



Contra Magica

Resistance is Magical



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For Jacob. Because you led me places I needed to go.

Author's Notes:

So it turns out that the one thing I needed to get me out of a rut I'd been for a very long time was a silly story about magical girls who weren't actually girls anymore. I began to sketch the ideas out in terms of words and ideas and concepts, and it took me by the scruff of the neck and hurled me down a rabbit hole that has been slowly but surely filling me up with all kinds of ideas and things I haven't had since I was, myself, a twenty something.

Along the way, that silly story gained trappings and ideas that intersected with my present, my past, and one would expect my future. I had been toying with various stories for a while, and would get a short ways in and lose the tale, but here, instead, the tale exploded in my head, a full blown, pretty decently mapped out story with all the things I needed in my stuff, and that didn't challenge me as much as the earlier efforts had.

I only recently discovered magical anime, and my earliest experiences with it were not something to write home about. I still can't say I am a fan of sailor moon. Not sure I ever will be able to say that. But I do like the deconstructions that loved the genre, such as Magica Madoka and Yuuki Yuna. Because there is something really special about stories that show girls being more than just fluff for someone else. Something that tells the wish fulfillments without the princes. Something that proves that when it comes to the world beating down on you, a simple truth is always there:

Resistance is Magical.



PART ONE: PROLOGUE

Prescriptivist thinking limits people to known boundaries, conserves and regresses.

Descriptivist thinking limits people by what they can see is possible, progresses and liberates.

CHAPTER 1

"The caged bird sings because you put her there, and she's calling her friends to help, ya damn fool."

"What do we want?"

"Equality!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

Chicory hollered with the crowd, looking out over the group that had gathered here today, glancing over at Sylvia, who had the mic and was leading the chants.

It was a good-sized protest. Looked about three hundred people, which put it at one of the larger ones so far. Better than that one a few months ago, where she had hauled a ton of signs and her medic kit and the portable amp to the site and ended up with three others.

She hadn't even organized that one. All she'd done was bring stuff. The organizers thanked her, and she never saw them again.

Most of the folks here today were not from her precinct, either. That was bothersome, but a midday protest on a weekday rarely drew a good crowd, so it was even better.



The challenge to Roe. That had to be the reason. Forget the added tax on hygiene products that sucked the money out of the wallet or the renewed focus on single earner households the new tax code pushed.

“Fucking Trump and his god awful fascist shit weasels.” She let slip in that odd direct to mouth thought habit of hers.

The gal whose name she had failed, as usual, to remember, gave her a push and a nod at hearing it. “Hell yeah, Sister!”

Chicory smiled back, stepped back as Sylvia began to wind down her speech. Though, to look at the crowd, it was winding them up at the same time. They were angry, a few dozen pink crochet hats bobbing, many signs waving side to side and up and down, voices raw with emotion that she could almost feel even as she slid along the side of the temporary platform – the soapbox she had built and could assemble and take down in under 30 minutes and could fit into her station wagon, still capable of supporting a good ten people.

“Infrastructure. It works.” She intoned as a motto of pride in herself. She had all the stuff to put together a protest at the drop of a hat, and it all fit in the back of her car. Down to a science. Had she been a boy scout in her past life, she would have totally gotten that preparedness badge.

Plus, it kept her away from being the one out front, which she hated. Better to be the support person than the lead. Easier for her that way. After 50 plus years on this rock, she had learned that lesson very well. Despite the serious thinking of running for office that had been occupying much of her downtime of late.

Someone *had* to do something about this. These goons were wrecking the country, and while at first it had seemed like they were just somehow god awful lucky to get into office, the midterms had shown just how bad things really were, as they took control of the Senate and snagged three more states.

The Amendment they were almost certain to pass was one of the worst things ever seen in history, and even with that so many people totally missed just how bad it was.

She sighed, shook her head as she made her way to the edge, planning to take a photo. Politics were always so upsetting. She liked it better when she had been working the other side of things. But with every major human rights law of the last sixty years about to be undone in the name of “smaller government”, it was politics now.

Would be nice if she could get a damn job, too, come to think of it.

She bumped into another woman. “Oh, damn, I’m sorry.” She looked at her. Muslim, maybe, or Mennonite. Either way, a good sign. She had pretty blue eyes that seemed to sparkle, and a shock of white hair under her head covering. Really pale skin, with the lightest hint of nearly grey freckles.

Something clattered, drawing Chic’s eyes down to the ground, where a cell phone rested. “Here, let me get that. Sorry.” She knelt to pick it up, her skirt a little too tight for the bending over.

Chic could hear the smile in the chuckle. “Thank you.”

The phone was a strange looking sort. At first, she thought it was an iPhone, then a one of the latest Androids, but as she lifted it realized it was something even more strange. It was slightly thicker than an older iPhone, hinged



along one side, with one of those edge screens. It folded. One screen on the outside, what looked like two inside, and a set of card pockets on the back.

“Wow. Nice phone!”

“Oh, you like it? Kind of a collector’s edition. Only three dozen made.” The woman agreed. “Name’s Whisk, Chicory. Nice to meet you.”

Chic blinked as the woman took the phone from her. She had spoken, that’s right. Introduced and thanked, too. So yeah, her name was out there. “Hey, that’s almost as odd as my name! Nice to meet you. Sorry, again; I hope it isn’t broken!”

“I’m sure its fine. You seem to be a bit older than most of the crowd here.”

Chic nodded as she stepped around, turning to finish with the woman as she kept on her goal. “Yeah. Fifty four soon. Still feel like 21, though! Gotta keep going. Sorry!”

She turned back around, avoided another collision, and made it to the edge of the crowd, pulling out her own phone, an older model iPhone she didn’t have service for but had picked up during a better time.

Before her husband had died.

She framed the shot, clicked a few frames, started to move to another position, and noticed something ahead of her.

“Oh shit.”

“Yes, that doesn’t look good, does it?”

She turned to her right, and there was Whisk again. “Oh, hey, sorry, didn’t see you there. Um, you might want to head out.”

“Police a common sight at these protests?”

“Not really, but they did just pass that riot law. And they don’t deal well with women who wear head coverings, Ma’am. Might be wiser if you head out.”

A shout caught the attention of the crowd and the stage both. It felt as if the entire crowd suddenly fell silent and turned to face the squad of police officers marching down the street behind riot shields.

Chicory started to push through the crowd to get to the front. If she got there in time she might be able to stop it from getting bad. From getting ugly.

It had gotten ugly in Berkeley. But that was Berkeley. It always got ugly there. Chicago, too. Peoria, though, didn’t usually get ugly. And it had gotten really ugly there.

Her heart beat faster. It was mostly younger folks in the back. She spotted a tallish teenager holding hands with her boyfriend. She had a shirt that said “Girl Power”, he wore a Captain America punching Nazi’s tee, his free hand holding up a “Save Roe” sign. They were truly a cute couple.



Their generation was the one that would have to be the foot soldiers in this fight.

She tripped, caught herself just before impact on her hands, bruising her palms and scratching one up. "Ow!" She turned, angry, looking up.

"Fucking faggot!" The spit hit her right in the eye, followed by a sharp pain in her ribs.

Some guy had kicked her! She wiped the spit from her face with one hand, gritted her teeth, pushed herself back up as she felt the crowd part.

"That's fucking tranny, turdblossom. If you are going to insult someone, try to use the right insult next time. Also, try real hard not to start something you can't finish."

The guy was in his late twenties, short spiky hair, white, of course, because it was always fucking white dudes. He gaped at her for a moment, trying to figure out something "cool" to do in front of his two friends.

Chic was not happy. This kind of thing was just what the cops needed as an excuse. If these boys start...

One of the tough's friends jumped up and punched a nearby black woman from behind in the back of the head. No warning.

The second one dove for Chic, catching her around the waist and pushing her back down to the ground. The first one turned into the crowd as well. As he did, Chic caught sight of an id card in his back pocket. The sort worn on a lanyard. The sort working folks wore often these days.

The sort that had been talked about by people at protests that had gotten ugly. A couple folks had posted photos of them on Twitter, almost immediately taken down by the service for unspecified reasons.

She took the blows to her face and body from the kid, waiting for him to stop and move on. This was not a random event. It was a set up. Which meant that what happened to her wasn't early as important as getting folks out of there safely and quickly. Because it was going to get ugly.

Even as she thought it, she heard the sound, her eyes closed. The chunk, whoosh, clatter, fuzy burble of the grenade.

Tear Gas.

"Attention Rioters, this is an illegal gathering inciting rebellion and terrorism. Do not resist, lay down on the ground, face down, hands on your head immediately."

Chic opened her eyes. Her purse was still at her side. The punk was off her. Her cheek hurt, her lip bled, and she was certain her ribs were at least bruised. She reached in her bag, pulled the sleeve of wet masks out of it as she staggered to her feet and looked around.

Another canister of gas struck a woman in her thirties in the head, dropping her like a wet blanket. A man next to her waved his arms, kicked the canister away, knelt beside her. The Riot cops moved into the crowd, and Chic heard a rumbling from behind them but couldn't see what it was.

She knew, though.



She watched the boyfriend go down under a Billy club. The girl was just pushed down.

Chic duck ran to the man with the woman on the ground, ripped open the sleeve, handed him a couple wet masks. "Put this on. Corner of Adams and Fifth is a first aid station. Carry her, by whatever way you can. Go!" She tapped him on the knee as he nodded, putting the mask on.

People were screaming. Some of the younger folks were yelling at the cops. A decent number had formed a chain, linking arms. Others were struggling to get away. Those who had followed orders, more than a few, were suddenly realizing this wasn't the time or place.

Across the street, a white masked, hoodie wearing someone threw a stone into a window.

"Fuck!" Chic yelled, upset at the gravel in her voice.

It was a riot now. A well-planned riot. Someone had to have joined the Facebook group as a spy. Great Just great. Another thing that was her fault. She was supposed to have been checking them, but had gotten lazy.

People were running everywhere.

She handed out several of the masks. The gas didn't faze her, though. Never had. The formulations were fairly common, and hadn't change in decades, and she was that one in however many gazillion who had found out she could hack most tear gas when in Basic in the Army.

She had failed to seal her mask in the chamber, and the Top had come in and ripped it off, expecting her to freak. She didn't. It has almost no effect on her. Red eyes, and in about an hour she would have the most runny nose ever, but she didn't even cough if she breathed short, shallow, frequent breaths.

Something was funny about this tear gas, though. It made her itch. All over. Everywhere. Even in places tear gas didn't reach.

It was almost fiery.

She saw Jason on the opposite side of the crowd.

He was a shorter, far more handsome guy than she had been in another life, but he was a lot like her otherwise. And he had been off today and agreed to come out to work as security.

He was her son. Her pride. The one thing she had left to Love in the world.

His being gay might get in the way of the grandma thing, but eh. She could live with that.

But he was in danger. He was at risk. He was...

"Jay! Duck!" She screamed. Her voice carried. At an octave lower than her normal speaking voice.

He turned to look at her, dropped a half second later, the sign swinging plant missing him by a hair. The plant raised the sign again to chop down on him, and suddenly met the full fury of Chicory's charge striking him in the side.



As they struck the ground, she drove her elbow into his gut, flipped her legs around his, and head butted him, followed with a palm to his chin, driving his teeth together.

He groaned, and she got up, taking Jason's help as she did so.

"Thanks, Mom." He looked around. "We better get a few more folks out of here fast, there's a tank or something coming. Unless you've got more of that Wonder Woman in you."

Chic looked towards the sound, saw the line of riot cops had broke up into three sections, pushing back on people, clubs swinging those in the gaps, a group behind the front line zip tying people as it moved forward, leaving them on the ground.

Behind them, dozens of protestors lay on the ground, nearly all of them bleeding in some way, arms zip tied behind their backs, and almost out of sight she spotted the girl and her boyfriend.

Something tugged at her inside. "I just might, at that."

"Want help?"

Chic shook her head. "You'll be better at getting the hurt out of here before the cops get close enough. That chain is going to last probably about another five minutes. Once it does, no matter what, you get the hell out of here. I'll give you a buzz later tonight."

Jason nodded, gave the recovering plant a kick. "That's for fucking with my Mom."

Chic was moving before she even realized it.

She was big for a woman. Despite myths to the contrary, she wasn't even as strong as most women. Age had not done her bones favors, either. But Chic was a gal who had done things in her life she wasn't happy about.

But wasn't afraid of having done, either.

Adrenaline raced through her, heart hammering hard in her chest. Her lungs gasped as she reached the chain. Smoking. She had only given it up last year after nearly thirty years, but the price had been high.

Took three tries, too.

She caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye of the punk that had tripped her. He was shadowing her. She turned towards him. He was holding his ear and talking, turned to glance at her, his face shifting to surprise.

"Holy shit, she made me!"

Kid had an earwig? What the hell, Chic though as she closed the gap. He moved away from her, broke into a sprint she was never going to catch up with. Chic adjusted her path again, heading for a gap between the buildings and the flank of a Riot group.

She reached inside for more strength as she neared the line, knowing she was going to give out shortly after it, hit a sprint speed, right up on her toes, leaning into it.



The cop line flashed by her, her curls a mess, her skirts tight against her legs, her focus narrowing to the girl on the ground beneath the shadow that had formed in the gas behind her.

She could hear the footsteps. She reached blindly in her purse, fumbling for the pocket knife, thumbing the large blade even as she pulled out, hoping like hell she wouldn't drop it.

This was going to hurt like hell, she reminded herself, as she suddenly dropped into a slide that ended right next to the girl and her boyfriend.

The boy was a few feet closer. He was having a seizure or something, eyes rolled back in his head. She quickly cut his bonds, feet first, hands second.

He suddenly sprang up and grabbed her, pushed her down, eyes wild and red and swollen, breath ragged and foul.

Chic looked over at the girl as he climbed up on her, pinning her down, just in time to see her head crushed by the wheels of the Riot Vehicle.

It stopped just as the wheel passed over her.

The air went out of Chicory at that moment, her eyes huge, the shock of it unbelievable.

Something hit her, hard, bouncing her skull on the pavement, a gasping cry forced from her, and then hit again, the world spinning.

She was flipped, and pummeled again, struggling to get her arms around her head which pounded and throbbed, her arms painfully wrenched and pulled back, her wrists suddenly searing as something cut into her.

"That's one of them, all right. Bag her."

She shook her head slightly, lifted it to see who was talking and someone shoved a bag over her head.

"What the fuck!"

Third time was the charm, as again something hit her hard in the head, bouncing her face off the street, and sending her into darkness.



CHAPTER 2

*“The Darkness stares back into those who gaze too long at it.
It does this in case it finds the thing worse than it.”*

The bag stank. Vomit. Sweat. Blood, too, probably. It was a double layer fabric. Poly blend, most likely.

Her arms hurt. Her wrists hurt. She was pretty damn sure she had third degree burns along her left hip and thigh. Her palms stung and throbbed. Her head felt like it had been jack hammered. She was pretty sure she had a concussion, but couldn't tell since she couldn't see a damn thing. Her nose was starting to run.

Add snot to the things in the bag. They really need to wash these things. The next person about to be dropped into a pit to get this bag was going to really not like her very much.

Assuming they cared.

Chic was in her headspace. The calm one. The one that always came when shit really hit the fan. The one that she slipped into when she just couldn't deal with what was going on emotionally, and needed to think clearly.

The one that was scared shitless.

She could hear and feel other people in the truck around her. Not many. People moved between them. They were checking them against some sort of list.

Her bag was yanked off, catching on her hair and pulling at it. She blinked at the brightness.

“Ok, yeah, this one's on the list. Shows a secondary.” He was young, generic, cop.

“In the other truck.”

“Got it.” He barely even looked at her as he turned and dropped down out of the truck. He looked in, scanning it, then shut the doors.

“Well, Chicory, that was as unpleasant as predicted.”

She flexed her eyebrows and turned her head slightly. Across from her and one over was Ms. Whisk.

“I have a history with the current administration, as well, it appears.” Whisk nodded as she spoke, a wry smile on her face. Her hair was very, very white. Cut into a nice bob, though. “Seems we are headed for a holding center of some sort.”

“Who the fuck are you, lady?”

Whisk laughed. “I told you. Whisk. I was looking for you.”

Chic froze her body. “What? Me? Why?”



"I have an offer for you."

Chic looked around the inside of the truck. There were eight people total. Four on each side. Two were men, seated the furthest in. Chic was at the door side. She shrugged and rolled her head. All but her and Whisk were unconscious.

"Seems like your timing is a little off. Unless your offer has to do with some sort of mass prison break of political prisoners. Because in case you didn't know, that's where we are headed."

Whisk grinned. "Not necessarily."

"Are you daft?"

Whisk's grin faded, replaced by a puzzled expression. "No. Why do you ask?"

"Because there is no other option unless you have a squad of mercenaries waiting to rescue you. We're tied," She shook her legs, and sure enough, there were cuffs there around her ankles. "Shackled, in a van about to go somewhere, my purse is god knows where, and everyone but us is out cold. Plus, I think they were talking about my son a moment ago, and that makes it even worse."

"They were. But if you haven't noticed, we're not moving yet."

Chic lifted her head a little, cocked it to listen. Whisk was right. They hadn't moved yet. Plus, it was really quiet out there.

It was really quiet in here, as well.

"Tell me, Chicory, do you believe in magic?"

Chicory straightened her head and stared straight ahead, as if looking at some audience, her face completely neutral, then turned towards Whisk. One eyebrow arched slightly. Her eyebrow game was strong today, and she was glad she had put a little more effort in on them this morning.

"Are you always this crazy, or is this just a momentary lapse, lady?"

Whisk laughed. "That seems to be the thought of many. I assure you, I am not crazy." She brought her arms around to her front and rubbed her wrists, then lifted one leg at a time and rubbed her ankles as well. "I came here looking for you. Well, not you, personally, but someone like you. Someone with your spirit."

"Stupid, old, and trans?"

"Why do you think you are stupid? And old is just a state of mind."

Chic frowned, a full face feature for her, drawing her brows together. "Um, I just hurt myself trying to save a dead girl, I got picked up by cops for god knows what, I'm going to end up in a jail with men, and my dogs haven't eaten today. Oh, yeah, and I dragged my son into this nightmare with me and have no idea where he is. And then I'm actually buying into the story some gal is giving me because she did some sort of stagecraft trick." She shook her head at that, wondering why she had felt the need to overshare like that.



IT wasn't very common.

"Go on, dear, I'm listening."

"I'm a widow who still hasn't gotten her shit together, and he died four years ago now, I can't find a job, I'm stressed about money, and I'm spending my time and distracting myself in political activism because its easier than facing the fact I'm going to lose my home and god knows what else if something doesn't give soon. And why the fuck am I telling you this? I don't know you."

"It is one of my gifts, Chicory. Like finding certain people, which is another. But my greatest gift comes from granting an opportunity.

"You see, when circumstances are right, I find myself with the ability to incorporate. Which doesn't mean much to you, I'm sure, as this avatar is just a shell to let me communicate with you. Those circumstances are present, right now, and so I have a task to perform. I can only interfere so much, enact so much, engage in so much. I can only guide, so to speak, and direct, and encourage.

"So that is what I do. When you and I bumped into each other earlier, it was not a random accident. It seems it is my turn to apologize to you for that, as it was really my fault. I was paying attention to the PED I was to give you and not looking where I was going."

"PED?" Chic blinked. The woman was out of her mind.

"Personal Empowerment Device. What you called a phone." She reached down beside her, and pulled it out of the shadows, holding it up. "This. It is a phone, but also so much more. In addition to the so much more, it also has a full radio, can pick up broadcast television from two stations simultaneously, uses apps from any store, cannot be hacked, and doesn't break from any planetary distance drop. Not sure if it would survive an X-ray pulse or a singularity, though.

"Sorry, I get distracted easily. Look, I can sense that you are currently worried about my well-being and your safety around me, but truly, I mean you no harm, and want to offer you an opportunity. If you choose not to take it, I will leave. You are very free to choose. If you choose not to take this chance, you will remain here, be taken into a secured location for processing, and placed in protective custody in a government facility that is not listed on any records until it is determined that no one is going to seek you out with any sort of vigor, after which you will be executed. Which is likely for the best, to be honest, as you have a series of cancerous tumors growing in your lungs. I think they are benign, but the conditions under which you will be incarcerated will be unpleasant and poor, and may lead to them becoming malign, much like everything that has been touched by the miasma that infests such places is so affected."

Chicory rolled her eyes. "So basically if I say no, I'm fucked. Seems like the kind of shitty deal one gets from a government type. Or in the movies. Or in fairy tales." Great, just great.

"Well, yes. However, you may choose that anyway. I offer you the chance to get away from this place, this moment, this possibility, right now. But the price is that you, as you are now, physically, will cease to exist if I do so. It won't change who you are, or strip your life experience from you, or alter time and fate for this presence, this incarnation of your Spirit and Soul, so it isn't like you will have never existed, it is more like this you," She waved her hand up and down at Chicory, "Will cease to exist, and another will come into being."



Whisk shifted in her seat, scooting forward and leaning in. "You will gain a new life. You will also gain a mission in that life. One you are already familiar with, but with greater tools to achieve that goal. You will be a Warrior against the forces of Oppression. Far more literally, however, than you likely think. You will, for the duration of this struggle, not age, not be affected by viruses and bacteria, and assorted other odds and ends that you may like. But you will be a warrior, and you will have to fight, and you may die in that fight. Die in a really horrible way. Should you die, you will be forgotten, as well, by all who have ever known you in either life."

"Sounds like one of those cartoons my son likes to watch. And does not sound at all as if you are crazy, except for the whole part of it where it is obvious you are crazy."

Whisk clapped and laughed in a bouncy, weirdly unconcerned way. "How cute! Tallow said nearly the same thing!"

"Tallow?"

Whisk gave it a moment's thought. "Another member of our strange names club. Although that wasn't her name before."

"Wait, you mean you did this to someone? Already?"

"Yes. Several someone's, over a very long time. The last time I did it here in this nation-state was during the 1940's. Another of my kind tried to do something a couple decades later, but I was resting, and didn't pay much attention. They, unfortunately, were not very successful. I intend for this time to be very successful."

Chicory tried to move a bit, sighed. "So, I –"

"Here, let me take care of those." Whisk waved her hands, and suddenly Chicory's wrists and ankles were free.

Chic pulled her arms to her front and stared at them, incredulous. "How the hell..."

"Magic! Really. Think of it as will made manifest, although that's not really what's going on."

"Magic?"

Whisk nodded with a big grin. "Yes, magic!"

Chic closed her eyes, breathed in slowly for a few moments as she cleared her mind. "Ok, so, um, I think I get what you are saying. But, um, if I were to do this, then there is one thing I have to have that I cannot not have. My son. He has to go free with me."

"This fits with your educational background, as well, I note."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You have a degree in social psychology. The opportunity fits right in with that."

"Oh. Um, my son? He's kind of non-negotiable."



"I can make him the offer, and explain what is going on with you, but it will depend on how the results of your first battle play out. And, of course, you must accept. But I cannot simply do it, without both his consent, and I cannot gain his consent if you are not alive when I do so."

"Wait, what – you mean I would have to fight someone right now? Is this like one of those video games? You say 'Fight' and I go up against the next level bad guy?"

"Well, no. To be frank, I took too long to find you. I was trying to locate you and make the offer in time to stop all of this, but by the time I found you, it was too late, and the humours were loose. The genius were everywhere."

Chicory shook her head. This was too much, too fast, and too weird. "Ok, so, let me be sure I got this. You want me to become some sort of soldier for you, starting right now, and, if I do and survive, you'll free my son as well, and both he and I get all new lives and whatnot? I know I am glossing over a lot, but does that cover it?"

Whisk grew very still, and her smile drooped just the tiniest bit. "That is the most generic summation, yes. Do you understand the cost of this power?"

Chicory rolled her eyes. "oh, yeah, totally. I am totally down with all of it. Makes perfect fucking sense to me. Yeah, whatever." She could feel the sarcasm drip down the back of her throat.

Her hand was filled with something. She looked at it, looked over at Whisk, who hadn't moved. It was the phone thing.

"Excellent! Repeat after me, please."

"Huh?"

"In the Light of Liberty, I am Columbia. With feeling, though."

"In the light of liberty I am Columbia? What kind of bullshit is th..."

The phone seemed to spark out, once, twice, a third time, and then a strange swirling circle of light dropped from it, spreading outwards, and Chicory could see designs and strange letters in the circle, which was more geometric and surprising complex, with lots of different shapes in it as it grew large enough to surround her. The phone seemed to get thinner and thinner at the same time, and rose up from her hand, becoming like a curved display that suddenly hovered, free and untethered, in front of her eyes, strange things, designs and characters, flowing across it, like some kind of designs or gauges or something.

Her whole body tingled the whole time, and suddenly the world dropped out from beneath her feet, everything around her gone, leaving her floating in some vast space that pulled at her senses, pulling them farther and farther out from her, giving her a sense of absolute insignificance, like a grain of sand in the vastness of space.

Then she noticed that she was naked. Although she couldn't quite see anything, as the modest areas were surrounded by what seemed like a ribbon of glittery sand and sparkling lights that wound around her starting at her left leg and spiraling artfully up to wrap around her whole body and trail off along her right arm, leaving at her wrist to swirl around her and rejoin the rest at her ankle.



"Oh, Shootfire. This is weird." *Shootfire?* Her voice seemed to have the reverb on, and sounded odd – more breathy, lighter, more, well, girly. Heck of a lot more likable than her regular voice, which she had hated from pretty much puberty on.

She looked up and the funky design was above her. It reminded her of something she'd read about years ago in one of her reference books on ancient systems of magic. Spencer's work, probably. Encyclopedia of the occult. One of the funky designs for summoning something or other that were supposed to date back to Solomon.

Except it was way more complicated and intricate, and looked nothing like any of the ones she could vaguely recall. It rotated slightly, a glowing design of a vaguely pearl like light that seemed to be a bunch of different colors all at once, yet had at least the brightness of a day style LED bulb.

Or a bunch of them.

She turned beneath it, her right arm drawn out parallel with the ground, and the light split into two, with one half starting to come down a little. It stopped moving when she stopped moving.

"Whoa."

She lifted her left foot up behind her, and it dropped more, and she got the idea, closing her eyes and resting her weight on her right foot as she brought the glowing light down to around her middle, then turned and brought her arm and leg in and brought up their opposites while still spinning on one foot, which was odd, since she wasn't actually standing on anything. Curious, she rose up on her toes, her foot pointing straight down, like a ballet dancer.

It worked. No pressure, which was good, because she'd never been up on her toes alone in her whole life and was pretty sure they would break if she tried. Plus, she's seen stories about blood and pain and worse to get to that point by ballerinas.

As she switched limbs, the second ring split again, one staying at her enter while the other dropped to the same level as her now pointed toes. She straightened, and felt what seemed like gentle tugs here and there, as if something was guiding her to move in certain ways, and she went with it, and the center ring began to rotate and spin and she could feel the sandy, glittery, light stuff begin to cling to her skin, gaining form, and there was a weight in her hand, a comforting weight, strong and powerful and she looked and there was a staff with an ornate top to it, almost comical, but she knew it was more than a staff but didn't quite know what or how and why.

The sandy, glittery, light stuff was not exactly uncomfortable, but it did feel like sand as it snaked around her body and seemed to gain weight and substance that was soft and resilient and danged if it didn't feel like clothing.

Wait, danged?

She followed through and felt a weight settle around her neck, a necklace, with a pendant, a ring, on her right hand ring finger, a bangle around her left wrist, the weight of a belt, something slithered along her spine, then stung like being bitten by a huge ass bug of some sort, before a pleasant warmth filled her and erased all the aches and pains and bruises and scrapes and whatnot that she had, even things like the pain in her shoulders and her hips and her knees that she'd had for so long she had mostly forgotten about them.



Her sense of self was off, though. Like she was out of proportion, and she let the pushes guide her for a few moments longer, leaving her in a posed position with her back arched and head held high and proud, the staff coming down onto nothing more than a glowy light with a resounding thud that sparked a massive flash and the sound of something like water splashing all around her.

She was back in the transport. She felt really good, really strong, really powerful. Her vision was colored by the little visor thing in front of her eyes, tinted a slight pinkish color. Her curls bounced around the corners of her sight, and she opened her mouth in shock because *they* were pink, not her usual blonde. And much longer.

“Well, that’s different!”



CHAPTER 3

“Never give a sucker an even break. Compound fractures are much more fun.”

Whisk whistled. “Welcome, Columbia! Don’t mind the glitter. That is a most different look. Much taller. But right now, tell me what you can feel outside and around the truck.”

“What the heck was that! That was fluttering awesome! I feel fluttering fantastic!” She looked down and froze.

“What the flutter am I wearing?”

“Your armor, of course. It reflects the woman you are inside, a manifestation of your femininity and your womanhood, derived from your individual will and socialization archetypes.”

“I look ridiculous. And my boobs are freaking enormous.” She twisted. “My butt looks about the same, though. Am I taller? I feel taller. Also, why can’t I say flutter. I mean, flutter. Dang it! Oh shoot! What the flutter!”

“Do you sense anything around us? The Veil is open.”

“The whatsit? Oh, um, wow, this is really freaky. Um, yeah, I kinda feel like there are lots of little worms and some kind of gas and something really icky out there over that way. Something mean, and vicious and cruel and fluttered up and icky. And I’m seriously supposed to just ignore the fact that I keep saying icky when I mean icky? Oh Lawd o’ Goshen!” She clamped her free hand over her mouth, her other still holding the staff.

“You are a Hero now. Your language reflects it. Which is nice, because your past experience, while useful to you now, was not conducive to acceptable language use.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No. Though I am amused.”

Whisk pointed at the door. “There will be plenty of time for you to learn more. For now, though, your son and those people here, and both you and I are in grave danger. Out there. As I have others to find, as well, and cannot move on until I have made your son the offer, it would be most appreciated if you were to begin, Columbia.”

“Damn. Bossy much?”

“Concerned for my well-being. Incorporating is extremely unpleasant, and takes a very long time. So, in a sense, I am in as much danger as everyone else here, and would appreciate the rescue.”

Chicory opened her mouth to speak, paused, thought better of it, and turned to the truck door. She gave it a kick, noting the good three or so inch heels on the boots. At least they were chunky. She hated stiletto heels.

She frowned as glittery, sand that seemed to have tons of teeny tiny lights in it slid off the boot as well. As the doors sprang open with a wrenching thud and slammed with a crunch that showed they were locked in place by crushed metal, she looked down and around here.



All around where she was standing was a thick layer of dust stuff, made up of this lighted sand glitter.

She filed it away and dropped down out of the truck and into the waiting squishiness of hundreds of tiny, oily, sticky, wriggling shapes that seemed to be like drops of black oil in water, or beads of mercury on glass that moved on their own but didn't merge together.

"Ow!" She screamed as something bit the back of her calf, the sensation one of compression, not tearing – her boot had protected her. She swung the staff at whatever it was as she kicked out and looked down to see one of the things, about half the size of a cat, with an enormous mouth that flowed together and vanished, but not before revealing a demonic maw of sharp, triangular teeth like a shark, in two rows.

"Those are genius. These have been corrupted by the miasma. As you can now see them, they can see you. You are in the Veil, a liminal space, a place between the tangible and the intangible. Like the Way, between the sacred and the profane, or the Light, between life and Death."

"Not very smart, and was a guy named Lovecraft ever like me? Because these things are creepy as all get out and my mind can't quite grasp them."

"I do not know what you speak of. They are spirits of the world. These are corrupted by the smoke or cloud you see around the area. It alters them and forces them to serve Nullity and its Agents."

Chicory knocked a swath of the black, swirling, gelatinous, gooey things away and looked around. The whole area was shrouded or shadowed by some sort of mist or fog, heavy and dark and moving. It was flowing in and around the cops and the bystanders being sat down around the area. Everything was still, as if time were stopped, except for the wriggling unmentionables and the mist. She could see the people, could feel them in a way, but it was as if they were also separate, unreached.

This was kinda cool, actually. Not that she'd tell the gal who she was pretty sure had just tricked her, but hey, she could just give it back after she got her son free.

He was all that mattered. Even if she was eaten by these disgusting things, died, she'd be fine. Jason needed to get out, though.

She kicked again, looked around the side of the truck, and spotted two more ahead of it. Standing between them, wrapped in a swirling, puffing, mass of smoke or whatever this sticky, filmy stuff was, was a tall man in a broad hat, dressed completely in blue with navy blue skin and super bright sky blue eyes that seemed to reflect a light somehow and make a noise as they did.

The visor thingy suddenly lit up in front of her eyes with all kinds of strange characters that streamed by in a weird way that reminded her of the Matrix titles.

Cuneiform. No, not really, but it was like that. Sorta. She'd have to look it up when she got home.

Words slowly faded in on the screen before her eyes.

"What the heck?" They blinked. "Oh, good grief. Really?" They blinked again. "Fine. Fine. All right. Okay!" A figure, like an outline, appeared in the left edge. It was posing. Chicory knew that pose.



She took the same stance she had been guided to, with one hand out flat, palm up in the direction of the strange blue dude.

“By the Light of Liberty, I bring Judgment to those who Oppress!”

It felt like an orgasm but with more electricity and good feelings, washing over her whole body but not eliciting a shudder. IT was as if she was suddenly even stronger, and she noticed that a small round shield had formed on her left forearm. It was oddly shaped, like a flower.

She blinked. Of course. It had to be a flower. And, of course, it was because of some inner girl in her.

Some nine year old girl who hadn't had a moment's rest her whole life and wasn't real keen on the world right now.

Not the over fifty year old woman who felt like she was 21 again and then had the extra oomph of like five more 21 year olds, at least a couple of them guys as big as she had been in the Army.

She was still, however, short, compared to the guy who towered over her by at least two feet, who seemed to move in a strange, unpredictable pattern without moving his legs, his arms clasped behind his back, leaning slightly forward, his eyes fixed on her like lasers, a grin spreading across his face that was very unpleasant to look at.

The word icky popped into her head again. She shook it, tried to track him.

“So, you are the new one.” He said. His voice was harsh, grating. Goosebumps popped up on her skin. IT was like a deep version of nails on a chalkboard, not nasal but somehow twisted into a parody of a human voice.

He had no legs. That's why they didn't move. He was like some cartoon genie, but much, much scarier and very stiff. He was made of the smokey stuff, the source for it, a solidified – what was it Whisk had said?

An incarnated version of it.

A single arm flashed out, she had a glimpse of long, sharp razor like claws, and it whisked back into place as he flowed by her with unbelievable speed, her hair fluffing in the passage.

She spun and screamed then, the movement bringing the pain of it to her arm. She looked, and her upper left arm had been nearly diced, deep cuts in it that ran to the bone, the whole arm hanging limp beside her, tendons and muscle severed in the blink of an eye.

“Oh, Flutter.” Whisk had said *if* she survives.

She had strength, a staff, one arm, and a dress she wasn't even going to think about right now. Some armor if it just let him slice her like that.

Then again, it had kept one of the ugly little tar things from doing the same to her leg, so, maybe she did something wrong.

He was moving again. She grinned. Of course, she was distracted.



Memory kicked up a hairball. Nicaragua. She'd been separated on a larp. Ran into a really big contra. With a shot arm and no ammo.

She focused hard on his movements, tuned the rest of the world out.

Peripherally, she found herself picking up on the movement of the little ugly things as she traced his movements. He was going to approach that way, and he was directing the little bitey things to trip her up, stop her from moving. She could see it, like lines of planning in front of her eyes.

She blinked, her concentration broken for a moment. She had been able to see them. Just like that. She refocused just in time to bend backwards at waist and knee, his claws moving slower in her mind's eye this time, eight inches long, curved in place of fingers on a ball like stump that passed for a hand of sorts. Four of them. No thumb.

She thought back. He had come at her with the same hand last time. She spun, looking for his back.

She caught a glimpse of it. The same on his other arm.

Ah well, it was worth a shot. A girl can hope, can't she?

He came at her again, but this time it was a bluff, as he pulled away from her at the last moment.

"You are quiet. Weak and quiet. Bleeding and weak."

"Call it a learning curve." She smiled, moved back into her pose, and then flicked her fingers in a come at me movement she totally copied from the Matrix.

The little visor thingy seemed to approve. It cleared up, even removing the tint.

Her left arm dangled uselessly, the staff was resting crosswise in her open palm.

"You are useless and weak. Not even worth my time." He raised his claws and a thick, split tongue which dripped slimy stuff darted among them, cleaning them of her blood.

The critters were massing around her. She could tell not just through the visor, but because the sense of their presence began to overwhelm her. She could feel the ways each had been twisted by something out of its normal form and shape, could almost hear the gibbering, chattering, guttural noises that always were cut off as they flowed over and through, and of themselves, mouths without anything else, ravenous and desirous.

On an off thought, she glanced at one of the people on the ground. It was the boyfriend, and she gasped. He was sitting up, vacant eyed, and with little wonder as one of the sickening little things was literally worming through and around his head, guiding more and more of the smoke dude's miasma or whatever into his nose and mouth and ears and eyes.

"What the flutter are you?"

"I am nothing. I am a precursor. I am like you. Weak and pathetic and – no, not quite like you. I am not bleeding."

That voice made him impossible to ignore. His grin now seemed more like a leer. He swayed, back and forth, rhythmically, like a candle in the wind, flickering...



She grasped the staff and spun as she turned it, bringing it around into a direct blow to his head as he rushed in a straight line that she had only guessed at. The staff seemed to pulse with energy of some sort as it did so, and his head snapped back and stretched away as his body slid underneath her strike, arms both up, twitching, his motion carrying him past her even as she spun again and let the staff slide through her grip into a full length lower blow to his body that tore him in half.

He screamed. Or bellowed. Or whatever it was that such things did in a weird voice that grated her nerves and made the hairs on her arms and neck stand up straight.

He reformed, but he was somehow less than he had been.

This was just like the cartoons the kid had watched for years. She'd never had time, or interest, and so never really paid attention. There was something she was supposed to do, but she had no clue what it was. She tried wracking her brain for something anything...

... she screamed and refocused, finding herself visor to brim of the blue dude, all eight of his claws so sharp you didn't feel the cuts buried in her chest, piercing her lungs, her heart, her liver, her gosh knows what else.

"You are mine. Breath now. Breath deep. If you can. Let me into you. Let me take it away. The pain that you know is coming. Let me in. You know you deserve it. You know you have no power here. This is the Veil, and here I am in power, not you."

She could feel her blood dripping down the fabric of her dress, inside and outside. She couldn't get a good breath, couldn't get any. Fire in her chest and her neck, she couldn't look away from him, couldn't move her torso, could hear the staff thud to the ground at her feet.

She was worthless, after all. She wasn't good for anything. Lost her husband. Only one of her kids ever spoke to her. No job. Who would want to hire her, after all? She was old and washed up, and should be grateful for even a little chance to be worth something, to anyone, even a specter of something she didn't understand and never would because she didn't matter so why should she ever learn.

She blinked slowly, and brought up her one good arm and punched him in the face.

She collapsed, the pain excruciating, unable to rise, no breath. Some Columbia. The personification of North America. A goddess, basically.

Killed because she didn't pay attention to the dweeb with the really sharp knives cutting her to shreds. She wasn't going to save Jason, after all.

Jason.

She closed her eyes. Forced herself to take a breath. Could feel the blood bubbling out of the punctures. It was incredibly painful. Her heart skipped, and she wavered, but she wasn't going to end. Not now. She didn't know where all this came from, but she was going to be danged if she was just going to go out without any real fight.

Time was slow for her. She could sense him approaching, sense the claws raising up.

She touched the ring on her finger to the pendant at her chest.



“Liberty requires the health and well-being of all people.” She intoned it, softly.

It was like a blast erupted from her, an explosion, and it rushed over everything and everyone around. The squiggly squirmy things were torn into shreds by it, cast out of the young boyfriend’s mind. The subtle miasma was dispersed by its power, and she could tell the blast of it lessened even this blue dude.

But most importantly, her pain vanished, her arm worked, her breathing was possible, her heart beat strong and firm, her Whole body suddenly burned once more with the strength she’d had when she stepped out of the wherever she had been into the truck.

She grinned herself, took up her staff, and marveled at how it burst into a pale pink flame that danced along its length. The blue dude slid away, backing up in a strange pattern that followed currents. She crouched.

Her motion felt instant, she leaped at him, a spin bringing the staff through him again, a down swing cleaving him yet again, pink fire dancing along the lengths of where she struck, again and again, a dervish of swings, unpracticed and raw but driven by intense power and passion.

Each blow burned away more of the blue dude, the pink dancing in palest purple at each edge, until all that was left was little more than as much as one of the slug like tar things, and that she literally blew apart with a massive breath, followed by a kiss.

“That’s a blow job you didn’t see coming.” She said with a grin.

Her visor was flashing in the strange cuneiform script at her. It seemed urgent. She turned and extended her strange new sense to seek Jason, finding him in one of the trucks. She could feel her strength fading, her energy sapped. She leaped to the truck in a single bound, and tore the doors open and off.

He was there. Awake. Frozen. She tapped the staff to the ankle cuffs and watched it melt away. Then she did the same for the zip ties on his arms. She threw him over her shoulder, and jogged back to the Truck she had been in.

Whisk sat there smiling sadly at her.

“My son. I did it. I lived. I...”

Chicory fell to the ground, her costume and staff seeming to shatter like glass and fade out into sparkly bits as she struck the ground, dressed in her protest clothes, which no longer quite fit the same.



CHAPTER 4

The problem with cranking it up to eleven is that you only get to use it for a little while before you blow the whole damn thing.

Except for women.

They list 11 as a setting, but what they don't tell you is they have a secret 20 setting. And that one never blows out.

She dreamt.

All her life, really, beneath all the other crud and crap all she had ever really wanted was to just be a good girl.

It was a child's desire, buried underneath all the knowledge and experience of decades, twisted somewhat by circumstances, but it was still the basic goal.

Later in her life, she ran across many folks who would talk about how she had never had a girlhood. They used examples for that, constantly, without for once realizing how every single one had a reflection in her.

She had waited patiently for puberty that never came. It felt like punishment to her, being denied, being locked out. But those who were focused on that kind of thing never really bothered to care about her as person. To them, she was a symbol, an abstraction, and as the years flew by she came to resent that and to hate that and then from their she became fascinated by it, and dug into it and learned about it.

So, in many ways, the hate of people for a trans woman such as herself was what had made her learn so much about them. So much about all people.

She knew others who had gone different routes, taken different paths; mechanics and engineers, scientists and lawyers. Beneath all of it, though, was a simple and, in her more adult mind, somewhat sad truth.

She just wanted to be a good girl. To be a wife and a mother and grandmother and bestie and all the rest.

She hadn't wanted college and the military and the years of work and the life she had ended up with. The younger folks of the day didn't have it easy, but their challenges were not usually as great. They hadn't sat there patiently while the doctor injected her and reassured her it would make her more manly. They often didn't need to watch as every childhood friend they had was dumped into a dumpster, her cries ignored, her heartbreak punished.

She had loss as a child that she didn't understand. That loss became pain she couldn't express readily, and as a child it became anger, and she spent the first third of her life so angry at everything. She found some solace in withdrawal, in building walls of space and distance between herself and others. IT was necessary, and she built them so strong and was so good at it she even built them inside herself.

Only to tear them down one day, after loss on loss, major change after major change.

She understood it academically. That was, after all, what she had found herself doing. She retreated to the shelter of her academic learning, and looked at it all that way.



But when she tore it all down, she was vulnerable, exposed, and lost. She had so much to deal with, so much to figure out. Uncertainty and fear were her constant companions, and she did have years of experience that let her figure out how to move, slowly, through all of it, gaining confidence and self-esteem and self-assuredness.

Then, one day, chasing snowflakes, and she was herself.

Her dreams were filled with the images of her life, the memories and the sights and the sounds and the smells. From the gosh awful first cinnamon toast to the watching girl scouts as a child with envy to the rages she had felt as a soldier.

They flashed by, and she watched it all, in a dream that she knew was a dream.

This must be what it was like dying. Watching your whole life. Like a film, a movie, and oh she so loved movies with their simple truths of good and evil and right and wrong and their nice little neat endings, mostly happy and sometimes sad.

She had always been drawn to stories of heroes who lived and died not for themselves, but for others and for things large than themselves. Those who did things for the glory of it, the asinine sacrifice that was borne from a hope that someone, some day, somewhere would see it for what it was.

She had loved books, books of all types, and she had read for hours and days and weeks and months, a lonely girl hidden from the world who found solace in knowing things. At a young age she had read an entire encyclopedia set. Cover of volume one to cover of volume forty something. She had learned to research and study and when she hit high school she had learned so much that it became somewhat boring to her, and with everything else, she acted out.

She hadn't seen it that way at that time. But that was what it was, and now, dying, she could tell it, could see, could smile wryly at the deeply unhappy girl pretending so hard to be a happy boy because if a good girl was told to be a good boy, that's what she did.

She was smart. She remembered trying to talk to a friend about friction co-efficients and how he hadn't even known what friction was, and that led her to becoming aware that boys didn't like smart girls.

So she started pretending to not be that.

You pretend some things long enough, they become habit. Done without thought, done on autopilot, things that happen while you are too busy looking at something else.

This was the way of her world.

Until she broke it all down, and built it all up again.

Her dreams bounced all over the place, throughout her life, into corners she rarely peeked like her grandfather's death, and always came back to the simple moment, a chance during an act of helping another, where she had found herself in a light snow fall and had gone out to catch snowflakes on her nose.

It was silly, juvenile, and yet, it was something she had to do, a part of the task of rediscovering her girlhood, taken when and where you could.



It had been a moment in between everything, a quietness that she cherished privately.

One large snowflake, falling slowly, drifting on a thousand little currents, the heat from her, the movement of her hair, the gentle breeze.

Tiff. There it was, a barest moment of moments, alighting on her nose, melting away, the fractal beauty of it vanished from the heat that was her.

In that tiny moment she felt whole, for the first time in her entire life, and it was wonderful.

Then her memories were swirling and she was glad it had returned to that again, because if she was going to be gone, forever after, then that moment was one she had wanted to take with her into the whatever.

Then there was the date.

It had been a blind date. Her first. She had never really tried dating, had stumbled into companions, girlfriends, wives...

Here was a man, tall, strong, and not very good looking but somehow, something, she didn't know what it was, it was just amazing. And he liked her.

It probably didn't hurt that she was totally a good girl the whole time. She had approached it like a job, set these goals and those requirements and these expectations and she was going to be the most perfect girl ever. For a guy she didn't even know, had never met.

He was kind. He was special.

He was hers. She got most of her dream. The parts she could have. She got to be the wife. She poured her all into it. She cooked and cleaned and made sack lunches and made sure she was pretty for him and he in turn did the things like taking out the trash and the weird things like washing the dishes.

Her two greatest weaknesses were dishes and trash. After he was gone, she would ignore them in her depression, for weeks.

They loved each other. She wasn't as blissfully happy as she had been that one moment with a snowflake, but bliss like that doesn't come all the time, and she was deeply happy to be the wife and woman she was, and that in turn freed other things inside her she hadn't even known she had, and that had led inexorably to why she had stood at a rally while thinking about running for an office.

It had been so wonderful, but, it seemed like all things in her life, it was only going to be enough for a good memory, a remembrance of what could have been had her life started out differently.

He died quietly, in their bed, at home, and she had been strong as he was taken away, and the hospice worker made sure she was alright, and she signed what needed to be signed and let them all do as they would until, finally, the last person left, and she shut the door and let out all her tears and sobs and slid down the door in despair and loss and the numbness that she so hated because that was what came from grief for her.

It was a black hole. That swallowed her. Every time.



This time it wasn't letting go. This time it just kept her trapped inside it.

Snowflakes, falling.

She had stopped seeing people after that. Her son was all she had, all she focused on. She didn't go out, she didn't work, she didn't do anything. Her life was on hold. In a circling pattern, a snowflake wafting down slowly from a cloudy sky.

Snowflakes on a desert girl.

For she was a desert girl. To meet her she was dry and vast and hot or cold depending on if you caught her in day or night. She was dangerous, risky, yet calm at the same time. In her mind's eye, she stood in the heart of a haboob and the sand never clouded her sight, the wind never tousled her hair; she was a tiny giant before the wall of the storm, and she was unafraid.

Born in the night of the winter, warmed by the heart of a mother, embraced by the strength of a father.

Rain on her, and she blossomed. Shower her, and she transformed. She could go on without it, without the water of love, for vast stretches, unchanging, surviving, alive but looking as if she was not.

Yet when the waters came, and they always came, she became the paradise of the moment as long they flowed.

Like the flora and fauna, she could be prickly, and poisonous, yet even her sharpest points had flowers and colors rarely seen.

She was a desert girl, and she was...



She wasn't dreaming any longer.

It was the giggle and the shush that gave it away more than anything else.

Sounds which also suggested that, somehow, despite everything else, she wasn't actually dead, and her mind had simply gone on a rampage through her memories, all of them, every single one, in a wild rollercoaster mélange that had touched on the most emotional moments.

That was pretty fluttered up of her mind to do so. She wasn't liking that very much. It left her wanting to sob again at loss, to laugh again at joy, to dance and sing although she sucked at both of them.

It also meant that whoever had tucked her into this bed had done one hell of a job of it, because she could feel the sheets pressing tightly against her, and could tell she was in a bed that was soft and comfy and warm without being too hot and big, because she could sorta tell that her feet weren't near the end of it.



There were at least two people in the room with her. She was pretty sure one was Jason. The other was someone else, likely one of his friends.

This told her a few things. She had been here for at least a little while. It wasn't a jail cell. Or a hospital room. Which suggested she wasn't bleeding out anywhere.

She also didn't hurt. Or at least, not in anyway that meant a lot. She did not feel particularly strong, though, although the weakness was passing fast.

She took a deep breath, held it for a count to three, exhaled at a count to three, held it for a count of three, inhaled slowly to a count of three, rinse, repeat.

30 breaths. There was fidgeting.

She frowned, opened her eyes, and looked up at a gauzy pink canopy that was just shy of the ceiling in the room.

"So, Mom, you know, I always wanted to be the magical girl in the family. Kinda rude you taking that away from me."

She turned her head, and there was Jason, sitting in a white, high backed chair pulled up next to the bed, his wonderful smile, looking at her.

Behind him was an enormous young woman. Early twenties, gigantic. Reminded her of when she'd met an old pro basketball player that was parent of a gal she'd known in college. Hands as big as her head, his head perched way up high so that you had to risk cracking your neck to see his face.

She had blue eyes, straight blonde hair that was pulled back into a ponytail, and her arms were nicely muscled. She had great biceps. She was pretty, too, with kind eyes and a friendly smile, and that air of jock about her that Chic had always found annoying in high school, but had found somewhat pleasant in her husband.

Jay looked big, for that matter. So did the bed, but at the same time it, no, this was only full size bed. She looked down and wiggled her feet under the sheet and blanket. They were not at the edge of the bed.

"Also, you are not going to believe what you look like now." Jay grinned in a way that told her she wasn't going to like it.

"Hi! I'm Tally! Well, Tallow, actually, but everyone calls me Tally. Just don't say 'Ho', though."

"Whisk?" Chicory said softly, her throat suddenly sore.

Jay brought a glass of water up with a straw. "She's out, and said you'd want this."

Chicory extracted her left arm from the covers and froze.

It was not her arm. Not her hand. It was much skinnier. Longer fingers. The scars from that time coming with the mosquitos were gone. The reddish blotches were gone. It was darker, too, like she had finally bothered to go out and get some sun, which she had avoided like mad the last several years to a point where she was nearly white.

Jay took her hand and wrapped it around the glass. "I told ya."



Her nails were done. It was a shade of lilac, with tiny flowers on them. They were long. She drummed them against the glass lightly. Real. They were her nails.

She took a long sip. Things felt funny in her mouth. Her teeth weren't right. She had all of them, for one. The crowns were gone, too. She could feel a couple fillings in back teeth, she thought.

"She didn't mean like witness protection when she said new life, did she?"

Tally smiled, somewhat sadly. "No, she didn't. I know. She did it to me, too. Though from what Jay tells me, I think you will have a lot more to get used to than I did."

"Lots of good with the bad though, Mom."

"Well, I'm Chicory."

"I thought it was Maribelle." Tally said, confused.

Chicory made a face. "Maribelle? Really?"

Tally turned, came up with a really cute lilac and white polka dot purse, which she rummaged around in for a second, then pulled out a wallet and opened it. She looked at it, then shoved it in Chicory's face. "Oh! I see, Chicory is the middle name! Well, I like Maribelle much better!"

Jay winked and side eyed Tally. "I told Whisk that you really wouldn't like a name change."

Chicory pushed her head back into the pillows and pulled her right arm out to grab the wallet. "What the.."

The wallet was also polka dots. Green and white, this time. In the window was a driver's license. Maribelle Chicory. Age 21.

"I'm how tall!?" She looked up at Tally, back at the license. "That is so not me. This girl looks like some kind of Shirley Temple, but blonde."

Jay grinned, pulled up a hand mirror. "Try again, Mom."

She traded the water for the mirror.

Dropped it.

As if it would bite her, she gently, slowly picked it up again and looked.

It was kinda her. Nose was much smaller. Eyes were a bit larger. Her brown eyes were a lighter shade of brown, she thought, and her hair...

... Her hair was everywhere. Still the tightly curled, blonde, but highlighted with gold and seemed to have, somehow, hints of pink here and there, as if someone had done one strand in each of her long curl sections. Darker at the top, lighter at the bottom, and there was so much of it, so much hair, it was easily down to her shoulders which meant if it was straightened, it would reach...



"Holy Shootfire!"

She covered her mouth. Tally laughed out loud. "Yeah, that's, like, a real thing. I think that Whisk used Carlin as the base, as I spent like a week trying all kinds of things. You've got about a dozen words you can't say. I've been looking new ones up on urban dictionary. I was Navy, by the way. About a decade behind you, from what Jay here says."

"Army. Where are we?"

"Tau Mu Iota Sorority, Tempe, Arizona."

"Come again?"

"Tau Mu Iota." She reached into the polka dot purse again and pulled out a key chain. On a heart shaped fob, in pink and blue, there the letters were. "It's our cover. You are a Junior, I'm a Sophomore, and officially Whisk is the House mother, although she's very rarely here."

"That cannot be a real a sorority. Seriously."

Tally nodded sagely. "Founded in 1999. Three chapters world wide. Here, somewhere in England, and one in Malaysia or something like that. I didn't believe it either, so had to look it up."

"Is that my purse you keep getting into?"

Tally made a guilty face. "Well, yeah. Nice one, too. And I love the polka dots. Mine is a boring geometric block print. Oh, and that's another thing. You are stuck with polka dots. Any little thing you get will develop them over time."

"I like polka dots, though."

"Then consider yourself lucky. Until you get sick of them. I liked geometric prints. For a while."

"It's a magical girl thing." Jay said with a knowing grin. The two women looked at him. "They have these things about each of them that is different and girly. I can't wait to see what you look like in power up mode!"

Tally rolled her eyes. "You mean you can't wait to ogle. "

Chicory snorted. "I don't think Jay will be ogling. Which reminds me, you don't look different. I guess that Tally didn't look like she does now, miss really huge amazon."

Tally shook her head. "Nope. I was tall, but not this tall. I could find dates then. Now I scare them all off. And what, is he gay or something?"

Jay shrugged. "I thought I could be a magical girl, but she said I didn't quite have it in me. Something about experience of life or something. She said I could be a Guardian, though. But I'm someone new. And, you'll like that I'm in college now. It's what you always wanted."

"I wanted you to be happy. College is a means to an end, and one of a few. Wait, you said I'm a Junior? Am I enrolled or something?"



Jay giggled. "Yep. Fashion Design major."

"Flutter you. There is no way I am a fashion design anything. I can't even draw a straight line. With a ruler."

"Just teasing." Jay got up. "I have to go and check out the place I'll be staying. Apparently it's a dorm on campus. Hoping I can move out later. Hard to have cute guys over when roomies are jerks."

"You are gay?"

Jay paused in the door and shrugged at Tally. "I'm whatever. Oh, and Mom, its social psychology. I have all your class stuff. You are all straight A students, somehow, which is totally not sailor moon enough. Gotta feed my turtle. Later!"

He closed the door behind him, and Tally seemed to get a little weird, wiggling in place with her hands clasped in front of her. "He has a turtle? I adore turtles!"

"Yeah, um," Chicory started to pull herself up a bit, paused as she realized that she was naked under the sheets. "Red eared slider or something. Big, too. I prefer poodles, but I guess my girl is alone now."

"You had a poodle?"

"Yeah."

There was a silence. Tally kept starting to say something, stopping, then looking down before starting it again.

"Um, Tally?"

"Yes?"

"Would you mind? I'd like to put some clothes on."

Tally looked puzzled. "Wait, what? You want me to leave?"

Chicory nodded. "Yes. Please." She sighed after a moment. "Its just for a few moments. I'm kinda shy about my body."

Tally suddenly looked as if a light bulb had lit up in her head. "Oh. Um, you don't know, do you? No, how could you. Of course."

Chicory stiffened. "Know what?"

"You are all girl now, Maribelle."

Chicory winced. "My name is Chicory, hon. And while that might be true, I never really got used to anyone I'd only met a few minutes ago seeing me in all my stuffness."

"Oh, its true. It's really true. Your son was so excited. And besides, I've already seen. Who do you think tucked you in there?"

"Ok, fine, but still, please? I am not comfortable with you being in here. At least, not that way."



"You're blushing!" Tally laughed.

"I am not!" Oh Shootfire, I am!

"Yes, you are! Oh my god, you are totally adorable! You boobie."

"Did you just call me a boobie?"

"Yes, but that isn't the word I wanted to use. You are going to be one heck of a tease."

"Fine, *please?*" Chicory pleaded.

Tally laughed again. It was a good, fun laugh. A real laugh. Without care. It had been a long time since Chicory had laughed like that.

Tally walked to the door and waved. "I'll be right out here. We still have a lot of stuff to cover about, well, us, and what we do, and I don't know when Whisk will be back. She doesn't tell me things very often. Your son seems to get it, at least." She looked down, sighed. "By the way, what you did was really awesome. You must have been really important to Whisk for her to grant that." She waved again, this time with her fingers, then closed the door, and Chicory was alone.

Chicory really looked around the room for the first time now as she slid out from under the tight bedding.

Her bed was a double, with a tall canopy draped in pink gauze, the posters, headboard, and footboard all of wood and painted white. Stuffed animals were all over the bed, including one she recognized instantly.

A teddy bear, orangeish yellow, that she'd had for decades.

It was a piece of home in a very big, very strange place.

She picked him up and hugged her to her chest. Swinging her legs over the side, she noted that her feet didn't quite touch the floor. She had to be at least six inches shorter.

Her head felt heavy. She looked around.

The room wasn't huge, but it was a decent size. The bed, a large closet, a standing mirror, a vanity cluttered with all manner of cosmetics, a desk with a laptop, a window with the shade drawn, a nightstand with an alarm clock, a low white dresser of drawers, a hamper somehow half full of clothes that she had never worn. All the furniture was white, with little trim bits in pink, and nearly everything had more stuffed animals on it that she could count, in all manner of sizes and shapes except gargantuan.

She supposed no boyfriend had ever won a giant stuffed panda for her.

Everything was much smaller than it seemed it should have been. She couldn't have be that short – it was almost as if they were the child sized version of things.

"Well, Katie would kick my twerp over that thought." She said aloud, remembering a short, decades long friend of hers. That was going to be really annoying soon, too.



On the vanity, she found a headband, quickly used it to pull her hair back and up. There was so danged much of it!

She walked on the balls of her feet to the closet, opened the door up, was stunned to see it crammed full of clothing, all hung, a scattering of shoes across the floor. Thankfully none of them were mile high heels. But there were several pairs of stilettos.

"I suppose I should get used to wearing those." She sighed. There were several pairs of sneakers, as well.

She frowned, looked around the room more closely. Tally was right.

Polka dots were on everything that was small or accessory. Several of the articles of clothing were polka dot. Not a lot, but just enough that it was going to be a pain. Not quite as bad as that one commercial she had seen that was way over the top.

Foxes were a big thing for her as well, which surprised her. She had long hidden her like of foxes from everyone around her. Publicly, she liked coyotes. But foxes were the one she loved the most. Stuffed animals, little figurines, cutesy little pictures, the works.

There was a jewelry box on the vanity, and she lifted it up. Inside was a silver brooch of a spider, filigree designs for the body. It was ugly and cool at the same time, and fitting in some way she couldn't put her finger on. A lot of jewelry had a web or spider theme to it, and more had a fox theme, but there was the usual assortment of regular style stuff.

The rings, so many rings. She looked at her hands, and froze, staring at her left hand for a long beat.

She screamed.

The door burst open, and Tally was there in what seemed like an instant, the tall girl behind her with arms on shoulders, tense, looking around.

"What's wrong! Everything Ok? Oh my gosh, why aren't you dressed yet?"

"It's gone."

Tally looked down at the smaller girl who was stiff, in shock, her face a strange contortion of mixed emotions. She softened a little. "What's gone, hon?"

"My ring. My wedding ring. Its gone."

Tally stiffened. "Maybe its around here somewhere. In the jewelry box, perhaps. What setting did it have?"

"None. It was just a plain stainless steel band. It was my ring." The tears in her voice as she said it, so small sounding, were joined by tears in her eyes. "I always wore it. Always. Its gone."

Tally poked around the jewelry box. "Kinda boring sounding, if you ask me, but – aha!"

She held up a necklace on which hung a single metal ring. It was a huge ring. All of the other rings in the box could fit inside it.



Chicory looked at the ring in awe, slowly reached out to take it, held it tight against her with the teddy. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll just get out of your hair again now. You going to be ok?" her hands rested gently on each of Chicory's shoulders.

Chicory looked up and back at the tall blonde. "You are really huge."

Tally blushed. "Yeah, I know. On the basketball team. Sorry."

Chicory blushed. "No, really, it's ok. Freaky, but ok. I kinda like it."

"Well, at least for now, we're teammates, and its just us, so we need to look out for each other." She moved towards the door again. "Let me know if you need anymore help. Just try and get dressed first. An no screaming. We aren't the only one's in the house."

Chicory nodded, her embrassment becoming worse with each moment. "Sorry."

The door clicked shut again, and Chicory's legs gave out from underneath her.

Her life was gone.

Everything she had done, all the good she had tried to do, all the sweat and sacrifice and blood and pain and happiness and hopes, it was all gone.

She tried to put the ring on her now tiny finger, watched it slide off to the floor, the chain still caught up in her other fingers.

She had done two things worth a damn in her life. Jay and her marriage. Her second marriage, but the first didn't really count in her mind as a good thing.

It hadn't ended well.

But without it, she wouldn't have had Jay.

And now, except for Jay and this ring she could never wear again to remember him by, it was all gone.

Even her name was taken from her. Her body, her name, her whole history.

She hadn't actually agreed to this.

She had been sarcastic when she said what she did.

She hadn't meant it.

Loss was not something she dealt with well. Grief was not something she could handle well.

She could feel the black hole starting to open again.

If she went down that path, it would swallow her whole for who knows how long.



She closed her eyes. "No. No. I will make do. I will find a way. I will get through this." She whispered softly to herself.

The tears were another matter. Running freely. Unchecked.

She wiped them away with the back of a hand and got herself up, and looked at the closet.

She turned, went to the dressers. If this was her room, she'd have put them here, so, yes, underwear, socks, ah-a, jeans, tees.

No slacks. It really was her room.

She dressed quickly, simply, and noted that while her chest was technically smaller, it seemed like her boobs were the same size as they were, because they sure seemed a lot larger. The tee was a little short, and she felt something at her tummy again after getting it on.

As she pulled the jeans on in a hopping motion to get them up her legs, she noticed it, finally. She had a belly piercing. Some sort of pink crystal in a silvery looking pierce.

She'd never had a piercing before. Except ears. No tats, either. Ever. Almost those few nights way back when, the foot tat and the team tat that she'd taken so much guff for never having gotten like everyone else in the squad had done.

Her belly was flat, with a hint of muscle underneath. She briefly remembered how good a shape she had been in the first time she was 21. If she were to be around that right now, she'd feel insignificant. If the weight on her license was correct, she'd be almost 75 pounds lighter, and over a half foot shorter.

She did not feel as big and strong as she had when she was in that gosh awful get up fighting the weird blue dude.

"Yeah, well, flutter that." She picked up a pair of canvas flats, slipped them on, then paused to look in the mirror.

Good gosh she had so much hair! It was, without doubt, the thing you noticed first. She studied herself for a few moments. She still seemed to be the mixed race girl she had always been. That strange mix of African, Native, and European features. Not exotic in the sense that the media used all the time, and not super pretty, but her stronger jawline was gone, her cheeks were a little more pronounced, the dark under eyes circles that had plagued her since she was sixteen were gone.

She was, in a word, cute.

Not gorgeous, not stunning, not model good looking. Cute. That hair, though. It stuck out everywhere, as broad as her shoulders.

She turned, pulled a another pair of jeans out, checked the size.

She was definitely a petite. It would take her at least twenty years to get back up to a size eight. She was a size three or five, depending on the article.

Much, much smaller.



She looked back at the mirror.

What was it Jay had said? Magical Girl.

“Flutter that. I ain’t no girl. I’m a woman.” She gathered her polka dot purse and wallet up, put the necklace on after a few tries with her nails, settled the ring between her breasts, added earrings and discovered she had additional holes in her ears.

She still wore the one necklace that had appeared when she changed, and the ring on her right hand, and the bangle on her left. She tried to take them off, found that she couldn’t. The bangle was too tight to slide over and had no catch. The ring seemed like it was glued on. There was no clasp on the other necklace, the one with the funky symbol dangling from it that she had touched during the fight.

She turned and checked out her backside in the mirror. The tee was vaguely see through, and she noticed that there was some kind of black stripe running down her back. It was like a tattoo. Simple shapes, lines and circles and triangles. It ran from somewhere near her hairline to the top of her bottom.

Huh.

“I guess I am more wild than I thought.” She muttered quietly.

She looked at the vanity. “No, no face today. I’ve got bigger things to do.”

She turned to the door, she reached out and quickly gave her teddy a big squeeze. “Wish me luck, Teddy. I’ve got a new life to figure out. Before I go crazy.”

She set him back down, picked up her purse, and opened the door to the sight of Tally leaning with her eyes closed against the wall next to it. She was really huge. Like even her shoulders were huge. She wasn’t like a guy at all, but she was just really big.

Chicory took a deep breath, let it out in a long sigh. “Ok, Tally, let’s get this stuff figured out.”



CHAPTER 5

"And what's wrong with girl? I'm a girl. I'm a powerful girl. A rich girl. I can make or break fortunes with the wiggle of my finger."

"And yet, a rich and powerful woman is still going to be taken more seriously than a rich and powerful girl. Because the girl is still growing up, while the woman already has."

The entrance to the basement had obviously once had a door, but that was long gone now, and the steep steps down looked to be a workout all by themselves.

That there was a basement at all was something of a shock. There weren't a lot of such things in Arizona at all, and this one went way down. Fortunately, it was well lit, and obviously well used, with the little bannisters gleaming from the polishing of use. The stairs were wide enough for two people to pass by side by side, but not much else, and went straight down what looked to be at least two stories.

The house wasn't really a house, though, as Chicory found out. Tally had pretty much made that clear when they started what was part tour and part catching her up on what she had been doing when she didn't exist. Which sounded far worse to think that it was to experience.

It was a large square building with a courtyard in the center, shops all along the ground floor, and five stories above that of dorms and study rooms and libraries and so much other stuff it would take weeks for Chicory to adjust to it. Below it all, reached by two stairs and an elevator, was the basement.

Freshmen and sophomores shared rooms, juniors and seniors had their own rooms. Security for the main entrance, and the courtyard was almost like a small park, with lots of lighting and even trees growing there. It was enormous, and very expensive, and apparently all run through some foundation that pretty much stayed out of the way.

Parties did happen, Chicory was assured, though Tally's description of them was boring and uninterested, which was to be expected for some gal who had been in her forties until not too long ago.

Some stuff was weird, though. There was a room on the second floor that had like little cubicles with large bean bag like chairs in each one, and corded phones for each cubicle. Enough for about eight gals at a time, but that was the only place besides the security desk and the shops that had phones. None of the rooms did. Another several rooms with slightly larger cubicles had televisions, but there were no televisions in any of the rooms or study areas. Monitors, yes, but not tvs. There was a small theater that could be reserved and whatnot, and a few conference type rooms.

The third and higher floors were all dorms, with a bathroom for every four people that featured two showers, three sinks, and three toilets each. There was one restroom for men in the entire building, on the first floor.



The second floor was where most of the action was. The first floor had a variety of shops. There was a clinic, an all faiths church like you might find in an old strip mall, a laundromat and dry cleaners, a couple clothing shops, a café, a coffee shop, what looked like a nice sit down restaurant, a convenience store, and odds and ends. Tally explained they leased the space, and that girls who needed jobs often worked in the various shops.

"It's all really kind of cool. We're like our own little world here. All of it officially under the sorority itself. We're linked to the University, but with gals here doing west valley and downtown campus courses as well as main campus, it sorta makes for an interesting time. Parking garage is one and three levels below, and there's enough for every resident to have one spot for them, but regular people have to make due with the street level parking and a lot across the street.

"Everyone who isn't a resident is recorded in the visitor logs and such, and that makes a lot of the girls angry, because, well, no sneaking boyfriends. Not that different from my old carrier days, really. Except a lot less men." The last part was followed by a very slight pout that Chicory only caught because she was looking at the time.

"How many girls all total?"

"Well, officially, there can be up to sixty five girls here at once. Right now I think its around forty. We're supposed to do pledges something hard this year. Oh, and your key fob is your pass code. Its got some kind of chip in it or something that lets security know where you are and if you can be different places."

"If I can be different places? What, I'm not allowed somewhere?"

Tally giggled. "Well, for example, all the stuff on the top floor is closed to you, You are a junior. And if you piss off Stacey, well, she can shut down use of different rooms, take away tv and phone privs, and the like."

"Stacey? Who's that?"

"She's the top Senior. Its' a sorority still, no matter how much it looks like some kind of silicon valley place. She's in charge. Queen bee. Not real mean, and I don't think she can kick us out, but well, you know."

"Actually, I don't know. I never did the frat thing back in college."

"Oh! Of course! Wow. Are you sure you were a guy at some time?"

"I was never a guy, Tally. Never. I was pretty good at pretending to be one, though, and most folks thought of me that way for a long time."

"Oh, um, right, yeah, sorry. I'm kinda confused. Never did really understand that kind of thing. No offense, but it always seemed kinda icky to me."

Chicory chuckled. "None taken. Always seemed kinda icky to me, too, though prolly not for the same reason."

Tally froze up. "Whoa. Did you just say prolly?"

Chicory thought about it, realized she had. "Ugh. Sorry."

"No, no, totally cool. Just kinda surprising. I've been doing things like that now and again too. This being young again thing is kinda odd."



"No Shootfire."

The two of them just looked at each other for a moment, then cracked up into laughter that turned into giggles.

As that had finally died down, they came to the stairs where they stood now.

"So, ok, now, down here is the gym." Tally said as she started down, talking back over her shoulder while watching her steps. "Pretty much everything. One of the Sorority deals is that all the girls have to spend at least a few hours a week down here. Gotta stay in shape and the like. Healthy minds from healthy bodies, I think it was, or some other kind of stupid nonsense. But for us, the real deal is after the gym. However, for some reason, we can only get to it through the gym."

"What is this real deal?"

"You'll see."

The steps ended and she turned into what looked like the ultimate fitness center. Row on row of machines and treadmills and stairclimbers and weight benches and wow, there were even yoga and dance classes going on. There were a dozen and half or so girls currently involved.

"The Gym is really packed in the evenings and weekend days. Memberships are open to the general public, and we do get some guys from time to time, but they rarely last long as the only restrooms are upstairs. They do get a changing room and a sauna to themselves though if they bother. Just no head."

Chicory did a double take, Tally blushed and looked away. "I, I, I mean, lavatory. Or showers. Sorry, old habits sneak up on me too." She buried her face in her hands.

Chicory gave her a light tap on the arm, chuckling. "I know what you meant. Just funny hearing it."

"I'd think that this whole thing didn't quite meet city codes. In one of my past lives, I sorta had to pay attention to such stuff. I had a thing about infrastructure. Prolly still do. Dang it, I mean, probably still do."

"I have no idea. Not my thing. Ok, here we are." She said, stopping at an elevator door. There was no call button, just a black pad with a couple of tiny led lights. One red, one green.

"Ok, get your fob out and wave it at the pad." Tally said with a bit of excitement.

Chicory dug around in her purse, noted that in it was that phone thingy. She made a mental note to look at that more closely when she had a chance. She found her keyring, which had more fobs and charms and doohickeys than keys, and waved the gaudy little heart thing at it.

The green LED lit up. The doors opened on a large elevator that could easily hold a half dozen people with lots of room. "This is just for us?"

Tally nodded. "Yep, look!" She pointed out into the gym area.

No one was even paying attention to them. Chicory shot Tally a look.



"I know! Right? I've been here dozens of times and no one ever even looks this way. I've asked about it and they all think I mean the regular elevator. Its like this one doesn't exist for them or something." She leaned way down. "It's like magic! OoooooooooOOOooOOOoo!" She said, making a ghostly noise.

Chicory rolled her eyes and grinned anyway. "Yeah, whatever, come on, show me this thing."

They got in the elevator, and there was another pad on the inside. Tally waved her fob at it, and the doors closed, followed by the typical hum of machinery for just a few moments, not even quite a minute.

"And here we are in our own personal training ground. Its like our own version of the X-men's danger room! Except not as dangerous and more down to earth, lol."

The space was about 18 feet high and filled with all manner of strange obstacle course type things. Poles hung from the ceiling, like trapeze things, and there was padding over a lot of the surfaces. The only really flat, seemingly normal space was the one right in front of the elevators, and off to the side were a collection of a dozen or so cubicles.

Chicory did a double take at one, that had an interior of pink and white polka dots and a little sign that said 'Maribelle' on it.

"Oh, no way. That is so going to change. I am not going to use that name."

Tally giggled. "I think its totally cute." She stuffed her own belongings into one that said 'Tallow' and was lined with abstract geometric patterns. "So, yeah, this is like the ultimate parkour and exercise for super girls place. It can take a beating, too. We can power up here and get our game on without any interruptions. Well, except for the actual fights, but those don't seem to happen too often. At, at least, I've only had about a handful."

Chicory turned and looked up at the taller girl. "Wait, you've had how many fights like that one I just did?"

"Like, maybe, six, I think? I know you've just started, but I've been going for a bit more than six months. Or, really, since right about the time Spring semester started. So, yeah, little less than one a month. I was going to try and make your protest, but Whisk stopped me."

Chicory did a double take. "Wait, you knew me?"

"Well, no, not you, per se, but I'm on facebook, just like pretty much every other girl here, and I think you'll find that we have a lot more to deal with that kind of thing than you think. So yeah, I'm a member of the group you had for the protest." She giggled. "I liked your hair back then, and I am so glad it stayed the same, but wow, there is so much more of it now!"

Chicory rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, its way too much. Going to get it cut. Would much prefer your ponytail."

Tally chuckled. "Its in a ponytail because it hangs past my bottom. And good luck. I had really short hair for years. Guys used to call me some ugly things for it. Then this happened, and presto change, I've got so much hair that it takes me an hour just to dry it. I swear, I spend more time now than I did when I was a little girl brushing and combing and don't get me started on how much conditioner I have to use."

Chicory paused. "Um, why good luck?"



“Because, Tiny, every time you power up, it grows back. Ready for some practice?”

Chicory looked shocked, as she took in the room. “Um, is it okay if I just watch, maybe? I’m not so sure I am up for any of this, right now.” She waved her hand at the room.

Tally looked crestfallen. She even seemed to pout a little bit. “Oh. Uh, yeah, duh, why didn’t I think of that.” She moved over to a squarish thing and sat down. “I’m sorry. I’ve been alone for so long with all of this and I haven’t had any sparring partners. I guess I kinda got carried away and jumped the gun.”

Chicory bit her lip. “Oh, hey, hon, I’m sorry. IT’s just, well, uh, there’s kinda been a lot going on for me to process all at once.”

Tally shook her head. “Oh, no, no, my fault. I totally get it. Took me like a month to adjust. And I suppose I was kinda hoping to see what you looked like, too, to be honest.”

“To be honest, I’m really not ready for that either, quite yet. What I could see earlier was sorta not real happy making. What I really want to do is sorta figure out what I am and who I am and all that stuff, without this, this, other stuffs. I know I’m letting you down, and I’m sorry, but I promise that the moment I’m ready I will so totally haul you down here, ok?”

Tally snorted and grinned mischeviously. “You, haul me? I don’t think so.”

Chicory grinned back. “Hey, I’m pretty sure I’m bigger in that other form. Betcha I could do it then.”

“Well, you won’t wanna to change in front of everyone up there, so watchin a tiny thing like you haul me around should be worth a laugh or three. You barely top my boobs.”

“I can’t believe we can say boobs. Can we say boobs? Ooops, no, I guess not. Dang it.”

“Annoying, isn’t it? Whisk says its so we sound like heroes. I think it makes us sound like twerpholes.”

“Yeah!” Chic agreed with a strong head nod. “And this being heroes thing, I’m not so sure I am really up for that. I sorta got tricked into this.”

Tally perked up, curious. “Tricked? I didn’t think she could do that.”

“Yeah. I didn’t believe any of it, and was being really sarcastic at the moment, and the next thing I know, poofies, I’m suddenly some kind of wonder woman in a dolls dress.”

“Poofies?” Tallow giggled.

Chic rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“So you didn’t actually accept this? You didn’t want it?”

Chic shrugged. “I, I, you know, I just don’t really know.” She seemed to deflate. She grabbed a spot and sat down herself. “Like I said, I didn’t believe any of this.” She waved her hands around at everything. “I was in the back of a truck, and there’s this crazy woman telling me how I’m going to die soon anyway, but I could somehow get out of all of it if I accept some kind of deal she’s offering me.”



"Did she tell you what you would give up?"

"I dunno, maybe?" Chic shrugged. "I wasn't exactly in the greatest place at the time to realize what she was saying, I certainly never realized she meant, meant, this!" She waved a hand in front of herself. "I mean, I suppose I should be ecstatic, and I prolly am in a lot of ways once I get into this a bit further, but I haven't even had a day yet and there is so much going still."

Tally grinned. "Yeah, suddenly finding out you are a hot co-ed with a second chance at life is gotta be kind shocking in so many ways."

Chic gave her a dirty look. "You know what I mean. I mean, what's the whole deal here, anyway? White hair is running around plucking people out of their lives for some big heroic purpose, but we don't even know what it is?"

Tally nodded. "That I totally understand! I mean, she told me she was going to find a whole bunch of us, and we were going to fight the bad guys, and, well, to be blunt, she said among them was the current President. I was on board pretty much from that moment. After what those folks did to me, I wasn't about to say no."

Chic blinked. "They did something to you?"

Tally looked down. "Yeah. Long story, icky and ugly, and I don't wanna talk about it."

"Sorry, didn't mean to pry."

"She shook her head. "No, Chic. It's ok. Still just a little raw there. So, anyway, she said there was going to be a bunch of us, and told me to be patient. She's almost never around, though, so I've been kinda figuring out a lot of real life stuff. Classes, grades, dating, making friends stuff like that. Hasn't been super easy, though. I was never the greatest in school, so even though I'm in Nukes still, it is slow, slow going and It seems like I have to work just as hard as I used to. Except when it comes to knowing things. I mean, it wasn't like I had to show my math, y'know? I just sorta did it. Plus, this is civvie side things, which is like way different.

"And that's not even all. I used to be able to get a date if I was up for it. Now the guys are all scared of me, except for the other basketball players, and most of them couldn't hold a conversation on physics to save their life."

Chic was surprised. "You are hot, though. I'd think guys would really be after you."

"Oh, the tall ones are. But the guys I actually might go for? Nope. Its like the stuff I used to see back in the service. Pretty girl who is doing her job gets ignored because she's not all soft and demure and Shootfire like they want her to be, and then the guys are always like figuring she's already taken, because, of course, who wouldn't go out with her, and meanwhile she's just sitting there wondering why she's suddenly cold fish."

"Huh. Bit out of my experience set there. Though, um, from the other side, that sounds about right. Oh, Shootfire. I'm going to have to deal with that, aren't I?"

Tally laughed. "Like you didn't before. Remember, I saw you. You weren't that bad looking."

"Nah." Chic shook her head. "I was a mess. And I never was very good at the whole turning guys down thing. Never really got used to being hit on, either. And once I got married, well, that was pretty much not something I had to figure out."



“So, anyway, I’ve sorta been stuck in limbo for a while here. Well, not Limbo limbo, but like I’m waiting, because other than when there’s a thing, I sorta don’t really know what to do. Which is why I was so gung-ho, I suppose. I mean, I am totally up for going after Nullity and all the rest, but this waiting things is killing me.”

“You seem to know more about this stuff than I do, Tallow. Care to catch me up at least a little on what we are supposed to be doing?”

Tally frowned, then put on a serious, concentrating face and sat up, leaning forward slightly. “Hmmm. Ok. So, it’s kinda like this. There’s this force or power or whatever called Nullity. It has been around for as long as there have been people, at least. It keeps trying to wreck the world, but not in the comic book kind of way;” she giggled. “Or at least, not in a comic book kinda way like some arch villain does.

“Nullity works by influencing people, poisoning them with things. Hate, dislike, mistrust, racism, sexism, that kind of stuff. The stuff that leads to the big things that Nullity gains power from. It’s been doing this a really, really long time, too, building power up and trying very hard to make itself whole, To, to, inky, inko, um, incorporate, yeah, that’s it, to incorporate here, and apparently that would be really, really bad, like the Devil and all that Bible stuff bad.

“Nullity has Agents. Basically personifications who all themselves have some level or other of incorporation, but not quite enough to break through, or cross over, like Whisk has, I suppose. They exist in a sort of not there place between real and unreal called the Void, or in other places a lot like the Void, such as the Way or the Pale or Limbo. They have been getting very powerful over the last few decades. The last time they got really powerful was during world war two. Most of them are working for one of seven major ones, the biggest and nastiest of whom are Aversion, Anxiety, and Animus, but there are like dozens, maybe even hundreds of them. They are all made up right now of this stuff called miasma. Its like a solid smoke, I guess. Its like everywhere. Like air, in a way.

“They use this miasma and something called humors to change the way people think and behave, and when you are in the liminal spaces, those things like the Veil and the Void and the way, you can see it. They also affect the spirits of the world. When I was young, we called them kami, but Whisk calls them genius, and I don’t think they are like the exact same thing but the idea is basically the same.

“You see everything in the world has a kind of spirit to it. Not everything has soul, but spirit is always present, and sometimes places and things can get a lot of power or whatever and that makes the spirit of that place stronger. Well, the really weak spirits, of which there are like billions, can be changed by this miasma and these humors into icky things that help the Agents.

“These Agents are the reason we have things like sexism and racism and all the rest, and why we keep having to struggle with it throughout all of history. And when they get really strong, like they have been of late, and things are looking really bad to whoever or whatever it is Whisk works for, they pick a few people to be heroes. The job of these heroes is to fight against the Agents, and to dispel the smoky stuffs, and basically take away as much of their energy or whatever as possible in order to weaken Nullity as a whole and prevent the end of the world or something like that.

“Did that make any sense to you, because it didn’t to me, and really, still doesn’t.”



Chicory leaned back. "Actually, it makes a lot of sense to me. It was the three big one's you said. Those are the ways by which oppression functions in society. Huh." She grinned. "Holy Shootfire, We are literally fighting Oppression. With magic. Oh my gosh, that is just too damned funny." She stared off into space for a moment, then clapped. "Ok, then. I guess I really do want to do this. Although I can tell I will be doing a lot of research and studying up on things. Wow. Thank you. Thank you so much!" She leaped forward and hugged Tallow.

"Hey, Whoa!" Tally laughed. "What's this for?"

Chicory leaned back. "Tally, when I met my husband, so late in my life, I found out what my calling was in life. It is totally cliché, but it took finding that place in myself and my world to learn it, after so many years of having never been able to see it. And that calling, that push, that reason, was to fight oppression. To stop it when people are hurt or wounded or beaten down by the world, like I was for so long, in so many ways. Its something so big, and so important, and it makes the world a better place in so many ways, that I was always willing to sacrifice myself on behalf of it. It was bigger than me, bigger than my own lousy little problems."

She grinned at the tall girl. "Its saving the world, Tally! Come on!" She got up and tugged at the bigger girl's arm.

"Huh? Hey, where are we going?"

"Out. To eat. I'm starving. And to find me a job. And to have you tell me all about those six fights you have already had, and what you learned, and I'm going to tell you all about my one fight, and we are going to figure this thing out, now, so that when the next girl comes along, she's not stuck in the same place you and I are! Let's go!"

Tally laughed and gathered her belonging up. "You are weird. You know that, right?"

Chicory smiled up. "Eh. More important is that once I know what I gotta do, I just say screw it and do it. The hard part is figuring out what it is I gotta do! And right now, that starts with taking the life I have and doing the best I can with it."

The gathered in front of the elevator, and the doors opened, revealing two other people were already there.

Tally and Chicory backed up a step, shocked to see someone there.

The first was Whisk. White hair, scarf over head, uncannily pale skin, ultra pale freckles, super thin limbs. Chicory shivered.

The second was a girl a touch taller than Chicory, but still a good foot shorter than Tally. She was of mixed heritage, a dark brown complexion with wavy red hair and greenest of eyes. She was young looking, but stood in the elevator with an air of grace and sense of self that was almost palpable. She was heavier of build than Chicory, but slighter of form. Her hair was straight as a nail, long in front with bangs, the sides reaching down to mid chest, the back also long, to her midback, and the sides were shorter, coming to just above her shoulders.

Whisk smiled. "I see that you two have come to know each other, and it appears that you have had a change of heart, Maribelle. May I introduce the third member of your group, Kara. Kara this is Tallow and Maribelle. Kara has traveled a very long distance, and, as with the two of you, fought a battle against the Nullity's forces. With greater success than Either of you had in your first outings, I will add. I have been giving her a tour of the Sorority, as the two of you were not in Maribelle's room as I had anticipated."



Chicory grumbled. "It's Chicory. Don't ever call me that other name." She turned to Kara and smiled. "Hi, Sorry, Looks like you and I started on the same day."

Everyone looked startled, enough that Chicory was taken aback. "What?"

"Oh," Tally began. "I forgot. You've been out of it for a week."



PART TWO: THE TEMPLE

Silly quote of some sort here.

CHAPTER 6

Silly Quote here.

Whew...

