?

She pressed her face closer to the window and ignored the flight attendant's request that she sit straight to prepare for landing. The city had towers, too, each one its own Pillar of the Plains. So many of them that the city acquired a third dimension, not simply coordinates on an X and Y plane but rife with Z values. The largest tower was absolutely monolithic. As she scrutinized it she had a weird thought.

"Is that... the tower in Dubai?"

The old man snorted and opened his eyes. He adjusted his glasses and looked out the window. "Oh my, we're here."

"That's the tower in Dubai. I know it is. It looks exactly the same."

"Dubai? No, miss, this is Mitakihara."

Sloan bit her lip and returned to her seat. Maybe it wasn't the tower in Dubai. She was no tower aficionado, she had only seen it a few years back during all that hoopla about the tallest tower in the world. But it looked similar, and had to be roughly as tall.

Unreal city. Did a demon really live here? Sloan would find out. Kyubey let slip that the city had six Magical Girls, four "on a different plane of existence" or whatever. Likely one of those six was timebitch herself. Likely still that the other five knew about their satanic sixth in some capacity. So the plan was simple, and her timing upon entering the city impeccable: Find the usual wraith haunts. Find the Mitakihara Magical Girls. Find Homura Akemi.

The kids were out full force tonight. They swarmed the arcade in droves, boys and girls in uniforms from all schools of Mitakihara. Middleschoolers and highschoolers. They clustered in friend groups, boys with boys and girls with girls, each group the same uniform. They danced, they laughed, they whispered. Neon lights cascaded across their faces as they shared cotton candy and swirly lollipops and popcorn. They paid in tokens and tickets. They formed a seething horde, vast torrents of bodies that gushed through the alleys between the game machines and concessions stands. Jingle jangle jungle. Coins dropped in metal dispensers and karaoke popped in the distance.

Kyoko Sakura leaned against the wall, hands in pockets. She held a raspberry popsicle between her teeth and let it gradually melt in her mouth. She checked her phone. Almost sundown.

Sayaka and Mami, you ask them where to find wraiths, they tell you the obvious spots. Slums, red light districts. That's how they think. Bad places equal bad things equal wraiths. But they think too small, y'know? Too narrow. Limits their range. Kyoko knew the loneliness of a crowd. Knew that between these grinning, laughing faces, the most unhappy people lurked. Knew a good amount of these kids would go home tonight and cry quietly in their

rooms by themselves. Assuming they went home at all. But Kyoko was here to make sure that happened.

And also for some personal reasons. She flipped through her phone with her thumb. Messages from Mami and Madoka and non-magical acquaintances at school. Even a goddam call from Homura of all people. And then the last text she got from Sayaka, three days ago:

k

Kyoko seized the popsicle by the stick and bit off a thick chunk. She swished the raspberry-flavored icicle between her cheeks and ground it to mush with her teeth. Awkward enough they barely spoke in person, despite, you know, living together? But this bullshit really pissed her off.

At the risk of looking desperate (she had already sent Sayaka two messages since then), she tapped out a text.

wanna talk?

The message vanished into the aether of slipstream radiowaves. Probably no response this time, either. She scraped the rest of the popsicle off the stick with her teeth and flicked the stick into the trash nearby.

Everything was getting bogus nowadays. First Sayaka being a moody bitch for no reason and now this bullshit with Homura's invisible girl. Maybe time to reconsider springing this city. Kazamino and the neighboring towns, she still had connections. Of course, she thought the same every time this happened. Eventually Sayaka would chill.

She pushed open the bathroom door. The lights and sounds from outside muted into a quiet series of stalls and sinks. She checked herself in the mirror, examined a tooth. In the closest stall a girl barfed into the toilet while her friend held her shoulders. The types of people who made Kyoko's job easier. No matter the cause, vomit attracted wraiths like flies.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. No sense getting her hopes up, probably Mami or Homura or whoever. But the name on her phone said SAYA(^•I•^).

sure

Great, a one-word response. Excellent start to a talk. Kyoko tapped a reply.

imma kill spooky ghosts soon come over

A long shot, but if they met in person the chance of making headway went way up. Sayaka didn't take long to respond:

gonna clear dtown 2nite maybe next time

Figures. The bathroom door opened and a pair of girls entered, only to leave when they saw the girl kneeling over the toilet.

r u still mad at me? Kyoko asked.

im not mad at u

Oh really Sayaka? Coulda fooled anyone. You know, in most cultures, getting in someone's face and screaming that they're a quote "lazy bum" indicates the basic human emotion of anger. Kyoko might understand were the situation reasonable, but every damn time it was some stupid thing, clothes left on the floor, snacks on the dresser, skipping school or copying homework or whatever. Always starts small. Sayaka telling her to clean up her shit or something. Then a snarky rebuttal, passive-aggressiveness, snide comments, and suddenly they're yelling and Sayaka storms out the room. Can't take a fucking joke and Kyoko has to grovel on her belly to patch things.

sorry i spent ur money 2 buy that cd. i thought ud like it 2

Kyoko should have just downloaded in the first place, but she got paranoid doing illegal shit on Mr. and Mrs. Miki's internet.

if u asked u couldve borrowed the money

Yeah, yeah. Kyoko knew this. The bathroom had started to stink, so she wandered back to the main arcade and weaved between the crowd. High time she got to work out here anyway, although she finally had Sayaka on hand so she shouldn't let the opportunity slip.

sorry. ill pay u back. lunch on me tmrw? ur fav place

She slid her hand in her pocket and retrieved a few coins, what she had left after the popsicle from the vendor. Maybe enough for some ramen. She'd have to pick a pocket or two before she went home tonight. A few bucks was cheap payment for ensuring nobody got eaten by a ghoul.

ur just gonna steal the money kyoko

Dammit. The hell she expect? Kyoko didn't have any parents to bum off an allowance. Ain't too many jobs for a sixteen-year-old chick, at least none Kyoko'd consider taking.

She elbowed a sluggish middle-schooler out her way as she meandered toward the exit and tapped a response:

its the thought that counts dummy

She hesitated before sending and sent it anyway. She pocketed her phone as she awaited an answer, passing the token counter as she drove against the flow of inbound thrillseekers and exited the arcade. Older kids leaned against the storefront and smoked cigarettes. The crisp winter air bit her ears and bare legs.

Come on, Saya. Laugh. It's funny. You have a sense of humor, this kinda stuff makes you laugh all the time. It's their thing, y'know? Kyoko does stupid/lazy/morally suspect thing, Sayaka chides Kyoko, and instead of getting into a huge bitchfit they laugh and it's cool, because Sayaka isn't as uptight as she thinks and Kyoko maybe isn't that much a loser either.

The response did not come as Kyoko rounded the corner of the arcade to the darker areas behind its formidable concrete walls. She entered a narrow passage lined with dumpsters and bags of garbage. Here lingered more smoking teenagers, some with bottles, some necking on the walls. Boys and girls from different schools. The lights from the street behind her tapered away and shadows stretched long down cobblestone. Her feet kicked through a thick black mist. Miasma.

She transformed, because nobody in this alley watched her anyway. The next moment her phone vibrated against her body. She extricated it from the folds of her costume, took a deep breath, and checked Sayaka's response.

brb someones at my window

"The fuck," she said aloud. Was that Sayaka's way of blowing her off? Their window was on the second story, what kinda stunt was she trying to pull? Or did her hitherto-unknown secret admirer toss rocks to summon her to a steamy rendezvous?

wtf does that mean?! she mashed out before she tucked the phone into her boot.

Fucking whatever. She trudged deeper into the miasma. Her spear spawned in her hand and she tapped it against the wall like a blind man's cane.

"C'mere, wraiths. I ain't in the mood for hide-n-seek."

The miasma thickened as she delved into the alley that looped around the arcade to the back entrances, where kids wound up after the kinetic energy inside fizzled. Where the wraiths waited and preyed. She spotted a few slouched behind dumpsters, some looming in doorways. They turned their staticky faces her way and mumbled bogus wraith words.

"Sorry pals, no free meal tonight. Let's go, get up and fight. I ain't got all evening."

Kyoko twirled her spear and propped it on her shoulders, doing some stretches while the wraiths oozed into the central corridor of the alley. More efficient to fight them bunched up than pick them out the nooks and crannies. A few humans lingered too—a pale-faced boy, a girl in a long brown coat—but they all seemed pretty space cadet. Miasmas did that to people.

She faked a warmup swing that turned into a real swing to decapitate the wraith that snuck up behind her. The other wraiths stretched their elongated arms and groped with hooked claws, but she leapt against the alley wall, ricocheted off, and came down on the front of the line with a heavy swipe to kill two. But the line stretched all the way down the alley. Maybe twenty total, no number to scoff at. Normally she had Sayaka to help, but before then she had handled herself just fine and she'd do so now too.

Between the first few wraiths and the rest she summoned a latticework barrier, partitioning them to keep the bulk away so she wouldn't worry about a stray attack blindsiding her. She lunged with her spear and impaled the next wraith through his gaunt robed body, wrenching it out while the other two on her side of the barrier attacked. Her spear separated into chained links and whipped out to block the attack of the first, while she ducked under the attack of the

second and kicked him in the chest. As he staggered back against her barrier she flipped and coiled the spear around him. The chains tightened and crushed the wraith to dust and cubes before she swiped the spear back to its straight form and gored the other wraith through his grotesque face.

Easy as pie. All she had to do was rinse and repeat ad infinitum. It was almost boring. Actually, as she brought down her barrier and placed a new one to seal in the next three wraiths, she realized it *was* boring. Stab slice whip. Stab slice whip. The same three moves repeated over and over, no need to vary her style.

Had it always been like this? Usually she hunted with Sayaka and they did team attacks while cracking jokes. She searched her memory for before she came to Mitakihara. Her lone wolf days. Kazamino and whatnot. Guess she had been less experienced or something? Of course, there was other stuff to do back then, like mess around with the local Magical Girls, exert influence over territory, finding a roof to sleep under.

She stopped bothering with barriers and took on the rest at once, rushing down the aisle and cleaving them with rapid attacks one after another. Too bad none of those boss monster wraiths were around tonight. These mooks had bad drops, too. A cube or two apiece. Oh well, it paid the bills.

The last few wraiths died and the miasma dissipated with a lonely wail. Its spell broke over the alley and the few humans blinked and started to stand, scratching their heads and looking around to wonder why the fuck they came here. Kyoko supposed being bored because wraiths weren't a challenge was pretty small potatoes. Some chicks would beg for that to be their main malfunction.

She detransformed and checked her phone in case Sayaka had texted during the rumpus. Nada. Guess whoever was "at the window" had more interesting stuff to say than old Kyoko.

It took more effort to find the fallen grief cubes in the dark alley floor than to kill all the wraiths. Even though they didn't drop much, it wasn't like she had to share with Sayaka. So overall a pretty good take. Or maybe she'd offer Sayaka a few as a gesture of goodwill. Of course she already knew Sayaka would refuse cubes she didn't earn. But it's the thought that counts, right dummy?

Kyoko pocketed the cubes and turned for the exit. To leave she had to get around the chick in the long brown coat, who limped in her direction with long scraggly hair hanging down her shoulders.

"Move it buster, you're in my way," said Kyoko.

Coat chick reached into a pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper which her awkward long fingers unfolded bit-by-bit. Kyoko was about to just shove her aside when she realized the girl wasn't from around Mitakihara. Or Japan, for that matter.

Kyoko held the hand with her Soul Gem ring behind her back as she approached. "Yo. You don't speak Japanese, do you?"

The other kids had left after the miasma broke. Meaning Kyoko and coat chick were alone back here. Coat chick sure was foreign, but she wasn't invisible. Yet. Kyoko bit her lip and better observed her surroundings. Gauged the height of the walls and the placements of the dumpsters. Checked windows and estimated distances to any given exit.

Coat chick finished unfolding her paper. She brushed back her hair and read:

"Ho. Homyura Aykeemee."

Had Kyoko not already made the mental association between this chick and Homura, it would have sounded like incomprehensible gobbledygook. And even then Kyoko couldn't be sure she was trying to say Homura's name, her accent was so thick.

"Look punk," said Kyoko. "This ain't your town. Scram, alright?"

Coat chick said something in English. Maybe it was German, or French, or whatever the fuck European language. English classes were prime Kyoko shuteye time, the chick could be speaking Swahili for all Kyoko knew. Then the chick looked at her paper and tried again.

"Hummera Aykimmy. *Hummera*."

"Homura Akemi, dipshit. And you got the order backward." Although why Kyoko bothered she didn't know. Clear this chick knew as much Japanese as Kyoko knew English.

Coat chick stepped forward. She was a lot taller than Kyoko and Kyoko found herself stepping back. Homura said this chick was extremely dangerous. Since it was Homura saying it, Kyoko hadn't thought about it too much, but now she wondered her battle plan if this chick went invisible. Like some kung fu movie, the master teaching the pupil to fight what they cannot see while the hero blunders blindfolded into a bunch of stacked pots.

"Hummera! Hummera." She appended some English(?) words to the end, or maybe it was an attempt at a different pronunciation of Homura's name. Kyoko took another step back. She glanced over her shoulder at the long alley behind her.

Fuck it. No reason to take chances.

She hopped back and transformed into her Magical Girl garb with a flash. Her boots skidded against the ground as her spear appeared in her hand behind her back. With her legs braced against the ground, she could immediately charge coat chick the moment the transformation finished. Coat chick looked kinda sluggish. One good strike and—and nope, coat chick already had some kind of machine gun in her hands. No outfit change, same filthy brown jacket. Like the coat *was* her outfit.

Kyoko jumped, slammed her foot down on the barrel of the gun, and forced it into the ground before coat chick could fire. She whirled her spear around and conked coat chick in the side of the skull with the blunt shaft. The tall girl grunted and slammed into the wall, dropping her gun. Kyoko smacked the girl in the knee with the shaft and brought her to the ground. She dropped like a sack of potatoes.

The spear separated into segments linked by chains. As coat chick propped herself on her arms and tried to rise, Kyoko wrapped the chains around her and bound her tight, making sure to get both arms. Coat chick thrashed against the bonds, but Kyoko forced her back to the ground, pressing her knee against the small of coat chick's back to keep her in check. Coat chick shouted more of her indeterminate language.

"Should be pretty clear by now I can't understand a word you're—"

Kyoko rolled to the side as the discarded machine gun fired a vicious torrent of light. So the bitch could maneuver it via telepathy? That put a new spin on things. The narrow corridor filled with the blaze as it ricocheted along the walls and rattled the dumpsters. Kyoko slid under the spray and impaled the gun on her spear. The point plunged through the gears and pulleys and jammed it immediately. The light cut out and the barrel spasmed harmlessly.

By then coat chick had already started to run. Kyoko yanked her spear from the ruined gun and thrust it at her, extending its size to trip up her boots before she made it far. The girl toppled again and skidded across the ground.

Kyoko leapt after her, span the spear over her head, and brought down the blunt shaft on the girl's exposed neck, where the densest cluster of nerves and pressure points agglomerated. Boom, lights out. The girl sagged and did not attempt to rise.

Was this your dangerous invisible chick, Homura? Because she sure didn't look invisible, and she sure ain't too dangerous neither. Kyoko prodded the limp body. More coat than body, really. She knelt beside the girl's face and turned it over to inspect it. Sunken cheeks, raccoon eyes. Girl had been through the thresher. Her eyelid twitched in forced naptime.

Well. Kyoko checked back and forth down the alley. No soul in sight. So what was she supposed to do with this bitch now?

Mami exited the boutique ristorante where she acquired most of her ingredients, a full cheesecake in a bag strung from her shoulder. If she had time, she would fix one herself. But time came at a high price nowadays. She wondered if Homura used her time magic to squeeze in extra study hours. It would explain her flawless marks despite her never putting much effort into her schoolwork.

She deposited the bag in the basket of her scooter when her phone rang. She answered with a cordial hello-this-is-Mami-may-I-ask-who's-speaking.

"Mami, hey," said Kyoko. "You uh, you're good at English right?"

"Hello, Miss Sakura. I manage decent marks at school, if that's what you mean. Do you need help with an assignment? College entrance exams have me pressed for time right now, but I'm sure I can work in a session—"

"No, not that. Look, can you meet me at the arcade? I got a serious problem here."

She sounded unharmed, but Mami asked anyway. "Are you hurt? It's unwise to fight wraiths alone, you know."

"I'm fine, Mami. Just get over here, okay? I'm not kidding around. It's easier if you see for yourself."

"Very well. The arcade, yes? I'll be there in ten minutes. I'll see you then, Miss Sakura."

"Yeah, see ya."

Mami ended the call and sighed. Oh well, Nagisa could wait a tad longer.

Borkman! John Gabriel!

Homura Akemi, elbows on knees, propped her chin and watched the screens. All showed the same: Madoka Kaname at her desk scratching a pencil across a worksheet. She gave a thoughtful pause and nibbled the eraser, a nasty habit. Behind her lounged ten of Homura's dolls. Stolz and Schwarzseherei rummaged through her dresser. Lügner burrowed beneath the bedcovers, Selbstsucht read a manga upside-down, Verleumdung danced on the headboard, Eifersucht played with the stuffed animals. Faulheit and Dämlich dragged a board game from the closet and made a mess of the pieces. Unterlegenheit hung out the window and Sturheit peeped from beneath the legs of Madoka's chair.

Madoka Kaname was safe. Homura had instructed her dolls not to let Omaha's appearance fool them. To beware black voids.

Nagisa Momoe and Sayaka Miki were missing. Off the radar. Vanished. Homura's omniscience detected nothing. From an objective standpoint, they no longer existed within this universe. Their dolls, Feigheit and Schafskopf respectively, held to the outskirts of Homura's apartment and dared not disturb their madam.

"Go to Madoka," she said. "Join the others."

Wordlessly, they melted into the shadows. That left Eitelkeit for Tomoe and Kaltherzig for Sakura. She weighed the pros and cons of having them abandon their current assignments to bolster Madoka's entourage. Tomoe and Sakura were functional nonentities, entirely irrelevant on the cosmic level to which this conflict had escalated. But Omaha might use them as hostages to draw Madoka into a compromised position. Or else discover some unforeseen application for them. Homura beat her wrists against her head. She needed to think, see every possible outcome, derive a strategy. Was her plan to guard Madoka at all times with fourteen dolls and a constant view of her location on the screens?

It *seemed* foolproof. She watched back in time when Nagisa and Miki disappeared. The same for each: a black void opened in the fabric of reality and Omaha pulled them in when they investigated. Neither time had the doll in question been prepared or armed enough to react. But with fourteen dolls and the watchful eye of Homura herself, surely...

Madoka tapped her head and scribbled an answer.

This was a scenario to which Homura was unaccustomed. She had suffered a hundred loops and all manner of unexpected developments, but each failure allowed her to return stronger, more ready. Here she had an adversary she had never met and whom she could not sense. Within a few hours of revealing her intentions, this adversary had already taken two significant pieces. The Incubator must have coached her extensively on what to do upon arrival in Mitakihara. It was the only explanation for spirited away Nagisa and Miki instead of the other two.

It was tempting to place Omaha as the opponent on the other side of the board, a creature genetically identical to Homura herself, marred by the same patterns of thought, the same

crippling deficiencies, the same obsession. Wasn't that the classical definition of Satan? Adversary? Fitting she should be her own greatest. But Omaha was a tool. The true enemy was the Incubator, who had his own weaknesses and deficiencies. He could predict any number of outcomes and possibilities, but only based on logical progressions and structured equations. Homura had seen him caught unawares twice before.

Most likely, Omaha had taken an Incubator with her into the void. Actually, no. The way his bodies communicated was unclear to her (hard to pick his mind, even with her powers), but from what she divined he had a central hive that relayed orders and commands to his various vessels. It was entirely possible separating a body from the universe would sever its connection with the hive and render it a worthless dead animal.

If so, that meant her adversary truly was Omaha. If such were the case, Homura had to approach the conflict with an entirely different set of behavioral assumptions. Omaha perhaps began with many ideas about how to proceed, with clear goals (acquire Madoka) and clear obstacles (dolls, Homura), but foreknowledge only held until the primary conditions changed. Homura knew the future every time she went back in time, and every time she prevented one thing, something unexpected occurred. Hence needing at least a hundred attempts before something one might consider a (fragmentary) success. Omaha had the same mental limitation without the ability to reset if she failed once.

Again, however, this assumed Omaha had no way to communicate with the Incubator inside her pocket reality. Which Homura had only conjecture and theory to support. Perhaps if Homura killed the Incubator, she could pressure Omaha into a hasty and ill-advised action. No, the Incubator had surely instructed her on what to do assuming his death. Remain inside the void. Wait for the world to collapse or for Homura to lower her guard.

The problem was Homura had little empirical evidence of how Omaha's powers worked. She considered going back in time and killing Omaha before she acquired the cubes, despite the Incubator's warning that it wouldn't work—just to make sure. But if she failed to kill Omaha for any unforeseen reason (and when trying to change a fated outcome, such unforeseen reasons often transpire), she risked creating a second Omaha. Homura was not yet desperate enough to attempt the risk.

Okay, Homura, but what do you *do*? She had sat in this cold room for an hour and had no solution beyond lumping all her dolls on Madoka. She had no answers, few fixed variables, could not even be sure whether to consider her enemy a distorted clone of herself or the Incubator. And the dread simmered deep within her: that she was acting exactly how the Incubator expected her to act, making the sole logical decision in face of such high uncertainty—stay defensive.

Madoka erased a line and blew the scraps from the paper.

Why did they have to do this? Why could they not let her be happy? She finally had the chance at a normal life, the life she deserved, a life loved by friends and family. Why her, why? Homura curled against her couch and stared at the screen. If she allowed the Incubator to do whatever he wanted in this world, turn Magical Girls against each other and spawn archons every day, would that sate him? She should just kill him. Delete every single shard of his existence. Seize Madoka and pull her into a perfect bubble. Damn the world. Damn the

universe. As the embodiment of evil, who more perfect to damn all humanity than Homura Akemi herself, right? Ha ha ha ha ha ha. All for Madoka, all for her. She was their God, after all! Their blood should repay her sacrifice. They needed no Mitakihara, no other humans. Only Madoka Kaname and Homura Akemi, the duality of good and evil, a universe could function with solely those two components. Yes, yes. Yes! The Incubator expected her to make logical reactions to Omaha's threat. But an illogical response, to eschew everything, even the world, for Madoka—her love could be that strong—he could never comprehend—he could never foresee—

Something tapped her shoulder. Homura opened her eyes; somehow she had wound up on the floor. Kalthertzig stood above her, holding a tomato. She let go and the tomato dropped on Homura's face.

Homura wiped the mushy pulp from her eyes and propped herself up. "What do you want. Has Kyoko Sakura disappeared, too?"

Kalthertzig giggled and shook her head. *Ritt fern*, she said.

Ritt fern? That barely made sense. "You mean she went into a black void," said Homura.

Kalthertzig giggled again and whacked Homura's ankle with the blunt end of her spear. *Ritt fern! Ritt fern!*

"You imbecile, what do you mean?" But the doll only chanted: *Ritt fern, ritt fern, ritt fern.*

When the chant devolved into a frenetic incantation, Homura understood the true meaning behind the syllables. Not *ritt fern*.

Redfearn.

She stood abruptly and went to the screens. She pulled away one and switched its view from Madoka (still scribbling peacefully) to Kyoko Sakura. Sakura walked down a dark side street Homura recognized as near Mami Tomoe's residency. Tomoe herself was with Sakura, as well as Tomoe's doll, Eitelkeit, who waved at Homura as she marched behind the others.

Bound by Tomoe's ribbons, unconscious, was Sloan Redfearn of Fargo, North Dakota, the United States of America. The brown coat and beastly hairdo rendered her unmistakable, but Homura pulled up Redfearn's profile and compared to be absolutely certain.

Her? Here? She was the Incubator's red herring, and she had done her job. What more use could he have for her? Nothing in her abilities signified she could even scratch Homura in a fight. She lacked subterfuge and intelligence. She could see Homura's dolls, sure. But Omaha, as Homura's clone, could already do that. What was the point? Especially since Sakura and Tomoe, acting alone, had already subdued her.

She dragged another screen from Madoka's room. She used it to follow Redfearn back in time with accelerated rewind, back to the alley where Sakura knocked her out. She watched the brief fight. Nothing interesting. Rewound again, traced Redfearn to Mitakihara airport, through customs, onto a plane, across the Pacific Ocean (hours upon hours of Redfearn doing

nothing, condensed into thirty sped-up seconds), into a Los Angeles airport terminal where she spoke with the Incubator. Homura stopped the tape and eavesdropped on their telepathic communication, in which the Incubator failed to convince Redfearn not to fly to Mitakihara.

Homura stopped the playback. So the Incubator did not want Redfearn to come? It was possible he put on an act to fool Homura. But why? What purpose did Redfearn serve?

The only reasonable hypothesis was that Redfearn would continue serving the same purpose she served all this time: A pointless distraction. Anything to divert Homura's attention from Madoka.

Well. Her shield appeared on her arm in a shimmer of purple light. She reached behind it and retrieved a Beretta M9. The Incubator probably wanted her to ignore Redfearn based on the logic that she was harmless. He probably expected her to remain paralyzed in this apartment and watch Madoka. That would be the logical assessment of a logical creature whose understanding of Homura Akemi involved unabated passion for Madoka Kaname. But if Homura refused to leave her apartment, she had already ceded too much ground. And with Redfearn now involved with Sakura and Tomoe, she may be able to work in more insidious ways. Best to eliminate this distraction before it consumed any more of Homura's mental faculties.

"Watch the screens, Kalthertzig," she told her doll. "Inform me immediately of anything suspicious. I will not be gone long."

Mami unlocked her apartment door, glanced to ensure nobody saw her cart an unconscious foreigner through it, and invited Kyoko inside. "It seems you will be enjoying some cheesecake after all," she said as she shouldered the bag from the bakery and led her through the door.

"You don't seem too worried about all this," said Kyoko.

"Nagisa, I'm home," said Mami. "And I've brought company." The triangle table had Nagisa's homework on it, but Nagisa was no longer in the room. Well, the unexpected proceedings had caused Mami to return past Nagisa's bedtime. She probably tucked herself in for the night, which was rather responsible of her, although the mess she left on the table disconcerted Mami somewhat.

She offered Kyoko a seat. Kyoko remained standing. Mami's ribbons lowered the foreigner onto the plush cushions near the bookshelves, ensuring she did not hurt her head against anything.

"It's weird, y'know?" Kyoko leaned against the wall and folded her arms. "Homura drops ominous warnings about a foreign girl, and she shows up same day."

Mami carried her bag to the kitchen and removed the cheesecake. Since Nagisa had fallen asleep, perhaps it would be best to save it for tomorrow. She opened the refrigerator and shuffled aside several blocks of cheese to make room. "A rather striking coincidence, but you said she used no invisibility powers, correct?"

"She had tons a chances, but I dunno," said Kyoko.

"Well, that means either she has refused to use them for some reason or she is a different girl entirely." The cheesecake just barely fit in the fridge. She next examined Nagisa's mess on the table. Tch, the silly child left a problem half-finished. "Either way, it's best we discern her reason for coming here. As long as she remains bound, she cannot escape. Becoming invisible will not help either, not that she can use that power without her Soul Gem anyway."

"She had this, too." Kyoko unfolded a piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to Mami. Mami looked it over. Handwritten script. Homura Akemi and Mitakihara were clear enough. The only other word she recognized was Minneapolis. A city in America, if she remembered right.

As Mami tried to parse the other names, Kyoko took out a muddy Soul Gem. "Take this too, it's hers. I'll just lose it if I gotta watch it."

Mami pocketed the gem. "Thank you, Miss Sakura. From what I can tell, this paper is merely a list of names. I can look up the ones I don't know to see if they mean anything."

She retrieved her cellphone and used it to search the words on the paper. As she suspected, "Minneapolis," "Winnipeg," and "Fargo" were cities in the United States and Canada. (*Fargo* was also an old American movie, but Mami doubted that meant anything.) "Williston" had a few different results, but also happened to be to a small town near the other cities. Meanwhile, "Sloan Redfearn", "Erika Dufresne", and "Clair Ibsen" returned no relevant results. But given the pattern established by MITAKIHARA — HOMURA AKEMI, they probably belonged to Magical Girls in the respective cities.

None of it explained anything, however. Who were these other girls, and why was Homura's name on the same list as them?

"Think we should call Homura?" said Kyoko.

A loaded question. Kyoko had already abstained from calling Homura for a reason, despite the clear evidence that this girl and Homura were connected. Mami agreed with that decision. Homura struck Mami as one who let her preconceived notions blind her. When she became fixated on a certain path or outcome, she missed all other avenues. Mami believed the odds of a peaceful resolution to this conflict would be highest if Homura Akemi remained uninvolved.

"No, we can sort this on our own for now," said Mami.

"Figured," said Kyoko. She checked her own cellphone, frowned at whatever was on the screen, and put it away. "Anyway, you gotta talk to her. The only English I know is 'hello' and 'fuck'."

Mami sighed and shook her head. "Very well."

However, Mami's fluency in English had never been tested conversationally. It was her best class in school, certainly, but a decent comprehension of the grammar and pronunciation plus an alright vocabulary only took one so far. Madoka Kaname, who had spent three years in the United States, could probably communicate more effectively, if more informally. But Kyoko had contacted Mami first, which spoke to the confidence the other girls had in Mami's abilities. Mami had to admit she may have fostered unrealistic expectations of her English skills by insisting the other girls use English or Latin names for their attacks (how could Kyoko say she only knew those two words when Mami distinctly recalled teaching her 'Latticework Barrier' and 'Driving Spearpoint Attack?'), but ultimately it mattered little. As the senior Magical Girl of Mitakihara, the duty fell to Mami Tomoe to establish good relations with visitors and extend hospitality toward guests.

Speaking of which, perhaps she should brew tea before the foreigner woke up? Tea transcended language, after all. No, no, the girl was already stirring. Mami supposed tea could wait.

Mami knelt beside the foreigner. "Hello," she said in her best English. "Are you awake?"

The foreigner tossed a little, although the ribbons kept her in place on the cushion. She cracked open an eye and twisted her mouth into a groan. "Ugh... unh..."

"I knocked her block pretty hard," said Kyoko. She had not-so-surreptitiously purloined a bag of pistachios from Mami's kitchen.

"Feel free to help yourself to anything in my kitchen, Miss Sakura," Mami told her. She turned back to the foreigner and tried again in English. "Hello! Are you awake?"

The foreigner blinked twice. Her eyes scanned the apartment, recognized Kyoko, and settled on Mami. Mami smiled at her. "I apologize because I bind you. My name is Tomoe Mami."

She immediately realized she forgot to switch the order of given name and surname for her Western conversational partner. She smiled wider to conceal the error.

"Tomummy," said the foreigner. She seemed a tad dazed.

"I apologize because I make mistake," said Mami. "My name is Mami Tomoe."

The foreigner blinked again. She said something in English, except she spoke far faster than Mami expected. She started with the word "Where" and threw in Kyoko's second English word for good measure.

"I apologize, ah, you can repeat?" said Mami. "My English is, ah, very okay."

The ribbons rustled as the foreigner tried to pull her arms from the binds, to no avail. She stared at Mami for a moment and repeated, very slowly: "Where. The fuck. Am I."

"She say what she's doing here?" asked Kyoko.

"Not yet." Mami searched her English vocabulary for the right words and arranged them in a proper order. "You are at my apartment. You are safe, no worry. I am not hurt you. I apologize, I mean say I am not hurting you." She must remember those pesky gerunds.

The foreigner nodded. The initial daze had worn off. She motioned at Kyoko with her head. "She hit me." Slow enough for Mami to follow.

"She is my friend. Her name is Kyoko Sakura," said Mami. "She is not hurting you also. My name is Mami Tomoe. What is your name?"

"Fargo," said the foreigner.

"Faago," said Mami. She tried again. "Farugo. Fargo. Fargo." Fargo was one of the cities on the paper. Was it possible it was both a city and a girl's name? "I apologize, I am pronounce your name correctly, Miss Fargo?"

"Yes," said Fargo. She immediately segued into a long and fast paragraph, from which Mami discerned several individual words ("Mitakihara," "someone," and what was probably a butchering of Homura Akemi's name) but no overarching meaning.

"What's she saying, what's she saying?" asked Kyoko.

Mami told her to be patient. When Fargo stopped, Mami said, "I apologize, I am very hard to understand you, Miss Fargo. Can please repeat? Very very slow." She motioned with her hands to indicate slowness. Oh dear, this was a shameful trainwreck. Kyoko seemed unaware of the how the conversation progressed, at least.

However, the foreigner stared at Mami with a piercing gaze that left no exasperation hidden. "I. Need to speak. To Hummera. Akeemy."

"Miss Homura Akemi is, ah, unavailable." Mami dug deep into her mental dictionary to remember that one. "Please, you can say to me instead."

Fargo glanced at the ribbons wrapped around her arms, legs, and torso. She groaned. Mami smiled hopefully for a few moments punctuated by the crunch of Kyoko devouring pistachios. But Fargo said nothing and indicated no intention to speak.

Okay, fair enough. Mami conceded she had pressed for information too quickly and eschewed many of the basic standards of politeness, which she attributed to her lack of freedom in expressing herself in English. She simply needed to slow down and start over.

"Miss Fargo," she said, "Would you like some tea?"

"Tea," said Fargo.

Mami nodded. "I have chamomile. Very good tea, would you like?"

Fargo attempted to shrug, but the ribbons hampered her action. "Okay."

Phew! Mami hurried to the kitchen. Tea was much more her element. Trying to remember all those English words and grammatical structures taxed her heavily, especially with all the other jumbled knowledge sloshing in her head from college entrance exam studies. If she had more time to prepare, she would speak much more fluidly, but Kyoko's call had been rather sudden. Nonetheless, the nonverbal communication of a nice pot of tea could compensate for her own shoddy skills.

"Wait, so what did she say?" said Kyoko, munching pistachios.

"She said she wanted some tea," said Mami as she prepared a pot on the stove. "You are more than welcome to some yourself, Miss Sakura."

"I mean, awesome, I'll have some, but you guys sure said a lot of words just for tea."

"Diplomacy requires finesse." Mami smiled toward Fargo, who watched them from the cushion. The pot began to heat up, but no sense watching it boil. "She certainly seems set on speaking to—"

The next moment the entire world went still. Blondie froze midsentence, holding aloft a wizened finger. Ginger's hand stopped with a handful of nuts halfway to her open mouth. The flame under the teapot did not flicker.

The ribbons around Sloan's body were gone.

She became aware of a hand on her shoulder. Her eyes followed the hand to the arm to a dour Magical Girl standing beside her. The girl had a round shield on her other arm, which hung at her side.

"Hello, Sloan Redfearn," said the girl. "I removed your bindings only to prevent Mami Tomoe from interfering. Otherwise, I expect you to remain seated."

The girl was interesting, but the transfixed state of the rest of the room kept Sloan more interested. Everything had a dull blue sheen. It reminded her of Omaha's magic, when Omaha grabbed Sloan's hand to make her invisible. The rest of the world got blurry and dark then. This new girl, who actually looked a lot like Omaha if Omaha lost her glasses and changed her hair, seemed intent on maintaining a physical connection to Sloan's shoulder for the same reason.

Only one other thing in the room remained unfrozen: the dark-haired doll who pranced around the triangular table in the center of the apartment. The doll had been there ever since Sloan woke, but showed no aggressiveness. Since Blondie and Ginger obviously couldn't see the doll, Sloan never bothered to mention it.

"Hey, mysterious girl," said Sloan. "You speak English better than Blondie?"

"Language is a trifle for a being on my plane of existence."

Sloan stared at her. "You're Homura Akemi. Aren't you?"

"I would prefer if you at least pronounced it correctly," said the all-powerful time-devouring demon who was actually a svelte Asian chick. "Ho-mu-ra A-ke-mi."

"Okay, well I got a question for you: Are you actually a demon?" Judging from the state of Blondie, Ginger, and the rest of the room, she certainly had the "time" part down.

Homura Akemi made a melodramatic flip of her hair that was supposed to look apathetic and actually looked anything but. "I am the embodiment of evil and the adversary of God. If that does not constitute the definition of a demon, I do not know what does."

Sloan stifled a snort of laughter. "Oookay. Sure. Can you sprout devil horns? Breathe fire?"

"I do not have time to chat with you." From her pocket she drew Sloan's Soul Gem. She placed the gem on the shelf over Sloan's head so Sloan had to crane her neck to see it. Oh boy, another person to threaten Sloan's life. Like she hadn't seen this before.

"Seems like we got a whole lotta time, considering you stopped it and all."

"My opponent, your friend who goes by Omaha, is unaffected by such things." To heighten the comedy of the situation, Time Demon Homura Akemi drew an ordinary military handgun from her shield and aimed it at Sloan's Soul Gem.

It took a lot for Sloan not to burst out laughing. "Oh, is that your demon weapon? They shoot Berettas in hell nowadays? Look, if you wanna kill me, sure. You're the embodiment of evil, after all. Even though it seems your friends Blondie and Ginger aren't in too bad shape. They demons too?"

"They're not my friends," said Teen Satan.

"Whatever. Look, Homs. You apparently already know about Omaha, so I guess I don't have to warn you about her. But the reason she wants to kill you is because all this demon crap you're spouting. Probably if you chilled out and talked to her like a normal person she'd realize there's not some weird celestial war going on, and then maybe you wouldn't all kill each other?"

Lucifer Junior narrowed her eyes. "I cannot tell if you are actually an idiot or merely pretending to be one."

"I mean, I'll own up to being a total dumbass," said Sloan. "I let Kyubey trick me into killing my friend, and getting a lot of other people killed too. But really, I'm getting sick of all these normal teenage girls acting like they're some kind of monster. Like they're something inhuman just because they did some bad stuff or had some mean thoughts. Clair, Delaney, and now you. What the hell'd you do to become the 'embodiment of evil'? Kill someone? Boohoo, I did that, it only made me a piece a shit, not a goddam demon."

On the other end of the apartment, the dark-haired doll took Ginger and Blondie's frozen bodies and posed them in positions like ballet dancers. Little Miss Hellspawn snapped at the doll to stop, and the doll did not stop at all.

Homura tossed her hair again (not so dramatically this time) and returned her focus to Sloan. "Why are you here, Sloan Redfearn?"

The million-dollar question. "I'm here because I saw a lot of people die for something I did. I don't want Omaha to kill you and I don't want you to kill Omaha. I don't care if you're a demon or not. I mostly want to fuck over Kyubey and do something right."

Homura's face remained stolid and emotionless. Her gun remained aimed at Sloan's Soul Gem. A true demon, Sloan figured, would neither hesitate in killing nor kill her so painlessly anyway. Come on, Time Demon. Where's the torture? Firebrands and rusty nails? If a quick and painless death was what constituted the embodiment of evil nowadays, evil sure pussied out.

"Farewell, Sloan Redfearn."

She fired her gun. The bullet zipped out and slowed to a stop inches away from Sloan's Soul Gem. It became frozen in place like everything else under the sway of Homura Akemi's time magic.

"So when you start time, that means it's curtains—"

Homura removed her hand from Sloan's shoulder.

After Redfearn deanimated and faded into the blue sheen of the frozen world, Homura returned the fuming handgun to her shield and snapped again at Eitelkeit to stop moving the bodies. The daft thing had placed Tomoe and Sakura in a Shakespearean pose, something akin to Romeo and Juliet. Or Lear. Not that it mattered much, anyway. When time resumed, both would be startled by the sound of a bullet shattering a Soul Gem. Homura stepped back and regarded the scene. Tomoe would likely wonder how Redfearn's Soul Gem escaped her pocket and wound up on the shelf. Indeed, Tomoe and Sakura were both smart enough to piece things together. A sudden, disorientating shift in certain objects, correlating to a phantom gunshot with a spent bullet embedded in a wall.

And then they would ask Homura questions.

Perhaps that was the Incubator's gambit? If he predicted Homura to kill Redfearn, had he somehow engineered events so that Tomoe and Sakura would inevitably connect the murder to her and later impede her progress because of it? Was Homura merely paranoid? What if the Incubator's plan was nothing more than to let Homura stew in a stalemate and wait for her to

consume herself in doubt and second-guessing? She considered pulling Redfearn's gem from the path of the bullet, even raised her hand. But she forced it down.

Why not just kill Tomoe and Sakura, too? Certainly the Incubator would have not expected such a seemingly illogical action, although it was a perfectly reasonable solution. Since Omaha had unstuck herself from time, once Homura killed her it would effectively delete her from not only present and future existence but also past. Which meant, after Omaha died, Homura could rewind time to this point, before Tomoe and Sakura and Redfearn's theoretical deaths, and resume as though nothing had happened and with all danger abated. What if Homura took it a step further, and killed the Incubator? It would cause a rapid dissolution of the world, but once Homura defeated Omaha—however long it took—she could return to a point before the world's decay.

No, no. She considered more ramifications of such a plan. If the Incubator died, it might become impossible to kill Omaha at all, with Omaha defaulting to a strategy that involved waiting for Homura to let her guard down. Which would never happen. So the world would simply end with only Homura and Madoka left alive upon it, and still Homura would have to watch and wait and watch and wait because as long as she watched and waited Omaha would not strike but the moment she stopped watching and waiting Omaha would strike. Worse yet, Homura had to consider the possibility that subjecting Madoka to the apocalypse would stimulate her memory of herself as the world's savior and cause her to realize her tragic purpose. Could the Incubator have planned for that as a contingency? How could he plan for something that had no precedent in either theoretical or lived experience? How does one plan for a god?

Homura balled her fists and waved them at imaginary targets. This was so idiotic! What good was having literally all the time in the world to think if all she did was run in circles and doubt herself? She would stick to the original plan. Redfearn dies, Tomoe and Sakura live.

She exited Tomoe's apartment and left Eitelkeit to reenact whatever scene with the true dolls of Mitakihara. The frozen world sat still and silent around her. Trees solid in a motionless wind, birds suspended as if by fish wire. Pedestrians on the streets, cars along the roads. Homura decided not to bother concealing herself before resuming time, because none of these blind fools noticed her anyway.

Once she had cleared enough distance from Mami Tomoe's apartment, Homura cranked the cogs inside her shield. The cars drove, the people walked, the birds flew. And Sloan Redfearn died.

She transformed back to her regular apparel and retrieved her cellphone from her pocket. Her phone doubled as yet another window through which Homura could see anything she so desired. First, however, she had received a text message from Madoka:

Hi, Homura! When do you want to hunt wraiths tonight?

Homura replied:

I'll be there soon.

She closed the messaging app and switched the screen to show the interior of Mami Tomoe's apartment. Much what she expected: Shock on both their faces, Sakura staying back while Tomoe rushed to the side of the crumpled corpse. She shook the body and said, "Miss Fargo? Miss Fargo?"

The broadcast was interrupted by Homura's phone suddenly ringing. The call came from Kaltherzig.

"What is it," said Homura. "What's happening?"

Attacke! said Kaltherzig's squeaky voice. *Attacke!*

Homura took off in a sprint toward Madoka's house.

Po-tee-weet?

Mami shook Fargo's body but nothing happened, the girl remained dead, the shattered remnants of her Soul Gem sparkled across the carpet. "Fargo, Fargo?"

"What the hell happened," said Kyoko. "Is she dead? What the hell!"

"I don't understand." said Mami. "This makes no sense, her gem was in my pocket, how did it get here? How did she get out of her binds?"

"This is fucked up," said Kyoko. "This is—"

Homura stopped time on the off chance it abated whatever was happening at Madoka's residence, or at least to stop the cars and people and birds so she could weave between them effortlessly. She eschewed her usual transformation, the one to maintain a façade as a normal Magical Girl in front of Madoka and the others. This time she used her true Soul Gem, hidden in the back of her hand.

A swirl of black feathers cloaked her in a black-feathered dress. She bounded skyward while from her back burst two laborious wings. They carried her into the starry sky and its dappled galaxies. She spiraled above the motionless metropolis, silent solid humans and machines transforming to brittle ants beneath her. The household of Madoka Kaname lay exactly 5.067 kilometers from her current position, a distance that shrunk at a rate of 146 kilometers per hour. The math whirred in her brain alongside the incalculable echo of

MADOKA

MADOKA

MADOKA

Which despite her omniscience could crowd so many thoughts and consume so much demigod processing power that the more logical scions of her psyche grew loath of the trisyllabic drone which prevented her from performing the basic calculation of her predicted time of arrival—

—Which was, by the way, now. She crashed headlong through the sunroof of the Kaname household and ceased her descent with an abrupt flip of her body and a massive beat of her wings that formed a cyclone of dead dust that froze after the brief disturbance ended. Tomohisa Kaname alone beside open refrigerator, Tatsuya in bed, facts instantly processed as Homura sprinted through the halls to Madoka's room, door ajar and a clatter of metal and small voices within.

Homura kicked open the door as in her hand materialized a bow fletched with an arrow, drawn tight. Her twelve dolls (all but Mami's Eitelkeit and Kyoko's Kaltherzig) formed a tight dome around Madoka. They aimed their pin-spears outward like a porcupine composed of many individual parts.

Opposite them stood Sayaka Miki, quite immune to the stoppage of time. She had her usual attire, a knight's costume, a cape strung from her neck by a clasped collar. Around her ankle was rope composed only of void, which extended out the open window to the yard below.

"Ah, transfer student," said Miki. "Figures you show up—"

Homura loosed her arrow for the Soul Gem above Miki's belt. Miki flipped onto the ceiling and clung like a spider, but Homura's arrow altered its trajectory midflight in pursuit. Undaunted, Miki brushed back her cape, drew a saber, and deflected the shaft with an agile parry. The arrow exceeded its short duration of maintained momentum in nontime and froze into a vibrant and solid tube of light angled at the wall.

"Gee, you're not one for talking, are ya?" Miki brushed back her cape a second time and several more sabers appeared in a circle around her, their points embedded in the ceiling and their hilts dangling. "Bummer, too, cuz I got a lot to say to you, Homura Akemi."

"Everything you say is predictable." Homura fletched another arrow and aimed. Her dolls watched eagerly.

The black cord that extended from Miki's ankle out the window offered the only explanation to her immunity from Homura's time magic. Even assuming Miki had regained her memories as a conceptual being who served as an assistant to the Law of the Cycles (or, to better coincide with the theological allegory of their situation: an archangel), she still dwelled within the broader framework of the universe and thus stood subject to its laws. This, at least, was an assumption which required no deep structural pondering. Homura had scuffled with Miki the Archangel three years prior, in a False Mitakihara not unlike the one now, and had taken note of Miki's strategies in that fight.

Homura diverted her aim from Miki herself to the cord. The purple arrow flashed beyond Miki's range and passed into the line of void, before it vanished without a trace into the blackness.

"Come on, transfer student," said Miki. "The whole *point* is that it's outside our universe. You can't just break it like a regular rope. Use your head a little, will ya?"

"So you are partially inside and partially outside this universe," said Homura. "Allowing you to interact with it while ignoring its laws."

"There we go, that's better! Seems like you got a brain after all." Miki, upside-down on the ceiling, tapped the hilt of one of her sabers with a finger and wiggled the blade. "I guess that means stupidity won't fly as the excuse for what you did to Madoka. Leaving what? Evil? Or would you call it love?"

Such an obvious bait dignified no response. Homura would rather not listen to this irresponsible, selfish dolt blather any more than necessary. Her mind processed a thousand potential battle strategies and tactics, not the least of which was ignoring Miki entirely and following the black cord to its source, where assumedly she could take the fight to Omaha. A dangerous risk, as a fully unoccluded Miki might have the power, given enough time, to defeat Homura's dolls and seize Madoka.

Homura reverted from her archdemon state to her normal Magical Girl outfit. The close confines of the Kaname household, which she would rather keep somewhat intact, demanded a less expansive mode of combat.

She pulled an AK-47 from behind her shield and fired. Miki rolled from the ceiling to the floor as a trail of bullet holes chased her. She hurled a blade at Homura and Homura raised her gun to deflect it but the sword froze in midair moments upon leaving Miki's grasp, transfixed by stopped time. The image of a swordpoint angled before her eyes gave Homura momentary pause, upon which Miki capitalized by lunging with two blades for Homura's midsection. Homura flipped back and kicked one blade out of Miki's hand while deflecting the other with her gun, causing the tip to jam within the barrel. She tossed the mangled AK-47 aside and drew twin Minebea PM-9 submachine guns, which she raked across the ground as Miki scurried in flight.

Miki might be immune to time magic, but their respective weapons still put Homura at an advantage. Since bullets traveled faster than swords, their initial burst of momentum carried them farther before they succumbed to absence of worldly progression. Effectively giving Homura longer range and forcing Miki to move closer to do anything relevant. Which was always Miki's problem, wasn't it? Swords went out of fashion in the 19th century for a reason. Miki's entire ensemble resembled something terrifically anachronistic, an antique unsuited for modernity. She should adapt to the times, although Homura feared that would require an entire remapping of her torpid, hypocritical personality.

Not that much would be lost should such remapping occur.

The bullets struck the ground and ricocheted upward before they froze into pebbles followed by streaks of steam. Miki danced between them and tossed additional blades to stick in the air, where they became solid barriers between her and Homura's attacks. Her deft weaves and agile motions inched her closer to striking range, forcing Homura to take slow steps from Madoka's room into the adjacent hallway.

Homura ran out of bullets and dropped her weapons, already reaching for a Browning Citori double-barreled shotgun in order to blast half or all of Miki's oafish face away when Miki used the brief lull to strike. A pin-shaped spear sailed through the air and impaled Miki from behind. Miki sagged forward, stuck to the floor like a butterfly while Homura's dolls cheered and chucked more spears at her. The boldest, Stolz, rushed forward, spear raised to skewer.

Wrapping one hand around the portion of spear exiting her body and lifting her torso against it, Miki swung back an arm and nailed Stolz through the neck with a blade. Stolz groped at the hilt and wobbled around wailing for help. Homura raised her shotgun for Miki's face and fired.

Except Miki had already hurled a second sword, which stuck at the end of the shotgun's barrel. The gun exploded with a twist and screech of steel. Homura crashed into the wall, tore through the plaster, and cracked against a support. She bounced onto her knees.

Miki ripped her body off the pin, dipped through the spears both frozen and in flight, and charged Homura with an upraised blade. Homura barely had time to react, lashing out a katana to block the first strike and discarding it for an M4 carbine. She rolled down the hall, flung herself to her feet, and fired a string of bullets across the narrow corridor. Miki reacted with a dip, but between bullets and spears she could not dodge everything and a bullet nailed her in the shoulder. She bounced against the concave wall as her splattered blood stuck in midair.

The dolls, led by Stolz (who had pulled Miki's sword from her throat and now wielded it as her new weapon), pounced on Miki. She defended her gem as they plunged spears and swords and other sharp implements into her.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" said Homura. "My dolls are experts at inflicting pain. You have no hope to defeat me, Sayaka Miki. While the more I think about you the more revolted I become, you *are* a friend of Madoka's. Throw down your blade and I'll put you back in your proper place, with no memory any of this ever happened."

Miki flung the dolls off her with a tremendous heave. Her blades lashed out and sent the others scurrying as reams of placid magic enveloped her and healed her wounds. Fitting that such a tenacious thorn in Homura's side would have magic to regenerate far faster than the average Magical Girl.

Oh well. It merely meant Homura must crush her into submission.

The dolls encircled Miki and penned her into a corner of the hallway. Miki flattened herself against the wall and flicked her eyes between the dolls and Homura. "I won't stop fighting until I've freed Madoka, demon," she said. "Until justice has returned to this universe."

Verleumdung strayed too close and Miki kicked her out the window with a swift sweep of her leg. As the other dolls encroached, Miki threw her cape around herself. Stolz slashed the cape with her sword but Homura knew Miki had already vanished—to recoup with Omaha—or to regain a tactical advantage in this fight? She caught sight of the thin black rope of void which twisted and coiled through the grid of frozen bullets, blood splatter, and broken or empty guns strewn from Madoka's room to the hallway. It roped between the dolls, between Homura's feet, and ended—

Behind her. Miki's cape blossomed out of the ground and swirled aside to reveal its owner, blade already swinging at Homura's head. Homura turned away but took the brunt of the blow to the side of her face. Homura raised her assault rifle and fired for Miki's gem but Miki kicked the gun aside and sent the spray harmlessly into the wall.

A second blade went for the back of Homura's hand. Her eyes widened in momentary panic as she shielded the hand with her body, causing Miki's blade to run her through the side. A dark blood oozed down her clothes. The dolls twittered in terror and grabbed Homura with

their little hands, pulling her away as Miki swung for more decisive strikes. The blades instead cut air.

"A long time since anything has touched me," said Homura. "At least death granted you some martial capability, Miki. You needed it."

The blood ran down Miki's blades. "I wanna know, demon. I just wanna know why. I thought Madoka was your friend."

Homura localized her time magic to the wounded parts of her body and accelerated their regeneration. Her blood dried as a byproduct of the magic. "Madoka has been happier these three years than she has ever been. She has known no pain, no anguish. And you come here speaking of justice. As if you are so free of sin yourself, Sayaka Miki. As if your selfish actions have done anything but cause her to suffer."

"I can't deny I did some pretty childish things in the past," said Miki. "But this is about now ___"

Homura drew an M24 sniper rifle and aimed for Miki's gut. Miki shut up in time to throw herself to the side, but the bullet sailed through her exposed midriff nonetheless, missing the gem by inches but cleaving off a pound of flesh in a paralyzed spray. Homura discarded the rifle, retrieved dual Berettas, and went crazy. Miki absorbed several more shots, each knocking her further down the hallway as she staggered to maintain her footing. Homura fired round after round. Blood kindled intricate arabesques on the air, ornate patterns of lines destroyed as Homura walked through them.

"You were foolish to fight me, Miki. You must know I exceed you in all manner of combative prowess. Speed, reaction time. Even my choice of weapon is effective against yours. You will always be at a natural disadvantage."

Waves of healing light bathed Miki while Homura pumped more bullets into her sagging torso, the regenerative magic fighting to keep pace with the onslaught. Miki reached the end of the hallway and the stairs to the first story. She took a step behind her but found no more ground, only stairs; she fell. Her faux-heroic caped form rolled down the steps and collapsed in a heap at their base.

Homura made a single graceful leap from the top of the stairs and landed directly on top of Miki. She slammed the butt of her pistol on Miki's skull. It made a satisfying crack.

"It would be irresponsible to kill you."

Another crack.

"Madoka would ask where you went."

Another crack.

"Although perhaps I could eliminate all her memories of you."

Another crack.

"I know her mind well. It would be easy to do."

Another crack.

"I doubt you're an especially integral part of her memories anyway."

Another crack.

"I suspect it might ultimately make even Kyoko Sakura happier if you never existed."

Another crack.

"It's difficult for selfish people to have friends."

Another crack.

"Even now I can tell you fight not to save Madoka, but for your own petty revenge."

Another crack.

"Is that justice to you?"

Another crack.

"Satisfying your self-righteous notions of morality?"

Another crack.

"Notions you cannot even uphold yourself?"

Another crack.

"You're lucky to have been graced by Madoka Kaname's presence."

Sayaka Miki's skull became a bloody mess on the carpet. It had mostly caved in, its cracked plate bent into a mush of misused brain. Her dull eyes stared forward and her mouth hung agape. Her body sprawled prone and vulnerable beneath Homura.

And yet her Soul Gem had not shattered, which meant it would only take a few moments for Miki to regenerate back to healthy. One shot and this pernicious root would forever be gone from Homura's mind. And Madoka's mind. And everyone's mind. Unremembered and unloved. How was that for justice?

Homura aimed her gun at Sayaka's Soul Gem.

However.

This was a person Madoka cared about. A person Madoka had known since childhood and whom she still, even though Homura had altered her memories and distanced their connection, whom she still harbored positive emotional feelings toward for reasons inexplicable and mysterious. But Sayaka Miki posed a danger to Madoka that Madoka could

not fathom. Homura had to honor Madoka's wishes, but she also had to protect Madoka from harm, and Madoka's trusting, forgiving nature was what allowed her to fall into league with such flimsy people.

The beginnings of Miki's magic swept over her bloodied body. The head started to reconstruct itself, the eye blinked with dullness.

No need to make a rash decision either way. Homura dropped her gun and grabbed one of Miki's blades. All she need do was sever Miki's leg and remove her attachment to Omaha's void. Then Homura would have time for a more logical decision, one in which all variables and outcomes have been considered.

Or simply remove her Soul Gem. No, better to take her body as well. To maintain her part in the stage play of Mitakihara. After Omaha was defeated, Homura could concern herself with widespread memory manipulation and the possible disposal of Sayaka Miki.

She lifted Miki's blade. Surprisingly lightweight, built for agile strikes rather than powerful. A weapon suited for a sixteen-year-old girl with little in the way of muscle mass. Wobbly, like a toy. Without pause she brought it down on the narrow part of Miki's leg, above her boot. The blade sliced through stocking and flesh and stuck somewhere in the bone. Homura wrenched the blade out and brought it down again, which was enough to sever Miki from the void tether. Her wound instantly ceased bleeding as her body went rigid and faded into the motionless background. Her regenerative magic stopped.

One problem solved. Her dolls snickered, spread along the stairs and the hallway like fable breadcrumbs back to Madoka's room. Selbstsucht and Eifersucht reenacted Homura's victory over Miki and the other ten dolls applauded.

That was twelve altogether, here with her.

Which meant—

None—

Were watching—

Homura bolted from Miki's body and barreled aside the dolls in her way as she stormed up the stairs and through the field of suspended bullets that became active the moment she bumped them and clattered into walls or shaved her skin with a hot sear until she skidded into Madoka's room where Madoka sat.

Nagisa Momoe stood behind her. A thin trail of void extended from around her ankle, like Miki's. She stopped with her hand outstretched for Madoka and looked at Homura.

"Oh, uh." She shuffled her feet. "Hi, Homura."

Homura dove at Nagisa and swung whatever was in her hand, which was Miki's blood-dripping blade, except halfway through the swing the blade vanished, poof, gone, blood and all, which meant Miki's magic had cut out, but Homura had no time to ponder the specifics

because while she flopped an empty fist through the air in front of Nagisa's throat Nagisa seized a toy trumpet and blew it with a raspberry sound that fired a bubble out the horn and directly into Homura's face.

The bubble popped with an explosive clap and Homura sailed backward, out the door, into the same wall she had crashed into before, this time her back breaking the support beam and collapsing the entire sheet of plaster like a torrent of sand.

Through destroyed blocks of wall and broken planks Homura watched Nagisa reach again for Madoka Kaname, one touch all it would take to pull her out of the timeless world, one simple statement afterward all it would take to remind her who she was and her true purpose in this universe, and then and then and then and then EVERYTHING—

"NO!" Homura pulled her arm from the wreckage and held aloft her shield. The stopped gears unstopped. The cogs and inner machinery whirred and pieces altered their positions.

Time turned backward. Forty-five minutes backward.

The wall around Homura repaired. The bullets and broken swords and wayward blood vanished. All trace of the conflict with Miki erased itself as the Kaname household returned to its stable prior state, the only things unmoved being the dolls, Homura, and Nagisa.

Madoka Kaname disappeared from her room, because forty-five minutes ago Madoka Kaname was in the shower. Nagisa regarded the empty chair and empty desk with bafflement.

Homura hissed askance at her dolls: "Defend her!" Without words they plunged through the wall and into the bathroom.

By all appearances, Nagisa still had not realized what had happened. She searched Madoka's bedroom as though Madoka would be there somewhere, hiding.

"Uh, uh." She backpedaled as Homura advanced on her. "Uh, uh please don't hurt me."

Homura seized her by the suspenders of her stupid outfit and slammed her against the wall.

"I'm seeing a pattern here." She hoisted Nagisa until her feet dangled off the ground.

"Homura Akemi is so single-minded and obsessive that she becomes especially susceptible to distraction. You specifically sent Miki first because I would be more emotionally invested in the conflict with her and forget about you, or Omaha. Even now Omaha remains in the shadows. Are you another distraction?"

Nagisa squirmed beneath her grip. "I, I don't know what you're talking about..."

"My dolls can keep Madoka safe long enough for me to arrive, when they all defend her. Or else Omaha would have taken her already." She pulled Nagisa higher. The girl was so short Homura had to slide her far up the wall for her to be eye level. "And since you have tried to fool me by using Miki as a distraction, I won't be fooled by that again. Besides, I have Miki —"

No. No, she did not have Miki. Why else would Miki's sword have disappeared? Omaha must have rescued her body the moment Homura started for Madoka's room.

"Well, either way. I have you, at least." She tilted her head and examined Nagisa up and down. The girl would develop soon. Probably cause a whole host of problems for Mami Tomoe. Already signs of contention had occurred, mostly centered around the dinner table. How would Tomoe react when Nagisa harbored interests beyond cheese? Tomoe lived the life of a sexless catlady, but doubtful Nagisa would follow the same puritanical inclinations.

After this unfortunate ordeal with Omaha, their world must be restructured. Memories and situations altered. Alternative ways to placate these mewling kittens.

Nagisa's foot lashed Homura in the hip. Homura held fast her hold on Nagisa's suspenders. "Hold still, I must remove you from Omaha's magic."

"N, no!" said Nagisa. "Don't touch me."

Turning back time had returned the katana to Homura's infinite arsenal. It would do to sever the foot. Although unlike Miki, Nagisa lacked swift regenerative capabilities, which may make the maiming awkward if Homura attempted to reinsert Nagisa back into normal life. Oh well.

"No matter what you do," Nagisa continued, her voice becoming more sure, "Sayaka and I will save Madoka! We'll set this world right again. Please, Homura..."

"If please could stop me, I would have stopped ages ago." She drew the katana from her shield.

"Okay," said Nagisa. "Guess I gotta try something else."

She stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry that shifted pitch into a whistle. Through the small square window of Madoka's room squeezed a gigantic white face with psychedelic disco eyes and a wide toothy grin. Its long cone nose, tipped by a billowy puffball, broke through the pane while its head smushed to follow. Homura leapt back and onto Madoka's desk as the face passed the threshold and popped into the room with a sudden expansion, escaping the square confines of the window to return to its full round shape, behind which trailed a serpentine body.

Nagisa's witch form, Charlotte. Now an extension of Nagisa herself due to Nagisa's ascension to the conceptual realm. Which explained (Homura supposed) how, despite time remaining stopped, the goofy Dr. Seuss reject could continue to move without a tether to Omaha's void. Another banal metaphysical question solved that until now could only have been purely theoretical, joy.

Charlotte was distraction, Nagisa the true threat. Homura swung the young girl into the wall and drove the katana for the Soul Gem on her waistband. Charlotte lashed out with surprising quickness for such a clunky abomination and clamped Homura's arm between its triangular teeth. One toss of its head and the arm wrenched out the socket clean.

Blood spurted down Homura's side. She hurled Nagisa away with her remaining arm and buried her face behind the shield to retrieve a grenade by the pin with her teeth. The pin slid out as Homura tossed her head to propel the grenade toward Charlotte.

The gears in her shield turned. Time resumed. The grenade exploded in Charlotte's bloodstained maw.

The blast threw Homura back. The wall between Madoka's bedroom and the bathroom collapsed and Madoka shrieked from behind her shower curtain, the twelve dolls crawling atop her like a swarm of beetles. Charlotte crashed through the other wall and into the Kaname household backyard. Its long body scraped topsoil and grass and tomato plants and trellises and the fence to the neighboring yard. A dog bolted from around a shed and yapped at Charlotte's prone form.

Out of her shield Homura dropped an Uzi. As it fell she kicked it with the back of her heel and caught it in her remaining arm. She went to the newly-formed balcony overlooking the backyard and fired the Uzi into Charlotte's long black torso. Candy-colored blood spewed from the orifices opened by the deluge of bullets.

The dog barked.

In the corner of her eye Homura caught a shimmer of polka dot bubbles. A battered and burned Nagisa scampered across the remains of Madoka's room for the window, enveloped in a transformative effect that changed her from a human-shaped girl to a small fae thing with a head like a candy wrapper. This girl had too many alternate identities. It annoyed Homura.

She aimed her Uzi at the polka dot fairy as it bounded for the window spouting garbled gobbledygook that emerged as bubbles of text from her mouth. *Mean Homura, bad Homura* read the bubbles.

Homura fired but fairy-witch-Bebe-Nagisa tumbled out the window. Madoka sheathed in a towel screamed at Homura from the now-adjacent bathroom. Homura ignored her. She looked out the window in time to watch Nagisa zip into a tiny black hole that floated in the air. Omaha's void. Homura prepared to follow but the hole closed the moment Nagisa escaped inside.

The normal world remained. The dog in the other yard quit barking because Charlotte disappeared when Nagisa did. Homura dropped the Uzi in the wreckage of Madoka's room and lowered her head to investigate the bleeding stump where once had been an arm.

Madoka pattered into the room, using the door rather than the agape hole in the wall. She clutched her towel tight around her small body and demanded to know what happened. Was Homura okay, she asked? Her arm...

Homura chuckled. Even in a situation like this, Madoka's first thought was for Homura. How could Miki and Nagisa demand to know why she did what she did when every single moment spent in Madoka's presence affirmed her decision?

Police sirens wailed. Neighbors rushed around the house. Tomohisa Kaname dashed in with a frying pan and pulled Madoka behind him.

Homura raised her shield. The gears turned and so turned time. All reverted; the holes in Madoka's room, the splatters of blood, the ruined desk and bed. Tomohisa returned to the kitchen and Madoka returned to the shower. The cold draft of winter air dispersed in favor of warm ventilation from the Kaname household heater.

Only Homura's arm remained missing, but that too she could fix. She accelerated time for the bleeding stump, causing her to regenerate several times the typical rate for a Magical Girl. Funny how Sayaka Miki's ill-chosen wish had granted her but a single facet of Homura's power.

The arm regrew like a salamander's tail. Bone emerged, flesh and blood and sinew and musculature compounded around it, followed by nerves and thin skin. Her hand reformed with all its intricacies, with the unique pattern of her intercrossed lifelines. Even the sleeve of her uniform rebuilt itself to cover the white arm's nakedness. Once it finished, Homura reverted to her normal attire and put the shield away.

Water sprayed from a shower nozzle the next room over. Homura stood at the window and watched the yard. Grass bent in the gentle wind. The moon glimmered among the stars.

Homura stood for many minutes, until the shower turned off and a towel whipped across a body and clothes were put on and a door opened. Madoka wandered into her room yawning, the twelve dolls in a procession behind her. She blinked when she saw Homura.

"Homura? Oh, you surprised me. I didn't expect you so soon."

"If you knew we would be fighting wraiths tonight," said Homura, "Why did you take a shower?"

Madoka puzzled this quandary. She scratched her head and smiled. "I like a hot shower when it's cold out, even though I know it wastes water... I'll wash again in the morning anyway."

"That's good," said Homura. She turned away from the window. "Would you like some help with your homework?"

Poor Grendel's Had an Accident

That uncanny feeling. Déjà vu. As though this situation played out before, perhaps a little different, but mostly unchanged. A feeling too weak to be predictive (this happens next, et cetera), but upon the event's transpiration a retrospective foreknowledge, or at least a momentary familiarity. Although if considered rationally, Mami knew for certain she had never seen this brown-coated foreigner before, and definitely never took her inside the apartment bound by ribbons. Maybe the familiarity bred from the likeness of a movie character, or a dream. Mami never remembered her dreams nowadays, but images and ideas dwelled in the subconscious and resurfaced when sparked by seemingly random stimuli.

"Wait, so what did she say?" said Kyoko.

"She said she wanted some tea," said Mami as she prepared a pot on the stove. "You are more than welcome to some yourself, Miss Sakura."

"I mean, awesome, I'll have some for sure, but you guys sure said a lot of words just for tea."

"Diplomacy requires finesse." Mami smiled toward Fargo, who watched them from the cushion. The pot began to heat up, but no sense watching it boil. "She certainly seems set on speaking to..." She paused as the words she intended to say momentarily slipped her mind. Then she remembered and continued unperturbed. "...to Miss Akemi."

"Yeah I got that." Kyoko scratched the back of her head. She slid her phone out of her pocket, flipped it open, flipped it closed, and put it away. "Tell her she gotta make due talking to us."

"I insinuated as much. She became unresponsive." Although now the foreigner scanned the room confusedly. Her eyes wandered across the framed photographs of Mami and Nagisa that lined the walls. "Perhaps tea will ameliorate her mood and loosen her tongue."

Kyoko folded her arms and sat on the counter, swaying her legs over the edge. She fiddled with the jars on the spice rack. Mami kept a close eye to see what foodstuff she would consume next, but after the pistachios she seemed temporarily mollified.

"Kyubey probably knows her deal," Kyoko said after a considerable pause.

"Yes, but it's rather difficult to coax him to say much at all, wouldn't you say?"

The kettle whistled. Mami poured three cups on a tray and offered the first to Kyoko, who sipped greedily and hissed after she scalded her tongue. She carried the tray with the remaining cups and placed it on the triangle table near the foreigner.

After a moment of concentration to switch her lexicon back to English, Mami asked Fargo: "Would you like some tea?"

"Sure, whatever," said Fargo.

Drinking tea with arms bound by ribbons seemed a considerable challenge. After ensuring Fargo's Soul Gem was safe, Mami waved her hand and allowed the ribbons to disperse. While she picked up the second cup and took a dainty sip, Mami kept a close eye on Fargo's movements lest she try anything foolish.

She tried nothing foolish. Instead, Fargo cracked her neck and relaxed her joints and stretched her arms. She took a proffered cup and swigged it before coughing and knocking her chest with a fist.

"It's good," said Fargo.

Mami smiled. "Thank you. I make a big amount. Please ask if want more."

Fargo took another sip. Mami watched for an easing of facial features, but the girl retained the same stoniness. The poor thing needed a wash, and a haircut, and some new clothes. That drab jacket did her few favors beyond concealing her considerable gauntness. But enough of that. Mami invited Fargo to sit at the triangle table with Mami and Kyoko.

"Okay," Mami said when everyone had moved themselves into a friendlier arrangement and spent a few moments to savor the tea. "Miss Fargo, you want to speak to Homura Akemi? Yes?"

From a guttural gulp Fargo wiped her lips on her sleeve and nodded. "Yeah. I have a warning for her." The tea had soothed the pace of her speech to a speed Mami more easily comprehended. Even then she had to think about the word 'warning,' she knew she had heard it before, although the context escaped her. Would it be rude if she excused herself to fish her Japanese-English dictionary out of her bookbag? Or worse yet, that she interrupted the conversation periodically to shuffle its pages?

She took a safer approach. "What means, warning?"

"What means warning." A dull look in Fargo's eye. Then she figured it. "Oh, you're asking... Um. Warning. Like, uh, danger. I... have to warn... danger is coming..." She gesticulated.

"Danger." Mami knew that one. "It means like caution?" Signs around construction sites were printed in many languages. The English language always started with big bold CAUTION.

"Yeah, yeah, like caution," said Fargo. "I have to caution Homura Akemi. It's important."

"At least she's pronouncing Homura's name better," said Kyoko. "It's awkward for me not knowing a word either of you're saying."

"Patience, please," Mami told her. "I am making progress." She turned back to Fargo after another small sip and said, "What is the caution, Miss Fargo? What is the, ah, danger?"

Fargo took a deep breath. The steam from her tea wafted around her in the cool air. Her eyes shifted from Mami and Kyoko, although Kyoko made busy investigating her own fingernails.

Finally, Fargo spoke. "A girl. A Magical Girl—a Puella Magi. Wants to kill Homura Akemi."

"Kill," said Mami. She made a stabbing motion with her hand. "You mean, kill?"

"Yeah, that kinda kill," said Fargo. "Kill dead. This girl is very dangerous. She can turn invisible. You know the word invisible?"

Vis. Vision. And the prefix in-. Yes, Mami knew that word. She propped her chin on a fist and stared into her swirling steaming tea. What a strange series of occurrences. First their meeting with Homura, and then this Fargo girl. Although she had only given partial heed to Homura's concerns, now Mami wondered what would happen if this enigmatic invisible girl did attack. Her eyes scanned the room. An invisible girl could be inside the apartment right now. Could be in the other room, where Nagisa lay in bed...

No, remain calm. She had an effortless way to behold the seen unseen. Under the pretense of pausing for a slow sip of tea, Mami focused her mind on the threads of a large quilt. She closed her eyes for a moment as if savoring her tea to better the actualization in her mind, a large quilt loosening into a grid of threads, each no thicker than a human hair, narrow wires of gold and crimson interlaced, spreading thinner and thinner, breaking from a cohesive whole to a mere crosswire, until to the undiscerning eye the threads were themselves invisible, mere shimmers of color easily broken if trod upon. She opened her eyes and placed her teacup back on the table. The lines in her mind became lines in reality, manifested from her magic to span her apartment, weaving between the furniture and the legs of the triangle table, wall to wall, door to door, stretching down the adjacent hallway to the bedroom, crossing over Nagisa and Mami's beds, Mami's well-made and Nagisa's a tangled lump of blankets and sheets.

Neither Kyoko nor Fargo noticed the threads that surrounded them. Time to test their practicality.

"Miss Sakura, if you wouldn't mind, would you fetch the kettle from the kitchen?"

Kyoko shrugged and stood. "Ain't doing much else anyway."

Mami smiled at Fargo while Kyoko went to the kitchen. Every thread she passed snapped, but Kyoko remained oblivious. Even with her back turned, Mami could sense the exact location of the break in her grid. Any movement within her apartment, whether by one invisible or not, registered in her mind like any other sense.

"Yes, Miss Fargo. I know the word invisible."

Kyoko returned with the kettle. Mami thanked her and poured each fresh cups while her magic repaired the threads Kyoko had snapped. The rest of the apartment lay still; Nagisa must be fast asleep, as her bed did not stir.

"Her name is Omaha," said Fargo. "The invisible girl, I mean."

The teacup in Mami's hand paused halfway to her lips. Homura had said the invisible girl had no name, one of the many unbelievable things she told them. Clearly Homura simply did not know the invisible girl's name but refused to admit gaps in her intelligence. It also signaled a mismatch between Homura's knowledge of this Omaha (an easy enough name to say) and

Fargo's, which indicated Homura may benefit from a discussion with Fargo. Since apparently Omaha truly did want to kill poor Miss Akemi, it was only right in such an instance that they do bring Fargo to her. Since Fargo was not the invisible girl herself, it minimized the odds of Homura doing something rash and violent.

"Okay," said Mami, "I take you to Homura Akemi, okay?"

"You'll take me to her?" said Fargo. "That's what you mean, right?"

"Yes."

Kyoko turned a page in Nagisa's workbook, left open on the table. She sighed and slurped the dregs of her tea. "This talk going anywhere?"

"Miss Fargo knows the invisible girl Miss Akemi told us about. She wants to warn Miss Akemi."

"Or," Kyoko said, spinning the empty teacup around her thumb, "She really is the invisible chick and wants you to take her to Homura so she can kill her. Classic subterfuge, y'know?"

"Without her gem I doubt that plan would work," said Mami. Unless this Fargo girl had real weapons stashed somewhere? A bomb, perhaps? Mami had frisked the many coat pockets when Fargo was unconscious and found only a passport, airline peanuts, and other miscellanies. "If what she says is true, it's our duty to inform Miss Akemi."

"What happened to not getting Homura involved?"

"That was when we suspected this girl was the one Homura warned us about. However, based on what she told me—"

Kyoko plinked the teacup on the table and stretched her arms. "Well I still think she's the same girl. Or an accomplice or whatever. This shit's way too fishy."

Fargo's eyes followed whoever spoke. Her coarse demeanor did portray her as a sort of ragamuffin, and Mami had her own misgivings about the entire affair. "I feel confident I can handle this situation," she said. "If she is the same girl, then the entire crisis has already been averted because you have defeated her. It is more precautionous to assume she is not the same girl. Do you disagree, Miss Sakura?"

The bag of pistachios lay empty on the table. Kyoko rifled through it as though a stray nut might fall out, and then checked her cellphone. "Whatever. Better bite the bullet and bring Homura into this mess. It's her problem, maybe she oughtta solve it anyway."

Fargo said something in English. Mami's mind had departed English mode too heavily to discern the individual words, but the exasperated tone carried clear enough.

"I apologize, please be patient," Mami told her. She turned to Kyoko. "I understand your frustrations, Miss Sakura. There's no need for you to remain involved. I'll take Miss Fargo to Miss Akemi and the two of us will resolve the problem."

Kyoko stood and slid her phone into the back pocket of her shorts. "Yeah right, first interesting thing to happen here in months and you want me to stay outta it?"

"Miss Sakura, I didn't mean—"

"I beat her up to begin with, so I'll see this through." She regarded the window and bit her lip. "I guess. It's whatever."

Something was on her mind. Anxiety about this invisible girl? No, of any of them Kyoko was least likely to flinch at a fight. Perhaps it was simply Mami projecting her own concerns onto her observations of Kyoko's behavior, but she suspected something to do with Sayaka Miki. Kyoko kept checking her phone with increasingly more displeased expressions.

Should Mami ask about it? She didn't want to appear nosy. Kyoko had already made it clear she disliked the topic. But it seemed to Mami their issues ran deeper than Kyoko realized. Such were the moments when a neutral third party's inquisition and useful advice could prove the tipping point for satisfactory resolution.

Oh, best to hazard it. At worst a stubborn admonishment from Kyoko. "I do not mean to pry, Miss Sakura, but is it possible something else worries you? About Miss Miki, perhaps?"

Kyoko grumbled. "Bah."

"If you wish to talk about it, we can speak on the way to Miss Akemi's apartment—"

"No, not that." She retrieved her phone, pressed some buttons, and showed Mami the screen. A text message from Sayaka Miki (at least that was what she assumed SAYA(^•I•^) stood for), received shy of an hour ago.

brb someones at my window

"That's last I've heard from her. I mean, her not talking to me is nothing new, but..."

Hm. Ostensibly innocuous. All varieties of people may visit a condominium complex, even at this time of night. Proselytizers, vendors, or a friend from school. Still, Mami could appreciate Kyoko's concern, considering recent events. Homura had warned them to stay careful, and admittedly the first thing Mami did afterward was purchase a cheesecake.

"I have an idea," said Mami. "Miss Sakura, you go back to your home and check on Miss Miki. Warn her of the danger if necessary. I'll stay here, put some things in order, and tell Nagisa what's happening. Then we'll meet at the bridge on the way to Miss Akemi's. Is that alright?"

Kyoko mulled it over and finally shrugged. She stepped toward the door, unknowingly snagging one of the threads around the apartment. "Sure."

After she set her teacup back on the tray, Mami stood and brushed off her pleated skirt. "If you run into any trouble, don't hesitate to call me. We're friends, after all, and in this together." While she obviously meant trouble with the invisible girl, Mami hoped Kyoko

caught the subtext: trouble with Sayaka. Mami of course would never meddle in the interpersonal dynamic of others without the consent of at least one afflicted party.

"Yeah." She hesitated. Now she need only extend the invitation... But instead she said: "There's probably nothing to worry about."

Mami sighed and nodded. "Yes, you're right." She glided past Kyoko to the door, weaving and unweaving the grid of threads throughout the room to grant her entry.

"See ya soon," said Kyoko. "Thanks for the tea."

"Goodbye, Miss Sakura."

Once Kyoko had exited, Mami closed the door and took stock of the room. Teacups and homework cluttered the triangle table. Should clean that up quickly, it would only take a few moments. She shuffled Nagisa's papers into a neat stack and ferried the tray and kettle to the kitchen. There! Much nicer.

"What's going on," said Fargo. "What is this?"

"I apologize, I show you Miss Akemi very soon." Mami put more small odds and ends in order and hummed a ditty, intentionally leaving her back to Fargo. In doing so, she signaled she trusted Fargo to at least a small degree, which might produce reciprocated trust in turn. Without her gem, such trust was mere illusion, but like as not Fargo would not cognize that fact.

Time to sweeten the pot. "I be right back. Please stay wait just little moment more." Mami passed Fargo with a smile on her way down the hall to the bedroom. As she rounded the corner and left Fargo unattended in the main room, she could track every significant movement with her threads.

All Fargo did with her newfound freedom was go to the wall beyond the shelf, where the pictures of Mami and Nagisa hung.

Mami creaked open the bedroom door and let a sliver of light slide inside. In the windowless darkness Mami's unadjusted eyes perceived mere outlines and vague forms.

"Nagisa," she whispered.

No response.

"Nagisa."

She opened the door wider and stepped inside. She felt her way past her own bed and toward Nagisa's. In the other room, Fargo strolled along the wall, pausing a bit before each picture.

"Nagisa."

Mami's hand settled on the foot of Nagisa's bed. She needed to be stricter about this girl making her bed every morning. Gently she slid a hand through the covers, not wanting to

startle Nagisa. But as her hand searched the tousled blankets it struck nothing, no limb or shoulder or resting head.

"Nagisa?"

She patted her other hand on the bed, but nothing was there, it was flat and empty and cold and she heard the sound of nobody breathing but herself.

Light, she needed light. She staggered across the room and banged her knee against her own bed before she found the switch. The room filled with light and revealed the truth:

Nagisa was not there. The beds were empty. The space between them empty, the open closet empty. Mami dropped to her knees and checked under the beds even though they were too low for Nagisa to fit. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

"Nagisa!"

She staggered down the hallway and into the main room. Fargo stood by the shelf and watched her; Mami paid her no heed. She searched the room but there was nowhere for Nagisa to hide, unless the cabinets? Could Nagisa fit in those, why would she hide there, why would she hide at all?

"Nagisa, Nagisa, Nagisa—"

Mami searched the cabinets but all they had were plates and bowls and spices in jars. Fargo said something in English, Mami's brain was not doing English right now. The closet! Mami hurried past Fargo and flung open the door but it too was empty, a vacuum, cleaning supplies, oh no oh no oh no oh no.

Don't panic, there's an explanation, calm down. The homework left open on the table—the problem half-finished—Mami had thought it odd, but no more than that—oh no oh no oh no oh no oh no—

Cellphone. Mami fumbled through her pockets for hers and mashed Nagisa's number. She hit call.

The catchy jingle of Nagisa's phone played from her discarded backpack by the table, muffled and taunting. Fargo said something again in English. Mami held a hand for silence and tried to think, tried to piece things together and grapple with this situation, as if it were even possible, how could Nagisa up and disappear with no warning, it couldn't be that she, it couldn't be that she, oh no oh no oh no not *that*, not, not, not the Cycles? No, no it couldn't be, no it couldn't be, no it couldn't be.

She wrenched open the front door and stared over the railing into the courtyard of the apartment complex. Doors and windows encircled it like a conch shell, lit with yellow light. A few neighbors walked past below.

"Nagisa!" she shouted. The neighbors looked up, looked down, kept walking.

Her own voice echoed in the enclosed chamber and died.

Cycles made no sense, none at all, Mami monitored Nagisa's gem every night, it was absolutely fine, Nagisa was happy and healthy and Mami had made sure of that, could it be the homework? A homework problem? No that made no sense, no it made no sense at all, sometimes yes girls had bad ends for small reasons but not that, not homework, it wasn't even a test, only a daily assignment, Mami tried to think back to their last conversation (before Mami left for Homura's—Captain Perry, gerunds), tried to piece together Nagisa's words and mannerisms, were there any signs, anything Mami had missed, how could she miss it, how could she have not seen something like that, it couldn't be, Nagisa must have left, but why, where, she knew not to go on her own late like this—did she think Mami had tried to fight wraiths on her own, had Nagisa gone to find her?—but Nagisa had Mami's cellphone number, she would have called, she NEVER would have left the apartment by herself this late at night without calling or at least leaving a note, was there a note, had Mami missed a note?

She stumbled back into her apartment, legs weak and heavy. She shuffled through the pile of homework on the table, scoured each page in search of a note, anything, but found nothing. Mami clutched her head and tried to think. Not Cycles. Can't be Cycles. Mami REFUSED to believe Cycles. But if not that—how else do girls just...

Disappear...

She looked up. Fargo looked back at her, mouth agape. On the wall behind her hung the photographs of Mami and Nagisa, at the park, at the beach, Nagisa with her citizenship award from school.

"Faago," Mami said. She didn't care she said it wrong.

Fargo said something in English. "What's wrong." Yes, she said what's wrong.

Mami braced her arms against the table to lift to her feet and staggered toward Fargo. She seized the citizenship award photograph off the wall and shoved it against Fargo's head, a quivering finger pointed at Nagisa's beaming face.

"You, know, her? Nagisa. Her, Nagisa."

"Uh."

"You know her? You know Nagisa?!"

"I, I don't know her," said Fargo. "I do not know her."

English words, what were English words? She knew the words in Japanese but not English, how could she ask the right questions? Nagisa couldn't be gone. She couldn't. What would Mami do without Nagisa? Without Nagisa what did Mami even have? Mami envisioned her entire world crumbling around her, beams and supports cracking, collapsing, an entire dome dropping to bury her. For years now Mami could proceed with a certainty of the direction in her life and its order and logic and now she saw nothing, blankness, a bad cold to obscure the prognostication, lifelines into the future severed, threads falling apart and leaving only void.

Empty, nothing, she felt this void in her stomach. Like her whole abdomen was about to implode.

Fargo backed away with a nervous smile and stopped against the wall. "You uh, you should calm down."

A sickness seethed inside the absence of her gut. Mami clutched her side and bit her lip. All Kyoko's voiced suspicions rattled through her head, could this Fargo be the invisible girl or in league with her, or else somehow related to this whole charade beyond her seemingly innocent attempt to "warn" them? A black muddle descended over her senses and made it impossible to cohere thoughts in rational patterns.

Light enveloped her as she transformed. She flicked a hand and called a single rifle to it, which she kept aimed at the ground.

"You know Nagisa?"

Fargo shook her head. "I have never seen her. Ever." She held a steady hand toward Mami's shoulder and said something that sounded like body or blandy (blondy?). "Blondy, calm down. Calm down."

Put the rifle to Fargo's throat? Would do nothing, Soul Gem in pocket. But pain? Threat of pain? Fargo had a certain careless vibe Mami didn't care for, a certain smug unworried aura around her, the vibe of someone hiding a secret. Or Mami imagined things? Oh, she could not think, she could not think like this! What was she doing drawing a gun on someone, but she could not think? She hadn't even exhausted all options and already desperation clung to her as though she already knew something was dreadfully irrevocably wrong in this world when possibly (possibly, hopefully) an innocuous explanation solved everything, Madoka or Sayaka or even Homura had taken Nagisa somewhere for some perfectly logical and rational reason and here was Mami already flipping out and AUGH

She devolved the rifle back into ribbons and snatched her phone. With furious digits she mashed typo-strewn messages to all the Magical Girls of Mitakihara, even Kyoko. Sent them into the slipstream, waited ponderous infinity seconds for replies. Paced around the room, sifted Nagisa's papers again, tapped the framed photo of Nagisa against her forehead as if to stimulate some lost memory of a late-night playdate or prior arrangement, to no avail.

Madoka's reply came first:

Sorry, I haven't seen her. Is something wrong?

No no no. Mami clutched the phone tight and waited for it to buzz again. Someone must have seen her. In the meantime, what was she doing standing around?

She stormed out the door, searched both ways down the apartment complex, chose one on a whim and marched. She made it halfway down the walkway when Fargo came clomping after her.

"Hey, you got my Jim, hey wait."

Jim? Some slang term? Mami paid her no heed.

"I don't like bean dead," she continued with equal amount of sense. "I'm stain with you."

"Speak gooder English!" Mami snapped at her. "Can't... understand!"

She must be coming off as a raving lunatic. She was surprised at how little she cared. Only one thing mattered now. By the time she left the apartment complex, her phone buzzed again. Homura.

I warned you about this.

Apoplexy nearly overcame Mami as she read the message. She sagged against the sidewalk and curled her fist around the phone and stared into the concrete beneath her knees and contemplated the merits of slamming her skull until it broke open. She managed to hold things in and save herself the blunt force trauma. Nagisa was alive somewhere. If the invisible girl killed her there would be a body, and there wasn't a body so she was alive.

SHE WAS ALIVE, OKAY? And Mami would not, would not relinquish that belief until she had incontrovertible proof to the contrary. The thought triggered a brief subconscious image—Nagisa, dead—and Mami folded inward and groaned.

"Hey," said Fargo. "Hey, Blondy."

"Nagisa..." said Mami.

"Your friend, she's misseen. Right?"

"Misseen...?"

"Missing. Gone. Vanished. Do you know these words?"

Oh. Oh, yes, Mami knew. "Yes. I apologize I am so crazy. She, she, Nagisa, she, very important, to me..."

Fargo knelt beside her and placed a hand on her shoulder. A breeze stirred the trees planted alongside the sidewalk. Leaves rustled past them into the silent street. The air was tremendously, devastatingly cold.

"I think your friend is okay."

Mami looked up at her. In the dark of night with only streetlamps to illuminate her, Fargo's face appeared even more hollow, shadows filling the concave surfaces of her cheeks and shrouding the dim eyes beneath her considerable bangs.

"You think, you think?" Mami tugged the flap of Fargo's coat.

"I know Omaha. She came here to kill Homura Akemi. Nobody else. This girl, Na-gi-sa, I don't think Omaha would..."

Don't think? Don't think?

"Look," said Fargo. "I want to make sure nobody dies. I will help bring Na-gi-sa back, safe. I promise." She extended a hand toward Mami and gave a wan smile, tired and uneven. Even in an uncertain language Mami could read the uncertainty etched in Fargo's mannerisms and inflection. But at least something was there. And if anyone knew anything about this Omaha character, it was Fargo. Well actually two people knew, but the other's response mocked Mami from the screen of her cellphone.

Mami took the hand and Fargo helped her to her feet. Before she could brush off her skirt, her phone buzzed again. Kyoko now.

saya gone too

She stared at the words, reread them. Was it bad that she actually felt some relief? Because if Omaha, this invisible girl, had taken them, it meant Nagisa would at least not be alone wherever she was? And that the sudden disappearance of both of them, short of a cataclysmic coincidence, ruled out Cycles as the cause?

Mami texted back: *Perhaps she is hunting wraiths?* It was that time, after all.

checking her fave spots now, Kyoko replied.

Made sense. Mami ought to swing by the places where she and Nagisa frequented on the off chance a spurt of adolescent rebelliousness or independence caused her to gallivant across town on her own. She neared that age, after all.

The hysteria had passed and now Mami could remember with shame her manic actions moments prior. "I apologize very much I so crazy," she said to Fargo with a humble bow. "Please forgive me."

With a casual wave Fargo dismissed her. "It's fine. I've seen worse."

Mami texted Kyoko to be careful.

On scooter they zipped across town. Nagisa's child-sized helmet didn't fit Fargo so they rode with a flair of illegality that befit the rogue abandon with which Mami took corners. First stop the red lights downtown, chock with acrid pubs and swooning drunkards. Mami told Nagisa to never ever go here by herself, for any reason, but they also spent the most time chasing wraiths around these alcohol-drenched curbsides so good place as any to start. Streams of lambent neon lined the sordid establishments, blurred and then clear as Mami slowed the scooter to a crawl to better see down the tight alleys. Decent wraiths, although the befuddled and downtrodden humans would have to fend for themselves tonight. No sign of children.

A young businessman, tie disheveled, ambled from a storefront and aimed a whittled cigarette at Fargo, whose arms were locked around Mami's waist. "Ey doll," slight slur, "She yer date?"

The scooter trundled along. Mami craned her neck to see over the man's shoulder and into the next tapered crevice.

He persisted. "Why not pull over a sec, doll? I'll buy ya something nice."

Fargo unlatched a hand from Mami's waist and raised her middle finger at him. The businessman laughed and dragged his cigarette.

"I been in the States, I know what that means." He kept pace with them despite his unsteady footing. A buddy trailed behind him, calling for him. "Y'oughtta teach yer foreign bitch some manners, doll."

Nagisa wasn't here.

They tried next the hospital. Quieter, darker. They came here less often than the red light district even though Mami much preferred it. Nagisa had bad memories about this place. Cancer, death, cakes mixed with syringes. Her mother gone. Real mother, that is. Not the mother Mami tried to be in the first's absence. That mother was currently failing her maternal duties. In a way, both mothers were, although the first had an excuse.

Nagisa disliked this place, but a negative connection was still a connection so it deserved a search. Mami parked the scooter and took the grounds on foot, Fargo like a shadow behind her. If she gave Fargo her gem, they could split up, double their radius. Or Fargo might simply flee, turn invisible if she had that power after all.

Actually, this may be the perfect opportunity to test her.

They paused before yellow shield of glass doors at the hospital entrance. Mami retrieved Fargo's gem from her pocket and held it out on an upturned hand.

Fargo regarded it with suspicion.

"Take," said Mami. "We go, ah, other way." She gestured with her hands to indicate splitting up. "See more place. Find Nagisa more fast."

"You trust me?"

Mami had already strung a single tiny thread, like the ones in her apartment, around Fargo's ankle. Where Fargo moved, Mami would know. If she bolted, Mami could tug the thread and reel her back. Invisibility did not matter because Mami already had a connection. Only if Fargo fought rather than fled would true danger arise. But if Kyoko could defeat this girl handily, Mami had utmost confidence in her ability to reach a similar outcome.

"Yes," said Mami. "Trust. Remember, we find Nagisa, then we go to Miss Homura Akemi."

Fargo continued to hesitate. Even if she took the gem and played nice, it still did not absolve her. She might suspect a trap, or maybe her whole goal was to put on a front to be taken to Homura, and had lost to Kyoko on purpose for that express purpose. But if she did run, if she did fight... Then it solved things nice and neat.

"Thank you." Fargo took the gem.

They split up. Mami covered the interior while Fargo circled the grounds. The thread between them flitted and twisted as Mami traversed the sterile corridors with their anemic scent and scrub-garbed nurses. No irregularities in Fargo's movement, no sudden burst of speed or derivation toward an exit. During the search Mami received a text from Kyoko. Sayaka still missing. Running out of places to look.

Nagisa wasn't here. Mami and Fargo met at the hospital entrance. Fargo turned up her collar and breathed white mist. She held out her Soul Gem.

"You want this back? Or should I keep it?"

Rather obedient. Mami didn't know what to make of such pliability, but decided for now Fargo could hold it. The thread still tethered her.

The main two spots covered, the rest of the places on Mami's list took progressively less time to search. Small nooks and crannies scattered throughout town, warehouses and factories, quays and shipping sectors, fisheries and the places as low class as an upscale city like Mitakihara got. Kyoko sent periodic texts about her status, an echo of Mami's own. No Nagisa, no Sayaka. Not a single clue save the final text Sayaka sent Kyoko, committed to Mami's memory. *brb someones at my window*. Be right back. Except two hours passed.

Had someone been at the window in Mami's apartment too? Had Nagisa looked up from her work, noticed the stranger? Gotten up to investigate? Was she afraid, was the person threatening? Or did they look nice, friendly? Nagisa knew not to answer the door when Mami wasn't home. If scraggly thuggish Fargo showed her face, Nagisa certainly would not scamper to greet her.

Easy during the long rides across Mitakihara for Mami to sink into these pointless and repetitive thoughts, exhausting all options with no new evidence to feed her, only feeling more the despair of Nagisa's absence, the hollow void inside. Clutching the hope that what was done could be undone, both of their friends rescued and this invisible girl defeated. But on a wharf near the end of the sprawled city, scooter propped against a NO SWIMMING sign and Fargo seated head-in-hands on a slick black rock, Mami had to concede Nagisa had not wandered off on her own. She met the acquiescence with a tempered serenity toward which she had worked her mental state the past few hours as they trekked across town.

Nagisa was gone. The someone at Sayaka's window had taken her. Mami texted Kyoko and suggested they go to Homura Akemi.

Blondie had a few pictures in her apartment. Sloan got the chance to look at them before Blondie flipped out. Apparently her friend, the small kid in most of the pictures, had gone missing? Nagisa, as Blondie said, although name or mere word Sloan had no clue. If she disappeared suddenly Omaha probably did it. Hostage? The most reasonable explanation, but Kyubey had mentioned multiple girls in Mitakihara having ascended to "higher planes of existence" or whatever...

Which was the sentence in Sloan's head when she saw the last picture in Blondie's apartment. It showed instead of only Blondie and Nagisa six girls, including Ginger and some random chick in a cape vaguely reminiscent of Anoka. But the girls who piqued Sloan's interest were the last two, dark hair and pink. Dark hair because, after a moment of *déjà vu*, Sloan realized she bore an uncanny resemblance to Omaha, if Omaha ditched her glasses and conditioned her hair. And pink hair because she had only seen one other thing with pink hair: the doll that snatched Delaney.

Omaha described that doll as a "mockery." Of god. And said the time demon Homura Akemi killed? enslaved? said god. Before Sloan fully put the pieces together, Blondie burst out the bedroom hysterical, demanding to know where Nagisa was, and then the two gallivanted across the city to find her.

Under normal circumstances, Sloan would have forgotten the picture and the weird coincidental connections, but she remembered she had a job to do here, which was solve this whole mess before some new damn catastrophe occurred, so she supposed she better stop not caring and start doing the opposite of that. And since Blondie carted her across the slums of Mitakihara with terse conversation at best, Sloan unsure of her destination or how long she would be in this weird fucking city (everywhere odd architecture, unusual objects—empty chairs—culture shock or something stranger?), she had time to put things together.

Pink was an obvious figure of importance, because who the hell has pink hair. Sloan wanted to say dark was important too, for some reason felt compelled to believe she was the Homura Akemi of yore, although on further reflection she had no hard evidence to support the connection beyond a gut impression and a possibly-imagined similarity between her and Omaha. Blondie and Ginger seemed pretty pedestrian, Sloan doubted they had much to do with anything. If Sloan had to bet, she'd bet they were the two out of six *not* "ascended to a higher plane of existence." Ginger's smack to the back of Sloan's head sure felt corporeal enough. If Nagisa were one of the demigods, it might make sense why Omaha targeted her. No clue on cape chick.

Okay, cool. You thought about some stuff and reached some conclusions. Or hypotheses at least. Now what? Kinda the issue, right? Now Sloan had to find a way to do something. But, well, it wasn't like Omaha was showing her face. Sloan had expected warfare in the streets. Fighting she could handle. Kidnapping not quite her forte.

Thinking not quite her forte. Now that Blondie's hysterics had died down, things got boring. Where was Homura Akemi, where was pink hair? Sloan felt like she'd gotten stuck with the ineffectual girls of the city.

So when, sometime past midnight, Blondie turned to Sloan and said, "We go to Homura Akemi now," Sloan gave a silent prayer of thanks to Omaha's bogus pink god.

"Awesome," said Sloan. They trundled on the back of Blondie's scooter down a straight street thronged by omnidirectional streetlights. Their strange two-bodied wheeled conglomeration had four shadows, one to follow, one to lead, and two on either side. "Finally."

Although for some reason she suspected Homura Akemi already knew about Omaha. For some reason she felt like she had already met Homura Akemi? It must be how much she looked like Omaha.

The crescent moon hung huge in the sky. All night Sloan thought something was off about it, and only now did she realize: she could see stars inside the crescent. Which made no sense, because as fancy prep school taught her, a crescent moon was caused by how the sun's rays were reflected on its surface (the moon having no light of its own, so it thieved instead), and some astronomical arrangement of heavenly bodies caused the monthly cycles. The way this moon looked, the Mitakihara moon, was as though someone had actually removed the moiety of its surface, leaving only a curved husk to drift luminous in the night.

Beneath it stood the Dubai Tower. And beneath it an endless cubist painting of block structures stretched to the horizon. She had never heard of this city before yesterday. It had no right being so big. In what year, she wondered, did they build that tower?

Blondie pattered the scooter to a stop beneath an overpass. The road ahead dipped downward to a sunken neighborhood buried beneath the shadows of higher structures. Lights flickered and small animals scurried across them. As soon as they stopped moving, Sloan quit awkwardly clinging to Blondie's midsection and staggered off the scooter.

"Are you sure there's no other way for two people to ride that thing?" she said.

Blondie cocked her head. "I apologize, can you repeat?"

"Never mind." No cars passed this way. Sloan paced up and down the sidewalk. "Is Homura Akemi here?"

"Ah, no, Miss Homura Akemi is, ah, there." She indicated the road into the depths. "We wait for Miss Coco. Ah, you remember, hair like this?" She pantomimed a ponytail with her hand.

Sloan supposed she meant Ginger. What was the name? Coco? Easy enough to say. Homura, Nagisa, and Coco. Three outta six.

They did some awkward roadside waiting. Blondie held her helmet under an arm and stared into nothing. The winter air made it cold, but compared to Minneapolis this was easy peasy. Not even a lick of snow.

She supposed the nice thing to do would be like, ask Blondie how she's feeling? If she's all right? She seemed close to this Nagisa girl. Plus the wistful silence verged on unbearable.

"So uh. What's your name?"

"Name," said Blondie. "Oh! My name is Tomay Mommy, I am please to meet you." She bowed her head. The curls in her hair bounced.

"Tomay... Mommy," said Sloan.

Tomay Mommy winced. "I apologize, I make mistake again. My name is Mommy Tomay."

"Uh." Sloan decided to stick with Tomay as the name. Calling her Mommy, kinda weird. She extended a hand. "I'm Sloan Redfearn."

Tomay shook the hand. Her face scrunched slightly before she intoned the name: "Suh... roan. Reddofaan."

"Close enough."

"I apologize I say badly."

"It's okay, I can't say yours either."

They waited in almost silence for a time. Sloan heard Tomay whisper under her breath the name: Suhroan, Suh-roan. White puffs accompanied each mispronunciation, thick under the streetlights until they dissipated through the night air.

Coco showed up. She hailed them in Japanese from the bridge above and casually hopped the railing to land beside them. Tomay greeted her in Japanese and Coco said some Japanese back and Sloan tried to be aloof and unobtrusive but despite her pronounced stoop she loomed over them both. Coco said something else and pointed at Sloan. Sloan waved from the hip.

Since no magic in hell would squeeze all three onto Tomay's scooter, they walked. Tomay and Coco continued their conversation and Sloan did her best to gauge what they said based on facial expressions. Tomay worried, eyes a tad bloodshot from her earlier freakout, she spoke eagerly and loquaciously in contrast to Coco's blasé shrugs and trying-too-hard apathy. Sloan in no way deserved the title of stellar empath, but even she could tell Coco had a few cares of her own buried beneath the exterior.

Tomay eventually remembered Sloan's existence. "Coco friend also, ah, disappear? Is right word?"

"Right word," said Sloan. "Pink hair or blue hair?"

Tomay registered the meaning with some surprise. "How you know?"

Blah, probably shoulda said nothing, now she'd get suspicious. "I saw the photograph in your apartment."

Tomay nodded. "Is blue hair. Her name is Saika."

Coco muttered something in Japanese. Tomay whispered something back. Wondering what else Sloan knew, probably. God dammit, approach this with a plan, dingus. Get them to trust

you. Best bet was play the dumb Americano, no speako Nippono, which was not a hard role to play considering it's exactly what she was.

"Tell Coco I wanna help find her friend too," said Sloan.

"Yes, thank you," said Tomay. She said something to Coco and Coco laughed. Who knew if the message came through, or if Tomay understood to begin with.

It took a long damn time to traverse the city on foot. Coco and Tomay spoke little and they did it mostly in Japanese, so Sloan got a lot of time to look like a thug bodyguard for the little Asian girl mafia (known in confidential police records as the Yacuteza) and chew the scenery. She smiled at the doll with the short black hair that followed them all across the city, who had become so commonplace Sloan barely even regarded her with dread anymore, although she supposed since the dolls were Time Bitch's flunkies it probably meant Time Bitch already knew they were coming. The doll winked an elliptical eye with a herky-jerky, mechanical motion. Sloan noticed a second doll, with platinum hair, in step with the first. When did she show up? Had she been around the whole time? Even though Sloan could see them, they had a tendency to slip her field of vision when they wanted. As if reading her thoughts, they covered their respective mouths and giggled.

The deeper they followed the declining, winding trail into the thicket of pre-Corbusian structures, the more weird shit Sloan noticed. Crows with purple skulls thronged on the electric wires and leafless tree branches. They cocked their heads and welcomed more brethren onto their perches, crowding closer together until they became jumbled black masses of feathers that gave Sloan a Clair Ibsen vibe. Sloan actually always had the impression Clair hated birds, that the décor of her home stemmed from the undesired whims of her parents. She never voiced any distaste, and she had that crow familiar which was ostensibly something dredged from her own imagination, but still. Moments, scenes surfaced in Sloan's head of a casual stiffness, a small flinch at a new avian knickknack.

Sloan stepped on something, thankfully rousing her from her thoughts before she thought too hard about Clair and did something dumb, like cry or whatever. She lifted her boot, now smeared with fluorescent purple liquid. The mangled remnants of a salamander stuck beneath it. They had salamanders here? Better yet, ones with neon purple blood?

She pondered the blot on her sole until Tomay glanced back with a questionable stare and Sloan scuffled after them. Doubtful Tomay or Coco could even see the salamander, or the birds, just as they could not see the dolls.

They delved deeper. Tomay and Coco whispered and crows made wayward caws. Silhouetted figures stood on the rooftops, attentive soldiers with bayonets and tall hats.

"I apologize," said Tomay. "We get a little lost."

To conjure so much bullshit, the Homster had to at least have power. Sloan still had reservations on the demoness title.

Thirty minutes of aimless wandering later they came to a place Tomay outed as Homura Akemi's apartment. Beyond its bizarre position on a median between two roads, it looked no

more foreboding than anything else Sloan had encountered thus far. It was past midnight but the lights were on.

After Tomay and Coco exchanged a nervous glance, Tomay stepped forward and knocked on the door.

And waited.

And nobody answered.

She knocked again, louder. She called Homura's name and said something else in Japanese.

And nobody answered.

Coco stepped forward and gave the door a thorough pounding. It rattled on the hinges. She got on tiptoe and tried to see through the peephole. She went around to a window and tried to see through the curtains.

She and Tomay exchanged words. Perhaps expressing wonderment that someone was uninclined to answer the door at one in the morning. They fiddled about at the windows, going to each in turn to squint between the blinds.

Sloan transformed, summoned her gun, and fired at the front door.

Tomay and Coco transformed seconds after and drew their own weapons to point in Sloan's direction, but it didn't fucking matter because Sloan's light reflected off the door and blasted her in the chest. She flew back, skidded across the ground, and slid to a stop against the pavement.

The two dolls stood over her, stared down, and giggled. They muttered stuff in another foreign language. German. All those guttural consonants.

"Are you okay?" Tomay rushed to her side. "What you do for?"

What she do for indeed. Of course all-devouring time demon Homura Akemi would have some defenses on her own front door. Tomay helped Sloan up, but both she and Coco remained transformed, Coco with her big damn spear unwavering in her grip and her eyes slanted. Dammit Sloan, remember like, a few minutes ago? Play the dumb American?

"Sorry." She struggled for a viable excuse while Tomay quickly healed her wounds by holding out her hands and exuding a yellow aura. No excuse came, so Sloan told the truth. "I got impatient."

Coco said something. Angrily.

Tomay winced. She whispered to Sloan: "I apologize, but would you please give your..."

No need to make her try to think up the right word for it. Sloan pulled her gem from her pocket and handed it to Tomay. Geez, back to square one. The dolls pranced around her and

chanted. Sloan stopped herself from telling them to shut up and looking even crazier to Tomay and Coco.

Even after Sloan relinquished her gem, Coco kept a close eye on her. Tomay focused more on finding a way to rouse Homura Akemi. She knocked on all the windows, one after another, called out Homura's name. Eventually Coco joined in and left Sloan to sit on the curb. The fucker dolls grew bolder and took turns poking Sloan on the nose and pinching her cheeks. Sloan wondered how hard of a swat she could pass off as warding away an insect.

The doors never opened, the windows never flickered, and no voice rose to meet those that called Homura's name. After an hour or so, long past the point when Sloan realized Homura Akemi would only speak to them if she wanted to speak to them, Tomay and Coco gave up and decided to go home.

Reason / ? ? ? / Justice

Stringent ablutions precede any contact with the Empress. In the lukewarm water Cicero scoured her flesh with a brittle sponge. Purge all filth. Purge all dead cells. She scraped until her flesh pulsed reddish, until she singed cleanliness into the skin. Arms, legs, hands, feet, fingers, toes. Neck, shoulders, face, scalp. Chest, breasts, stomach. She made liberal use of Hennepin's soaps and shampoos, each with an exotic French title etched on their luxuriant vials. She eradicated hair with a slick razor, careful to cause no nicks. She doused the lather and scrubbed the smooth areas again.

Once the cleaning finished she stood beneath the nozzle and let the water pour over her. Her one moment to breathe. No subordinates, no superiors. Only her, alone in the square tile shower of Hennepin's apartment.

Ahhhhhhhhh.

Okay, enough of that. She cut the water and dried herself thoroughly and garbed herself in smallclothes and called for Berwyn.

The bathroom door opened and drained the room of its steam. Berwyn entered in a plain white dress, a bag under her arm. She placed the bag on the counter, left, and returned with hangers of white clothes which she handed to Cicero and implored she put on. Cicero did so with careful diligence while Berwyn opened the bag on the counter and placed its contents neatly beside it. Undershirt, buttoned sleeved shirt (careful the buttons lined up evenly), straight pressed pants, stiff belt (tight against her abdomen), pure white blazer. Cuffs sharp and straightened. Through the upturned collar Berwyn threaded a necktie and tied it. She checked Cicero front and back for lint, pulled off a few smidges and rubbed them between two fingers. Once the clothing passed inspection, Berwyn returned to her bag.

"Please hold still, milady." Berwyn held a brush, comb, and small scissors deftly between her ten fingers. She went to work on Cicero's short hair.

Cicero watched herself in the mirror while Berwyn attacked knots and evened sides. She clutched her fingers around the counter edge and began to mentally brace herself for her impending encounter with the Empress.

Hair finished quickly. Makeup next. Berwyn knew cosmetics as well as she knew hair. She puffed cheeks, curled eyelashes, and applied lipstick with deft, artistic movements. The other Centurions chose lieutenants with power, brute strength. Cicero liked hers to cover strengths she lacked.

Once Cicero's face adopted the character of a glossy doll, Berwyn trimmed and polished her fingernails. She blew on them to help them dry and made secondary checks of the suit, the face, and the hair. She stood back to examine her work, retrieved a bottle of perfume, and sprayed an unguent puff on either side of Cicero's head.

"Is everything in order, Berwyn?"

"Aye, milady. You look ravishing."

"Do I pass all the Guidelines?" From the mirror, it seemed like she did. But Berwyn flipped through the Empress's Guidelines for Etiquette & Conversation Iteration XVIII and announced each criterion with a confirmative eye.

"Aye, milady. All of them."

Cicero closed her eyes and exhaled. "Thank you, Berwyn. You are dismissed."

"I merely do my duty, milady." Berwyn bowed and departed. Her footsteps pattered across the apartment. A front door opened, a front door closed.

Okay. Time to peel the bandage.

Hennepin turned out to have a computer and computer peripherals of far higher quality than those Cicero brought, and she had volunteered her access codes freely. The communications program stood open on the screen, Cicero need only enter a phone number. First she took her seat and examined herself in the computer's video recording device. She preferred herself in golden armor, but Guideline for Etiquette & Conversation Iteration XVIII #7 (and its corollaries, #7a and #7b) stipulated the necessity of white suit and black tie. She tested the auditory input contraption to ensure her voice came through clear and crystalline. *Unus duo tres. Unus duo tres. Nihil.*

The auditory output contraptions also functioned as intended. She adjusted the volume slightly and searched for anything else to test. But she had nothing more with which to delay herself. She called the number.

Beep boop, the transmission program rang. *Beep boop*. On the third digital babbling the call was accepted. The image box on the computer screen went from black to the face of the receiver.

"Good evening, Madame Cicero," 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 tapped her pretty fingers across the board of keys. Her eyes shifted from the screen to her fingers and back. Her fingers paused; her eyes paused.

After a moment: "Her Munificence has reaffirmed her acceptance of your offer of appointment, Madame Cicero. I shall transmit you to her shortly."

"Thank you, Chief Handmaiden."

The image box went black. Cicero's clasped hands tightened. Always the worst part, wondering when the black would change to the Empress, never wanting her first glance at you to be blinking or otherwise disheveled in some capacity. Cicero held open her eyes, but not so much to make them water.

On the image box appeared the study of the Empress's manor, dark save a single candle on a distant table that cast bronzed light on a high-backed velvet chair turned away from the camera. On the opposite wall hung a Caravaggio recognized more by memory than sight. *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. On the wall opposite, behind the camera, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula*. Nothing moved save the single flickering flame. Cicero waited.

A hand on the rest of the chair lifted and turned a page in a book.

"Welcome, Cicero."

"Thank you for the honor of this communication, Your Munificence." Cicero bowed her head. "I hail you from Minneapolis and the lands I have claimed in your name."

A protracted silence. The Empress's hand turned another page. "Which lands are those?"

"Counties Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, Washington, Dakota, Scott, and Carver, Your Munificence. Including the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. An approximate human population of two million and eight hundred thousand. Upon implementation of our methods of wraith harvest, I predict the territory will sustain at least twenty-four Puella Magi, whereas before only seven—"

"We asked not thy predictions."

"I apologize, Your Munificence."

The hand turned another page. The Empress said nothing and Cicero dared say nothing in turn. Whether she asked now or later, eventually she would ask what became of the archon. Cicero had already fumbled a minor etiquette protocol, so surely the Empress must know something had gone awry. She would ask now: What became of the archon?

Instead she asked: "Didst thou read the prologue of De Pizan, as assigned?"

"Yes, Your Munificence."

"Which doth thou consider the most important virtue, Cicero: Reason, Rectitude, or Justice?"

"I," Cicero hesitated, "I was unaware they were to be ranked. As virtues, are they not all pertinent? What is Reason without Justice, and Justice without Reason?"

The hand turned another page. "Astutely spoken, Cicero. Thou art indeed correct, the importance of all three virtues cannot be questioned. Allow us to rephrase the question: Which virtue is the foundation of the others?"

Foundation...? Cicero fidgeted, and then she remembered. "In De Pizan's allegory, Reason is the foundation."

"De Pizan lived and died six hundred years ago, Cicero. She wrote to placate a certain learned population with a certain series of predilections and assumptions about philosophy. Is it reasonable for the praying mantis to devour her mate?"

Cicero considered it. "I assume she does it for nutrients and energy in order to bear her young."

"Precisely," said the Empress. "Animals operate in reasonable fashions in order to ensure the survival of their species. Mantids, swine, chattel, spiders, seahorses. The premodern thinker believed fauna incapable of Reason, that the virtue presided solely in the human. They believed so out of arrogance in their own intelligence. Would a human female who devoured her husband be considered virtuous?"

"A human male helps raise the offspring—"

"Let us say a young urban female not unlike thyself is impregnated by an irresponsible young urban male. This male has no intention of raising the child, no intention of recognizing its existence. Is the female then virtuous for devouring the male?"

In some circles, Cicero thought but did not say. "I suppose she is not, Your Munificence."

"Of course." The Empress turned a page in her book and paused. Elsewhere a clock ticked. Grandfather clock, just right of the image box's extent. "Reason is Darwinism. Survival of the Fittest. A reasonable being prioritizes their wellbeing above the wellbeing of their fellows. Society cannot stand on such principles. What, then, is the virtue we must seek as foundation?"

Cicero tried to remember the assigned reading. De Pizan and the three allegorical ladies. "Justice," she said. "We must give each their due."

"Ah, of course." The Empress turned a page. "That is what is fair. Tell me, Cicero, how many Puella Magi under thy command receive more cubes from the communal take than they produce?"

Lyons. Stickney. Hodgkins. Clearing. Bellwood. Crestwood. River Forest. "Seven."

"Very well. Those seven girls shall have their wages reduced to what they deserve. Justice, no?"

"Ah, Your Munificence, please, I was merely..."

The Empress turned a page. "We were merely illustrating a point. Justice harbors its own inadequacies as well. That leaves only one virtue left."

Unfortunately, the one Cicero comprehended least. "Rectitude."

"Reason and Justice stem from the earthly realm. Reason dictates what one must do to survive; Justice punishes or rewards actions. They are physical, bound to corporeal nature, and thus suffer the same inadequacies of our frail bodies. But something came before the Earth, did it not?"

"God, Your Munificence."

"And what virtue guides God, Cicero?"

By process of elimination, Cicero knew the answer. Although she still knew not what it meant. "Rectitude."

"Yes, Cicero." The Empress turned a page. Her hand tapped the armrest of her chair, seemingly disembodied in the pale glow. "Rectitude. The division of right and wrong. The basis of morality. It comes from God, not Earth. It manifests to we Puella Magi as *Legem Cyclos*; when our spirits grow so corrupt that we can no longer distinguish right from wrong, God's intercession saves us before we can do harm to ourselves and others. A reasonable God would not forego the energy such corrupted souls can produce; a just God would save only those who deserved salvation, of which there are truly few. Our God is one of Rectitude, then—one who saves because to save is to do the morally correct thing."

Cicero bowed her head. "Glory be to God."

"For dappled things," intoned the Empress. "For thy next assignment, Cicero, thou shalt read De Pizan's chapters on Reason. Keep in mind our conversation today."

"Thank you, Your Munificence. I am edified."

The Empress turned a page. The grandfather clock ticked. Judith beheaded Holofernes. The conversation on Christine De Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* ended. Cicero straightened her spine against the back of Hennepin's plush swivel chair and braced for the next question.

The pause lasted so long before the question came that despite her preparation it surprised Cicero anyway. "Now tell me, what has become of the Minneapolis archon?"

"Your Munificence, when we arrived in Minneapolis, the archon had already been defeated."

"By whom?"

"By the remnants of the Minneapolis Puella Magi and a few Puella Magi from outlying areas," Cicero said. "Our initial assessment of the aftermath of the battle revealed two survivors: Hennepin of Greater Minneapolis-St. Paul and Fargo of, um, Fargo."

The Empress turned a page. "Thou must remember to speak up, Cicero, and avoid stammering. Such debilitating patterns of speech ill become one of thy stature and bearing. We take it thou have apprehended the survivors and secured the grief cubes dropped by the archon?"

Cicero's fingertips dug into the knuckles of the opposite hand. "We apprehended both Hennepin and Fargo immediately upon arrival, Your Munificence, and located the grief cubes."

"How many cubes?"

"Thousands, Your Munificence," said Cicero. "Perhaps millions. They covered the streets like a vast sea."

"Thou 'located' them, rather than secured?"

Never once did the Empress turn around from her chair and look the camera in the eye. Never once did Cicero even catch a glimpse of her face or any part of her body save the hand that turned the pages in her book. And yet she felt an eye on her, thick and piercing and hot, like sun caught in a glass, fit to burn ants and paper. "No sooner did we apprehend Hennepin and Fargo, Your Munificence, than did a third party intervene."

"We dislike a tale without foreknowledge of its ending," said the Empress. "Hast thou the cubes currently?"

"No, Your Munificence."

The book shut. "Very well. Proceed."

"Yes, Your Munificence. We know little about the identity of this third party. She seemingly had the power to make herself and others disappear. We later located records in the wreckage of the deceased Minneapolis's home that described a Puella Magi with similar powers, who operated under the name Omaha. We do not believe she is the same Omaha who presides over the eponymous city of Douglas County, Nebraska."

"She is not."

"This Omaha created a sort of... tear in the fabric of reality. I am unsure how to describe it. Into the tear she drained the cubes and then took the apprehended Fargo."

The Empress's hand seized the candlestick and tilted it toward her. A single breath and the flame went out and the room submerged in darkness, illuminated only by the dim phosphorescence of the computer monitor on which Cicero's own face sat projected. Judith no longer beheaded Holofernes, but the grandfather clock ticked. "This interloper thieved all of the cubes?"

"All but a paucity we found on Hennepin's person. No more than the nightly take of three or four small neighborhoods."

The outline of the Empress's hand stroked the armrest of the chair. Skeletal in the white light of the monitor. "We are disappointed, Cicero."

Cicero exhaled. She closed her eyes. "Say but the word, Your Munificence, and I shall turn my command over to Berwyn my lieutenant and dash my gem upon the ground."

"An archon is a form of God," said the Empress. "Demiurges. The Gnostic interpretation of YHWH. Yaldabaoth. They are gods of Reason and Justice but lack Rectitude. Nonetheless, their power is of a God; they can create."

"Say but the word, Your Munificence."

"That power belongs to us and no other, Cicero. No being but us on this Earth has the responsibility to wield it. Any other who acquires it is a danger to this planet."

"I am prepared to atone for my failure, Your Munificence."

The Empress sighed. "Oh, hold thy tongue already. Hast thou scented the trail of this faux-Omaha and her accomplice, Fargo?"

Cicero raised her head. "My best trackers combed the city. The magical signature of Omaha could not be sensed, but we were able to follow Fargo's signature on an unusual course throughout the city. She went to a seemingly random house and interacted with a Puella Magi whose aura was so minor as to be almost entirely inconsequential—possibly a vagrant. She then went to the Minneapolis airport."

"And?"

"We manipulated an attendant to give us access to the flight records from the appropriate time period. With Fargo's true name, which we learned from Hennepin and confirmed with documents scrounged from Minneapolis's house, we discovered that she boarded a flight for Mitakihara, Japan, by way of Los Angeles."

"When?"

"Approximately two days ago, Your Munificence."

"Thou art certain the name of the city is Mitakihara? Not, perhaps, Sagamihara or Miyazaki?"

"Mitakihara is the name of the city, Your Munificence. Why, is something the matter?"

The Empress sat in silence in the darkened room. The fingers on her hand slowly rose and fell against the plush upholstery of her broad chair. "We have never heard of such a city. Typically that indicates a lack of an airport. What has the Incubator said?"

"He has been characteristically coy under interrogation," said Cicero. "Hennepin has proven less than useful as well. She claims no knowledge of Omaha and little of Fargo beyond descriptions of a grudge with the deceased Minneapolis."

"She claims?"

"Rest assured we wrung her. She has been subjected to the full gamut of our devices."

Another long pause. The pale hand stroked the armrest but nothing else moved on Cicero's image box. The immaculate resolution of Hennepin's monitor could not penetrate the shadow.

"It is possible," the Empress said at last, "That Fargo has gone to an irrelevant locale to draw away our forces and weaken the Valiant City of Chicago for an attack by Omaha and any hitherto-unknown allies. However, we cannot leave such an avenue unexplored. Therefore, we order thee, Cicero, my Third Centurion, and thy legion to travel to Mitakihara, Japan. Locate and apprehend Fargo. If further information as to Omaha's whereabouts and the whereabouts of the archon's treasure become apparent, do not hesitate in their pursuit. Meanwhile, we shall fortify the City with the other Centurions. Such are the orders of the Empress of Chicago."

"Yes, Your Munificence." Cicero bowed her head. "With the powers at my disposal, it shall take but one day to forge documents and arrange a flight for twenty Puella Magi. I shall

fulfill my duty as expediently as possible." Mitakihara, Japan. The moment the name appeared on a document in the terminal of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Cicero had a premonition she would end there somehow. "Your Munificence, if you allow me, may I ask a small boon to aid my mission?"

"Thou mayst."

"I request merely a Puella Magi learned in the language of the nation of Japan. Does such a Magi preside within the Valiant City, Your Munificence?"

"Unless one has been recruited recently, no," said the Empress. "Ask DuPage or Cook if a Japanese Magi is within their faction."

Cicero disliked conversation with either of her senior Centurions. "Thank you, Your Munificence. I shall not trouble them with an unlikely request. I have an alternative solution."

"Then we shall leave the specifics of the operation to thy capable hands. As for the consequences of thy failure in Minneapolis, we shall meditate upon whether to demote thee to Fourth Centurion and replace thy position with Joliet. The verdict of our meditation may rely upon your results in Mitakihara. That is all."

The Empress's hand made a trenchant gesture of dismissal. Cicero pounded her chest with a fist and said, "Praise to Your Munificence!" The image box on her screen went completely dark and the call ended without another word.

Cicero sank into the chair. Conversations with the Empress always taxed her so heavily. No wonder the prohibitions that none save Centurions or Anointed Handmaidens speak in her presence; lesser Puella Magi doubtless could not bear such strain. Cicero took the brief moment of solitude to recharge her frayed nerves and collect the thoughts and philosophies abound in her mind. She categorized and arranged her objectives:

1. Fly herself and twenty other Magi to Japan.
2. Locate and apprehend Fargo.
3. Learn the whereabouts of Omaha and the archon's cubes.
4. Read the next chapter of De Pizan.

Actually, shuffle Objective 4 between 1 and 2, as she could most likely read the entire work on the flight. Not that she would; she must wait for the Empress to enlighten her as to the chapter's meaning before she proceeded to the next one.

The logistics of putting twenty-one Magi on a plane, and so close to Christmas... Bah. She had underlings for that. She stood, the voltage of the conversation still electrifying her bones. She straightened her suit (the Empress had not looked in her direction the entire time, rendering the formality functionally, if not spiritually, pointless) and rolled her shoulders. Rubbed her eyes. Anything to dampen the buzz.

Joliet. Bah again. The full meaning of the Empress's decreed penalty for failure hit Cicero only now that she could freely think again. Honorable suicide would be less torturous than to have her position as Third Centurion usurped by the Empress's mewling wretch of a daughter. Not that usurpation was evitable. Little secret the Empress had groomed the product of her loins as her ultimate successor. Wonder how DuPage and Cook would take that. DuPage especially.

She exited Hennepin's apartment. Elmhurst and Lombard leaned against the railing in civilian clothes, pretend-smoking cigarettes to blend into the heathen surroundings. They checked to ensure no normals watched and stood at attention.

"No disturbances, milady," said Lombard.

"The hallway is secure, milady," said Elmhurst.

With a minimal signal she ordered them at ease. "We have received new orders from the Empress herself. Lombard, gather the legion and have them reconvene at the transport."

"Yes, milady!" Lombard saluted smartly and strode down the hall.

"Elmhurst, take me to the captive."

"Yes, milady."

She led Cicero the other direction. They exited the backdoor and weaved between the alleys, went down a flight of eroded steps still slick with snow, and came to the hollowed cavity at the cross-section of two structures, still strewn with the garbage of the homeless men they had chased from the spot.

The guard, Norridge, saluted. "The captive remains captive, milady."

"At ease."

The captive, Hennepin, lay on her side in a fetal position, rocking her nude body slowly as she clutched her knees and stared forward with blank eyes. The chain strung between her ankle and the sewage grate rattled with the shivers of her pale skin.

"Was the night cold, whore?" said Cicero.

At the sound of her voice, Hennepin lifted her head and scampered to her knees. She prostrated herself at Cicero's feet. Her short hair plopped around her shoulders in a filthy mop, lit by a lusterless purple bang. "P-p-p-p-p-please..."

"Elmhurst, fetch the whore a blanket," said Cicero.

"Yes, milady." Elmhurst departed.

Hennepin's head lifted. Her eyes stared up at Cicero. "Th-th-thank you s-s-s-so much..."

"What type of Asian are you, Hennepin?" said Cicero.

The gratitude in her eyes gave way to confusion. "W-w-w-w-what?"

"I do not repeat myself. Answer the question, whore."

"I, I, I'm Ch-Chinese..."

Elmhurst returned with the blanket and draped it around Hennepin's shoulders. Hennepin seized the quilted edges and tugged it around her, covering it up to her chin, nearly obscuring her mouth behind it. She clutched at it from the inside, tightening its folds against her body while her shivering only worsened. Since Cicero detested to hear her stammer, she waited for the blanket to work before she responded.

"How similar is the language of China to the language of Japan?"

Hennepin ogled her. "I, I can't speak either, so..."

"Tch, disgraceful." Cicero folded her arms. "Those who sever their connection to the past are doomed to wander estranged in the present. No wonder you turned into a female of such loose morals."

"C-can you speak African, then?"

Cicero scooped her by the throat and forced her against the nearest wall. The blanket, pinned between Hennepin's back and the brick, dangled loose around her. "I speak *Latin*." She tightened her grip on the neck.

Hennepin squirmed against the wall. She groped at Cicero's hand. Cicero dropped her.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," said Hennepin. She gathered the blanket around her and shuffled into the corner among the filth. "My head, it's so dizzy, I can't think, I don't know what I'm saying..."

"Tis true, milady," said Norridge. "She raved in her sleep."

"P-please don't hurt me anymore... I'll do anything you want, anything. I'll never swear again. I'll never even *think* about sex again. I'll do anything, anything."

Repulsive. Such a miserable creature, unable to bear even a single night in the cold. If this girl knew even an inkling of the punishments Cicero herself endured in her wilder days, when she flouted the Empress's system in unenlightened ignorance, she would not be so quick to beg. She might bear herself with some dignity. But what could one expect from a whore? She had already sold her dignity to the twenty thousand groveling men who watched her "video game stream." Gluttonous, lecherous men, and she had no qualms against their voyeurism if only she received a few paltry, transient dollars from it. *I'll do anything, anything*, she said. Yes, she would, and that was the exact problem. If she had even an inch of spine, had stood up for herself even for a moment, things may have gone better for her.

Cicero contemplated deepening her penance, inflicting upon her the punishments reserved for whores, punishments designed to kill their whorish inclinations absolutely and irrevocably. But she had more relevant business than the rectification of a single deviant.

"I need you to speak Japanese."

Hennepin stared, mouth open. Like a grouper. "I, I can't..."

"Then I need you to learn. Within the next forty-eight hours."

"That's, that's not..."

"Possible?" said Cicero. "For most, correct. For you, wrong. It angers me how clever you think you are and how cloddish you are in actuality. During our interrogation, I asked to know the wish you made during your contract with the Incubator. Would you mind repeating your wish, whore?"

Hennepin's brow furrowed. She altered her posture slightly, her back somewhat straightened. "I can't be good at something I don't even—"

"Would you mind repeating your wish, whore?"

"Bah! I wished to be good at things."

"A major part of my duty as Centurion is appraising the wishes and talents of those under my command and determining ways to make those wishes and talents useful. As it is part of my duty, I am particularly good at it. I have seen wishes like yours before. They grant aptitude and adaptability, if not total mastery. Although you have sadly only utilized this aptitude for the purposes of so-called 'video games' and parading your body on a camera for the benefit of thousands, you can assuredly achieve more ambitious accomplishments with it."

"But forty-eight hours, no, that's not enough time. I know my own powers. You're intentionally setting me up for failure, and when I fail—"

"Rest assured if you fail I will do everything you are currently imagining and more," said Cicero. "A Puella Magi with drive would take that as a challenge to succeed. But I see you are a lazy clod."

Hennepin, her blanket already soiled by the garbage and black slush around her, gazed forward with that same dim expression she had started to adopt ever since about four hours into their interrogation. Then her eyes blinked and her face sharpened.

"Call me a whore all you like," she said. "Even though I've never even touched a guy before, okay. Whatever your weird cult logic dictates. But if you're gonna accuse me of laziness, if you're gonna tell me you know my powers better than I do, then fine. Fine! In forty-eight hours I'll speak the best damn Japanese you ever heard. Why not. Why not!"

She had risen to a half-sitting position, staring at Cicero with a hint of obstinacy rather than pure despondency. Except her expression soon went pale again.

"I mean dang. Best dang Japanese. Oh please don't flog me—"

"I have made quite clear to you the rules of profanity," said Cicero. "Norridge, dole out the appropriate number of lashes. Elmhurst, run to the store and fetch Hennepin materials to

facilitate her education in the language of Japan."

"Yes, milady." Elmhurst ran off.

"Yes, milady." Norridge summoned a whip in her hand.

Hennepin bent against the ground. "No, come on, it wasn't even that bad a swear word!"

"Profane your mouth, profane your body," said Cicero. "As the protectors of this world, we Puella Magi must keep our bodies sacred. We are the emissaries of God, after all."

"We're the emissaries of a telepathic lab rat," said Hennepin.

Norridge cracked the whip and lashed her naked back. Hennepin sagged with a pathetic cry as her pale skin, barely healed since the lashes of her last offense, broke open and gushed blood anew. The girl would learn, sooner or later. In due time they would remap her and her ability and geographic familiarity would lend great assistance to the Colonial Governor of Minneapolis, whomsoever may be fortunate enough to receive such a boon from Her Munificence the Empress. Likely, as had happened with Milwaukee, DuPage's favorite lieutenant would gain the post. Cicero ought to make a token nomination for Berwyn nonetheless. A show of respect.

As Hennepin foamed with agony, Cicero exited down the alleyway to organize her Magi into action.

Sloan slept on a mat Tomay plopped in her living room. Except not really, because the thin walls and the thick creak of feet in the adjacent room made it difficult to rest (plus she kinda slept the whole way on the plane). Intermittent shuteye sure, nothing substantial. No dreams. Mostly wondering Tomay's deal.

Oh, and the creepy doll who giggled in the corner made sleeping hard too. Fuck you, creepy doll. Fuck you.

Eventually Sloan supposed she did fall asleep because she woke up. Sunshine filtered through the window and glazed the whole place a nostalgic yellow. Creepy doll remained in the same spot. Tomay hummed from the kitchen. Pleasant humming.

Sloan sat up and rubbed her eyes. Something smelled good. A plate steamed on the kitchen counter.

"Oh, you're awake!" said Tomay with an uncannily polished accent. "I cooked you a nice breakfast. Come and eat!"

Sloan sat at a small chair around the counter. Instead of only one plate, there were about five or six, an entire country breakfast composed of good old American mainstays like bacon and

pancakes and butter, the kinda stuff Sloan thought they didn't eat in Japan. It looked fucking delicious and Sloan felt no shame at overloading her plate with all of it.

"Wow, thanks," she said. "Looks great."

Tomay wiped her hands on a rag and straightened her apron. She smiled, but she had major raccoon rings around her eyes, and the bouncy curls in her hair had flattened. That's what pacing in your room half the night'll do to you, Sloan knew from experience. She lathered her pancakes with syrup and butter and dug in with fork and knife. Didn't they use, like, chopsticks or something? Oh well, good old American cultural imperialism at work, saving Sloan from more lame faux pas.

"Is it taste good?" asked Tomay.

Sloan spoke through mouthfuls. "Mm, delicious."

"Ah, what means delicious?" Tomay poured Sloan a tall glass from a pitcher of milk.

"Delicious means very very good."

"I am so glad you like!"

Really though, it transcended delicious. Imagine Sloan Redfearn, seven months subsisting off cereal in Fargo, then a four day stint where Delaney bought her like pizza and stuff, and even then pizza tasted delicious, but this shit was like, authentic homecooked, these pancakes were made from flour and the bacon was thick and layered with fat, the fucking grits (who the fuck eats *grits*?) were like the best damn grits of all time, goddam sausage burst with succulent juices the moment Sloan's incisors dug into the browned sheath of skin, milk so fresh it might have been poured straight from a cow's overswollen teat (okay calm down Sloan you're getting ridiculous), but holy shit FOOD. Such a simple pleasure, how had Sloan missed it so?

She looked up from a forkful halfway to her mouth. "You gonna eat too?"

Tomay smiled. "No thank you, I cooked for you to eat."

Uh okay. Sloan plopped the fork in her mouth and scraped off the amalgam of pork and fluffy pancake. Tomay stood and watched with her Stepford Wives smile while the creepy doll sat and watched with its Jack the Ripper smile. Jesus.

"Come on, Tomay, you fixed a whole banquet. I can't eat all this myself."

"It is very okay," said Tomay. "I eat before."

Sloan slurped her milk and wiped away the mustache. Eyebags Tomay had a battered housewife vibe she didn't quite care for. And why after pacing around her room in worry for her small friend would she get the idea to fix a breakfast like this? Sloan looked at her demolished plate. Poison? Poison had to be the shittiest way to try and axe a Magical Girl. Didn't even physically maim or incapacitate, it simply got flushed right out the system.

"So uh. Wanna search for your friend some more today?" Not that it meant anything. Sloan had an inkling where Nagisa was, and it wasn't exactly in this universe. "Or try Homura Akemi again?" Sloan personally wanted to take a look at Pink Hair. Something told Sloan she might be the secret linchpin in all this mess.

Tomay's smile kinda twisted a little, but she said nothing. The creepy doll giggled and giggled. Its shoeless feet kicked against the counter it sat atop.

Like someone pulled a pin, Tomay fell to her knees and began to sob. Sloan stared over her pancakes for a stunned moment before she dropped her fork and went to Tomay's side. Uh, probably should like, say something? Hands are important. Uh. Place a hand on the shoulder. Reassuring-like.

"Tomay? Tomay?"

Tears streamed down Tomay's face. She sniffed and said, "What means, Tomay?"

God fuck. Why are you so bad at everything, Sloan? "Are you okay?" she tried. "What's wrong?"

Tomay's hands balled into fists. She gave her head a tremendous shake and abruptly stood straight and rigid with her arms at her sides and her head low. Her eyes narrowed into solid slats and her mouth twisted into a flat horizontal line. "I apologize. Nothing is wrong."

"Uh." Sloan stood too. "Uh, something is wrong."

"I apologize you see me so crazy. Please eat breakfast." Tomay's entire body trembled. But it maintained straight vertical alignment.

"Uh."

"Please. Eat. Breakfast."

Sloan slowly returned to her seat. "We'll find Nagisa," she said. She hoped she said that name right at least. "I promise." Not that she could promise it. Any number of reasons Omaha might want Nagisa and Blue Hair out of the picture. Sloan had kinda been preoccupied with other shit at the time, but she thought back to how Omaha had murdered Lynette. Because Lynette had tried to kill Clair, which would have invalidated the sin of Sloan killing Clair, or not been enough sin to spawn the archon? Lynette seemed to have deep-seated issues with Clair too. Or did only Magical Girls offing each other count as sin?

Beyond the point. The point was, Omaha would kill anyone in her way. She did not have much in the way of mental stability. Nagisa might already be dead and there was nothing Sloan could do about it. Some ten-year-old corpse drifting in Omaha's antirealm alongside the cubes from the archon. Quite likely Sloan was wasting her time here, like Kyubey said would happen. Stuck with Tomay and Coco, denied access to Homura and Pink Hair. If Homura Akemi could control time, maybe the entire celestial war had already played out in a split second?

Well, she couldn't really be wasting her time no matter what happened, because the only reason she had any time left to begin with was to be here. So enough of that. Gotta soldier on like there's still hope. If she gave up...

If she gave up she supposed she was no better than Delaney.

Tomay straightened her apron and brushed back the boingy curls and wiped her eyes and reestablished a semblance of solidness. Sloan took a cautious bite of pancake. The creepy doll giggled.

"Um, hey," said Sloan. Tomay apparently not her name, better not use it. "Hey, I have a question."

"Please ask!"

"Um, you see that picture?" Sloan pointed across the room at the photograph of the Mitakihara Six. "Who is the girl with pink hair?"

The creepy doll quit giggling real fast. It hopped off the counter and stood in the corner and stared at Sloan. Tomay looked at the picture. "Pink hair... Ah! You mean Miss Madoka Kanamay."

Madoka. Ma-do-ka. No weird vowel stuff. Good, because Sloan figured she oughtta remember that one especially.

"Um, this may sound weird. But is Madoka, is she... is there something special about her?"

She felt foolish asking. If Madoka was God like Omaha claimed, no way Tomay knew jack dick about it. She would have dropped the subject if the creepy doll did not begin to advance toward her with slow, meticulous steps, the elliptical eyes fixed on her, the toothy grin fading into grim consternation.

"Special?" said Tomay.

"I mean like..." How to say this? "I mean, is Madoka, is she connected to the Law of the Cycles?"

The creepy doll whipped out a spear, leapt onto the counter between the plates of food, and impaled Sloan through the chest. No wound opened as the shaft passed between her ribs into her heart, but immeasurable pain surged through her.

Sloan did not scream. Did nothing but tighten her hands around the edge of the counter and clench her jaw as ragged breath escaped her. Her gem was secure in Tomay's pocket. If the doll sought to kill her, it attacked the wrong body. She suddenly wanted very much to hear Tomay's response.

Tomay thought for a moment. The spear remained lodged in Sloan's torso, the doll standing above her, holding it strong with both arms. Sloan trembled on her seat. Come on, Tomay. Think about it. Think about it, the fact that you haven't dismissed the statement as nuts by now must mean there's something behind it. Think, Tomay. Think.

"I apologize, what means Law of the Cycles?"

The doll wrenched the spear out of Sloan and cackled awful laughter. Sloan tried to maintain support of her body but the doll struck again with the spear, and this time it was too much to bear. Sloan fell off the seat and onto the ground. The doll leapt on top of her and rammed the spear down again and again into Sloan's body. Sloan curled up and screamed.

"Sroan? Sroan?" Tomay rushed to her side. She stared down at Sloan while Sloan writhed on the ground beneath the onslaught of stabs.

The doll grew tired of stabbing and wrenched the spear out with a single solid jerk. She knelt close to Sloan, so that the doll's face and Tomay's face loomed above her one beside the other. The doll held up a single finger in front of her jagged smile. *Shhh...*

So they didn't like talk of Madoka's potential godhead around here. Sloan decided to take that as confirming her suspicion. Too bad it would take more time to explain the concept of the Law of the Cycles to Tomay in English than it would for the doll to turn her into a living pincushion.

Sloan helped herself to a sitting position and only noticed Tomay's proffered hand after it was no longer needed. Whoops. "I apologize," she said, taking a page from Tomay's lexicon, "I was crazy for a moment. I'm fine now." Hoping Tomay took the hint: we don't talk about your crazy, we don't talk about my crazy.

(Although Sloan's crazy wasn't really crazy, she was just seeing little evil dolls nobody else knew existed.)

Tomay took Sloan's hint and Sloan took the doll's hint. She returned to her breakfast and Tomay returned to watching her eat breakfast and the doll returned to giggling and a rickety peace fell on the apartment.

And a rickety peace fell on the day. After Tomay cleaned the dishes she returned to her room and her footsteps creaked against the floor. Sloan stayed in the main room with the creepy doll. The second doll had left with Coco the night prior. Coco's doll. This must be Tomay's doll. Each girl their own special doll. Would remembering which doll went to which girl help her in any way? She tried to remember if Omaha had ever mentioned how many dolls Homura Akemi had, came up with nothing. All she knew was four that chased her in Minneapolis, one for Tomay and one for Coco, and one with pink hair who took Delaney.

She spent the whole day confined to the room, wondering what more interesting stuff was happening elsewhere. The view from Tomay's window was pleasant, tranquil. Somewhere Omaha clashed blades with a demon.

Tomay exited her room around twilight and began fixing dinner. Like nothing had happened. Which was exactly what had happened. Same harried demeanor but in the kitchen she regained a semblance of her former elegance in motion and bearing. Bowls, ladles, whisks, rollers. Bags of flour, bowls of batter. The oven timer chimed at intermittent intervals.

She baked a chicken potpie. She presented it on the counter in a tin pan.

Sloan *lived* in America and was pretty sure nobody actually ate chicken potpies. But she ate it anyway and it tasted delicious. And Tomay watched.

For dessert, brownies.

"So uh, hey." Sloan swallowed a bite of chocolate fluff. "It's getting late."

"Yes," said Tomay.

"Are you going to fight wraiths tonight?"

"What means, wraiths?"

Sigh. "You know, monsters? Ghouls? The things Puella Magi fight."

"The things Puella Magi fight..." Tomay thought about it. "Ah, so that means wraiths!"

"Yes, yes, you get it. And wraiths, when we kill them, they drop grief cubes. Grief cubes." Best to get these important terms defined in English straight off the bat.

"Grief cube." Tomay nodded.

"We need grief cubes to clean our Soul Gems. Soul Gems."

"Soul Gem." Tomay took Sloan's gem from her pocket and showed it as if in confirmation.

"Yes, that's a Soul Gem." Good, this was going well. "As you can see, it's very bad, right?"

Tomay inspected it. "Yes, very bad."

"I haven't had any grief cubes in two days."

Tomay sighed. "I need grief cube also."

"If you want, I'll help you fight wraiths tonight." Please work. "It's important to stay strong. To find Nagisa." It's also important to get out of this damn apartment. Before Tomay shut down entirely. Before she did something nutty.

Tomay thought for a moment, either about the offer or what words to use to respond. It must have been the former, because her response was to toss Sloan's gem over the counter to her. Sloan caught it with a sigh of relief. For the first time that day, they left the house.

Neutral, Composite, Oblique Space

They went to the hospital. Sloan disliked hospitals as hunting ground, not nearly as efficient as you'd expect. For every death by cancer a baby born. Joy and despair tended to even each other out, and couple that with the lack of secluded spaces to fight and it made more sense to go to some actual shithole. But Tomay wanted it and Tomay Tomato got what she want. Mitakihara General far outpaced the hospital in Fargo, or the one in Minneapolis, or all the damn hospitals that set the stage for Sloan's stunted childhood, the doctors who inspected her sister Morgan for hours only to shake heads in wonderment and suggest Mr. and Mrs. Redfearn give up hope. The doctors said it was a waste of time. Morgan said it was a waste of time. Sloan said it was a waste of time, and only she was spanked for it.

Tomay led them behind the immense, multi-winged, multi-storied hospital, to an ambulance drop-off terminal or something, a roundabout that led past a back entrance. The place was deserted, save the horde of wraiths agglomerated within the partial enclosure. Tomay and Sloan surveyed their prey from behind a parked ambulance.

"No big wraiths," said Sloan.

"One big wraith," said Tomay. "In middle."

Sloan looked closer. Between the bobbing, static-strewn faces, something else lurked. But the horde had packed too dense to make it out.

"There normally this many?"

Tomay considered. "No. Many more wraith than normal."

Sloan thought so. This looked close to Williston-levels jampacked. Something to do with Omaha? It made sense. If Magical Girls killing Magical Girls created archons, a protracted war between them ought to at least ring up the smallfry total. If Omaha succeeded in killing Akemi, what kind of archon would that create?

"What's our plan?" said Sloan. She had no idea of Tomay's offensive capabilities. Strangling, probably.

With considerable flashiness and a small dance (or at least a coordinated and rehearsed series of movements), Tomay transformed. She acquired a hat, a feather, and a corset, plus other homely accessories that suited her well. Ribbons sprouted around her and came together to form a flintlock rifle which she grasped in her hand.

"Leave to me," said Tomay. "Will be easy."

She leapt onto the hood of the ambulance and bounded above the field of wraiths. A single well-aimed shot from her rifle took off the head of a ghoul before she discarded the weapon and summoned two more and fired them as well. When she hit the zenith of her leap, and when the wraiths had turned their collective attention toward her, she sent a ribbon to an

opposite rooftop and used it to swing like either Tarzan or Spiderman above their heads. Her rifles rained bullets on the crowd below her, each shot a sure hit to the head for a clean kill. The wraiths returned with beamlike attacks, but she sped past unscathed. She landed on a balcony on the side of the hospital, defended from attack by a railing.

Cute. All that finesse and maybe twenty wraiths dead. Sloan had to grant her she looked fine doing it, but let's be real now, shall we? She summoned her own gun, letting it maintain its full weight so she at least looked like she exerted *some* effort while doing this. She stepped from behind the ambulance, perfectly unnoticed by the wraiths as they stared in Tomay's direction. With their defenseless backs turned toward her, Sloan revved her gun and fired.

Blam blam motherfuckers. Her light tore through them. It disintegrated their ascetic robes and the misshapen bodies behind them. Ten, twenty, thirty wraiths fell in moments as she raked the spray through them. As the rest of the horde realized the new threat and started to turn toward her, she strafed toward the next parked ambulance, avoiding the beam attacks by mere nimbleness. She only ended her fire and allowed her gun (and her magic) a rest once she reached cover.

Nice job, Suhroan, said Tomay's telepathic voice from across the roundabout.

You too. How long you been doing this? Cuz usually chicks with inefficient styles got problems after a few years. Magical Girl arthritis, wear and tear of the hocus pocus. Tomay looked about Sloan's age, which meant she was probably in the biz as long or more.

Long? Like snake?

Like time. How many years you been a Puella Magi?

I am Puella Magi five years. And you, Miss Suhroan?

Three and seven months.

Ah, it means I am the senior. I take the lead.

In the side mirror of the ambulance, Sloan saw Tomay bound from her balcony and fly on a line of ribbon above the sea of wraiths. In a circle around her span at least ten guns at the ready to seize and fire. Each spent rifle she tossed away to devolve into ribbons. Rather than swing to another safe locale, however, she dropped into a cluster of wraiths detached from the whole and continued the fight in close quarters.

At near range she could increase her efficiency, using the rifles to bash in the brains of her adversaries, but it opened her to more danger. Sloan swung from around the ambulance and fired again to divide the attention of the wraiths, leaving many unsure who to target. Her fire wiped out wraiths far faster than Tomay nonetheless.

Your technique's a little slow, isn't it? said Sloan. She knew she shouldn't rub it in like this, but she had a hard time helping herself. Killing wraiths was the one thing Sloan was good at, and like most people with one good quality in an ocean of bad, she must strangle that good quality into a bad one somehow. It became the misshapen pedestal atop which Sloan set

herself superior, because if she made everything about killing wraiths it meant Sloan became the undisputable best Puella Magi, best girl, best human being.

Tch! Tomay summoned another circle of rifles around her, pointed like cannons around the last hill of a remnant army. The guns thundered in an explosion of smoke as the full ring of wraiths closest to Tomay dropped dead. Sloan swept sideways across the pavilion, raking away wraiths in solid swaths as she made her way to regroup with Tomay.

Except by the time Sloan reached the smaller group of wraiths, Tomay had gone somewhere else. Sloan scanned the teeming hordes for a golden flash of blonde hair. There, near the far wing of the hospital, whipping out yellow ribbons to bind wraiths in bundles. Tomay kept light on her feet, tumbling and darting between waves and drawing from an infinite supply of rifles stashed in her petticoats.

Let's stay close, said Sloan.

I handle this very easy.

A flurry of shots rang at once as Tomay delved deeper into the thicket. Her blonde head and the bouncing white feather tucked behind her ear disappeared beneath the swarm of gray nonfaces.

Sloan ran after her only for a wraith to rise to her left and divert her attention. She rolled out of the way and swept the turret around her in a swift coil to clear the immediate vicinity of danger before she bounded in the direction she had last seen Tomay surfaceside. The constant spatter of gunshots led the way, although the thick miasma that emanated from the central core of the wraith herd distorted sounds to echoes alongside the crackle-cackle of static and ominous laughter. Little visual distortion, however, odd for the sheer quantity of wraiths. Or did the power that allowed Sloan to see the creepy dolls now allow her to pierce such hallucinatory effects?

Yeah, probably. Might as well believe it. Believing it made it slightly more real. She charged deeper, cleaving the path with her light, scanning for Tomay's head to resurface on the gray waves.

You there? Talk to me.

I do fine, thank you.

Where the hell was she? Dammit Sloan why you gotta do this shit. Every time. Every time your whole damn life. And you thought you would come here and do something nice for a change. If the brutal murders (at your hands) of everyone you ever cared about wasn't enough to change you, was anything?

No, fuck that, one callous comment, one careless jab. Hold yourself together and focus on what you came here to do. (What did you come here to do?) You came here to stop this shit. Kyubey, Omaha, Akemi. Find a way to end this so the Incubator loses and nobody else dies.

Reach the end of the chessboard. Then you can turn around.

She dove beneath the sweeping arms of the wraiths and bashed back one with her turret before resuming fire to wipe the rest clean. She had to start conserving her magic, she was draining her little remaining energy fast. The ground glistened with cubes from the hundred dead fiends they had slain already but she had little chance to stop for them. When she pierced the seething hull and came out the other side, near the back entrance of the hospital, she turned and took stock of the remaining foe. Most had fallen, a few wayward souls scattered here and there around the outskirts of the roundabout. Tomay stood across the way from Sloan, gunning down wraiths with an almost unreal pace, summoning rifles simply to discard them after a single shot, the air heavy with gunsmoke. Her eyes met Sloan's for a moment as the action lulled, both of them breathing heavy, both of their breaths congealing as white dust in the cold night air. Between them the last vestiges of the wraith hordes gathered. They wove a tight circle around something larger. Sloan held her fire. Greater wraith, had to be. The question became what kind. Naga, basilisk, lamassu?

Tomay sent Sloan a look and charged, guns blazing. Blam blam blam! Each rifle expended a single satisfying eruption before becoming useless. Each bullet an individualized masterpiece in presentation and delivery into the skull of the wraith it murdered. Whereas Sloan's rays wiped the world clean in a single splatter. Despite the lack of efficiency, one could say something for someone who took such pride in the most rudimentary of daily tasks, who expended the effort at the toll of her own fiber and being to transform her life into art.

(It had always been Clair's problem. The single notch on the slick smooth obelisk of her genius that Sloan could stand upon and exceed her. For Clair, every wraith required a careful performance, an original musical number, a new instrument. Because of it she so often needed Sloan's help in the cold Minneapolis nights to earn her sustenance in the form of cubes. But that music, now dead, now lost on the wind, had perhaps meant more in their brief time than all of Sloan's whole life.)

A digital shriek slit the throat of these thoughts. A forceful wind spread from the cluster of remaining wraiths and bowled both Sloan and Tomay over. Tomay sent ribbons to tie around nearby streetlamps and steadied herself; Sloan, lacking such luxury, scraped across the ground until she rolled into a patch of topiaries.

From between the wraiths rose a larger figure, only partially formed, lacking elements of its composition but with a general structure apparent. Vaguely humanoid, it had an emaciated, almost skeletal torso upon which sat no head. It had one fully-formed arm; its other hand drifted disembodied at its side, clenched into a fist. Static filled the missing components. The arm that did exist held a torch, or a spear with the top half aflame. Rather than stand, it floated on air, crosslegged within its robes.

Sloan had never seen a wraith like this before. It had the size and bearing of a greater wraith, but did not conform to the types with which Sloan was familiar, nor did it seem to coincide with the general theme of the mythic beasts she encountered in Williston.

Tomay, you know this type? What's it do?

I handle it. Watch.

Aaaaand she went straight at the thing. No way did someone normally this reckless last five years magical-girling. It was your stupid comment, Sloan, you made this a competition. The Buddha wraith turned the absence where it should have had a head to survey its surroundings. Settling its non-eyes on Tomay, it drew back its arm and hurled the flaming torch like a javelin. With aid of her ribbons, Tomay leapt the spear as it crashed into the pavement where she had stood moments prior, but it struck with such cataclysmic force as to form a fissure that erupted a volcanic spray. Great boulders of magma flung up like a fountain, forcing Tomay to pivot and flee to the side. Her nimbleness and agility kept her ahead of the flames, but it deterred her offensive against the wraith.

Time, then, for Sloan to quit gawking. She heaved her gun against her side, still unwilling to use magic to reduce its weight (although now for purposes of conservation rather than showmanship) and set it firing at the Buddha wraith while, its back turned to her, it extend an arm and pulled back the thrown javelin with a telekinetic force. It swung the javelin around and blocked Sloan's fire. The light seemed to disappear when it struck the flames that enveloped the weapon, or it was absorbed, or something.

Yeah yeah, guess these greater wraiths always have some gotcha power, or else there wouldn't be much greater about them. Sloan killed her fire. No need to waste magic until she figured this thing's weakness. The spear did all the defensive work, but if she hit the fleshy body it would probably die like basically everything Sloan hit with her magic. So a simple distraction would suffice, get it to hurl its javelin at Tomay and hit it while it hovered helpless in midair. The thing knew its own weakness and retrieved the weapon fast, but with timing and preparation Sloan could—

She scrambled aside as the javelin launched at her. The searing heat scalded her back as an explosive force lifted and flung her into the topiaries. Branches and stiff leaves buffeted her until she bounced to the ground. Her gun had left her hands and landed somewhere. She searched the shrubs for it, because she would rather not waste more magic to summon a new one.

By the time she found it lodged in a flowerbed, the wraith had reclaimed the javelin. Sloan dusted the barrel off and turned to fire again, but Tomay beat her to the punch. She bounded over the scorched hot cracks in the pavilion, exuded exquisite acrobatics with the aid of her ribbons, and careened toward the wraith. A puff of smoke and a resounding bang flared from the barrel as the bullet sank straight into the heart of the Buddha wraith. Gray dirt streamed from its hollow torso for a moment before the wound sealed shut. Undeterred, the still-airborne Tomay drew another rifle and aimed another shot, but before she fired the wraith swung its javelin and decked her in the ribs with a forceful smash. Her trajectory altered midflight like a human baseball and she skidded against the ground.

Sloan tried to run to her but the lava cracks in the ground spread with a vast fracturing of the earth. Torrents of fire forced Sloan back. The roundabout expanded and shattered, chunks of concrete and asphalt breaking off as red rivers pulsed and flowed beneath. The hospital walls lit up with an orange glow and the temperature skyrocketed. The remaining lesser wraiths lost their footing and plummeted into the crevices, bursting into flame as they sank into the lava. Their metallic screams rang like obstinate fax machines. Only the Buddha wraith remained. It hovered with a serene grace, a holy om, above the spreading swirl of fire and

molten rock. The ground directly below its crossed legs sank in a conic depression. For a brief moment, a pervasive, almost real image of Clair's body sinking into the Minneapolis snow grabbed Sloan's mind, so vaguely hallucinogenic in nature that she had no clue whether her subconscious had gone on the fritz or the wraith exuded powers of minor mental manipulation.

The battle arena became a few floating pieces of ground on the lava sea. Sloan narrowed her eyes to peer through the dense heat in search of Tomay. But everything was red and orange, a single girl in yellow blended in too well. Sloan focused harder, used magic to strengthen her vision in the smoke and haze. Increase the, what was the word, contrast. The colors, once composite, separated; Tomay's body became clear on a distant rock. She hung precariously on the edge, one limp arm flopping against the side.

Sloan ignored the wraith and bounded between the rocks. The javelin whooshed behind her as she sought the swiftest path to Tomay. Tomay's rock sagged into the lava; Tomay started to slide.

Shit, Tomay, wake up already. Sloan was nowhere close enough to reach her in time. She landed on a rock that cracked beneath her and had to redirect her route to hit a safer platform. By the time she turned again, Tomay's rock collapsed into the lava and took Tomay with it.

Yellow ribbons whipped out from several directions and caught Tomay inches before she touched the lava. *Am fine,* said Tomay's voice as the ribbons grabbed her under the arms and pulled her to a standing position on the loose bridge she had created. She flicked a handkerchief or napkin or something from somewhere and dabbed blood from her lips. She then cracked the handkerchief like a whip and seven rifles appeared from it to hover in the air around her.

It can regenerate, said Sloan. *Wraiths that heal themselves are easy, you gotta hit em hard so there's nothing left to heal.*

I apologize I am bad show senior Puella Magi.

Whatever the fuck that meant. *Let's work together and ruin this thing's night, yeah?*

Tomay folded her blood-dribbled handkerchief neatly and slid it into a pocket. *Work together? Yes, I am make mistake. Work together is always better.*

The javelin hurtled at them. Sloan dove to the next rock to avoid it, but Tomay held her ground. She extended an arm and pointed. Ribbons swirled out, three or four uncoiling and coiling around the javelin to bind it in midair. The javelin trembled and quivered within the grip of the binds, but could not break them.

Buddha wraith sailed defenseless in the distance. Sloan wasted no time. Her gun spewed light at the lump of gray flesh and scored a direct hit, no further bullshit to defend it. The light seared its flesh and caused its upper body to break apart, unraveling into cubes of matter that escaped like gas through the air. Sloan tilted her head back and laughed.

The javelin bound by Tomay's ribbons erupted with a tremendous flare that rendered Sloan blind until her magic healed her eyesight. The flare disintegrated the ribbons that bound the spear and freed it. It instantly redirected its route and zipped toward Sloan. She had only a moment to react and barely did before it gored her through the shoulder and propelled her backward.

Her gun left her hands. It hit a rock and bounced into the flames. Sloan tried to direct it with her mind but reacted too slow to prevent it from melting in the molten depths. Across the arena, the Buddha wraith began to reconstruct itself with the escaped bits of matter.

The force of the javelin sent Sloan backward, but an opposite force yanked against her ankle—another ribbon. After a moment of feeling like she was about to rip in half, she slammed onto a rock. The spear pinned her, digging deeper into her body as though it possessed a mind of its own. She wrapped her hands around the shaft to yank it out but only succeeded in causing the cuffs of her coat to catch fire.

The javelin wrenched itself out and redirected for the Soul Gem on Sloan's stomach. The instant it left her body, however, Tomay's ribbons dragged her out of the way. She sailed toward Tomay while the javelin pursued. More ribbons grabbed her arms. They twisted Sloan upward and forced her body to turn. Her arms raised above her and one leg kicked out with surprising grace as Sloan realized that... Tomay was... making her dance. The ribbons were causing Sloan's body to move in a way that approximated elegant ballroom dancing.

As she came close to Tomay, Tomay's arms wrapped around her and led her in the ballet. A series of ribbons shot out and coiled around the spear in a desperate attempt to stop its advance, but they only managed to slow it down.

Count three, said Tomay, and say Tiro Duet!

What, said Sloan. Tomay's arms twirled her like a ballerina.

One...

The spear cut through the ribbons, setting them ablaze. Its tip loomed close to Sloan's eyes, but she only caught a quick glimpse before Tomay redirected her gaze somewhere else.

Two...

The Buddha wraith hovered dead ahead, still in the process of reconstruction. Most of its upper half was destroyed, but the pieces quickly stitched back together.

Three!

"TIRO... DUET!" shouted Tomay.

"Tiro Duet?" said Sloan.

The javelin broke free of the ribbons, impaled Sloan through the side, and went into Tomay directly beside her. Despite the wound, a tremendous rifle appeared before them, more a cannon than a rifle, but even bigger than a cannon, like a piece of artillery from an old world

war. Tomay grabbed the vast, broad butt of the rifle and Sloan reached for it too, channeling her magic into it. The barrel of the cannon lit up with a yellow orb that built and built until the hammer fell and sparked the magical energy.

Heavy power burst forward. It zoomed over the lava and the rocks and scored a direct blow on the Buddha wraith. The light enveloped it entirely, devolving it into a black outline in the white swath. The lava rippled away from the blast in viscous waves.

The wraith cried out, and its cry sank beneath the continued roar of the cannon. It disintegrated to dust and cubes.

The javelin disintegrated too. Sloan and Tomay fell in separate directions. The miasma dissipated and the ground beneath them reconstructed to its original appearance, a solid gray circle of road surrounded on most sides by hospital wings. The lava sank back to the mantle from whence it came and tranquility resumed over the night.

Sloan gripped her dripping side and tried to rise with a grunt. Tomay crawled toward her, placed her hands over the wound, and with a pale aura stitched it with a thousand threads that tightened rent skin back together. Her suturing worked fast and precise. Once the hole had been closed, the threads transformed into smooth, unbroken skin, which was frankly pretty weird. Did that mean part of her body was thread now, like a living doll? Sloan prodded the spot. It felt like skin, moved like skin. Fucking magic, man.

Tomay quickly employed the same tactics to mend her own wounded body. She stood and helped Sloan to her feet and brushed dirt off Sloan's coat.

"You did good!" she said.

"Thanks, you too."

Tomay shot out another ribbon, which scraped across the ground of the pavilion and collected the grief cubes dropped during the fight. The haul was good, but seemed low for the number of wraiths plus the greater wraith. Many cubes had probably fallen in the lava. Oh well, more than enough remained. The ribbons folded around them and effortlessly pooled them into a neat pile. Tomay reached out and grabbed a handful—

—Aaaaaand time froze. Oh boy.

Although after a moment's thought Sloan wondered why it felt like this had happened before, because she knew she had definitely seen the world like this, gray and frozen. Because it kinda looked like how the world looked when Omaha turned her invisible? She guessed, but she had more important things to think about. The creepy doll with the short black hair lay transfixed to the ground by a long saber, although during and after the wraith fight it had kept itself to the outskirts. Its arms and legs kicked against the ground as it screeched in German.

Someone held Sloan's arm. It was Blue Hair, from the photo. Uh, Sloan knew her name, Tomay had said it at some point.

"Saki," said Sloan.

Saki sighed. "Close enough."

Tomay turned and regarded them with a confused look. "What? Miss Miki?"

Miss Miki gritted her teeth. "Crap, you're still—Oh." She flung out a hand and tossed a sword. It sailed through the empty space between Sloan and Tomay, until it severed a golden ribbon that had apparently been there the whole time, tied around Sloan's ankle and Tomay's wrist. The moment the ribbon severed, Tomay faded into gray obscurity with the rest of the backdrop.

"Okay, that was close." Miss Miki pulled Sloan toward a floating black hole in the air. A portal to the Omaha Zone. "Hurry up, quit lollygagging. You want Homura to catch on?"

"What the hell's going on," said Sloan. "You speak English a lot better than Tomay."

"Yeah well, language kinda not a big deal once you become a concept? Come on, you got a friend who wants to talk to you."

Omaha. Well, a meeting might help straighten what's going on around here at the very least. Sloan followed Miss Miki through the gaping hole in the sky and into the empty void of Omaha's creation.

Except the void wasn't so empty anymore. Step One in the war against Time Demon Extraordinaire Homura Akemi was apparently home furnishing. In particular, about fifty or more empty chairs of various shapes, sizes, and colors drifted in the dark aether, arranged in uneven rows and facing the same direction, although in that direction stretched nothing but black infinity. The grief cubes twinkled like stars on the outer edges of the chair grid, their twinkling giving some form to the formless space.

"Also, you keep saying her name wrong," said Miss Miki. "It's Tomoe. T-O-M-O-E. Say it with me: To-mo-e."

"Tomoe." One mystery solved already.

Miss Miki continued to lead Sloan by the wrist through the chairs. "Also, that's her last name. Her first name is Mami, M-A-M-I."

"I know that," said Sloan. "It's weird to call someone you just met—"

"Yeah yeah, her name sounds like mommy, I gotcha." Miss Miki stopped in the middle of the chair field and searched the area. The space was larger than it appeared at first glance, there were probably more like two hundred chairs arranged around them. Other shadowy objects drifted above and below them, maintaining a grid structure. At the far end of the chairs hovered a hole back to the outside world, although it was too far away to see what part of the outside world lay beyond it. "If you wanna be polite, just call her Miss Tomoe. Or Tomoe-chan if you feel culturally sensitive. It's the least you could do after she made you dinner."

"And breakfast," said Sloan.

"She'll probably make you another tomorrow," said Miss Miki. "That's the way she is. Always thoughtful, always wanting to make people happy the best way she knows. So don't be a jerk, okay?"

"I didn't intend to," said Sloan.

"Yeah well, I dunno what you intend, and that's the whole problem." Miss Miki let go of Sloan's arm. She pointed down the row of chairs to what looked like a burnished black throne at the end. "Your friend's down there. See what she wants, will ya?"

Might as well. Sloan walked ("walk" being a loose term; she moved her legs and propelled herself forward, although no ground stood beneath her) down the aisle. She glanced back at Miss Miki, who sat in one of the chairs with her arms crossed and her legs propped on the back of the chair in front of her. She gave a terse nod to keep Sloan moving.

Sloan approached the throne. It was formed of solid ebony and glinted in the lightless realm from its own internal luster. From behind the back Sloan could see a small pale hand grip the armrest. The throne faced the open hole Sloan had seen earlier. As Sloan drew closer, she saw what appeared to be the front lawn of an ordinary if upscale home. Nothing moved, time remained frozen.

In the darkness past the opening, beyond the wall of cubes, floated some fun things. Like missiles. And a tank.

"Omaha, what the hell is this," said Sloan.

Omaha bolted upright from her throne. She pushed it out of the way (it drifted aimless through the cubes) and turned toward Sloan.

"Oh, so you're here after all..."

"Blue Hair dragged me in. Said you wanted something."

Omaha herself had not changed, throne notwithstanding. She stood in dark robes, frayed and torn around the sleeves and hood. Yes, she definitely bore a resemblance to Dark Hair from the photo. Who, by process of elimination, had to be Homura Akemi.

"Yes... I suppose I should be quick... We don't have much time..."

"I thought you said time doesn't matter here. And it's stopped out there anyway."

"I have Nagisa out there now... she's distracting Homura Akemi so I can have a moment to speak to you. I'm sorry I didn't try to contact you earlier, but things are so hectic..."

"Any progress on killing Satan?"

Omaha scratched her sleeve. "Ah, no. Sadly... our initial attempts failed. We thought it would be simple to distract Akemi long enough to rescue the Goddess, but, ah... she is a formidable foe..."

Sloan had so many questions she wanted to ask but couldn't think up the right one and didn't ask any. After a sufficient pause, Omaha continued:

"What happened, Sloan? I thought you said you didn't want to help me..."

"I don't want to help you, Omaha."

"What! But... but..."

"I think this whole thing is totally dumb. I think you're just going to get everyone killed."

Omaha sighed. She scratched the back of her head and turned toward the portal. "Sloan, you really don't understand... What I'm doing is the right thing. This house, it's the home of Madoka Kaname... the Goddess who created the Law of the Cycles."

The house was nice enough, but not what Sloan would call fit for a goddess. At the same time, though, the reaction of the doll in Tomay's—er, Tomoe's—apartment signified Madoka really did have some connection with the Law of the Cycles. "Look, even if I believe that, what's the big deal? The Law of the Cycles works fucking fine. I saw it take Delaney and Winnipeg no questions asked."

Omaha stared out the portal for a few seconds. Cold air filtered through into the dampened space. "The realm of God is heaven, not earth. Only from a world detached from corporeality, bodily desire and suffering, can She make the just, reasonable, and morally correct decisions that guide all Magical Girls on their paths in life. Homura Akemi has maintained a semblance of the Law of the Cycles, yes. But she does so without the love and kindness that our Goddess originally used to institute such a system. She profanes its holiness, drags it into the mud. Strangles it!" She clenched a forceful fist. Sloan hoped she wouldn't go into seizures like she did the last time they broached this subject.

But she held herself together. "Look," said Sloan. "That sounds like highfalutin philosophical bullshit. If it works, you shouldn't go fucking around with it to make it better on esoteric moral principles. I've gone down this road, Omaha. You saw me go down this road, it ended with everyone dead. I don't want that to happen to you, or the girls here in Mitakihara."

"You don't want it to happen to me..." Omaha unclenched her fist and managed a weak smile. "Thank you, Sloan. It means a lot that you care for me at all. After I lied to you..."

It helped that Sloan thought of Omaha less as an independent agent acting on her own volition and more of a pawn for Kyubey, but she refrained from voicing her opinion on that. "Omaha, you've got missiles floating around here. How the hell did you get missiles."

"I stole them from the Pakistani military," said Omaha. "That's beside the point, Sloan. The missiles are just in case. I think we can win with just the three of us. Me, Sayaka, and Nagisa, I mean."

"You said you were having trouble with that."

"I know... But something's going to happen tomorrow. An event, that um, that I shouldn't tell you about, because, um..."

"Don't tell her anything!" Blue Hair shouted from down the way. "Homura can pick her mind like a book."

"Right..." Omaha fidgeted. She glanced nervously at the house of Madoka Kaname outside the portal. "That's absolutely right... I've probably put you in danger just by bringing you here, Sloan... I'm really sorry about that. But I wanted to talk to you, in case... In case you changed your mind about helping me."

"I'm not going to help you, and I'm not going to fight you either. I'm gonna make sure nobody gets hurt." It sounded incredibly stupid as it left her mouth, but it left anyway.

"Yeah..." Omaha said. "That's a noble goal... Sometimes I wish I could have that goal too... But don't worry, Sloan. Even if all else fails, and we can't save the Goddess, and everything goes wrong... I have a last resort. A surefire way to defeat Akemi without even killing her."

Sloan folded her arms. "Really. That sounds dubious."

"I can't tell you the specifics, obviously... but it's true. Only one person has to die for it to work, and... well, even saying that is too much. My friend—"

"You mean Kyubey."

"My friend told me it would be better if I rescued Madoka Kaname first so she could beat Akemi, and I understand why he said that, he cares about my wellbeing, but I am prepared to sacrifice my life if it will save the Goddess from her fate. If I have to, I will not hesitate..."

"Omaha, please don't kill yourself to try and beat this Akemi chick." The words sounded so weak. Please don't kill yourself. Please don't do this. Please don't do that. Sloan tried to think of stronger words, stronger arguments, the kind Clair would use, because when Clair wanted you to do something she had that way of just saying things and suddenly you wanted to do that thing, it wasn't like a reluctant okay-I-see-your-point it was like, wow she's absolutely right, I have to do this thing right now. Sloan had no idea how to bend words that way, and a sudden futility crept over her, like she had come all this way and staved off death so long in the name of saving everyone from whatever destruction Kyubey intended for them, and when she finally caught back up to Omaha she couldn't think up anything to say. How do you say it? Omaha obviously wouldn't listen to reasonable arguments, she barely had one herself for why she was so adamant on killing herself so the Law of the Cycles might run with a little more kindness. Was this what Sloan herself looked like during her rampage in Minneapolis? Delaney and everyone else with half a brain cautioning her not to kill Clair, there's no point, and Sloan propelling herself forward undaunted, only strengthened in her resolve by the doubts of her peers, was this how she looked? Going into convulsions when she thought too hard about Clair, concocting bullshit reasons as to why Clair had to die, willing to die herself to ensure she reached her goal—God dammit, it was exactly the same, it was the same damn scenario played out again, god dammit, god dammit.

"I will do what I must," said Omaha.

Sloan felt defeated. She had hardly tried and she felt defeated, and that only made her feel more defeated.

"I ruined my life trying to do what you're trying to do now, Omaha," said Sloan. "I lost everything."

"No," said Omaha, "You lost everything because of what Clair did to you. You were in Fargo then. Now, the entire world is in Fargo. Forced there at the hand of a cold and calculating mastermind by the name of Homura Akemi. We linger in darkness, spiritual squalor, deprived the presence of our benevolent Goddess who loves and cares for us. We eke out an existence in the cold, possessing only the clothes on our back, hurt and alone in this devastating wasteland of tundra. Clair Ibsen was a bad person, Sloan. In many ways she deserved death. Homura Akemi has committed an even greater sin than Clair's betrayal, a sin that mars us all. I must rectify her sin."

Sloan had no idea what to say to that. She said the first thing that came to mind: "The house outside that portal, you'd never find in Fargo."

"I will remain steadfast in my path," said Omaha. "That is my one certainty in life. We should not talk much longer. Nagisa has been running around for several minutes to keep Akemi distracted."

"God dammit," said Sloan.

"You really shouldn't be too sympathetic toward Akemi anyway," said Omaha. "She's already murdered you once. In a previous timeline. Surely you felt it? That feeling... déjà vu. You two had a conversation, and at the end of it she killed you. No fight... You didn't even try to fight, and she still did it."

"I'm pretty alive now."

"Because of what we did. We got close to freeing Madoka Kaname and she was forced to reset time. Sloan, please... don't get involved in this. It was selfish of me to ever ask your help, when you've done so much to help already. It's too dangerous, okay? You'll get hurt."

"I don't think you're understanding my goals here, Omaha."

"Sadly, I don't think you understand mine, either." Omaha exhaled a long and quiet breath in the absolute silence of the void. She kneaded her narrow, bony hands together. "Goodbye, Sloan. Perhaps we shall meet again... perhaps not."

"I'll figure out something, Omaha. Some way to stop this." Her words lacked all conviction. She still did not even know where to begin to unravel this knot before the swords on display merely sliced straight through it.

Omaha turned toward the portal and stared at the pleasant home beyond without another word. Sloan remained at her back for a few moments more before the finality of the conversation seeped into her. She headed the way she came, back down the aisles of chairs.

Miss Miki waited for her, seated in the same precarious position as before. Sloan approached her, glanced over her shoulder in case Omaha eavesdropped, and whispered: "You know she's crazy, right?"

"What!" Miss Miki tilted her head toward Sloan and cupped a hand around her ear. "You'll have to speak up, I couldn't quite hear you."

Sloan gave her a look. "You heard me."

"I know, I'm just messing with you." Miss Miki bolted up and kicked her chair aside. It sailed into the dark. "Look, I can't say I trust her as far as I throw her. I'm like ninety-nine percent sure Kyubey's telling her everything he wants her to do, and she's got an uncanny genetic similarity to a certain someone I just can't place, a certain someone with a disposition toward nutty to begin with. But she's pretty earnest about saving Madoka, and it's not like Nagisa and I are getting any better shot at doing that, so..."

"Yeah, but why? I don't get it. Omaha's reasoning made no sense."

Miss Miki swept an arm over Sloan's shoulder and reeled her in for confidentiality. "Look, pal. Omaha's a little scrambled in the noggin, you got that right. But there's a coupla pretty real reasons why leaving this world in the hands of Homura Akemi is a bad, bad idea. First off is entropy."

"Don't give me that Kyubey crap."

"Yeah, it's the reason he's interested in all this, true. But when you're only a few levels removed from deity status, you can kinda see the bigger picture a little more clearly. Entropy doesn't affect you, it doesn't affect anyone you know, it won't affect anyone for generations, although maybe not as many generations as you'd expect. The fact remains that someday down the line the universe will run out of energy, and then poof, kaput, there goes. Think about all the people who won't even have the opportunity to live their lives, and all the people who weren't even born yet that get even less of an opportunity. Madoka and Nagisa and I, and pretty much anyone taken by the Law of the Cycles, has to think about that. It's when we would all die too. I mean really die. Double-die? Is that a thing? In any case, we would cease to exist."

It still sounded pretty damn esoteric.

"Akemi," Miss Miki continued, "is running this whole universe into oblivion. She wants to eradicate all wraiths, not because she cares of course but because she mistakenly believes Madoka wants that. Which isn't true. Madoka understands the need for balance in existence. For all good, there must be evil, vice versa et cetera. It's why wraiths even started showing up after all the witches went away."

"Witches? What the hell?"

"Don't worry about witches, that's a few tiers above your pay grade." Miss Miki led Sloan down the aisle, away from Omaha, but not toward anything in particular. "The point is, Madoka hates suffering, but she knows it needs to exist. Or else happiness would have no

meaning, y'know? And also the universe would literally die. She just wants people not to suffer so damn much. That's not so bad, is it?"

"If Kyubey wants something, it's usually pretty bad."

"Kyubey's got his own agenda. He wants more suffering, so he can get more energy. Homura wants less suffering, but to the point of making the world sick. Madoka is in the middle, and that's why she's the best one for presiding over this place. Don't worry about Kyubey, Nagisa and I are keeping an eye on him. Based on what he's already tried, we bet he'll make some kind of play to capture Madoka or worse. But we've outsmarted him before, and we can do it again, piece a cake."

Miss Miki had a cool, loquacious practicality to her words and demeanor that at least made Sloan more willing to listen to her than to Omaha. But still, Sloan got the impression she was prattling on about stuff Sloan had no honest idea about, witches and entropy and whatever, stuff Sloan couldn't weigh in the palm of her hand. She remained unconvinced.

"I see you remain unconvinced," Miss Miki said.

"Yeah, I mighta been thinking that."

"Lemme then give you a more down-to-earth reason why we gotta deal with Homura one way or another." She let go of Sloan's shoulder and gave some space between them, twirling with her cape as she stood atop a chair and struck a heroic pose. "Do you wanna know *how* regular girl Madoka Kaname became basically a god?"

"Sure."

"It was Homura, of course. In a past universe, Madoka was destined to die. Homura refused to let this happen, she kept resetting time over and over and over and over again. She tried desperately to save Madoka, and every time she failed. Until, after the timelines had reset enough, and enough of them had converged around Madoka as to increase her karmic power a thousandfold—"

"You said this was a more down-to-earth explanation."

Miss Miki groaned. Her chair tilted forward and she tilted with it, until she hung upside-down in the air. "Okay, fine. The point is, Homura's obsessive determination to keep Madoka alive broke the universe. Madoka became God, things got better for everyone, it was all great. But of course, Homura didn't like this. Because Homura was obsessed with Madoka the human girl. Homura couldn't stand that she had to live life as a human while Madoka lived life as a concept, inhabiting an entirely different celestial plane."

"And this is the down-to-earth explanation."

"Okay, fine. There *is* no down-to-earth explanation, I lied." The chair continued to revolve until Miss Miki stood rightside-up again. "Sometimes you gotta escape the down-to-earth, Sloan. You gotta think bigger and broader, cuz there's more important stuff out there than the stuff you see in front of you, y'know?"

Sloan was about to say something, but then she supposed Miss Miki was right.

"Anyway," Miss Miki continued, "Things would've continued fine and dandy despite whatever Homura wanted, if not for the meddling of the Incubator. He didn't like the way Madoka changed the universe, cuz it made less energy for him. So he did a little experiment. When Homura's Soul Gem became tainted, he sealed her in a device intended to capture Madoka when she came to take Homura away in the Law of the Cycles. We figured out a way to circumvent his trap, but in the process something awful happened to Homura. Her mind was warped and her power grew exponentially. If I had thought about what was happening, I mighta seen warning signs. But in the end, it was Homura who captured Madoka, not Kyubey—and that's how we got here."

"Okay. What does any of this mean."

Miss Miki drifted on her chair. She stared at the glittering cubes that surrounded them.

"Homura, in her own corrupted mind, wanted Madoka to live a normal life as a normal girl, and didn't care about the consequences. Which leads us to the big problem with Homura. The thing about normal people is, well, they die. Inevitably."

"If Madoka's a god, she can't die," said Sloan. "Unless the definition of god changed recently."

"Ah, but by pulling Madoka—and me and Nagisa—into the normal world, Homura broke us off from our immortality. This Soul Gem here—" Miss Miki pointed at the azure jewel above her belt, "—is real. It breaks, I die. Same goes for Nagisa, same goes for Madoka. Same goes for Homura herself, although arguably she never became immortal anyway. Jury's out on that one."

Okay, Sloan could start to follow the logic here. "So you're saying that something could happen that kills Homura and Madoka, and then everything would go to shit, right?"

"That's true, that's part of it." Miss Miki turned back upside-down. She revolved slowly, gradually, stepping between chairs and setting several spinning. "Homura of course thinks if Madoka dies, she can just turn back time, same as she always does. Cuz Homura doesn't think her actions have consequences. How can you when you can hit redo whenever you want? It's playing life like a video game. But that's the biggest issue, the thing scares me most about Homura, more than the basic anger at her invalidation of Madoka's sacrifice, at her selfishness, at how she DARES say she does all of this out of LOVE—the thing scares me most is that, one day, Madoka in this form will die. And no matter how many times Homura turns back time, Madoka will still die. Because Madoka can't live forever. Maybe Homura can extend her life to 99 years old, or 120. But humans die. Magical Girls die. It happens. And what happens then?"

"Then Homura would keep turning back time," said Sloan.

"You got it. Again and again. Turning back, living the same span of Madoka's life forever. Using her magic to keep her own body from aging. She'll do it. She has nothing else to live for, nothing but Madoka, and she refuses to just die, so... So that'll be the end of the universe. Not a bang, not a whimper, but the... same... damn... thing... forever."

"Unless Homura dies first."

"Which is exactly what I'm gonna ensure happens," said Miss Miki. "At least now you can see my perspective. I know what you'll say next. Maybe we can reason with Homura. You haven't really met her, not in this timeline, so you don't know how ridiculous that plan is. She's beyond reason. She's beyond everything. She's beyond even herself."

"If you kill her, it'll create an archon," said Sloan. "What if that's Kyubey's plan? To create an archon so powerful it'll fuel all his energy dreams."

Miss Miki had almost the entire aisle of chairs spinning now, spinning around and around as she hopped between each one, skipping with her cape aflutter. She laughed. "Killing Homura Akemi won't create an archon, I can tell ya that. Wanna know why?"

"Why."

She tilted her head back. In the ambiguous light from the cubes, her face acquired a spectral quality. "Cuz she already *is* an archon."

"An archon."

"Not Magical Girl, not witch, and not God," said Miss Miki. "A demon, she says. She can create, she can destroy, but she acts out of her own pride, her own self-seeking interest. She embodies despair because she enslaves the embodiment of hope. I can't think up a better way to describe her, can you?"

"I've never met her."

"Yeah, well. You're lucky." Miss Miki settled back into the chair closest to Sloan. She turned and shouted: "Omaha, where the hell's Nagisa? She's taking too long."

Omaha's voice sounded quiet and small across the void. "She's on her way."

"Once Nagisa's here," Miss Miki explained, "We gotta kick you out. We got important plans and stuff to figure out for tomorrow."

"Right."

They remained silent for a time. Omaha beside the portal, Miss Miki in the chair, Sloan standing in the middle.

Miss Miki leaned over and extended a hand. "I'm Sayaka, by the way. Sa-ya-ka."

Sloan shook the hand. "Sloan."

"I knew that one."

Not long after, commotion arose from the portal by Omaha. A spatter of gunfire ruptured the stillness around the home. Sloan looked up and tried to perceive what was happening, but before she could make much out a small creature zipped through the portal and the portal

instantly closed behind it. The creature bounced against the floor that didn't exist and rolled to a stop partway down the aisle. Omaha gave the thing one look and turned away to retrieve her throne.

Sayaka hopped along the tops of chairs and landed beside the creature. It looked like a fairy or imp or something, with a lot of polka dots and a cartoonish face. Its mouth was a squiggly line and its eyes span in its sockets like a standard cartoon depiction of being clocked in the head. It lacked only tweety birds flying around to complete the image. Po-tee-weet?

"Ey Nagisa, how ya feeling?" said Sayaka. Oh, so this thing was Nagisa. That made perfect sense.

Nagisa's eyes quit rolling and blinked at Sayaka. A large puff of what looked like cotton candy enveloped her, and when the candy dissipated, a normal girl sat in its place. She matched the picture in Tomoe's apartment.

"Uggggh, she ran me all over this time," said Nagisa as Sayaka helped her up. "I had to take a totally different route cuz she had the normal one blocked."

"Figures she'd catch onto our patterns sooner or later," said Sayaka. "She's good at patterns, it's when we mix it up she gets confused."

"Didja talk to what's-her-face?" said Nagisa. "I hope I didn't go out there and get all winded for nothing!"

"Yeah, she's right there." Sayaka pointed. "And come on Nagisa, it's rude to call people what's-her-face, her name's *clearly* why-so-serious."

Sloan rolled her eyes. "Why-so-serious, reporting in."

"So you're the girl who's staying with Mami now?" said Nagisa.

"Yeah, that's me." Sloan thought for a moment. "She's worried about you."

With a pouty face, Nagisa crossed her arms and sighed. She looked younger than any Magical Girl Sloan had seen before, younger than Woodbury and Winnipeg. And yet, like Sayaka, she too was some kind of conceptual being. "I knew Mami would worry about me. She gets lonely so easy! It's really sad."

"Sloan's gotta leave soon," said Sayaka. "We can't really stop for chitchat."

"Yeah, I know..." Nagisa shuffled through the pockets of her rather eclectic getup and retrieved a folded note. "Hey, what's-your-face, can you give this to Mami? It's a note telling her I'm okay, and that she shouldn't cry because everything will be better soon!"

Sloan reached for the note (finally something to make Tomoe less crazy) but Sayaka snatched it from Nagisa's hand before the delivery could be made.

"Nuh-uh, Nagisa. If Sloan hands that to Mami, it'll make things worse. Mami will get even more suspicious of Sloan than she already is and she'll try to do more stuff she shouldn't.

She'll think Sloan has you hostage or something. You know that!"

"Bluhhhhhhh," said Nagisa. "I specifically wrote 'I haven't been kidnapped' in the letter!"

"Mami is really worried about her," said Sloan.

Sayaka creased the already-folded paper down the middle and rolled it between her fingers. "Mami's strong enough to get through this. If things go according to plan, she only needs to last one more day. It's better for her—and Kyoko—that they don't know what's really going on here. It's not something that should concern them anyway. They don't have the power to get involved, not in that way at least. They have their own roles to play, and we can't meddle with that."

This answer did not placate Nagisa. She kicked her foot in the emptiness.

"Come on Nagisa, everything'll be fine. Trust me!" Sayaka smiled broadly. Nagisa glared at her askance. "Why don'tcha see if there's any cheese left floating around here anywhere. It'll go to waste if nobody's around to eat it."

After a few tense moments of sullen staring, Nagisa turned away and marched down an aisle. Her footsteps clip-clopped against nothingness as she weaved between the chairs and toward the opposite end of the space from where Omaha sat in her throne.

Sayaka drew close to Sloan. "Look. I know you probably don't care, but Mami and Kyoko are good people, okay? Can you at least try to keep an eye on them, make sure they're not getting themselves killed? It'd really mean a lot to me."

"My whole goal in coming here was to make sure nobody got killed," said Sloan. Also, mental note: Kyoko, not Coco.

"Maybe you're not as bad as you look, then. Tomorrow's gonna be a big day. A lot of stuff's gonna happen and hopefully if everything goes right, we'll win and it'll all be over. I *think* Mami and Kyoko will be fine, but... you never know. Just, like, stay on your toes, alright?"

"By this point I've seen everything, so sure."

Sayaka smiled. She patted Sloan on the shoulder. "Thanks, buddy." She then pulled away and signaled to Omaha, who did not appear to be looking in their direction. But Omaha raised a hand and a new portal appeared in front of Sloan and Sayaka. It stared onto the pavilion behind the hospital. Time remained frozen, with Mami Tomoe standing amid a field of grief cubes with confusion plastered on her face.

"Hurry, before Homura restarts time. Try not to let Mami get suspicious about what happened. Trust me, things'll only get worse if she starts getting ideas."

She gave Sloan a light push to get her moving. Sloan hopped out the portal and onto the solid concrete. The next moment, the portal closed behind her, and the moment after that, time resumed.

Tomoe blinked. She looked around, started to point at something, but let her arm fall limp at her side. "Was... was there..." She stood on tiptoe and strained her neck to see over Sloan's shoulder. She blinked several times. "Never mind, I am just see things."

They collected the cubes and headed home.

Mami led Sloan home, still wondering about what she had seen, if only for a brief moment. It had looked like Sayaka Miki. But it had gone by so fast Mami had to wonder if she merely imagined it. Sloan herself acted like nothing had happened. But Mami could not help herself from thinking. All the facts about English and history and math had been replaced by theories and dark avenues.

When they reached the apartment, they encountered Kyoko lounging around the complex, hands in pockets, eyes turned downward.

"I hate to ask this," said Kyoko. "But shit's real awkward at Sayaka's place, with her missing and all. Mind if I crash here tonight?"

Mami donned a smile. For the proper hostess, there can be only one answer to such a query.

Hark! How the Bells Sweet Silver Bells

A better night. Mami actually slept. She didn't remember it happening, but she did lay atop her bed and closed her eyes and opened them two hours later. 6 AM. For a dazed moment she thought Nagisa had returned, only to blink and stare around the dim room and realize, no, she had not returned. Nothing had happened to even imply such an occurrence.

She told herself: things will be okay. She felt surer stepping out her room and seeing Sloan and Kyoko sleeping on mats in the living room. Their ranks bolstered, the chance of success increased. They should talk to Madoka next. Yes, Madoka, why had Mami not thought of her before? She would be the perfect addition to the Save Nagisa and Sayaka Squad. Her conversational background in English, having lived in America for three years, might streamline communication with Sloan. And if they managed to involve Madoka in the proceedings, Homura would have to poke out her shell and do something too. Yes, yes, a fine plan. She decided to text Madoka immediately. But it was 6 AM.

6 AM. Everyone asleep. Mami alone. She showered, did her hair, took a lot of time and effort because she found it preferable to taking a lot of time and effort doing nothing. 7:30 AM. Kyoko and Sloan still asleep. Sound asleep. Snoring.

Mami should cook breakfast. Yes, breakfast. Double the size as yesterday, Kyoko could eat even more than Sloan. Mami shuffled through her cabinets, her pantry. Not enough supplies. Will have to buy more. A lot of leftover cheese. Nnnrgh.

She glanced at the calendar. "Oh," she said to an unconscious audience. "It's Christmas."

It snuck up on her. She was usually so organized about these things. What to get Nagisa? Cheese, of course. When Nagisa came back she would buy all the cheese at the store. You can't have Christmas without presents. Without a tree. Mami had forgotten a tree. How had she forgotten so much? What will she do? Sloan was American. Christmas meant a lot to her. A very important holiday. The most important holiday. Mami must be a good hostess. Being a good hostess means your guests must feel comfortable, at home. Christmas with no tree, no presents? Inconceivable.

How much money did she have. Enough money. She gathered her coats and scarves and handbags. To the store. Plenty of time. Were stores open at 7:30 AM. On Christmas? Mami would make do. She would rely on her extensive knowledge of the Mitakihara shopping district. Merry Christmas.

Should she take Sloan's gem with her? Just in case. No, no need. If Sloan wanted to kill them all, let her try. Kyoko is here. Kyoko can handle herself. All is well. Silent night.

In her dream, Sloan sat in a garage. She recognized it as the garage from her old house in Scottsdale, Arizona. Before they moved around and wound up in Minneapolis. Pulleys and cranks hoisted a Cadillac so a mechanic could climb underneath. Sloan sat on the washing machine and watched the mechanic's legs shuffle as she worked, reaching every so often to pull a tool from a toolbox, but all the tools were the same wrench. The mechanic performed her duties despite the lack of variety in her tools. Eventually she pulled herself from under the vehicle: it was Anoka.

Anoka brushed her oil-drenched suspenders and regarded the vehicle. She said:

"We wish you a Merry Christmas."

Of course. On Christmas, repairs cost extra. For wasting the time of the mechanic when they should be with their family. Especially Anoka's family, because she was going to Vancouver to meet them.

"We wish you a Merry Christmas," Anoka repeated.

Sloan shuffled through her coat for her wallet. Sixty thousand dollars for repairs, Christmas or not, felt rather steep. Wait, someone had stolen her wallet!

"And a Happy New Year," said Anoka.

Sloan woke up. All memories of the dream instantly vanished outside of fragmentary images and the lingering tune of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas", which lingered because it was actually playing in real life. She sat up, bundled in blankets and her hair more a mess than usual. She rubbed her eyes. A small plastic Christmas tree twinkled on the triangle table in the middle of Mami's apartment, decorated with bright ornaments. Green and red tinsel festooned the walls. Something baked in the oven. Red hair—Kyoko—raided a box of chocolates on the kitchen counter. She looked up from the box with only partial shame when she noticed Sloan staring.

From the hallway came Mami, dressed in a bathrobe designed like the red suit of Santa Claus, a Santa hat perched on her head. She noticed Sloan and suddenly extended her arms.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

Kyoko wiped her mouth and flailed her arms too.

"MERI KURISUMASU!"

"Merry Christmas," Sloan mumbled. It was Christmas? She tried to remember the last time she saw a calendar, or made a cognizant note of the date. The metric came in months. She yawned.

"I am fixing big Christmas turkey." Mami busied herself to the oven and checked its various dials. "Also big Christmas potatoes, and big Christmas gravy, and big Christmas everything. Also big Christmas cheesecake for dessert, yum!" She rubbed her stomach for emphasis.

Sloan disentangled from the blankets and shimmied into her jacket. Excavating the corners of her eyes, she shuffled to the counter and tried to appear generally present. Kyoko flicked her a chocolate from the box. Sloan popped it in her mouth. Fucking coconut.

"We Wish You a Merry Christmas" ended. Bing Crosby's rendition of "Do You Hear What I Hear" began. Sloan's Dad, draped in the same jacket Sloan wore now, sang Crosby at Christmas parties to entertain his drunk dad friends. Ay-ay-ay, her Mom replied, Who spiked the eggnog? Even after the move to Minneapolis, they kept an ironic Christmas cactus.

Mami hummed to the music as she checked on containers of food in various gradations of cooked throughout the kitchen. As usual, it smelled delicious. Kyoko said something in Japanese, Mami said something in Japanese back.

"Miss Sakura want to open present." She pointed at the Christmas tree, under which sat three unopened boxes wrapped in vibrant paper and superfluous ribbons. Sloan had noticed the gifts but thought they were, like, props or something, like you see in department store displays. Kyoko clapped her hands and watched Sloan eagerly. It took Sloan a moment to realize that she had been somehow deigned the arbiter of when presents get opened, perhaps because she had more Christmas experience? Well, as Grand Christmas Elder, Sloan saw no reason to prolong Kyoko's torture. "Yeah, sure."

Mami started to translate but Kyoko flung her arms akimbo and stormed past Sloan to the tree, sliding to her knees and snatching the gift labeled KYOKO in both English and (presumably) Japanese. She held it close to her ear and shook it. Something rattled inside. Satisfied, she tore at the wrapping paper. Huge handfuls sailed aside in crunched wads. She tugged and yanked the ribbons until she gave up and used her teeth to snap them.

Beneath the paper remained only a bland brown box with no markings. Kyoko searched for a seam, found it, and tore it open. She dug into the box, filled with packing peanuts, and eventually lost enough patience to simply upend it and let everything gush onto the floor around her knees.

Half-buried amid the peanuts lay a much smaller box of clear plastic. The label on the box read *MP3!GO*, and then smaller Japanese text, alongside an anime chick rocking out with exaggerated music notes orbiting around her lavender-haired head. Kyoko's mouth widened into an O. She hugged the MP3 player and turned to Mami. Sloan need not understand Japanese to catch the gist of her words.

Mami curtseyed and gave a sedated, humble reply. While Kyoko grappled with the plastic to get at its contents, Sloan decided she better open her present too. She honestly had no clue what Mami would buy for her, they had known each other less than two days and conversation between them had been terse, disjointed, and businesslike.

As she reached for the gift marked SLOAN, she checked the third present under the tree with a sinking suspicion it was for the same Nagisa who was not there and would not be in attendance. However, the tag read MADOKA.

"Is Madoka coming?"

"Ah, sorry, no," said Mami. "She and Homura are together today. Please, open present!"

The thought of what lurked inside her gift filled Sloan with unease. She took great care to untie the ribbons and unfold the paper, arranged with such artistry that the gift felt iconoclastic to destroy. Beneath the paper waited another brown box with no markings. Sloan hesitated; Mami clasped her hands together and watched. Kyoko looked up from her MP3 player. In the corners, two creepy dolls giggled.

Sloan cracked open the box. More packing peanuts inside. Rather than upend them, Sloan slid a hand into the depths, seeking the slightest touch of whatever awaited her. Her finger touched something soft and pliant. Her hand grasped it. Fabric, smooth but thick.

She dragged whatever it was from the depths. Peanuts fell away as from the box rose a long, black, velvet coat with bright brass buttons and fancy trim. Despite herself, Sloan's mouth fell agape. Did it—did it have pockets? How many pockets? She turned the coat over, undid the buttons and looked inside. So many pockets.

"Do you like?" Mami smiled hopefully.

Did she like? Did she like? This was... it was...

Sloan rubbed her face against the soft velvet. And then, inexplicably, she began to cry. At first a single strangled sob that caught in her throat, followed by a tense moment when she wondered if they were really going to see her like this. They were. It was stupid, too, just a goddam coat, she already had a coat that was much warmer than this one, but it didn't matter, Sloan could not help herself. She didn't need a warmer coat anyway, she was never going back to Fargo ever again, never going anywhere that cold ever again. She pulled the coat to her chest and curled over it, protecting it, trying to curl in on herself so she could burrow her face and prevent them from seeing her look so foolish. It didn't matter.

"Thank you," Sloan said. "Thank you, thank you." Such an undeserved act of kindness. The most foolish thing of all was she did not cry from happiness. But they need not know that.

"Wear it!" said Mami with an encouraging nod. Sloan nodded back, shuffled out of her old coat, and slid her arms into the new one, the plush velvet so soft against her skin, the lightness of the coat as though she wore nothing at all. She did the buttons and, wiping her eyes, stood so the full length of the coat could fall to her knees. Slightly shorter than the old one.

Mami clapped. Kyoko gave a thumbs-up. Sloan went to the mirror and surveyed herself. Despite her unkempt hair, the coat exuded an air of smartness, sophistication. It held to her figure, tighter around the waist and flowing around her legs. She turned and checked the backside, the tails swished playfully.

"You look very nice," said Mami. "I am glad you like!"

This girl, this Mami Tomoe, she had no reason to do this, no reason to give this gift. In no way did Sloan deserve it. Even if Mami did not know the things Sloan had done, what in the past two days had Sloan done for this? She had been unpleasant, uncooperative, a general

asshole. Because that's who she was, had always been and if she had not changed by now, always will. But Mami Tomoe thought of her enough to give her this gift.

Sloan had the crazy thought of, of taking the coat off, folding it neatly on the table, and telling Mami that she would wear it when she deserved it, as a symbolic gesture or something. And if she did manage to make amends here in Mitakihara, if she earned her happy ending, she would wear the coat then. But given the language barrier, communication of her idea would lead to confusion. Even without the language barrier, communication of the idea would lead to confusion. Sloan could not communicate to herself what she felt without being confused.

Such was the power of kind people, people who, despite naiveté, inefficiency, standards, morals, and self-regulations, managed to hold a force that even the most brute strength could not replicate.

Maybe Sloan could not save everyone in Mitakihara. Maybe Omaha's machinations exceeded her grasp. Maybe the celestial war between her and Lucifer spanned too broad a breadth for one mortal to impact. Omaha had said as much, Kyubey had said as much, Sayaka had said as much, and Sloan had the odd suspicion that in a past timeline, Homura Akemi had said the same as well. But in Minneapolis, the cold day after Clair and the archon died, when Sloan lay in the house that had once been hers and contemplated death, Anoka said something contrary to all said by the others: That if Sloan had the power to ruin something, she had the power to fix it. Her advice had been impractical, empty words perhaps. Sloan could crash a car but not repair it. But there was one thing Sloan could fix, could protect. She would fulfill the request Sayaka made the night before. She would protect these people. Mami. Kyoko too. Both of them. They were good people, Sloan knew. Better people than most she had ever met. Mami and Kyoko and Sayaka and Nagisa, they cared for each other, they loved each other, they protected each other. Who did Sloan love, who did she protect? Who did she buy gifts?

Nobody. Not even if she counted the dead ones. She resolved to change that today. This instant. She would protect these people, these people who genuinely deserved it. With whatever meager protection she could afford.

Sloan wiped her eyes and Christmas resumed. Mami returned to the kitchen. Kyoko, in a series of gestures and pantomimes, offered to let Sloan listen to the MP3 player if Sloan let Kyoko try on the coat. They swapped, Sloan listened to a popstar intone sonic bubblegum (comprehension of lyrics little mattered) while Kyoko tromped around in a giant jacket several sizes too large for her, the sleeves flopping past her hands and the tails dragging on the ground. After they returned their gifts, Kyoko treated them to jaw-dropping karaoke renditions of all your favorite Christmas classics, which wound up sounding like the final scene of *A Christmas Story*. Jingu ber, jingu ber, jingo o-te way. O wattu faan, et cetera.

It was fun. Sloan laughed. She sang a few ditties herself. ("Carol of the Bells" her especial favorite with its frenetic pace. She remembered the words.) She wore her coat. Timers went off in the kitchen.

The man behind the desk leaned on an elbow. Behind thick-rimmed glasses his eyes shifted from the documents arrayed before him and the faces of those gathered in the sterile customs office at the airport.

"The twenty of you. Here for a school trip, you say."

"Twenty-one, to be exact," said Laquesha Kabwe. Or at least that was the nomenclature on the passport the customs man now examined.

"Mhmm." The man perused the hefty stack of forms, multiple per female in attendance. "And which of you is the chaperone?"

"That would be Mrs. Kabwe," said River Forest (alias Melissa Haskins), exerting her powers of suggestion over the feeble-minded human. Although River Forest dwelled on the lower end of the spectrum of combat strength among those in the platoon, her unique abilities oft proved pivotal when accounting for unwanted human intervention, such as peace officers or eyewitnesses or, in this instance, governmental bureaucracy.

The customs man, unaware that his judgment had been impaired by a degree similar to alcohol intoxication, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and examined Laquesha Kabwe closely. "And how old are you, Miss..." He checked a passport. "Kabwe."

(If he thought more clearly, he could have answered that question himself by reading the date of birth on the very same passport.)

With maintained patience, Laquesha Kabwe cleared her throat. "Mrs. Kabwe, thank you. I am thirty-three years old."

"Right." The customs man stroked his chin. Her bit his lip. "You sure don't look thirty-three. Or married."

"Pray tell, what aspects of physical appearance in a young woman are altered upon her entrance into a legally-binding union with a male human?"

The customs man's eyes immediately went to Laquesha Kabwe's hand in search of a ring. Of course, Laquesha Kabwe had a ring. All Puella Magi have rings, as they prove handy receptacles for Soul Gems when not in use.

"That's your wedding ring?"

"That is her wedding ring," said River Forest.

The customs man nodded, the matter settled. Nonetheless, his eyes narrowed. "You're *sure* you're thirty-three years old?"

"Fortunately, I need not be certain, because I have legal documentation which I have placed on the desk to verify this simple fact."

The man regarded said documents. He turned them over with diligent care. Laquesha Kabwe could almost perceive the cogs revolving in his brain. He knew something was incorrect, something on an instinctive level that aroused his suspicion, but his muddled mental state rendered him incapable of cohering logical particles of evidence to confirm his intuition.

With a note of finality, River Forest said: "Mrs. Kabwe is thirty-three years old."

"Alright." The customs man sighed. "I guess there's nothing else to say on the matter. You girls have fun. Enjoy your stay in Mitakihara."

After they gathered the significant quantity of documents (which included forged parental permission forms from one Saint Ursula's School for Young Females in Chicago, Illinois, the fabricated academic institution of choice for whenever a Puella Magi may require such a thing), Laquesha Kabwe became once more Cicero, the Third Centurion of the Holy Order of the Knights of Chicago, and led her Puella Magi from the airport into the open Japanese air. Other than Cicero in a smart matronly dress, her twenty disciples donned identical school uniforms to better blend into the surroundings.

Cicero took stock of the gigantic metropolis that spanned beyond. "Lombard, acquire for me a cartograph of the city."

"Yes, milady."

"Hinsdale, Hodgkins, scan for magical residue. We must locate the Puella Magi in this city as soon as possible."

"Yes, milady."

"Yes, milady!"

"Berwyn, take Niles and Westmont and establish a base of operations, preferably in a central location of the metropolis. Someplace to which we may retreat should the situation prove unfavorable."

"Aye, milady. Niles, Westmont, attend."

"Norridge, bring me Hennepin."

"Yes, milady."

"Hennepin, how progresses your Japanese?"

Hennepin, in the same uniform as the rest but marked as a prisoner by the red ribbon tied around her upper arm, scratched at her neck and said a sentence in Japanese.

"Correct answer," said Cicero.

Lombard returned with a tourist map pilfered from a nearby kiosk. Cicero unfolded it and took stock of the geography. Or lack thereof.

"Milady!" said Hinsdale. "I have picked up a magical trail identical to the one exuded by Fargo in Minneapolis."

"Excellent work," said Cicero. "Let us make it our objective to apprehend her before the day ends."

The Puella Magi assented with dutiful salutes. Combat operations in Mitakihara commenced.

After the Christmas carol playlist ran its full gamut thrice, Mami Tomoe announced that dinner was served. She set the meal on the tiny triangle table, only able to arrange plates and silverware for the three in attendance plus a few main dishes. Chief amongst them loomed a gargantuan turkey, its skin roasted brown as it basked in a shallow puddle of its own juices. Sakura and Redfearn drooled at the prospect. Alongside the turkey were mashed potatoes, salad, and rolls of bread. On the kitchen counter where more space remained available waited other delights. Fried okra, stuffing, corn on the cob slathered in butter, asparagus, peach cobbler and cherry pie and cheesecake, cornbread, any homestyle delicacy imaginable.

Tomoe bowed her head and said she hoped they enjoyed the meal, first in English to Redfearn and second in Japanese to Sakura. They ate. Forks and spoons scooped helpings and plopped them onto plates. Tomoe carved thick cuts from the breast of the turkey, while Sakura wrenched off a full leg. Salt, pepper, horseradish, and other seasonings drenched servings. Gravy lakes formed in craterous potatoes and overflowed onto adjacent foodstuffs. Plates acquired third dimensions before food began to funnel into mouths. Satisfied palates sent the girls into spontaneous yums and appropriate thanks to the chef. Tomoe must have done painstaking research on authentic American recipes. Of course, for a girl with her skillset, execution of such recipes came naturally. She worked well when given a series of detailed instructions. A path upon which to tread. Everything ordered and everything moving toward a predictable outcome. And if the outcome lasted naught but a few minutes, a half hour at best disregarding leftovers—in any case less time than it took to reach that outcome—for Tomoe, that was enough. For Tomoe, a fleeting moment of happiness on the face of her friends meant the effort had been expended correctly. Their approval. Their love. She endeavored to make herself useful, helpful, wanted, needed.

A precarious, fragile existence. A canvas of a house perched upon stilts. Small gusts of wind might disrupt her entire abode. Had done so already in any number of past timelines. When her canvas toppled around her and revealed the barren, empty space of the true world, Tomoe's propensity to break exceeded all the other girls.

"Homura, what's wrong?" said Madoka.

Homura glanced from her phone, on which displayed her view into Tomoe's apartment. Best not to worry about them right now, although eventually she would have to chat with Sloan Redfearn about what happened the night before. Eitelkeit had seen it (and been on the receiving end of one of Miki's blades): A hole to another dimension opened, Miki appeared,

Miki took Redfearn inside with her, and some time later Redfearn returned. It happened concurrently to the latest raid on the Kaname household, when Homura had been preoccupied with Nagisa. On one hand, the event indicated conspiracy between Redfearn and Omaha's forces. At the same time, why would Omaha be so obvious about it? Miki had paraded in full view of Eitelkeit, so despite Nagisa's distraction they had made no effort to conceal their tracks. Regardless, the matter merited investigation. Redfearn's mind had become more difficult to read since her time in Williston.

"Nothing is wrong, Madoka." They sat opposite each other at the table in Homura's apartment. A paper bucket of fried chicken from a fast-food establishment Madoka liked sat between them. It lacked the flair of Tomoe's dinner, but the food itself did not matter. "I hope I haven't come off as aloof."

"You were staring at your phone for a long time." Madoka wiped her mouth with a napkin. "It's Mami, isn't it? She's worried about Nagisa..."

"Yes, exactly that." Homura closed the phone and slid it into her pocket. She stared at the half-eaten chicken on her plate. "I'm sure Nagisa and Sayaka are fine, though. In fact, I have a few theories of my own as to their whereabouts."

"Really? Have you told Mami? I think we should team up to help her and Kyoko find them. You don't think they're in danger, do you?"

"As I said, I have merely theories." Homura fiddled with a chicken leg. "No proof. I want to investigate on my own before I give anyone false hope."

Madoka sighed. "Nagisa and Sayaka are so nice... I'd hate if anything bad happened to them. I asked Hitomi and everyone else from school if they had seen anything, but nobody had. I'm starting to get really worried... I can only imagine how Mami and Kyoko feel."

The twelve dolls stood around her, on high alert. Funny how when alone with Homura, they got up to all kinds of antics, but around Madoka they were so well-behaved. "Don't worry, Madoka. I'm certain everything will turn out all right. I will make sure it happens. You trust me, don't you?"

"Yeah..." Madoka looked down. "Yeah, I know you'll make things right. You just have that way about you. So cool, and like you always understand exactly what's going on even if I don't... Ha, I hope I don't sound like I'm gushing!"

"It's perfectly fine, Madoka. Your compliments mean a lot to me."

A short silence reigned.

"Homura." Madoka shuffled her feet a little. She stared to the side, where the empty screens floated and the shadow of the pendulum danced. "Homura, can I tell you something? Something that probably sounds a little silly."

"Of course. You can tell me anything."

"It's just..." Another pause. "It's just, sometimes I get this weird feeling. About Sayaka and Nagisa, I mean. I don't know why them in particular. I can't quite describe this feeling, it's like... like I've met them before? Before I transferred here, I mean."

"I see." Homura sipped from her coffee mug. "Perhaps this uncanny feeling is déjà vu."

"Oh, that might be it. I don't know, ha ha." Madoka scratched the back of her head and gave a sheepish smile. "I always thought it was just like, regret at not getting to know them better? I think me and Sayaka, and Nagisa and Mami and Kyoko, I think we all could have been much better friends than we turned out being. I mean—don't get me wrong—we're not enemies or anything, of course not, but it just feels like we're a little..."

"Distant."

"Yeah, that's it! I always chalked it up to how Sayaka and Kyoko were really close, and Mami and Nagisa. It's hard to walk into someone's life when they're already so close to another person, if that makes sense. You just wind up being a third wheel, I guess. But I've always felt like, I don't know, something always just felt right about us being friends, even if we never got that close. If that makes sense?"

"You are a kind person, Madoka Kaname. It is in your nature to want to be friends with everyone."

"Okay, maybe I'm not explaining myself the best. It's just, you and I are really close, right? We do almost everything together. I see you every day. It just feels like, I should be having that kind of relationship with all of them, especially Sayaka for some reason. Yeah, that's the word—should. Like, there's something that ought to be happening but isn't..."

She trailed off and gave an embarrassed grin. Homura drank from her cup. Should. The implications of the word should. What should happen. What has been mandated. What the laws of the universe have conspired to create. What Homura Akemi, the salamander, has prevented from occurring.

Was the Incubator's plot, his masterminding and machinations, his series of perfectly-executed movements, the work of one attempting to break the universe or the work of the universe itself trying to break free of its restraints? No, no. The Incubator's goals far exceeded restoring the universe to its state before the ascension of Homura Akemi. He wanted to enslave Madoka, pervert her universe in the opposite direction. But the thought lingered: Who decided what should happen. Who decided what was right.

Akemi's Paradox:

The beautiful qualities of Madoka Kaname meant she should be the rightful God of this universe; the beautiful qualities of Madoka Kaname meant she should not have to be the God of this universe.

The Christian theologians, among many mistakes, made one correct deduction: God was sacrifice. To be God was to relinquish mortal happiness to ensure the happiness of lesser beings. It was not the Buddhist notion of individual enlightenment and ascension. Why else

would the wraiths don the robes of Buddhist ascetics? Individual enlightenment was selfishness. Enlightenment was evil. To be truly enlightened, to see the truth of this universe and its naked horror, was to understand the necessity of its destruction. The wraiths knew. The archons knew. It was in fact Madoka's ignorance that made her their benevolent antithesis.

One could not be simultaneously omnipotent and benevolent. But, like Homura herself, Madoka was not truly omnipotent. She was a concept, something akin to a god, but not a true god. She ascended not by abandoning her humanity, like the Buddhists and the wraiths, but by embracing it. It was because of Madoka's humanity that she could create such a beautiful world. Madoka's humanity was the key to everything. That humanity must be protected. Must be held.

"Everything will be okay," said Homura. "I promise."

"I'm just worried I'll never see them again. You know, like the old saying, you never know what you have until it's gone? It makes me wonder what I've been doing these past three years. They were right here all this time, and I never... I was always doing something else, it seems."

Homura swished the dregs of her coffee in the mug. "So you're saying you regret the time we've spent together. You wish you could have traded that time for more time with them."

Madoka looked up. "Oh, no! I don't mean that at all. I've always enjoyed the time I've spent with you, Homura. It's just..."

"Time is a commodity." The pendulum ticked. "It is precious, like all scarce things. No matter how much time you accrue, it is never enough. To spend time in one way is to sacrifice its use in another."

"Yeah... Yeah, that makes sense. It's like balance, I guess. But I don't think you have to spend time with just one person always. Like the other day, when you were sick and I hunted wraiths with the other girls. We were all there together, and it was loads of fun! I thought the whole time how great it would be if you were there too, Homura."

"I do not think the other girls like me very much."

Madoka sighed. "Homura, that's not true at all! Why wouldn't they like you? You're smart, and brave, and caring, and you're always there to back up a friend when they need help. You just need to open up to them and I'm sure they'd like you a lot!"

Despite herself, Homura smiled. It was hard not to. If she did not smile at such things, what did she have to smile at? "Thank you, Madoka. You always know how to brighten my day. Maybe... Maybe when Sayaka and Nagisa are back, maybe then we can do what you say."

It would require work, however. Occlusion of memories, remapping of identities. The Sakura—Miki dynamic showed signs of falling apart, something must be done about that. And preparations for Nagisa's upcoming adolescence. Assuming of course Homura wasn't forced to kill either in the battle with Omaha. Assuming she didn't have to turn back time and erase

this conversation from existence. But even if the conversation never transpired, or Nagisa and Miki never went missing, did that change what Madoka wanted, her true desires? Those desires were constant, immutable. Homura had always known Madoka wanted things to be this way. Six instead of two. More rather than less. Madoka liked to share. Homura did not.

"Mami invited me to a Christmas dinner," said Madoka. "I told her I already had plans with you, but I'm sure if we both went she wouldn't object! Come on, Homura, why don't we go? It'd probably make Mami feel a lot better too, and take her mind off Nagisa for a little bit."

Homura regarded the mostly-empty bucket of fried chicken. "We have already eaten."

"Well, we could stop by for a visit..."

Best not to move too much. Movement presented vulnerabilities, avenues for Omaha to exploit. Best to remain defended, encased, incubated.

"Maybe later."

"Okay," said Madoka.

"Would you like to open your present now?"

Madoka's face lit up again. "Sure!"

Their two gifts, one to one another, rested on the table between them. Madoka wiped her hands on her napkin and took up the painstakingly-wrapped present addressed to her. It had taken several... hundred attempts to ensure the ribbons and bows and paper were just right. Homura clasped her hands on her lap and waited while Madoka picked the pieces apart with careful diligence.

Homura held her breath as Madoka opened the box and regarded what was inside. Then a reassuring glow on her face as she extricated the contents. "Oh, it's a music box!" She turned it over in her hands, inspected it from every angle, and located the key, which she wound with a few delicate cranks.

She set the music box on the table and let it play. The notes percolated through the air, little chirps and chimes in lovely lullaby while the gears inside the box turned the pieces atop it. An outer circle lined with figurines of happy children revolved slowly, causing the children to play and dance, rotating on their own internal axes, circles within circles. They thronged around a central structure, a pillar of golden beams that rose into sinewy woven puffs of clouds and a lurking yellow dome of sun. Small bars extended out, at the ends of which were affixed miniature birds and airplanes that revolved around the sun counter to the turn of the children beneath. Parts extended and retracted, flipped and oscillated at key points of the melody. At one point a small mouse skittered up the golden pillars, turned, and scampered back down to vanish into a hole beyond which gears gnashed.

"Wow, it's so pretty," said Madoka. She watched until the song played out and children ceased dancing and birds ceased spinning and the sun retreated behind the clouds. "It's so intricate... It must have cost a lot!"

Homura lied. "I found it for almost nothing at a store of trinkets."

"Well, I love it! Thank you so much!" Without warning, she flung herself at Homura and hugged her tight. Homura froze at the unexpected contact. Her arms locked at her sides and she was unsure how to angle her head while Madoka nuzzled hers against Homura's neck. But she allowed the moment to linger. A moment like this could last forever as it would be okay. A moment like this made all the moments that led up to it worth it.

And then the moment ended. Madoka pulled away and picked up the other present. She handed it to Homura. "Here, now open mine." She scratched the back of her head and smiled. "It's not nearly as cool as yours, but I hope you like it anyway!"

"I'm certain I will." Homura unwrapped the gift. In the box she found bundled a woolen pink scarf. She unraveled the article and extended its length. The tails at either end trailed to the floor.

"It's a scarf!" said Madoka. "I knit it myself. Well, kinda. My dad showed me how."

"It's beautiful." Homura wrapped the scarf around her neck. It was thick and warm. Not quite her color, but such a minor quibble barely registered. She would make much use of this gift. "Thank you, Madoka. This means a lot to me."

"Oh, it was nothing. It's the least I could have done. I'm really glad you like it!"

They smiled together. Together. A moment like this, were it only prolonged. A moment like this, if it only lasted forever. Why must anything else exist?

Nagisa zoomed through space, along with a full collection of table, tablecloth, chairs, platters, silverware, and of course cheese. She tore voraciously at the blocks and slices heaped before her. The void filled with the scarf and smack of her hamster-crammed mouth.

From a darker corner, Omaha said: "Cicero's group nears Tomoe's residence."

Sayaka looked up from the manga she had been reading. "Cripes, finally. What'd they do, circle the whole city?"

"They're cautious..."

"Yeah, yeah." Sayaka stood and kicked her chair aside. Not that kicking the chair did anything, but it had that satisfaction, you know? Try kicking a chair sometime, it's more fun than you think. Especially if the chair then hurtles in Zero G. "Nagisa! Put the cheese away, it's about time to rondo!"

"Time to *what*?" Nagisa zipped upside-down overhead. "And come onnn, let me finish this plate first."

"Quit fooling around and take this seriously, will ya! Those Chicago girls'll attack Mami and Kyoko soon."

"Guh, fine." Nagisa flopped out of her chair and onto the approximate level of space Sayaka and most of the other chairs inhabited. "What're we even getting ready for again? Are we making another go at Madoka?"

Sayaka rolled her eyes. How many times had they gone over the plan by now? She scrutinized her partner-in-crime, unsure whether she had legitimately forgotten or was simply being facetious. "Not yet. But soon enough, so you better be ready when it's time. This is the best chance we got, so give it your all, got it?"

"I always give it my all," said Nagisa. With that you-don't-have-to-tell-me-what-to-do look.

"Miki," said Omaha. "You're certain Mami Tomoe and Kyoko Sakura will handle this situation correctly?"

"Of course!" Sayaka tried to locate their nebulous ally in the darkness of the void, but metrics both visual and aural lost all meaning in such space. "They can be headstrong, but they're not dumb. They know when they can't win a fight. Their first thought will be to go to Homura for help. Which is exactly what we want."

"If you say so..." said Omaha's disembodied, echoey voice.

"What's that supposed to mean? Isn't this what your 'friend' wants? Why else is he letting these girls come here all the way from Chicago?"

"Where's Chicago?" said Nagisa.

"My friend has said nothing about these events," said Omaha. "I was not aware the girls from Chicago would be involved in the proceedings beyond their intended role of dispatching the archon in Minneapolis."

"Yeah, well, I ain't one for complex schemes anyway." Sayaka grabbed Nagisa by the wrist when she attempted to scamper away for more cheese. "Sometimes you just gotta wing it. Do what feels right, y'know?"

Omaha said nothing. They waited.

Cicero

Mami's guests reached the dregs of the cornucopia she had prepared when a megaphone sounded outside. It buzzed, unwanted, into her apartment, its cacophonous drone reverberated across the walls. What meant this? An earthquake drill, or construction on the complex across the street? Although at first the sounds failed to converge into coherent words and sentences, after her brain adjusted to the percolation Mami recognized it as English.

Sloan dropped her fork and hopped to her feet. "Oh fuck."

"What's the big deal," said Kyoko, likely stirred from her meal by one of the two English words she knew.

"Remain here," said Mami in Japanese. "I will investigate." She repeated herself in English for Sloan. Neither Kyoko nor Sloan seemed interested in following her request, but they remained at the table regardless as Mami progressed carefully toward the window. She peered between the curtains, over the railing of her rarely-used balcony onto the open patio behind the apartment complex. A street ran parallel and behind it additional apartment structures promulgated in needless array.

Two young women stood on the patio below, beside the complex swimming pool and recreation area. One, who held the megaphone, wore a dress and was of African lineage. The other wore a school uniform and was Asian, with a purple streak in her hair.

The young woman in the suit again bellowed into the megaphone. English was difficult enough in normal conversation, but with the amplified sonic distortion Mami could make neither head nor tails of it. Instead her eyes surveyed the surrounding landscape. The two women below were not alone. Figures crept along rooftops, in shady alcoves, on balconies.

"What is it," said Kyoko.

"We shall see." Why were they using a megaphone? Telepathy ought to suffice. All they did was risk dragging regular humans into whatever they intended. Or perhaps they intended to use the public setting to their advantage, in case they butted against forces beyond their strength? No. There were many Magical Girls lurking around. At least ten. They had little to fear in regards to an attack. The public setting rather worked in Mami's favor. She drew aside the curtain and unlatched the doors to the balcony. Unafraid, she stepped outside, held the railing, and stared down at those below.

"What is it you want?" she asked in Japanese.

The first one said something to the Asian beside her and handed over the megaphone. The Asian yelled, in poorly-pronounced but passable Japanese:

"Where is Sloan Redfearn! Where is Fargo! All we want is Sloan Redfearn! All we want is Fargo! Please save me, these people are insane!"

She lowered the megaphone. Oh dear, thought Mami.

"Did she say what I think she said," Kyoko whispered from inside. Behind her, Sloan stood, hands crammed in the pockets of her new coat, her shoulders slumped and a severe glare etched in her eyes.

Mami considered her words carefully before she replied, although she realized her words would be strained through the translation of a girl with a tenuous grasp on their meaning. "I will not even consider capitulating to demands without knowledge of who makes them. Identify yourselves immediately, including those who are in hiding."

The Asian grimaced before she turned to the one beside her and muttered something. The first one, the leader, cut off her hostage(?) midsentence and said something back, louder, but in English. The Asian cowered beneath the deluge of words and, once the speech finally ceased, raised her megaphone to translate.

"Her name is Cicero! She is from Chicago! They have twenty girls, you are surrounded! Please save me they are going to kill me! All they want is Fargo, all they want is Sloan Redfearn!"

Mami had no idea who these people were, or their connection to Sloan. Or what kind of person calls themselves Cicero, after the Roman senator who murdered Julius Caesar (if her assemblage of mental facts dredged from the murky depths of World History failed her not). From the interesting interpolations the translator injected into her communication, it took little imagination to deduct what they intended to do when they got their hands on Sloan. Twenty girls or fifty, Mami would not sentence a guest—possibly a friend—to certain death.

"I know nobody by the name Sloan Redfearn, or Fargo."

The translator flinched. She relayed to Cicero. Cicero laughed and said something. The translator said: "She knows Fargo is in there! We can trace her! Do not lie or punishment will be severe! These people are insane, don't do anything they say! Help me, save me!"

Kyoko burst onto the balcony beside Mami. She seized the railing and leaned far over it. "Hey! Buster! Tell your boss or whatever that we don't like foreign chicks stomping around *our* territory! Tell her she can fuck off or all twenty-seven Mitakihara Magical Girls will punt her ass back to America!"

While the translator scratched at the collar of her school uniform and shifted her eyes left to right, Mami placed a hand on Kyoko's shoulder. "Calm yourself, Kyoko. They have girls with long-range weapons stationed on the nearby rooftops. Best not to provoke them unduly."

"Bah! Let's kick their asses. If chicks show up and you don't show em who's boss, they start getting ideas. They didn't send this many out here for just Fargo, they're thinking invasion. Well, not in *my* city!"

The megaphone blared. "She says you don't have twenty-seven girls! She says there are only three of you! Blonde and redhead and Fargo! Acquiesce or die! Can't you see they're insane?!"

"Mami," said Sloan. She kept further back in the apartment, but not as far back as Mami preferred. "It's okay. These girls are strong. You can't win. I will go."

"No." Mami strained to remember her English, especially with so many other things on her mind. "There is no need, I will fix."

Sloan sighed. She tightened her coat around herself and stepped forward. "This'll end badly. I can already tell. I don't have what they want anyway."

Before Sloan took another step, already dangerously close to the door, Mami tossed her hand. Ribbons lashed out, wrapped around Sloan, and pushed her back inside, binding her safe behind the kitchen counter, far from all windows. The principles at work here were rather stark. Unpleasant aggressors wanted to harm a guest in Mami Tomoe's apartment. It was Mami's duty to protect those she invited into her home. She would allow no other resolution than—

Kyoko grabbed her from behind and forced her down. A projectile sailed overhead and smashed into the wall. Fired from a rooftop girl. Mami glanced at the bullet: it had latched to the doorjamb, a small blinking pellet that flashed red and orange.

The pellet exploded. A swollen lump of flame burst, shattering the walls. Cracks spread across the plain façade of the back of the apartment. The balcony ripped from its supports. It, and the railing, and Mami and Kyoko flew away from the apartment.

No time to hesitate. Mami sent a ribbon spiraling through the open and misshapen door and latched onto the first solid thing with which it came in contact—the leg of the triangle table. She sent another ribbon that coiled through the falling debris around the leg of Kyoko. Projectiles zipped by them, either projectiles or debris, as Mami reeled herself and Kyoko toward the apartment door.

However, the small triangle table proved a poor anchor for the combined weight of both Mami and Kyoko. The ribbon snagged and went slack for a moment as the table overturned and its glass top shattered, leaving Mami's ribbon tied only to a useless peg. (And Mami really liked that table, too...) As they fell again, she probed the ribbon deeper for something stronger to hold. She found the kitchen counter, but they had already dropped nearly to the ground. Gunfire rained around them, creating stellated cracks against the mortar walls. Kyoko summoned latticework barriers to deflect some of the attacks, but her barriers only offered partial protection versus small projectiles. A hot shard sailed into Mami's elbow. She clenched her teeth and stifled the pain as she reeled them in.

In the doorway appeared a hovering machine gun turret. One of Sloan's. Its cannon rotated; a stream of light rocketed across the pavilion, cut through the pool, and forced Cicero and her translator to dodge in opposite directions. The storm of enemy bullets diminished for a brief moment. Enough opportunity for Mami to pull herself and Kyoko inside.

They staggered away from the windows, which had already been shot—even the ones of the opposite wall. The gunfire from outside resumed. Plates and pictures shattered. Puffs of plaster burst. A cabinet door dropped off its hinges. Mami pulled Kyoko to the base of the kitchen counter, where Sloan lay bound in ribbons.

She undid the binds while she inspected Kyoko's wounds. Beyond scratches and grazes, she had been hit twice, once in the muscle of her lower leg and once in the gut.

"Damn!" Kyoko crouched over her wound. "Bastards."

"Please remain calm." Mami held her hands over the wound on Kyoko's gut. Her threads wove deep into the puncture and pried out the bullet lodged inside. Kyoko winced as a fresh spurt of blood trickled down her dress while the ribbons stitched her back together. The wound on her leg took less time to fix.

Sloan controlled her machine gun mentally, covering them while Mami went to work on her own wounds. Not so many, and quicker to resolve. All extraneous information flushed from Mami's head as the logistics and tactics of war rushed to the forefront.

Unfortunately, she needed to retain her English. "Sloan," she said as she summoned multiple rifles from the threads strewn across her apartment, "Know you these people?"

"Yeah," said Sloan. A small explosion ruptured the wall. A chunk fell outward to douse them in sunshine. "They're from Chicago. They want grief cubes they think I have. But Omaha has them."

Kyoko crouched between the chairs, propped against her spear as her eyes scanned the various entry points into the apartment. "What the hell are they doing, making so much noise in broad daylight? People will see em."

"A force of twenty Magical Girls likely has a wide variety of powers at its disposal," said Mami. "If they are being this aggressive, at least one of their ranks likely has the ability to obfuscate the perceptions of normal humans."

"Bah!" said Kyoko.

The gunfire halted. Mami craned her neck to see the pavilion. Both Cicero and her translator had disappeared, and the angle made finding the other girls impossible.

"This is not a fight we can take," said Mami. "Even if they were unskilled Magical Girls, which their organization suggests is untrue, they outnumber us too significantly."

"Dammit, I know that!" Kyoko felt her hand on the counter above her until she located the demolished turkey and wrenched off the remaining leg. "But we can't just let em do whatever. I've been in their shoes before, you give a chick an inch she takes the whole damn city."

The megaphone screeched. "All they want is Sloan Redfearn! They're certifiably insane! All they want is Fargo!" It added in English: "Fargo, give yourself up peaceably! Accept your rightful doom!"

Shut the fuck up, Hennepin, said Sloan telepathically.

Fu—I mean, eff you, you left me to rot, the translator replied. Mami did not know what "eff" meant, or if it were even spelled the way she thought it should be.

Sloan tapped Mami on the shoulder. "I'm going out there. You two don't need to get involved."

"I already said no." While she spoke, Mami span her minuscule threads out the shattered windows to probe the surrounding area in case any enemies had attempted to sneak close. "I have plan to end the fight easy."

"End it easy." Sloan gave a dubious look. "How?"

"Homura Akemi control time," said Mami. "Time stop, twenty Puella Magi do nothing."

Yes. Yes, that was the plan. Elegant in its simplicity. But then again, such powers as Miss Akemi's afforded a simple end to all problems. One crank of the gears in her shield and the twenty girls from Chicago stand frozen and still. It becomes then but a trifle to disarm them of their Soul Gems and resolve this conflict without bloodshed.

She related the plan to Kyoko. "We must reach Homura Akemi. She can stop this."

Kyoko tore flesh from the turkey leg with her teeth. "Homura ain't said a word to us since Sayaka and Nagisa went missing. We even went to her damn house, why would she help now?"

"As you said, this threat is to our city, not solely us. Which means Homura Akemi herself is threatened. And perhaps more pertinently to her, Madoka Kaname. She will respond. She must."

With remarkable efficiency Kyoko cleaned the turkey leg and discarded the useless bone. "Well, you wanna send the SOS or should I?"

Mami already had her phone out. But when she tried to turn it on, the screen fizzled with scrambles of static. She tapped the buttons but nothing happened. The static eventually resolved into two words transcribed in English with bold, red lettering:

GAME

OVER

She showed the phone to Kyoko. Kyoko took out her own phone and after a few random buttons presses revealed an identical screen. "The hell is this?"

"Twenty Magical Girls is a lot of magical tricks." Mami watched out the window at the swimming pool and pavilion below. The momentary peace resumed. Perhaps they waited in case Sloan made the response they desired.

"You think they're jamming our signal or something?"

"Something in that vein. It would be to our benefit to be prepared for other surprises."

"But what do we do? How do we get in touch with Homura?"

They would do what Mami had already suspected they would have to do whether they contacted Homura via phone or not. "We shall pay her a visit at home."

From the shed of pool supplies behind the aquatic recreation area, Cicero observed the apartment with a spyglass. Her soldiers had done devastating damage to the walls, but they remained structurally sound enough to prevent visibility of the adversary inside. From certain angles at occasional intervals she espied a hand or arm flitter in a pocket of her field of vision, but she could not confirm whether the limb belonged to Fargo or the two Mitakihara Puella Magi with which they had held negotiations.

"Lombard, status appraisal."

"Yes, milady." Lombard crouched between the pond scrapers and colorful floatation devices. She spoke into an enchanted radio: "Status appraisal, Addison."

The radio crackled. "Position at Rooftop 6. No visibility on the Target. No telepathic communication."

Lombard made a mark on a whiteboard that showed a top-down cartograph of the layout around the apartment complex. "Status appraisal, Burbank."

"Position at Pavilion 2. No visibility on the Target."

Another mark on the whiteboard. "Status appraisal, Maywood."

"Position at Rooftop 3A. No visibility on the Target."

"Status appraisal, Darien."

"Position at Apartment 17. Hinsdale has a positive on magical signature and says three Magi at most. Three Magi but strong."

Several marks on the whiteboard. Cicero grabbed the whiteboard from Lombard and examined it.

"Status appraisal, Norridge."

"Position at Platform 1. Hennepin has blundered out of range of her Soul Gem, she's dead on the ground at what looks like Pavilion 1B."

Cicero poked her head out the doorway and took a visual of Pavilion 1B. Sure enough, Hennepin lay facedown on the concrete, completely motionless, the megaphone beside her. Cicero handed the whiteboard back to Lombard to make the appropriate mark.

"Status appraisal, Alsip."

"Position at Rooftop 2. I jammed their electronics. It appears they tried to call for help."

"Likely other Mitakihara Puella Magi," said Cicero. "Even with inefficient levels of harvest, this city could support several."

"Milady, it's possible they attempted to contact Omaha or another third-party," said Elmhurst, who knelt at the front window of the pool shed with her massive arquebus mounted on a stand and aimed at the apartment.

"Indeed. Astute observation, Elmhurst."

"Thank you, milady."

Lombard gave Elmhurst a glare that she thought Cicero did not notice. Cicero had more pressing concerns than to reprimand her for allowing jealousy to enter her heart, although such reprimands would come at the end of combat operations. "Resume the status appraisal, Lombard."

"Yes, milady. Status appraisal, River Forest."

"Position at Apartment Main Office. My judgment field has muted the perception of all normal humans in the facility."

More marks on the whiteboard. Lombard hailed the final independent component of the status checklist (all unaccounted Puella Magi under the command of platoon members already hailed). "Status appraisal, Berwyn."

"Position at Safehouse 1. Prepared to assist the battle when commanded, milady."

"Everyone accounted for, milady," said Lombard. "All are in their prearranged positions. What are your orders?"

Cicero considered the whiteboard. They had the apartment surrounded. Three Puella Magi inside. One (Fargo) with strong offensive magic, one (Blonde) with what looked like ribbons, and one (Redhead) with weak barrier magic. Granted, none had revealed the full range of their powers, but even strong Puella Magi only had so many illusions. Cicero had to weigh that assessment against the home turf advantage the Mitakihara girls held, both in terms of cultural and social acumen (including the possibility of receiving local reinforcement) and in the literal sense of an actual dwelling. Cautious types tend to rig their own homes in case of intrusion from rivals. Mere victory was not enough. Their numbers alone ensured eventual triumph. Anything less than flawless victory Cicero could not tolerate within herself. If a single girl under her command lost her life in such a minor skirmish, the blood would cling to Cicero's own hands. She refused to add a name to the seven she had lost before.

At the same time, given the severe imbalance in numbers between the two forces, a sane foe would prioritize flight over fight. Fargo had done so before in Minneapolis, aided by Omaha. The portal had not taken her far; she had resurfaced only a block from the point of origin. Had Cicero anticipated such behavior, she could have tracked her down before she managed to board a flight to Mitakihara.

"My orders are thus: Addison and Maywood remain at their positions to provide cover fire and enhanced visibility over the area. Burbank and her sub-squadron approach from the front to draw the enemy's attention. Darien and her sub-squadron drill from below for a pincer attack. River Forest remains on crowd control, Alsip monitors electronics usage. Berwyn remains on standby." She double-checked the names on the board. "Norridge fetches Hennepin and revives her in case we need the language. That is all."

That way, Darien took the brunt of the offensive. Cicero placed utmost faith in Darien's competence.

"Yes, milady," said Lombard. She relayed the orders one at a time through the radio.

"And what shall we do, milady?" asked Elmhurst.

"Wait for our adversaries to flee."

The gunfire had paused for a suspiciously long time. Sloan kept her head low but searched from shattered window to shattered window for a trace of movement. Mami and Kyoko continued to whisper in Japanese. Better to whisper. In twenty Magical Girls, at least one could read telepathic channels well. At least one could probably do all sorts of stupid bullshit. Sloan had totally forgotten Cicero and her stupid horse and gold-armored bitches even existed. She never even entertained the possibility they might follow her to Mitakihara. How did they even manage it? By interrogating Hennepin? Hennepin knew jack dick about anything, what the fuck could she tell them. Did they get Anoka? Anoka didn't know where she was going either. Kyubey may have told them. Or they dredged something up in Clair's files. Clair kept meticulous notes.

It didn't matter. They were here. Test number one against Sloan's new resolution. She would ensure Mami and Kyoko made it out of this alive. Dying to goons from Chicago, what a useless and stupid thing. Chicago was such a stupid place, vapid bullshit from its impenetrable vortex always wound up getting in Sloan's way during her Minneapolis stint. Refugees begging for handouts or with ambitions of their own. Weird emails from a certain "Centurion DuPage" laced with vague threats and ominous stipulations (*To the Puella Magi with Current-But-Perhaps-Not-Perpetual Governorship Over the City of Minneapolis-St. Paul*), emails Sloan let Clair handle. Why were they even involved? Why were they even real? Didn't the universe have better things to worry about?

Well, Sloan was not the universe. A stupid thing to worry about fell right in her wheelhouse. She knew what she had to do. First chance she got she had to offer herself up to them. To let Mami and Kyoko go free. Although she had reservations that Cicero would uphold that end of the bargain, or even bargain at all. She wanted Sloan to get to Omaha to get to the grief cubes. Sloan could not bring her what she wanted, so she would tear this city inside-out to find it. Any girls she found—especially those she knew had communicated with Sloan at some point—would not be spared her ire. Take Hennepin as Exhibit A in that regard.

Shit. No easy self-sacrifice ploy for her. Damn, and she'd been so ready for it too. Imagine had she given herself up and Cicero fucked over Mami and Kyoko anyway. Christ, Sloan had not even considered that before, and she was so close to doing it too. Jesus, did she ever fucking *think*?

Mami cut off a sentence to Kyoko and raised her head, stirring Sloan from her thoughts. She held a hand for quiet although nobody said a word. Outside birds chirped, a plane rumbled overhead.

She whispered a terse sentence to Kyoko. Then she said in English: "They come. Front door."

Sloan shuffled around the counter and aimed her turret at the door, spattered with bullet holes from the previous assault. She brushed back her hair and waited. Mami knelt beside her, a rifle in each hand trained to the shattered front window. More rifles floated disembodied to watch other portals inside. Kyoko braced her knees like a sprinter ready to set.

Footsteps creaked on the planking outside. Sloan's hands tightened. The sound of Mami's breathing filled her ear.

"This is your last chance to surrender," barked a voice outside (neither Cicero nor Hennepin). "Throw out your gems and we will guarantee your survival."

"Fuck you," said Sloan.

"Fak *yu!*" added Kyoko.

"Very well," said the voice outside. "Your profanity shall be remembered when you face judgment at the hands of Lady Cicero!"

Then stuff happened. A girl in gold armor leapt through the front window. Mami's rifles erupted and Sloan pivoted her turret. The body flopped backward as bullets and light sailed into it, but it took only one toss of its rag doll head for Sloan to realize it was some sort of golem, not a real girl. By that time, however, the floor between the kitchen and living room bulged upward, causing the strewn remnants of the triangle table to clatter and topple as from the apex of the bump burst a gigantic drill. Kyoko scampered out of the way as the ripping, tearing tooth shredded through the wooden floor. Sloan glanced back at the front window as another gold-armored body cartwheeled inside and swung a ball-and-chain at Mami. Mami raised a spent rifle to deflect the blow; the spiked ball wrapped around and snapped the rifle in half.

Sloan lifted her turret to fire while the front door burst open and two more girls dashed inside. For a pivotal moment Sloan hesitated, unsure whether to fire at the ball-and-chain girl or the two new ones. The moment cost her as the first of the two girls smacked Sloan in the face with a paper fan, the kind used by fancy ladies and Super Smash Brethren. Before Sloan's head finished recoiling from the first strike, a second came, and a third, and a fourth.

A flurry of gunshots rang out and the girl with the fan flew back. The girl behind her charged forward with a can of pepper spray and sent a noxious blast directly into Sloan's eyes. Unfortunately this girl had attacked literally the one thing Sloan could heal, so Sloan quickly

recovered and blasted her. The light from her gun rattled with a raindrop din against the girl's golden armor, but the force propelled her backward out the door and over the railing.

When Sloan turned to assess the rest of the enemies, a spiked ball crashed against her chest and sent her rolling into the refrigerator. She maintained her grip on the turret and raised it to fire at her attacker before a second strike came. The moment she unleashed her light, however, she realized she was firing at another golem. The puppet body disintegrated into dust.

Sloan pulled herself to her feet. The girl with pepper spray (it wasn't pepper spray, it was a paint spray can) ran back through the door and aimed her can at Sloan; Sloan bashed her with a single sweep of the turret and sent her again hurtling the way she came. Sloan turned only to catch a bullet to the frontal lobe. A splatter of blood spurted across the pockmarked remains of Mami's apartment, but it did little to stop or slow Sloan, she was used to running around headless anyway.

Her twitching eye shuttered the chaotic scene before her. A thick gaggle of girls clashed weapons, some still climbing from the hole in the floor where the drill had once been. The drill now swung wildly left and right, handled by a gold-armor girl engaged in fierce combat with Kyoko. Each time Kyoko swung her spear on the oversized and impractical drill, sparks scattered in all directions. They landed on cloth and paper and set it aflame. Tiny blazes sprouted along the ground as the unstoppable forward motion of the drill forced Kyoko back step-by-step. Among the burning things, Sloan noticed her old jacket.

She pivoted her turret and loosed a volley at the drill girl's unprotected side. But before the light struck her, another armored girl dashed forward, holding only a tremendous shield emblazoned by a renaissance escutcheon. The shield deflected the light, which crashed in various places around the apartment.

Fuck shields. Sloan charged the girl and leapt. Her aim was to clear the whole damn thing and rain fire on the drill girl from above. But she misjudged her height and rammed her head against the ceiling. A massive hole punctured in the paper-thin material and a torrent of plaster and asbestos poured over her. She fell onto the girl with the shield. A sharp edge jabbed her side.

Shield-girl levied flimsy punches at Sloan's back. She was a younger girl, maybe twelve or thirteen, and Sloan's awkward lanky body and fancypants coat engulfed her. At the same time, when Sloan tried to rise, her limbs became entangled between the girl and the shield and she had difficulty getting anywhere.

Sloan contorted her body and looked back in time to see another armored girl charge her from across the apartment. The girl clutched in two hands a sword of comedic proportions, at least twice the height of its wielder, broader than her waistline even including her armor. It looked like a buster sword in a Japanese video game, which was probably the inspiration. She swung back the sword over her head. It sailed through the ceiling as though the ceiling were not there and left a precise gash before the girl brought the sword down toward Sloan's neck.

Ribbons sprouted from seemingly nowhere and wrapped around sword-girl to stop her swing. Across the whole apartment similar ribbons appeared, first in a grid pattern as they emerged

from nonexistence and then in ornate patterns to strike at the gold-armored girls. Into neat cocoons of yellow thread they went, the sword girl and the drill girl and the fan girl and the spraypaint girl who had only moments prior emerged through the front door for the third time. The ribbons wrapped under Sloan's waist and pulled her away from the shield girl, and then they tied up the shield girl too. Sloan staggered back against the wall and rubbed her bleeding head while more threads tended to the wound and stuffed her empty brain with straw.

All told, nine armored girls stood suspended in ribbon around the room. Not even half the force. Not even including Cicero.

"Very fortunate I prepare," said Mami. She clapped her hands and inspected the bundled ball-and-chain girl beside her, before saying something in Japanese to Kyoko. Kyoko ducked from beneath the tied drill girl and responded.

While most of the armored girls said nothing or muttered to their closest neighbor, the girl with the ridiculous sword, frozen mid-swing, laughed. "If you intended to stop me with naught but thread, you have made a grave error."

"Show them, Captain Darien," said the girl with the shield.

"Make them tremble beneath your might!" said the girl with the fan.

Captain Darien's arms quivered. Her eyes focused on her half-swung sword before her, affecting stern concentration as a small tip of her tongue pressed against her upper lip. The ribbons that bound her behemoth blade stretched. Individual threads separated and snapped. Sloan started to yell for Mami to do something but the next moment the blade crashed down and sundered the whole damn bundle.

Mami raised her hand to send more ribbons at Darien. But with unseemly agility Darien lashed out her blade, long enough to reach halfway across the apartment. The blade passed first through the knees of one of Darien's own soldiers, then at a diagonal angle through Mami's midsection, and finally cleaved off an upper portion of another bound soldier's skull. Body parts plopped to the floor or hung suspended by Mami's threads. Blood ran down the length of Darien's blade.

"So strong," said the girl with the spraypaint can.

"Watch your back, Darien," said the girl with the ball-and-chain (who now lacked her legs).

Darien wheeled around as Sloan revved her machine gun. She fired, but Darien held the sword vertically in front of her, covering her entire body with the stupid broadness of the blade. Sloan's light ricocheted off and sailed into the ceiling above Sloan's head. It dislodged a massive chunk of roof that crashed down on her. She rolled to evade it, at which point Darien already beset her with a swift vertical slice that chopped another thick gash through the ceiling. Sloan kept rolling and managed to scrape outside of the sword's arc moments before it sank into the floor.

The instant it did, Kyoko charged forward, running across the sharp edge of the blade with her spear aimed at Darien's face. Darien did not even blink. Her hand lashed out and seized the spear by the shaft while its point hovered an almost imperceptible distance from the bridge of her nose. For an instant they stood locked, their arms shaking, their faces glaring into each other. And then, almost casually, Darien turned the spear aside. The spear's blade passed harmlessly past her head and Kyoko lost her balance on the edge of the giant sword. But as she stumbled to the side, her outstretched spear broke into segments linked by chains and coiled around Darien's head. With a single strong tug, Kyoko slammed Darien to the ground.

Darien rolled onto her back and lashed out the sword. Kyoko jumped to avoid losing her feet as the sword sliced through the wall facing the back pavilion. Kyoko's spear snapped back together and she twirled it to bring down on Darien's prone body, but Darien flung herself aside, cartwheeled to her feet, and made another horizontal slash, this time aiming high. So high it traveled over Kyoko's head without her even needing to duck. But the true intention of the swipe became clear immediately. She not only severed many of the strands that kept her allies suspended around them, but made another long cut across the back wall of the apartment. Its structure unsound, the entire wall with its doorways and windows cleaved from the rest of the building and toppled outward, into the pavilion below. It smashed into pieces.

The entire back wall of the apartment now hung open. Sloan, unable to intervene in the Kyoko—Darien brawl due to the high likelihood of her frying Kyoko more than Darien, realized they were now exposed to the snipers on the distant rooftops. Sure enough, the moment the wall peeled away a barrage of bullets descended upon them.

Sloan cartwheeled under another sweep of Darien's outrageous sword and launched herself at the girl with the shield, who had fallen from the ceiling when Darien severed her binds. Sloan slammed the turret on her head, snatched her shield away (it was attached to her arm, so her awkward body jerked after it), and used it to defend herself from the gunfire. From relative safety she searched for Mami and Kyoko in the mayhem. Kyoko had ducked out of her fight with Darien and hid behind the kitchen counter; Mami's two halves lay in the opposite corner, thin yellow strands attempting to stitch them back together. The Chicago girls meanwhile fought to extricate themselves from the remaining ribbons that Darien had not yet severed. Although bullets hailed like a blizzard throughout the apartment, not one struck a single Chicago girl. One girl knelt beside the two that Darien had maimed earlier. She summoned what looked like toy soldiers, who carried severed pieces like ants to put back together again.

We can't stay here, Sloan tried to tell Mami, although most of the girls in the vicinity could probably hear too. She kept an eye for Darien, but in the tight confines and with all their adversaries in the same gold armor, she had blended back into the fold.

What they needed to do first was get out of the hellfire these snipers had unleashed. But with the whole façade gone, they had almost no cover.

Sloan's eyes settled on the massive hole in the floor the drill had made. Yes—but communicating to Mami and Kyoko what to do would take too long. Instead she did things the old fashioned way. She swung her turret's rays into the floor, starting at the edge of the hole and fanning out across the surface in erratic lines and patterns. The Chicago girls darted

out of the way; a few in no immediate danger ran at Sloan herself. Someone—Darien—kicked the shield out of Sloan's hand and raised her sword to bring down. But when it came to property damage, Sloan's gun was second to none. Coupled with the previous work the drill had done, it took only a few moments of sustained fire to punch out the structural support. The floor collapsed in two halves, curling inward to funnel everything atop it into the vicious gashes Sloan created. Chairs, ribbons, Christmas ornaments, platters of food, girls, weapons, and Sloan toppled into the vacant apartment below. Sloan aimed her descent for a sofa, missed and cracked several ribs against an armrest of surprising hardness. The girl with the shield landed on top of her and the shield's sharp bottom edge gored her side.

Shield chick rolled off her, but the damage was done. Sloan slid to her knees, propped against the sofa armrest, agony on both sides. Many of the Chicago girls moaned with similar complaints, although the full armor they wore probably meant less actual damage.

She had little chance to chew the scenery, because a thick pane of metal smacked her in the head. The blunt side of Darien's sword. Sloan slumped over as Darien pointed the tip of her blade under Sloan's chin.

"With the power invested in me as a Lesser Captain of the Holy Order of the Knights of Chicago," she said, "And as a loyal adjunct of Third Centurion Cicero, I am placing you, Fargo, under arrest." She turned her head toward the injured subordinates behind her. "You fools, get up and catch the other two already—"

Ribbons coiled under Sloan's arms and yanked her from under the tip of Darien's sword. The ribbons snaked Sloan through the crushed furniture while the last bits of debris toppled from above, until they pulled her to the front window where Mami (now in one piece) helped her up.

"Come, quick!"

A single rifle shot shattered the window. Mami hopped between the curtains and pulled Sloan after her. Sloan was about to ask what happened to Kyoko when the girl in question swung from overhanging remnants of the ceiling and flipped out the window behind them, deflecting a projectile attack from a Chicago girl with a spear.

The Chicago girls charged after them, but Kyoko sealed the exit with her red lattice barrier. It occurred to Sloan that her two companions were communicating in Japanese telepathically to coordinate attacks or plan ahead; their incomprehensible drone had filled Sloan's mind for awhile now, but in the chaos of battle she had a tendency to filter out stuff that didn't make sense. Mami said something aloud to Kyoko and Kyoko nodded before they both took off down the walkway that lined the apartments. Sloan decided not to question their long-term goals. She drew up the back of the line and watched, turret ready, for the Chicago girls to break through Kyoko's barrier. They had pressed in a glut against the window, outstretched hands slipping between the latticework, but until Darien yanked them aside and began pounding on it with her sword they made no progress. Then Sloan rounded a corner.

Conversation between Mami and Kyoko jittered in Sloan's head. They appeared in disagreement about something, although both carved a path through the entrails of the complex with concise and efficient movements. Sloan swiveled her turret to face down every

open door and corridor lest more Chicago girls tumble to fight them. They leapt one after another down a short staircase to the lobby, a sparse square with a counter and seats. The landlord sat behind the counter, nose buried in a newspaper and enveloped in a plume of cigarette smoke. He did not look as they sprinted past him. Like his senses could not even perceive them—

A Chicago girl slid in front of the exit before Mami and Kyoko reached it. Mami spawned a rifle and aimed, but the Chicago girl raised an object—a book—over her head. The pages fluttered open as a swirl of violet aura pervaded outward, carrying with it a deluge of words in neat Times New Roman font that bulged to tremendous sizes and encompassed the entire room, blotting it out with their messages: YOU WILL OBEY. YOU WILL BECOME PLACID. YOU ARE IN A SAFE PLACE. YOU WILL STAY.

The words covered everything, swirled in Sloan's vision. Mami and Kyoko stood stunned in their wake until they too disappeared beneath the sentences.

A trick. Like the kind Clair played, but with weaker power and less creativity. Sloan imbued her sight with magic to decipher the illusion. The text around her faded, dissolved back into the lobby of the apartment complex. The Chicago girl held a book above her head like a totem. In her other hand she clenched a radio.

"River Forest to Commander. River Forest to Commander. I have them pacified in the main lobby. I repeat, I have them—"

Sloan blasted her with a volley of light. River Forest rolled through the glass door in a cascade of broken shards and skidded against the sidewalk. She writhed as the residue of Sloan's power sparkled across her chest, the mangled remnants of her golden armor in pieces around her. But her pained gurgles indicated she had not died, which presented a hitherto-unconsidered problem: Sloan had no clue where these Chicago chicks kept their gems.

If they moved fast they would never need to answer that question. Sloan gave Mami and Kyoko each a strong shove to rouse them from whatever stupor the words had worked on them. They blinked and looked at her and needed only an outstretched finger to continue moving the way they had, past the crippled body of River Forest.

The distraction had killed the argument between Mami and Kyoko, which gave Sloan's head a respite from the obstructive rattle of an incomprehensible language.

Mami led them to her scooter, chained to a post outside the apartment complex. She snapped a finger and the lock around the chain fell away. Kyoko yelled something at her in Japanese while Mami boarded. Hands gesticulated toward Sloan and then the single backseat. Mami said something back, Kyoko grunted in frustration.

Sloan got the gist of this argument. She coiled her arm around Kyoko's waist and made her weightless with a small dose of magic. Maintaining her grip on the struggling girl, Sloan hopped onto the scooter with her back against Mami's, giving Kyoko room to sit on Sloan's lap. It was awkward as fuck, and Kyoko's flailing limbs indicated she disliked the arrangement, but it got them all onto the scooter and didn't overburden them with excess weight. So Kyoko better shut up and sit still.

The scooter trundled out of its spot and maneuvered onto the road. Kyoko settled down enough for Sloan to get a better grip around her waist, but then she turned to snap something in Japanese to Mami and knocked Sloan's jaw with her thick skull. Sloan tried to arrange a simple enough English sentence to convey to Mami she should tell Kyoko to chill the fuck out, but before she did she noticed something a tad more pressing.

From around an alley or driveway or something that led behind the apartment complex barreled a golden horse comprised of constantly shifting plates and segments, its legs and neck moving with absolute fluidity despite their mechanical construction. Atop the horse rode Cicero, the visor of her helm down, the turquoise plume billowing behind her, an arm extended with the halberd clutched within it. The steel blade of the axe glinted in the daylight. All of Cicero glinted, her golden armor and her golden steed, a bright orb of light charging after them.

"Go, go," said Sloan. Mami glanced over her shoulder, acknowledged the danger with a nod, and stepped on the gas. The scooter sputtered forward at a terribly underwhelming speed.

Oh god. Sloan kept one arm wrapped around Kyoko and summoned a new turret to hover beside her. Her free hand directed its aim toward the equestrian and bid it fire.

The light streamed out in a strong torrent. Cicero made no attempt to evade; her horse stormed forward undaunted. Which made sense, because when Sloan's light hit, it plinked harmless against the gold and ricocheted into a random direction without even slowing Cicero's progress.

Ha! said Cicero as she rapidly gained ground. *My armor is blessed by the Empress herself, an Apostle of a Rightful God! Your magic cannot so much as scratch such power.*

"Ah shit," said Sloan. She maintained her gun on Cicero, but seconds of repeated exposure passed with no change in the reflective properties of the golden armor. Nobody knew jack dick about the actual girl Chicago (popular theories on the net suggested she did not exist, merely a puppet entity for honchos in the area to maximize influence), but the fact was she had put a many-million-people city under her thumb and had done so since before Sloan was born, if rumors spoke sooth. Nobody put so much territory under control without serious power to back it up, so an enchantment from such a mythic Magical Girl might pack serious punch. The sheer fact someone could maintain an enchantment when the enchanted object in question was halfway around the globe from the enchantress spoke volumes enough to its potency.

Sloan shut off her gun and watched with no idea what to do as Cicero galloped closer and closer. The good news was that Mami's scooter had picked up acceleration, so at least the rate at which Cicero closed the gap had slowed. Fucking *math*.

Kyoko shouted something in her ear, which sounded less like Japanese and more like a generic cry to get her attention. Sloan craned her neck to see past Mami's head at the road in front of them. Two gold-armored girls stood on either side about half a block ahead. Each toted heavy-duty weaponry in their hands, old-timey guns/cannons, one maybe an arquebus, the other a blunderbuss (Magical Girls being the only people outside of military historians who can recognize such things at a glance from afar). Sloan had no time to communicate the

threat to Mami, which was fine because Mami was conscious enough to see the threat herself and didn't need it pointed out in a language she barely understood.

But it put them in a precarious spot. Mami leaned over the handlebars of the scooter as it accelerated faster. Sloan pivoted her turret from Cicero to the more dangerous-looking of the two girls ahead, which was the one with the arquebus because the arquebus was the bigger gun. But the arquebus fired before Sloan could aim right. A thick, smoky explosion burst from the barrel and sailed like a meteorite toward them. Mami swerved and Sloan had to cling tight to Kyoko to stop them from falling as they zoomed past the craterous eruption that billowed where the blast struck. Blunderbuss chick fired next and her aim was surer, or else Mami had less time to evade. Fire sprouted in front of the scooter's tire and the scooter itself catapulted skyward.

As they revolved, Sloan left the scooter and hurtled in a random direction. Her arm remained wrapped around Kyoko mostly out of habit. The world rolled around her, street and sky and skyline like a globe propelled down a staircase.

A ribbon snatched her ankle and jerked her back into the pull of gravity. She tried to orient herself and perceive the world around her and she managed to sight arquebus girl altering her aim for another shot. But if Sloan knew dick about old guns she knew they were slow as fuck to reload. With magic who knew what random bullshit they could do but why was Sloan even still thinking she oughtta just DO—

—So she swung her turret and fired. The light chewed up the street in a line that intersected the arquebus girl. Except at the last moment arquebus girl ducked out of the destruction and scrambled into the street. The ribbon around Sloan's ankle wrenched her in; another gripped Kyoko. Mami reeled them to the scooter as it righted itself and landed on the ground with the aid of more ribbons. Like the blast had simply unspooled them, and now Mami rewrapped the skein. Sloan and Kyoko landed on the back of the scooter and Sloan searched for arquebus girl and blunderbuss girl and at the last moment remembered Cicero before the halberd crashed down for her skull.

Kyoko's spear slammed against the axe-blade. The resulting force nearly knocked Kyoko out of Sloan's arms and off the side of the scooter, but Mami had them snared in enough ribbons. Her blow deflected and her velocity far beyond that of the scooter, Cicero skidded past as her horse whinnied and twisted its golden limbs to slow itself. Kyoko elbowed Sloan rough in the sternum to get her to let go. A swift swipe of her spear severed the threads that tied her and she bounded from the scooter onto the back of Cicero's horse.

She brought her spear down on Cicero's helmet, and this time it was Cicero's turn to deflect the blow. Their respective polearms clashed with a spark of energy as Mami rode the scooter parallel to the stallion. She aimed a rifle at Cicero and fired, only for the bullet to bounce off the armor. Cicero appeared more concerned with Kyoko, their weapons striking in a lightning display of sweeps and slices.

Sloan searched the surroundings for the antiquated gun girls, or any others from the Chicago army. She did not have to search long because their rapid forward momentum had carried them close to the one with the blunderbuss. She held her weapon with one arm and pointed for Mami's head. Sloan had no time to try and shoot her first. She grabbed Mami by the hair

and forced her head down as the blunderbuss erupted. The shotput of a bullet sailed over them and struck the side of Cicero's horse before it exploded. The scooter veered away from the blast but it did not even dent Cicero. Kyoko, on the other hand, went hurtling.

"Mami, help Kyoko!" Sloan shouted. Kyoko herself yelled telepathically.

Ribbons sprouted and weaved around the horse to catch Kyoko before she hit the ground. Cicero swung her halberd and severed them, only for more to emerge. She swept her axe with frenetic strikes to try and cleave them before they reached Kyoko. Kyoko meanwhile turned and twisted in the air as ribbons grabbed her, let go of her, and grabbed her again in a constant struggle.

They zoomed past blunderbuss girl and presumably arquebus girl too. In some ways that was a clear strategic victory, because it cut Cicero from her numbers advantage. But at the same time, Sloan had only tenuous plans to deal with Cicero herself. Their best bet was to bind her with ribbons and render her useless, but at the speed she handled her halberd success seemed dubious. A distraction? Or maybe the best bet was to keep ahead of Cicero until they made it to Homura Akemi.

Lombard. Cicero's mental voice cut clear and precise through the blur of sounds around them. *Contact Berwyn. Have her intercept. Organize the rest of the soldiers and follow us.*

Yes, milady, another voice (Lombard) said.

Did Cicero know Sloan could hear her? Or did she think her telepathy too strong to read. It didn't matter. A weirder question was how could they race down a normal city street in broad daylight, Cicero on a golden horse swinging a giant axe, Mami hoisting Kyoko with ribbons, and no normal people were freaking the fuck out. Sloan glanced at the pedestrians and storefronts. They did not look up, they did not seem to perceive anything but the vague path ahead of them. No police sirens or chaos. But they had moved significant distance from the majority of the Chicago girls, so unless Cicero herself wielded obfuscation magicks no logical explanation existed for why the civilians acted the way they did.

Unless. Sayaka said Homura Akemi was an archon. Dullness, lack of perception, general ignorance—typical symptoms of humans in a miasma.

Well it mattered little. Gave Sloan free reign for as much magic as possible. Which currently was zilch, because her gun failed to dent Cicero's armor. Maybe with sustained fire (because that's the Sloan Redfearn credo: If shooting it doesn't kill it, try shooting it some more), but she risked wiping out the gaggle of ribbons stretched between them and Kyoko. So Sloan sat on Mami's scooter kinda worthless while Mami did the hard stuff, zipping between cars and cyclists and civilians with measured recklessness while keeping Kyoko afloat with ribbons strung between the legs of Cicero's horse. But Sloan didn't like being worthless and she didn't like letting someone else do the heavy lifting. Besides, she had made a promise to herself, right? That she would make sure Mami and Kyoko got through this safe, because this whole debacle had nothing to do with them and also because they deserved to not die, which was more than Sloan could say for herself.

So Sloan leapt off the scooter, over the descending swing of the halberd, and onto the back of the horse. She extended a hand for Kyoko. Except Kyoko instead drew her spear and slashed the blade through the ribbons to sever herself. She hit the ground already bounding forward, carrying her previous forward momentum and with tremendous strides actually managed to keep pace with the horse long enough to jab her spear between its galloping legs. The spear divided into segments and the chains between them wrapped around the hooves.

Sloan wished she knew enough Japanese to thank Kyoko for waiting (it seemed almost specifically) for Sloan to jump onto the horse in order to pull this gambit.

The chains snagged between the hooves and then, surprisingly, snapped. Kyoko's eyes widened for a brief moment at the mangled remnants of her spear, and then she pitched directly into a parked car on the side of the road. The hollow twang of face against metal reverberated for but a moment before the car—and Kyoko—disappeared fifty, a hundred feet behind them. The gap broadened with each passing second.

We lost Kyoko, said Sloan.

"Expect to lose much more," said Cicero.

Oh. Right. Sloan was on the horse now. She tried to calculate the best way to jump back to the scooter, but Mami had to swerve aside to avoid a car and left Sloan marooned.

Cicero seized her by the collar and pulled her close, face to golden facemask. "Delinquent! Where is Omaha? Where are the grief cubes dropped by the Minneapolis archon?"

Sloan shoved her hand against the visor and summoned a blast of pure light into Cicero's face. Cicero recoiled and grunted and pawed under her visor at her singed eyes, while her horse moved with either a mind of its own or extrasensory detection of its surroundings, gliding between the vehicles of the street undeterred by its rider's plight.

The tinny electric vroom of the scooter surged into Sloan's ears. She glanced over her shoulder as Mami zipped beside the horse and coiled ribbons around Sloan's torso. The ribbons tugged hard and Sloan jerked away, but Cicero's hand remained clenched around her collar, the fingers unyielding. Sloan's lower body tilted toward the scooter while her upper body remained fixed where it hung, which basically put Sloan in the position Kyoko had been in before. She disliked the arrangement. Cicero raised her halberd and made tenuous swipes at the air around Sloan, perhaps searching for ribbons, hampered by blindness.

Sloan slammed into the back of a truck. The glass and carriage frame caved around her as her head snapped back and a splatter of blood ran down her face. Cicero's arm twisted at an odd angle, almost a complete one-eighty from normal orientation. Her fingers loosened. The next moment Sloan again sailed through the air, turning, twisting, seeing sky then ground then sky then a vomit of color. It gave her motion sickness and it took a damn long time for Mami's ribbons to stabilize her and pull her back onto the scooter.

She slumped against Mami's back. Face numb. She touched it; shards of glass stuck out the skin. Mind scrambled, she picked at one. It came out slow and with more blood. Pooling on

her shoulder, staining her new jacket. She gave up on the shards and clung to Mami's waist. More cars, more buildings zoomed past.

"Kyoko, Kyoko's gone," Sloan whispered. As her brain collected itself she scanned for Cicero. They had landed into dense traffic, with only the narrowness of Mami's scooter allowing continued forward progress. No sign of gold.

"Kyoko strong. Kyoko be fine," said Mami. "We close."

Through the tinted glass of economy-sized cars Sloan espied the stallion. It ran a lane parallel to them, undaunted by Cicero's lack of vision. If Sloan listened, its alloyed nostrils snorted. White puffs of steam rose to mark its position.

The scooter veered again. Sloan thought at first to dodge another car but instead Mami lurched off the main road onto a branch that looped downward between the towers and pillars of Mitakihara. Daylight turned to shadow as the spires blotted out the sun and cast them in darkness. Cicero's steed leapt onto a vehicle and bounded over another to follow them.

Lombard. They have departed the main road. Redirect Berwyn's route. They are heading into Sector F7.

Dammit, Cicero's lackeys were still in telepathy range? It felt like they had covered a significant amount of distance already, but the goon squad must have kept some semblance of pace. Had they caught up to Kyoko? Dammit, Sloan should have helped her. Mami seemed unperturbed, and Mami probably knew Kyoko's capabilities better, but still.

Too late to worry now. Without any weird obstacles and with a much surer shot, Sloan aimed her turret at Cicero and fired. She held the trigger down, let the light stream out and reflect off the shifting golden surfaces both human and equine, carefully tracked her beams to keep even and steady. Five seconds, ten seconds passed. Nothing happened, no change, Sloan's magic simply could not pierce the enchantment. She tried to tell Mami but Mami was already talking—in Japanese. The language buzzed in the back of Sloan's head, two voices, Mami and Kyoko. Which meant Kyoko had kept close too. Sloan knew nothing of Mitakihara geography, perhaps a girl on foot could follow shortcuts between the roads.

Between the roads. An idea popped into Sloan's head. She tilted the gun barrel downward, not at Cicero but at the ground directly in the path of her horse. The light tore into the gravel, churned and spat up rocks and clumps of black ash. Long lines carved deep through the roads, twisting and weaving as Cicero's horse scampered left and right to keep on undemolished surfaces.

It was working. Cicero did not stop, did not even stumble, but she did slow. The distance between her horse and the scooter quit shrinking, even began to widen as they entered a long decline into a portion of the city darker, lower, sparser, unencumbered by mindless humans to clog the passages of transport, walled in by sardine tenements. The Homura Akemi district. Sloan fired her magic wildly along the length of the narrowing streets, wrecking whole swaths of terrain, cleaving smaller and smaller pieces of stability for Cicero to use. Close now. Maybe a few more minutes. Then Chicago is done and Sloan finally gets the chance to meet Satan herself.

Cicero spurred the back flank of her horse with her halberd. The horse loosed a neigh and snort of steam as it bent its legs and bounded off the ground and landed on the wall of tenements to the left. It hit the wall at a ninety-degree angle and continued its charge without pause, defying gravity as both Cicero and the horse hung parallel to the ground. Its golden hooves clattered along the brick and mortar structures, making easy leaps at rare gaps between them. Sloan started to adjust the angle of her gun to fire at the walls instead. But people lived in those houses—probably. Her magic would punch through the curtained windows and thin bricks and rain destruction on the dullards. Rip them to shreds without hope of magic to heal the wounds.

She hesitated.

It was enough. Cicero's horse powered forward and leapt from the wall. It soared toward the scooter, Cicero's halberd raised, her other arm limp and her head at a lazy angle, but the horse's eyes saw, two stones of pure turquoise set deep in the gold plates. The halberd swung down. Sloan ducked as the blade traveled over her head, nicking the skin on the back of her neck. Mami cried out. The scooter dropped and skidded. Sloan ejected from her seat and careened down the path. She scraped until friction stopped her. Half her face—half her whole body—hissed with heat and rawness.

She rolled onto her side and pushed herself up. No clue where her turret had fallen. Best to summon another and worry about magical expenditure later. One arm hung stiff and difficult to move, so the other clasped the turret as she scanned the dead street for Mami. The scooter lay in two clean pieces on the opposite end, the part with the motor still chugging as it span in a slow circle. Mami lay facedown nearby. Not moving. Shit. Sloan staggered toward her, but the next moment Mami's head rose and she propped her upper body on her hands.

Cicero's horse trotted between them. She rode spine straight, halberd straight. Her head lolled. "Congratulations. I will admit I underestimated you somewhat. Forgive me; it has been some time since I have dueled a Puella Magi outside of a training context."

Her horse stopped beside Mami. Cicero held her axe an inch from the flower-shaped gem on the side of her head.

"Don't kill her," said Sloan.

"I do not intend to commit murder on this excursion," said Cicero. "Although if necessary I shall not hesitate. It is your own pointless struggle that bears you closer to death. Had you surrendered peacefully, such violence would be evaded."

Sloan sensed something approach from behind. She glanced over her shoulder as three Chicago girls flanked her, although only two held weapons. A crossbow (like Bloomington) for one and a saber for the other. Sloan pressed her back against the nearby tenement wall and aimed at the girl with the crossbow. Nobody attacked.

"Impeccable timing, Berwyn," said Cicero.

The girl with no weapon bowed her head. "I am thankful for your praise, milady. You appear injured. Have these unkempt wenches harmed your ladyship?"

Cicero rolled the shoulder of her broken arm. "The one in the coat blinded me. My fault, I allowed her too close. As for the arm, that's my own recklessness. You understand the way I prefer to war."

"Aye, milady," said Berwyn. She quite casually strolled past Sloan to the side of Cicero's horse. In her hand materialized a syringe which she jabbed between the plates of Cicero's armor into her thigh. "Although it is not my place to advise strategy, perhaps in future expeditions it would be most prudent to keep your chief medic with the main core of the army rather than as the lead of the reserve squadron."

The lever of the syringe went down. Cicero rolled her shoulder again and this time instead of a limp response her arm bent and turned like a normal arm. "You could not have kept pace either way," said Cicero. "I would rather have a competent commander to helm the reserve squadron than an extra healer to bolster the ranks. Regardless, now is improper time for such discussion. Lombard will arrive shortly with the others and we can place Fargo and her companions under arrest. Now, my blindness."

"Aye, milady." Berwyn drew another syringe and plunged it into Cicero. Sloan searched for an avenue of escape while they were distracted, but the other two girls had their weapons trained on her. Sloan could probably take the goons, but she had nowhere but straight empty street to run afterward. Plus, she'd leave Mami behind.

Given the surroundings, Homura's apartment could not be far, but Sloan had no clue how to reach it. Where were Homura's stupid dolls? Shouldn't they tell Succubitch the situation here? Or did Homura not—

A spear launched from a rooftop and nailed Berwyn through the throat. The two girls watching Sloan turned their attention to the figure tumbling from the air toward Cicero, so Sloan turned her gun and fried both goons with a quick sweep. Kyoko pirouetted onto her spear, bounced off its springy shaft, and wrenched it out of Berwyn's throat as she lunged at Cicero herself. Her spear locked with the blade of Cicero's axe.

Sloan staggered for Mami while Kyoko and Cicero clashed weapons. She hopped over the kneeling, blood-gurgling Berwyn and grabbed Mami by the wrist to jerk her away from the melee. "Mami, are you okay?"

"Yes, am fine." Mami nodded and helped herself to her feet. She noted Kyoko and Cicero engaged in combat (Cicero remaining mounted atop her horse while Kyoko dodged and dashed around her) and summoned a rifle into her hand.

"No," Sloan grabbed her wrist. "Her army is coming. Even if we beat her, they'll surround us." Please understand, Sloan did not have time to explain this better. "Get to Homura Akemi. Stop time. Kyoko and I will distract her!"

Mami said nothing, only stared. Did she understand? Did the words make sense? Sloan held her breath. The clash of Kyoko's spear and Cicero's halberd made the only sound in the dark and barren space.

Finally, Mami turned her head toward Kyoko and used telepathy to ask something in Japanese. Kyoko darted under a swing and barely deflected a blow. She shouted one terse word.

Mami pulled her wrist away from Sloan and nodded. Her rifle devolved back into ribbons. "Okay. Back soon. I promise!"

She sprinted down the street, past the prone bodies of the roasted Chicago girls. Sloan wasted no time. She turned to Kyoko and Cicero, Kyoko still ducking and jumping to keep up with Cicero's measured and precise strokes. It took only a moment to appraise Kyoko as being on the worse end, her shoulders and arms glistened with sweat and she huffed for breath. Each swipe by Cicero struck closer to Kyoko before the spear blocked it. Each moment between strokes allowed Kyoko less time to reposition.

But what could Sloan do? Her weapon had no effect whatsoever. She stood useless and pondered a strategy as each blow beat Kyoko lower and lower. Her eyes flitted across the battlefield for anything and settled on the kneeling form of Berwyn, who had summoned another syringe to inject into the gaping wound of her throat. She had removed her helmet, or it had fallen off, allowing her dark hair to drop around her shoulders. From her ear twinkled an azure gemstone. Her Soul Gem? If the Chicago girls kept them in the same place...

Sloan bounded onto the stooped head of Cicero's horse while Cicero levied another blow at Kyoko. She seized the golden helm with both hands and tugged. The helmet popped off with surprising ease, so much that Sloan's excess force propelled her into Cicero, their faces nearly touching. Sloan's eyes searched her ears.

No gem.

Cicero socked Sloan in the jaw. Sloan staggered, lost her balance on the horse, and dropped onto her back.

A blow from the halberd followed. Sloan held up the golden helmet to deflect it and it somehow worked, the axe rebounded off the blessed piece of armor without even a reverberation of its force traveling through Sloan's arms, as if the attack had dissipated entirely the moment it struck.

But it did not dissipate, because the recoil brought the halberd back up to Cicero. Her body jerked with extreme ferocity. She flew from her horse and bounced against the ground.

Sloan stared at the helmet. Kyoko glanced at Sloan and then pounced on the opportunity. She launched her spear at the prone Cicero, gunning directly for the exposed head.

Out of nowhere, Berwyn threw herself between Kyoko and Cicero. The spear pierced her less-blessed armor and drilled into her heart as she latched her hands onto the shaft and tried to wrench the weapon out of Kyoko's grasp. Cicero rolled to her feet and struck a defensive position between Kyoko and Sloan.

The horse, no longer mounted, folded inward on itself. The shifting plates and pieces shuffled and scraped until the entire horse compressed into a single tiny cube of gold that disappeared

in a puff of powder. Meanwhile, Kyoko kicked at Berwyn's body to pry it from the tip of her spear. She eventually succeeded and flung Berwyn far from the immediate arena.

"Very well," said Cicero. Her eyes flitted between both adversaries. "Until now I had weakened my blows, intending to incapacitate rather than murder. But you have proven an adequate contest, and thus it no longer behooves me to handicap my own strength."

Cicero's head and bob of short hair stood exposed to assault. And while her gem remained concealed within her defenses, she had no innate healing ability. Blast a girl's brain to bits, gem or not, and it'll sure stop her from swinging her damn axe. Sloan shoved the helmet on her own head—it barely fit over her stringy hair—and grabbed her gun from the ground.

"I've beat archons," said Sloan. "I can sure as fuck beat you."

"Heh." Cicero swung her halberd onto the ground. It smashed through the street with a cataclysmic force. Cracks spread to the buildings on either side, and then spread up the buildings. Windows shattered, their glass shards spewing onto the road. The ground beneath Sloan's boots burst and sent her flying.

A horrendous warcry filled the air. Cicero bounded skyborne at Sloan and raised her halberd high for another devastating attack. Kyoko leapt at her but as the halberd came down it cleaved clean through the spear and continued toward Sloan. The helmet! Sloan tucked her head to absorb the blow with her one piece of armor. Despite its protection the blast rattled her skull and plowed her straight into the ground. Sloan had no time to collect her senses before Cicero bore down from above, halberd already raised. Ignoring all pain Sloan rolled to the side but she had no clue if she dodged or not because the impact of the axe hitting whatever it hit caused another seismic pulse that flung her far.

She hit the ground, bounced, rolled, stopped against a curb. Nausea and pain overwhelmed everything. Her sight blurred and odd colors crept across it. But eyesight was the issue she could fix. With a quick blink everything became coherent and Sloan's eyes settled on the arena between her and Cicero. Cicero wrenched her halberd from the ground and turned toward Sloan as the buildings behind her lost their support and crumbled down, bricks and beams and columns snapping, roofs caving inward, the ground rumbling with tremors. Ash and dust swept across the street as tenements collapsed into rubble, swallowing Cicero for a brief moment in their wispy sandstorm, but even in the obscurity her golden armor gleamed bright and vengeful.

"You should not have tested me," she said. "I consider restraint a key virtue for a noble woman. But I always remain willing to tap into my untamed roots when the need arises."

The dust lowered. Sloan coughed—needed to retaliate. She summoned a new gun and aimed at Cicero's head and fired. The light sailed through the settling sediment. Cicero did not dodge. Instead, she pulled back her halberd and swung again, swung at the light itself. The blade of her axe cut clean through the encroaching beam and split it in halves that glanced off and forked in opposite directions. She cut the light. She cut the light with her axe.

"Remember, the option of surrender always exists. I grant that basic right, if none other."

Sloan gaped. Her mind went blank. No ideas. No strategies. Unsure if she could even move. Her body felt wedged in the debris of the battlefield. The voice of Delaney Pollack filled her head: *You need to be more creative, love.* Creative. Creative how. Creative HOW, Delaney? No creativity came. Only one brief idea: more power. Sloan remembered her finisher. But so deep beneath the skyscrapers of the city, only glancing needles of sunlight seeped. Not enough.

No, wait, no. You don't need to beat her, just distract her long enough for Mami. But how long would Mami take? How long did it take to run to Homura's apartment? Time to pray. Pray for a miracle. A sudden *deus ex machina*, except instead of *deus* it was *diablo* or whatever the Latin for devil was. Time stop. Stop now, time. Please stop now.

A wall of red lattice sprung between Sloan and Cicero. Cicero barely even registered the barrier; one casual swing severed it cleanly. She continued toward Sloan undaunted.

Kyoko flung herself at Cicero. Or rather, at the ground next to Cicero. But she moved so fast and from such a periphery that while Cicero made a clean horizontal slice at something she suspected was headed straight at her, Kyoko dipped beneath the stroke, jabbed her spear against the ground, vaulted back up, and whipped her weapon at Cicero while the axe-stroke finished. The spear point sailed through Cicero's throat into her jaw. Kyoko jerked the spear and the jaw unhinged like a zombie, lurching from the rest of the skull with a deluge of teeth and blood to hang by a strand of cartilage around the base of Cicero's neck.

With her free hand, Cicero seized the upper shaft of the spear and snapped it with one squeeze. Kyoko looked at the shattered stick for a moment before the halberd raised again and crashed down on her. A direct hit. Kyoko sailed back, the air itself bending around her body as it soared across the street and stopped only when it hit a solid brick building. The impact caused the façade to shatter. Kyoko's body bounced and landed facedown on the sidewalk.

Sloan did not watch idly. As Cicero's stroke terminated, Sloan hoisted her gun and fired at the mutilated face. The halberd turned to deflect, but Cicero had too little preparation. The light hit her, scored a direct blow, **KNOCKED HER FUCKING BLOCK OFF**. Cicero's body jerked, the gold armor gleaming with the glow of Sloan's light as it tore into the unprotected head. Sloan held her ground and fired, and fired, and fired, until Cicero's body ceased jerking and collapsed to the ground. It no longer had a head. The bloody stump of neck oozed with occasional spurts.

"Holy shit," said Sloan. "Holy shit." She turned toward where Kyoko fell. "Kyoko—"

A syringe sank into her neck. In an instant, all feeling numbed. All control left her. Her body slackened and her legs no longer supported her. Hands wrapped around her shoulders to catch her as she fell.

Berwyn whispered in her ear. "Hush now, poppet. Hush now. You're safe. I never hurt anyone."

She laid Sloan gently on the ground. Sloan tried to open her mouth to speak but the sedatives rendered her incapable of anything. She tried to communicate telepathically but nothing

happened. She tried to use her mind to make her gun fire, but nothing happened. A complete and total block.

After patting Sloan's head, Berwyn rushed to the side of Cicero's body. More syringes appeared, larger, filled with fluids red and pink and green. She injected each in turn into the headless stump. Berwyn's body blocked Sloan's view, but she had a fairly good idea of the intended purpose of the syringes. Strange gurgling noises filtered from Berwyn's workplace, sounds like vines creeping over a trellis. Like slugs crushed against a patio. Vivid, wretched noises that churned Sloan's already-churned stomach. Most of all because she knew what it meant.

It meant she fucking lost.

After maybe a minute, Berwyn stepped back and regarded her work. A fully-formed head had reappeared on Cicero's shoulders. Cicero blinked, pushed herself up, brushed her armor. Looked around. Stretched her limbs, cracked her neck.

"Thank you, Berwyn. It appears I allowed myself to fall into an embarrassing situation."

"Aye, milady. But you can depend on me, as always."

"Indeed. Thus I may depend on you to keep this matter quiet, especially to the other soldiers. They have no need to know what happened here."

"Aye, milady."

"Attend to Niles and Westmont. They are injured."

After another aye-milady, Berwyn hurried to the bodies of the two girls Sloan had fried at the start of the fight. Quick dosages of medication had them on their feet with little aplomb. The more unsettling thing in Sloan's field of vision was Cicero, who clomped over to Kyoko's body. Kyoko's Magical Girl clothes had vanished in favor of her usual street attire.

Cicero turned the body over and inspected it. She knelt and picked up a small piece of something between two fingers and held it close to her eyes. Even from a distance, Sloan's strong eyesight detected a ruby glint in the particle.

"It appears my strike was too strong for this one," said Cicero. "Her gem shattered."

Everything inside Sloan sank. Sank or simply vacuumed out, leaving only a hollow pit where once had been intestines, spleen, stomach. No. No dammit no. Kyoko. Hours ago they were opening Christmas presents together, no no no no no. Sloan had done it again, done it a-fucking-gain, a girl was dead because of her, for no fucking reason, she had no reason to be part of this, now she was dead, embroiled in the vortex of fuck that encircled Sloan since the day she was fucking born, and Sayaka, Sayaka had asked one fucking thing—keep them safe—one fucking thing, it wasn't even ending the whole goddam universe/god/devil whateverthefuck like she originally planned, it was just keep them safe, Kyoko and Mami, Sloan could not even manage THAT, could manage NOTHING THE FUCK AT ALL. Nothing. NOTHING.

She did not even have the chance to hate herself more because Cicero had already turned to her, now accompanied by Berwyn and the other fucks, four gold-armored assholes staring down at her. Cicero pulled the helmet from Sloan's head and put it back where it probably rightfully belonged.

"For what duration of time will this one be paralyzed?" said Cicero.

"A natural hour. But I can administer an antidote immediately if you so desire, milady."

"I do desire it. Lombard and Elmhurst will meet with us shortly, along with the rest of our forces. Once that has happened, we shall have Hinsdale and Hodgkins track the trail of the blonde-haired one. I want no girls to escape. Any of them may have critical intelligence as to Omaha's whereabouts or the whereabouts of the Minneapolis archon grief cubes. It is a pity I underestimated my own strength and slew the red-haired one. I did not wish to kill."

Time stop. Please stop, time. Please stop and never resume.

But time kept ticking.

This Story's Dead

A lone figure approached. She came from the main road, the one that forked in two around Homura's apartment, although neither fork led anywhere because nobody ever came from either. The figure and her hurried wobble disturbed the tranquility of the neighborhood, marked before by only birds and dolls. Her brisk pace drew her into better sight: their old friend Mami Tomoe.

On the rooftop of a nearby tenement, Sayaka tapped Nagisa's shoulder with the back of her hand. "Look sharp, she's here."

Nagisa woke from her pretend nap and scanned the street below. When her eyes settled on Mami her face grew bright and her mouth opened in a sudden breath. Sayaka clapped her hand over Nagisa's lips so only a muffled mutter escaped.

"Shh, not yet. You'll blow the whole operation."

Nagisa's spittle seeped through Sayaka's glove and touched her palm. With a bluh of disgust, Sayaka pulled the hand away and wiped it on her skirt.

"She's alone," said Nagisa. "Where's Kyoko and what's-her-face?"

Sayaka inspected her palm. "Probably ran interference for Chicago. Nothing to worry about."

"I hope they didn't get hurt..."

"They're fine. Trust me. Now quit yapping and get ready."

Mami reached Homura's door. She knocked and yelled for help, her voice tiny and weak from far away. Nagisa scrunched her face. "I don't get it, what are we even doing again?"

Groan. Now Sayaka *knew* she was being facetious. How many times had she outlined the plan? Like twenty, probably. Each time Nagisa missing some new integral component. Or else Omaha staring with ominous silence and a dour glaze of disapproval. But hell, what else were they supposed to do? Omaha had the same utter lack of creativity as the girl she'd been cloned from, a total space cadet when it came to the unknown. She wanted to sit tight, keep running raids on Madoka's place until one worked eventually, said that's what the Incubator told her to do. Well neat, but Sayaka disliked falling into a pattern. Homura needed repetition and predictability. Gotta shake it up, y'know? So Sayaka had slapped together a nice contingency.

"Simple. Chicago girls distract, we swoop. We got close just the two of us, with twenty more girls we're sure to win."

"I guess..." Nagisa probed at the bracelet of void tied around her ankle. "But Madoka's inside the apartment. And Homura's just gonna stop time? I dunno."

"Bah, I'm ain't explaining the finer points again," said Sayaka. "Trust me, I know what I'm doing. You know how I know this plan'll work?"

"How?"

"If it wouldn't work, you can bet the Incubator would be here right now telling us not to do it. He's got a vested interest in this whole thing too, y'know."

Mami continued to bang on doors, rattle windows. Tough luck, pal. Homura ain't interested in answering. Madoka would open it if she heard, but Homura's best trick was to make Madoka stop noticing things. The biggest point of failure in the plan was if the Chicago girls showed and Homura totally ignored them, even if they waited outside for hours, days. But Homura had to let Madoka return to her family eventually. She wasn't so nuts to think otherwise, right?

Truth be told, Sayaka only had vague ideas what Homura would do when cornered. We're talking a girl who became Satan to pluck her best friend out of heaven, accounting for reason kinda went out the window. But Sayaka viewed it like a win-win: Homura either deals with the Chicago girls, or she draws the blindfold too tight and Madoka sees through the sieve. That's a note from the Incubator Handbook of Diabolical Schemes, make it so no matter which way someone goes, they go the wrong damn way. Like the forks on either side of Homura's apartment.

"I don't like doing what Kyubey wants," said Nagisa. For a moment Sayaka thought Nagisa had somehow read her mind, but then she remembered the last thing she said.

"I got the Incubator handled. This is the most important thing in the whole universe, I ain't taking it lightly."

Nagisa chewed her lower lip.

"Look," said Sayaka. "You know my motto: No regrets. If I screwed up and let this go south, I'd sure have a whole lot of regrets, right? So I gotta try my damndest to make it work."

"Okay fiiiiine," said Nagisa.

Things had to work eventually. Had to. This couldn't be the way the universe ended. That didn't make sense, it wasn't *right*. Death (and reincarnation) had given Sayaka the capacity to forgive most sins, or at least see the perspective of the perpetrator. Yet Homura Akemi's actions made no sense no matter how she sliced it. If she wanted to be with Madoka, why not submit to the Law of the Cycles and be with her for eternity? If she wanted Madoka to be happy, why divorce her from her purpose? If she wanted the world to remember who Madoka was, why make her an irrelevant corporeal entity?

The best guess was that Homura wanted to be with Madoka, but not in a subservient role. She wanted to be Madoka's protector, her keeper. That was her wish, after all. To protect Madoka. She derived her worth from a white knight complex. Okay, Sayaka could empathize. But to go so far—

"You're gonna kill Homura, aren't you?" said Nagisa.

Sayaka looked up. "What?"

"It's what you want to do, isn't it. Kill her."

"She's a proven danger to Madoka. To this universe. More than anything else in it."

"Madoka wouldn't want her to die."

"I know." Sayaka balled her fists. Below, Mami rattled on windows. "I know that. Madoka can forgive everything. I don't even hate Homura myself, not really. She's done good. She could do good again. She's not an evil person, not totally."

"I don't think you should kill her," said Nagisa.

"I know. When the time comes, I'll decide. If she makes it hard, I won't hesitate. If it's a question of her or Madoka, there's no question in my mind." Sayaka looked at the purple sky amid the towers. "You need to be prepared for the same if necessary, Nagisa. Promise me: If I die, you do what needs to be done."

Nagisa crossed her arms and made a pouty face. "Don't even talk like that, Sayaka! Nobody is gonna die."

"Maybe. But the universe is more important than any one person."

"Yeah..."

The conversation died.

FINALLY, from the direction Mami had come, new figures approached. Their gaudy gold armor was unmistakable. At their head rode a girl on horseback, an obvious leader, fancy axe weapon. The others followed in neat rows and marched in step.

"Showtime," said Sayaka. "Watch my back."

Nagisa nodded. Sayaka hopped the rooftop's railing and landed with a roll on the cobblestone street. She sprinted for Mami, head low and cape aflutter behind her. Her long legs took only a few extended steps to cross the distance. By the time Mami turned Sayaka was on her, a hand around the waist as she threw her cape over them both. The cape sank atop them, seemed to push them into the ground, but it's just a trick you see, they're still under the cape as a stray gust of wind carries it back to the rooftop where Nagisa waited. Like a random rag or tarp, nothing odd or suspicious in an ominous neighborhood.

The cape landed on the roof. Sayaka cast it aside, and there she was with Mami, on the rooftop. The girls in gold armor continued with no indication they noticed a thing. Piece a cake.

Mami looked at Sayaka with an utterly befuddled expression, and then her glance caught Nagisa. Sayaka had to clap a hand on *Mami's* mouth to stop a too-loud exclamation.

"Pst, quiet," Sayaka whispered. "Both of you. Mami, we'll explain everything in a bit. We had to use you as bait to lure those Chicago girls here."

These words pretty much totally bounced off Mami's ineffable face as she scooped Nagisa in her arms and squeezed her tight. At least she managed to keep to a whisper as she said:

"Bebe, Bebe... I missed you so much, I am so glad you're safe, so glad, so glad..." Her arms tightened.

"Oof," said Nagisa.

"Happy reunions later, Mami. Nagisa and I got business to settle. Shouldn't take long now."

Mami did not relinquish Nagisa. She started to cry, Nagisa started to rasp for air. Bah, guess they could have a moment. Sayaka watched the Chicago girls. Their leader received consultation from two girls near the front, probably her two magic detectors. Sayaka unfolded a piece of paper she had kept tucked in her collar. They were... let's see... Stephanie "Hinsdale" Galloway and Xochitl "Hodgkins" Hodgkins. The second name didn't look right, looked like Sayaka got lazy or bored and wrote the same word twice, but it didn't matter. They were the girls who tracked magic. The plan worked, they followed Mami here. Mental pat on the back for Sayaka.

Now to make sure nobody spotted them on the roof. Sayaka threw her cape over Mami and Nagisa and pulled them to a prone position. Under the edge of the cape they peeked at the proceedings below.

"They captured Sloan," Mami whispered. She finally released Nagisa and extended a timid finger at the rear of the convoy. Two girls shambled in step with the others, marked by their lack of gold armor. One was Sloan Redfearn, the other that one girl, uh, Sayaka consulted her notes—Serena. Serena "Hennepin" Ru. No Kyoko.

Wait. Sayaka caught a glimpse of something. Behind Sloan and Serena and their attendant guard (Charlotte "Norridge" DeWinter), amid the rearguard of gilded breastplates and shoulderpads, a whip of red hair flashed. Kyoko, captured after all. Looked like two of the Chicago girls were dragging her. They must have knocked her unconscious. If Sayaka knew anything about Kyoko, she knew she'd never get captured willingly. They'd have to pummel her to a pulp to put her in chains, girl was stubborn as a bucket of rocks.

"Kyoko looks bad..." said Nagisa.

"If I know anything about Kyoko," said Sayaka, "I know she'd never get captured willingly. They'd have to pummel her to a pulp to put her in chains, girl's stubborn as a bucket of rocks."

Her fingers kneaded the edge of her cape. She bit her lip. They must have knocked her unconscious. If Sayaka knew anything about Kyoko, she knew she'd never get captured willingly. They'd have to pummel her to a pulp to put her in chains, girl was stubborn as a bucket of rocks.

Why would anyone haul a dead body around anyway, right?

Nobody said anything. The Chicago girls marched to Homura's apartment. The trackers at the front stopped, signaled for the others to stop.

"The trail ends here, milady," said the first tracker.

"I read the same, milady," said the second.

"By 'here', you mean the housing unit before us?" said the girl on the horse.

"I believe so, milady," said the first tracker. "The signature of Fugitive Yellow ends at this door. I also detect the presence of incredibly strong magic, but from another source."

"Explain."

The first tracker approached the door. She waved her hands over it in small circles. "Yes... An incredibly powerful Puella Magi resides inside. Her aura is unlike any I have ever detected. Its raw signature exceeds even Your Ladyship. It exceeds even Centurion DuPage. She has enveloped this structure in a powerful barrier."

The girl on the horse (the paper with the names had crumpled in Sayaka's hand, she felt no desire to open it) surveyed the façade of Homura's apartment. "I dislike hasty conclusions. However, the existence of a Puella Magi of such power in this geopolitically unremarkable Japanese urban agglomeration comprises a tremendous coincidence. I hypothesize Omaha has some connection to this power."

The rest of the soldiers made no movement and said nothing. Which frustrated Sayaka because at their current position she couldn't see Kyoko. Bah, it was for the best. They knocked her out. End of story. She imagined the scene, Sloan already subdued, five or six or twenty girls all trying to pin down Kyoko, but she bit and kicked and was basically the hugest bitch of all time so eventually they had to conk her in the skull. Leave it at that. Sayaka needed to focus. Madoka needed rescuing.

But as soon as Sayaka made this resolution, the girl on the horse called for the captives to be brought forth. A stir divided the ranks into two wings. The girls holding Kyoko dragged her aside while Charlotte "Norridge" DeWinter led Sloan and Serena between the soldiers. Terse commands bid them stop before the girl on the horse.

"Fargo. Who resides in this structure?"

Sloan held her head low, swallowed beneath her coat's collar. "Why don'tcha knock and find out?"

"An inappropriate response, as expected." The girl on the horse (Sayaka relented and unwadded her paper—Laquesha "Cicero" Kabwe) remained rigid and straight atop her steed. "If you desire corporal punishment, Fargo, you will be disappointed. I have more pertinent matters to assess. Norridge, give Hennepin the megaphone."

"Yes, milady."

A megaphone exchanged hands. It ended in the palm of Serena, the second captive. "What should I say?" she asked in what barely rose above a whisper. A testament to the stillness of the street that her voice carried to the rooftops.

"Demand that those inside this structure emerge for a conversation with Centurion Cicero of Chicago," said Laquesha Kabwe. "In truth, it matters little what you say. I doubt one erected a barrier like this to stand outside it. I seek merely to provide fair forewarning of our purposes and give our adversary, as always, a proper chance to surrender."

The residual lilt of Cicero's words acquired a character of their own, not an echo so much as a perceptible weight in the eardrums that took time to decompress. Once the words came together, Serena shrugged and raised the megaphone and shouted in weirdly passable Japanese:

"HEY THERE LITTLE PIG. COME OUT COME OUT OR WE'LL BLOW YOUR HOUSE DOWN. NOT BY THE HAIR OF MY CHINNY-CHIN-CHIN. WELL I'LL HUFF AND I'LL PUFF. IF YOU ASK ME PERSONALLY, I THINK YOU SHOULD JUST RUN NOW. GO OUT THE BACKDOOR, THEY HAVEN'T TAKEN THE TIME TO SURROUND YOU YET."

Despite the fact that she said "chinny-chin-chin" untranslated, none of the Chicago girls seemed to find anything amiss. Apparently coincidentally, Laquesha Kabwe turned to a subsection of her soldiers and commanded them to encircle the premises. Five girls broke from the main squadron and rushed to fulfill her bidding. Five! Did they have any idea who they were dealing with?

"That shall be sufficient warning, Hennepin," said Laquesha Kabwe. "My patience for negotiations wears thin anyway. Lombard, fetch me a chronokeeper."

A girl handed Laquesha Kabwe a watch.

"We wait five minutes for a response. If we receive no response or a contrarian response, we shall commence operations to test this barrier's strength." She checked the watch. "Lombard, organize the Artillery Subsquadron to the right wing."

"Yes, milady."

"Addison, relocate to Rooftop A." She indicated the apartment left of Homura's. "Maywood, relocate to Rooftop B." She indicated the apartment right of Homura's.

"Yes, milady!"

"Yes, milady."

"Norridge, relocate Fargo and Hennepin so they do not interfere."

"Yes, milady."

No mention of Kyoko. The girls who had dragged her (unconscious) body dropped her on the cobblestones and filed into a subsquadron.

"Darien, prepare to assault the entrance with your sword. If the Artillery Sub Squadron fails to pierce the barrier, attack while they restock their ammunition. Under constant assault, even the most potent wall shall fade."

"Of course, milady."

And so on. Sayaka kinda zoned out while the rest of the orders swirled around. Girls in gold armored flitted, chirruped. Weapons manifested in hands. She watched Kyoko's body, near where Norridge had corralled Sloan and Serena beside the shelter of a tenement. Was she breathing? If Sayaka stared hard enough, focused her eyes until everything else ebbed away, she thought she saw Kyoko breathe. Thought, almost, that she could hear it.

"Sayaka..." said Nagisa.

"Miss Miki, are you alright?" said Mami. "I am positive Miss Sakura is alive. They must have rendered her unconscious in a scuffle."

Stubborn as a bucket of rocks.

"Yeah, yeah I'm sure too," said Sayaka. "I'm fine, don't worry."

Laquesha Kabwe's sharp voice cut through their conversation. "Are all sub squadrons in position?"

A resounding chorus pealed yes-milady in unison.

"Commendable." She checked the watch. "Operations shall commence in exactly one minute and thirty-four seconds. Until then hold position and await my command."

Credit where it's due, they did work efficiently. The Chicago girls stretched in almost a straight line across the front end of Homura's apartment, pieced into smaller groups each with its own subcommander and internal organization. It looked rather reasonable, rather composed. Not that, under normal circumstances, any of it mattered when Homura did her stop-time gag. (Key phrase: *normal* circumstances.)

"Get ready, Nagisa. It'll start any second now."

"Excuse me, Miss Miki," said Mami, "But what will start? Do you intend to fight Cicero? I'm afraid I won't let you endanger Nagisa's life so recklessly."

Yeah this thing, this is that thing Sayaka was worried about. "Sorry Mami, I swear what we're doing is super important and is way too complicated to explain right now. We're gonna be fine though."

"Mami, please," said Nagisa. "Sayaka's right, this is reeeeeally important, like super duper okay?"

Mami's face indicated Nagisa's sound reasoning had left her unaffected. Which was fine, even though it did make Sayaka sorta nervous, but like everything else she had considered Mami being a pain and not letting Nagisa do stuff. And had discussed this possibility with

Nagisa. The solution of course was simple. When Homura turns off time, just make sure nobody's touching Mami. Then she freezes along with everything else and when time resumes everything is already over.

Sayaka gave Nagisa a stern look to try and jog her memory about this plan, because currently she was way too buddy-buddy with Mami, basically nuzzled into her side. Nagisa caught her glare but looked perplexed so Sayaka drew a line over her throat and finally the message rang clear enough for Nagisa to awkwardly roll away from Mami and almost out of the cover of Sayaka's cape. Which was just about the least subtle way to conduct business in basically the history of humanity but it turned out fortunate timing because the next moment time stopped.

Sigh.

Homura knew it too much to ask for a single pleasant day alone with Madoka. The fact that she had striven to enjoy one perhaps invited the current situation; the Incubator would of course plan his most vigorous assault the he perceived Homura at her weakest. Truthfully, though, what did he expect from these Chicago girls? Even the strongest of them could not compare to her power. And they had attacked Homura when she was already with Madoka, at her fortified home. Which aroused her suspicions, as no rational strategist would create such a ploy with so little chance of success.

"Homura? You're spacing out again." Madoka sipped from her tea.

Kaltherzig whispered the situation into Homura's ear while Homura tried her best to look invested in a story about Madoka's classmates. Twenty girls from Chicago plus Serena Ru as a hostage. Attacked Tomoe's apartment, Tomoe and the others fled here. Sakura dead. What a shame, Sakura definitely surpassed both Tomoe and Miki in terms of likability. Although Homura supposed she did not consider it enough of a shame to turn back time and prevent it. Even if she resolved the conflict with Omaha: too much risk associated with rewinding a successful outcome. Kaltherzig actually seemed a little upset about the death, although she tried best not to show it especially in front of her twelve peers, who listened with rapt attention from Madoka's side of the table.

And now the Chicago girls had come here. They bellowed idle threats into the impenetrable façade of the apartment. They would attempt to break down the barrier. They would, of course, fail. Even under a relentless barrage from twenty Magical Girls, Homura's protective spells and enchantments could not be rent. However, the question of them breaking down the door was not the primary issue. Madoka had to go home eventually. Homura's appraisal of their resources indicated the Chicago girls were equipped to maintain an assault for over twenty-four hours, sustained on surplus grief cubes. Potentially longer if they dedicated part of their force to foraging during the night. And Homura's appraisal of their collective sanity indicated they would stand in front of her apartment all twenty-four of those hours.

Which at least partially explained why the Incubator arranged his stratagem in this way. It ensured Homura must at the very least exit her house to contend with them. An obvious diversion, but how could it work? If Homura left her thirteen dolls to watch Madoka—Eitelkeit remained with Tomoe, relaying information on the whereabouts of Miki and Nagisa as well—and went to dispatch the Chicago girls, then even if Miki and Nagisa went for Madoka the dolls could warn Homura in time for her to fall back and crush the threat.

That strategy had remained inviolable on four prior attacks by Miki and Nagisa. The Chicago girls merely added a secondary layer of diversion, they did not change the underlying layout of events. Besides, with Homura's magic it would take merely moments to destroy them, with them helpless to fight back. And she would destroy them. No more leeway. If an enemy got in her way, she must kill it. Or else this conflict would never end.

"Homura...?"

Best then to end it. Homura stood, transformed, ignored the startled gasp of Madoka, and churned the gears in her shield to freeze time.

"Defend her," Homura instructed her dolls. "Report any and all disturbances. Stave off attacks as well as you can."

The dolls said nothing. A few blinked. Homura reached into her shield for a weapon and proceeded toward the door.

Time stopping didn't stop Mami. Sayaka pulled back her cape and checked to make sure nobody was touching her, no wayward ankle of Nagisa's brushing against a finger, but she had thrown herself far enough from Mami to make that not an option. Sayaka thought for half a second and realized—goddam *threads*.

But that didn't matter because Homura's front door opened and Homura herself emerged with a McMillan TAC-338 tactical sniper rifle. She raised it and took aim at the girl on the horse.

Sayaka turned and shouted into the black portal behind them: "Omaha, now!"

A portal opened on the street below. Out of it sprang a cluster of wispy tendrils, like a squid or two squids, each comprised of the same dark essence of the portal itself. The tendrils lashed forward. Each wrapped around the ankle of a different Chicago girl, forming a connective chain. One by one the Chicago girls emerged from the grayscale palette of the world around them. Their entire line lit up, their weapons already raised at the front door.

Some of the Chicago girls looked at the world around them with a mixture of confusion and uncertainty. But Laquesha Kabwe, their leader, didn't miss a damn beat, didn't even take the time to register the situation.

"FIRE!"

The single confident cry galvanized her underlings into action. Those with guns pulled their triggers. A bricolage of gunshots rang out, some explosive, some sedated, some abrasive. Flashes spread in a line like a cannonade across the ranks of girls.

Homura stood perfectly still as a wide variety of bullets—slender, round, broad, minuscule—soared at her from a semicircle of angles. Each bullet traveled a full couple of meters before it slowed and settled into the monotonous background. The girls watched, bewildered.

The stunned silence lasted only a moment before a girl with a sword at least twice her height loosed a feral roar and charged Homura. Homura brushed back her hair and with barely a windup rolled under the swing and nailed the sword girl in the groin with a stiletto heel. Sword girl hurtled far far away, but more Chicago girls followed her lead and rushed Homura.

"That's our cue," said Sayaka. "Nagisa, let's do this! Just like we planned!"

She seized the railing and hopped it. A quick two-story drop to the cobblestone which she stuck with a sharp tick-tick of her heels and a small bend in her knees. She dropped into sprinter position and raced down the road toward the fracas. Homura nearly disappeared beneath the sheer multitude of golden armor that thronged around her, but the way the Chicago girls kept flying back indicated she had no trouble dispensing with the numbers disadvantage. One girl, holding a ball-and-chain, got flung away from the fight with a single strand of blood trailing from a wound on her chest, the blood freezing in time moments after leaving the body. The girl landed on her back and detransformed. Her gold armor changed to schoolgirl clothes. For a brief moment after she fell, Sayaka glimpsed Homura amid the others. One arm clutched the sniper rifle while her other wielded a handgun as she cartwheeled and dodged and kicked and shot.

Her powers of omniscience surely let her know the locations of all their gems despite their concealment. One shot kills each, but the Chicago girls were distracting better than expected. Sayaka hastened her sprint, set her eyes on the goal of Homura's front door. She had left it open in the shock of the attack. Great, meant Sayaka didn't even have to pick the lock.

She sprinted past Sloan and the other captives, untouched by Omaha's magic and frozen in time. Kyoko facedown. Sayaka didn't look. Eyes remained locked ahead. So close now, and not a single impediment. If she and Nagisa both got inside, it would be easy—almost trivially easy—to circumvent the dolls. Madoka acquired, game over man.

An explosion burst from the Homura mosh pit. It froze immediately but not fast enough to stop its force from propelling all the Chicago girls skyward, save the one on the horse. Homura emerged from the blaze and cast aside the rocket launcher she had used to create it.

Even in the stillness of time, time seemed to slow. Homura rising, back arched, hair all over, her other arm extended with the sniper rifle, pointed directly at Sayaka. Sayaka running, leg raised, arms bent, head turning as the barrel of Homura's gun took aim. Took aim toward the gem on her stomach.

Sayaka reached for a blade to deflect the bullet. Her hand settled on the hilt when a halberd swung from the explosion and nailed Homura in the ribs. The blow detonated against Homura's body and wave of power rippled across the solid air as the girl on the horse finished her swing, mounted amid the explosion like it did not even disconcert her, wielding her puny mortal weapon against a demon straight outta hell with such fearless abandon that Sayaka felt a stirring of admiration, stupid horse girl, stupid horse girl you stupid hero.

The force knocked Homura straight into the tenements on the other side of the road. She crashed into the brick and the brick shattered. The fortune of the blow almost did not register to Sayaka, that this whole damn plan could be salvaged on the back of a random girl whose name Sayaka forgot. But that was the whole point of roping these Chicago chicks into the fray: Homura can't deal with deviations from pattern, so dump enough girls with enough weird powers on her and one is bound to catch her off guard. Mental pat on the back for Sayaka!

Don't chick your countens. The door to Homura's apartment was still a good ten paces away. Sayaka resumed her sprint, casting a glance over her shoulder only to check how Nagisa had kept up.

Nagisa had not kept up.

Nagisa had not even left the rooftop.

Because Mami.

She had strung Nagisa with a ribbon around the wrist, a shiny gold tether that jerked her hither and thither as tried to float away on a trail of multicolored bubbles. Mami clung to the rooftop railing, tugging on the ribbons, shouting at Nagisa with words unheard over the din of battle, but it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure the issue, how Mami might understandably not want Nagisa rushing into a fight (although from Mami's perspective it must have looked like Nagisa was trying to help Homura), and Sayaka had even considered this a possibility but given the unexpected circumstances of Mami not getting time-stopped she didn't have the time to come up with a contingency which was what she had to do now.

The contingency was abandon Nagisa, the open door gaped ahead of her, Madoka not far beyond it. Sayaka turned to throw herself through it before Homura recovered but Homura had already recovered and extricated herself from the wall. She placed her eye to the scope of her sniper rifle and aimed.

Not at Sayaka. At Nagisa. Which made no sense, Sayaka was the threat, Sayaka was at the door, how could she just ignore—

Homura pulled the trigger. The recoil jerked her back as a long, needlenosed shell sped from the barrel. Sayaka reached for a blade to throw and intercept the bullet, but she already knew the pointlessness of the endeavor, no magic will make a thrown sword move faster than a bullet.

Time unstopped. Sayaka threw her blade. It hit nothing.

The bullet drilled through Nagisa's waist with a spurt of blood. It passed through her body, out her back, and drove into Mami's throat behind her.

Sayaka had no time to process this information because all the bullets the Chicago girls had fired at the front door resumed their forward motion and exploded against Sayaka's back.

Everything jumped positions, swapped places, within the span of an eye blink. Although the bullets fired by the Chicago girls exploded where and when they should have, the girls themselves had gone all over the map, many consumed in a second explosion farther away from the door. Many were on the ground, not in armor but in schoolgirl uniforms. Those ones looked pretty fucking dead.

The moment of confusion passed when Sloan remembered time demon Homura Akemi. The confusion resumed as she saw Sayaka Miki and her unmistakable blue cape flop out of the doorway explosion, slam into a wall, and ricochet to the ground. Sloan started toward her, but Sayaka had already flipped to her feet and drew a sword to deflect a bullet fired by Homura from across the battlefield with a loud clang and a spray of sparks. The entire mess disoriented Sloan, Chicago girls and Homura and Sayaka clustered in an elongated panorama of bullshit.

Her eyes went to the Chicago girls on the ground. One of them—not a dead one, but dazed and groaning—was the girl Cicero had tasked with watching Sloan and Hennepin. Porridge, if Sloan remembered right, which she totally probably didn't. She glanced to check if anyone else was watching (nobody except Hennepin, cowering against the street curb) and rushed to Porridge's supine body.

"Guh?" said Porridge. Sloan slammed her knuckle into Porridge's face and knocked her out of commission.

She scoured the unconscious goon for where she kept the gems. Knocking her out reverted her to the same schoolgirl uniform the others wore, which limited the number of pockets because skirts. But the gems weren't in the outer vest pocket and when Sloan undid the buttons she found no inner pockets at all. She patted the body awkwardly, kinda placing her hands wherever in search of like a bump or something. Eventually her hands moved down to the girl's twiggy bony legs at which point she detected a hidden pouch strapped to her upper thigh. Her very upper thigh.

Hennepin shuffled behind her. "Gee F-Fargo, I'm not one to k-kinkshame but..."

"Shut the fuck up." Sloan reached under the girl's skirt and tried to wrench the pouch away, but the strap held so Sloan had to fumble for the buckle which of course was on the innermost part of the thigh and after a few seconds of failed fumbled touching she gave up trying to unbuckle it and instead tried to open the pouch itself. Her brain kinda went

AHHHHH real loud while she did it but eventually it worked and the button undid itself and Sloan dug her hand inside.

She grabbed the first gem her fingers touched. She expelled a tremendous sigh of relief when it happened to be her gem, because if she grabbed Hennepin's instead and had to go back under...

"Where's mine?" said Hennepin. "Is mine there?"

"Get it yourself." Sloan tucked her gem back where it belonged, in the pocket of her coat.

The moment she stood, another explosion burst nearby. The force hit her in the gut and lifted her up, up, up, and down again. She slammed hard against the cobblestone. Her vision blurred and various golden shapes drifted before her. She slapped her face and fixed her eyes. The battlefield only grew more hectic the better she saw it. Cicero sallied her horse and swung her halberd. Around her dashed her soldiers, and in the midst of the melee clashed Sayaka Miki and Homura Akemi. Sayaka looked on the offensive, her sword strikes battering against Homura at a berserk pace. Homura backpedaled with each strike, deflecting with various guns she drew from her shield—the guns looked oddly conventional, not standard Magical Girl fare—and although the apathetic, almost bored glaze in her eyes indicated she had no trouble defending herself, the insane rapidity of Sayaka's attacks prevented counterattack. Which was good for Sayaka, because half the Chicago girls were shooting or stabbing her in the back while she focused solely on Homura. Blood and gashes spread along her body, healed as quickly as they came by a teal aura that surrounded her.

Magic, right. Sloan found herself in the awkward position where using her own magic to affect the fight would hurt her ally as much as her enemy. If Homura even was her enemy? She had never spoken to the girl, had only Sayaka and Omaha as sources.

Bah, whatever! She broke from her stupor and scanned the area for something to do. Hennepin rolled around on the ground; her hands clutched a wound on her side. But Hennepin could suck a dick, she'd live. Kyoko lay where the Chicago girls had dropped her. Flames from the most recent explosion flicked around her outstretched arms. Sloan tried not to dwell on her too much.

Instead she looked over her shoulder and saw other terrible shit. Two bodies lay on the cobblestone near a building at the end of the street. The facedown one Sloan could not place but the other lay propped with her back against the wall, her blonde head slumped and blood running down her chest. Mami.

Sloan ran. No no no. Don't let Mami be dead too. But soon Sloan was close enough to see the gem in her hairpin, intact, although severely dark. It flickered as a sole spot of black on Mami's otherwise autumnal color scheme. Bad, very bad, but not dead. Sloan could work with not dead.

She slowed as she reached the first body, the facedown one. Nagisa. A precise wound bled on her back. Sloan knelt beside her and turned her over. The ground beneath her glittered with the shattered fragments of her gem. Her one wound, a small round red circle, lay directly where a belt buckle should be.

No. She could be no older than ten. No older than that, dammit. Sloan balled her hands into fists.

What could she do. What could she have done differently. How could she have stopped this. The point where she could have given up seemed so distant, so far away. Williston. Another continent, another world. She wanted to die herself, lie down and die. But Mami. Mami was still alive. Sloan had to do something.

"Mami," she said. "Mami, listen to me. It's Sloan. Mami?"

Mami's eyes stared forward at the cobblestone. Her throat gurgled with blood, her threads made no effort to stitch the wound. Sloan crawled close and placed her hands on Mami's shoulders. Shook her gently.

"Mami, Mami please. Please listen to me. Mami. Mami?"

Nothing. An empty dullness in the eyes. Her gem the color of coal. Sloan had no hope herself, no hope she could say anything to change anything. Not with Nagisa dead. But she had to say something, she had to try, she could not give up.

"Mami. Mami. Mami. Please Mami. Please."

Mami said nothing.

Sloan started to cry.

In the periphery of Sloan's blurred vision appeared the doll. *The* doll. The one with pink hair and a flowing white robe. Its mouth a twisted triangle smile. Its feet barely touched the ground. It drifted toward Mami.

"No," said Sloan. She shook Mami again. "Mami, Mami, no."

Mami's head lolled to the side. Like a doll herself.

"No," Sloan said again. "No, don't." She turned toward the doll. "Get away. Get away."

The doll floated, unconcerned with Sloan's words. Its arms spread wide as if to envelop Mami in an embrace. Mami's dull eyes flitted for a moment to the side. Then they settled back straight ahead and did not look again.

"No you DON'T FUCKING TOUCH HER!"

Sloan threw herself at the doll. Her arms wrapped around its frail body and clutched tight as she forced it back, away from Mami. It swiped at her with hooked hands, little white claws that raked the side of her face and drew thick hot blood. Sloan didn't care, did not let go, only heaved her entire weight against the pink-haired doll, the false Madoka.

"Mami, Mami run, run away!" Sloan yelled over her shoulder. She seized a handful of pink hair and slammed the doll's head against the wall. It screeched at her, its eyes a swirl of hypnotic hues that Sloan squinted to avoid staring at. A deluge of German—probably

German—flooded her mind, like the Japanese Mami and Kyoko had transmitted between themselves during the battle with Cicero but multiplied, amplified, rebounding in the hollow confines of her skull. Sloan held on, refused to relinquish it. She had done nothing for Kyoko or Nagisa, but she would not let Mami die. Would not let her disappear completely!

Mami did not heed her call to run, did not look at her. Remained in repose against the wall. Sloan forced the doll back, further away from her, moving with herky-jerky steps. The doll unhinged its crescent mouth and sank a long row of fangs into Sloan's shoulder, but the pain only caused Sloan to lock her arms tighter, sealing the doll into the cage of Sloan's lanky, wiry body. Despite the doll's flowing dress and hair, Sloan outsized it. Outpowered it. They staggered back in their disjointed tango. Away from Mami.

A new voice entered her mind. Cold, stiff, formal, aloof, but strangely familiar. Sloan was certain she had heard it before, but couldn't quite place it—Omaha? Similar, yes, but Omaha had no such confidence, no such force. No, this had to be Homura Akemi. The voice said:

You have no idea what you're doing, do you?

Sloan twisted her head over her punctured shoulder. The battle raged down the street. In the midst of the chaos Sloan glanced Homura, her weapon locked against the sword of Sayaka. Homura's gaze met hers for a moment, but the look she gave Sloan bore no emotion whatsoever.

Mami's gem exploded. It burst with a sharp crackle that stirred Sloan's attention. The glitter of fragments twinkled as it erupted from the side of Mami's head. Sloan stared dumbly. How? HOW? Sloan had kept the doll so far away... had Homura? HOW COULD THIS BE HAPPENING?

"MAMI!" she shouted. She throttled the doll's scrawny throat. Its head bobbed back and forth. "WHAT DID YOU DO TO HER?"

A tremendous pulse of energy issued forth in a ring from Mami's body. It ripped through Sloan and the doll and launched them into the air. Sloan clung to the doll as they revolved together in the sky, the cobblestones and brick buildings beneath them bending, melting, changing. The wind rushed past and lifted Chicago girls off their feet, flinging them into the vortex. A girl with a shield crashed into Sloan's side, ricocheted, and sent them both in new directions.

Everything kept changing, even the sky changed. As Sloan and the doll reached the top of the cyclone and drifted in its pull, the view around her stabilized and she could see that everything stemmed from Mami Tomoe. Not her body—her body scraped limp against the ground. But the spot where she had—where she had died. Waves of purple and red emanated from it, swallowing the landscape in new colors. From the colors rippled sheets and ribbons that trembled and rolled into a cavernous abyss below, the ground itself crumbling away to reveal an infinite void. The colors sealed them in, surrounded them on all sides, no sign of exit, no sign of the real world that had once existed.

Was this... a wraith miasma? Like in Williston? Or was this something different?

Wrapped Christmas presents dropped from a nebulous ceiling. They fell in slow motion, and yet fell faster than Sloan and the doll (they did not fall at all, merely floated). The Chicago girls who had been pulled inside with them were seized by ribbons and dragged into the darkness. Bowls of ice cream and platters of cake formed precarious towers. Chains of gold links strung like streamers from columns and arches. Architectural forms existed inside the space but cohered to no greater plan or format, no kind of structure in the mayhem, only additional heaps of objects. Fragments shored against the ruins. Only in a wraith miasma had Sloan seen distortions like this—if these were even distortions—but she saw no wraiths, no glimmers of static.

Out of a tangled bundle of cords rose an impish figure, small in stature but with long, thin arms of yellow ribbon that spread in all directions and had no end. The fae being wore a bonnet that dwarfed its featureless round face and a teal apron that spread from a twig body. It moved like dada art, like animated collage, rectangular segments that shifted by degrees. It turned its eyeless face toward Sloan.

It looked like no wraith. Sloan regarded it only with horror. She gripped the pink-haired doll tighter as the odd creature twisted its spindly arms toward her, groping and reaching for her defenseless body. Did this come from Mami? Did this come from this universe?

The arms neared, encircled them. The doll wrenched its fangs from Sloan's shoulder screeched at the arms as they neared. Sloan had no recourse for retaliation, no brain to conceive an action. A dream, right? An illusion?

Moments before the creature's endless arms bound her, the pink-haired doll tossed its head. A pure white sliver tore through the space around them. It flashed in an overwhelming ray of light that enveloped Sloan and the doll, erased their outlines, faded them into nonexistence.

Sloan went blind.

BUBSLED RIDE BAYBEE

Either Sloan woke up or her eyes adjusted to the light, hard to tell. Her stiff neck creaked as she lifted it from an ambiguous white surface in an ambiguous white space. The whiteness emanated with enough intensity to encroach Sloan's own form, blurring her lines and angles, leaving her almost translucent. *Almost* translucent? She held a hand in front of her eyes. Maybe not almost at all.

Wait. The doll. She climbed to her knees and scoured the area for a dash of pink. Nothing. When did it get away from her? She swore her arms clung to it the entire time. She touched her shoulder; her wounds had disappeared. She stood up and felt weirdly fine, finer than she had any right to feel. Tranquil. From her coat she extricated her Soul Gem. It flickered with a half-muddy amber glaze, but she felt fully purified regardless.

What was this place. What happened to Mitakihara, to Cicero, to Homura Akemi, to Mami Tomoe. What happened to the surreal hellscape that unfolded around her with its ribbons and coils. What happened to color or anything.

"Hello?" she said. Her voice did not escape her throat.

Hello? she thought.

A voice responded immediately. In Japanese. It babbled for a few seconds and ended with an interrogative.

I don't speak Japanese, said Sloan.

A pause. *You... don't? My apologies. You are Mami Tomoe, are you not?*

I'm Sloan. Redfearn.

Sloan Redfearn? My apologies, we were not expecting you so soon. Not to worry! A hiccup in the system. Bureaucracy, you know how it is. Please step toward the door.

Before Sloan could protest the lack of a door, one opened in what became clear was a wall nearby. Sloan blinked; form and line oozed out the whiteness, things became clear at least as shapes, empty spaces. Structure. She rose and leaned toward the door to try and see through it, but only another white area awaited her. Nonetheless she did as bid and stepped through.

The moment she passed the threshold the whiteness of the space disappeared, replaced by a sterile but nonetheless existent lobby replete with desk and computer. A tropical plant served a spot of color, potted in the corner opposite the desk. A few empty chairs lined a wall.

In the center of the room stood a resplendent figure, draped in a low-cut white dress that flowed into the floor and had no distinct end. Her bronzed skin glowed in the otherwise opaque space, and her hair, so black as to be almost violet, formed a refreshing darkness to which Sloan's eyes naturally gravitated. Every detail of her presentation and body exuded

perfection, from her finely-filed nails and her emerald eyes and her full lips and her full other stuff. The dress reminded Sloan of the pink-haired doll. The woman was uncomfortably beautiful, the first human being Sloan had ever seen where the first descriptor to pop into her head was "beautiful". Sloan lowered her head and stewed in her own ugliness.

I sense you are not at ease, said the beautiful lady. Again I apologize, typically we have better foreknowledge of new arrivals and deliver a more personalized transition experience. Would you prefer if I presented myself like this instead?

She snapped her fingers. Instantly her wardrobe changed into a conservative librarian look, with horn-rimmed glasses and her hair tied in a bun. She was still stupid hot.

Look, can you tell me where I am. How do I get back where I was?

We will discuss all these topics and more in due time, Sloan. You are understandably confused. That's okay, the transition into the Law of the Cycles can be abrupt and disorientating. Luckily, I'm here to answer any questions you may have. Oh! Forgive me. I've yet to introduce myself. My name is Ereshkigal. As the first Magical Girl, I hold the distinct honor of presiding as High Priestess to the Law of the Cycles.

Law of the Cycles. Ereshkigal. First Magical Girl? Sloan examined closer the white walls, the white ceiling. An unsettling suspicion formed in her gut. Her last memory of clinging to the doll as it opened a portal in spacetime. Had it taken her to... the afterlife?

She burst out laughing at the absurdity. Heaven! This was heaven, this was her first angel—Ereshkigal the sexy librarian! Her laughter might have gone on for awhile if it ever left her throat. Instead, she made only a series of silent chuckles into the whiteness.

Is something the matter, Sloan?

So, so does that mean I'm dead?

Your corporeal form, yes. But your spiritual form, by no means! You have been taken by the Law of the Cycles. Surely you saw her—Madoka Kaname, our beautiful savior. Ereshkigal clasped her hands and stared starry-eyed with a slight tilt of her head. You were on the brink of despair, and she came to save you from a disastrous fate. She swallowed your pain and agony and allowed your Soul Gem to shatter, freeing your spirit to become part of her wondrous system. It may have looked and felt like death, but truly your life is only now beginning!

Except none of that happened. At least, not that she remembered. Maybe the doll did it when she whited out. But Sloan still had her Soul Gem, she had checked first thing.

That's the only way to get here?

Why do you ask? Ereshkigal's eyes narrowed, although she maintained her pleasant smile. Is that not what happened to you?

Sloan hesitated. She had no idea whether telling the truth would do any favors here. What would they do, boot her back to Mitakihara? She decided to roll with the flow for the time being and see what happened.

Uh, no. I was asking, because, uh. Because what about girls who have their gems shattered in battle? They come here too?

Ereshkigal's entire upper body rearranged its position, her head lowering with crestfallen expression, her smooth unblemished arms moving with operatic flourish to place one hand over her heart and another upturned in the air beside her. *Unfortunately, such is not the case. Girls slain in battle will never know the salvation afforded to us by Madoka Kaname. For them, the destruction of their gems is the destruction of their eternal spirit. A tragedy indeed. Which is why we who are taken by the Law of the Cycles owe Magical Girlhood the duty of unflinching devotion to Madoka Kaname's cause. We must facilitate her system so that it runs as a well-oiled machine, ensuring she rescues all possible girls from their grim fates. Consider your fortune in standing here before me, Sloan Redfearn—and now consider those girls, your friends, whose lives ended in the terrestrial plane. You owe it to them to do your part to maintain the Law of the Cycles!*

Wait. So you mean, Clair... Kyoko, Nagisa... they're dead for good? There's nothing we can do for them?

Ah yes. Ereshkigal adjusted her pose again, like a mannequin in a store, to a more businesslike demeanor. You refer to Clair Ibsen, Kyoko Sakura, and Nagisa Momoe, friends of yours during various points in your life? I am afraid so, Sloan. I know hearing that news may be difficult. I am willing to offer any consolation you require.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Death became even shittier when you realized you fucked them out of eternal paradise in the afterlife. Was that really the arbitrary distinction between girls who went to heaven and those who just died? Whether some fucking doll showed up and spirited them away? At least it explained why murdering another Magical Girl was such a big fucking deal.

I apologize, Sloan. I see this explanation affected you negatively. Had I more tact, I would have refrained from telling you until after you had grown more comfortable in your newfound conceptual form. In this state, your bodily emotions and feelings will eventually ebb away and leave you at constant equilibrium, but it is not uncommon for those who first arrive to cling to their human attachments. Allow me to ease the process somewhat by informing you that the unique conditions of Clair Ibsen's wish—that she never feel true despair—rendered her incapable of salvation at Madoka Kaname's hands. Your part in her death did not change her ultimate fate; eventually she would have died in an unnatural way.

The explanation didn't help. And what the hell did she mean about feelings ebbing away? *So we become emotionless drones when we die, is that it?*

Oh, Sloan. You misunderstand me. It is not that your emotions depart you entirely, but your new state allows you to master them and accept them. You will no longer be a slave to the whims of your hormones, as in technical terms you no longer control a physical body and thus have no hormones altogether. Give it time; you'll soon see what I mean.

This was what Sayaka and Nagisa became. Angels in heaven, before Homura Akemi pulled them back to earth and returned them to physical form. Did they have to sit in this room and listen to this stuffy bitch prattle about this shit too?

So where's Mami.

Mami Tomoe? Truthfully, I am uncertain. She was the one slated to arrive here, not you. But the Goddess works in ways beyond the comprehension of even her closest aides, like me. Another dramatic flourish of arms. Her librarian glasses twinkled.

What happens if she never arrives?

I'll have someone check up on Miss Tomoe and determine what happened to her. Glitches in the system must be eradicated, after all. However, I implore you not to worry about it. What happens happens—such is the will of fate. Soon you shall understand.

Oh god, when people start rambling about fate that's when you know you're fucked. Sloan suspected Mami was dead. She saw the gem explode. But it didn't explain what happened after, the weird contortions to the geography or the strange creature who appeared. Sloan got the impression this Ershkigrelkgl chick couldn't explain it either. Or explain much of anything.

Great, said Sloan in the least passive-aggressive way she could muster. Fate and such, yep yep. Now can I go, uh, anywhere else?

Of course! Ereshkigal swept an arm to her side. In the wall opened another bright door with more brightness beyond it. Light was Sloan's magical weapon of choice and she still found it too damn bright. Follow me. We'll begin the new employee onboarding process. I'll revert to my native tongue so no girl feels more privileged than any other. By the way, did you know my native tongue is the first sophisticated spoken language in all human history? My wish led to its creation. Fascinating, right?

The words flowed out in Ereshkigal's mellifluous voice so smooth and silky Sloan missed the drift until she followed her into the next room and saw the rows upon rows of office cubicles that stretched down an infinite corridor. Sloan blinked to make sure she saw them right. Cubicles, like corporate office cubicles, adorned with vibrant colors that spanned the spectrum of the rainbow, some blue some green some red some orange some yellow some purple. Some of the cubicles had designs, some had pictures of starry nights or pastoral meadows. The doors opened and shut and girls buzzed between them, noses buried in files and forms, some in pairs that chatted amicably with facial expressions rather than mouths. Some trundled gurneys stacked with books, some ran with clipboards tucked under arms. One girl zipped past on a skateboard. All of them wore Magical Girl uniforms, fancy capes and gloves and boots—some uniforms even weirder—which only magnified the strangeness of the scene.

Sloan turned to ask Ereshkigal what the fuck was this only to find she now stood among a gaggle of girls, each with eyes riveted on the cubicles. They too wore uniforms and comprised a wide range of races and ethnicities. Some exchanged glances and asked questions in polyglot mental languages, a few Sloan at least guessed as European or Asian

but some entirely incomprehensible. Each girl nodded and responded despite the fact that no two used the same tongue. Sloan counted between twenty to thirty in a group around her.

Uh, hello? said Sloan. *Do any of you speak English?*

The girl standing next to Sloan, who wore a floral kimono, tore her eyes from the cubicle scene and responded in not English. Sloan smiled and nodded like she understood. These were the girls who had succumbed to the Law of the Cycles. Their gems got muddy and the pink-haired doll warped them here. The ones at the cubicles had been here awhile, those in the group around Sloan were "new employees." Ready for the "onboarding process."

Sayaka spoke English—she said languages meant little to concepts. Okay, cool, explained why these chicks could communicate how they did. But if Sloan remained her dumb uneducated American self (three years high school French, JE SUIS OMELETTE DU FROMAGE?), that must mean...

Ereshkigal glided to the front of the group and pressed her long fingers against her chest. She had reverted to her low-cut gown. The other girls in Sloan's group quit their chatter and diverted all attention toward her as she cleared her throat and gestured emphatically at the cubicles behind her. She began to speak, except not in English, not in any language Sloan had even the barest comprehension. Her "native tongue." The first human language, so fascinating! What did that make it, ancient Mesopotamian? The language before Babel?

The new employees nodded to the rises and falls in Ereshkigal's timbre. Sloan tried to keep her head low because she was taller than most of the girls here. They all understood this batshit Gilgamesh language and Sloan didn't. Because Sloan wasn't dead. She didn't come here the normal way. She piggybacked a ride.

Ereshkigal talked a lot. Her longwinded speeches grew more agonizing without the ability to comprehend her words, it sounded like ceaseless babble. She gestured at the cubicles, at the girls with files who flitted between them. Sometimes she gestured at nothing or brushed back her luscious hair. Sloan ought to tell them she didn't belong here. Probably not too hard to prove. Then they could kick her back to Earth.

She had a better idea, though.

After a solid five minutes of Ereshkigal's undying voice, she swept the flowing folds of her gown behind her and walked toward the closest aisle of cubicles. The group of new employees followed en masse, the one behind Sloan giving her a slight nudge because she apparently missed the cue for the guided tour of Dilbert Heaven to begin. Sloan popped the collar of her coat to up her inconspicuousness as she clomped in line with the others, but nobody paid her the least attention anyway. What the hell could Ereshkigal take so long to blab about. Yes, they're cubicles. How fascinating. Although Sloan did wonder what kind of work girls who existed as conceptual entities even did. The ones who ran between the cubicles clutched ledgers and documents. Did they do Madoka's taxes or what?

She slowed her pace. Gradually she worked her way to the back of the new employee group, allowing those more invested in Ereshkigal's monologue to surpass her in line. She observed the girls in the cubicles, but none even looked up from their stacks of paperwork as

Ereshkigal and the new girls passed. Nobody paid Sloan the least attention. Her heart pounded in her chest as her mind formulated her plan.

They reached a junction at the end of the aisle, a crossroads that led to many more aisles of cubicles. While Ereshkigal and her tour group went down one aisle, Sloan shoved her hands in her pockets and slumped her shoulders and stepped into an entirely different aisle. She continued without pause, staring straight ahead while girls and cubicles passed on either side. She loosened her shoulders, took her hands out of her pocket, checked over her shoulder in case Ereshkigal glided after her to accuse her in Mesopotamian. But nobody came.

Each cubicle had a name on a plaque by the door. The names appeared to be in the native alphabet of the girl in question, so a lot had indecipherable characters, Cyrillic and Sanskrit and Hiragana and Hangul. Many were in Latin script but obviously not English—Scandinavian or Germanic or Italian or French. Sloan read the name on each plaque she passed until she reached one with an undeniably English name: Mary Wright. A painting of a pony emblazoned the ajar door to Mary Wright's cubicle. Sloan peered through the crack. Mary Wright herself stooped over a desk. She scribbled with a quill feather on a piece of parchment.

Um, excuse me, said Sloan.

Mary Wright lifted her head. Freckles infested her face. *Ello! I've not seen ye afore, are ye newly arrived?*

Aye, said Sloan. *Yes. I'm afraid I don't know my way around very well yet. Do you happen to know where the office of Delaney Pollack is?*

Delaney Pollack, ye say... Mary Wright rubbed her chin. *Nay, I cannot say I've heard the name. She must be newly arrived too, aye?*

Aye, said Sloan. *A few days ago.*

Well, tis nothing to fret over. Did Ereshkigal give ye a directory?

Uh, yeah, she did, but I uh, left it in my office? And it's kinda far away, and I'm in a hurry, so... Did immortal conceptual spirits even hurry? Ereshkigal sure didn't.

But Mary Wright betrayed no wonder at the remark. She put down her quill and rolled her standard-issue office chair to the other corner of her cubicle. She opened a filing cabinet and rifled through the papers within and removed a thick bound booklet titled OFFICES & EMPLOYEES. The S in both words looked like Fs.

Well, ye can borrow mine, I s'pose. Sorry for the wear; tis a trifle used. Check the back, it'll have the newest names.

She handed the directory to Sloan. It weighed nothing despite its thickness. Sloan opened to a random page, encountered a long list of names in minuscule font. After each name came a "Date of Employment" and an office aisle and number. The names were arranged chronologically, the oldest girls first, the newest last. She turned to the last page to see if her

own name had joined the list and did not see it. However, the final page was not static; new names appeared at the end of the list as if by magic, each with December 25, 2013 as the date.

Sloan had seen a book like this before. She tried to remember where and when. Her memory faltered and she gave up and flipped through the pages, following the dates until she found December 23. Even then, a ton of girls bit the dust that day. It took awhile until her finger found Pollack, Delaney.

Aisle 9230, Office 203. Where is that?

Ah, I'd've known, said Mary Wright. Tis the newest aisle, they're still fillin' it. Ain't it your own aisle?

Uh, no, I'm somewhere else. Sloan abandoned any hope of a more believable explanation. Can you tell me how to get here?

Right, tis simple. Mary Wright stood and brushed past Sloan into the aisle. She pointed toward a junction of multiple other aisles. Mark ye the fork? Take left, left, right, left, right, left. That'll put ye where ye need to be.

Left, left, uh. Can you repeat that? Slowly? Or write it down?

Aye, you're perhaps too fresh to keep such things even. Here.

Mary Wright pointed an open hand toward her quill and inkwell. They scraped across her desk, levitated through the air, and sailed into her palm. She took a blank piece of parchment and propped it against her cubicle door to scrawl the Konami code of directions in loopy Jane Austen typeface. She rolled the parchment into a scroll and placed it secure in Sloan's hand.

There. Welcome to yer new life.

Thank you, said Sloan.

Mary Wright curtseyed. *Yer welcome.*

Left, left, right, left, right, left. Sloan reached the first fork and went left; she followed another long aisle to another fork and took left again. What did this place look like from above? As a floorplan blueprint? For some reason Sloan imagined interlocking hexagons, although it could be anything. She kept her eyes open lest she bump into Ereshkigal and the tour group, but to house Magical Girls since the dawn of Magical Girls this place had to be huge enough to make that unlikely. Mostly she passed more girls with papers and trolleys and in small groups that chatted among themselves, garbed in a colorful array of costumes. A few nodded hello to Sloan as she passed, Sloan tried to smile and nod back.

Truthfully, it took a lot of effort not to break out in sprint. The realization that she could meet Delaney here, Delaney and Erika too, and maybe some others, built in intensity with each identical fork she reached. Her mind reeled. This was heaven, this was the afterlife. It was too amazing to think that such a place even existed for her to be that miffed it manifested as a

gigantic corporate honeycomb. Sloan had met plenty of girls, usually rookies, who thought the Law of the Cycles led to some kind of heaven. But the grizzled vets puffed cigarettes and dismissed their theories as jejune fantasy. This was real, though, unless Sloan fell under the spell of a lucid illusion. She ought to keep that a possibility considering the strange circumstances that surrounded her appearance here. But it felt real. It had to be real. Sloan wanted it to be real. Even if you had to deal with Ereshkigal's self-righteous prating, even if you had to file forms. This beat the shit out of her previous life.

She reached the final fork. A plaque at the aisle's entrance read 9230. The new angels ward.

Fuck it. She started to half-jog, half-speedwalk down the long white path. Her eyes flicked between the rows for the names she wanted. Татьяна Иосифовна Замятин, 黄靖雯, Hedda Borkman. Some names more recognizably American, but still no Erika Dufresne or Delaney Pollack. She quickened her step. She had to be close.

Sloan?

Sloan skid to a stop. She looked over her shoulder at the girl who hailed her. Even without her bleached blonde hair—a natural brunette—Sloan recognized her instantly.

Ramsey.

Ramsey squealed in delight. She stumbled the rest of the way out of a cubicle, her costume a hodgepodge of belts and buckles, and flung herself at Sloan. Sloan stepped back reflexively but Ramsey weighed so little—she weighed literally nothing—that the gesture was unneeded. Ramsey's weirdly incorporeal embrace would not have registered on Sloan's sensory matrix if not for the visual cues. No warmth, no feeling. Like being hugged by a ghost.

It lasted only a short time before Ramsey released her and stepped away. *Sorry, I forgot we don't feel anything up here. Ha!* She scratched the back of her head with a nervous smile. *And I guess I shouldn't be celebrating your death anyway, but I'm really glad you made it here! I've made so many new friends already, I'm sure you will too.*

I'm glad you're happy, Ramsey. You deserve it.

Ah, well, the name's Chelsea now, actually. It's my real name, and you know, names based on cities—or I guess counties?—are pretty gauche up here, so... I mean, if you want to still call me Ramsey that's totally okay, it can be like a nickname!

Chelsea is fine too. Although the moment Sloan said it a slight twinge of downcast appeared in Ramsey's eyes and Sloan made a mental note to go with Ramsey for nomenclature, not a difficult mental note to make because not having to learn a new name always superseded having to learn one.

The moment of disappointment vanished from Ramsey's face, replaced by new brightness as she swiveled on a heel and turned back the way she came, grabbing the cuff of Sloan's sleeve to lead her. *Oh, you have to talk to Selma too, she's just down the hall.*

Sloan shuffled her feet, although she kinda wanted to find Delaney. *Selma?*

You probably knew her as Woodbury. Did you even meet Woodbury? I don't know if you did. She worked for me, so I guess you could say we were friends during our lives, but now we're definitely friends. Come on, here's her office.

Ramsey knocked on the door and received a pleasant chime to enter. At the desk inside sat Woodbury—Selma—bah whatever, go with the names you know—whom Sloan met once, maybe twice (probably once). All she remembered about her was that Delaney stabbed her throat out with the magic knife, so she felt none too swell about this dubious reunion. Indeed, when Woodbury looked up from her paperwork, the smile on her face faded.

Selma, Selma, look who I brought. It's Sloan!

Woodbury did nothing for a moment but eventually nodded. *Oh, yeah. Hi Sloan! So you're here now too, huh?*

I guess. No reason to bumble into a more precise explanation.

Of course. Death comes for us all. Woodbury returned to her paperwork. She tapped a keyboard and a screen blipped to life. On it a Magical Girl took down wraiths with electric bolas. *Now if you'll excuse me, I got work to do... as do you.*

She jotted notes on a paper while she watched the screen. Ramsey slumped her shoulders and sighed. *Come on Selma, there's plenty of time for that later. You can take a break and talk to Sloan.*

I can talk to Sloan anytime too, said Woodbury. She put down her pen and tapped a key on the keyboard. The view around the girl with the bolas swiveled a little. *Sorry, I know I'm being pretty lame right now. I'm sure we'll be good friends in time, Sloan. Our past differences don't mean diddly up here, I know I know. But I am busy right now.*

The girl on the screen hurled her bolas. They wrapped around the neck of a wraith and crushed its static skull between two cobalt spheres. The wraith burst into cubes, which the girl scrambled to collect. She glanced over both shoulders as she picked each cube out of the ground. Around her shanty houses leaned and trembled. It looked like a Brazilian favela.

What are you watching? said Sloan. She tried to sound sincere, not so hard because she kinda was.

Didn't Ereshkigal tell you? said Ramsey. *She shoulda said what we do during the orientation tour.*

*It must have slipped her mind. She talked a lot about justice and reason and—*Sloan tried to think up another highfalutin virtue Ereshkigal might prattle about—*and justice.*

Yeah I get the impression she does stuff like that a lot, said Ramsey. *Uh, but I think we're bothering Selma. I'll catch you up to snuff while we walk.*

She said goodbye to Woodbury, who hummed in response, and led Sloan back into the hall. Girls passed them, many nodded hellos to Ramsey. Ramsey responded with hello in the

respective language of the girl who hailed her, even though all initially spoke in English. Wonder what the etiquette is for girls who can speak literally all languages. Like, how do they decide which to use?

Ramsey's explanation interrupted Sloan's thoughts. *So basically, what we do up here is monitor the Magical Girls living on Earth. We watch them, kinda like guardian angels I guess? We take notes on them, their temperaments, their strengths, their weaknesses. It's up to us to figure out when they're close to despair. That way we can put them on Madoka's queue so she knows where and when to go to take them into the Law of the Cycles!*

This Madoka, said Sloan. *What do you know about her?*

Well, I saw her when I succumbed to despair myself, said Ramsey. *Ereshkigal told me the basics, about how she saves Magical Girls from turning into witches and whatnot. You also get to see her when one of your charges—a charge is a live girl you watch—gets taken. But that hasn't happened yet for me, so I've only seen her the one time.*

Sloan wondered if she could telepathically lower her voice at least so all the girls around couldn't key into their conversation but gave up and went ahead with her question. *And when you saw her, did she look... What did she look like?*

Ramsey stopped in front of her office and faced Sloan. *Whaddya mean? She looked exactly like how you saw her. Did she look weird to you?*

Well, uh. Sloan tucked her head lower into her collar and squinted out of Ramsey's gaze. *I was uh, in a bad state of mind when I saw her. I don't quite remember too well.*

Oh, oh I see. Well, you'll be able to see her yourself eventually. Not only when you look after your charges but I hear from some of the older girls like Ereshkigal she sometimes comes around for visits. But not lately, she's been busy and nobody's spoken with her.

How lately?

Ramsey covered her mouth to stifle a silent giggle. *Come on Sloan, Ereshkigal HAD to have told you the first rule of the afterlife: Don't talk about time.*

What a fun-sounding rule. Sloan had her own ideas on what "lately" meant, but decided Ramsey wasn't going to give her the best answers to her questions. If heaven knew their goddess had a little Homura problem, the atmosphere might not be so chill. *Well, I'd like to talk to Delaney before I, uh, get to work. She's down this corridor right?*

Delaney Pollack right? She helped you out in Minneapolis. I only met her once down there but I've talked to her a coupla times up here and she seems pretty nice. She's down this way, come on!

And again they were off, Sloan displeased with Ramsey's tagalong attitude, she would kinda like to talk to Delaney one-on-one, or maybe with Erika. But whatever, Ramsey was harmless enough.

She thought she might feel some trepidation as they approached Delaney's cubicle but the previous post-death reunions loosened any anxiety about the situation. Plus she remembered the situation downstairs was a trifle more urgent than up here. When the plaque emblazoned with Delaney's name appeared, Sloan did not hesitate to step in front of Ramsey and rap a knuckle on the door.

Come in, dear.

Sloan opened the door. *Delaney, it's me.*

Delaney sat in an overinflated swivel chair with plush scarlet cushions, hunched over a computer screen to watch a girl sleeping peacefully in a motel bedroom. She had the same white hair she had when she died. She rolled away from the desk and span to face Sloan.

Hello, love. When did you arrive?

I hear time is a dirty word around here.

Oh, that's right. I'm inexperienced with how things operate.

She did not stand. Between her and Ramsey awkward and unneeded in the doorway, Sloan's unease amplified. *Are you gonna be cold with me too, Delaney? I guess that's fine, I deserve it pretty much.*

Oh no no no no, Sloan love. Don't take it like that. Delaney reclined in her chair and spread her slender arms down the rests to grip their ends. *But each girl when they come here has to overcome the flaws that destroyed them in life. I spent my life trying to cover up who I really was, because who I really was I thought was terrible. And I really did do some terrible things. But I have to come to terms with that now. No more masks for me. So if I seem distant... That's simply the normal me. The true me.*

Ah.

It also helps I no longer have a physical body, so I don't feel the urge to hump everything in sight!

Uh.

Ramsey finally took the hint she didn't need to be here and sidestepped toward the exit. But Delaney extended a hand. *Oh no, Chelsea dear, no need to leave, I was simply cracking a joke! Humor is a foreign concept to concepts, Sloan. You should have seen Ereshkigal's expression when I made a quip about her lascivious bosom.*

Well, some things about her had certainly changed, but Sloan at least got the impression she was actually speaking to Delaney again and not some ghostly doppelganger.

Actually, Delaney said, pointing at Ramsey, Could you be a dear and fetch Erika Dufresne for us? Tell her Sloan's here, she'll be sure to come.

I'm not sure I know Erika Dufresne, said Ramsey.

You don't. She's on the next wing, Aisle 9229. She croaked a couple days before we did, but we must have her for a true Williston Three reunion.

Ramsey stepped at smart attention and saluted. *I'll bring her as fast as I can!* She sped away and left Sloan and Delaney alone in the cubicle.

Now now, my little chickadee. Delaney snapped her fingers and the cubicle door sealed them inside. *It's a long aisle, we'll have some nice private time before Erika arrives. How about we resolve all the sexual tension we never got to resolve in life?*

Sloan jammed her hands in her coat pockets and avoided Delaney's gaze. *I thought you said you didn't feel the urge to—*

I know. I'm just trying to give you that old Delaney Pollack you know and love! We don't even have corporeal bodies even more, and these ghost avatars or whatever aren't quite anatomically correct. Trust me, I checked, it's like a Barbie doll down there. So don't worry. You're cute when you're uncomfortable, love.

Gee, thanks. Too bad these cubicles have only one seat apiece. Well, that didn't stop Sloan. She sat on the desk beside the computer screen and scraped her boots against the floor. *Look, Delaney, shooting the shit is cool and all. But I have something serious to talk about.*

And because the mention of something serious obviously meant the opposite of that, Delaney immediately tore away from the conversation and clacked some keys on the keyboard to zoom its view on the sleeping girl. *Sorry, love, keep going, I'm listening. It's not my break though so I do need to keep at least partial attention on Miss Ravalli of Palermo, Italy. Do go on.*

Miss Ravalli seemed perfectly content to remain asleep and do absolutely nothing, but Sloan let it go without comment. *Delaney, do you remember before you died? All that weird bullshit with Clair and Omaha?*

Of course love. I have attained perfect clarity of memory. Haven't you?

When we were doing that crap, you kept talking about God. The one you thought punished you for murdering that girl in Saskatchewan. And demons, remember this?

Delaney scratched her pen across the notebook. Unlike Mary Wright, she used a perfectly modern writing instrument. Was the pen a "concept," like the girls kept saying they themselves were? An illusion? Nothing here felt like anything, nothing here made any sound. *I already told you I remember everything. You ought to also, which means anything you need to ask me you can answer yourself if you search long enough. Come now love, I know the transition from life to afterlife jars the senses, but it doesn't take so long to acclimate. You're acting odd.*

I've been to Mitakihara, Delaney. I've seen Homura Akemi.

The pen stopped. Delaney's eyes shifted from the computer screen to her notebook to Sloan. She placed the pen lengthwise across the top of the notebook and clasped her hands together.

Should those words mean something to me?

They were... You... Sloan remembered she had a better way to prove this. She patted the pockets of her coat to discern where she had arranged all her collectibles after relocating them from her prior coat. She found the folded piece of paper in her lower left side inner pocket and handed it Delaney. It read the same as it had the morning after the archon died in Minneapolis:

WILLISTON — SLOAN REDFEARN (FARGO) / ERIKA DUFRESNE (WINNIPEG).

MINNEAPOLIS — CLAIR IBSEN.

MITAKIHARA — HOMURA AKEMI.

Delaney read the paper. She read it again. Her eyes scanned the words, her mouth remained impassive. She glanced at Miss Ravalli asleep in Italy.

This is my handwriting.

Yes it is. You gave this to me. You told me to use it to do some good.

I remember that. I remember writing the first two lines.

And the third?

Delaney's eyes scanned the paper again. She turned it around and upside-down and scrutinized it close to her face with red eyes—Clair's eyes.

It's my handwriting, but. How did you even bring this here? This is a real object.

Delaney, you once told me you needed to save God from a demon. That demon's name is—

Ramsey reemerged in the cubicle doorway. She gripped the jambs and leaned inside, her face an ineffable beam. *Back! Erika's right behind me. Here she is, here she is.*

She sidled aside to allow entry. Erika peeked her head around the doorway. It felt like ages since Sloan last saw her, but really it was a matter of days, and not very many at that. Death did wonders for her acne. A clear face took the childish edge off her appearance and imbued her with a serene beauty (there Sloan goes with that beauty word again). At a beckoning hand from Ramsey, she tiptoed into the cubicle and stood beside Sloan.

Hello.

Hi, Erika.

Erika kneaded her hands together. A small foot fidgeted. *I honestly wish I felt more seeing you, Sloan. The downside of our elevated state, perhaps.*

Crammed into the tight confines of the cubicle, Ramsey had to contort her whole body to avoid crushing against them. *Come on Erika, that's no way to be.*

I suppose. Erika managed a smile. Of the entire tableau of my life, one of my happiest memories—nay, my happiest—is that moment after we defeated the archon. Before the invisible girl attacked. That fleeting, brief exchange we had, Sloan. I wish I could feel like I did then.

Well. Sloan did not come equipped for conversations like this. Existential ramblings on emotion and memory and the conceptualized afterlife. She guessed concepts had little else to do but contemplate their existence and philosophize, and maybe in a different circumstance a bare heart-to-heart with Erika might drop into Sloan's wheelhouse but she had to forget this safe and pleasant place and remember the world beneath. Something had happened to Mami. Sayaka fought Homura. Sloan had never met Madoka but she was probably a nice person too. Omaha existed.

Close the door, Erika. I have something to show you all.

Erika stood still, quizzical, and eventually Ramsey had to twist around her to pull the door shut. Delaney sat deep in her chair with the paper clutched in one hand.

The space became even smaller. If they weren't in an actual geography, why did they have to make the offices so claustrophobic? You'd think every girl would get her own pasture or something. Sloan maneuvered best she could to the middle of the office, her three companions triangulated around her. She slipped a hand into her coat and rummaged through the random junk. When her hand emerged, it held her Soul Gem.

The reaction from her companions was instantaneous. Ramsey and Erika in unison: *That's—*

Then Delaney: *Her Soul Gem.*

It cannot be, said Erika. Our Soul Gems must break before the Law of the Cycles takes us. It is how Madoka releases our souls from corporeal form.

I'm confused, said Ramsey.

Delaney's head slumped. Her white hair cascaded around her. *She's not dead.*

How, said Erika.

Uh, said Ramsey.

What to explain first? Homura Akemi, doll Madoka, the situation in Mitakihara? Sloan took a deep breath even though no air existed in this realm. The absence ached in her lungs.

I grabbed the thing you guys see as Madoka Kaname and hitched a ride here.

No, said Erika. Madoka Kaname is an incorporeal concept. Normal humans cannot detect her with any sensory apparatus. She appears only to Puella Magi on the verge of despair, and only to perform the ritual of unbinding. You cannot simply "grab" her.

Also she's not a "thing"? said Ramsey. She's really really nice Sloan, don't say mean things about her.

My magic allows me to see the invisible, said Sloan. Erika and Ramsey had closed in on her, confining her even tighter. Delaney remained in her seat.

You miss the point, said Erika. *Madoka Kaname is not merely invisible. She is—*

Look. Sloan tried to sigh. No breath exhaled. *What you guys are seeing as Madoka Kaname isn't Madoka Kaname. It's a doll. In a fucking pink wig.*

Erika took another aggressive step forward. *Sloan, regardless of my feelings about you, if you continue to defame our Goddess, I will strike down your living body here and now.* Her hand settled on the hilt of her sheathed katana. Did a conceptual katana still cut human flesh?

The philosophical quandary never reached resolution. Delaney lifted her head and brushed aside the thin strands of white hair from her face. *She's right. She's fucking right.*

What? Erika's knuckle tightened around the hilt. *You too, Delaney?*

I can't remember Homura Akemi, I can't remember Mitakihara, but I can remember everything else. Why we were in Williston. So Sloan would get the archon's power and fight Clair. It's why you had to die, Erika, because you would have taken the power yourself. Or that's what Kyubey thought.

We were there to save the town. I was there for territory.

Delaney rolled to her computer and clanged her fingers against the keyboard. A variety of menus and windows cropped up on the screen. *Yeah, you were a tad out of the loop, weren't you dear? I wanted something different. I wanted to do a good deed. A deed good enough to salvage my soul—not that such a deed proved necessary, in the end. I wanted to save our Goddess.*

The screen shifted from the sleeping Italian girl to a blank black nothing. A window appeared with a caution sign and the text THE LOCATION YOU SPECIFIED (MITAKIHARA, JAPAN) DOES NOT EXIST.

Save her from what? ventured Ramsey.

That's the part I can't remember.

This is lunacy, said Erika. *We must report Sloan to Ereshkigal at once. She can't be allowed to know about this place. We'll obviate her memory and return her to her world.*

Hold a moment. Delaney's fingers skittered across the keyboard. A new window appeared: THE PUELLA MAGI YOU SPECIFIED (HOMURA AKEMI) DOES NOT EXIST.

Try Mami Tomoe, said Sloan. She realized she did not know how the name was spelled. But Delaney typed without question and a new window appeared:

NAME: MAMI TOMOE | AGE: 18 YEARS | LOCATION: | GUARDIAN: |

Ramsey and Erika uttered a collective mental gasp. *How can she have no guardian?*

Or location, Erika added.

Sloan wanted to have Delaney check Kyoko and Sayaka and Nagisa, but she either never knew their last names or, true to form, totally forgot. She suspected a similar screen would appear for each. *Someone expunged the records, she said.*

Erika bit her lip. *A glitch.*

How many glitches have you seen here, Erika. Sloan had no idea how tight they ran their databases but she doubted heaven let ghosts in the machine. *How likely is it that the first girl I mention has no location?*

Erika stared at the screen and made no response. Ramsey wrapped her arms around herself and said: *If she has no guardian, Madoka won't know when to come for her. If she doesn't come—*

She had someone watching her, alright. The best guardian of all, one with a direct uplink to the doll posing as Madoka. Homura Akemi.

How can you say these things, Sloan? How can you—a human—come here and tell us these things?

Sloan placed her hands on Erika's shoulders. No sensation of feeling extended from her fingertips to the sensory cortex in her brain, as though Erika were a puff of air. A shade. Like the Greeks believed. Ethereal wisps of the girl once known as Erika Dufresne, once known as Winnipeg. Erika looked up at her, mouth slightly open, eyes unable to peer directly into Sloan's.

A lot of things that should be impossible have happened, Erika. I did not transcend space and time to come here so I could lie to you. A girl named Homura Akemi has taken the real Madoka Kaname and keeps her in Mitakihara. Do you think I made those names up, Erika?

Erika's eyes glanced toward the paper in Delaney's hand. *I... I don't know.*

Erika. Please trust me. Please.

I believe her, said Delaney.

Ramsey shuffled her feet. *I do too.*

A twist of her shoulders pulled Erika away from Sloan. *Fine. Fine! I believe something is suspicious, at least.*

Good enough. Sloan again tried to sigh and again received an airless vacuum. She needed to remember to stop inhaling. *Okay. Now we need to convince Ereshkigal or whoever's in charge here. Send this whole damn angel army to Mitakihara.*

That won't work, love. Delaney closed the windows on her computer and returned to the sleeping Italian. *The only reason these two believe you is because they're your friends. The only reason I believe you is because you filled the gaps in my own memory. Do you think a*

piece of paper and a single oddity in the system will convince Ereshkigal? The only thing she will be interested in is deleting your memory once she discovers you're still alive.

She would never take the word of a human over her own perceptions, said Erika.

She's kind of uh, Ramsey rubbed her throat, *Full of herself?*

Then what do we do? said Sloan. *Something serious is going down. I came here through a portal, there has to be a way back, right?*

Of course there's a portal love. How else does Madoka move between here and the physical world?

Great, then let's go. Homura Akemi is only one girl, and there's other girls already fighting her. With your blood magic it should be easy to restrain her and fix everything.

Erika crossed her arms. *We minor concepts are forbidden from accessing the portal unless the Goddess Madoka requires us to assist her. Which has not happened in some time.*

The portal is located beyond Ereshkigal's office, said Delaney. *We'll have to go through her to get to it.*

We wait for her to go on another orientation tour, said Sloan. *We can sneak through her office easy.*

An admonishing finger from Delaney waved near her face. *Nuh-uh-uh love. That's not how concepts work. Ereshkigal is both on the tour and in her office at the same time, because neither time nor space binds her. Just like how Erika and Chelsea are both here and in their own cubicles, monitoring their charges.*

Well that was about the dumbest thing Sloan heard today. Fucking conceptual entities, why were they even a thing Sloan ever in her life needed to think about? She wanted to stop scrambling for contingencies and have them bumrush the portal, Ereshkigal be damned. What power did she hold over them anyway? Could concepts hurt each other? That would make even less sense. Everything Sloan said had some arbitrary rule to diddle her. When down below something had happened to Mami, Homura and Sayaka were fighting, Kyoko and Nagisa already dead. She wanted out of this damn white office and this stupid cramped cubicle, she needed to do SOMETHING, fix EVERYTHING, end this awful migraine.

She opened her mouth to spout some obscenity but remembered the void of sound and closed it right after.

Ramsey's face lit up. She raised a hand like in elementary school. *Oh, oh, I know, I can do this, I can do this! I can really do this, oh my god I can. I can.*

Do what, said Sloan.

Ereshkigal likes me. Ramsey beamed. *Everyone does, at least a little. I can distract her. She can only split her attention so many ways—she's not as powerful as Madoka—and she's*

probably already near her limit. I can distract her while you guys get through the portal. I know I can!

Sloan looked from Delaney to Erika and tallied mental bets on which would be first to declare the plan infeasible. For a long time neither said anything. Long enough that Sloan considered venturing an affirmation to Ramsey's idea.

But Delaney did eventually speak. *If Madoka is truly in danger, I'd feel more secure with a stronger plan.*

Do you have one? said Ramsey.

No.

Then it's settled, we do it. We can't wait forever! Ramsey reached for the door's handle.

What we are doing is incredibly impulsive, said Erika. *The prohibition against our using the portal is not without cause. It was placed by the Goddess Madoka herself to protect us. If we return to the physical plane, we suffer risk of permanent death.*

Sayaka mentioned the same thing. A flicker of pause slowed the gnashing gears in Sloan's head. If Homura proved too much and killed either of them, Delaney or Erika... No. That scenario could not happen. Either way, Sloan had lost too much to cut losses. Either she reversed the destruction or she drilled herself so far into the ground to make her own immolation via friction the most spectacular of all time. Try that for gambler's fallacy.

As part of the Law of the Cycles, our chief duty is to ensure the defense and protection of Madoka Kaname. Delaney finally stood from her chair and tucked it beneath her desk. *Death in her name is but an afterthought for one alive solely by her intercession.*

Indeed. Erika extended an arm and indicated for Sloan to exit. *I pray Sloan is not mistaken in her judgment.*

They filed out the cubicle and followed Ramsey down the aisles. The girls who ran back and forth with trolleys and files maybe heard, if not the whole thing, snippets of their conversation, enough to be alarmed at least. But none reacted, none did anything but continue on their business. They must be used to tuning out extraneous conversation from their perfectly clear minds. God this was a weird fucking place. It got weirder the more Sloan mulled it over, the more she considered that nothing she saw had any physicality to it. Spirits and illusion. Mary Wright could use a quill and Delaney a pen because neither existed. Like Neo in *The Matrix*. Bending spoons.

If Sloan used her power to perceive through this hollow shroud, what would she discover behind it? She decided not to try.

Nice coat by the way, love. Delaney tilted her head and winked. *It fits your body a lot better.*

That girl I mentioned, Mami, she got it for me.

Ooh, does Sloaney-woaney have a new giiiiir!fwiend?

Pretty sure she's dead now.

Oh.

The conversation could have died there, but Sloan decided now was as good a time as any to clear up the last mystery of the evening.

What happens to a girl when she's filled with despair but Madoka can't get to her?

None of her three companions responded immediately. Ramsey, in the lead, rubbed her throat while Erika made no reaction whatsoever. Delaney inspected her fingernails.

Madoka has never failed to reach a Puella Magi, said Erika. At least in this universe. In a previous one, however, those who succumbed to despair transformed into monsters.

Witches, said Delaney. The final form of a Magical Girl. Far more powerful, and far more terrifying. Sort of like archons. They create labyrinths to lure victims inside. They spread curses. Once a Magical Girl becomes one, she cannot return.

Sayaka mentioned witches during their conversation in Omaha's void. Once again Sloan got that uncanny feeling she had unraveled merely a tiny corner of an overarching tapestry, that events beyond her comprehension swirled around and propelled her one way or another. Silly girls talked about fate, predestination—as though a deity had a grand plan for their lives. Sloan knew no deity gave a shit about her, not even this oh-so-exalted Madoka. But she could understand the concept of fate in another way, as paths set in motion by the structures that held up this world, cells of a jail into which mortals were born and had no chance to escape. Death, despair, failure.

Again that hesitation: She had already killed Clair. She had already killed the Minneapolis girls and Erika and Delaney. She had already killed Kyoko and Nagisa and Mami. Why was she leading Erika and Delaney once more into the breach to die again?

We're here, said Ramsey. They reached the end of the infinite office complex. Ereshkigal stood at the entrance with a new group of neophytes. She enacted puffstool elocution in ancient Mesopotamian and the girls bobbed heads in agreement. Sloan sidled behind Delaney as the tour group forged past them into the offices, but Ereshkigal's absorption in her own words was total enough to render surreptitiousness superfluous.

A plain white door hovered in the plain white wall. Ramsey inched toward it, stood on tiptoe to peer inside even though absolutely nothing was visible.

What's your plan, said Sloan.

Delaney gave Ramsey a small shoulder rub. Perhaps it won't be so hard. Normally girls here don't ever want to leave—the serene peace of the afterlife far outstrips the misery that forms their last memories of life. But we shouldn't be lax, we likely only have one chance.

Trust me. Ramsey balled her fists and donned a serious face. I've mucked up a lot. I won't muck up now. You'll see, Sloan. You'll all see.

She broke away from Delaney's grasp and ventured inside the room. The moment she crossed the threshold she vanished, absorbed entirely by the light. Sloan leaned close to the door to better perceive something beyond it, but Erika yanked her back with a tug and indicated her to act casual with a sharp motion.

Nothing happened. They stood in group. Girls flitted between the offices. The static of their conversations fizzled in Sloan's inner ear.

Um, Miss Ereshkigal? said Ramsey's voice.

Hello, Chelsea. What brings you to my office? Is something the matter?

Um. Yes. Yes, something's the matter. I want to talk to you about love, Miss Ereshkigal.

Erika put palm to face. Delaney covered a snigger. *Love?* said Ereshkigal. Disinterested, distant. As though demanding the elucidation of a word poorly heard.

Yes. Pause. Love. Pause. I'm well aware that, as concepts, we are incapable of feeling erotic love or the physical pleasures that come from it. I want to instead speak about... platonic love.

Platonic love. The same disinterest.

Yeah, you know. Love that stems from... admiration? And, uh, just liking someone? That kind of love.

Erika's hand remained plastered to her face. *Ready Plan B, this is going nowhere.*

But Sloan had no Plan B. Instead she listened to Ereshkigal:

And what, pray tell, pertaining to platonic love do you wish to speak? Shall we discuss platonic love as defined by the philosopher Plato himself? In which a beautiful being inspires another being to become spiritually edified?

Uh yeah that.

I have presided over this realm almost since its inception, Chelsea. As the first Puella Magi—in this universe at least—I was designated by the Goddess Madoka to become its warden during her mandated absences. As such, I have observed the love between humans in all its forms across all the centuries of humankind. From those observations I have written several treatises on elements of the spectrum of human emotion, which you may peruse during your leisure in our Archives. However since you have already come to me I will impart to you a brief description of my findings.

This actually might be working, said Delaney.

But is it working enough? said Sloan. *When do we go in?*

Now's good as time as any.

She grabbed Sloan's wrist and led the way through the door, Erika at Sloan's back. As they stepped through the blindingly white threshold, Ereshkigal droned:

In truth, I have yet to notice love in the way Plato describes it among mere humans. I notice it frequently among our own types, as their love toward Madoka and the beautiful and wondrous miracles she creates has often ameliorated the vulgar dispositions of sour or depraved girls. Her beauty does indeed enlighten and edify, and to love her in a non-platonic way would be sacrilege.

The interior of Ereshkigal's office had altered since Sloan last visited it, unless the first room Sloan entered after coming to this astral plane wasn't her office but some kind of reception area. The dimensions had expanded and rows upon rows of wooden shelves provided structure to the otherwise-nebulous whiteness. At the fore of the office, behind a lima bean desk with a three-screened computer, Ereshkigal sat. She leaned over the desk on her elbows while Ramsey sat opposite her and nodded along to her words. She did not glance in their direction as they entered, and Delaney soon pulled her behind a row of shelves.

Among humans I instead have witnessed four kinds of love. The first love is erotic love and involves base sexual pleasures. It is not a type of love worth dignifying with a nineteen-thousand word dissertation, although in my diligence I have indeed written a nineteen-thousand word essay on the subject. However given the way you conducted your life on Earth, Chelsea, I feel you are no stranger to this type of love and thus a longwinded explanation will be unnecessary.

Holy shit could this really be working? They were already out of direct sight, the three of them ducking behind the shelves. It oughtta be easy street from here—Well, no, of course not. Not far down the aisle, atop a small librarian stepladder, a second Ereshkigal tapped her finger along the spines of the tomes on the top shelf. She found one she liked and extricated it before she climbed down the stepladder with graceful swan steps made more impressive by her unending gown. Sloan and Delaney and Erika froze against the shelves as she cracked the book open and walked past them, her nose buried within the pages.

The second kind of love is familial love. The love between those related by blood. Like erotic love it is a base form of love, rooted in the physicality of DNA, meaningless outside shared genetic dispositions and humors. However on an instinctual level this love can be the most powerful love of all, as when a mother loves her daughter enough to sacrifice her life. Although you never knew motherhood, I bore five children prior to my death at the age of nineteen. Three of those children failed to survive past early infancy, and even their deaths wracked my heart with agony and demanded of me immense fortitude. It was the death of my eldest daughter, at the age of 5, that ultimately undid me. Such a pointless death, to illness. The sight of her corpse plunged me into a darkness from which only our Goddess Madoka Kaname could deliver me. And yet, once I became part of the Law of the Cycles, the fate of my final child, my young son, suddenly meant nothing to me. That he lived a long life and fathered many children of his own only registered as a brief footnote in my annals of the human species.

The moment the second Ereshkigal passed, Erika gestured for them to move. They kept low along the side of the shelves, Delaney in the lead pausing at every junction of aisles to check

in case more Ereshkigals drifted around. Like the offices, the aisles of shelves stretched forever. The identical spines of the books bore titles in a script alien to Sloan.

I'm sorry for your loss, said Ramsey.

The third kind of love is perhaps the closest analogue to the true definition of platonic love that mortal humans harbor. It is a nonsexual love between friends, generally rooted in mutual respect and admiration. It differs from true platonic love in that it has nothing to do with beauty and it has nothing to do with spiritualism. It is the love that causes two people unrelated by blood to sacrifice their lives for one another. It is the love that cannot be rent by petty squabbles and strife. It is the love that our Goddess, our Madoka Kaname somehow managed to hold in her heart not solely for her own friends but for all Puella Magi, all humankind, all life in general. Her capacity for this love transcends the capabilities of any normal human, any normal being. Transcends the love of you or I, of all the girls in this sphere combined. A love so great she obliterated her physical form to express it.

Delaney held a hand to stop. Ahead down the aisle two Ereshkigals worked, back to back as they perused opposite shelves. With Erika taking the lead, they doubled back to a junction, crept along the rows, found a new aisle clear of conceptual copies. They moved faster. The shelves seemed to curve over them, distorted like a fisheye lens. Sloan remembered the library in Williston—eons ago. Where she had her first conversation with Omaha as they walked hand-in-hand between the monolith shelves.

I see! said Ramsey. So that's why Madoka is so great? Not to insinuate there has to be a reason of course, but you know a lot of time it can be hard to, uh, y'know, conceptualize her greatness? If that makes sense? Sorry if I don't make sense.

Ahead shone a bright light that coated the wood-colored shelves in whiteness. They bore toward the light at a full sprint.

It's quite alright, Chelsea. You are still new, your integration into the cohesive whole remains incomplete. Asking these questions and receiving answers from the proper authorities is key to your development as a secretary of the Law of the Cycles. Indeed you are correct. It is Madoka Kaname's beautiful sacrifice that gives meaning to her greatness. Power came to her not through her own will. She did not earn it, had no obligation toward it. She had, perhaps, no comprehension of her strength when she made her wish. She was not born a Goddess. For her then to act with the justness, the reason, and the rectitude of one was itself an act of ascension regardless of the quotidian karmic cycles that propelled her to this state. She simultaneously became a God in mind as well as body, and none, not I or you or any girl here, could replace her, could fulfill her true duty toward humanity.

I see, said Ramsey.

The shelves melted away into the white. All became white, ahead and behind, Delaney and Erika and Sloan herself, arms and legs vanished into the aether. Ahead the whiteness focused, intensified, stretched like a maw.

That's it, said Delaney. That's the portal to the physical plane. You have to lead us, love. Visualize where you want to go and take us there.

Visualize where to go. She remembered the last place she had been—the bizarre labyrinth, with the ribbons and gifts and unreal colors. With the strange creature, the witch, that spawned from Mami's corpse. She closed her eyes to see it better but even with her eyes closed everything remained a perfect white. She did not even know if her eyes were open or shut.

But I digress, said Ereshkigal.

Go, love. Take us there. Take us to Madoka.

The fourth and final kind of love is the love of self.

Sloan stepped into the portal.

Her Pale Fire She Something Something

And stepped into color. A lot of it. Fast and vicious color, a stark juxtaposition from before. Sloan had to blink hard to adjust, and even then little of the topography coalesced. She missed the fact she was falling until her boots crashed onto a tabletop and her legs buckled and she scraped her face against the wood. Scraped but at least felt something unlike the senseless void of heaven. She let her body flop against the hard surface while Delaney and Erika stuck perfect landings behind her.

The table stretched ahead what looked like forever, laden with china and candlesticks and headless swine the severed stumps of the latter stuffed with apples. Below the table writhed a snake den of yellow ribbons, slick and coiled eels that churned over each other and blotted any semblance of ground.

One glance and my misgivings are put to rest, said Erika. *A witch labyrinth should not exist in this universe.*

"You can talk normally now," said Sloan, rising.

"Oh, right." Erika's voice cracked. She groped her throat and retried. "There. Better."

"We have vocal chords again!" said Delaney. "This is real flesh and blood! But ahem, serious business time. Madoka is inside this labyrinth, Sloan love?"

Sloan rubbed her scraped face. "No," she said. "I think she's in Homura Akemi's apartment, outside the labyrinth." Not that she knew for sure. But Sayaka had been trying to get inside, so it seemed a safe bet.

A bizarre, cartoonish figure dressed like a maid and with red hair plus ponytail skirted past, carting a tray with tea. The figure paid them no heed as it conducted its business.

"A familiar," said Erika. She drew her katana and brandished it defensively while the maid-thing tottered away. "We best be on our guard while we search for the exit."

"Yes, very well," Delaney added with a sigh. In her hand materialized a scepter with a tremendous ruby at its end. "Time is of the essence."

Shit. Sloan forgot. "Homura can freeze time." She waited a response from her allies but they regarded the information with silent wonder. To fill the void, Sloan added: "I think it doesn't work if you touch her. Like Omaha's power. Right now she's fighting Sayaka, who's immune for some reason, so maybe she won't use it unless she needs to."

"Who's Sayaka," said Erika. She led the way down the tabletop.

God dammit, how much would Sloan have to explain. She already forgot what she had and hadn't told them. "She's uh, another girl like you, who came back to save Madoka."

"What do these girls look like," said Erika.

"Uh, Homura has, uh." She tried to remember the picture in Mami's apartment, the small glimpse before Mami died. Instead she just remembered Omaha. "She has long dark hair."

"Love, we're in Japan, you'll need to be more specific."

"She looks like Omaha. Like, a lot like Omaha."

"Who's Omaha," said Erika.

Erika didn't know *Omaha*? That had to be wrong, Omaha was the one who—well, Erika never knew her name. "Invisible girl."

"Ah."

"I have a question of my own," said Delaney. "Is Omaha Homura?"

"I think they're clones. Or some bullshit. Sayaka mentioned something about it." Most of these explanations weren't even useful. Sloan kept her eyes peeled for Homura's dolls, because if they saw them before they got to Homura they were mega fucked.

Instead she saw a different thing, bundled in a web of gold threads and suspended in the nebulous space between up and down. A girl in gold armor, arms bound, legs bound, wriggling her head. Moments after Sloan noticed her, she noticed them.

"Hey. Hey," she said. "Hey you guys. Hey. Help me out here. Please."

"Who's that," said Erika.

"Nobody important." Not even one of the Chicago girls Sloan recognized. Of which there were only like three: Cicero, Berwyn, and the one with the bigass sword.

Delaney waved at the Chicago girl as they passed. "Toodloo, dear. We've more pressing matters to which we must attend!"

"Hey, hey, no wait, hey," said the girl.

They continued down the table, Erika setting a brisk pace and getting brisker until they were basically jogging. More maid-creatures skittered in the opposite direction, some with different colored hair, blue and pink and white. If the witch was, as Delaney said, a Magical Girl's final form, did that make this labyrinth some vivid expunge of her shattered psyche? Ribbons, presents, tea, dinner. And the hair color of her automaton helpers followed suspicious patterns.

The incipient embryo of an idea, a tiny kernel, generated in her mind. Something to fix Mami. And bring back Kyoko and Nagisa. She remembered something Sayaka told her—

"I've got an idea for dealing with stopped time," said Delaney. Before either Sloan or Erika asked what, she waved her scepter. Two tiny bubbles formed from its ruby. One zipped at

Sloan's forehead and burst in a deluge of blood that dribbled down the bridge of her nose, the other similarly struck Erika.

Sloan pawed at the blood. "What—"

"No no no, love, don't touch." Delaney waved a stern finger. "Leave it there, let it dry onto your skin. You too Erika, stop it stop it stop."

Erika's fingers curled near her face, the tips trembling not to touch. "What is the purpose of this!"

"Usually when blood leaves your body, it's no longer part of you. But not mine! Because I'm a weird freak with a goofy power. I can control my blood even when it's not in my body— where do you think those bubbles come from? That means the blood on your foreheads is still very much alive, and still very much part of me."

"Which means you're technically 'touching' us," said Erika.

"Very good, very good. That's exactly it. Now, all I need to do is douse the hitherto-unseen Homura Akemi with a surprise attack and pow! We're immune to her time magic, all three of us."

Sloan saw the logic but it felt tenuous at best. The blood pooled on a raised eyebrow. "You're sure this'll work?"

"I know the capacities of my own power very well, love. Do you take me for a dilettante?"

Since Sloan had no clue what that word meant, no.

"I see an exit." Erika pointed with her sword into the abominable cluster of polyblobs that formed the canopy of their uncertain space. Ahead, above where the table stopped with a splintered edge, flickered a frantic crack from which light exuded.

They hastened their pace to reach the end of the table. The tablecloth, ragged and frayed, dangled into oblivion below. Presents and food tumbled down the abyss.

Delaney tapped her staff against the table. A large bubble enveloped them and floated toward the glowing crack. "Alright. Keep your eyes out for an Omaha-looking girl with long dark hair, is that it love?"

"Watch out for dolls too." The spherical confines of the bubble forced them to shuffle closer to remain balanced.

The bubble continued to rise. The crack was farther than it looked, seconds passed. Sloan tapped her foot, the bubble jiggled, Delaney glared at her to stop.

They finally reached the exit. The moment the sloped side of their vehicle hit the source of light, the entire landscape changed with a chain-reaction flash. The random hodgepodge of Dadaist vomit shifted to an external scene, descending daylight, apartments and towers. Homura Akemi's apartment stood atop a precipitous pillar of jagged rock and marble. It

loomed so high in the sky Sloan honestly had no way to know if it were actually her apartment. But what other apartment would it fucking be.

The rest of the area remained unchanged. Just a random stone pillar extended out of the ground. God damn it Homura.

Sloan had to save her griping, the words half-formed in her mouth, because they weren't alone. A few wayward (mostly dead) Chicago girls milled among the cobblestones, the live ones attempting to crawl away from the cracks Sloan and company emerged from, which spread across the ground with grasping, probing tendrils.

Sayaka and Homura clashed between the cracks. They weaved in and out with lunges and parries and expert coordination of their footsteps. About a million swords gravitated around Sayaka, her body drenched in blood that ran from gashes across her skull and shoulders and limbs and back, gashes that healed the instant she received them. Homura, untouched, wove between Sayaka's attacks and returned fire at an extreme pace, bullets from weapons not even automatic, and nearly every shot hit Sayaka because Sayaka with a red glint in her eye made no effort to dodge unless the shot aimed at her Soul Gem. It took all of two milliseconds for Sloan to appraise Sayaka as not winning this fight, she looked less like a living thing and more like a golem animated to continue despite structural failure.

The bubble burst. A cascade of blood splattered around them as they landed onto the cobblestone. Delaney swung her staff at the duel and the blood swirled forward in a thick spiral. By the time Homura tore her gaze away from her adversary it was too late. The blood slammed into her with enough force to knock her off her feet and carry her into the pillar of crag.

She bounced off the rocks and hit the ground catlike, four limbed. The shield churned, time stopped, and Sloan could actually cognize the concept of "time stopping" because she and Delaney and Erika remained animated, active, able to move despite the omnipresent grayscale around them. Sayaka also remained active, although this time Sloan saw why: the dark cable that connected her to a portal beside a nearby tenement. Omaha's portal.

Homura and Sayaka halted their fight and regarded Sloan's new companions.

"Who are you," said Homura.

Sayaka heaved with breath and brushed a blood-clumped tuft of hair from her face.

Delaney bowed with a dramatic flourish of a gloved hand. "Who we are is unimportant, but since you asked. I am Delaney Pollack, this is my associate Erika Dufresne. We come from the afterlife to ascertain the whereabouts of one Madoka Kaname, have you heard of her?"

"Madoka must be in that apartment." Sloan pointed at the momentous pillar. "Why else would she lift it into the sky."

"I assumed that, love," Delaney whispered between gritted teeth, "It's *called* socializing."

Homura reached behind her shield and drew another gun, which Sloan couldn't identify because it was a real gun and not a bogus fake one like an arquebus. "Could the Incubator plan even this? It doesn't matter. You'll never take her. You'll never take Madoka back there!"

"So you do have her," said Erika. "Very well. Negotiations have ceased."

Her lithe form darted forward, a blur of purple. By the time either Sloan or Delaney took a single step she swung down on Homura, who raised her shield to absorb the blow and fired her gun into Erika's knee. Erika knelt hard while her katana returned for a swift second strike, which came the same moment Sayaka rushed forward and renewed her assault on Homura, all wounds healed and a fresh coat of blood rippling across her body. Homura cartwheeled backward to evade the flurry of blades and raked a new gun across them both, except the moment they absorbed her bullets Delaney scampered onto the scene to drench them in blood.

Time resumed.

A lightning-paced three-versus-one ensued. The girls moved so fast Sloan had trouble watching them, the scene of their combat shifting quicker than she could move her head. The fuck was this, Delaney and Erika never had this speed in Williston. When did death become a powerup? She didn't bother summoning a turret.

Instead she ran for the awkward pillar of stone which propped Homura's apartment in the sky. At least a few hundred feet, which chucked a wrench in Sloan's embryonic plan to revive Mami and the others. Probably a bad plan. A don't-even-fucking-try-it-Sloan plan. And yet a plan with intoxicating allure because the more she considered it, the more she replayed what Sayaka and Omaha told her, the more she knew it would work.

Well, it would work if she made it to Madoka. Which right now looked like substantial rock climbing.

(Also dolls, gotta remember the dolls.)

She checked on the fight. Sayaka lay facedown in a pool of blood. For a moment she looked kinda dead but she flipped to her feet and charged back screaming, aided by her own regeneration and Delaney's. Delaney hovered apart from the battle's brunt, establishing strategic bubbles either to block bullets from Homura's weirdly ordinary arsenal or form platforms that Erika and Sayaka bounced between while Homura darted among the tenements. Dizzying intensity of strikes from Sayaka especially, Erika cleaner, more composed, but agile and compact in her thinness. Despite the two-pronged assault, Homura remained not even nicked. Hard to tell with Delaney's blood all over—even if Homura did get hit, wouldn't it instantly heal her?—but she appeared to evade every slice levied her direction. These girls were another level from Sloan in terms of raw mechanical prowess. All your video game vitals: Str, Spd, Skl. Like when devs code a spawn box wrong and you blunder into an enemy intended for way later and it takes one damn look to know you're fucked. Cicero, okay, she's a bulky motherfucker, a boss monster sure. But doable. You can take her down with focus fire, it's just her HP is high, maybe she hits hard, but overall in striking distance. These girls, no way.

Erika, Delaney, said Sloan. Can you take her?

She's formidable, love. Delaney maneuvered her bubbles to defend Sayaka and Erika as they lunged with coordinated attacks. But her weapons are too rudimentary, they're quite easy to block.

Once I, learn her, patterns! Another swipe from Erika cleaved empty air where Homura had stood moments prior. Then it'll take but one stroke.

What's the name of blueberry blast, love? Delaney cocked her head toward Sayaka amid a four-sword blitz. She comes across rather unhinged, it's poor for strategy.

Sayaka. Her name's Sayaka. Which did not snap Sayaka from her delirium. Her strikes barely finished before she swung another, her arms pinwheeling so fast she looked like a Hindu goddess. Sayaka, Sayaka, are you listening?

Sayaka said nothing. Only attacked.

Well, they seemed to have it under control at least. Sloan returned to the insurmountable pillar of jagged boulders and layered limestone. Like Homura simply wrenched a rough cylinder of crust out the earth's surface to put her damn apartment in a more defensible position. If Sloan tried to mountaineer it, Homura might spot her well before the summit, even with three uncepts on her plate. Sloan needed a faster way.

Erika. Gimme a gust.

Erika sagged to a knee as a bullet penetrated her ankle. Delaney's blood wrenched the chunk of metal from the wound and sealed it. *Gust? I'm busy.*

Think about what I said.

But Erika bounded into action without a word. Goddammit. She should've asked Delaney for a bubble, Delaney probably caught the drift, but Sloan figured the wind went faster. Homura probably wasn't a total idiot, maybe she already knew Sloan's aim. Hard to tell, her blood-caked face betrayed no discomposure. Her eyes glazed in a vapid, disinterested stare.

The moment Homura diverted her attention to shoot Sayaka in the head with a handgun, however, a vicious updraft swept beneath Sloan. Her coat billowed around her as her body left the ground and soared upward. She lost control of herself, carried on the whims of the gale, flipping and turning and flapping as the city spread around her. It looked like Minneapolis, in a way, in the way all cities to some extent look like one another, have the same sprawl of structures and skyscrapers. Bigger than Minneapolis, less snow, less fog. But a place of widespread human habitation. A city.

And boom, the wind released her, she hovered a brief moment in air as Homura Akemi's apartment greeted her at the top of the stone pedestal. She landed with a soft plop on a sliver of the cobblestone road that had risen with it, although she had to cling close to the structure's façade to prevent falling. She checked over her shoulder. No sign of Homura racing after her. Either she didn't notice or the trio kept her occupied, didn't matter. Now was Sloan's shot.

Except the front door was shut.

God.

Fucking.

DAMN.

Sloan seized the knob and tried to twist it anyway on the prayer that Homura took the time to ascend her apartment to an unassailable sky fortress but forgot to lock the door. She hadn't forgot.

Fuck fuck fuck. She sidled along the lip of ground in search of an alternate entrance, although the odds of Homura having left some obvious ventilation shaft into her headquarters struck Sloan as exceedingly unlikely. Her options narrowed. She studied the apartment's façade in search of a way to the roof. A few ledges and gables, Sloan could probably parkour it, but the high altitude made her uneasy and she wasn't sure she should try it for another dead end. Maybe if she had nothing else to do. Which it looked like she did.

Bah. Maybe best anyway. Remove Sloan from the equation, let Delaney and Erika handle it. People at the right level for the Satan sort of raid boss. She did her one random redemptive thing by traveling to heaven and pulling down some firepower, now she should sit tight and let "fate" dictate the rest. Her new plan to fix things had a dangerous edge anyway. But. But sitting and doing nothing when she had an idea of how to do something sat so ill it made her queasy, or maybe the vertiginous view of the streets below did that.

Wait. Window. Sloan crept to the nearest and peered best she could between a gap in the curtains. If Sloan twisted herself over or under or to the left or to the right, she could angle her tiny view inside to collect piecemeal images and puzzle them together in her head. The room looked mostly white. A few pieces of minimalist furniture, ottomans and divans. Something scrapbook-like, maybe a bulletin board.

And a whole bunch of creepy dolls, each staring directly at her. Sloan suppressed a shiver and tried to count them. At least ten, they clustered close together it was hard to tell, plus she had to keep redirecting her view to even see so she might be counting twice. But a lot, more than in Williston for sure. Amid them, smack in the center of their glut: a girl with pink hair.

Madoka Kaname. Miss Law of the Cycles incarnate. Winner of the coveted Cutie Patootie Award since the dawn of creation.

She languished on a couch, her eyes fixed on something or on nothing. She rocked back and forth like she was hypnotized. She certainly appeared unaware of the world around her, or that she sat inside an apartment a few hundred feet in the air on a narrow column of dirt.

The dolls definitely saw Sloan. Why didn't they attack? Well, if Omaha had the ability to open a portal anywhere in the universe, they probably had to keep close to make sure she didn't simply yoink Madoka out of the blue. Plus, since Sloan was stuck outside, they had no reason to worry about her. How much leeway did Sloan have before they got aggressive?

Let's find out! Sloan angled her view through the gap in the curtains to align herself directly with Madoka. She pressed a palm to the pane and focused a small beam of light, nothing weaponized, the barest possible energy expenditure. The beam sailed through the glass like light usually does and struck Madoka in her face.

The dolls did not move. Madoka remained still a few seconds, her attention rapt on whatever was in front of her, but when Sloan amped up the power of her light, she gave an abrupt blink and turned away, rubbing her face.

Hey. Hey, Madoka. Can you hear me?

Although Madoka blinked some more and examined the interior of the apartment, she made no response. Maybe she couldn't speak English? But then she'd say something in Japanese. Maybe some anti-telepathy magic in the barrier. Sloan almost laughed, because Homura put so much care and diligence into making her apartment impenetrable, but Sloan could still get through with light because a window that let in no light was a mirror and to have mirrors for windows would alert even the dopest of Cutie Patooties to the true nature of your evil lair.

Still no response from the dolls, although they shuffled around to keep with Madoka as she blundered to her feet and took tepid steps around the couch. She opened her mouth and moved her lips but whatever she said did not osmose through the barrier.

Sloan angled her light to again strike Madoka's eye, which this time forced an immediate flinch. Madoka discerned the source immediately. She saw Sloan.

She saw Sloan.

Part of Sloan could not believe this was real, that her dumb light magic had some specific application that allowed her to solve this problem, but she reined her enthusiasm. Madoka tiptoed closer to the window, tilting her head for a better view, Sloan herself probably looking like a disembodied eye, the rest of her concealed by curtain. Madoka opened her mouth again and no sound emerged. She moved closer to the window.

From her entourage of dolls, two broke away and sprinted toward Sloan. Sloan almost reared back and toppled off the edge but instead lunged to the side as they drew back their arms and hurled their spears at her. The spears sailed through the window, somehow without shattering it (oh that's right, the dolls go through walls). Both missed, but Sloan had little room for evasion up here. She glanced at the façade. Time to put fears of parkour to rest.

One lunge to grab a second-story windowsill and swing for momentum. She flipped onto the eave, which loosened and cracked under her weight as she bounded for more solid ground. Instead she bounced into an Escher array of towers and architectural oddities, jutting platforms and the like. Dickensian smokestacks expunged bilious puffs into the darkening air. Sloan wheeled, searched for an exit. Only up.

Something that felt like a chainsaw shredded through her hip. She screamed in pain and lost her balance, consumed by the agony of the rend on her body, but when she looked she saw no wound at all, only a doll's spear protruding without blood. Fuck, that's right, the spears do no damage but hurt like hell. She ripped the spear away with another scream as she sagged

against a parapet and manifested her turret. By the time she swiveled to fire, every motion sluggish and pained, both dolls beset her. One spear rammed through her foot but the spear she watched and expended her energy to evade was the one levied for the Soul Gem on her stomach. Tassel hat doll for the foot and short blonde for the stomach, Sloan maybe encountered both these before (unsure about blondie, but tassel hat was pretty distinctive).

How did she even fight these things before? By running away, she remembered.

She tore her foot from the spear and leapt to the next layer of rooftop, misjudging her height and angle because of her gimped foot and hitting the eave with her knees. Her body slammed onto the sloped rooftop and she scrambled for something to grab as she slid back, clawing shingles that tore off in her hands. She dropped onto her back amid the dolls. Both stared at her with swirly psychedelic eyes and giggled.

Her gun, which she dropped on the roof as she clambered for traction, rolled off and toppled onto her ribcage. She twisted and grunted and the dolls went into hysterics.

A soft but pleasant voice asked something in Japanese from below. Madoka? She had opened the door! The dolls froze at the sound and gave Sloan the window to launch her gun into the blonde one. The second rammed its spear down but Sloan was already rolling. She flung herself off the edge and fell to the tiny lip of cobblestone before the front door.

Madoka stood in the doorway, one hand on the jamb as her head searched the surrounding area. But her eyes remained dim, listless, empty. She saw but saw nothing, not the vista of Mitakihara below the apartment, not the purple-headed birds in the sky, not Sloan on the ground at her feet. An invisible cloud swirled about her head. Ten or so dolls clustered around her, a living(?) aegis to separate her and Sloan.

For a brief second Sloan groped for her gun only to remember she threw it and that was all the time she got before the dolls from their dollhouse door launched their dollhouse spears at her. Sloan prone on her side had one option, one direction to go, and rather than have ten shafts penetrating her soul she swung herself off the narrow lip of cobblestone and into the open air.

Down, down, down she went. The purple-headed birds cawed. The dolls peered over the cliff and waved at her as she went.

Sloan had a long time to think about how long she fell before she hit the ground.

She did not hit the ground. Not at first at least. She fell until the tenements appeared around her before a flash enveloped her and the world around her warped and the patchwork quilt of Mami Tomoe's labyrinth replaced it.

Then she hit the ground. Or the table. The impact send shockwaves along the wood and rattled the platters of stuffed pork, the fine china and the silverware. Cups of tea upended.

Well.

Things could be worse. Her back only felt kinda broken, after all. She lay on the table for a minute, which turned into two minutes, which turned into five.

She attempted to rise and winced with a seething ache. Her second attempt went a little better and by her third she managed to sit up. She massaged the daze out of her temples and rubbed her eyes to wipe away the mystification from the lightshow in the labyrinth's canopy. The exit to the real world flickered above. Nothing to stop her from climbing out and trying again. She could get Madoka to open the front door, she only needed a way to deal with the dolls. If the dolls let her pull the same charade with the curtains again. They might cotton to her devilish schemes.

Whatever. The common denominator remained the dolls. Deal with the dolls, acquire Madoka. Wrack brains and think. Be creative, Madoka only had maybe twelve to protect her. Sloan did not even need to defeat them, only get around them. Easy goddam peasy compared to some of the bullshit plans she had to slap together in Minneapolis.

Minneapolis. Shit, Sloan knew exactly what she had to do. She lurched to her feet and winced from the residual pain. Everything hurt like hell, especially the spots where the dolls hit her. The pain would ebb away, no more time to wait. Who knew how long Delaney and Erika could hold against Homura. She needed to find Hennepin, and fast.

And since Hennepin had not been among the girls outside the labyrinth, it meant she had to be inside. Sloan stared down the endless table into the inner reaches of the labyrinth. With a pronounced limp she slouched away from the exit, although it only took a few hobbled steps to get her fucked-up legs working at a faster click. Faster not being fast enough. Jesus dick, the spears never hurt so much in Minneapolis. The hell was wrong with her, did the dolls up their power?

On a hunch she slid a hand into her coat and retrieved her Soul Gem. It fizzled with darkness, sharp purple electricity among the amber hue. How much magic had she used since the night prior? Sure she'd used a lot of firepower at Mami's apartment, and took a beatdown from Cicero, but she'd been in the Magical Girl rodeo three years now and knew her limits, and her limits ran deeper than that. Plus she barely felt hopeless at all, in fact with Delaney and Erika back in the game she had plenty to hope for. So her gem's state made no sense.

More of the cartoony maids with colorful hair zipped hither and thither alongside the table. Sloan wondered if they dropped cubes. She summoned her gun and summarily blasted one to cinders. It dropped diddly.

I find your movement patterns quite illogical, said a familiar voice. She turned as Kyubey trotted up to her, readied a pounce with four limbs and landed on her shoulder with one agile hop. *You are well aware of the exit, yet you move away from it. Did the impact of your fall compromise the ability of your poorly-defended brain to think rationally?*

"I'm doing something," said Sloan. "What the hell are you doing here? You don't show up much lately."

My presence in Mitakihara would likely only inspire Homura Akemi to rash acts of violence. His swishing tail brushed her hair. *However, given the extremely rare circumstances*

that have transpired here, I have dispatched several of my bodies to observe the proceedings.

"You mean this place, right. This labyrinth."

Correct. Witches are not allowed to exist in this universe. And because we have no memory of the previous universe where witches did exist, we have only had the opportunity to observe a real witch once before. Thus, the data we collect here is of high value to us.

They passed the tied-up Chicago girl. She appeared asleep, or maybe Mami's witch murdered her. She no longer wore gold armor, but a schoolgirl outfit.

"The first witch was Homura, wasn't it. Sayaka mentioned something about that."

Correct. We conducted an experiment to test what happened to a Magical Girl when she was removed from the Law of the Cycles. While we confirmed our hypothesis, our experiment had an unintended effect which led to Miss Akemi's current position.

"Let's be real, Kyubes. You're talking to me cuz you're scared I'm gonna fuck shit up. Maybe you're scared I already did."

Please explain.

"Don't tell me it was somehow part of your plan I'd follow that doll to wherever and come back with Delaney and Erika. No way you predicted that."

Indeed, such an event was never considered. We are still unsure what even happened or how, and prior to its occurrence never would have suspected it even possible for a living Magical Girl to travel to and return from the conceptual plane of the Law of the Cycles. He scratched her ear with a back paw. Every move he made brushed his prickly fur against Sloan's ear, which annoyed the shit out of her. As I mentioned earlier, I never expected you to survive the ordeal in Minneapolis, let alone travel to Mitakihara. In that sense, literally everything you have done here has been outside my calculations.

"So what? You'll ask me to stop? Give me a strongly-worded reprimand?"

On the contrary, your every action has only proven fortuitous to our designs. For starters, you opened up the interesting possibility of bringing Miss Kabwe's girls from Chicago to provide a new avenue of assault against Homura Akemi. Even now, your return with Miss Pollack and Miss Dufresne has only bolstered the fighting force, again serving my aims. However, the odds were always high that any action you took would benefit me, due to the simple fact that I am far quicker to alter my projections based on new data than Miss Akemi. In a purely neutral battle subject to random external influences, I would always prove the victor for this reason.

"Ever read the Greeks, Kyubey? They say some stuff about hubris."

Primitive human fiction is of no interest to us. Besides, my statement has already proven true. Take, for instance, the appearance of the girls from Chicago on the playing field. Miss Akemi could have easily predicted them and used them to distract the attention of Sayaka Miki.

Miki. Sayaka Miki, let's remember that one. Always good to know names.

However, Miss Akemi was so focused on fighting Miss Miki and Miss Momoe that she did not even realize the Chicago girls had entered Mitakihara until they attacked you! Which is frankly a baffling oversight on her part. It only goes to show that although she may have the powers of a demigod, she is still limited by her execrable human mental faculties.

Sloan kept in mind that Kyubey had to be talking to her for a reason. This entire adventure he only bothered to show himself when he needed to goad her one direction or another. He didn't waste his time otherwise. "I think you're bluffing. If I didn't come back with Delaney and Erika, Nagisa would be dead and it'd just be Sayaka to fight Homura. Which is bad for you."

The possibility that Miss Miki and Miss Momoe would fail to bring Madoka outside the reach of Miss Akemi's mind-occluding powers has always existed and been accounted for in my designs. Indeed, their success is only necessary for my most optimal victory. The primary goal of eliminating Homura Akemi is inevitable no matter whether Madoka is taken to Omaha's void or not.

It took Sloan a few moments to piece together his meaning as she delved deeper into the labyrinth. Worse things cropped up in her way than stuffed pigs. A Chicago girl lay on a platter split open jaw to navel, filled with the stuffing that fills turkeys. Sloan sidestepped the gory display and forged on unshaken.

"Omaha said something weird like that. She said she knew a way to kill Homura guaranteed, which I remember because it sounded like some bullshit you fed her."

I would not have gone through so much trouble to get so far if once I reached this stage my victory was not one hundred percent assured. As I said, my stratagems involving Miss Miki and the Chicago girls are only to accomplish a more optimal outcome. Should they fail, I can always institute multiple backup plans, the last of which is infallible.

Then why tell her this. He had to be scared. Scared she would render fallible his infallible scheme. Whatever it was. "Let's cut to quick, Kyubey. Tell me why you want me to stop doing whatever I'm doing."

Considering I have absolutely no idea what you're doing, that would be rather difficult. However, I do feel compelled to bring up the point that your meddling has not hurt my plans at all, but has hurt your friends time and again. My original plan, which did not involve the Chicago girls, never required Mami Tomoe or Kyoko Sakura to be in danger. It instead focused on a long war of attrition between Omaha and Miss Akemi, a war Miss Akemi would ultimately lose, even if it took years for her to lapse in her judgment and make a critical misstep. But the entrance of the Chicago girls allowed me to accelerate my original plan, at the cost of the lives of Miss Sakura and Miss Tomoe. While I am willing to sacrifice a handful of Magical Girls to help save the universe—

"Understatement of the century."

— Your newfound relationship with both girls suggests you did not want them to die. In effect, your actions helped me but hurt yourself. The fact that you immediately proceed to endanger

more of your friends, in this case Miss Dufresne and Miss Pollack, is simply illogical. I cannot understand it at all. Even simple organisms adapt from trial and error.

He had to have some inkling what she wanted to do. Had to be nervous.

She reached the table's end. It sloped into the floor, a bed of writhing yellow ribbons, some red mixed in, some other colors beneath the swarm of squid tentacles. No discernible solid ground, no guarantee if Sloan stepped off she wouldn't sink straight down, no guarantee the ribbons would not snap her up and cocoon her like the Chicago girl near the entrance. Nowhere to jump, nowhere to climb, but the route led on.

Additionally, your Soul Gem is in rather poor condition. You suffered an attack from Miss Akemi's dolls, did you not?

Sloan summoned a machine gun and dropped it into the nest of ribbons. The ribbons seethed, flinched away from the dead weight, found it harmless, and crawled around its sleek barrel. The gun did not sink. A maid skirted past.

I suspected as much. Miss Akemi's dolls don't deal conventional wounds with their attacks. They attack hope and inflict despair. You did not need to worry about them in Minneapolis because your Soul Gem was so powerful, but now you are in great danger. Why forego reason and risk your death, as well as the deaths of your friends? My goals are irrelevant. It is purely in your interest to stop what you are doing.

A short hop placed her atop the gun. She balanced as it wobbled. The ribbons tested her feet with tentative coils, but did not grab.

You act with neither regard for human life nor regard for your own life. Why? To what gain?

As much as she would love to summon more guns to create platforms across the sea of ribbons, she didn't have the magic. So she dropped into the pit and braced for a change, an attack, something nasty to emerge out the ground, but the ribbons remained placid. She took her gun and forged down the narrowing tunnel.

"Kyubey, I got a question for you. Was it you who made my sister blind?"

I would never bother to do something so mundane.

The walls of the tunnel narrowed the further she walked, and each step seemed to sink her deeper into the ribbons, until she had to tilt her head to keep it from brushing against the fleshy hardness of the ceiling. The slithery movements of the ribbons were about the most uncomfortable thing ever, but she held her quibbles to herself lest Kyubey make fun of her.

Soon she had to stoop. The tunnel only narrowed and no light appeared at its end. She made her own light, a flash in her hand that pulsed with filthy effervescence. It got more difficult to take steps. She thought she must be going the wrong way, that she missed a junction somewhere. She considered turning back, but didn't doubt herself enough yet.

"Hey!" said a voice. "Who's there? Alsip, is that you?"

Sloan held her hand as far from her face as the tunnel allowed. Ahead a silhouette crouched, light glancing off metal and gold. Mustering an authoritative tone, Sloan said, "Identify yourself!"

"I am Darien, Captain of the Blessed Theocracy of Chicago's 37th Platoon under the direct command of Centurion Cicero the Indefatigable! State your name and allegiance."

The name meant nothing, but Sloan recognized the seven-foot buster sword the girl held half-buried in the ribbons.

"I'm Fargo."

"Fargo!" The sword slid up, clanged against a tunnel wall. Ribbons hissed in pain as it divided them clean. "Surrender your Soul Gem or face the consequences."

"Darien. Let's be real. Situation's changed. Do you even know where you are? Or where any of your friends are?"

"Irrelevant. You are a fugitive wanted by the Empress herself. You shall suffer purgation for your crimes and sins. If I must crawl back to Chicago with you under my arm and my nineteen comrades dead behind me, I shall!"

"Better question: Do you even know where the exit is?"

Darien hesitated. "I will find it."

"Nothing but corpses the way I came."

"How many."

"Huh."

"How many corpses!"

Sloan cobbled a number from the bodies live and dead she had seen inside and outside. "Six. Maybe seven."

A strangle resounded from the silhouette. "No..."

"How many on your side?"

"What does it matter to you? So you know how many more you've left to slay? Well, here is one you'll never strike down!"

Darien held her sword straight in front of her and staggered through the waist-high ribbons. The waving tip clashed against the tunnel's edges and sprayed sparks as she built momentum into a charge. Sloan tried to backpedal, got stuck in the mire, revved her gun instead. By the time the barrel whirred fast enough to fire Darien was on her. She raised the sword, but it hit the ceiling and crashed back down. Darien tripped and staggered face first. The unwieldy blade sliced Sloan's arm as she pressed against the curved wall and let Darien fall past her.

Darien tried to rise and hit her helmet against the ceiling. Sloan considered her options but running was basically impossible. Darien clamored to her feet and tried to turn her sword for another go at Sloan but no way would it turn in the narrow space. She shrieked with frustration and attempted to bash Sloan's brains with the hilt, an action less ineffectual than it looked. After a stunning blow to the forehead Sloan wound up on her ass amid the ribbons. Darien went at her again but as she raised the hilt to bring it down the confines of the tunnel struck back to muddle her aim. Her swing came weak and flimsy and on Sloan's shoulder.

Sloan grabbed her around the waist to hold her from another attack but the effort proved meaningless because Darien slumped against her and started to sob.

"Stickney... Lyons, River Forest... They're dead. They're dead!" She raised her head. In the dim light her face contorted into crumpled forms. "Why did you do this to us. Why did you."

"I didn't want this to happen. My friends are dead too."

Hands slid around Sloan's throat, wet and clammy. In the dim phosphorescence of the tunnel Sloan got her first good look at Darien's face. Either Mexican or Middle Eastern, her hair stringy and black with thin tufts jutting from beneath her helm. Her hands squeezed, Sloan allowed them. They could do nothing to harm her.

They did stifle her vocal chords, however. *I think I can bring them back. Bring everyone back.*

Surely Darien could squeeze harder, at least to snap Sloan's neck. Instead she kept the pressure at a dull medium, constrictive but not damaging. "Liar. Knave!"

You remember the girl from the apartment. The one with the guns and black hair. She stopped time, you saw it right? Sloan wondered if beneath the ribbons, a coil of Omaha's black void still connected Darien to a portal. Or if, once sucked into the labyrinth, Omaha relinquished them.

Darien's grip slackened. "I saw her murder Lombard and Elmhurst."

"She controls time. She can stop it. She can also turn it back."

The realization dawned on Darien immediately. The damp hands left Sloan's throat.

I would pay her no heed, Miss Abgaryan. Kyubey gazed from atop the writhing bundle of ribbons beside them. *Sloan Redfearn has a penchant for leading those who follow her to ruin.*

Darien's wide eyes swiveled from Kyubey to Sloan. "Ask him," said Sloan. "Ask him straight: Can Homura Akemi turn back time."

"Can she? Can the girl I saw outside the apartment turn back time. Is it true, tell me."

Kyubey swished his tail. His red eyes floated in the dark. *We have not observed her reverse time, to our memory.*

"Listen to that, listen to him cheat." Sloan jabbed a finger into his face. "He knows she can. If he knew she couldn't, he would've said."

Darien seized Kyubey by the throat and held him close to her face. His tail dangled beneath him and stirred the ribbons. "You tell me. You tell me, what do you know about her time powers."

Miss Abgaryan, you'll have to be more specific.

A furious shriek escaped Darien's mouth as her lips parted and she shoved Kyubey's head inside. A single twist of her neck and the body went limp and slack in her hand. She spat the long-eared skull into the ribbons and wiped fur from her tongue onto the back of her hand. A trickle of blood rolled down her chin.

She pulled off her helmet and tossed it aside. She pulled a tie from a bun and let her hair cascade around her shoulders. She dug her fingers into Sloan's shoulder. "Allow me to straighten some things. For starters, I have placed you under arrest with the power vested in me as an Acolyte of the Holy Empress of Chicago. I merely allow you to keep your Soul Gem in the interest of rallying against external threats to the safety of me and my compatriots. Understood?"

"If we make this work, I'll come with you to Chicago. Willingly."

"I of course have no reason to trust your word," said Darien. "Should I see an ounce of insubordination, a flicker of a scheme, I shall cut you down where you stand. Understood?"

Sloan nodded.

"Very well. You shall refer to me solely as Captain Darien. You shall not use profanity or debauch yourself in my presence. Understood?"

Debauch herself? Coming from the girl who geeked out on Kyubey? "Yes, yes."

"Okay. I believe that's everything. Now tell me what we have to do to make this girl turn back time."

"Her name is Homura. I don't think she'll turn back time for no reason. But we can trick her." Best not to get into the nitty-gritty. Sloan barely understood the specifics herself. A lot of random details and half-formed explanations floated in her head, pieced together between her conversations with Omaha, Sayaka, and the girls from heaven. Most of it she forgot.

"Trick her how?" Darien asked.

"We need to find Hennepin. Hennepin has magic that can magnify my own. With her abilities, I can create realistic illusions."

Darien's eyes narrowed. "You want an ally so you can turn on me."

"If I wanted to turn on you, I'd do it now, while we're stuck somewhere too tight for your sword."

This logic seemed strong enough for Darien. She gnashed her teeth and acquiesced. "Very well. I noticed the captive Hennepin in the labyrinth behind me, but took little note of her condition, being preoccupied with matters of more interest to me."

"Is she alive?"

"Perhaps."

"Then let's move."

Darien led the way. Her sword clattered and clanged behind her as she waded through the deepening pool of ribbons and the tightening corridor. Sloan crept at her back, her hip buffeted by the broad side of the blade as it swayed. She wondered how long she wanted to stick with Darien. It might be good to take her to the apartment, the more ways to distract the dolls the better. Darien and the tattered remnants of Chicago's army, Hennepin's illusion, and then Sloan down the middle for Madoka.

At which point she could end the game. If she chose.

They reached the end of the tunnel and it opened abruptly into a lavish athenaeum of ogive arches and high, almost endless naves. Shelves of books overflowed into the sea of ribbons, which had grown so thick they would have been hard to traverse if Darien's blade did not hack a path. A corpse drifted on the yellow waves.

"Stickney," said Darien. "I came too late. The maids got her."

"Maids? I passed plenty earlier, they weren't hostile."

"I've had to cut through a fair army of them. This way. The puppet thing's chamber is around here—that's where most of the girls are."

Puppet thing. Mami's witch. Darien led them toward a pair of monstrous double doors. "You've only found corpses?" said Sloan.

Darien flinched. "Some were alive. Merely bundled. I. I fled. The thing itself terrified me. I've never seen a wraith like that before. I lost my nerve, *okay?*"

No need to press further. Sloan wheeled her gun in search of maids. A few clung to the edges of the cyclopean chamber. Their eyeless faces watched but they did not attack.

"What powers do you have," said Sloan.

"So you can better turn on me after you have used me to retrieve your compatriot?"

"If this is gonna work you're gonna have to trust me."

"I do not. If you want this to work you're going to have to deal with it."

Whatever. Sloan rode a lot longer beside girls even less reliable. At least Darien had combat effectiveness. They neared a domed hallway inset with mihrabs although certainly not all

faced the Qiblah. (Advanced Placement Art History. Maybe Darien knew more about it. What kind of name was Ab, Abger, Abwhatever anyway?) Clustered together in the hallway stood a legion of maids, pink and blue and red and white hair in intricate patterns, teetering on pinpoint toes and all facing Sloan and her companion.

"They bar our path to the inner chamber," said Darien.

Sloan hoisted her gun. "Waves of shitter goons are my specialty."

"We are surrounded." Darien indicated those lurking in the outskirts around them. Sloan glanced over her shoulder and saw more had followed them through the narrow tunnel. "We must cleave a path to the hallway as fast as possible. Once we capture it, we will be in a far more defensible position."

"I take the mobs, you make the path." Her gun revved.

The moment her light streamed toward the thicket of maids in the sacrilegious(?) hallway, a fierce din arose like a thousand tiny voices twittering in unison. While the maids directly in Sloan's fire fizzled to cinders, the others arrayed around them raised weapons, bows and spears and swords, certain types for each color of hair. Darien hacked and slashed through the frothing ribbons, which as the maids curled and died grew more active, twisting and coiling and entwining in pretty knots, thickening against Darien's blows although not enough to slow her devastating swings. The deep notch carved through the ribbons served as cover against the arrows and blades that rained from above, although by the same metric it stifled Sloan's aim and narrowed her angles of attack. Darien, whose reflexes and combat instincts struck Sloan as pretty damn good, sometimes quit a swing to hold the blade over them and shield against severe gluts of attacks.

A wayward arrow plunged through Sloan's hand regardless. She dropped the machine gun, suffered the expenditure of magic to have it float beside her—better aim anyway—and resumed fire. Most of the maids in the tunnel had baked to a crisp, and Darien as she neared leapt ahead to strike down several survivors in one clean blow. As Sloan followed her she turned to face the hordes of maids that streamed from the roof and all other exits. A veritable army of bobbing heads and colors. Too many even for Sloan's fire to stymie.

"Fast—move!" Darien seized her arm and dragged her along. The ribbons around them grew aggressive, groped for limbs and throats. They dashed between the mihrabs toward a single door detached from the wall and floating in midair. Another arrow or maybe a spear got Sloan between the shoulder blades but she trudged onward regardless of the blood and no-longer deadened pain. She started to lag, unable to keep Darien's pace.

Darien slowed for her to catch up. She grabbed Sloan's collar and dragged her while blocking with the sword, keeping so close to Sloan that her armor pressed against the wounds on Sloan's back.

"The door, go!" Darien's voice commanded. But the path ahead was no longer cut by Darien's sword and Sloan was shoved into the tangles until Darien lifted her by the scruff of her neck and hurled her at the floating door. Sloan almost slammed into it before she redirected the aim of her gun and blasted it down. The space beyond festered with yellow ribbons, an entire

ocean of them, but Sloan's momentum carried her too far to hesitate now. She flew through the doorway, Darien right behind.

They fell. The floor lay a long distance below the door. From such height Sloan surveyed the entire space, conical with a pointed top. Stalactites hung from the sloped sides, except they weren't stalactites or even stalagmites but minarets, the significance of which Sloan could not comprehend. Suspended from the top in a web of ribbons hung the impish figure Sloan had seen before, the one with endless arms and blue dress and yellow bonnet. Around it, strung from the minarets, about ten girls swayed in various positions and degrees of entanglement.

They hit the ground. Darien landed beside her and swung to clear the immediate vicinity of ribbons. "Can you heal?"

"No."

"Crestwood and Bellwood are dead, I haven't seen Berwyn. Those are the healers we have."

Sloan wrenched an arrow from her shoulder. It crumbled in her hand. "I'm fine. Nothing debilitating." The floating door did not spew the tides of maids that chased them. The entire inner chamber seemed devoid of them. The only obvious threats remained the ribbons and Mami's witch above.

"Is it asleep," whispered Darien. "It was active before. We had no idea what was going on, it was able to defeat us easily."

Corpses in matching school uniforms floated half-submerged on the tides of ribbons, some sunken so only outstretched arms held above the surface. Five dead. Seven bundles suspended. Plus Darien plus the two corpses she saw already and the live one bundled near the entrance, sixteen out of twenty-one. She tried to remember how many were outside the labyrinth, because if it added up it meant Cicero was among the girls here.

She waded through the ribbons to dredge up the dead girls in case one of them were Hennepin. Nope, although she did recognize the girl whose legs she had groped to retrieve her Soul Gem, Porridge or whatever her name was.

"Hennepin is one of the bundles up there." She pointed to the minarets. "Darien, I need you to be straight with me. You want to turn back time, right?"

Darien stared at her.

"If we don't turn back time," said Sloan, "These girls stay dead. If you want to bring them back, I need you to cooperate with me."

"I am the Platoon Subcommander. I am the one who trains the recruits," said Darien. "The novices. The weakest girls. The ones too weak to fend for themselves. The ones who died. Five of the eight for whom I am responsible I know are dead. The other three are missing. The only recourse for one who has allowed so many under her responsibility to die is suicide." She seized Sloan's collar and dragged her close. "If they can be brought back,

I *will* bring them back. If you have lied, I will ensure your death is humiliating and painful before I bring about my own."

"Then we rescue Hennepin," said Sloan, "And *only* Hennepin. Is that clear?"

"I have said what I will do and I will do it."

Then no more needed saying. Sloan leapt for the lowest-hanging minaret, sloped downward so that its spire gored the ribbony flesh of the floor. No girl hung from it, only the highest towers had them, maybe tiered with the most powerful girls near the top so Evil Mami could better leech their powers. That had to be the point of incubating them in cocoons, right? If so, it must mean Hennepin was near the bottom, because Hennepin was, like, not that great a Magical Girl? Right? Sloan had no clue. Hennepin sure *thought* she was pretty great.

As Darien followed her bound for bound, Sloan dove between the minarets, climbing higher with each leap. The first cocoon neared, a thick wad of bandages with a tilted head. By the time they landed atop its minaret Evil Mami above had still not stirred.

"It's Hodgkins," said Darien. "She's alive."

"Let's keep moving."

"There's something on her neck. Look."

Sloan looked, although the cocoon dangled far from where they stood so detail took some focus to recognize. "It's some kind of mark."

"Hodgkins, report," said Darien.

"We should be moving." Sloan had worried about this.

Hodgkins did not report anyway. She stared ahead with glazed eyes. She wore no helmet and her hair hung as scraggly as Darien's. Her lips trembled but no sound came out.

"She's under a spell." Darien angled a wary eye at Evil Mami above. Then, with one swift swipe she severed the string that connected Hodgkins to the minaret. The ribbons fell away and the limp body dropped to the ribbons below. It landed with a soft ripple.

"You said—"

"Hodgkins is one of the ones under my command. Even if we reverse this, I see no reason to allow her to remain like this, possibly in pain."

Christ. Sloan almost mentioned that Hodgkins was probably safer tied up than on the ground, but she caught herself and sprung toward the next minaret. The rest of the bodies loomed significantly higher, which was strange because from the ground they all seemed around the same vertical region, but now that she started to climb everything looked a lot taller, a lot more elongated. How did Delaney describe spatial distortion in Williston? But she said as long as their magic counterbalanced the magic of the archon, the dimensions could not

change. Did a witch labyrinth have some nebulous metaphysical difference from an archon labyrinth? It must, if Kyubey had dispatched bodies to survey it.

Although why would Kyubey even have interest in this labyrinth? He seemed like a utilitarian kinda guy. He made the real, the tangible, the possible his dominion. Even if he succeeded in booting Homura, then Madoka would retake the place of pink wig doll and the Law of the Cycles would resume as normal and no witches would exist.

Unless.

Before the unless received any more brainpower, they reached the next girl. They were now much closer to Evil Mami and many of the other girls were close, so maybe instead of the dimensions of the labyrinth contorting Sloan had, y'know, misinterpreted some angles. This girl was not Hennepin either.

"Hinsdale," said Darien. Like Hodgkins, she had a glaze in her eyes and a mark on her neck. The mark looked like a tattoo, some kind of insignia.

"Will you cut her down too?"

Darien demurred but made no movement of her tremendous blade, which at rest she propped atop her shoulder. "No. We're closer to the monster. We may disturb it prematurely." She added in telepathy: *I think we should communicate like this from now on.*

Good idea. Sloan scoured for the closest minaret. At their height, the towers threaded between each other, formed rigid networks that intersected and betrayed no clear hierarchy.

A voice cut the murk: "Captain Darien? Is it you I espy?"

From where? Sloan scanned the dark echelons of the structure's heights. The six yellow bundles jostled and swayed in nonexistent wind, heads tilted downward in sleep or something worse. She picked Hennepin out of the group, in a triad that formed the innermost ring around Evil Mami's placid form. But Hennepin was out cold, the speaker was nearby. Sloan recognized her: Berwyn, the one with the syringes.

Lady Berwyn, I implore you remain silent, said Darien. *We do not wish to disturb the creature.*

"Hogwash," said Berwyn. "It reads my thoughts. I can feel it swallowing my brainwaves~" She wriggled in her cocoon.

Please, Lady Berwyn, remain silent. Darien bounded to the next minaret and Sloan followed. An unconscious girl dangled from the edge but Darien paid her no heed. Her wary eye alternated between Berwyn and the witch.

"It huuuuurts, Darien," said Berwyn. "I am an Egyptian sarcophagus; my brains are spooned from my nose. I injected myself with a serum to maintain consciousness, but now I realize I have made a grave error! It really hurts..."

The impish witch of Mami Tomoe rustled. It hung upside-down from the apex of the cone, like a bat. Only now were they close enough that Sloan could see the uppermost three bundles were not strung from the minarets but clutched in the ribbons that composed the witch's arms. Berwyn and Hennepin were tied in one arm like two knots in a rope, the other arm only a single bundle with what must have been Cicero.

One quick strike on its left arm, Sloan told Darien. We sever Hennepin and flee before it wakes up.

I am aware of the best strategy, said Darien. She braced herself against the minaret in preparation to jump. Her improbable sword did not compromise her balance on the cylindrical surface.

"A beautiful gorgeous powerful *loyal* female such as yourself would not leave me here in such a state, would you, Darien?" Berwyn shook and rocked and the arm of the witch shook and rocked, and Hennepin's bundle beneath shook and rocked. "Certainly you can slay this beast. It only got the best of us because it appeared so unexpectedly! I order you to release me, Darien. I order it!"

Cover me, Fargo.

Darien propelled herself with a quick flex of her legs. She soared into the air, between the remaining fangs of minarets. Her hair streamed behind her as she pulled back her sword, her aim and trajectory were perfect, she would soon need only swing to sever Hennepin but the moment before the witch's arms entered the range of Darien's tremendous sword the witch gurgled and unlatched from its perch. It dropped directly atop Darien, engulfed her in its swollen dress and bonnet. A strangely metal conk resounded through the echo chamber of the upper cone as Darien's body lurched back and the sword went spiraling out of her hand.

The attack came so quickly Sloan did not register it until the witch and Darien and all three hostages whizzed past toward the spaghetti-and-meatballs floor of yellow ribbons. She leaned over the edge and fired her gun at the rippling back of the witch and managed to fire only a second before a ribbon from somewhere wrapped around her ankle and dragged her down after the main *mélange*. Sloan clung to her gun but her aim jerked left and right and her light sprayed everywhere.

Mami's witch hit the ground and smothered the girls beneath its growing body, stretching from a small thing to one much larger, a vast tarp of turquoise. Sloan landed atop it. The folds immediately rose above her as though she were sinking, sinking not into cloth but water, sinking into the witch itself. Above her the passage to a non-turquoise world rapidly closed.

She fired directly into the thing's back. Or what she thought was its back, everything was mostly fabric now. Her light cleaved threads, fraying them brown then black as she pumped and pumped. The witch loosed another guttural gurgle, now laced with anguish, and a yellow ribbon coiled around Sloan's throat and yanked her away. A single flick and Sloan went flying, this time away from Mami while more ribbons groped for her gun. Below, the witch remained only a small thing, not the expanse into which Sloan had descended. The witch's long arms dragged Cicero and Berwyn and Hennepin, Berwyn now screeching in agony. Darien remained on the ground, half-buried in the sea of ribbons that seethed over her,

wrapping around her, stretching her limbs, reaching between her plates of armor. She too screamed, especially as the ribbons pulled off one of her arms like the arm of a doll, except the arm remained attached by thin tendons and strings of blood.

A blast of light fried the ribbons that groped for her gun. Sloan tried to reorient her trajectory in midair to little success and only stopped when her spine plowed into the broad length of a minaret. She bounced off and headed down again. The disorienting space did nothing to help and she had a hard time discerning anything, she had no idea whether more ribbons pursued her or if she had blasted most away, the image of Darien being plucked to pieces remained ingrained on her mind, Mami left her field of vision.

Snap out of it, Sloan. Get your head in the game plus any other halftime sports movie rough-and-tumble coach platitudes you can think to switch into that mindset you had in Williston, that mindset you had in Minneapolis, confronted by a serious monstrosity of a foe that you had no right to kill and which you killed anyway, even if half those odds had been gamed by Kyubey so that Delaney or Omaha or whoever went out of their way to keep you alive because at least part of that success was Sloan being able to fucking do what she set out to do which right now in some weird twisted way was to kill the person she had sworn to make sure didn't die, although Mami Tomoe's current form barely counted come on you can't hold this against her.

She stuck a landing on one of the lowest minarets, because if she dropped onto the seething floor likely she'd suffer the same fate as Darien. First she checked if ribbons were coming for her—they were—and then she blasted them back with a wide spray of light before she took a better look for where Mami's witch had scurried. There! Coiling up the cone, allowing its arms to swing and batter its captives against the minarets.

A small thing and fast, not Sloan's ideal target. Plus a deep ache set in the inner reaches of Sloan's head, the ache familiar to her through most of a year lived on the brink of despair. She slapped her skull so she would have a less nefarious pain and revved her gun.

The light swirled out and filled the cone with its blinding sheen. It rattled against the walls and rebounded in lunatic directions against the sloped surfaces. Hexagons, decagons, dodecahedrons formed from the rays as they caromed across the room. Mami's witch darted between them, quick with its own body and careful to avoid the bullet hell Sloan created, but with her spindly long arms she was not so careful. A thick ray slammed into the bundle of Cicero, only to reflect off her untouchable armor into the other arm. It cleaved the ribbons between the joints that held Berwyn and Hennepin and Hennepin's portion dropped to the floor.

Before Sloan celebrated her (totally blind luck) triumph, Hennepin's form sank into the ribbons entirely, swallowed by the churning mass. Sloan considered diving after her, Hennepin being the prime element of her strategy to confound the dolls and reach Madoka, but if she plunged into the ribbons she had no way to pull herself out. She had to kill the witch, but the pain in her head burgeoned to an aneurysm of clotted blood deep between the lobes and her hands trembled and her aim went loopy and the kaleidoscope of light only befuddled her.

She lurched across the minaret, suddenly woozy. She blinked hard and tried to recuperate her focus. Slip into the mindset and finish this damn job. If a girl has hope she can't die that way, and Sloan still had hope, her own magical energy be damned. This was going to end well. EVERYTHING WAS GOING TO END WELL.

A piston slid into place and she heard the voice that had been screaming inside her head the entire time but previously had fallen beneath her own nutty jumble of thoughts. Darien's voice:

MY SWORD, FARGO! I CAN'T MAINTAIN MY MAGIC MUCH LONGER!

Sloan glanced at Darien—a mass of torn lumps—and glanced for where the sword had fallen. Nowhere near her body, nowhere on the low minarets. Her gaze lifted, she saw a glint of her own light against a long brand of steel. The sword had impaled the side of the wall, sword in the stone, colossal Arthur from the land of Brobdingnag and his ten-foot buster sword.

She hurled her gun in front of her and used her magic to make it hover long enough for her to leap onto it and forward to the next minaret. She let it drop after she passed but had little energy to use it anyway—time to go for broke. As the reflecting beams of light dissipated, Mami's witch quit evading and turned its red faceless blot of a face at Sloan as she soared past, onto the next minaret and one step closer to Darien's embedded blade.

Ribbons closed in on her. She streamed her remaining energy into forward propulsion, maintained momentum, acrobatic leaps across tremendous gaps and to tremendous vertical height. The blade shimmered ahead, growing larger, nearing, the hilt long and ready to seize.

And she seized it. She flung her feet in front of her and struck the wall and bounced off and the sword came out effortlessly. Her forward momentum transferred into a backflip. Her magic made the blade weightless because otherwise she would have no control over her lopsided body as she dropped. Ribbons spiraled for her; she swung the blade and severed them at once and held the blade in front of her as she fell. From doorways floating in midair streamed the hundred maids from earlier in a last-ditch effort to protect their queen. They fell the moment they left the portal but flung their arrows and swords at her, all of which she battered away with rapid swishes of the blade. Gravity's pull increased her velocity down the center of the conic room, into the vacuum between the minarets, at the small form of Mami Tomoe and the bodies of Cicero and Berwyn behind it. The red blot of faceless face stared up at her. Someone screamed in Sloan's head.

Sloan opened her mouth and screamed in tandem as her coat rippled around her body and she hoisted the blade behind her head and brought it down on Mami Tomoe or the thing she had become. One clean slice went down through the head, into the neck and fleshy bosom, and clean through the thick turquoise dress.

Mami Tomoe split in two halves and Sloan kept falling.

The world shattered. The cone, the minarets, the ribbons, the maids, all of it burst into fragments and particle dust. The ground collapsed into nothingness, replaced by a single solid block of cobblestone street into which Sloan plowed face first. She rolled until friction caused her to stop. The sword left her hand and clattered somewhere.

She lay on the ground and panted. She watched her hand splayed in front of her and the apartments beyond.

Get up, said a voice inside her head. Her own voice.

Her fingers twitched.

Get up. Get up, get up. Get Hennepin.

The pain inside her skull lashed out like a whip. It spread through thick veins into the back of her eyes, into the roots of her teeth. Nausea compounded on her tongue. Her palm pressed against the ground and tried to lift her body.

Not yet. Not yet. Get Madoka. Not yet.

She moved her ambiguous other hand and pushed with it too. Her upper body lifted. She pushed with her knees and managed to lift herself onto them before she had to choke back the vomit that swelled in her esophagus. Come on Sloan, you've been worse. You've been worse.

Bodies lay strewn around her. Cicero, Berwyn, Darien pulled piecemeal. A few others. Most were unconscious, only Berwyn stirred and even then only barely. No corpses, Sloan realized. The corpses had disappeared with the labyrinth.

Kyubey sat between the bodies. In his paw he played with a small round object, black and somewhat reminiscent of a Soul Gem.

"What's that," Sloan mumbled.

Nothing you should know about. Kyubey's paw crushed the pseudo-Soul Gem against the cobblestone and tossed the remains into the mouth on his back.

Whatever. Sloan lurched past him in search of Hennepin. She lay across the street, close to the giant stone pillar atop which Homura's apartment loomed. For a moment a fear stirred in Sloan's head: Did Hennepin ever reclaim her Soul Gem from the Porridge girl? She knelt beside the body and inspected her neck. The marking from before had disappeared, but Hennepin remained motionless. Sloan slapped her cheek.

"Wake up. Wake up dammit." The pain in her skull exceeded whatever shitty words Sloan could use to describe it. She slammed her hands against her temples because maybe if she hit hard enough her brains would leak out her ears and she'd feel better.

Hennepin's head lolled left, lolled right. Sloan searched her pockets for a Soul Gem. She had the same damn schoolgirl uniform as the dead Chicago girls, with the same pockets Sloan had felt up before. Her hand settled on something round and solid in a breast pocket. She reached inside the vest and rifled around and found it, held it in front of her face to make sure: Hennepin's gem.

Which meant she lived. It didn't matter if she took time waking up. Sloan had to take time to climb the pillar to Homura's apartment anyway, because she glanced around and saw no trace of Erika or Delaney or Sayaka or Homura or anyone else to boost her up the crags.

She hoisted Hennepin onto her back. The jacket Mami had given her had a lot of useless straps and bands, which Sloan used to bind Hennepin's body to her. Should she risk the magic to make the body weightless? One attempted step with the full hundred pounds of dead weight against her spine told her she had no chance otherwise.

Miss Roth, said Kyubey. Regain your senses! The girl you know as Fargo is escaping.

Sloan glanced over her shoulder, saw only Hennepin's head resting there, and glanced over her other shoulder. Kyubey nudged Berwyn's face with his paw. Berwyn batted at him lazily.

"I am *so* exhausted, Kyuuuubey. Please allow me to rest." Her hand settled around his slender body and she nuzzled him against her cheek like a stuffed animal.

Harsh penalties will befall you if you knowingly fail to restrain your prisoner, Miss Roth. You'll have your rank stripped from you or worse!

"Baaaaaah. Have an underling do it. Niles and Westmont shall suffice, by my estimation."

Everyone but you is unconscious, Miss Roth.

"Why don't you shut the fuck up already, Kyubey?" said Sloan. Pulling the sagging Hennepin further onto her hunched back, she made for the pillar.

"Alright." Berwyn's tone was lazy, sleepy, but with a deeper strain of coherence that gave Sloan pause. "I *suppose* fatigue is nothing a shot of adrenaline won't cure."

Aw shit. Sloan hesitated whether to drop Hennepin, worried how hard it might be to pick her back up again, worried how hard it would be to even summon another gun. Berwyn released Kyubey and drove a needle into her own neck, pushing the lever down with a flexed thumb as an opaque liquid surged into her bobbing throat. She wrenched the syringe out with a bead of blood and tonic on its tip and jerked to her feet as though possessed, a lucid clearness filling her dark eyes as she placed her hands on the sides of her head and cracked her neck and shoulders.

"Alright. Alright alright alright. Poppet—Fargo!" She extended a rigid arm. It held another syringe. "You are a prisoner of the Holy Order of the Knights of Chicago, under the command of Third Centurion Cicero! As her loyal adjunct Berwyn, I hereby reaffirm your arrest and demand you relinquish the prisoner Hennepin and surrender your Soul Gem and all that variety of rot! Else I shall be forced to restrain you with sedatives, see?" She tapped the back of her syringe and an arc of clear fluid splattered the cobblestones.

"Okay," Sloan closed her eyes and sighed. "Okay, okay."

Kyubey's voice squeaked: *Miss Roth, behind you!*

Berwyn turned. The next moment a tremendous sword cleaved through her from shoulder to hip. She came apart in four pieces, both arms severed from the single swipe. Darien skidded to a halt, lacking an arm of her own and drenched in blood, her hair clumped with reddish clots. A tic contorted her face.

Miss Abgaryan, what is this madness? said Kyubey. *Surely you know the punishment is death for those in your order who attack superiors!*

"I've got enough death sentences on me." Darien spat a glob of blood. "The Empress can only kill me once." More blood spurting from the stump of her missing arm. Something seemed off about one of her legs, maybe dislocated at the hip. It dragged behind her as she approached Sloan.

"We need to get up that pillar," said Sloan. "To Homura's apartment. Can you climb?"

"If you can, so can I." Darien drove her sword into the side of the mountain and used it in conjunction with her one-and-a-half functional legs to pull herself onto a rocky outcropping slightly off the ground.

Sloan had no excuses, either. She checked the straps that tied Hennepin to her back and grabbed the lowest jutting rocks to pull herself up. Darien, one step ahead, swung her sword again and leveraged herself against it to rise.

Before Sloan made it far, Kyubey scampered onto her shoulder, or onto Hennepin's head, or somewhere near enough for his voice to buzz loudly in her ear: *Miss Redfearn, why are you doing this? Surely you do not expect it to end well for you.*

"Why..." The single word tore out of her heaving chest. She decided she had better ways to expend her oxygen while her quivering arms pulled her higher across the cliff face. *Why are you so committed to stopping me? I thought the whole point of your scheme was to distract Homura so someone can get to Madoka.*

Blood from Darien's stump arm, which flopped while she pole vaulted from outcropping to outcropping, dribbled across Sloan's upturned face.

My plan involves Miss Kaname being taken into Omaha's realm, said Kyubey. *There she will be severed from the effects of Miss Akemi's memory-occluding magic and regain knowledge of the Law of the Cycles.*

Omaha, said Darien. *She's the girl we're after.*

Maybe that's my plan too Kyubey, you ever consider that? Sloan strained to grab a high ledge. A sharp rock sliced her palm; she gritted her teeth and bore the pain she no longer had magic to deaden.

I did consider the possibility. However, from what I have heard you say to Miss Abgaryan and my own assessment of your critical reasoning skills, I believe you intend something completely different.

Damn, caught me. Look Kyubey, lemme do my thing alright? As you said earlier, it worked well for you so far.

The uncertainty surrounding your appearance in Mitakihara was useful. However, Madoka Kaname is too important a figure to allow uncertainties to contaminate.

Who is Madoka Kaname, said Darien.

The girl at the top of this pillar. The one Homura wants to protect. If we get to her, we can force Homura to reset time.

Sounds simple to me. I wondered why she went through the trouble to send this thing into the sky.

Sloan sagged against a safe portion of outcropping and heaved for air. Hennepin had regained some weight, which meant Sloan's magic was failing. She peered up, but it looked like an insurmountable distance ahead of her. She hoped Hennepin woke up soon.

Miss Abgaryan, the girl named Madoka Kaname is far more important than you realize. I implore you not to meddle in these affairs.

Nothing to do but keep climbing. Sloan raised an arm and grabbed the next ledge. Kyubey wanted Madoka to go into the Omaha Zone. So she would regain her memories as a goddess. But the real question became, how did that benefit Kyubey? The Law of the Cycles worked both ways, and Sloan doubted he maintained the same pseudo-religious scruples that worked Omaha into such a lather. Everything for Kyubey boiled to one bottom line:

Energy.

Kyubey. Tell me something straight. Do you get more energy with Madoka in charge compared to Homura?

Yes! When Madoka Kaname controls the Law of the Cycles, she refrains from or is incapable of placing restrictive stipulations on my energy collection methods, while Miss Akemi reinforces such stipulations arbitrarily.

Okay. Now lemme ask a new question. Do you get more energy with Madoka in charge of the Law of the Cycles or with no Law of the Cycles at all?

Hennepin groaned into Sloan's ear. Her head rolled against Sloan's shoulder and Sloan would have breathed a sigh of relief if she did not have to use all her breath to keep climbing.

Your question seems completely irrelevant, Miss Redfearn.

Thanks, Kyubey. Your answer tells me everything I need to know.

Which it didn't really, Sloan still had no clue what was going on here or what Kyubey's big plan was or how these million tiny pieces fit together but she knew one thing and that thing was that if it would get Kyubey more energy, he would do it. Sloan saw Mami's witch. Imagine a world filled with those things. They had to be chock full of energy, but in the current world Magical Girls disappear before they get made. Taken to a conceptual plane. A dispersal of corporeal energy into an incorporeal form.

What did Kyubey say before, in the labyrinth? Defeating Homura Akemi was an assured fact. He only needed Sayaka and Nagisa for a "more optimal" victory... Sloan thought she might know what that more optimal victory entailed.

Well, whatever Sloan was doing had to be the right thing, because it got Kyubey so up in arms. Paws. Whatever he had. Dammit would Hennepin wake up already? Sloan held to the wall and tried to jostle her into consciousness, but she mumbled mindless sleep words and wrapped her arms around Sloan's chest.

Sloan nudged her head against Hennepin's to rouse her faster and wound up catching sight of something beyond Hennepin, high in the air over the city, between the skyscrapers and skylines. Homura Akemi soared through the air with gargantuan raven wings on her back, the wings more bone than feather. She darted around what looked like a giant flying mermaid with a sword and fired purple arrows at it from a bow. Erika and Delaney and Sayaka flitted about the airborne arena as well, immersed in wind and bubbles. None of them, including Homura, noticed Sloan, so Sloan decided not to ask questions. Obviously their battle had ascended to the next power level. What mattered was they kept Homura preoccupied while Sloan climbed.

The distance to the top of pillar did not seem any smaller than before, although a downward glance told Sloan she had climbed a long way. She wished she could sleep. Recharge. Regain. This day had gone so long. Hell and back, except the opposite. Darien gained ground and kept vaulting higher. She should warn her about the dolls. But the whole reason Sloan wanted her along was to distract them. Except Darien could not see them. They would kill her in one shot.

Darien. Wait.

Darien stopped. She dangled by one arm from her sword. She stared down at Sloan with an expression either expressionless or exasperated. Sloan grabbed the next ledge and nearly slipped. Hennepin's legs kicked against her ankles.

She stopped looking ahead or looking behind and looked only at the endless façade of the pillar. Each step became mindless, automatic. Movement on momentum alone. If—when—she reached the top she had more to do. The dolls to contend with. Hennepin would help but Hennepin sucked. High likelihood of failure. No. High likelihood of success. Positive thinking. Sounded like something Delaney would say. Optimism breeds success.

"Unh... Fargo?" Hennepin's voice. Soporific and sedated. Take another step. Wince in pain. Take another step. Repeat.

Can you make it, Fargo, said Darien.

Yes.

Given your remaining energy, I doubt you can make it, said Kyubey. *As one accustomed to living at her limit, I would have expected you to know it better.*

I can make it.

"Fargo... Where are we...?"

Step and wince. Step and wince. *Hennepin, do you want to live.*

"What?"

If you want to live I'm gonna need you to not ask questions. We're trying to turn back time. Okay?

"Uh..."

A pair of hands against Sloan's chest, a weight against her back. Feet jabbing her hamstrings. Breath against her ear. That was Hennepin, those things, those things and an occasional voice.

"Oh god. Oh god we're high up. Oh god oh god oh god."

Shut the fuck up Hennepin. If you don't wanna fall, hold the fuck on.

The profanity went without comment from Darien. Darien no longer existed as an entity on Sloan's radar of perception. She had no clue if Darien still stood motionless while waiting for Sloan to catch up, or if Sloan had caught up and Darien resumed her pole vault up the mountainside. Please be the latter.

"I, I, you know, I'm not scared of much, but, never been good at, at heights, ha ha..."

Hold on and shut the fuck up. Sloan gave up the notion of letting Hennepin climb by herself even though Hennepin's Soul Gem must be squeaky clean and new, what the fuck had Hennepin even done this whole ordeal, stood by and remained irrelevant, never hurt never fought, Puella Magi Switzerland Magica, or whatever the Latin was for Switzerland (Suisse in French, masculine or feminine? Anything to block the pain), and Hennepin's protracted irrelevancy only made Sloan angry, like how she could survive while Erika Woodbury Bloomington Ramsey Delaney the Terminatrix St. Paul Lynette Clair Kyoko Nagisa Mami died. Anything to block the pain. Hennepin's turn in front of the Deer Hunter firing squad. Six chambers five bullets full. Someone had to get lucky.

Her hand fell and hit not jagged rock but cobblestone.

She blinked and looked forward and stared at the top of the pillar. Homura Akemi's apartment loomed overhead. Darien's hand seized hers and one swift tug yanked her up. Sloan staggered against the wall and undid the straps of her jacket to let off Hennepin. Hennepin skittered as far from the edge as the narrow lip of ground allowed.

In the distance, the giant mermaid clashed its blade against Homura's bow.

"So there's a girl inside here?" said Darien. "One we can take hostage?"

"Yes," said Sloan. How to explain the dolls.

"The door's locked," Darien continued. "And we had no success breaking the magical barrier earlier."

Shit. They locked the door again? Sloan never considered that. No wait, she did, all she had to do was use her light through the curtains to get Madoka to open up. She slid past Hennepin

to the window and peered through the gap. But she saw no Madoka. Not even a doll.

Oh no. Did they move her? Of course they did. Why would they bring her back to the exact spot where Sloan could get at her? Because Sloan had gone through the most complicated series of events to get confounded by the simplest countermeasure.

"Oh no. Oh no." Her eyes angled around the gap to see more of the room. "Oh no."

"The heck's going on," said Hennepin. "What are you guys even trying to do, what the heck is happening here?"

Darien tried to fold her arms only to stop trying when she realized she only had one arm. "We must gain entry to this apartment in order to take a girl hostage so we can force the raven-haired girl to turn back time and revive our fallen allies."

"Why the heck am *I* here?" said Hennepin.

"Ask Fargo."

"I need you to make an illusion. Homura has guards... But dammit, none of it matters if we can't get inside." She knocked her head against the wall. Defeated by a locked door. Oh god, the comedy.

"Well uh." Hennepin fidgeted her shoes. "Locks are easy."

"Easy?" said Sloan.

Hennepin reached into her hair and retrieved two bobby pins. "Yeah? Well, for me anyway. I wished to be good at everything, after all."

The bobby pins seemed unreal in Sloan's field of vision. They waggled between Hennepin's fingers as she held them up.

"You did not mention this particular talent when we attempted to break down the door," said Darien.

"Like I was gonna speak up to help *you* guys." Hennepin gave a single harsh laugh. "I probably shouldn't have said anything this time, either."

"You can pick locks," said Sloan. "This isn't some farce?"

"I can do anything I put my mind to. Breaking into homes was how I got my meals on the long walk from Mississauga to Minneapolis."

Sloan wanted to whoop or celebrate or something but she decided to hold off until she actually accomplished what she set out to do. She put her eye against the window and peered between the curtains in case dolls had started coming their way, but she only saw the same patch of empty carpet.

Miss Ru, if you open that door, the odds of your survival drastically plummet.

Oh god fucking dammit why was Kyubey still around. His plushy body sat perched on the edge of the cliff, but before Sloan took a step toward him Darien seized her sword and pointed it at Hennepin.

"If you refuse to open that door, the odds of your survival become nil."

Hennepin looked at Kyubey and looked at the sword and laughed. "Everyone calm the fuck down, I'll open the door. You don't need that sword." She licked the ends of her bobby pins and turned toward the door and inspected the lock almost as though Kyubey's words had not even shook her, had not even given her pause for thought.

What? said Kyubey. *Miss Ru, why are you suddenly acting so illogical? You've told me plenty of times before that your sole aim in life is to survive as comfortably as possible. That's a selfish goal, but a goal that at least follows a base logic. For what reason would you possibly abandon such beliefs?*

"Well gee Kyubey, why don'tcha gather round the campfire so I can tell a little tale." Hennepin crouched before the doorknob and made a tentative test against the keyhole with her pins. Sloan, unsure if she could trust Hennepin, if Hennepin maybe weren't stalling for time while she plotted some inane ulterior self-seeking end, hesitated before returning to the gap in the curtains. No change inside, no dolls visible.

"Sloan, you maybe remember this one," Hennepin continued as she pushed a bobby pin into the lock. "Clair's dead, that turbowraith is rampaging across Minneapolis. There's you, me, Ramsey, Anoka, and your nutty friend with the tits. Remember?"

"Yeah." Not sure what this had to do with anything, but the breather allowed Sloan to muster her energy for the final push that would come after the door flew open.

"We have those two cars, remember? Ramsey's pink cars. We make some harebrained scheme that one person will ride ahead in the first car and distract boss wraith, while the rest drive past in the other car to get to the tower or some bull... feces. Remember?"

"I remember." Sloan altered her angle of vision and tried to see the rest of the room. Even one doll would give her something.

"We're arguing who'll drive the cars. Your nutty friend wants to drive ours, that's fine, she seems good at it. But we need some chump to drive the first car, the distraction car, the sacrifice car. Remember?"

"It didn't happen that long ago, Hennepin." There! On the couch. One doll. Red hair with a little hat. Head tilted at a lazy angle, eyes fixed on her. They knew Sloan was coming, at least.

"Well. I'm really damn good at driving cars, I'll have you know."

Hennepin stopped abruptly, as though she had no more to say, and Sloan had to replay her words to derive their meaning. Good at driving cars. Her mind switched back to that moment in the snow, gathered in the cold, asking for volunteers.

"Ramsey," said Sloan. "You let Ramsey get into that car instead."

"I didn't say anything," said Hennepin. Sloan's eyes flicked toward her; both bobby pins were stuck deep inside the lock. "I said not a single solitary thing."

She said nothing more. Sloan said nothing more and returned to the window. Redhead doll was no longer in the same spot. But where?

I don't understand, said Kyubey. *What does this anecdote have to do with your current actions? This makes no sense! How can all three of you act against the logical strands that have guided you so far? How are humans so inconsistent?*

Darien levied a boot and kicked him off the edge of the cliff. His body cartwheeled into oblivion.

"Hurry on the lock," said Sloan. "Her guards are moving. The moment we get the door open, we need to create an illusion, like we did in Minneapolis. Remember?"

"It didn't happen that long ago, Fargo," said Hennepin. She bit her lower lip and maneuvered the pins with masterful finesse, twisting and prying and turning with calculated motions of her wrists and fingers.

The lock clicked. The knob turned, the door slid ajar.

In the narrow space between door and jamb awaited the redhead doll, its smile wide and mischievous.

Sloan seized Hennepin's collar and yanked her back moments before a spear sailed through the door. "The illusion," she barked into Hennepin's ear, "Now!"

From Hennepin's perspective she must have seen nothing, but she complied. Her outfit shifted in a flash from the schoolgirl uniform to her exaggerated lab coat with the frumpy Victorian dress underneath. She extended an arm and a prismatic crystal emerged from the air, within which her Soul Gem twinkled. Sloan wasted no time, the illusion already an image in her mind.

She summoned light to her fingertips and unleashed the magical energy in a focused blast aimed at the crystal. The light issued forth and the prism redirected its beam directly at the gap in the curtains behind the window. Inside the apartment appeared an image of Darien, copied directly from the real Darien beside them, giant sword and all. The redhead doll squeaked in dismay as its eyes turned toward the manifestation. Another spear appeared in its arm, ready to throw.

Sloan raised a boot and brought it down on the doll's head. The doll collapsed beneath the sole, flattened like origami, a contorted mess of limbs and fragile parts as Sloan jumped and stomped on it. She flung the door wide open and barked at Darien and Hennepin to follow.

"What's going on," said Darien. "What are you attacking?"

"Her guards are invisible, we just need to move!" As usual, it sounded completely insane the moment she said it. Probably if she explained things better beforehand it might not come off so crazy, but too late for quibbles. She dashed into Homura's apartment, into the stark white room with its postmodern furniture. At one end of the room a bulletin board of images and videos floated, at another end a pendulum of scythes swayed. She puppeteered the illusion of Darien forward. Already three dolls had risen to attack it. But where was Madoka, where were the other dolls?

Her eyes flitted left and right. Then they moved up and she saw her, Madoka, suspended by her ankles from the gears and clockwork on the roof, around which the remaining nine or ten dolls clung, unmoved, eyes focused on the figures darting across the floor.

"The ceiling, with the pink hair!" Sloan pointed. Darien—the real one—immediately bounded past her, onto a couch, and flipped toward Madoka, whose eyes remained glazed and sightless despite her upside-down position. The ten dolls around her shifted positions into a solid wall between Darien and Madoka, and their spears sailed directly into Darien before she even got close.

More illusions. More distractions. Sloan fired another blast of light into the crystal and spewed out an image of herself and Hennepin, reflected like a mirror onto the other side of the room, to the side of Madoka now unprotected by the dolls. As Darien dropped embedded with arrows (her illusory doppelganger remained upright), the dolls communicated in vague chatter and shifted their focus to the new illusion.

Another blast radiated from Sloan's hand and a third illusion, only Hennepin this time, flashed in a third corner of the room. Hennepin seemed to have figured out what Sloan was doing and altered the angle of her crystal so that the first illusion of Sloan and Hennepin made aggressive movement toward Madoka, and although neither legs nor limbs moved and the illusions seemed to glide as though yanked by levers and cords, the dolls went into a frenzy and hurled their spears at the encroaching threat, while a few turned from the pack to face the newest illusion, and another—short hair blonde, one of the two that attacked Sloan on her first attempt against the apartment—caught sight of the real Sloan and Hennepin and dropped from its perch to charge them.

Sloan summoned a fourth illusion in front of the blonde doll, but the doll cleaved through it with a spear and charged at Sloan herself. Sloan grabbed Hennepin by the waist and hurled her. Hennepin, shrieking, waved her arms and plowed into it, the spear skewering her through the shoulder and amplifying her screams.

Illusions now crawled throughout the apartment. The dolls broke ranks, attempted to defend Madoka from all angles at once, but enough of them had dropped from the ceiling to fight the various illusions that gaps existed in their defenses. Sloan took a deep breath and closed her eyes and blotted away the pain and summoned a gun in her hands.

Sloan only needed a tiny spray. Nothing much, never no matter what inner fortitude she summoned did she have enough left to eradicate all dolls, and even if she did they were fast enough and legion enough to drop her before she dropped them. But one quick shot. All she needed.

The gun fired an anemic blast. Blast was the wrong word to describe it, more like a trickle, but Sloan's aim had not left her. The narrow stream of light threaded the needle between the dolls and struck the cords that anchored Madoka's feet to the clockwork gears. The cords snapped. Madoka fell.

Sloan staggered forward. She stumbled onto Madoka's prone form as the dolls plummeted around her.

Everything happened very fast. First, the moment her hands settled onto Madoka's limp shoulders, a portal opened in front of her. Omaha stood inside it, extending her arms, reaching for Madoka. "GIVE HER TO ME," she bellowed, in slow motion, each word stretched, tortured. For a long second Sloan thought she should. She should hand Madoka over, throw her into the portal, remove her from Homura's magic, end everything. Abandon her foolish plan to save the others, because odds are it had zero chance of working, and like everything else she tried to do would blow up in her face. Already Darien appeared dead, slumped to the side.

But something caught her attention, behind Omaha, inside the dark void, past the rows of drifting chairs, into the transient far corners, the enigmatic shapes like whales emerging from a deep ocean.

Missiles.

The missiles Omaha had stolen from some country's government. The ones she said were "just in case." Never would it have crossed Omaha's own mind to steal missiles from somewhere. Kyubey must have told her to do it.

He had wired the entire place to explode. So when Sayaka and Nagisa brought Madoka inside

The dolls swarmed her. They raised their spears to strike and Omaha screamed again for Sloan to hand Madoka to her. Sloan's mind blanked, she knew what she had to do but could not do it. The spears came crashing down.

Hennepin flung herself on top of Sloan and caught most of the spears. One or two slid past and struck Sloan in her leg or arm. The pain came intense, unimaginable, but at the same time galvanized her into action. She seized Madoka's hand, the one with the simple silver ring where most Magical Girls kept their Soul Gems when untransformed. In one smooth motion she wrenched the ring from Madoka's limp finger and slammed it against the floor. A brief image of the Soul Gem of the Terminatrix flashed in her mind, how easy it had been to shatter. Madoka's ring bent beneath the force of her hand. Shards of metal sliced deep into her palm as the circuit unlinked, twisted.

The blank gaze in Madoka's eyes became nothing, became not even a gaze. Omaha screamed. The dolls froze in disbelief, their mouths unhinged in stunned shock. Hennepin's perforated corpse rolled off Sloan's back.

The front façade of the apartment tore away, fell into empty space and let in the sky and the endless panorama of Mitakihara. In its vacant space floated Homura Akemi in a dress of

black feathers, her wings spread on either side, a bow and arrow drawn, an unhinged glint in her eye. Sayaka, Delaney, Erika zipped behind her, catching back up to her, stopping short when they too saw the scene. Nobody said anything. Nobody spoke.

Sloan rose from the corpse of Madoka Kaname. She stood, on wobbly legs, and held out her arms in a shrug.

Homura seized the shield on her wrist and unwound the gears. Time turned back.

Love

Madoka dead—well, not anymore. Incipient horror, agony, grief, despair, hatred, disbelief, madness erased in an instant, a single grating whirr of gears and cogs, and presto change-o the body sprung back to life, the other two corpses disappeared, the façade of the apartment returned to its rightful place and sealed them inside.

Like a crying kid. How you give them candy (or cheese) and whatever happened before no longer happened.

Finally, after so long, Sayaka understood Homura. That instant gratification to flip a switch and revert misery. For every condemnation of cowardice, for every assessment of a woman unable to contend with the consequences of her own repeated failures, for every insult, for every philosophical breakdown of her psychological state and the systems she had usurped because her infantile addiction to a state of perfection fostered only in her own head which by rights itself could never come to pass regardless of how hard she shattered time and space and rearranged the pieces into a cracked mirror more to her liking, for all that when Homura Akemi reversed time and animated the corpse of Madoka Kaname like a latter-day Lazarus could anyone condemn her, could anyone say she made a poor decision?

Homura Akemi's original sin was to break the world so that Madoka Kaname became as important to it as she was to Homura herself. But now that such a sin had come to pass, her methodology for committing that sin was unquestionable, undeniable; justness and rationality rolled into a single ball.

And then, and then as if to undo even these moral mental ramblings, Sayaka's next thought was to wonder just how far back time had turned. Her eyes flitted across the apartment for a clock, found several strewn about with heavy pendulums and twisted iron arms. Each clock read a different time and it did not matter because Sayaka had no clue what the time had been before beyond a vague conception of afternoon, bright sun and long shadow. Strategically which made more sense: To return to a time far before the inciting incident that eventually led to the outcome of Madoka's death, or to twist only five minutes and maintain prior victories? In the past universe, her modus operandi had been intervals of weeks. Circumstances had changed since then. God what time was it, how much had been reverted? How much?

No immediate answer came and the shocked stillness of the apartment broke when Homura buffeted Sloan with a swish of her wings and scooped the dazed Madoka in her arms. Erika and Delaney jostled forward, Sayaka groped for a sword.

The battle resumed.

No time to think in battle. Go, do, instinct. Sayaka kicked a stupid doll that blundered into her path and took point, boots turning over carpet before dip under a thrown spear and slide to avoid a curved shaft from Homura's bow somehow drawn while she held Madoka into horizontal slash at knees to incapacitate plus best target to not hit Madoka by mistake. Maybe

with Madoka in her arms her reactions would be slow but nope Homura leapt the blow and then twisted her body to escape a similar head-aimed strike from Erika the problem being that Erika and Sayaka had too similar styles of fighting they did the same things at the same time and had the same instincts which meant they fell into the same patterns which was where Homura worked best. Nagisa was the best partner because for starters she had no damn patterns just did whatever and with all her idiosyncratic weapons and attacks like horns and bubbles, her supposed physical and mental weakness more than made up by that key advantage and while Sloan had brought back a girl with weird powers in Delaney, Delaney did defense which only protracted the fight.

Hence the damn stalemate. But Sayaka hacked and slashed anyway, up and down and left and right with four, five blades at once, trying to shake up her fighting style and either opening herself to counterattack because she did something dumb or else falling into new patterns. And try to communicate all this to two girls you've never met while in heat of battle. Impossible.

Madoka's feet dangled and her head slumped with her eyes dim while Homura held her under one hand and fought with the other. She retreated, her wings flapping her across the foyer and knocking sofas and tables aside. The door to the next room flung open and she flew through it after sidestepping another sweep of Erika's katana. The door tried to shut behind her at telekinetic bidding but Delaney summoned a bubble to block it.

They delved into the deep interior of the apartment, which Sayaka had never seen before. Which as far as Sayaka knew nobody but Homura had ever seen before, unless Homura brought Madoka here. Bad. Bad bad bad. Can't let Homura onto home turf. They maintained advantage solely by maintained offense. If they let up, let Homura do anything but counterattack, they were good as donezo. Homura's wings brushed against narrow corridor walls, upending clocks and paintings of clocks to clatter and smash against the floor. She retreated deeper, into a telescoping row of doorways. Sayaka leaned into sprinter form as the carpet bundled and bunched beneath her in folds of increasing size. Shadows crept across the walls and the sinister faces of the dolls phased through the plaster, causing ripples when their heads broke the surface.

Sayaka swung a sword to sever the arm of one that clutched for her cape and Erika sped past on a gust of wind. Homura kept in sight, Madoka's limbs floundering, but she grew smaller down the endless corridor. Several dolls blocked their path with spears, only to fall in pieces from clean cuts of Erika's blade.

Lucifer's escaping, my lovelies, chimed Delaney from behind.

We know, said Sayaka. Delaney kinda had that quirk. The one where someone feels compelled to make obvious assessments of the battle that everyone already knows.

But it wasn't like they could go any faster. Damn dolls. Never shoulda let Homura take them into her own apartment. Of course they didn't *let* her. Sloan forced their hand with her stunt. What the hell was her goal? Sayaka knew her goal, what a stupid question. The same goal that made it so Sayaka couldn't be so annoyed. Mami, Nagisa. Kyoko. Maybe it worked, maybe they came back. Although, she had the perfect opportunity to bring Madoka to the shadow realm and end everything... Like the timelines where Homura discarded a

successfully defeated Walpurgisnacht because a more personal victory condition had been nullified.

Again, Sayaka could not grudge her.

Idiots! Plural correct form? Or only one? Idiot! Too personal, too direct. Could not fault Sloan alone. Idiot Sayaka Miki bungled too. Not part of the plan, bad. So bad. Because the other one. Mami Tomoe. Interloped. Killed the one with the similar name. Nagisa Momoe. Tomoe Momoe. Omaha Homura.

Consumptive rage. Like tuberculosis: to cough out. Blood on the snow, that was her rage. Because—hands extended—God—fingers spread—only a single push—instead, murder. Murder. Murder of God. No, initial assessment incorrect. Sloan no idiot. Sloan something worse. The priests who answered we have no king but Caesar (John 19:15). No, even that, wrong analogy. Wrong quote. Biblical precedent became unclear. Why should Sloan murder God? Thoughts so fast. Hard to puzzle.

She curled in her space, legs under chin, hands under knees, floated in dead air. Tried to calm herself. Sloan knew not what she did. Had to be. Why else would. Why else would her Friend tell her. Why else would he tell her to help Sloan, if Sloan could be so vile? So base? So depraved? Even if she expected Satan to change time. Even if. WHY WAS IT SO HARD TO THINK?

Calm. Calm down. Become... nothingness incarnate. Yes. Nothingness inside nothingness. Her space, her safe space, home to her alone. Perfect, inviolable. And inside it she could meld. Into the black. Into the empty. Her body draining into a vast basin. The liquid skin sloshes and disperses. Blood, insides melt away. Goodbye, Omaha. Wave goodbye everyone! She is gone forever, you can never find her again. Goodbye, God. Goodbye, Friend. Sweet and peaceful suicide.

The soothing thought returned her to equilibrium. Her panic and fluster dissipated alongside her imagined body, which had only a modicum less corporeality as her real one.

She could see things clearer in the absence of light and form. Regardless of what happened, God was now alive, which was the only thing that mattered. As long as she lived, hope remained. God herself, the wellspring of hope. A world without God was a world without hope. It descended irrevocably into nihilism. Raw reason, raw justice. Such precepts could not imbue an object with meaning. Only God herself and her guiding love could do so. Their purpose became to serve her; any alternate aim stemmed either from petty hedonism or petty masochism.

Omaha raised a hand and slapped herself. For her doubt. For her fear. For her weakness. She made the rules of this space, so the pain magnified into a thick blistery welt of fire that spread down her cheek. The feeling roused her egg yolk corpse and she extended herself into

standing position. She must man her portals. Await any opportunity to pluck God from her captors.

She rotated toward the portal that remained placed in the main room of Satan's dwelling and froze in renewed terror as a half-shrouded figure rustled beside it. The dolls. She had let in the dolls, and they could surely kill her. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no—Oh.

It was Sloan.

A flick of her wrist closed the portal and sealed Sloan inside with her. She did not want to see Sloan. Or talk to her. Or be in the presence of anything alive. She should have listened to her Friend and killed Sloan. Only moments before the incident she thought Sloan remained on her side, a single lowercase friend. A bloom of happiness crushed to make the sadness more bitter.

"Please... Sloan... Go away."

"Omaha. Omaha, listen to me. It's important." Sloan drifted toward her with anemic movements. She had a weak Soul Gem. If Omaha expelled her it would surely be to her death. Death by Law of the Cycles, the better death. The one Omaha had ensured for Dufresne. Although, in the heat of the moment, when it came down to it, she had killed Lynette Ibsen in the bad way without hesitation. But she was vile. She knew that. The Man Who Said He Was Her Father told her.

"Please... I feel ill."

"Omaha, it's a trap. Everything Kyubey told you is some bullshit half-truth as usual. He wants to kill Madoka, Omaha. He wants to kill her so witches come back."

Omaha's head rested on her shoulder. She and Sloan floated among the chairs, a thick and pleasant distance between them. The words came out like babble. Who was Kyubey? She said that name before. Oh, right. Her name for Omaha's Friend.

"Sloan... I'm sorry. I should have never let you come here..."

"Listen to me dammit. He has two objectives here. One is to kill Homura, the other to kill Madoka. He played all your bullshit prejudices against each other. Omaha! Omaha, listen to me!"

No. Unwanted voice. Omaha killed sound inside her world. Sloan's lips moved in a frenzy, but nothing emerged.

Omaha, the missiles. What are—

Telepathy gone too. A world of absence. She turned away from Sloan and drifted toward the sole remaining portal. From this portal, placed in a secure location behind a tenement nearby Satan's, extended a single loopy strand of void, which jiggled and danced while at its other end, up the tremendous pillar (which was unaffected by the time reversal) and into the bowels

of Pandaemonium, Sayaka Miki scuffled with devils. When Omaha pressed her eye to the strand of void she could see, like a curved and pliant scope, the world at its other end from the perspective of Miki's ankle. Beyond her sprinting boots lay an open door. She passed into an room of nebulous dimensions and much smoke. In the center of the room lay a large crystal sphere, glassy and clear. Behind the sphere's surface was an image of a city, cold and shrouded in fog.

"A dead end?" said a voice. Dufresne. Sloan somehow brought them back the same way Miki had been brought back. Without God's permission. Which only added to her mounting total of mortal sins.

"She's not here," said Miki. "She must have doubled into another room. This place is a maze."

"We saw her go in here, there is nowhere else she could be. Look for a secret door or passage."

Another girl clopped on ruby heels in front of Sayaka. Omaha recognized this one, too. Pollack. Only in a world run by Satan could such a monster find eternal salvation. "Wait, dears. Look at this fun contraption."

Miki and Dufresne gathered near to placate Pollack's whimsy. From the low vantage, Omaha perceived only a fisheye view of the city. Distorted, perverted.

"It's Minneapolis," said Pollack as though this fact bore any relevance to what they should be doing.

"Okay, and?" said Miki. "We need to find Madoka!"

"She was able to watch us the whole time," said Pollack. "But she let things happen as they did. She must be pretty dumb!"

Dufresne paced in the background, inspecting walls and floors. Miki's foot tapped, rendering Omaha's view worthless.

"I bet," Pollack continued, her voice increasingly wistful and detached, "She uses this to spy on our dear Goddess in the shower, or during onanism."

Miki's foot quit tapping. "During *what?*"

"Tsk, surely I don't have to define it for you?"

The word did not need to be defined for Omaha. She turned away, unwilling to listen anymore. Idiot Sloan. Degenerate Pollack. Filth. What possible sin. Did a name even exist for the sin of discussing God herself in such terms? Blasphemy. Blanket term blasphemy, a proclamation against God's holy qualities. Dragging her through the filth of base copulation. Even Satan herself would not. Surely she would not. Even *think*. About God. Like that.

(Every sin she ascribed to Satan. Had to be ascribed to herself. For did they not share the same body, the same material, the same insides? Did not the same elements comprise them

both? Matter, line, form. Even if one had not committed the sins of the other, they admitted that they had the potential inside them to commit those sins, and only circumstance prevented them.)

When she untucked her head from the canvas of her arms she noticed Sloan floating in front of her. She continued to babble her mouth in silence, with frantic gesticulations while she struggled to extricate herself from a chair. Really ought to kill her. If you had listened to your Friend and killed her, God would be free by now. Well, no. But she had certainly complicated matters, because now Satan held God in her clutches. Ostensibly that would cause a drastic reduction in Satan's combat acumen, but it also made things complicated for Miki and the others because they had to worry about striking God. Bah! Her Friend was always right. She had followed his orders with utmost faith before and everything had gone exactly as he said. One deviation, one mistake—her mistake alone! Her human imperfection, the innate flaws in her flesh.

Enough prattle. Omaha summoned to her hands a scythe. She must correct the error.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how sacrilegious was imaging their Lord and Savior Madoka Kaname enjoying her private time while strange perverts watched in crystal balls? Probably a good 9.8. Richter scale, of course. Total earth cataclysm, brrrrrrng!

(God, being back in a real body was so weird for her brain.)

Delaney coughed politely to maybe kinda brush over the compromising way she had described Madoka, which suddenly felt to Delaney as bad as if she up and molested the poor Goddess, but of course Sayaka the Blueberry turned red as a raspberry and clenched her hands into fists and demanded to know who Delaney thought she was, and it was all rather trite and Delaney wished she had held to herself what at the time sounded like fun banter, an invitation to some nice stichomythia if you will between her and Miss Blueberry, Sayaka herself being a somewhat appetizing prospect (blueberries... yum!) and witty repartee being basically the only way Delaney could flirt without exuding aggressive sexuality.

Thankfully, Erika spared an escalation of conflict by interjecting: "If we don't keep up with the demon, it is highly likely she will clean off your blood and subject us to the whims of her time magic."

"Psh, no problem." Delaney tapped the butt of her scepter against her heel. "Blueberry-chan here is also immune to the time magic, and I've covered her in my blood too. So we're safe either way!"

"Don't call me Blueberry-chan," said Blueberry-chan. Mm yes, that Japanese tsundere shtick.

"Would either of you take this with a modicum of maturity," said Erika.

"I am being very mature," said Blueberry-chan. "Who the heck is this weirdo you brought with you, that's what I wanna know." She flung a gloved hand in Delaney's direction.

"The objective is to rescue Madoka Kaname." Erika cut a commanding but short figure in the mist. Shadows danced across her stiff clothes and oblique angles. "Any conversation not aimed toward that purpose is irrelevant. Now help me find where she went."

Erika turned back toward the shadowy walls and tilted her head to scan its surface. Delaney sighed, placed a hand on her hip, and raised her staff overhead. A rush of blood burst from the ruby at its end and splattered in a wide torrent that blasted Erika's back and the wall beyond. The blood painted the entire surface red, except for a door-sized opening in its direct center, through which her blood streamed and coated the floor of a new hallway.

Well! Delaney had expected a secret switch or something, but a complete doorway concealed solely by mist and the utter blandness of the hallway beyond served a fortuitous outcome indeed. Plus, she could play it off like she expected it all along. "Voila, mesdemoiselles."

Her boon companions sent her a single stern glance mirrored in their no-fun-allowed features before both tore into a sprint, which proved awkward because both attempted to cram through the doorway at the same time but despite the thinness of their svelte little bodies some pushing and shoving became mandatory. Delaney, accustomed to patience, tip-tapped behind them in her shiny shoes.

They followed a dark corridor a long time. Delaney dragged her blood in two thin lines on either wall in case another surreptitious exit awaited them, but the walls were solid and they narrowed toward a faint light at its end. Difficult to believe they remained inside the rather compact apartment, but Delaney had detected odd magic at work in this realm, akin to the strangeness of the Williston miasma, a widespread distortion of reality although somewhat more subtle. A map of such geography might prove enlightening! Alas, such cartographic luxuries remained just that.

"Another door," said Erika, who had weaseled herself into the lead. She threw it open and light streamed in. A vivid skyscape stretched before them, marred only by the high towers of Mitakihara, chief of which loomed a to-scale replica of the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, and who knew for what silly reason it had been placed here. Outside the door stretched a precipitous drop down the pillar, terminating in a sidewalk splat far below.

Blueberry-chan jabbed a finger over Erika's shoulder and pointed. "There! Homura."

A tiny dot flitted above the horizon. From such a distance it seemed only a rather large bird, although Delaney's extensive knowledge of zoology informed her such albatrosses flew not so inland. "She's got somewhat of a head start on us, my dears."

"Perhaps next time nix the idle chatter," said Erika.

Their blue-haired friend stooped as far as the narrow confines allowed and shouted into the bracelet of void around her ankle: "Omaha. Omaha, you hear me? We need a portal to get closer to Homura."

Ah, so that explained things. Delaney had wondered how she had remained unaffected by the time manipulation, as well as how Omaha factored into the situation at all. However, Delaney did not recall void bracelets being part of Omaha's arsenal.

"Omaha, the hell you doing? We need a portal now."

They waited.

"Omaha!"

Delaney prepared a vaguely disappointed statement to break the tension, but her preparations proved for naught because a black circle appeared in front of them with a sound effect ripped from someone's zipper and far less theatrical aplomb than would have entertained her. Distant in the void awaited another circle, this one not black but blue because it went back to the real world, a real world where Homura Akemi was a lot closer. Delaney guessed Omaha now controlled wormhole technology too, because alright sure why not.

Into the wormhole they went, hurrah! Blueberry-sama first and the Maiden(?) from Manitoba second. Delaney plunged after them, arms akimbo like on a rollercoaster ride (she had never been on a rollercoaster ride, unless you counted her entire life), and they floated without gravity through a short dark passage toward the second portal. Delaney took the chance to see what comprised this nether realm, and noticed her dear chums Sloan and Omaha near another portal below. A third girl Delaney had never seen before was with them, who waved as they passed. Aw, how sweet. Delaney waved back and boom, they returned to the real world, now amid the skyscrapers of the city. And in midair, which was not as inconvenient as one might expect. Delaney summoned bubbles to buoy her and Erika upward on drafts of wind, while their fruitier friend rode atop her tremendous mermaid witch form as it appeared out of a wave of clouds. The mermaid monster intrigued Delaney, mostly because she wondered if she had her own latent witch form she could summon, and what it would look like, and what it would do.

Homura, who soared not far away, tilted back her head and inspected them with wide eyes and a grimace. Madoka remained clutched by her waist under one smooth arm. Silly move, Miss Akemi. Gimp your own combat effectiveness while leaving the key to ending this conflict so close in reach? Tsk, tsk. Desperate girls do desperate things, Delaney knew.

The mermaid witch, having an absurdly large reach on account of its absurd largeness, struck first. It raised its janky collage arms over its head and brought down a blade roughly ten meters long, aimed at Homura's wing. Homura barrel-rolled behind a skyscraper and Sayaka's mermaid wasted a lot of time grunting and growling and attempting to turn its body around the impediment. Erika, less constrained by Megalodon mass, managed a swifter turn in pursuit.

When Delaney followed her around the bend, Homura had already turned to face them. With what appeared impossible dexterity, Homura maintained her hold on Madoka while also drawing her purple bow with a painful-looking shaft. She loosed her hold on the bowstring and the shaft rocketed toward Erika, rippling reality around its vorpal point. Erika dipped to the side; the shaft immediately curved to follow. Delaney flung up a bubble to block it and the arrow burst it with hardly any effort before sailing into Erika's chest, centimeters below

the pendant that bore her Soul Gem, missing solely due to the millisecond of delay caused by the bubble's obstruction (or so Delaney decided to believe). The arrow pierced Erika straight through, impaling her on the shaft of purple light in a spectacle of gore Delaney found merely mundane. Nothing not fixed by a quick heal!

Homura followed the charged attack with a rain of weaker arrows, fifty notched and loosed at once, but Delaney's bubbles had sufficient power to block most of them. Behind them lumbered the hulking mermaid with Blueberry perched on a shoulder, directing it with her blades. But by the time she got close enough to do anything, Homura had taken off again, sailing toward a new skyscraper and delving closer to the heart of the city and the faux Burj Khalifa. As before, without hesitation, Erika kept close on her heels.

So, said Delaney, Miss Blueberry, howabout we start knocking these skyscrapers down? Maybe we can flatten Homura with them.

What! Are you insane? Do you know how many people that'd kill?

Hm. Delaney placed a finger to her lower lip and calculated. Probably somewhere in the two or three thousand ballpark per tower. We could take down seven of them and not even exceed the death toll of your average third world earthquake!

What! Blueberry's favorite interjection.

Forgive my companion. Erika dipped around Homura with a series of sword strikes parried by well-placed blocks of the bow. She is legitimately insane.

Delaney drenched Erika in blood after she received a series of pin needle arrows across her body. *Neither of you are any fun at all.*

Nagisa blinked and what? What happened to Sayaka? One moment she's right next to her on the roof, they're spying on Homura's bad guy lair, and now she's just—and what happened to Homura's apartment! Why is it now a million miles in the sky? Did Nagisa miss something?

She cupped her hands over her mouth and called to the wind: "Hellooooooo!" Her own voice echoed to reply: "Hellooo, hellooo, hellooo..."

Uh. This was really weird? Nagisa looked around the rooftop, looked over the railing, looked everywhere. But other than the not-there Sayaka and the big tower of stones, nothing had changed and nobody was around. She bit her lip and kneaded her hands against the railing and kicked a foot and only then did she notice the black cord that was supposed to tie her to Omaha's portal had disappeared too. Now that was especially weird, because without a connection to the portal, Nagisa would be frozen in time if Homura used her powers! Wait, what if Homura already *had* used her powers? That'd explain why stuff had changed... But it didn't explain what happened to her cord.

She peeked around the building to where the portal was, and it was still there, and one cord even extended from it and went aaaaaaall the way up the tower to Homura's apartment, so that was probably Sayaka. Nagisa decided the first thing she oughtta do is get back into the void place and figure out what went wrong before Homura used her powers again. Which she wouldn't notice anyway unless some new weird thing appeared or disappeared suddenly. Homura could be using her powers... right now! Or... now! Or even now. As Nagisa crept toward the portal, she kept her eyes peeled for strange stuff.

And saw nothing, not even a single creepy doll. Kinda lame! Oh well. Into the portal she went, with its eerie darkness and all the strange shapes that floated around, plus the million chairs which existed for whatever reason. Not-Homura stood nearby, which was weird because usually she kept out of sight even when Sayaka wanted to talk to her. She had a big scythe in her hands.

Hi, Ohio! Nagisa said. Except she didn't say it. She opened her mouth and no sound came out. Huh?

A second person also floated in the space. It was what's-her-face, the one in the coat. She too opened and closed her mouth with no words coming out. She also held out her hands toward Ohio and pantomimed something like a robot.

Nagisa had no clue why nobody could talk, but she was right behind Ohio so she reached out her hands and plopped them on Ohio's shoulders right as Ohio raised her scythe overhead. Ohio span around with a mix of shock and hatred in her eyes, which took Nagisa aback, although soon afterward the same dull sadness gleamed behind the lenses of her glasses and she lowered her scythe.

"Oh... It's you..."

Since Ohio could talk, Nagisa tried again, and sure enough this time it worked. "Yeah! Who else would it be? What's going on, what happened to Sayaka? Why's Homura's apartment way in the sky?"

Ohio seemed like maybe she was gonna say something or maybe not, but what's-her-face blurted first: "Kyubey wired this whole place to explode when you bring Madoka here." It came out like one breathless bluh of words. Nagisa blinked and had to think hard about what she said to make it make sense.

"What," she said when it registered. "Ohio, is this true?"

"No." Ohio's fingers dug into the handle of her scythe. "No, it's not! Have you heard anything more devoid of sense? None of this would be possible if not for my Friend. None of it! And you, you who killed God herself...!"

"Madoka's *dead*?" Oh no. Oh no that's bad, that's really bad.

"Not anymore," said Sloan. "I had to do it so Homura would turn back time and you and Mami and Kyoko would come back to life."

"Mami's *dead*?" Tears, hot and thick, streamed down Nagisa's face. What was happening.

"No, dammit, stop crying. I already told you Homura turned back time. Stop it, she's still alive!"

The instant, reassuring words cut through the warm haze that covered Nagisa's eyes. She wiped them with an elbow and sniffled once to clear her runny nose. "Really, she's alive? She's telling the truth, right Ohio?"

Ohio's head hung at a funny angle and a mean snarl grew on her face. "I don't know. I don't know how far she turned back time. And it doesn't matter. All our lives are forfeit in service to God!"

"We have to save her," said Nagisa as she grabbed Ohio by the shoulders and shook her. "We have to, we have to. We can help Madoka whenever, we gotta make sure Mami and Kyoko are safe now!"

"Gaah!" Ohio tossed her scythe aside and pulled at her long black hair. She tugged until her strained scalp showed and then she coiled the thick strands of hair into a rope around her neck. Eventually a gross clump broke off and poked between her clenched fingers. "I was told you and your friend Miki were champions of God—her angels! And yet I see you concerned more with the Kingdom of Man than the Kingdom of God... Unacceptable!"

"Just because Madoka is important doesn't mean everyone else isn't," said Nagisa.

Ohio seized her by the shirt, her fingers long and bony and cold. She shook Nagisa and Nagisa's head jerked back and forth. "Do you have any idea what God did for us? What she sacrificed? How much she loves each and every one of us, down to the most reprehensible blot? Do you? DO YOU?"

"Omaha," said what's-her-face.

"Faithlessness... Impiety... Narcissism... Why does she care about any of you? Why? Why!"

Nagisa felt dizzy. Omaha kept shaking her until her eyes swirled around. Finally with an angry heave she let go and Nagisa drifted in the dark.

"Omaha, calm down." What's-her-face held out her hands. "I know you're mad. I know this isn't going the way you wanted. But you need to slow down and think. Please, let me explain everything."

Omaha went deathly still in a single moment, as though a power cable got pulled out of her, her arms slack and her hands held straight down and her head low with her hair in gnarled tangles around her shoulders. She whispered: "Sloan... I am teetering on a precipice. Of whether to kill you or not. I am very close to deciding. Do not tilt me over the edge."

This girl was so weird! No wonder she looked like Homura, they both had brains like scrambled eggs. Nagisa brushed off her shirt, which was all crumpled and messy, and stuck

out a lower lip. "I think we oughtta listen to what everyone has to say. Trying to kill Madoka totally sounds like something Kyubey would try."

With the same suddenness, Omaha returned to life. Her body made a swift and small adjustment and she held a scythe under Nagisa's chin, the long curved part touching the skin of her neck. "You know nothing. Nothing! Do you know what my Friend has done for me? How he helped me, how he comforted me when I was locked in a basement with worms and centipedes and had nobody to talk to but him and God? My Friend is kinder than any of you have ever been or ever will be. Ever! He is a true emissary of God. He is a true angel, not whatever base and perverted thing you have become."

Nagisa rolled her eyes. "Oh, brother."

Omawhoever's hand trembled and the blade nicked Nagisa's skin. A little trickle of blood ran down, she could feel it and it felt weird.

A small voice said something. "... closer to Homura," it said.

"Who said that!" said Omaha. She wheeled on Sloth but Sloth hadn't said anything.

"Omaha, the hell you doing? We need a portal now."

Omaha's eyes flitted toward the portal, where the cord that connected Sayaka extended. The voice, clearer now, was pretty much probably Sayaka. "It's Sayaka," said Nagisa. "She wants a portal?"

"Omaha!" said Sayaka.

The plea seemed to strike Omaha as an extreme inconvenience. She swung her scythe and cleaved a chair in two (for pretty much no reason). Then she went to the already-existing portal and looked into Sayaka's cord. Turning away with a lazy flourish and a humph she opened a portal above them, followed by a second portal next to it. She did not watch as Sayaka streamed through one portal to the next, even though Sayaka now had two friends Nagisa had never seen before. Nagisa waved, but Sayaka and her first friend didn't see. The second friend, though, waved back. Yay! Then they were gone.

"Follow her, Momoe," said Omaha. "Join the battle against Satan."

Bluh, not even Homura called her Momoe. "Sayaka has new friends, she might not need me that much." Nagisa folded her arms. "But if Slug's telling the truth about how in a past timeline Mami and Kyoko got killed, we need to make sure that doesn't happen!"

She braced for another mean outburst from Oklahoma, maybe some more shouting, or some more breaking things with her scythe, or some more hair-pulling. Maybe she would do what Mami did when she got upset and smoke a lot of cigarettes(!) when she thought Nagisa couldn't see. Nasty habit, very gross. And it put you in the hospital, very bad. But Oklahoma didn't do anything like that, didn't really do anything at all. She just kinda slumped her shoulders and breathed a big breath while her eyes disappeared behind her big round glasses and she stared at her feet.

"Fine... Do what you will. Otherwise you'll only continue to hurt me..."

"Omaha," said Slop. "I don't want to hurt you. I want you to live too. I want to be your friend."

"Pah," said Omaha. Although she said nothing else. She only drifted away from them, not moving her arms or legs or anything just drifting without moving, sinking back into the darker parts of the void beyond the chairs and where the bombs floated. Slow started to say something else as she went but stopped when a new portal opened in front of them, a portal to a place Nagisa recognized instantly:

Home.

Stored in infinite memory, a log.

Earth Calendar Date: 17 January 2009.

Location: 41.464166 North, 96.780833 West (North Bend City, Dodge County, Nebraska State, United States of America Country, North America Continent). 620 W 8th Street. Basement.

Specimen: Unnamed female human, 12 years age, exact DNA match to Homura Akemi of Mitakihara, Japan.

Objective: Fraternize.

Y'know, Kyoko always thought something was fishy with that foreigner girl. Look at the coincidences. She just happens to show up the same time Sayaka and Nagisa go missing? Yeah, right. Mami was too soft on her from the getgo, all the worse because that softness stemmed from confidence instead of ignorance, like big bad Mami can handle some ragamuffin American Magical Girl no problem, so she cut back the leash bit by bit and bam, that's when they get you. Course, Kyoko had schmoozed with the girl just the same, playing around with coats and music players, so maybe she coulda set her own discerning eye on the matter and they wouldn't be where they were now, aka eating Christmas dinner the three of them and suddenly the foreigner up and vanishes. No warning, no explanation. She had goddam invisibility powers the whole time, like Homura warned. Homura was bonkers as all hell and gave Kyoko the creeps sometimes but she often had a damn point.

It seemed so obvious in retrospect Kyoko couldn't even muster some low-hanging outrage, especially since it wouldn't do Mami any better as she flitted around her apartment upending

stuff like the foreign girl decided to play hide-and-seek or whatever. Instead Kyoko played with the turkey bones on her plate and waited for Mami to cool her jets, which might take forever. Dammit. Another good meal ruined—

SKREEEEEEEEEEEE. BUH BLAHHIDDY BLAH BLUH.

Now *this* was worthy of outrage. Kyoko jolted out her chair, turned toward the bombast. Goddam megaphone? Why? Where'd it come from? Past the balcony doors, into the courtyard behind the apartment. Was it construction? Whoever was using it wasn't speaking Japanese.

Mami hurried out from her room. She looked at Kyoko, Kyoko shrugged. "Remain here," Mami said, "I will investigate." She opened the balcony doors and looked outside.

Remain here? You mean in the room adjacent the goddam balcony you're investigating? What the hell Mami. Kyoko crept behind Mami and peered over her shoulder at the courtyard below. She had to stand on tiptoe because Mami was stupidly tall.

Two random chicks stood in the courtyard outside, near the complex pool. Some more chicks, apparently attempting to remain concealed, crouched in the pool shed and at a quick glance Kyoko spotted more shady characters in random locations. What kinda bozos were these? Worst ambush of all time. Where'd they come from? Looked foreign. Fargo's pals, probably.

"What is it you want?" said Mami to the prominent two below.

The more imposing of the pair, the black one, said something to the wimp with the megaphone. Megaphone bimbo skreeeeeee her megaphone and replied, now in Japanese:

"Where is Sloan Redfearn! Where is Fargo! All we want is Sloan Redfearn! All we want is Fargo! Please save me, these people are insane!"

She said it so bad maybe she meant to say something different but it hardly mattered, Kyoko caught the scheme here. "A trap," she muttered to Mami. "They're in cahoots with Fargo. I count eight lurking."

Mami cleared her throat and spoke clearly, simple diction: "Fargo is not here."

Megaphone chick murmured with black chick. Black chick the obvious leader. The megaphone girl trembled and quivered when she spoke with her. You see these cult of personality chicks sometimes, take over a city like a third world dictator and brutalize the poor girls have to live with them. Big bad bossa bitch, pull tithes and basically have their lessers groveling at their feet. Thing about those kinda girls is, though, you take them out and the remoras got nothing left to cling to.

Skreee. "She knows Fargo is here! They can trace her! They will kill you and me both if you do not bring her!"

All right, death threats already meant no more fucking around. Kyoko pushed past Mami and seized the railing. "Hey! Punkass bitch! Tell your boss or whatever we don't like foreigners

in *our* territory! Tell her she can fuck off or all twenty-seven Mitakihara Magical Girls will punt her ass back to America!"

The girl with the megaphone flinched and shifted her eyes toward her stolid boss. While they muttered, Mami whispered: "Calm yourself, Kyoko. They have girls with long-range weapons stationed on the nearby rooftops. Best not to provoke them unduly."

Kyoko had already seen the snipers. But she and Mami were good enough to get this done quick. "Look, we don't have Fargo, it's a clear setup. Either we tuck tail and cede the city or we go for the leader and drop her fast."

"We are heavily outnumbered, Miss Sakura. If diplomacy fails, perhaps ceding temporarily is our best option."

"Wrong. Give them hooks in, give them territory, and they—"

Another obnoxious blast from the megaphone silenced her. "She says you don't have twenty-seven girls! She says there are only three of you! Blonde and redhead and Fargo! Acquiesce or die! Can't you see they're insane?!"

"One shot on the black girl," said Kyoko. "Give me one shot and I'll have the others scampering."

"You only assume she is even the leader. And what of her powers? Perhaps she has impenetrable shields. This is headstrong even for you."

Bah, sure. Headstrong. Call it that. But these girls really pissed Kyoko off and usually what she did to people who pissed her off was kick their teeth into their throat on a curbside. And really what did she have to lose? Sayaka was gone. She'd been gone for nearly two days now. Magical Girls who disappear usually don't come back. Not even like Sayaka had a reason to leave. She had family here, friends. She had school and a future. If anyone ever shoulda left it shoulda been Kyoko, wayward spirit and wanderlust, left her and all the others because honestly other than Sayaka and Mami she barely knew any of them, like who even was Madoka? Who even was Homura? Names, in three years she had swapped maybe thirty minutes of conversation with the latter and saw the former *maybe* once a month. And she had no problems ditching Mami before, so let's be real the only thing tying her to this damn city was Sayaka and even that tether had frayed to a single flimsy thread so Kyoko thought maybe a change of scenery would do her good, unmoor her from a buncha shitty memories of awkward fights over stolen CDs and misplaced trash and copied homework. Because that balance, those allegorical scales of justice with good memories on one side and bad on the other had in recent weeks tilted more and more to the wrong side.

So why the fuck not. Sayaka ditched her, why not ditch everything?

"This is your final warning! Bring Fargo or suffer the consequences!"

But because Kyoko was no coward and she had debts to repay to the girls who still called this place home, she'd do them one last favor before bowing out. A nice little thank-me-later. Then she might see the what's-what in Kazamino tonight, or maybe not.

"Watch your head, Mami."

Kyoko launched past her, over the railing and down toward the ground. In a flash her Magical Girl clothes rippled around her, all the frills and laces, with her spear in hand and ready to impale. Shots rang out and stuff whizzed close to Kyoko's ear, singeing her flapping ponytail, but nothing stuck. Dull clod girls always move too slow. In an honest fight only one thing matters and it's how fast you move. You end a fight in less than a minute or you don't win the fight. Maybe you don't lose, but you don't win, and in this instance winning meant everything.

She swung her arm and below her appeared strings of red lattice diagonal to the ground. She landed on one taut strand and it flexed with a loud creak, bending, bending, reaching its lowest possible point, the latticework electric like hummingbird wings, aaaaand:

BOING! Kyoko rocketed forward on the transferred momentum of the string. Everything blurred around her as her eyes focused on the sole point that mattered, the tough girl boss lady, who had already transformed into a suit of gold armor with a wild and unwieldy axe while the megaphone girl skittered out the way. Good. Better than good. Big weapon big armor meant slow, slow, slow. Maybe better defenses, maybe better ability to take a hit, but when a girl's speeding at you fast as a racecar with a spear taller than her, armor don't mean shit.

Fast hard spearpoint drove into Ugandan warlord's breastplate. Except not. All the momentum in an instant coalesced into a single point of realization, a widening of the eyes and an unhinging of the mouth as amid all the velocity the tip of Kyoko's spear did not sink into the golden plate but shattered, cracks and crumbles starting from the triangular end down the greater width of the point, spreading and crumbling into dust as Kyoko continued forward, destroying the shaft against the gold like plunging it into a grinder.

Kyoko slammed against the girl. The sound of metal filled her reverberating skull and she bounced back, her own useless body unable to even dent the armor. Everything shook, everything rang, and her brain sloshed around in her skull. Plop, she hit the ground. Blood ran down her nose and from where one of her sharp teeth snagged against her lower lip. The entire right side of her face went numb and the entire left side pulsed with transferred energy.

The pain hurt less than the goddam embarrassment. Instant wonderment at how her stupid head had conceived this godawful plan filled her dazed eyes. Three years of cush living. Dulls the faculties. You forget everything. Every word she thought echoed in her own skull. Forget everything, forget everything, forget everything.

Two girls, also gold armor, emerged from the pool shed and aimed guns at Kyoko, but the leader bid them halt with a staunch arm. She said something in not-Japanese. One subordinate saluted and ran back to the shed, the other yelled at the girl with the megaphone, who cowered near the diving board.

Kyoko rolled onto her knees, only to suffer a kick to the ribs from Boss Lady. She coughed blood and tried to turn her eyes skyward toward the balcony to see what happened to Mami. Should never have done it. Put Mami in danger, dammit.

"They are putting you under arrest," said megaphone girl, mercifully without her megaphone. "Why would you do such a thing, are you fucking retarded?"

Another red glob of spit plopped onto the concrete under her. Kyoko wiped her mouth and reared up, seizing megaphone girl by the throat and grappling with her, back and into the pool with a splash. Water swelled into her nostrils.

Well, fuck it. Let's go nuts now, why not.

Who was this goony bird? No really. Hennepin wanted to know. Of all the dumb things this redhead chick could do, well first she had to go and attack Cicero (lol) then she decided to go after Hennepin? Why? Hennepin didn't do shit to her. The only reason Hennepin kept her cool was because any moment now the Chicago girls would pluck them out the pond and pull them apart.

Any moment now.

They hit the bottom of the pool.

Hennepin started to freak out. She swung her fists, slowed by water, at the girl's face, kicked her legs against the smooth concrete. Water clogged her nose and eyes and ears and mouth.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING UP THERE SOMEBODY HELP ME!

Why her? Why her. What evil did she do to deserve such hapless misfortune. She never wanted much. Let her play her games. Oh god, she tried to tell herself she didn't have her gem on her so nothing this girl could do would hurt her but when you feel the water inside your lungs an instinctual panic swells your head and oh god—

She groped her hands against the bloody face of her assailant and shoved her thumbs into the red eyes. Redhead's head swung back and her grip loosened while she reached for Hennepin's wrist. Everything occurred staggered, delayed, every action telegraphed far in advance. Gold shapes flitted around the surface. Nobody came for her. They must be laughing. Laughing at her, egging on the fight, hoping to see one kill the other. This was punishment. Only explanation was punishment, divine retribution for being such a selfish bitch, for leaving them all alone when they needed help, for abandoning the city, for condemning Ramsey to die. The worst thought of any prisoner is that they deserve it. Night and day they punished her, whipped her, stripped her, pressed her bare skin against the ice, called her a whore, called her every name they could think except the one Hennepin herself thought.

Their entwined bodies twirled in suspended space. Hennepin rose above the redhead and swung a slow kick into her groin. Hands groped against her clothes and ripped the buttons of her blouse. After what Cicero did to her, her modesty reflex no longer existed and she

shimmied out of the torn article. Rising, she broke free. The surface shimmered with sunlight and gold. Up and up and into real air, sputtering and coughing.

The scene around her had descended into madness. None of the Chicago girls stood at the poolside and laughed, or even paid attention to her at all, because they ran toward the apartment complex with their weapons drawn. She turned her head to see what they saw. Oh, oh shit. One of those portals, the one Fargo disappeared into. It hung in the sky close to the second story of the main building, not far from the balcony where the two girls had—

Something wrapped around her ankle and dragged her back down. Hands groped along her body as the redhead crawled up against her, also apparently without modesty. Hennepin braced for another strangling, cuz gee why not, but once redhead had pulled herself close to the surface she relinquished Hennepin and swam for air herself, not giving Hennepin much of a glance like she herself got bored of the whole affair.

Hennepin floundered back to the surface and reemerged beside her. Redhead saw the portal and took no more notice of Hennepin. In fact, nobody took notice of Hennepin. Good. Hennepin liked that. Leave her alone. Embryonic thoughts entered her suddenly reasonable head. If the distraction kept up enough, all Hennepin had to do was locate her slaver, Norridge, the one with the whip, and take her by surprise. She kept the Soul Gem in a pouch tied to her thigh—Hennepin watched.

She swam to the pool's edge and searched the grounds for anything with which to arm herself when an incredible roar splintered the air and the golden girls around her buckled in trepidation. From the balcony burst something bonkers, too bonkers to describe too well, like a giant snake with a polka-dot face and a mouth filled with triangle teeth. Between its gnashing jaws screamed several mangled Chicago girls; the rest raised their weapons to assault the eldritch abomination.

Alright cool, this was the kinda shit Hennepin needed. The more fucked everyone else got the better good ol' Serena Ru got, that was her credo (she decided now) and she was sticking to it. She slogged herself out the pool, drenched with her hair thick against her back and her skirt thick against her legs. Her shoes squelched as she rose to her feet and alternated her eyes in search of proper armament and the Norridge bitch. Her powers let her do basically whatever she needed so as long as she kept a cool and collected head she had this, yeehaw.

An itty bitty pixie thing zipped past her face on a trail of shitty special effects and transformed into a small girl with white hair and horribly clashing colors. The girl clapped her hands and started speaking to Kyoko in Japanese. Hennepin's Japanese being better than she expected (although she had purposely understated her powers to Cicero in vain hopes she wouldn't have to come to this godforsaken otaku nation), she caught the gist of the conversation.

"Kyoko, hurry! We have to get you away from here."

"What? Nagisa? Where the hell have you been?" Redhead (Kyoko) paddled to the edge of the pool. The giant snake coiled through a formation of Chicago girls and tossed them skyward with a flick of its head.

"I'll explain later! You and Mommy are in danger. Come with me, hurry!"

"Hey cool your jets bros," said Hennepin (although her linguistic capabilities made her actually say something more akin to "Wait"), "Don't leave me here."

Kyoko and Nagisa took one look at her and then resumed their conversation as though she did not exist. Fair enough. But Hennepin connected some dots, Nagisa must have come from the portal, which led to Omaha and the zillion cubes of the Minneapolis wraith. With the Chicago girls distracted by the snake monster, the portal hung open and unattended by the balcony. One critical chess piece, one unexpected action by an unexpected girl, and suddenly fate flips on its head—perfect! Perfectly stupid! That kinda thinking gets a girl dead. But if she made it into the portal, she'd at least be safe from Cicero.

She stopped wasting time. With Kyoko and already-forgot-her-name mired in heated conversation about someone's Mommy, Hennepin stole away unnoticed into the rumpus room of gold-armored girls setting up cannonades and unloading into the giant snake-thing. Clouds of smoke and ash rocketed from their explosive guns and the snake reared back with a piteous moan, only to surge anew and scatter the girls with its gnashing teeth. Battered bodies lay across the grass and patios while a couple of smalltime healers flitted between them. No sign of Norridge with the whips, but she couldn't have gone far or else Hennepin would be dead by now.

Actually, she didn't need to find Norridge. Adopting the tone and brute force of Cicero's barking (mimicry being yet another thing Hennepin was good at), she said: *NORRIDGE!*

The response came instantaneously: *Yes, milady?*

Oh shit. Chalk up another genius idea on the Hennepin genius idea board, which sadly had been rather barren of late. She briefly considered a way to approach her sleight-of-voice with finesse, but fuck it.

I ORDER YOU TO BRING HENNEPIN HER SOUL GEM AT ONCE! SHE'S NEEDED TO HELP US IN THIS FIGHT.

Right away, milady!

Holy yes. Not even hesitation. She considered other ways to milk her Cicero-voice. Girls charged around her with all manner of weaponry. If she turned them on each other, ascended to chessmaster status and shifted all the pawns life doled her to the end of the board, well then...

Norridge, you imbecile. That wasn't me, that was Hennepin trying to deceive you.

Hennepin flinched and scanned for where the real Cicero was. She had somehow gotten onto the roof of the apartment complex, swinging her halberd at the buxom blonde girl in a fancypants battle, lots of ribbons and rifles swirling around. Not important. What was important was that Norridge had already blundered into sight before Cicero's rebuke brought her to erect attention. Close to the left wing of the apartment complex, alongside a girl with a drill and a girl with a giant sword.

Her eyes searched for a weapon. A stray pool skimmer would have to suffice. She picked up the skimmer and became an instant master of pool skimmer martial arts. Skimmer fu. Oh god she was fuck-fuckity-fucked.

No! Have heart, frail Serena! You're in too deep to back out now. Do you really want to spend another night or another week or another who-knows-how-long in the custody of these lunatics? Of course not. Now charge!

She charged. Norridge had already turned away from her, while drill girl and Cloud Strife girl renewed an assault on the big snake, leaving their hapless friend alone and prey to Hennepin's adept skimmer strikes.

Silent she struck, a pool skimmer to probably the only place it had any chance of doing any damage, which was the small piece of exposed neck between the girl's gold plates of armor and her helmet. The flimsy thin pole settled with a swift thwack as Hennepin pulled back and stepped away, tilting to the side to dodge an attack of retribution. Norridge's whip lashed out and grazed Hennepin's face regardless of evasive maneuvers but what mattered was that Norridge had turned her face to her, which exposed the one weakpoint to which all were susceptible regardless of their armor and regardless of the shitsterness of the opponent's weaponry.

Hennepin flipped the pool skimmer and jabbed the blunt bottom of the shaft directly into Norridge's eye. Get wrecked motherfucker.

And indeed wreckage occurred. Norridge recoiled and slapped a hand to the eye, common bottom tier bitch mistake of giving a shit about structural damage to your own person before neutralizing your opponent because once Hennepin had an in she could stunlock with successive strikes, the blunt end of the pool skimmer to all the unprotected parts, throat and face. Attack its weakpoint for... MASSIVE damage, busting out the vintage 06 memes for this one (memes never die they merely age like fine wine). Norridge, devastated, fell onto her ass and shielded her face with her hands to protect herself.

Now Hennepin was hyped and when she got into something you really had to watch out, it was like her one limitation her kryptonite was her capacity to not give a shit but if you push her over the brink ho boy. With a final solid jab to nail Norridge on the bridge of the nose and dent the soft cartilage, Hennepin discarded her skimmer and dropped to her knees. She scavenged around Norridge's legs and soon found the leather pouch and from it her Soul Gem.

So now everyone was more-or-less fucked because Serena "Hennepin" Ru of Mississauga, Ontario had her damn SOUL back. Flash! Light enveloped her and her slopping wet ensemble vanished, replaced by a dry and plush and beautiful assemblage of pseudo-Victorian lady wear and a sleek and intelligent lab coat on top, a costume mind you Hennepin had assiduously designed herself, fashion design being one of the infinite things she was very good at.

She wanted someone to recognize her badassery but as she appraised the situation around her the other Chicago girls remained preoccupied with the snake monster, as well as the now-combined efforts of Kyoto and Small Kid and Big Mommy. The trio clashed with Cicero and

some of the other Chicago girls on the roof. The roof, by the way, had several large craters in it because every time Cicero swung her big damn axe she caused a miniature explosion, which Hennepin had to admit was kinda badass. But what mattered most was the portal by the balcony. Long ago she learned the perils of excessive gloating even if she only did it to herself. The portal mattered most.

Little stood in her way. She scurried between the fallen and injured bodies of the Chicagoans, lithe and furtive in her movements, efficient in her steps as she glided across the remains of the courtyard-turned-battlefield. Only a quick hop to the balcony and a second into the portal.

Except someone already stood inside the portal, and it was

GOD.

DAMN.

FARGO.

"What the hell are you doing there Fargo?" said Hennepin.

Fargo leaned halfway out the portal and angled her turret to fire at the Chicago girls on the roof. She seemed reluctant to leave the portal itself and she gave no acknowledgement of Hennepin.

"Hey! That gun of yours finally make you deaf? I'm coming up, you better get out of the way or—"

Or nothing, because the big goofy snake monster which until she stepped close to the portal had been perfectly content to ignore her turned its stupid face in her direction and peered down at her. Hungrily.

Its wide smile parted into two rows of perfect white triangles. Hennepin's mind went blank as she gazed into the maw of perfect blackness beyond, like a portal into void itself, and then the thing lunged and its teeth tore into her waist and spine and she felt herself hoisted into the air because feeling became the only sense left to her.

For a pretty brief moment she lay limp between its jaws because the absurdity of the situation made it impossible to comprehend. If not for the jagged fangs lodged in her body she might have denied its reality, but soon she had no recourse but to accept that a goofy snake monster was eating her for lunch. And when she did accept it, the first thing that popped into her head was the movie *Braindead*.

Have you ever seen, or even heard of, the 1992 New Zealand cinematic classic *Braindead*, also known by the equally sublime title *Dead Alive*, written and directed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker Peter Jackson? Well, purely hypothetical friends (Hennepin's only "friends" being people she met online), it's a coming-of-age tale about a meek young gent who lives alone with his rather unpleasant mother. But love blossoms in this poor kiwi's heart when he meets a nice foreigner and the two spark a budding romance. Too bad the man's mother disapproves of the couple (because RACISM) and does everything she can to break

them up. The part in particular that entered Hennepin's mind was a scene at the climax, wherein the mother, now transformed into a colossal rampaging zombie, devours whole her hapless son, in a way quite similar to how Hennepin herself was being currently devoured. But fear not, dear audience. For the crafty young man escaped his dire plight. In a gesture rather symbolic of his newfound independence from his mother and his fledgling steps toward manhood, the young man clawed his way out his mother's stomach with a knife.

Hennepin did not have a knife. Nor had she yet been swallowed into the monster's stomach, assuming strange magical creatures had regular digestive tracts and she wouldn't simply tumble into everlasting emptiness. Nonetheless, with a glimmer of magic she summoned her crystal. Normally her crystal needed light to do anything, but in a pinch she could always trust it for simple bludgeoning.

She rammed the sharp edge of the long prismatic shard into the roof of the monster's mouth. It hit something with a wet and soft sinking sound. Hennepin wrenched it out and tossed it again to ram it back in. The monster flailed its head wildly and her body shook like a rag doll and the teeth clenched to the point they had nearly bifurcated her or at least felt that way. Weird fluid poured over her as she shanked and shanked and shanked her crystal deeper into the monster's mouth, up and toward a brain if one existed.

The mouth opened, light poured in, and a flick of its head sent her flying, wrenched from the teeth that gored her. She hit the wall of the apartment and bounced onto the balcony. The creature howled and its eyes went psychedelic discotheque shades of bonkers as candy-colored blood frothed from its mouth, dribbling across the balcony in gloopy rivers, running over Hennepin's paralyzed legs and twitching lower body. The snake spazzed, scraping the side of its face against the apartment walls, gnashing its teeth and making unreal screechy sounds until its cocaine-addled eyes fell on her again. At which point its brow furrowed in exaggerated cartoon anger and it unhinged its maw to finish the job.

From the portal not far away, Fargo fired her gun at Chicago girls. Hennepin directed her crystal into her fire, intercepting the light and redirecting it at the snake. The rays streamed out magnified by Hennepin's own magic and walloped the big round dopey ass face of the monster. The monster reared back and rolled against the side of the apartment complex, shattering windows and cracking walls. Hennepin did not bother to check if she killed it and it didn't matter anyway. She commanded her legs to move and ignoring the fact that her entrails tumbled out the cavity in her stomach—fun fact, not the first time this had happened—she pulled herself up using the railing as a prop.

"Hennepin dammit stop fucking around," said Fargo.

Walking, let alone leaping, was out of the question. But Hennepin propped her collapsing body against her crystal as a support. She wrapped her hands around its sleek sides and angled it straight toward the portal. Fargo kept yapping at her, apparently unaware what she intended to do. Hennepin was beyond caring. It was rocket ship time.

Her crystal fired at the portal, with Hennepin along for the ride. If she had more life and less pain she'd shout a yeehaw for good measure. Instead she plowed into Fargo and through the portal. Gravity and atmosphere vanished, replaced by realm of void broken only by the

occasional chair. Fargo went flying, Hennepin went flying. Her blood whipped through the space, her guts flapped from her wounds.

Around her glittered thousands of cubes.

Little worked. Attacks proved only speciously effective, frequently not even so. This demon, or whatever Sloan called her, made a formidable foe. If not for the constant stream of healing magic provided by Delaney, they would have suffered defeat long ago.

Erika Dufresne dashed across the windowed wall of a skyscraper. The glass behind her shattered after every step and rained shards on the populace below, likely fatal to hapless pedestrians imperceptible at such distance. Allowing civilians to die for Madoka's protection probably ran counter to Madoka's philosophy, which seemed to be one of baffling pacifism and (for lack of a better word) niceness. Even for Erika's short time in the ascended realm, she had found her perception of the universe to bend toward that of the Incubators, whose entropic platforms she had never considered before mostly because entropy was to her only a word (and a vaguely-defined one at that). But when you can see the entire scope of human and nonhuman existence, or at least acquire a deeper understanding of where those existences are heading, it becomes difficult *not* to consider entropy a rather grave issue. And when you can see the whole of human existence, from Mesopotamia to globalization, the importance of a single human life diminishes to the point of mere statistic curiosity.

Perhaps that then explained Madoka's significance, for even as a Goddess (by some definitions) she ran her operations for noble and humane purposes, when many given her powers would not, even those who began well-intentioned.

Erika leapt from the side of the skyscraper and flew in an arc above Homura Akemi. She aimed her trajectory to land not directly on top of her but slightly to the right side, well within striking range but (hopefully) at a strange enough angle to confound her, as it was the side opposite that which clutched the sleeping Madoka. Furthermore, should the attack go poorly, it gave Erika a better route of escape, because Delaney floated further to the right on her bubbles, and could more easily snatch her from harm if she came at such a position.

Her goal was the long, sparsely-feathered wings that adorned Akemi's back, because their length made them more difficult to defend and because if they could somehow incapacitate her ability for flight and bring the battle back to the ground it would give Akemi fewer options, allow them to more easily pen her into inescapable situations, and generally increase her desperation. Common parlance suggested a desperate, trapped animal is at its most dangerous, and for animals such sayings were true, but humans in such situations normally acted only stupidly (Sloan Redfearn served as such an example). Her velocity brought her close to Akemi and she lashed her sword at the bony joint halfway down the wing, but at the same moment Akemi dipped into a nosedive and Erika's sword swiped naught but air.

She hit one of Delaney's bubbles and rebounded to try again. As she repositioned, their blue-haired companion attempted a similar attack and achieved a similar result. Their problem was lack of coordination. They could not communicate to ameliorate this problem because any communication they made could be heard by their adversary, merely telegraphing what they intended to do. It all made Erika rather frustrated, because hadn't her final life lesson prior to death been about the necessity of proper teamwork to take down foes stronger than oneself?

Another attempted attack, another miss. Akemi zoomed around another skyscraper and their ineffectual trio chased. Drawing the fight to this kind of stalemate would favor Akemi ultimately. If she were a being like Madoka her Soul Gem must be nigh incorruptible, and while Erika felt that her own gem had evolved past its usual capacity, the uninterrupted thirty minutes (give or take) of high-powered fighting had exacted a toll. She had no idea if her companions felt the same. She knew next to nothing about Blue Hair, and come to think of it she knew very little about Delaney. But Blue Hair had been forced to stop roving around with her mermaid witch form (or perhaps its lack of maneuverability made it simply impractical), so likely they could commiserate.

She landed on another bubble but this time did not bounce for another strike. "Pollack," she said. "We're making no progress."

"Indeed it's true," said Delaney. "I had hoped with her holding onto Madoka she'd be handicapped somewhat, but it's really only made her harder to catch!"

Blue Hair landed atop a bubble beside her, drew her cape around her, and revealed several more disposable blades which she quickly launched at Akemi. Akemi's eyes barely flitted in their direction and she was able to avoid all of them. Erika sighed, because it meant it was her turn to attack. When they rounded another skyscraper (she had lost track of whether they were simply cycling around the same two or three or if the city actually sprawled so much), Erika launched herself at Akemi. The attack felt token even to her and she did not even feel further frustration at its inevitable failure. She quickly rebounded off the skyscraper wall and landed back onto Delaney's bubbles.

"I'm going to try something different," she said.

Delaney clasped her hands. "Oh, very good! Blueberry said she's bad at adapting to new circumstances. I figured you two had expended all your tricks long ago, however. You're both rather one-dimensional!"

Perhaps so, but Erika always kept one trick in reserve. She had hoped not to have to use it until they had at least exposed some sort of weakness or pushed Akemi into a more compromised position. Honestly, however, what they ought to do is regroup inside the void where invisible girl Omaha (if that was her real name) dwelt so they could plan an attack outside Akemi's earshot. Or perhaps glean key tactical information from Blue Hair and Omaha themselves.

Either way the best course of action became clear. They had entered an open area between four towers arranged in a diamond, each with sleek reflective surfaces and pyramid spires so that they looked like prismatic crystals catching the dwindling sun to create dazzling arrays

of light across the air. The openness, with no unusual protrusions or nearby walls around which Akemi could dart, made the locale perfect.

She flung herself from the bubbles and did not angle her trajectory at Akemi but rather the space behind her while she raised her katana overhead. She closed her eyes and emptied her mind of needless noise, attracting and collecting the energies that buzzed inside her into a neat and tidy sphere of thought, streaks of indigo and celadon ricocheting across the firm but translucent confines of their prison, gaining velocity and speed and power.

Her eyes opened and the powers she visualized with her mind's eye appeared around her katana. They brimmed with fluorescent pulse, shivering up and down the length of molecular steel. The power blossomed into a neon halo around the katana's tip, a halo that swallowed her sight and plunged the skyscrapers and the sky into effaced whiteness. Homura Akemi remained, a dark smudge on the purity of her mental landscape, wings of lazy inksplots and a body like that of a salamander wriggling itself from Jurassic tar mires to touch land for the first time.

"Bourrasque," said Erika.

Her bones adopted the lightness of a bird's. The wind billowed at her back and gave her strength.

"Denouement."

The whisper of breath that issued from her lips bid the power in her sword to release. From her body burst a stellation of copies of herself, built and fibered with thick strands of wind. The copies formed exponentially and soon littered the entire space between the four skyscrapers with their eyeblink movements and sword slashes. Made of no solid matter, they could travel far faster than Erika herself, faster even than Akemi despite her swift gliding motions across the stagnant air. Hundreds, thousands of the wind-borne forms streamed through the area. They encircled Akemi and fenced all avenues of escape, at least on a horizontal plane. One tremendous beat of her wings and Akemi dropped beneath the onslaught, dipped into a nosedive and bombed toward the concrete roads below.

Erika's thousand wind clones pursued, buzzing about Akemi like a vicious cluster of wasps. Erika herself dropped, the energy transferred from her soul to the spirits outside. She allowed herself to fall in a perfectly rigid and straight position. Even if she hit the ground she had withheld enough power to stick the landing without harm to herself. Her hair rustled behind her as the wind rose to greet her.

Oh lovely, she's on the run now, said Delaney.

She's always been on the run, said Blue Hair.

That's all my power, said Erika. *Capitalize now or we must retreat.*

It cut the chatter at least. Blue Hair surged ahead of Erika, all of them in freefall. Her cape fluttered among the army of spirits toward the thickest cluster of wisps, where little but stray

black feathers could be seen of Akemi for all the bluster around her. Even Delaney pulled ahead of Erika to remain close enough to Blue Hair for instant healing.

A shard of purple light sliced through the wind. It curved in air and divided each spirit it struck into nothingness. Blue Hair cartwheeled off a well-placed bubble to evade but the arrow continued through Delaney's body and into the beyond afterward. A second arrow followed the first, and a third in a different direction, and a fourth and a fifth and soon an uncountable number in every conceivable direction, until it seemed impossible that even a demigod could draw so many arrows with such rapidity. Several struck Erika, but she held the pendant that was her gem in one hand to keep it safe and cared nothing for anything else. Delaney did not put especial focus into healing her.

They struck the ground. Or rather, Erika struck the ground, her shoes hitting the roof of a car but absorbing the force of impact with her magical reserves so that she did not even stagger. The remaining few spirits and Akemi now fully visible between them diverted their fall moments prior, Akemi with a powerful blast of her wings to clear away many of the remaining spirits, her bow drawn between her hands. She pulled back the string to fire at Blue Hair but Blue Hair came down too quick and her sword sliced deep through one of Akemi's wings and into the side of her flesh. Blood stream out and Akemi dropped to the middle of the intersection, amid mindless cars and pedestrians. The dregs of Erika's Bourrasque Denouement attack disappeared, but they had done their purpose to bring Akemi down and allow Blue Hair a solid strike against her.

The severed wing flopped with a limp splatter of blood. Akemi darted backward while Blue Hair went on the offensive with renewed vigor, and the swiftness of her strokes prevented Akemi from using her time magic to heal herself. Delaney transitioned to a more offensive role, coming at Akemi from the opposite angle and using her bubbles less for defense and more to pen Akemi into unfavorable situations and reduce her options for evasion.

Erika knelt against the roof of the vehicle on which she landed and caught her breath. They had dealt a staggering blow against Akemi and transformed the terrain of the battlefield. Now they need only—

A portal opened beside her. She peered into the blackness and immediately Omaha leaned out, fright etched on her features. She recognized Erika with a dull gleam and drew back.

"Oh... you..."

"Yes," said Erika.

"We... we have a situation here! Sayaka isn't listening to me..."

"We're close to defeating Homura Akemi," said Erika. "Nothing else matters."

"If my portals are allowed to decay... Then it won't matter how close you are to beating her, because she'll only have to turn off time and win..."

Did that mean some kind of danger had entered Omaha's void area? Erika had little conception of how Omaha's powers worked or why they made Blue Hair immune to time

magic. However, she conceded that Omaha probably at least knew what she was talking about.

"Fine, out of the way. I'll come."

Omaha pulled herself aside and Erika climbed through the portal into her dark world. She had collected an odd assortment of knickknacks, most of which were chairs, some of which were nuclear warheads. Erika disliked the latter elements of her collection, because there appeared to be quite a large sum of them. But she had no opportunity to ask because the situation that so distressed Omaha became clear at once. A lot of people bounced around within this world, one of which Erika recognized as Sloan but the others a mystery. Most of them wore golden armor and swam through the space with determined motions, although for what purpose Erika could only fathom. Two more portals remained open. Within the farthest portal a girl in gold armor had propped herself, her back curved and her legs folded to fit within the circular entryway as (aided by an excessively large sword) she held it open for more of her gold-armored fellows to enter.

"Why haven't you closed the portal," said Erika.

Omaha clutched at her robes. "Because that stupid girl with the big sword is in the way! She... she... I didn't even know they could be held open like that!"

This all seemed pretty ridiculous. Erika had no clue what to make of it, nor could she appraise the actual danger posed to Omaha by the platoon of girls who entered, because most of them did not seem to notice her at all and instead turned their attention either on a vast sea of grief cubes that floated near the nuclear warheads or else Sloan and some of her companions. Erika got the distinct impression that about a million things had happened since her death and the amount of explaining it would take for her to comprehend such an extreme quantity of shenanigans was simply insurmountable.

"I could alter the rules here so nobody's magical powers work but... but it would also stop my powers and make all my portals disappear... Which would be bad for Sayaka..."

"If you can alter the rules of this space, why can you not alter them so everyone's powers stop but your own?"

"Because the purpose of rules is that they apply to everyone! They can't be broken because one person wants to!"

She spoke with bizarre conviction and Erika was unsure whether she had actually handicapped herself with such an explanation or if she was merely trying to explain a power she legitimately did not have. To think of it wearied Erika, even though the moment she entered this formless and empty void her fatigue from using her finisher vanished. Not to the point that she felt rested and well, but to the point she felt neutral and benign.

"We're making progress against Akemi," said Erika. "All you need to do is hold out until we finish her. They're not even attacking you, and Sloan is fighting them to keep them back."

"It's not about me, do you understand anything!" Omaha pawed at her own face. "They're taking the cubes! Without them I'm powerless..."

Erika decided to assume the cubes were important because Omaha said so, although honestly she had little reason to trust the girl who had more-or-less killed her. If something did happen to this realm, however, it would ruin their hopes of defeating Homura Akemi and rescuing Madoka Kaname, and such being their sole and ultimate goal, anything in service to that goal was a worthwhile endeavor.

She brushed back her hair and gripped her katana. "I shall see what I can do."

Everything had happened so fast, and Mami had so little understanding of it all. It made it exceedingly difficult to maintain a cool head and a poised disposition, but when Nagisa had suddenly returned and without explanation dragged her into a portal to a black space where she had to fight without aid of gravity or much else, she had to concede to her lack of understanding. Although it put her in a rather uncomfortable position where Nagisa, as relieved as Mami was that she was safe and unharmed, had more understanding of the situation than Mami herself.

She had little time to think about it. The leader of the gold-armored ladies, who wielded a large halberd, had maintained her offensive even unto the void, alongside some of her stronger compatriots. She swung her halberd at Kyoko, although the lack of anything to steady herself against caused her body to rotate and staggered her attack. Kyoko tried to avoid but she also had nothing with which to brace herself against, so Mami had to coil ribbons around her waist and yank her out of the way. The halberd glided past and struck nothing until the leader girl did a complete three-hundred-and-sixty degree cartwheel.

Mami summoned and fired a rifle at the leader while she reeled Kyoko away from immediate danger, but the bullet stuck in the strangeness of the space. Its momentum stalled and it drifted with no more velocity than the chairs or other detritus that clogged the area. When Sloan raised her machine gun and fired, her light did not even escape the barrel before the overwhelming darkness extinguished it.

"How dumb can this be?" Kyoko pulled herself away from Mami's ribbons. "Where the hell even are we?"

"We're outside the universe itself," said Nagisa. She kept close to Mami and Mami kept an eye on her lest she stray too close to danger. "So a lot of laws and rules and stuff don't work so well here."

Kyoko immediately lost control of herself and spiraled in a random direction. "Well I don't like it at all."

Meanwhile the girls in golden armor seemed mired in similar problems. The leader with the halberd fought to right herself, although the force of her swing had caused her to spin in perpetuity, even though one of her allies tried to drift to her side to stop her and only got sucked into the whirlwind. A third girl raised a massive arquebus and fired at Sloan, but the bullet, which was as large as a cannonball, encountered the same distortion of physics that Mami's bullet had.

Honestly, it was rather comedic, and the utter lack of danger allowed Mami's heartrate to settle. She had to contain a smirk, even. Besides, Nagisa had returned—was that not cause for happiness? She still wished she understood what was happening, however. She wanted to ask Sloan but her English had suddenly failed her and she could not cohere words together.

A new girl drifted beside them, from the direction where Mami thought no more girls were. She was somewhat young, perhaps twelve or thirteen, and she had a purple vest with short hair. She held a katana in one hand but she was an obvious foreigner, like Sloan or the girls in gold armor. She moved with graceful glides and stopped herself beside Sloan and spoke in English. Cubes. She said something about cubes.

Then, quite shockingly, Nagisa spoke in flawless English herself.

Mami stared at Nagisa and then tried to exchange a glance with Kyoko in order to confirm she had heard what she thought she heard, but Kyoko had tumbled far away and gotten tangled in a bunch of chairs and it did not seem she was aware of much else.

"Bebe," said Mami, "Did you speak English?"

"Oh yeah," said Nagisa. "Sorry I didn't tell you earlier, but I can speak a lot of languages. Like, all of them."

The gold-armored girl with the arquebus floated at Mami and attempted to bludgeon her with the butt of the gun, but she moved so slowly that it took no effort to summon ribbons with which to bind her and fling her in the opposite direction. The girl with the arquebus growled and shouted but nothing could reorient her trajectory and she was soon as far away as Kyoko.

"How," said Mami. "Bebe, what are you not telling me?"

Nagisa shuffled her feet and held her hands behind her back. Sloan and the short-haired foreigner chatted about something, Sloan angrily and her friend calmly. "I'm really sorry Mami, I probably shoulda told you earlier—I wanted to, but Sayaka said I couldn't..."

"What is it. What's going on?"

"Mami, so I'm... I'm not supposed to be here. In Mitakihara, I mean."

Sloan gesticulated wildly at the objects drifting around the outskirts of the void, including the grief cubes that most of the remaining gold-armored girls had gone toward, scooping huge handfuls into whatever containers they could.

"Not supposed to be here? Bebe, please be clear. I don't understand what you're trying to say."

More shuffling of feet. Her gaze would not meet Mami's, which usually meant she had slacked on her homework or stolen an extra piece of cheese from the pantry or misbehaved in some manner.

"Well..."

Sloan said something to her friend which interrupted Nagisa's thought and caused her to say something in English. Sloan's friend had an increasingly disconcerted expression on her stolid and serious face and she glanced at the objects Sloan pointed at as well as over her shoulder toward the darkness she had come from.

Using the girl who had entangled with her for leverage, the leader of the girls in gold armor righted herself and lunged at them with her halberd. Mami's ribbons put an end to that. She made a mental note that in a world where projectiles did not work and evasive actions were sluggish and delayed, powers like Mami's were especially potent.

But that did not matter. Mami placed a hand on Nagisa's shoulder and pulled her away from the conversation between Sloan and her friend. "Bebe! Answer me now. What has happened to you and Miss Miki? What is going on here?"

And again Nagisa only shuffled her feet and picked at her collar. That old fear settled in, the fear that things were incorrect, that the natural order had in some way become disorganized, an omnipresent and overbearing feeling of offness, uncanniness, and the heart inside Mami's chest began to beat against its confines and her airless breaths wrenched their way from her gullet.

Still Nagisa said nothing and only turned away when Sloan's friend, a furrow of anger now on her own brow and her katana raised, tore away from the group and plunged back the way she came. She barked English words into the air. They may as well have been ancient Mesopotamian. Sloan followed her friend and Nagisa turned to follow as well, but Mami held her shoulder.

"Bebe."

"Mami, I'm sorry, I promise I'll explain everything later, but right now something's happening and it's super important, okay?"

"No, tell me now. What is happening? Tell me, please!"

Nagisa demurred some more. "Madoka is in trouble."

"Madoka...? Miss Kaname?" Mami blinked. What did Madoka have to do with anything? She had not even gone missing like the others, Mami had kept in contact with her up until a few hours ago. She was at Homura's apartment.

"Yeah, Madoka! She's really important. A lot of things in Mitakihara aren't what they look like, but it's really hard to explain right now. Can you trust me, Mami? Please?"

Sloan's friend in the darkness continued to shout, although her voice came out distorted and muffled due to the void. She seemed to repeat the same word—Homura? No, different: Omaha. Omaha.

Mami wanted to be stern with Nagisa, but could she punish such a child any longer with threats of withheld cheese? Much of the childishness had ebbed away from her features and her gaze was now strong and determined, focused on a goal that Mami could not comprehend. The disconnect between them struck Mami hard and fast and tears welled in her eyes, unbidden and unwanted, and she averted her face and wiped at the tears to scrape them away while she fought to control herself.

"At least." She swallowed a sob before it could rise in her gorge like a bubble and burst. "At least tell me what they're saying."

"They? Oh, you mean what's-her-name and the new girl."

"Sloan Redfearn, her name is Sloan Redfearn."

"Right." Nagisa tugged on Mami's sleeve and led her toward where Sloan and Sloan's friend drifted. "Right now they're looking for Omaha, who's like, the person who created this place? Kinda. This place always existed and will always exist, because it's outside the universe. But Omaha found a way to get here and go back."

Outside the universe? What words were these? How did Nagisa, who struggled with long division, understand what she said?

Out of the darkness came another voice, also speaking English, tiny and weak and its sentences concluded with ellipses as though the words themselves were decaying out of the speaker's mouth. No matter where Mami looked, she saw nobody.

"That's Omaha," said Nagisa. "She wants them to go and stop the girls from Chicago from stealing the grief cubes. If they take them all, Omaha won't be able to open portals anymore. At least that's what she says, I personally think she's lying. Although having the cubes is good for us because it lets us fight for a long time if we have to."

"Fight who? Fight who, Nagisa?"

Nagisa kept her eyes low and said nothing. Sloan's friend with the katana, however, shouted a great deal, staring into the sky although nothing but darkness lay there. Sloan herself interjected once or twice.

"Uh oh," said Nagisa. "This is the important part. You see those bombs over there?" She pointed at some objects Mami had never thought to be bombs, half-shrouded in darkness as they were. "Sloan thinks Kyubey set it up so those bombs would explode when we take Madoka here, because she thinks Kyubey wants to kill Madoka."

"Kyubey? Madoka? What?" How could this be real? The nebulous black space mocked her from all sides. Could this be a dream? But so many years of fighting in wraith miasmas had made her adept and knowing when she was awake and when she slept.

Omaha's voice spoke. She was interrupted by Sloan, and soon everyone began to speak on top of each other, in a twisted melee of words from which nothing intelligible arose.

"Omaha doesn't think Kyubey is capable of doing it even if he wanted to, and she doesn't think he wants to because she thinks he's her friend for some reason? And Stow's friend, whose name is Erika I guess, says that in order to bring Madoka here a portal will have to be open, which means Kyubey could transmit a signal or something, even if he only had a brief moment to do it... I dunno, it's all pretty complicated, Sloan's talking about how it doesn't matter how he would do it, and Omaha's whispering too quiet to hear."

The shouting match continued. Mami glanced over her shoulder at the space behind her. Broken and aimless chairs drifted among girls in gold armor. A girl in a lab coat clung to a crystal, and on the fringes lurked ominous shapes—bombs.

Sloan's voice cut above the others and the others fell silent. She sputtered a long and twisted sentence and fell quiet, her eyes searching the dark for Omaha. A silence fell and Nagisa said:

"Sloan wants to know what Omaha planned to use the bombs for. She thinks that Omaha intended to lure Homura in here and blow up the bombs as a last resort if nothing else worked. She says that was Kyubey's failsafe plan."

Homura?

Omaha spoke.

"Omaha says the bombs were for a different reason. She says the failsafe plan didn't need the bombs, because if Omaha lured Homura into here, which would be easy because it's the only way Homura could ultimately win, then all Omaha would need to do is kill herself and Homura could never escape."

"What?" said Mami.

Nagisa folded her arms. "It's true, of course. Homura probably doesn't understand how this place works. She probably thinks it's just a distorted version of the real world, like a wraith miasma, so that if she killed Omaha, everything would return to normal. But this is its own place, so... Even if Homura hesitated at first, she would come in here eventually. Otherwise she'd go crazy knowing she had no way to really be safe without killing Omaha."

None of this made sense. Mami clutched at her forehead and stared at her shoes. She wanted to take Nagisa out of here, her and Kyoko and Sloan and escape to a world she understood and where she could place everything into proper compartments and make sense of it and control it. With ribbons she could bind Nagisa. There were three portals open. One was guarded by the gold-armored girls but the other two were clear. Yes, that was it. That was the solution. She had a distinct advantage with her powers here—

Sloan cut off her thoughts with a quick, terse sentence.

"She wants to know, then, what the bombs are for," said Nagisa.

Nobody spoke. A severe and inviolable silence reigned over the area, even though the girls in gold armor seethed in the background. Mami placed her hands on Nagisa's shoulders. She could take Nagisa and probably Kyoko with her at one time. She would have to return for Sloan, if she chose to return. No. She could not just abandon her. She would return.

A hundred portals opened at once, below them. Mami drew back because for a moment she thought they would all be sucked through into the world beneath, but they continued to drift in the space. The portals formed a neat checkerboard pattern, perfect circles staring onto a vast cityscape—Mitakihara. No, wait. Not Mitakihara. Each portal looked onto a different city. She recognized Tokyo and Paris, and Moscow and Seoul, and Washington and Rio de Janeiro. She recognized Sydney and its opera house, Shanghai and its strange towers, Istanbul and its Hagia Sophia, Athens and its Parthenon, Mecca and its black square. London, Rome, and Berlin. Kyoto, Mumbai, Singapore. Even Mitakihara itself amid all the other cities, the cities Mami had always wanted to visit, the landmarks and buildings and cultures, and for a moment she stood suspended in awe of it all, the entire breadth of human society and culture stretched before her in a wide panoply.

"Oh no," said Nagisa.

Mami turned to her. "What do you mean?"

The dark objects in the far reaches of the space began to move, notable because nothing else in the space moved, neither the chairs nor the cubes nor any of the assorted people, the gold-armored girls and the girl with the crystal and Kyoko and Sloan and Sloan's friend staring silently at the array of portals. The dark shadows, vague shapes, filled the space above their heads, above the windows to the cities of the world.

Nagisa broke away and zipped toward one of the portals that had always been open, the one closest to them that looked onto a busy city intersection. Mami went after her, hesitant to stop her because she had no idea whether she ran toward danger or away from it, unsure of anything and paralyzed by her uncertainty, but she knew she must stay with Nagisa no matter what so she used her ribbons to seize the chairs nearby and propel herself. The ribbons allowed her to move fast, but not as fast as Nagisa, who reached the portal and leaned out and shouted:

"Sayaka! Sayaka Sayaka Sayaka, she's doing the thing! The *thing!*"

When Mami reached her and peered over her shoulder she saw Sayaka and another girl fighting—what couldn't be—Homura? Surely her, but with a long black wing and another severed stump, blood pouring down her side as she wielded a bow Mami had never seen before. She clutched Madoka under one arm, which somehow did not impede her ability to use a two-handed weapon.

"Nagisa, what thing, what thing is she doing?" said Mami.

"SAYAKA SHE'S GONNA BLOW UP EVERYTHING!"

Sayaka froze mid-swing and turned her head over her shoulder, her eyes huge and blood running down her face. Her cape stuck to her back and she said, "Tell her I only need more time, dammit! There's no need for that yet!" Then she rolled into a cartwheel to avoid a purple arrow from Homura's blow and swung her sword at Homura's body.

Why were they fighting? Mami had always detected a hint of animosity between Homura and Sayaka, but to descend to this—inconceivable, inexplicable... She grabbed Nagisa by the shoulders and pulled her close to herself, and although Nagisa struggled to escape she did not let go because she could think of nothing else to do, nowhere else to go, to escape the confusion that had enveloped her.

The bombs fell through the portals and onto the cities below.

The cars on the street with Sayaka and Homura and the third girl stopped. The stoplights went black and the lights within the glass towers disappeared.

The glass shattered. The world went an almost pure white with only etches of outlines within. Mami seized Nagisa's head and tucked it under her arms, pulled her away from the portal as cataclysm swallowed the city beyond. A horrid shriek of metal and conflagration swarmed, followed by the radiating pulse of heat that seared the flesh on Mami's skin and ate at the fabric of her sleeve, filling the air with flecks of charred paper. She burrowed Nagisa deeper into herself, covering her with as much body and ribbon as possible.

The portal beside her turned from white to red and the heat and sound for a moment nullified, even though heat and sound pulsed from the hundred portals across the bottom of the void. The red bubbled against the portal, squeezing its way in, forming a convex lens of crimson that Mami, although her eyes sizzled, found her attention drawn to. The convexity of the red surface extended, rounder and rounder until without warning it burst into a deluge of liquid and through the portal rushed Sayaka Miki and the unknown girl who had been with her. They flowed into the space and the red liquid flowed over Mami and Nagisa and healed the surfaces of Mami's skin that had dissolved from the heat of the blast, but as soon as the liquid sloshed through the portal the heat and overwhelming light resumed.

Then all portals turned off at once.

Three in the morning in Fargo, North Dakota. Damn cold and swallowed in snow.

The Magical Girl formerly known as Anoka, now little more than a Lily Cheong, trudged down a main street wrapped in jackets too thin to stop the trembling of her skinbare arms and the drip-drop of her runny nose. The alleys and streets were all dark, nobody stirred in a night like this in a city like this. Well enough Lily knew these cities and towns, but she'd hoped she

wouldn't have to see them again so soon. Minneapolis had been nothing after all. A bust. Baloney.

Getting back was difficult. Especially since she no longer had Gwen. Or anyone but her own self. She knew most likely how this story ended, a frozen corpse on a roadside somewhere. Except in her case probably not even a body. But she ain't dead yet so she'd try her hardest.

Still, Fargo was the biggest city until Billings so she needed to stock up on cubes while the cubes came good. If only this place had more wraiths. No wonder Fargo—Sloan—had been such a jerk, she lived in the pits.

She grumbled in her thoughts and a little under her breath, because at least grumbling took her mind off the cold. Her boots crunched against swept and salted sidewalks. Dampness seeped through the supposedly-waterproof rubber and dampened her woolen socks, which had a lot of holes in them.

A lot of miles back to Vancouver, even back to Calgary. Was it worth so she could apologize to parents who barely even cared about their daughter and probably hadn't noticed she had gone missing? Her parents or Gwen's. When she left Minneapolis it felt so important to do... *something*, to make something right. But she no longer knew what that something was or if she had any power to undo it. Gwen died. Lily had a hand in her death. Did an apology change anything?

She could've stayed in Minneapolis. No less cold but more cubes. Especially with the residents having offed themselves Shakespeare-style, with only the blandest girls left alive because someone needed to say a final line. A stage dense with corpses. Everything since then felt like overtime, time that should not exist—

A shape scampered across the road in front of her and roused her attention. She blinked, unsure she saw anything, because who but a lunatic would be out in subzero temperatures? But after she blinked the shadowy figure remained, running across the snow with jerky wide jumps of legs. A second figure opened a door and ran too. They shouted at each other, gruff manly words more sound than sense. Lily checked to make sure she hadn't blundered into criminal activity, no gangsters waiting in getaway cars, but only rusted snow-covered vehicles on the street sides clogged the roadways.

She followed behind the two men, moving quickly with her hands in her pockets, keeping her distance even though neither seemed particularly interested in their surroundings. They spoke in hushed but stark whispers. Lights turned on in the squat structures around the street. More slumped figures streamed out doors that before had seemed welded to the backdrop. The hell was this? What were these people doing? Mass delusion? Or had the cold taken Lily so thoroughly her eyes made stuff up? A crowd gathered around the two men. Men and some women and no children but mostly men. Fear laced their whispers, but their words remained unknown to Lily.

Who were these pilgrims?

The mob rounded a main street corner and came to a pickup in the middle of the road with the bed open and men crawling across it in flannel jackets and furred hats. The mob stopped

in front of the truck as though the truck had been their destination the entire time. Maybe it was, because they all went silent without a command from anyone. Lily drew up the back of their thick cluster and stood on tiptoe to try and see what was in the truck, but broad shoulders and bobbing heads blocked her.

She did, however, hear the crackle of a radio:

"We are receiving reports... these are verified eyewitness reports... The cities of New York... Los Angeles... Washington... Toronto... We are receiving reports... The president, we believe, is still alive... I repeat, we believe the president is still alive..."

Whispers electrified the crowd. Faces turned toward each other, chapped lips expelled gusts of white breath. Their terror took on a physical dimension and seeped into Lily's own psyche. What was all this? The radio continued:

"Yet unverified reports... Mexico City... London... Paris... Madrid... Rome... Berlin... No word on who has perpetrated these attacks... If you're just joining us now... We believe an attack has transpired... A worldwide attack... Not only the United States..."

Someone in the crowd, a woman, screamed, and the chaos began.

Twenty-one people inhabited the space between universes, the empty and formless void with uncertain rules and a large quantity of chairs. Twelve of the occupants hailed from Chicago, and, having seen what they had in the portals before the portals closed, they clustered around their leader, the girl named Laquesha Kabwe and known as Cicero. Kabwe told them to remain calm, maintain their discipline, and continue siphoning the grief cubes from the void into their own possession. Soon the portals would reopen and they would regroup with the eight girls who had been left behind in Mitakihara. Confidence imbued her words and the girls absorbed the confidence and became confident themselves. They did as ordered and Cicero oversaw their work.

Serena Ru, known as Hennepin, clung to a crystal she created with her magic and tried not to admit to herself she was scared.

Kyoko Sakura struggled against a cluster of floating chairs that had seemed to magnetize to her flailing arms and legs. She fought to move closer to her friends, but her frantic motions only pushed her further away. She thought she saw Sayaka in the distance. The thought made her struggle more and propelled her deeper into the void.

Erika Dufresne and Sloan Redfearn, known as Winnipeg and Fargo respectively, shouted at the warden of the void realm. The shouts were mostly of raw emotion and had little semantic content. Redfearn used ample expletives while Dufresne made due with severe gesticulations to convey her fury and disbelief.

Delaney Pollack, known as Regina-Saskatoon, cured her irradiated body with magical blood and straightened her robes.

Mami Tomoe clutched Nagisa Momoe in her arms and refused to relinquish her despite Momoe's struggles. Although any danger to either of their persons had long passed (and truthfully had never existed, because the void filtered the nuclear blasts that had osmosed through the portals to severely dampen their effects), Tomoe displayed no signs of altering her behavior. Both –omoe girls were covered in Pollack's blood.

Sayaka Miki, also covered in Pollack's blood (and good thing too, because she had suffered the worst of the nuclear explosion that engulfed Mitakihara, and most of her had eroded away before Pollack enveloped her in a bubble and pulled her into the void—although one could argue that Miki's own healing prowess would prove sufficient for recovery), gripped two of her swords and turned her head left and right in search of the girl known as Omaha, seeing nothing else in her anger, and not seeing Omaha for reasons we will discuss in the next paragraph.

The girl known as Omaha could not be seen because her magical powers allowed her to disappear at will, and with so much excess energy from the grief cubes and within a realm defined by lack and emptiness, her capacity for disappearance proved even stronger, so that she could ebb away her own existence until she could disappear from even herself. The voices of her guests filtered through the negative space and reached her only through osmosis.

Miki: What did you do? What did you do, dammit! We injured her, we had her on the ropes!

Dufresne: Nuclear weapons. Who gave a madwoman a hundred nuclear weapons? How did she even get them?

Redfearn: Omaha. Omaha. Omaha. Omaha.

Pollack: I simply wish to know the purpose.

Miki: *[Rubs face with hand.]* A backup strategy. I didn't think we'd need it, but...

Tomoe: *[In Japanese.]* Please, someone explain. Miss Miki, someone, please.

Miki: *[Ignoring her. In English.]* The idea was Homura might be too tough to beat no matter how long we waited. But her hold over Madoka's consciousness is only so strong, we figured a worldwide cataclysm would awaken her memories. Homura can only block out so much.

Redfearn: You agreed to this?!

Miki: She already had the bombs, the hell was I supposed to do?

Pollack: *[Casual shrug.]* If it works, I don't see the issue.

Miki: Will you shut up?

Pollack: Humanity breeds with unparalleled fecundity. What is several billion, if a billion remain? Madoka Kaname is irreplaceable.

Redfearn: You sound like Kyubey.

Pollack: How bizarre! I'm told we look alike, too.

And similar prattle. These words were ultimately meaningless because these actors had little to no control over what had transpired. Besides, while Pollack's words were met with disdain from most who could understand them, Miki and Dufresne both knew her point was sound. Of those who had returned from death, only Nagisa Momoe held a contrary opinion, but she remained quiet except to whisper explanations to Tomoe that did not ameliorate Tomoe's harried confusion.

A new portal opened in the space. It was larger than the others, with a diameter near the size of a cinema screen. It opened slightly above the Earth's sole moon. Across a craterous gray landscape the sunned side of Earth revolved at a rate too slow for human perception, even at such a distance. Thick clouds, visible from space, coated the atmosphere and covered fragments of continent.

Earth was of little importance to the one called Omaha, who had opened the portal. Her interest lay in the one who stood atop the Moon's surface, Homura Akemi. Blood flowed from her severed wing and drifted in the weightless space. In her hands she held Madoka Kaname, whose glazed eyes peeped from a tilted head. The fourteen dolls, which Akemi named Stolz, Schwarzsehrei, Lügner, Kalthertzig, Selbstsucht, Verleumdung, Schafskopf, Eifersucht, Faulheit, Eitelkeit, Feigheit, Dämlich, Unterlegenheit, and Sturheit, stood around her in a circle. They too watched the Earth. The fifteenth doll, Liebe, was absent, as she had much work to do on the planet below.

The conversation between Pollack and the others, and between Cicero and her subordinates, ended. All people inside the void watched through the portal in silence.

Akemi tilted back her head. A smile twisted on her lips.

Akemi: *[Telepathically, due to a lack of sound in space.]* Is that all?

She lowered Kaname to the ground. The dolls Selbstsucht and Eifersucht attended her unconscious body while a bow of purple energy appeared in Akemi's hand, held straight at her side.

Miki: *[Drawing swords.]* Homura, stop. Can't you see this is going too far?

Akemi: *[Head remaining tilted.]* Too far? I didn't expect your camp to pull a gambit like this. Bravo. Using the world itself as a weapon against Madoka...? You're more cruel than I suspected.

Miki: I didn't—

Pollack: [*Stepping forward.*] Your name is Homura, is it not? We haven't gotten the chance to get acquainted properly. My name is Delaney Pollack.

Akemi: I am aware of you.

Pollack: Fantastic! That quickens things somewhat. [*Clasping hands.*] Now, we've clearly reached something of an impasse. We've both dealt blows to one another and have indicated the capacity to deal and receive several more blows of increasing caliber. How about we settle down for a moment for some good old fashioned diplomacy? We can set forward our respective needs and desires onto the table and determine a compromise—

Akemi: No.

Pollack: Consider how many innocent human beings have been hurt, Miss Homura. You may consider yourself a demon, but you know nothing of soullessness. Nothing at all! Billions of lives are in your control to save. It would be rather simple for you to do it. Shall you withhold salvation? Would you not prefer to be an angel?

Akemi raised her bow and drew the bowstring back. A long, purple shaft appeared, fletched by magic, its arrowhead aimed at the Earth. Akemi's muscles tensed and trembled as she pulled back the string, bent it and her bow, and the arrow built in size and intensity, until its glow infiltrated even the void.

Akemi: You seek to use this world as a weapon against me. Then I must remove it.

Miki: Homura, what are you—

The arrow swelled to gargantuan proportions, until it no longer seemed to fit within the narrow confines of the bow, until it stood a length that extended beyond both ends of the cinema screen portal, until Akemi and her fourteen dolls and Kaname disappeared beneath the hue. Some of the guests, Dufresne and Miki chief among them, understood Akemi's intentions and staggered forward, summoning their weapons as they waded through the viscous void to reach the portal, but suddenly the distance between them and the entrance had extended and no matter how they churned their bodies through the emptiness they made it no closer to escape. Kabwe barked orders at her subordinates and her subordinates abandoned their appointed tasks to arrange themselves into battle formations. Tomoe clutched Momoe as one clutches a pet or a doll. Redfearn sat on a chair and propped her chin on her wrists.

Akemi released the arrow. It soared across space, spanning the relatively narrow distance between Earth and its largest satellite. The endless purple line dug into the planet's surface at the intersection of equator and prime meridian, off the coast of the human nation of Ghana.

The ocean parted in a swirl to accommodate the entrance of the arrow. It sailed into the spheroid with little further disruption beyond a few ripples of tidal waves that submerged much of coastal western Africa. The purple light vanished into the crust and mantle, and beyond the puncture where it struck nothing changed across the surface of the planet.

Then the planet imploded. The puncture transformed into a concavity, and grew wider and wider, pulling in the continental plate of Africa, moving up toward Europe and down toward

Antarctica and west toward South America, until an entire hemisphere began to flatten inward. Long, molten cracks spread across the dry land and beneath the oceans, which sloshed and drained into the dent. A large fragment broke from the rest of the planet and exposed the core beneath, which by the power of Homura Akemi's demigod magic crumpled into a smaller and smaller sphere of magma and flame. The pieces of the planet shattered into rocks and other bits of debris, which no longer had a gravitational core to bind them and thus floated into the vastness of space.

In all, it took only a few minutes for the planet to become irrevocably broken, and all humans upon its surface perished.

Akemi dropped her spent bow, sat on the surface of the moon, and slipped her arms around Kaname. She and her dolls watched the flickering remnants of her apocalypse. The dolls raised their hands and applauded.

Redfearn:

Pollack: Well, that was certainly unexpected.

Tomoe: *[In Japanese.]* This isn't real, right? This can't be real.

Momoe: *[In Japanese.]* Mami... Yes, yes it's a trick. It's not real.

Pollack: Well.

Sakura: *[Wading to the rest of the group.] [In Japanese.]* What the hell trick is this? Nagisa, you said this is a trick right? Sayaka, what the fuck is happening?

Pollack: Well, let us not grow too perturbed. Rally the troops and let's put an end to this.

Kabwe: *[To her subordinates.]* A Puella Magi has fostered an illusion to break our morale. We shall not allow such knavish deception to degrade our order, shall we?

Subordinates: *[In chorus.]* No, milady!

Ru: *[Under her breath.]* Ha. Ha ha ha ha ha?

Redfearn:

Pollack: Erika, she hasn't yet tended to her injuries. This is the chance to strike.

Redfearn: DELANEY WILL YOU SHUT UP?

Redfearn: YOU'RE GOING TO TALK LIKE WE'RE STILL IN A FUCKING FIGHT?

Redfearn: WHO EVEN ARE YOU?

Pollack: Love—

Redfearn: *[Much more quietly.]* We. We have to kill Madoka again.

Miki: Kill her. *[Considering the ramifications.]* And then turn back time...

To turn back time. To bring back the world and the people on it. To try again. And if again they met failure, to turn back time again. And if again they met failure, to turn back time again. And if again they met failure, to turn back time again. And if again they met failure, to turn back time again. And if again they met failure, to turn back time again.

What mattered was God. Yes. Correct.

Pollack: If we turn back time, we won't have the bombs again.

Redfearn: Good?

Dufresne: The bombs were ineffectual anyway. They failed at their intended goal of awakening Madoka Kaname from her slumber.

Pollack: That's not to say they didn't have another use. It was our lovely Kyubey's plan to use them, wasn't it? He's not the kind to make a plan that won't work.

Miki: *[Hands splayed out, very expressive.]* Are you dense? What did any of that accomplish?

Pollack: With the world destroyed, it won't be long for Ereshkigal and the rest upstairs to notice what happened. She'll be hesitant, but eventually an entire army of our kind will be mobilized to assist. Against such numbers, not even one with Homura's power can stand against it.

Pollack: *[Turning on a heel for dramatic effect.]* Thus, the current situation is quite beneficial. Redoing it for a "more optimal" outcome with success so close is simply illogical, right my loves?

Redfearn: More optimal? Delaney, Earth is toast. Gone. We failed.

Pollack: You failed, perhaps. The universe is not solely Earth. Sloan, love, I know you feel you're still important here, but allow me to converse with Erika and Blueberry for a moment, hm?

Momoe: You're crazy!

No. She's right. Somehow.

Momoe: Madoka would never want this. She gave up her own life, her own existence, so people on Earth could be happy.

Yes. And as such God is good. And as such we must forfeit our lives for her sake.

On the lunar surface, Akemi clutched tighter Kaname and flitted wide eyes at the portal to the void.

Momoe: If we saved Madoka at the cost of so much suffering, she wouldn't want it. She'd be so sad...

Life is transient, God is eternal. The Bible and her Friend told her so.

Pollack: She's probably sadder in the sorry state she's in now, no?

Redfearn: God dammit Delaney. God dammit. How is this even a discussion. Erika, how is this even a discussion. You don't believe this do you?

Dufresne: I agree that Madoka Kaname's importance supersedes that of any human, but I believe we have crossed a line somewhere.

Redfearn: Thank you, I think.

Miki: We *have* to turn back time. It's not a debate.

By hurting God. By killing her. Again and again and again. Weakening themselves every time. Reducing their chances every time. Struggling to inflict pain in a vicious endless cycle. Binding her. Wrapping her arms around her, holding her in space and stroking her pretty hair.

WHAT WAS THE ANSWER? The world was gone. God... What would God say if she saw this? The world belonged to God. Their lives were forfeit for her. But was it their role to destroy it in her name? Confusion, uncertainty, that heavy anxiety. Oh no.

The portal closed. The void plunged in darkness. All rules ceased in this world, physics and matter and energy. The chairs and the people and the detritus froze. Voices became silent. Nothing but black. Nothing but space.

Enough space to think. Enough time to think.

Omaha: [*Internal monologue.*] Because. As you know. Homura and her, they're. Quite similar. And at one time. Homura herself. Was. A regular girl. Like you. But inside. Lurked the capacity to. Become what Homura now was. Satan. Lucifer. Beelzebub. Asmodeus. Pazuzu Azazel Belial Baal Belphegor Moloch. Adversary to God.

Omaha: And that thing inside was.

Omaha: You destroyed the world for her. You would turn back time every time for her. For God. What if. Could you. It was always a possibility.

Omaha:

Omaha:

Omaha: Sloan.

Redfearn: [*Appearing out of the darkness.*] What? Where—?

Omaha: Sloan. I.

"I feel every possibility is wrong," said Omaha.

"Huh?" said Sloan. They floated together, face-to-face, enveloped in blackness the center of which flickered a dim glow to coat their features in shadows.

"Either way, whether I turn back time or progress with the world destroyed... Either way I become her."

"You mean Homura."

"She and I are the same person," said Omaha. "Our eyes, our skin, our genetic makeup. Only our experiences separate us. My entire life I have hated her. I have blamed countless misfortunes on her. The Man Who Said He Was My Father, the basement where I slept, the insects that crawled on me at night. The testing of Job, the temptation of Christ. Everything... her..."

Sloan said nothing. What could Sloan say? Why did Omaha decide to talk to her? Why not Sayaka, who knew Homura better, or any of them?

"Those ills, those physical ills, war, strife, famine, pain, sadness... I surpassed her in those today. She and I worked, I the first and she but the second, to inflict an eternity's suffering in mere minutes."

"Omaha," said Sloan.

"But those were physical ills. And long I thought that no physical ill could surpass her truest crime: the pain she inflicted on God, the pain she inflicted on Madoka Kaname. How she replayed the same torturous moments again and again so every time God would have to suffer anew, a hundred, a thousand times, how she severed God from the world she loved, how she, how she, how she..."

Omaha began to cry.

Sloan floated to her, embraced her in her arms, and held her.

"It's okay. It's okay."

"This world cannot bear two devils. No, it already could not..." She looked up. A gaggle of amorphous shapes drifted beyond the tear-coated lenses of her eyes. The shapes were Sloan.

"Omaha, it's okay. We can force her to turn everything back."

"No..." Omaha wiped her eyes. "You're missing the point... I know what I have to do now. There's only one thing..."

"One thing? Omaha, what—"

Omaha relinquished her. Sloan faded into the darkness, silent and motionless like the others, and again only Omaha remained, alone. She straightened the ruffled folds of her cloak and

rubbed her eyes until she saw clearly again the nothingness around her. Only one thing to do now.

A small portal opened beside her. Beyond it sat Homura Akemi and Madoka Kaname and the fourteen dolls. Omaha stepped out of the portal.

A quiet and perfect moment. Absolute stillness save the residual turning of the moon, all its half-shrouded craters and depressions, her with Madoka and nobody else. Arms around her body, fingers between strands of pink hair. Before them spanned a panorama of stars, planets, moons, asteroids, heavenly bodies. Aquarius, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn.

If this moment might last forever. But she had not finished yet. The girls Omaha had salvaged would prepare for a final assault. The Law of the Cycles might spit out a few more seraphs, or a few thousand, or a few million. Well, but time would destroy them. She extended her arm and stopped it, even though to her nothing seemed to stop, so still the universe had been before. Now the Law, bound by her power, could not muster its forces to usurp her.

It ruined the vista, however. Made the pretty colors gray.

The portal opened behind her and she tensed. So soon? They had seemed at odds last she heard, she expected more time for them to plan. Well, time made no difference there, so perhaps they had spent an eternity in preparation. Well. Let them come.

But they did not come. Only the one, Omaha.

She hovered slightly above the ground, her feet dangling, her arms limp at her sides, her hair in scraggly bands down her shoulders. The portal remained open behind her, its void attached to her back, strung in wispy tendrils to the dark robes of her cloak. The blackness swirled behind her, growing, spreading across the lighter blackness of space. In its void appeared the faces of those inside, whose names Homura recalled in the databases of her almost infinite memory: [Miki, Nagisa, Dufresne, Pollack] [Tomoe, Sakura] [Kabwe, Seward, Black, Yankowski, Abgaryan, Galloway, DeWinter, Nguyen, Hodgkins, Weir, Shanbhag, Rojas] [Ru] [Redfearn]. Homura braced for their attack, cycled stratagems for whatever formation they took against her.

But no attack came. The other faces remained behind the portal and only Omaha stood outside it. Her glasses glimmered in the rays of a nearby star. Homura grimaced to look at her, for she looked exactly as Homura had, an eternity ago—a different time and universe.

Homura, I want to talk to you.

Talk to me?

Yes, you. I give up. I surrender. You can kill me if you want, but I want to talk to you first.

Homura's eyes narrowed. She surveyed the surroundings, surveyed Omaha. The trap. It had to be somewhere. Her dolls looked too, and because they knew her thoughts and countenance, they shrugged.

Voices filtered from the portal: "Omaha, what are you doing?" "Get back in here!" "Are you nuts?"

Omaha held a hand, the one with the bracelet with her Soul Gem, to her chest. The fingers of her other hand worked with methodical and diligent motion to remove the bracelet from her wrist. What trap. Had to be one. It was her own mind she conspired against, she had to know its workings even if initially obscure. She thought back to that other time, the way her brain functioned then. What plans and ideas filled her brain? What would such a Homura design?

Such a Homura tossed the bracelet toward the other Homura. It drifted slow in the low gravity, twisting and turning as it neared. Homura's eyes widened. She reached for her bow. The words returned to her: a trap—at any moment portals could open on every side of her—she remained vigilant, did not move until the bracelet bounced against her shoulder and she reached to catch it in the hand that had stroked Madoka's hair.

More protests came from those in the portal, but some power seemed to hold them back. The bracelet was thin and smooth in Homura's hand. She could crush it easily. In an instant.

You can crush it easily, said Omaha. In an instant. And I will die and the portals will close and all those inside will remain inside forever.

Perhaps. Or perhaps killing Omaha would expel everything inside her dimension, creating a sudden and powerful all-out attack.

When you kill me, said Omaha, you'll win. Irrevocably. I want to talk to you first, but if you don't want to talk to me, I understand. If you do kill me, though, will you turn back time to bring the world back?

The question came as Homura pondered what might happen if Miki and Dufresne and Pollack came with whatever else Omaha had hoarded inside the void (perhaps more bombs, anything quick and destructive). She tilted her head, the words only partially meaningful to her.

Omaha repeated: *When you kill me, will you turn back time to bring the world back?*

I, Homura considered. If your goal is to trade your life for a bargain, you've made a grave error.

Yes. The world was dangerous. The world was unnecessary. Her and Madoka, Madoka and her, this moment forever: What else was needed? She had thought these thoughts before but when the world still existed it seemed somehow forbidden to destroy it, as though the mythic power of its celestial existence held sway over her; but in a single moment, that power gone,

she wondered why she had ever harbored trepidations. Why she had let Miki and Tomoe and the others live. What thought process made them necessary? Only burdens.

I see. Omaha closed her eyes. *Will you permit me a conversation, at least?*

Her gambit had to be that killing her would open her void and drop her final attack. A conversation gave Homura time to prepare. Or was the conversation a distraction? Was she now opening voids around the moon and depositing her soldiers in key locations for an ambush? The faces in the void behind Omaha remained unchanged, the most critical members (the ones who had returned from death) accounted for. Only a handful of the Chicagoans escaped her vision.

Very well, said Homura. She placed her bow against her leg and wrapped her arm again around Madoka. Her other hand held the bracelet and Omaha's soul.

Omaha expelled a breathless breath and lowered her eyes. She looked so pathetic. So repulsive... And yet Homura could not wholly despise her, despite everything she had done, everything she had been party to, all her deceptions and designs. A single stirring nugget of pity from a pit inside Homura she thought long-filled with love for another, for Madoka. A kernel, an ember.

I love Madoka Kaname, Omaha said. *You may scoff... I know I've never met her. Never heard her speak. Never touched her. But... even so... I love her... I love her more than I love anything in the world or the universe. I love her more than my one Friend. I love her because she is so good, so perfect, so full of love for everyone else, even someone as disgusting and repulsive as me. That was the first thing I heard about her: That she loved me, even me! Me, alone in a basement, dark and unseen by anyone... Even so, she could see me and love me.*

Charcoal bones festered in Homura's skin.

I love her because I hate myself. Because I have no happiness, because I have nothing but emptiness, but still she loves me, and so I loved her back because her warmth meant so much to me. I would do anything for that love. Do you... Do you love her too, Homura Akemi?

I, said Homura, clutching Madoka tighter to her, so that her head lolled against Homura's neck. *You equate your love of her to mine? To mine? Have you any idea, any idea how much I love her, and what I would do for her, and what I have done for her? Have you any idea at all?*

I know what you did, said Omaha. *Miss Miki told me. You turned back time so many times to save her from a fate that seemed unchangeable... No matter how much it hurt you, no matter how many times you saw her die. I know... I know. And you would do it again.*

Yes, said Homura. *Yes.*

I just want her to be happy, said Omaha. *I was willing to let myself become a monster to swallow her anguish. I was willing to destroy myself so she would live. Because I hate myself and I love her. Why must she have misfortune while I'm alive? I am the one who deserves to die. Why is it her who suffers?*

Homura lowered her head and her bangs covered her eyes. She clenched her jaw.

I love her because she loves me, said Omaha, even though I hate myself. So I would do anything for her, no matter how evil, no matter how depraved, as long as it made her happy. When you hate yourself, sacrifice becomes such a trivial thing... Such a thoughtless, immediate action. It feels almost natural... When you value yourself less than something, someone, else.

Trivial? said Homura. *The pain I've endured. Everything I've endured. You know nothing about what I've endured. Nothing.*

Yes, that's exactly it... My pain is surely only a fragment of yours. But if you think about it... if she loves me, and I hurt myself, does it not hurt her? Does it not hurt her the same way it hurts me when she is hurt?

A scene from infinite memory: Two girls, lying amid the rubble of a ruined city, both filled with grief, both about to die... And one takes the grief of the other so the other may live.

And if Madoka loves everyone, said Omaha, everyone in the whole world, which is exactly why she is so good and so worthy of love, how much does it hurt her when...?

Her voice trailed off. Homura's eyes turned toward the ruins of the planet, the few stray scraps of land and rock that swirled in the vortex.

At what point, Omaha continued, was a line crossed? At what point did my pleasure in making her happy even if it hurt me and everyone else become indulgent? Because if hurting me and hurting everyone else hurts her, then how can I say I do what I do out of love for her?

No, said Homura. *No, she... she...*

But she looked down at Madoka. Madoka, silent and peaceful and serene, her eyes glazed, her mouth a placid line. No, no, no, she's happy. She's happy, everything was done for her happiness, for her protection, to create a safe place for her to live without fear or despair, everything was done to that end, everything always, Homura had never been forgetful or inattentive, everything was for her, everything everything everything.

Madoka's eyes saw nothing. They were big and round like the eyes of the fourteen dolls gathered around her.

Perhaps I only think this way because I don't truly love her the way you do, Homura. Because I've never seen her or met her. Maybe it's because my connection to her was always aloof no matter how personal I tried to make it in my mind, how her love to me was given through the words of a book thousands of years old. Perhaps I'm just rambling. I just want to ask you one final question, Homura Akemi.

Omaha paused. Her eyes shone behind the glasses and she looked at Homura as if expecting a rebuttal, a counterargument, and Homura groped for things to say but seemed to grab sliding slopes, her mind had not prepared for this kind of attack, she had strategies and combat and metaphysics bouncing in her head but this, but this—

Who is happy now: Her or you?

And Homura opened her mouth and a great big sob cracked in her throat, swallowed by the airless space, because she knew at once the answer, she knew at once what she had done in making Madoka, the one she loved, into nothing more than a mindless doll for her own pleasure, the glazed eyes, the motionless body, she had to do it because she knew that if Madoka could see the world as it was she would be hurt beyond repair, that her soul would crumple and die, and that Homura had made this world the way it was, her and Omaha together, those who supposedly loved her most had done the most to hurt her and only by robbing her of everything—mind, sense, breath—could she be sustained, and how much did Homura have to take from her, why did Homura take anything from her at all because in the beginning the only thing she had wanted to do was give, give, give Madoka everything that belonged to Homura so that all Homura's worthless rotten insides and outsides and everything could be put to a purpose more worthy than its own selfish needs and wants, why had this happened, why had everything come to this, when had things become corrupted, was it when Homura took Madoka's powers from her or was it when she created a false Mitakihara to ensnare her or was it even earlier, that scene from infinite memory, where she took Madoka's last bits of hope to survive and turn back time in the name of saving Madoka, which of these things were good and which were bad, which made Madoka happy and which hurt her (how much was her own selfishness, how long had everything been her own selfishness and not what she thought was selfless love), suddenly everything got confused and rattled in Homura's own mind and she thought for a moment this was Omaha's plan, her grand scheme to confound Homura, and maybe Homura would have believed it and even despite the confusion held to her original convictions and stuck them until the very end but who was she talking to a separate unconnected alien entity named Omaha or was she talking to herself, that same self in that scene from infinite memory with the glasses and the knotted hair, whose words rebounded in her brain, again the thought that this was exactly why the Incubator chose her own clone to war against her, this kind of confounding, but the Incubator would never create a plan like this, based on emotions he could never understand, and what did any of that matter anyway if the words spoken were her very own from a different time and place? Tears streamed down her cheeks and she clutched Madoka to her as though even now she tried to extract Madoka's warmth and take it into her, as if even now she had not robbed Madoka of enough, and she thought of the Madoka this morning who had given her the music box and the Madoka a million years ago who gave her love and the million Madokas in between.

You can kill me, said Omaha. My existence, I see now, will only hurt her more, so I'll do what I should have done long ago and give it up. But please, please bring the world back, and let Madoka be happy. Please do it. That's all I want.

Should have done long ago. Should have done long ago. Should have done long ago. Homura remembered that first time, that first time Madoka died. And every subsequent time. Each new time created by Homura herself.. And now this time, also created by Homura, all time created by Homura, and this is what the time had led to, this empty void and this lifeless doll.

The shield appeared on Homura's wrist. She churned the gears back before her arrow pierced the planet, before the bombs dropped, to the time when the city remained as it always had. Time turned as it always had, as had become so rote and familiar to her it hardly seemed

consequential when the entirety of the Earth reappeared in front of her, whole and unharmed with her on the moon beyond it, because her own powers had so deadened her to the world that this somehow felt her natural location relative to it.

Let Madoka be happy. That's all I want. What I should have done long ago. I am the devil, after all. I am the embodiment of evil. I ate up so much suffering and despair I transformed into it, and then I allowed myself to infect her. That's what a witch is. One who takes on so many curses and begins to curse in kind. Magical Girls never come back from being witches, after all.

She tossed the bracelet to Omaha and did not care to watch if she caught it or not. She placed Madoka on the ground and stood up and ignored the glances of her dolls. From the back of her hand emerged her Soul Gem, which despite its great size was now muddied with darkness. It hovered before her eyes, scornful and spiteful.

Sayaka. Nagisa.

"Homura," said their voices from Omaha's void. "Homura."

I realize I have made some foolish errors. Please keep Madoka company and make sure she's never lonely, okay?

She lobbed her Soul Gem. Although she did not use much force, the low gravity lifted it high into the starry dark. From her shield she grabbed a simple handgun and aimed.

A blade tore through her arm and severed it cleanly before her finger squeezed the trigger. The arm and the shield floated, connected to the stump of her arm by a string of suspended blood. The scythe that cut it continued a staggered and arduous swing, painting an arc of blood. Omaha's hands wrapped around her and held her.

No, said Omaha, There's no need.

The gem drifted to the ground and her shield drifted into space.

Wing of Gold Leaf

Cicero awoke on grass. "Awoke" only a temporary descriptor of the action, because she did not remember sleeping, although she did remember void.

She sat up, no longer armored, and rubbed her eyes. Her legs stretched in front of her along the summit of a small hill overlooking a city, the same city she had seen from the plane: Mitakihara. A tree's leaves rustled in gentle wind. Clouds drifted in immense blue sky.

The eleven soldiers who had been in the void with her lay scattered down the side of the hill, awakening in turn with rubbed eyes and stretched limbs. Their heads lifted from the grass, sticks and stalks in their hair. They looked left to right at their fellows, at the city, at the clouds.

A moment of tranquility passed.

Cicero bolted upright and brushed the grass off with one swift sweep of an arm. "To attention!" she commanded. Her soldiers without delay lurched to their feet and saluted. She glanced from face to face and confirmed they were the eleven who had been with her, and that the other five (plus Berwyn and her two) were absent.

"Elmhurst," she said. "Establish contact with Berwyn. Lombard, establish contact with Addison. Ascertain their whereabouts and confirm their status. Account for the missing members of our platoon."

"Yes, milady," the two said in chorus. They transformed and summoned radios to their hands. They blurted quickly and soon made reports.

"Berwyn and her squad are at their appointed location in the center of the city, milady," said Elmhurst.

"Addison and the remaining four are at the apartment complex, milady," said Lombard. Her eyes shifted sideways. "They're rather confused about what happened."

"What's happened is that a Puella Magi used powerful magic to confound us with tricks and illusions. Fortunately, we have suffered no casualties." A long exhalation. Cicero surveyed the city and its towers, which no longer seemed so tall as before. The city itself felt as though it had shrunk to be no larger than Cincinnati, where Cicero had lived before she contracted. "We regroup with Addison and Berwyn. We have an improved conception of our adversaries and the capabilities of the chief target, Omaha. Once we have reassessed the situation, we shall renew the assault on the city and its Puella Magi. Our objective remains unchanged: We do not leave until we have procured the grief cubes of the Minneapolis archon."

Cicero looked up, but nobody moved. They stared at her like dullards, some of them with mouths agape. No, not at her. Past her.

Darien, always impudent, spoke up: "Milady, behind you."

She considered berating her for her insolence (Darien's flashes of disobedience sporadic but essential to squash, especially if she were to eventually become Cicero's successor), but something told her she better check what they stared at. Her eyes shifted, she turned her neck slightly.

At the summit of the hill, arranged in neat rows, lay a vast swath of grief cubes. They undulated up and down the hill, and across to the next hill, and ended finally at a distant third hill. They glittered under the late afternoon sunlight.

A piece of paper fluttered in the wind, pinned to the earth through by a long needle. It read:

Please leave the others alone.

On the junction outside Homura Akemi's apartment, the doll named Liebe hobbled up to Madoka Kaname. She moved sheepish, a little unsure, like she wasn't used to her feet. She avoided eye contact as she extended a thin white arm and handed Madoka a note. The note had writing on both sides. Madoka, starting to remember who she was and why she was here, already knew what was written on both sides, and despite everything the knowledge only made her sad, not so sad as to cry but rather a kind of somber melancholy, the kind where you know something is for the best but that doesn't make it hurt any less, and the melancholy was only tempered by the faith that no matter what, things would work out in the end. And the words on the note only strengthened that belief. She read the backside first:

Hello Miss Kaname,

My name is Omaha, and we've never met, but I want you to know that you mean a lot to me and got me through some really bad times, and I hope to see you someday but that time is not now, I know you probably don't care, or maybe you do, yes of course you do because you care about everyone, but anyway thank you for everything and I hope to see you someday.

Omaha

Madoka smiled. With her mind returning to her she knew everything about Omaha, what she did, what she didn't do, what she wanted and hated and loved. She really was a lot like Homura, with the same things that were so nice and kind about her, and also the same mistakes. But people always have the chance to change. Even if they can't there's always that piece of them worth saving. She turned the note over:

Madoka,

I know what I have done. I was very selfish and I see that now. I don't know if you'll forgive me or not, and honestly I'm not sure which is worse, because I do not deserve forgiveness. I'm going away for now, along with Omaha. I think I can learn a lot from her about myself and who I am, and how I can be a better person. Most importantly I think I need to learn how to...

live without you, even for a time. How to love myself, even though right now that somehow seems like the hardest possible thing to do. But if I can't love myself I have no right to love you, you who love everyone including me despite my flaws. Or maybe I don't have to love myself, but I need to be able to appreciate your love, truly appreciate it, rather than burrow inside it. I fear I am beginning to ramble, and if this was goodbye I would take the time to put my thoughts in better order, but right now I'm not ready for that. This isn't goodbye, however. If you'll accept me, I'll return. But I need to figure things out first, both for your sake and mine.

The increasingly shrinking font bunched up at the bottom of the paper without an inch of extra room. As before, Madoka understood what Homura meant, even if Homura hadn't communicated it very well. Of course Madoka forgave her, although it wasn't like her forgiveness was some huge important thing. What Homura had done was wrong, but that wasn't enough to ruin their friendship.

She would have a lot of time to dwell on Homura and what had happened, but now it was important to wrap things up in Mitakihara. She patted Liebe on the head. The other fourteen dolls stood in a bunch behind her, their eyes low, their feet toeing the cobblestone, their hands clasped behind their backs.

"Thank you for giving me this." She smiled to each in turn. "Did Homura leave you here alone?"

Some of them nodded.

"Don't worry, I'll make sure to take care of you all."

They were pleased by this and clapped their little hands. They gathered around her, less shy now, and clasped at the long flowing strands of her dress, which had begun to manifest as her consciousness ebbed back into her and the occluding barriers dropped.

Across the cobblestone scampered a small white creature. The dolls pulled away from her and drew spears like thin pins, but truly there was no danger. Madoka placed a gloved hand on the head of the nearest, Stolz, and stepped between their ranks to approach the Incubator.

I find myself again confounded, it said. *A rare occurrence, although it has become more common as of late.* It squatted on its haunches and batted an ear with its back paw.

"Did things not go as you planned, Incubator?"

Not exactly. In fact, we're unsure what exactly transpired. One moment Miss Akemi was locked in combat. The next, you have awoken and Miss Akemi has disappeared. We can only assume manipulation of time was involved somehow. However, the outcome has proven fortuitous to the universe. You have been freed. Miss Akemi's arbitrary laws can no longer be enforced on us.

Even toward this creature, although she knew its grander designs had called for more than this outcome, she felt no ire. It, too, did what it thought right for itself and for existence

altogether. Its methods, although cruel, had ultimately pure aims. And yet such aims meant nothing if bought with suffering.

"I hope you take this ordeal as a warning not to meddle any more with the emotions of people," said Madoka. "Everything that came to pass stemmed from your actions."

The placid face smiled back. *I am aware.*

"Good. I know you're one to learn from your mistakes." She considered the fifteen dolls gathered around her. "Nonetheless, I'll have these dolls keep an eye on you. Do you guys think you can do that?"

Ja, ja, they chimed in chorus. It became a song; they nearly cheered it, running around Madoka in circles.

"Thank you very much," she said. "I know you'll all do a great job."

While I assume you'll leave this plane of existence soon, said the Incubator, *I would like to talk to you to satisfy certain curiosities of mine—*

A sword whizzed across the air and impaled the poor creature. Madoka flinched from the sight (so much for godliness, ha) while Sayaka skittered beside her, another blade already drawn. She regarded the dolls, who stared back agape, and grabbed Madoka by the shoulder.

"It's you," she said. "It's really you."

"Of course it's me, Sayaka," said Madoka. "It's always been me. There was no need for you to be so violent, you know."

Sayaka regarded the body of the Incubator and shrugged as she sheathed her blade. "Bah, it's best not to let that thing talk. Besides—"

Before she could finish, Nagisa plowed into Madoka, knocking aside the dolls in the way. She wrapped her arms around Madoka's waist and nearly bowled her over. "We did it! We did it we did it we did it, and nobody even got hurt! Well, got hurt for long I guess."

Madoka giggled as she wobbled against Nagisa's unrelenting hug. She ruffled Nagisa's hair and pulled Sayaka close to join in as well. Sayaka seemed reluctant at first but eventually gave in and laughed too.

"You guys did a really good job," said Madoka. "I'm really proud of you both."

"Aw, come on," said Sayaka. "We didn't do that much. Nagisa mostly ate cheese the whole time."

Nagisa waved a fist. "Hey! That's not true at all! I saved your dumb butt plenty of times. Homura woulda killed you that one time if not for me." She stuck out her tongue.

"Killed me! Yeah right, she just had me in a rough spot, I'da made it out." Sayaka pulled away and crossed her arms. She turned up her nose and let out a low harrumph, but she could

not keep up the façade for more than a few seconds before she broke into a wide smile and laughed. "I'm just joking, everyone did their part. What's important is that you're back, Madoka. I'm just sorry it took three whole years."

After Nagisa finally released her, Madoka steadied herself on her heels. After so long not using them they felt really weird for her feet. "There's nothing to be sorry about, Sayaka."

"Where's Homura anyway? She may have released you, but I still don't trust her. After everything she's done, and the power she still has, I'd like to keep my eyes on her."

"Don't worry, Sayaka," said Madoka. "She's perfectly safe. I understand your feelings, but I know she's a good person at heart."

Sayaka's next thought was *That's what you said before she turned into the devil*. She did not transfer the thought telepathically, which made no difference because Madoka could read it anyway, and Sayaka surely knew that. But because she did not say it, Madoka made no comment. What Sayaka did say was: "Well, if you insist, I guess I won't argue."

"If Homura was good enough to free Madoka of her own will," said Nagisa, "I'm sure Madoka's right about her. Don't be such a sourpuss, Sayaka."

"Sourpuss?" said Sayaka. "What kinda word is that? You been looking through Mami's books again, you little... little... ragamuffin!"

Sayaka hooked her gloved fingers into claws and lunged at Nagisa. Nagisa let out a gleeful shriek and scampered out of the way, dodging between the dolls while Sayaka chased after her. They ran circles around Madoka and made her kinda dizzy.

After a few seconds of goofing around, Sayaka suddenly skidded to a halt and stood straight, her face changed from mischievous to nearly panicked. Madoka did not need to look to know what she saw. After Nagisa ran another complete circle and only stopped when she crashed into Sayaka, Madoka herself turned to address the pair of friends who had approached.

"Hi, Mami! Kyoko!" She waved.

Neither Mami nor Kyoko waved back. They stood side-by-side in the middle of the cobblestone street, the blocky tenements arranged around them and the city spanning a great distance across the horizon above them. The setting sun formed a bright orange half-disc broken by black towers, but its light crept in and caused Madoka to squint until she shielded her eyes with her raised hand.

Kyoko spoke first. "So what the hell was all that? Anyone mind explaining?"

A barrage of thoughts bubbled in the minds of all four friends, but especially Sayaka and Nagisa, who knew what would soon come. Sadness, anxiety, regret... The emotions of an imminent farewell. It made Madoka sad too, to think how she would have to leave this world again, leave behind Mom and Dad and Tatsuya, and all her friends from school, and Mami and Kyoko. Just as Homura had left her.

Perhaps that was why, although reclaiming her true identity as the Law of the Cycles caused her to remember everything Homura had done in the past three years, Madoka could not truly feel anger at her. Because she had given Madoka something special: three years of a normal life. It made wrenching herself away a new difficulty, a renewed hardship she would have to bear a second time. And while she knew her true place and true purpose, those three years were something to cherish, just as she had cherished the thirteen that preceded it, the special memories of her friends and family that made her who she was today and forever more. Homura had given her something. Everyone, if you looked, gave you something.

"I'm starting to remember," said Mami. "You... None of you are supposed to be here, are you?"

Silence from the other side. Neither Sayaka nor Nagisa could maintain eye contact with their friends; Nagisa stared at her feet and Sayaka closed her eyes.

The task of explanation, then, would fall to her. "Mami, Kyoko. I'm sorry this had to happen. But you're correct, we do not belong in this world. We have not for a long time now..."

"Whaddya mean by that," said Kyoko. "I asked for explanations, not more damn riddles. Why're you in that fancy dress, Madoka? Come on, can someone just lay it out clear already?"

"Don't you remember, Miss Sakura?" Mami's eyes stared ahead, focused unblinking on Nagisa. "We were trapped inside a false Mitakihara. Miss Akemi became a witch, and then she..."

Kyoko turned away on a fast heel and shoved her hands into her pockets. She retrieved a box of pocky and shoved a stick between her teeth. It bobbed while she spoke. "I thought that was a dream."

"It really happened, Kyoko," said Madoka.

With a toss of her head, Kyoko snapped the pocky stick between her teeth and expertly caught both halves in her mouth. She munched, her eyes peering deeply into the cobblestones down the road. "So that means you're all dead."

"Not exactly!" Nagisa held out her hands. She thought by doing so she could placate Mami before she got upset, and Madoka, able to know Mami's thoughts as well, knew Mami's reaction already. "We're more like, um, angels? Well, really we're just assistants to the Law of the Cycles, to make sure it runs right."

"Which means you'll be going away forever," said Mami. Despite the thoughts in her head, she remained outwardly placid. "Is this true?"

"Well... We'll be going away. But someday you'll join us, Mami!"

The strangeness of knowing what people will say before they say it filled Madoka with unease. She had never quite gotten used to this side of herself; knowing past, present, future,

nothing concealed from her, all fates preordained. She knew Mami and Kyoko's futures, the same futures of all Magical Girls. She knew how this conversation ended.

"Someday?" Mami said. "Is there not... Is there not some way we could be together now?"

"Mami..."

"Bebe, you have been the most special person in my life these past three years, even if you were not supposed to be here. I would just like... I understand there must be rules as to why you cannot stay. But if that is so, is it possible I could... go with you?"

Nagisa stepped forward and placed a hand on her arm. "No, Mami! You should stay here. Stay and live your life, and do all the things you wanted to do. Like go to college, and become a teacher, remember?"

"Yes," said Mami. "Yes, that's true." Although the thoughts in her head were: *None of that is important if I'm alone.*

"Mami, you shouldn't worry about being alone," said Madoka. "Many more people will be your friend, some you've met already and some you'll meet soon enough. I know your bond with Bebe is very special, and I know saying goodbye is always hard. But sometimes it's important to meet new people and make new experiences. Your life is a gift you should treasure."

Before Mami spoke again, her thoughts went to Homura, and her expression changed. "Yes. I suppose you're correct. But Bebe..."

Nagisa grabbed Mami's hands with her own. She looked up at Mami and smiled. "Mami. I want you to live a good and happy life, okay? I don't want to see you cry over me, because we're going to meet again someday. If I find out you were moping around like a big lame bluh, I'll be really mad!"

This caused Mami to suddenly giggle, and she wiped the corner of her eye although she had not been crying. She wrapped her arms around Nagisa and hugged her tight, and Nagisa hugged Mami back, and Kyoko shoved another stick of pocky into her mouth and said:

"So that's it, huh?"

She stared directly at Sayaka, who had stood at Madoka's side the entire time, silent and motionless. Sayaka dreaded this moment more than she had dreaded the battle with Homura, and if not for the serious mien Madoka would have giggled.

"Well, you heard the boss," said Sayaka. "I gotta go back where I came from."

"After everything? You're just gonna leave?"

"I had my shot at life. And I got a second chance, too, thanks to Homura. I already owe more than I own."

Her eyes met Kyoko's. Kyoko stood, shoulders straight and hands clenched, her heart racing and her blood surging.

"That's. That's so dumb! Look, I dunno what dumb rules you got going on or whatever. You're my best friend, and you're not gonna ditch me for such a stupid reason."

"Kyoko," said Madoka, "I'm afraid I can't allow Sayaka to stay. The rules for Magical Girls should probably stay in place, for everyone's benefit. I really wish none of this had to be, that every girl had the chance to live their full lives happy... But a balance must be struck."

The explanation did not placate Kyoko. No explanation would. The burden of infinite knowledge was to know that sometimes happiness was impossible. Kyoko would not be happy if Sayaka left and Sayaka would not be happy if she stayed. Even such a simple, small strife could not be resolved by all Madoka's godly powers.

But there was a way the pain could be mollified; the one who knew the words for that was not Madoka.

"Kyoko," said Sayaka. "Look. When you're dead, things are different, you can't experience life but you remember everything you did experience when you were alive. So those experiences, those moments, you treasure them. And the moments I had with you, all of them, good and bad, I know I'll treasure, and I'm so glad I had them. And I want you to continue living, and have your own experiences, and live your life the way you want. Same goes for you, Mami."

"Yeah, that's right," said Nagisa. She hugged Mami again. "Homura paired us up the way she did because she thought we couldn't survive without someone else. But you also have to be able to live life for yourself!"

"I understand," said Mami. Although the thoughts in her head were not so certain.

Kyoko scraped a shoe against the cobblestone. "Pah." What she did not say: *Shoulda cut town long ago.*

"Kyoko," said Sayaka. "I'm sorry. For everything. For being so stuck up. For getting mad at dumb stuff. For not telling you what was going on. And for leaving." She stepped forward and, before Kyoko could react, threw her arms around her.

For a moment Kyoko stiffened, her mouth twisted into an uncertain snarl, but the moment passed and her shoulders slackened and she reciprocated the hug, tight and forceful, like squeezing a doll. "Dammit, you don't get all the apologies! I made some mistakes too y'know."

Sayaka rested her head against Kyoko's; their foreheads touched. "I promise we'll see each other again one day. I promise."

Neither said anything for a long time.

Nagisa tugged on Mami's sleeve. "Come on, we oughtta give em some alone time."

Images and ideas entered Mami's mind and she concealed a light blush with a turn of her head. "Oh, yes, ah."

Meanwhile, different images entered Madoka's mind, not of the companions around her but of another girl, hidden in a shadowed alley between two dusty tenements to the side of the street, watching Madoka and Mami and the others although she dared not join them, even though the light of the street would allow her to heal the wounds across her body.

Madoka decided a polite nudge might spur things along.

"Come on, Mami. There's someone else you should talk to."

"Me?" said Mami. Madoka gave Nagisa a look. Nagisa nodded and pulled Mami by the arm, while Kyoko and Sayaka continued their quiet farewells in the middle of the road.

Madoka extended an arm over the heads of the dolls clumped around her and pointed toward the alley. A hunched, slight figure crouched in the crevasse and turned away when she saw she had been spotted. But Madoka called to her:

"You can come out. We won't hurt you. You're wounded, aren't you? Come on and Mami here can heal you. Right, Mami?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" A flash of light enveloped her and she transformed into her Magical Girl outfit, which looked so cool and which Madoka had always wanted to wear (even if just for a minute!). "Come on, don't be shy."

The figure only retreated deeper into the alley, out of sight. The poor girl had received a lot of abuse lately, so it made sense she was not keen on trusting. Madoka tried a different tactic, and hailed the girl in English instead of Japanese. "Serena, it's okay. You're safe now, everything's over."

Mistrust brewed in the girl's mind, but the invocation in her familiar tongue stirred her and she poked her head from the shadows. A trickle of half-dried blood ran from the corners of her lips. She held her gored stomach with a hand.

"The hell are you," said Serena Ru. "Some kind of angel?"

"Someday I'll be able to tell you," said Madoka. "For now, you should get yourself patched up."

With a half shrug, the figure slumped against the wall. Madoka nodded to Mami; Mami started forward and Nagisa trailed at her heels.

Madoka clasped her hands and exhaled slowly, one of the last breaths she would take before again leaving this plane of existence. Nagisa and Sayaka she would allow to leave on their own time, although she knew neither would want to linger long and increase the pain of goodbye. For Madoka herself it was best if she left silently, unheralded, as was her burden to bear.

The dolls gathered closer around her, sensing her intentions, although she was not ready to disappear just yet. She read again the words on the note, first Omaha's and then Homura's. No matter how hard she tried she could not sense their presence. But she believed Homura's promise. She would return some day, when she was ready.

Mami and Nagisa tended to Serena. Sayaka and Kyoko whispered to one another. Madoka patted the heads of the dolls. "I have one thing left to do," she told them, and then she left to do it.

In a dark cranny constructed of slippery black bricks, Sloan reposed against the wall and absorbed the cool air on the skin beneath her coatsleeves. So very tired. But at least it was done. Done and done well, and now they all could be happy and it turned out the best possible way. She guessed that was what she set out to do here, although she wasn't sure how much she mattered in the end.

Although what she had hoped, when she killed Madoka and the timeline reset, what she hoped was that it would go farther back, way back, days back, weeks back, before she embarked for Williston and this whole shitty debacle started. Wishful thinking, probably. Ah well.

Two pairs of smart shoes clipped against the ground, one pair to either side of her. She did not have to look up to know who they were.

"Everyone's having a nice heartfelt reunion out there." Delaney motioned toward the end of the alley, where a sunnier road waited. "Shame on you for sulking like this."

Erika's boot nudged a pile of glittering grief cubes at Sloan's side. "It appears Omaha left these for you. You should attend to your Soul Gem."

Sloan's eyes fell on the pile. More than enough for a cleanse. "Nah."

"Oh, rubbish love. No need for the doom and gloom. Think of the life you've yet to experience. That blonde girl, she's a fetching lass, eh? You could probably weasel your way into her heart like the little weasel you are." Delaney winked.

She felt too tired to vocalize what she thought, which could be pretty succinctly summed as quitting while ahead, but even those choice few words caught in the dryness of her throat and she mustered half a shrug.

Erika knelt beside her. She leaned close to Sloan and angled her head to make contact with Sloan's lazy eyes. "Hey. Look at me. You did a fantastic job, Sloan. I'm proud of you. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, very proud, love." Delaney did not kneel. "Who knows what might have happened if not for you."

"The Incubator may have killed Madoka," said Erika. "Or something equally heinous, whatever his plans were. You have a lot to be proud about, so cut out this sniveling."

Not sniveling. Only fatigue. Neutral, oblique, empty fatigue. A desire to go to sleep on a note of lukewarm happiness.

A hand fell on Erika's shoulder. "I think it's best to let her be, dear," said Delaney. "It is the fate of Magical Girls, after all. The lucky ones at least."

Erika stared at Sloan for a long time, making no reaction to what Delaney said. Her hands balled into fists against her legs and, it was hard to tell in the dark, her body maybe began to tremble. Sloan exhaled and opened her mouth to try to say something, some kind of word or phrase to placate them, because really she was done with this shit.

But before the whispered words came, Erika grabbed Sloan by the shoulders and leaned forward and kissed her on the lips and at first Sloan had honestly no idea what she was doing but soon it became undeniable.

The kiss lasted a long time and Sloan lay dumb under its force before Erika finally pulled away, her face bright red even in the shadows, scrunching and fidgeting her hands. Delaney stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled.

"Well," said Erika. "What about now?"

Now Sloan only felt guilty, because if the kiss was meant to do something, to galvanize her back to life, it only felt dull and placid and empty, although she could tell that Erika perhaps had not done it solely as a kind of anti-despair cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Sloan thought back to the last time they had been like this, when they killed the Williston archon, before Omaha appeared. That had been the feeling Erika had taken with her to the afterlife.

Sloan said nothing, because anything she said would only make it worse. Erika's blush turned to a clear sadness, and ultimately she stood up and turned away without saying anything.

"I'd do a lot more than kiss you, love," said Delaney, "But it'd probably be improper. Besides, no offense, but I think I'm over you in that way."

Since Sloan had never asked for either of them to be into her in any way, she mostly hoped it would end soon.

And, thankfully, neither companion spoke again, because an odd light extended down the corridor, illuminating it with a pure whiteness that dribbled through the cracks in the bricks and along the grooves of their mortar, shining across first Delaney, then Sloan herself, and lastly Erika. Sloan's head lolled to face the light, which somehow did not blind. The light seeped into her skin and eyes, its very presence enough to melt the melancholy and exhaustion.

From the light emerged a sole figure. Sloan had seen her before, with the flowing white dress and the pink hair, although now she was neither a doll nor a benign Japanese schoolgirl. Now Sloan supposed she beheld God, or as close as this world had to one, and although her first inclination was toward some snide and cynical jab, or a joke, a sarcastic comment, whatever, the light effaced her to a state of tranquility and she welcomed the figure's approach.

Delaney and Erika stepped aside for her and averted their gazes. But the Goddess touched each on the shoulder as she passed, and smiled too.

"Delaney Pollack and Erika Dufresne, right? Thank you so much for all your help."

"It was nothing," said Erika.

"Yeah," said Delaney.

"Because of what happened, I never got a chance to really talk to either of you," said Madoka Kaname. "I'm truly sorry for that. I generally make it a habit to meet personally all who comprise the Law of the Cycles."

"That's quite all right," said Erika.

Delaney said nothing.

"Don't worry. Now there's all the time in the universe to make amends."

Erika got halfway through a simple pleasantry when Delaney blurted: "Are you mad at me?"

"Mad at you?" said Madoka. "No, of course not. You've done your best. And everything turned out fine in the end."

"I mean," Delaney rubbed her wrist, "I mean before that. What I did before that."

Madoka smiled. She placed one of her slender gloved hands on Delaney's shoulder. "Don't worry. We can talk about that if you want. But first, I have something important to do."

Her eyes flitted toward Sloan. Both Delaney and Erika seemed to understand at once, and truthfully Sloan understood too. Not even a twinge of dread struck her, Madoka's voice so calm and soothing and pleasant to hear that no words she spoke could cause pain.

"So there's nothing we can do," said Erika.

"I'm afraid not," said Madoka. "But I think this isn't so bad a way to go? Sloan's really done a lot. And I don't think Sloan feels all that bad about it, do you?"

Faces turned toward her. Sloan said: "No, this is a good time."

Erika looked as though she might say something, but Delaney grabbed her and pulled her aside. "Then it's for the best," she said. "Come, Erika dear, we should leave them be. Sloan perhaps has some personal business to discuss with our dear Goddess."

"Very well." Erika closed her eyes in acquiescence. "Sloan, until we meet again."

Delaney bowed with a flourish of her hand. "Au revoir, Mademoiselle Redfearn. See you on the other side."

She wrapped her arm around Erika's shoulder and they both turned and walked away. Sloan watched them go, down the long and narrow aisle, away from the light effused by Madoka until they became nothing but shadows, and then nothing at all.

The alley fell silent. When she mustered the strength, she looked toward Madoka.

Madoka was now no longer in her goddess garb. She had returned to the simple schoolgirl outfit, and she no longer stood but sat. They were both sitting, in plush velvet chairs, because they were no longer in an alley but a movie theater, lined with long rows of identical empty seats. A massive silver screen stretched before them, a circle of light from an unseen projector dancing across its undulating sheet.

"Where..." Sloan looked down. She opened her coat and checked her Soul Gem, but it no longer existed. Her tiredness evaporated, the dryness in her throat disappeared. "So that's it then."

"Yes," said Madoka. "I figured you weren't one for theatrics. No need to make a big show out of it!"

Sloan took another glance around the cinema. "I guess I'm afterlife Dilbert now."

"Oh, you mean the office? You were there before, that's right. Sorry, I'm still getting used to having this form back, so I don't remember things right away like I usually do." Madoka reclined in her chair. She grabbed a soda in her cupholder and slurped from a straw, although Sloan had the suspicion they were not in a real theater and it was not a real soda. "Even though it's a conceptual plane of existence, it's more familiar if it looks like something in real life. But I had no idea what to make it look like, a school, a meadow... If it was something normal, I worried everyone would get bored. Plus, I need them to do important jobs, so I can't have everyone slacking off!" She giggled and beamed. "I'm kidding, of course, it's not a big deal."

"So why an office?"

"Oh." Madoka clasped her hands. "I thought about something that would make people feel fulfilled with their jobs. My mom worked at a big company with offices like that, and even though she worked hard and came home late, she always seemed really satisfied... So that's how I designed it to look. Probably pretty silly, huh?"

Sloan could not help but smile. Although ostensibly God, this Madoka girl acted so sheepish and bubbly it was nowhere near as overwhelming an experience. Did she do that by design? Sloan got the impression she was actually like this.

"I think it's fine," said Sloan. "Not sure how someone from ancient Mesopotamia would feel."

"Well, everyone gets used to it really quick," said Madoka. "Anyway, that's not what we're here to talk about! We're here to talk about you, Sloan."

"Me." Oh boy. "Not much to talk about."

"Oh, come on!" Madoka took another slurp of her soda. "It's your life, there's tons to talk about."

"Alright." Sloan stared at the blank cinema screen. "I did a bunch of shitty stuff and then I did one okay thing at the end. And I guess that's enough to go to heaven. You must be one lenient judge."

"I'm not really a judge," said Madoka. "I guess everyone seems to think that, but if a Magical Girl feels despair, I always come to help her. It doesn't really matter who they are or what they've done. There are girls who have done awful, terrible things, and some who keep doing awful, terrible things right until the end. But nobody, not even the worst person in the world, is all bad. Everyone has something inside them worth saving. I truly believe that."

Sloan chuckled, and then laughed outright. Nobody is all bad! Everybody is worth saving! "That's... So all that time Delaney was worrying, it didn't mean a thing."

"That's not true," said Madoka. "It was the good inside her that made her worry. I guess you're right to laugh... A lot of people do. I know I'm not a philosopher, or some grand arbiter of justice, like a lot of people think. But I do believe everyone deserves happiness, and I try to give it to them."

Slowly, Sloan stopped laughing, and soon she stared at her boots beneath the seat. "I took happiness away from a lot of people," she said. "I killed them."

"I know," said Madoka. "And I'm not going to say what you did was alright. But now, that stuff doesn't matter. Now your existence will be for the good of all Magical Girls. Everyone makes mistakes."

Unreal. The simplicity of her morals, it was in some ways aggravating but in others a welcome relief, a soothing panacea. Still, it did not overcome Sloan's own thoughts, which turned toward Clair Ibsen, her friend who she had killed, who did not even have the chance at an afterlife for redemption.

Madoka's hand touched her shoulder. "Let's talk about your life, Sloan. I don't think we need to talk about the things you did wrong, though. You've thought about them a lot on your own, haven't you? I can't say that the things you did were right, but I'd like to talk about the things you haven't thought about so much—the good things you've done."

"I had some tangential hand in your rescue, I guess," said Sloan. She bit her lip and added: "Sorry for murdering you that one time."

"Oh, don't worry about that." Madoka jiggled her cup. Only ice sloshed around. "But you're right, that's one nice thing you did. Not just saving me—you helped it be so nobody had to

die. That's important, right? I think without you, a lot of people would have wound up hurt. Although you did do *one* thing super wrong!"

"Only one?"

Madoka covered a giggle with her hand. "You left without saying goodbye to Kyoko and Mami! Come on, how could you? They'll be sad when they find out."

Oh. Sloan had actually actively avoided meeting them. When they woke up back on Earth, and she saw they would have some reunions with their more longstanding friends, she decided not to make things awkward by dying in the middle of it and crawled into the alley where it was quiet and cold.

"After you put in so much effort to save them, too," said Madoka. She clapped her hands twice and the lights in the theater dimmed. The cinema projector began to churn its tape and images faded onto the screen. "They're two of my best friends, so I'm really glad you did what you did. Mami in particular would have enjoyed being your friend, I'm certain."

The screen came into focus. On it was Mami and Nagisa, on the street in front of Homura's apartment. Mami knelt beside Hennepin, who looked like she had fallen into a thresher. Small yellow ribbons slid into the wounds and stitched them, while Hennepin protested with pained grunts.

"Mami can get really lonely, even though she tries not to show it. So it's really sad for her when Nagisa and Sayaka and you leave, and it gets worse because Kyoko leaves not long after."

The screen changed. It switched ahead; they were no longer viewing the present but what could only be construed as the future. Well, it made sense for a Goddess to be able to see all points in time, Sloan supposed. She didn't ask more about it. On the screen was Kyoko, in some neon-lit urban area, bundled in a jacket as she walked with her head low.

"Kyoko was always a restless spirit. She goes back to wandering around to different cities, never staying anywhere too long." Madoka narrated the events on screen, which showed Kyoko in various settings and contexts, sometimes battling wraiths, sometimes helping out younger Magical Girls. Sleeping under overpasses, eating random foodstuffs. "She meets a lot of people and does her best to help them out."

"So is this some kind of lesson," said Sloan. "Like, you helped this person out, and she helped these people, so in a sense you helped those people too?"

"If that's the way you want to see it!" said Madoka. "Which I think is a pretty fine way to see it, personally."

A final shot of Kyoko showed her walking across a bridge during sunset, a pack slung over her shoulder, a candy cane in her mouth. Two other girls walked alongside her, both looking maybe twelve years old. They chatted between each other while Kyoko stared onward in silence. Then the screen switched to Mami's apartment, unchanged from when Sloan last saw it. Mami sat at the triangle table alongside Hennepin. Both ate sponge cake.

"Hennepin stays with her?" said Sloan.

"Yep," said Madoka. "Her Japanese gets really good really fast, so she figures why not stay? It's a good thing, too, because if Mami were truly alone again I don't know if she would last long. But she and Serena strike up a... friendly rivalry."

A new scene played. Mami and Hennepin fought a horde of wraiths together, kind of like the time Sloan and Mami fought the greater. They both seemed to gun for kills, displaying aggressive grandstanding and flashy acrobatic stunts.

"Together, they train the next generation of Magical Girls in Mitakihara. And so the cycle continues."

Sloan thought none of this would effect her, had even prepared to harden her heart, but somehow the sight of Mami and Hennepin competing wormed its way deep, especially since it was such a random combination of people from Sloan's life, two people who never would have ever met each other if not for Sloan. She laughed, because what else could she do but laugh at something so ridiculous?

The laughter came fast and easy, it tumbled out of her, especially as the screen showed more scenes from the daily life of Mami and Hennepin. Mami and *Hennepin!*

"You touched more people than just those three, however," said Madoka. She waited for Sloan's laughter to subside before the screen changed again. This time not to a person Sloan recognized, but a place. A place she would know anywhere, despite its generic buildings and flat topography.

Fargo.

"Oh come on," said Sloan. "You're gonna show all the random civilians I saved from wraiths now? Come on, that's overkill."

Madoka smiled. "If I did that, we'd be here for days, ha ha. No, I'm here to focus on someone else."

Sloan took a closer look at the scene. She noticed the camera (or Eye of God, or whatever gave them this view) focused on a single figure, hunched against the wind as she strolled down the main street. It took awhile for Sloan to recognize her, buried beneath so many layers.

"Anoka."

"Lily's her real name," said Madoka. "You saved her in Minneapolis."

She had wanted to go back to Vancouver or wherever she was from. Something about apologizing for the girl she killed. Sloan could not even remember the details, although she had told that big tragic backstory and everything.

Madoka said nothing more. The snow melted, the seasons changed. Anoka remained in Fargo. She fought wraiths, she helped passerby Magical Girls. It played like a montage.

So Anoka stayed in Fargo. Helped more Magical Girls. That was the theme. The people Sloan helped pay it forward. They help others. The Law of the Cycles. Sloan had always wondered why they called it that. Seemed like an odd name for random disappearance from existence. But that was the logic of God, who sees all creation from beginning to end. Renewal, rebirth. Things happen again, endlessly. The people Anoka helped would help others. And so on. And together they formed a chain, helping each other from one end of infinity to the other.

"In the end, they all die." Sloan slid her hands into her pockets.

"Yes," said Madoka. "But they also all lived."

The screen went dark.

"So is that it?"

"There's plenty others I could show you, people you helped a lot and who you maybe don't even remember," said Madoka. "I think you're getting the idea now. However, there is one person I want you to see. Someone especially important to you, although you haven't seen her in a long time."

One more. Okay.

The projector flashed again and a new scene appeared. At first, Sloan wasn't sure what she was looking at. It was a bland room with pale blue walls, a chair, screens and diagrams on the walls. A counter with a sink, hand towels, cabinets. Like some kind of doctor's office. Or a scientific laboratory.

A woman walked into view, a woman with Sloan's face. Sloan blinked. It was her, it looked exactly like her, only older by maybe ten years. She wore a lab coat and busied about the counters, shuffling files and folders.

And then Sloan realized: Morgan. Her twin sister Morgan.

She remembered her wish. So that Morgan would see again. Because Morgan had always been better than Sloan, smarter, friendlier, kinder. A more perfect iteration of the same human being, and that thought had filled Sloan with so much jealousy.

"She's a doctor," said Sloan.

"An optometrist, to be exact."

Optometry. Of course. Unlike Sloan, Morgan had never hated the doctors they went to see, even though they performed so many tests and asked her so many questions. She had always asked questions back, what is this tool, what's the purpose of this examination, do you have any new developments, what are your hypotheses? She liked the word hypothesis, took every possible chance to use it.

On the screen, Morgan stepped back from her papers. She took a deep breath, sighed, and stared wistfully at the counter, where small framed pictures stood. Three of them: A

handsome man, a pair of children, and the third a family photograph, Sloan and Morgan and Mom and Dad, with an obscure blue backdrop and both girls dressed in identical dresses. Sloan remembered when the picture was taken, she hated the stiff collar, tugged at the bows even when Mom slapped at her hands.

"She still remembers you," said Madoka. "She thinks about you a lot."

The dam burst. Sloan folded in on herself and pushed her hands to her face and cried, strong waterless sobs that caught in her throat and only confused her because none of it was real, she was not real, she was dead, a ghost, a wisp of air. Morgan. Morgan, Morgan, Morgan. It began with Morgan, Morgan and Sloan, two copies but one blind, and Sloan had traded her soul and life to cleanse that blindness.

If the screen showed more, Sloan did not see. Madoka's hands wrapped around her and hugged her, patting her back and stroking her hair. "You've done a lot to be proud of," said Madoka. "You made a wish to help her, remember? Even though later you told yourself it was for spite, when you made that wish... you did it to help her."

Because Morgan had always been good. Because Morgan had always been smart. Because she deserved a chance...

"I forgot," said Sloan. "I can't believe I forgot. I forgot that I love her."

"She loves you too, Sloan."

The love welled inside Sloan's chest, the love she had buried so long beneath snow and mud and dirt and the entire city of Fargo, love for Morgan and for Mom and Dad too, and love for Clair and love for Delaney and love for Erika and love for them all, Omaha and Homura and Mami and Kyoko and Hennepin and Anoka and Ramsey, the ones she had killed, the ones she had saved, she realized she loved them all, and that they meant so much to her, and that above all she was grateful to have shared her life with them.

That was what she forgot, love, what she had killed inside herself, and next to Madoka, who exuded love, who seemed to be nothing but pure love bundled into one singular essence, she remembered, and she loved them all, and she loved the ones they loved, and the ones nobody loved.

"It's okay, Sloan. Now you understand. Now you understand."

The cinema broke away. The seats and screen ebbed into nonexistence, fading, becoming nothing, until only the projector remained, spilling light into the white void, illuminating that which was always illuminated, that which was always good. The light shone strong and bright in Sloan's eyes.

It went out, and Sloan vanished too.

THE END

Credits

I. Titles

1. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "The Mayor and the Crook".
2. Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "Pied Beauty".
3. Bosch, Hieronymus. *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.
4. de Pizan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies*.
5. Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*.
6. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "Float".
7. Browning, Robert. "My Last Duchess".
8. Strunk, William Jr. & Elwyn Brooks White. *The Elements of Style*.
9. Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*.
10. Jonah 4:6.
11. —
12. Okonma, Tyler Gregory. "Nightmare".
13. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "Garbage".
14. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. "Kubla Khan".
15. Eliot, Thomas Stearns. "The Waste Land".
16. Staples, Vince. "3230".
17. Shakespeare, William. *Timon of Athens*.
18. Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*.
19. Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.
20. Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*.
21. Hussie, Andrew. *Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff*.
22. Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*.

23. Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*.
24. Okonma, Tyler Gregory. "Tron Cat".
25. Kafka, Franz. *The Trial*.
26. —
27. —
28. Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*.
29. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "The Mayor and the Crook".
30. Hussie, Andrew. *Homestuck*.
31. Ibsen, Henrik. *John Gabriel Borkman*.
32. Vonnegut, Kurt Jr. *Slaughterhouse-Five*.
33. Gardner, John Champlin Jr. *Grendel*.
34. de Pizan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies*.
35. Barthes, Roland Gérard. "The Death of the Author".
36. Wilhousky, Peter. "Carol of the Bells".
37. —
38. Moiderah. *Magica Madoka Veneficus Puella*.
39. Gastrow, Jason. "Bubsy 3D 2".
40. Bavitz. *Fargo*.
41. —
42. Bavitz, Ian Matthias. "Garbage".

II. Thanks

Thank you to all my readers and reviewers. I have been very fortunate to receive thoughtful and detailed reviews, and I have enjoyed reading them very much. I am also thankful for those of you with whom I have shared longer conversations via personal message, and I hope you found my ramblings about writing and novelistic form interesting in some capacity. A special thanks goes out to the user Imageination, who created the *Fargo* TV Tropes page, which was very well done. Additional thanks to the user I-En-Tee-Jay, who reposted this story on various forums. Many others of you have posted reviews or recommendations of *Fargo* on other sites, and for that I thank you. It's always my goal when writing to make a

connection with people through what I write, and I hope my story has managed to do so with at least a few of you.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!