



Contra Magica

Resistance is Magical



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DEDICATION

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

SPECIAL THANKS & DEEP GRATITUDE

Gillian Ybabez



AUTHOR'S WELCOME

Welcome to the first ten chapters of Contra Magica. These Chapters are all from the first draft of the first book of the series, shared for free in order to drum up an interest and get patrons to pledge via [the Patreon website](#). This is a work of fiction, inspired by and using the conventions of Magical Girl Stories from manga and anime – the *Mahou Shojo*. It is also an act of love on my part, for the craft of writing, and for the first time in many, many years has given me a sense of the joy that I had lost in the simple and silly act of sharing a fun story. To the baseline genre conventions I have added in the epic tale of the Hero's Journey, and tweaked it for the idea of a Heroine's Journey, and done a deep dive into the ideas around and concepts that fill the often puffy but empty idea of what is meant by Girl Power. Over that I have layered a massive Epic Fantasy storyline that spans what is no doubt going to be several books in a long series and that is gaining the title of "The War of Sand and Smoke". Game of Thrones, eat your heart out.

As a lifelong writer who has studied her craft but rarely taken the chance to use that knowledge, this book represents a bridge between a time in my life that was dark and twisted and a time when I am coming out of a great and abiding loss, and there is neither shame nor humility in my gleeful enjoyment of this wish fulfillment fantasy.

Like you, I am learning about these five amazing women as we go along, as they tell me the story of theirs that the grand cosmic quantum multiverse lets it trickle into my waiting brain. The last time I felt this much joy writing was decades ago, and I suppose it has to do with the novel that I wrote then and left alone, the memory of which (if not the reality of it) lies beneath the stories being told here, by what is hopefully an older, wiser, and more experienced woman.

I hope you enjoy the reading of it as much as I am enjoying the writing of it.

Thank you. For your time, your effort, your interest.

A. E. D'orsay

Phoenix, Arizona

Friday, April 7, 2017



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 merest 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 nearly 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, fuzzy 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 broken 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 it's 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 malignant, 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?"

"By the Life of Freedom, I am Columbia. With feeling, though."

"By the life of freedom 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 center while the other dropped to the same level as her now pointed toes, placing one above, in the middle and beneath her. 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 Land 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.



“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 Freedom, 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 old's, 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 smoky 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 biting 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.

“Freedom 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, someday, 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-efficient 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...



... awake.

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 any way 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 four color, circular shaped fob, in pink and blue and lavender and seafoam, 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. Six chapters worldwide. Here, somewhere back east, somewhere in England, one in like Belize, one in Nairobi, and one in Malaysia or something like that. I didn’t believe it either, so had to look it up. Looks like there were two here to get recognized. Oh, and they have ones for guys, too. But fraternities. You know.”

“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. "It's 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, it's 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, orange-ish 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 signed. 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. It's gone."

Tally stiffened. "Maybe it's 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. It's 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 it's just us, so we need to look out for each other." She moved towards the door again. "Let me know if you need any more help. Just try and get dressed first. An no screaming. We aren't the only ones in the house."

Chicory nodded, her embarrassment 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, the 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 televisions. 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 do 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 it's around forty. We're supposed to do pledges something hard this year. Oh, and your key fob is your pass code. It's 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. Stacey Trainor."

"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 stair climbers 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 circle 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. It's like this one doesn't exist for them or something." She leaned way down. "It's like magic! Oooooooooooooo!" She made 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. It's 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 it's 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, it's way too much. Going to get it cut. Would much prefer your ponytail."

Tally chuckled. "It's 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 mischievously. “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? Oops, no, I guess not. Dang it.”

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

“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, sexy co-ed with a second chance at life is gotta be kind shocking in so many ways. So hard. So first world problems."

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 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. It's 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 Oblivion 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 Oblivion. 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.

“Oblivion 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 Oblivion 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.

“Oblivion 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. It’s like a solid smoke, I guess. It’s 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 Oblivion 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. That explains a lot." She hugged Tallow.

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

Chic let go, stepped back. "I, I don't know. Just felt like the right thing to do at the time, and I'm big on doing things that feel right. Have been since I stopped pretending."

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. It's 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."

"Well, um, ok, I guess. I mean, I knew that kinda of thing, but I was more about my own Shootfire. Sorry." Tally blushed slightly. "For me, it was personal. I wasn't ever a feminist or anything like that, like you were. I just didn't like what happened to me."

Chic nodded, smiled and touched the taller girl's arm. "I know. Most folks are like that. I was always weird. Even as a kid."

Tally's face twisted oddly. "Oh my gosh."

"What?"

Tally shook her head, looked away. "No, never mind. You'll get mad."

"You hardly know me, Tally. And vice versa. I don't get mad that easily."

"Well, you were, um, down there, like, did you ever, um, you know. The surgery thing?"

Chic stiffened, closed her eyes. "Oh. Well, that's out of the blue. Um, I don't like to talk about it. But, um, no. I had the money a couple times, but there was always something else that was more important and I couldn't justify it."

"Oh. I'm sorry. But, Um. Well..."

"Chic sighed. "Come on, girl. Spit it out. You just got me to confess something that wasn't anyone's danged business."

Tally blushed hard, and was suppressing a smile. "Well, um, that means that you are, uh, um, you know."

Chic was puzzled. "No, no, I don't know. A what?"

"Well, I guess, technically, um, aren't you, like, a virgin?"



Chic blushed from toes to crown. Her slightly reddish hued complexion became nearly dark pink. She fanned herself, looked away.

“Oh my gosh. You are!”

“Nope. Nope. No. Nada. Uh uh.”

“You are.”

“I’ve had sex, Tally. I have a son. You’ve met him.”

“But you haven’t!”

Chic looked around, nervously. “So, you want to show me this place?”

“Nope, no way. You are not changing the subject.”

“It wasn’t one I knew we were heading towards, or I wouldn’t have gone there! Oh my gosh, tally, that’s like way over the line!”

Tally laughed. “I’m sorry. Like I said, you’re being, well, that, was kinda weird to me. And now you have the uh, um, equipment and stuff, and you’ve never been able to use it!”

“You say that like I would!”

“What, you wouldn’t?”

“Well, um, I, I, I don’t know Not like that. It’s none of your business anyway. Besides, since we are in new bodies, that makes you technically one too!”

Tally nodded. “It does. But I was already a virgin.” She posed alluringly, adopted a thick accent. “But us hot blooded Latinas are always on the prowl.”

Chic stared open mouthed in shock for a moment. “Wait, you were a virgin?”

Tally nodded. “Yeah. Well, um, yeah, but I just never found the right guy, and I had that whole save yourself for your man thing going on.”

“You were in your forties!”

Tally blushed and smiled sheepishly. “I know. And not nearly as good looking. But I’m not going to save myself this time. But I will be picky. And I am so not going to be a hot-blooded Latina.”

They had gathered near the elevator, and just then the doors opened, revealing two other people standing 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. That woman gave her the willies, and yet there was something about her that she just couldn’t let go of her like she would have normally with someone who set off the bells in her head.



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, Lark. Lark this is Tallow and Maribelle. Lark has traveled a very long distance, and, as with the two of you, fought a battle against the Oblivion'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 Lark 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."



CHAPTER 6

*You Don't own me. You Don't get to tell me what to do. You Don't get to tell me what to say.
But you do get to be walked on by these boots I just bought.*

“By the Struggles of Freedom, I am Hispania!”

Chicory was somewhat surprised at how easily she had given in to their pleading. It was as if they had the same strange power that her closest friends had had in college, where they could just suggest, wheedle a little, and she would give in.

Well, that, she realized, or she was just as curious as they were and simply refused to admit it just to be ornery. Now, however, she was regretting it.

Tally had gone first, of course. Whisk had stepped aside and simply watched, and was certainly aware that Chic was watching her, as well.

The part that she had been interested in was not nearly as exciting as she had thought it would be. One moment, Tally was there, imposing and strangely thrilling, and the next she seemed to blur. As if suddenly in just that tiny space in the whole of the universe, some applied some kind of really bad filter that made her seem like a multicolored paint smear.

It lasted about a full second. And then the gigantic version of her came in to focus, and the rain of the glittery, powdery, sand like stuff that was lit from within somehow.

Tally was indeed gigantic. Lark's breath left her and she stumbled back, and Chic could feel the tendons in her neck whine and complain as she craned her neck.

White hair flowed down the right side, the left gathered into a long ponytail. Bright violet eyes peeked out of a face that was pretty obvious trying to look warrior like, and failing. Although she hadn't come right out and said it, Chicory suspected that Tally had been a hard core nerd. For her, this must have been the ultimate dream of power come true.

The outfit was a long coat over armor. The coat was padded along the arms, except for the left forearm, which was covered in a solid bracer from elbow to wrist. The front of the coat ended just below her waist, but the back went down to about mid-calf, and flared out from there. The coat was black with a light trim of green that served to accentuate her curves, not hide them. The armor, itself, and the bracer, were a shiny metallic red, marked with a green arrow design in the center around her where her belly button was, and on the chest piece that protected her upper chest, there was a black circle that seemed to have something in it that swirled and shifted, but wasn't transparent in any way. Her legs were covered in thigh high boots that flared out at the thighs and seemed to be made of skin tight metal, mostly red, with a black and gold accent just above the knee.



"Yu, yu, you can move in that? It looks like it's made of metal!" Lark whispered softly.

Tally nodded, and her voice seemed a bit deeper, her side ponytail moving almost as if it had a mind of its own. "It is!" She tapped on it with her nearly eight foot tall staff, which was only a hair taller than she was, and it was clearly metal. "But it moves as if it is cloth. It's like it was made like regular cloth from metal string, then covered with a kind of paint or something. Isn't it cool! And red and black! It's like I am totally the ultimate warrior chick! Oh, and watch this!"

She lifted her staff and struck in on the floor. "Let my foes feel the edge of my fury!" she shouted. Or spoke. It was hard to tell, with the sense of reverb that was in her voice.

Her staff glowed and seemed to flow, and where there had been a cap on the staff of a two pronged something holding a golden crystal, there was now an immense double edged axe head.

Chicory giggled despite herself.

"What? It isn't cool?"

Chicory shook her head. "No, no, it's not that. It's that I suddenly had a phrase pop into my head. I guess you really are a battle axe."

Tally looked puzzled, but Chic caught a very, very light, wry grin on Whisk's face.

Tally turned to Lark. "Ok, new girl! Your turn!"

Lark swallowed, but took a stable stance and gripped her phone tight. "By the Blessings of Freedom, I am Diaspora!"

Again with the blurring thing, only this time it wasn't paint smear, it was as if she was turned into an out of focus version of herself, again only lasting for a second.

Chic supposed that while the experience was subjectively longer, if it really took as long as it seemed to take then the Agents would probably take that moment to strike.

Still, a second was a very long time, and if they were ready...

Six feet and change tall, Diaspora was imposing as all get out. Even more so in her garb. It started with what looked for all the world like an actual bonnet. Which framed the purple hair in a nice way, the tight ringlets spilling out the front along the sides to further frame her face. Her face was made up with gold and violet make up that set off her red eyes even more.

Below that, it was as if she had stepped out of a doll factory or some fantasy version of the Victorian or Edwardian era. There was a word for it. Chicory churned it over in her mind, came up with Lolita. Except that wasn't quite right, either, and the bright blues and whites of her outfit, with the black bows and trims, was stunning. It was if her whole outfit was satin, and the number of petticoats was nearly impossible to count.

It was a dress. At least three layers of it. A bright royal blue the dominating color, with tiny bows and lace and string and that corset had to be breaking her ribs. The trim was all black. The dress stopped just above her knees.



She wore white lace stockings with blue designs, and beneath that closed, pointed toe shoes that came up just above her ankles, like some twisted person had combined a pair of the old high top sneakers with a pair of old time 16th century shoes.

Her sleeves were puffed at her shoulders, which in turn had a shawl collar of white lace trimmed in black ribbon, and then sharply hugged her at the biceps. Elbow length, fingerless blue gloves trimmed in white lace, but her thumb and forefinger were covered by the gloves on her right hand. Her staff was crooked at the top, like a shepherd's hook, but twisted as if it was normal wood, and a ball of light hovered in the center of the curve. There didn't appear to be anything holding it, and it was iridescent.

She looked like a doll. Just six feet tall. White peeked out all over the place, and the amount of cleavage it showed was impressive.

"Can you even breath in that?" Tally asked.

Lark grinned. "Yes. I have no clue how. And thank you for not laughing."

"How do you fight in that thing?"

"It seems to be unable to get caught on anything, and despite looking pretty firm, it flexes just like cloth. No hoops. Just a whole lot of puffy fabric. Here, let me show you." She walked over to Tally and gave her a tight hug. Tally was still over a foot taller than her.

Just as she described, the dress seemed to collapse in on itself, the whole of it pushing out the back.

"Ok, Chicory, your turn."

"I really need a mirror, though. And you two should see yourselves."

Whisk stepped forward. "Then make a mirror."

All three girls looked at her. She shrugged. "Make a mirror. You are Columbia, Hispania, and Diaspora. You have the power to make whatever you need."

"Say what?"

Whisk bent down and took a handful of the powdery stuff that burst from wherever the girls were as they changed. "This is Dust. Some call it Powd, or Cind, or a few other names. It is one of your most powerful tools, being the physical manifestation of Spirit, and it can be shaped by your will. Your armor is made from it, and as you get more familiar with your abilities, your outfits will change and more will be revealed to you."

"How do we use it?"

Whisk laughed and stood, a handful of dust still in her hand. "Take a handful. Yes, Chicory, even you. You do not need to change to do this. Now, for you, Hispania, and you, Diaspora, you do not need to touch it, You can reach out with your thoughts and lift it into the air. It is only in your mortal forms that you must touch it. Excellent, Diaspora. You'll get the hang of it, Hispania, just keep trying. Ok, now, focus hard on what you want. Picture it in



your mind. You must be committed to it, and you must desire this item to be, want it to come into being, as you have seen it in the eye of your mind.”

Chicory closed her eyes, focused her senses on the slippery, soft, strangely tingling stuff in her hand, and built an image in her mind of a hand mirror. The softness in her grasp slowly became weighty, and as she opened her eyes, she found herself holding a very ornate and heavy hand mirror of the sort she had once broken as child. Her mother had been kind, but she had been able to tell how much it hurt, and now here was its duplicate, right down to the little nick in the side.

“Very good, Chicory. Though with your ties to Spirit being the strongest, it is fitting that you should be able to do so. Now, you should know, you can do much with Dust. Your PEDs have one of those things you call an app, and it explains much about your powers and your abilities and how to use Dust. A very little Dust goes a long way. You will never need go without something, so long as you can bring it into being in your heart and mind.”

“I think I got it.” Tally said and opened her eyes, only for the swirling snake like mass to puff into a dozen directions without forming up. “Rats.”

Whisk smiled. “It takes some longer than others. Think back to how you would solve problems in your old life, Hispania. How you would try to see into the issue.”

Tally nodded, closed her eye and held out her hand once more. The Dust swirled up into the air around her again. Some of it began to coalesce around her left arm, centered on the bracer, while another set seemed to settle into and around her hand.

Lark squeaked. Directly in front of her was a very large, very plain, dressing mirror. It was at eight feet tall or more, and easily four feet wide. Strong, simple legs supported it on either side and splayed out in a kind of x pattern for stability. She waved her hand, and it tilted to her command.

“Booyah!” Tally raise her sword and shield. “Wonder woman, baby!”

“There. You see? You have all only just begun to explore your powers. You, Chicory. You used a greater power, one that sapped your reserves of Spirit, and you did it without the use of Dust. That is why you were rendered unconscious.”

“For a week, though?”

“Yes. Your act ensured that all those who had been injured save one were healed. Your child, for instance, was badly wounded by a strike to his head, and would have died before our bargain could have been completed, had you not done so. But so many being healed was giving far too much of yourself at that moment.”

Chicory stepped back. “Wait, what? Jay was dying? I healed people?”

Whisk nodded. “Yes, child. That is your greatest gift. You are Columbia. Your caring for others is a strength, a source of your power. Just as Hispania’s enduring resolve is hers, and Diaspora’s flexibility and fluidity is hers. You are wood, to the metal and the water. You are Aether, to the Stone and the Sea.”

“It’s still your turn, Chicory!”



Chicory nodded, everything Whisk had said cycling in her head, and stood before the mirror Lark had brought in to being.

She was not going to say conjured. Not going to do it.

“By the Life of Freedom, I am Columbia!”

She was, once again, in the dance.

It was a formal dance of some sort, like ballet. She should have learned more about it. Dance had always been something she liked, but her life had never made it possible for her to learn, to indulge, to embrace, to the degree she had wanted to.

The music for it was her own heart, the beat of her life, the glory and sadness and joy and grief that had followed her, the sacrifice and the empathy, the creative and tenacious spirituality of her being, a song of womanhood embraced and denied, a struggle that wasn't a duality, but something more, something else, something greater.

The Dust swirled around her, caressed her, kept her modest while giving her over to the vulnerability of this moment, an intimate second in time that she somehow knew she could make last forever.

She was back.

She was about the same height as Diaspora, who stood behind her. Her blonde hair was yellower, with pink streaks, longer, even more full, tighter ringlets than the ones to either side of Diaspora's face, but not so tight as those that peaked out of the bonnet.

Her sleeves were attached around her biceps, light blue colored jewel encrusted bracelets or something holding them in place tight enough she could feel them holding the massive triangular sleeves that flowed from them to just the edge of her fingertips. The sleeves were pink, with an edging of pale blue. Her legs had similarly attached something, that went around her thighs like garters, the metal tight even as she moved about, as if it moved with her. From them flared out gauzy pink leggings of a sort that were just as billowy as her massive sleeves, except they ended at her ankles. A pair of pale lavender colored wedges adorned her feet, her toes peeking out with a perfect manicure in pink with small white flower clusters on her big toes.

Her nails were longer, as well, also pink, each with a small white cluster of flowers. Something vaguely familiar – they were begonias.

The intricacy of the design was astounding.

She wore a strapless dress that left her plenty cleavage and seemed to highlight that she had a pair, but didn't feel like she was going to pop out of it. It hugged her torso, flaring out into a broad skirt of pink of white that ended in points, alternating pink and white, one color stripe per point. She had a ribbon sash around her waist in palest lavender that had a large bow in the back. She admitted, right away, she liked it, except the sleeves were a little much. She turned side to side a little, noticed how she had a few underskirts that were gathered and flowy in lavender as well.

Pink, blue, and light purple. The colors of the Trans flag. She suppressed a smile, and let the tiny whoop remain deep inside her, a private pleasure.



It was then she noticed the enormous bow that was keeping her mass of curls in the back of her head together. It was gargantuan, sticking out on either side of her head; the bow ends were pink, decorated with pale blue lace, and the ties that draped nearly to her hind end were lavender.

She turned her head a bit to either side, watched it flounce.

"You have got to be joking." Chicory glared at the reflection with contempt. "You know, if I was a bad guy and saw me coming, I'd laugh."

Lark smacked Tally, who trying incredibly hard to suppress giggles and failing. "Aww, c'mon, girl, you look adorable!"

"I look like I am in flutter preschool, dang it." She turned her head, side to side. "And this gosh darn bow in my hair has got to go. Oh my gosh, it is ridiculous!"

Lark grinned. "Well, at least I don't feel nearly as bad as I did earlier."

"Yeah, no shoot. You just got a Lolita look to you. And Tally looks some sort of knight from a gender flipped King Arthur story. Me, I get this."

Tally burst out in a guffaw and doubled over. Lark rolled her eyes. "Jay says it vaguely resembles a shrine something."

"Jay says a lot of things to make fun of people without seeming to. Look at these sleeves! How the heck am I supposed to swing that damned scythe like this?"

Tally managed to gather herself together long enough to attempt a straight face. "Carefully, Columbia, carefully."

Both Lark and Tally cracked up at that, leaving Chic to stare at the bizarre sight before her.

"Jehoshaphat, this is absurd..." She froze, and gave Whisk an evil glare. "I cannot believe that just came out of my mouth."

Whisk shrugged. "Then perhaps what you wanted to say was not the thing you should be saying. You are heroes. You are in service to Genesis, the living embodiment of the will of the Gods. You agreed to the bargain, and part of it is that so long as you are given these gifts, you will be an exemplar to the world."

"You didn't mention that before. Seems a bit like cheating."

Whisk shrugged again. "The whims of the gods are beyond my ken. However, as you have all shown your true forms now, it seems only fitting that I show mine."

Whisk turned, crouching as she did so, and seemed to shrink into herself as she did, a spinning moment that ended with the white-haired woman gone and instead an adorable and cute little fox, a vixen, sitting up in her place.

Chicory felt the pull immediately. "Oh my gosh! So cute!"

"If you take one step further in your quest to pick me up and cuddle me, I will bite you and rake your belly until your intestines fall out."



Tally, despite being over seven feet tall, looked as if she was going to be ill. "You can talk."

"Of course I can talk. I'm not a normal fox. I am Whisk. I am a Weird. Those who bring destiny to the fated. A task which I am not accomplishing quickly enough on my part. As much as it loathes me to do so, I will have to seek help. I have dawdled long enough with you three. There are more to find and I must be going."

"Wait!" Chicory called, that odd reverb thing still going on in her voice. "How many more? Girls. Like us, I mean."

Whisk cleaned a paw for a moment. "There are five groups of five. Yours is the last. I would have brought you all here together much sooner, but one of my brethren is missing, and so we all had to work to make up that absence and build their team in their absence." Before anyone could say anything else, Whisk began to turn in circles again, shrinking ever smaller, until she vanished, with a popping sound.

Lark gave the other two a glance. "So, we get two more, and there are twenty-five total for the whole world. That is a lot of magic."

"No kidding."

"So, Lark, you get your room assignment yet?"

Lark nodded. "Yeah. My roomie wasn't in, but she's messy, and loves comic books and stuff. Has this huge poster of some kinda superhero named America on her wall. Definitely slob."

Tally went rigid. "Hey..."

The two girls exchanged looks. Chicory raised her hands. "Ok, so, how exactly do we get back to our normal selves? The last time, I did it by passing out."

Tally folded her arms as her sword and shield turned into more of the Dust. Lark turned to Chic and smiled.

"You say your thing again, only you say your name. Your full name, though. The horrible one they gave you."

"Oh, that sounds easy enough. By the Life of Freedom, I am Maribelle Chicory Domane!"

"By the Struggles of Freedom, I am Carmelita Tallow Relm!"

"By the Blessings of Freedom, I am Serephina Lark Lands!"

"I am not a slob! Ok, maybe a little messy, but practice has been intense the last few weeks."

"I am. A slob, that is. Or at least, I was. I haven't gotten obsessive yet," Chicory noted as they headed for the elevator. "But once I do, well, we'll see."



PART TWO: THE TEAM

The Castle of the Man is the Empire of the Woman.

Emperesses always outrank Kings.

CHAPTER 7

"I hate Social Justice warriors!"

"You should," said the Magical Girl. "We keep kicking your bottom!"

"So, there are three of us now. We should probably pick a name for our team."

Chicory looked up over her book. "Eh?"

Tally grinned. "You know, like a superhero team! The Avengers. The Defenders. The Justice League. The JSA. Teen Titans!"

Lark leaned back in her chair, head back. "You are way too into comic books, Tally."

Chic kept her head in her book, raised an arm. "Seconded."

Tally pressed on. "You know, something cool. Something that shows what we are about. Something awesome. The Resistance, maybe?"

"Right. Because we are totally going to be able to fit in with the usual protest crowd."

Lark shook her head. "Well, based on what Whisk said, we're kinda in this to be that. If this Obi, Obli, whatever dude is all about world conquest, and the people in charge are working for him, then yeah, it makes sense, but not that."

"How about Rebels?"

With a sigh, Chicory slid her bookmark in place and closed the book as she put her feet down from the cushion she had been using for a foot rest. The girls had found themselves retreating to the training area as a group to study in private and get to know each other a little. They had brought down chairs and made some cushions in an area that was separated, and set up a small stand that had a minifridge, a microwave, a tiny freezer, and a coffee maker, along with assorted odds and ends to make it palatable.



"No. Not rebels. That means a rebellion, and rebellion always means people who don't deserve to get killed. The same with revolution."

Tally pouted. "But that is what we are."

Lark nodded, moving to join in. "She's right, Chic. We are fighters. Well, she and I are." She chuckled. "We are about that. So, it kinda works."

"Fine. I get it." Chic held her hands up. "I get it. But can we do something a little less obvious? I hate just totally being out there so obvious if we are going to do this."

The elevator made a small ding, and the doors slid open. The girls turned to see Jay walk in carrying pizza. "I bring foods that all young women must eat."

"That was thoughtful of ya, Jay." Chic smiled.

Tally was up in a moment, and had one of the three boxes in hand before Jay knew what was up, sniffing deeply. "Mmm. Pepperoni."

"How did you know we were going to be hungry, Jay?" Lark took a second box, slid out a large slice of supreme.

"Terry noted that none of you have eaten today. He's really weird about watching over you guys."

Chic took a slice, folded it, took a large bite, holding her hand under her chin as she did so. These clothes might be somewhat easy to make, but it still didn't make sense to ruin them. If she was going to be involved in fashion design, she should at least pay attention to them.

"Well, we are powered by magic, and we are anti the magic of the bad guys. So why not CounterSpell?" Lark suggested, getting back on topic.

"Oooh, I like that!" Tally managed around a mouthful.

Jay looked at Chic, who shrugged "You coming up with a team name? Like Sailor Senshin?"

Tally nodded. "I figure if we're superheroes we should at least have a name for ourselves!"

Jay laughed. "And mom was against it, of course."

Lark and Tally nodded together. Chic rolled her eyes. "You're going to have stop calling me that, you know. I mean, you're older than I am right now. Would be pretty weird."

"I'm 23 and college studying music. I think I can call whoever I want to call mom, mom."

Tally nodded. "He has a point. How about Social Justice Warriors?"

There was a collective groan. Tally shrugged. "OK, so not that one. How about Contras? It might be too ethic for all of you, but I think you'll deal."

Chic gave it a play in her head. "I like it. Simple."



Lark made a face. "Reminds me of the stuff my Uncle talked about."

"Your ex-Uncle," Jay noted, plopping down with a slice of his own.

"Hey, that's ours. And he has a point again. Plus, he knows more about this stuff than I do. Gimme a slice of the p, Tally."

Lark shrugged, a darkness passing over her face. "Yeah, I guess. Ok, I have no problems with it."

Tally clapped, nearly dropping the slice she was handing to Chic. "Yay! We're the Contras!"

"Happy now?" Lark deadpanned.

Tally nodded with a tight-lipped grin that leaked pizza juice.

Lark smiled "The ase is good with it, then. Now, can I get back to my study? I have to get it to my group so we can start on the animation process by the weekend."

"Me, too." Sighed Chic. "Well, in my case, I have to get this stuff memorized. Which is a pin – I mean, I already know all of this. But for some reason it is harder for me to keep it all in my head than it used to be, and studying is actually paying off. It's weird."

Tally looked thoughtful. "Huh. Is your fashion design stuff easier?"

Chic raised her eyebrows in thought. "You know, yeah, it kinda is. Not as interesting to me, and definitely not something I've got a feel for, but, yeah, it is."

"Oh, come on, Mom. I've seen all those drawings of your old D and D characters. You were designing their costumes."

"Yeah, but that was hard for me. Like, it could take me hours to get the drape of something just right, and now it isn't even something I think about."

Lark jerked. "You know, my painting is much easier than my Economics work. Which is the opposite of how it used to be."

Chic grumbled. "Great. Just great. So not only do we have to look like stereotypes as heroes, but our lives are actually easier if we live them in real life."

"Say what?"

Chic frowned, thought for a moment. "Ok, Jay, this is going to be odd for you, but bear with me. It is like there is some kind of magical privilege bargain going on. In regular life, we all have to make these deals with society at large to make our lives a little easier. Women wear makeup. You tend to disavow your Mexican heritage. I've always downplayed my sense of being native and I used to highlight my paler skin. Well, this is like that, except that the artsy stuff, and the fields of study that would be considered girly, are easier for us for whatever reason as a result of the magic that changed our lives. Just like those bargains we make willingly in our daily life, so we don't get crap for not quite being whatever the mythical idea of perfect is. What everyone is saying is that the stuff we



did that wasn't like some sort of stereotypical mid-20th century idea of what is appropriate for a woman in our past lives is suddenly harder for us to do than it was before, and the more girly stuff is easier."

Tally's PDA beeped. "Whoa. Deep. Too deep for me." She pulled the device out of her purse, looked at the screen. "Oh, shoot! I've got practice in twenty!" She started to scramble.

"That kinda makes sense, Mom. I don't get it, but yeah, I guess I can see where you are going."

Lark was thoughtful, and after a moment returned to her studies.

"Well, that mission was handled." Jay said, getting up with another slice in a napkin. "Oh, and Mom, there's a message for you upstairs. You need to see Stacey Trainor about something."

"For me? I thought..." She shook her head. "Never mind. Ok, thanks, hon. I'll catch you later."

"Not tonight. I gotta date. See ya."

Chic sighed as she rose and stretched. She began gathering her stuff as Tally and Jay vanished into the elevator.

It had been a pretty boring few days since she's seen herself, and the most exciting part was reading up on some of the stuff inside her PED. Once she got it open, which required her fingerprint, she was able to see that there were several apps for all manner of stuff. Some were greyed out, and didn't work, but one of them, called "Guide" explained that as she mastered her new abilities, they would in turn become available.

It was way too much like school work.

Which wasn't going as well as she had thought. Being in a sorority was a new experience for her, and being in one she hadn't actually joined herself was kind of a shock. From what she could tell, her current life was pretty much a bit of an airhead who had mostly done well through being really focused on what she was doing.

She had pledged on her first day at the Uni, and after two weeks of hazing had been accepted and by all accounts was bouncy excited and had spent the first year involved in everything. Last year she had apparently run for pledge captain, or some such, and so was officially in charge of the whole pledge system.

She was grateful that at least that part had passed, having joined into this new life just as the first quarter ended.

"You have that look again. You'll get bitch lines. Stop it."

She blinked, looked over at Lark, who was once again hanging her head over the back of the chair. How she could look at the world upside down was beyond her.

"Thanks." She smiled. "I had really deep ones in my old life."

"You think too much. Besides, you asked me to remind you." The three of them had grown close, and despite an initial standoff between Lark and Tally, the two had become amazingly close following an incident on the campus where some of the jocks had been going after Lark.

Lark was pretty obviously able to handle it, but was for some reason not able to. Right then, Tally had come by, and in the blink of an eye, changed everything. Ever since that moment, Lark had been completely behind Tally.



It made for an interesting combination, as Tally still seemed surprisingly indecisive, while Lark was one of those people who is so totally focused on her stuff that she never seemed to figure out how to be a person around other people.

Case in point, as Chic went to thank her again. She had already returned to her book.

Chic shook her head and laughed silently as she slid her books into her bag and headed to the elevator. "Don't lose track of time."

Lark waved an arm without looking up.

The other thing about the Sorority and her past life is that apparently she had managed to work her way into Stacey's good graces, and was some kind of member of her clique. This was not something she liked. Mostly because she couldn't stand Stacey.

The woman was all Sorority and Dating all the time. It was like being in an old film called *Clueless* or something. Three dates in two weeks, all blind, all boring, and on one the guy had thought to get handsy.

It ended poorly for him. Which had not pleased Stacey.

"This is not going to be a lot of fun." She said to herself.

The Elevator dinged at the Gym level, and she marveled at how dedicated some of the girls were to their physical condition. She'd never been able to muster much more than a vague desire, although when she'd been younger she'd been proud of her ability to do things.

She felt the urge to join in, and made a mental note to schedule some time just as she nearly bumped into a girl she'd seen around a lot.

"Sorry." She said. She was pretty, with light brown eyes and a pageboy cut, in the standard uniform of everyone on campus these days, which was jeans and a tee, and with a pair of pretty low wedges that had Chic a bit jealous, she had nearly six inches on her.

"Oh, hey, no worries. My name's Chic."

The girl blushed, struggled with her armload of books as she freed a hand. "I know. We're in Fashion Design together. I'm Celestia. Celestia Litatio, though everyone just calls me Cele."

Chic shook the hand. "That's right! You're behind me a row or two, I think. I have to sit up closer or I get lazy."

Cele brushed a lock of hair back behind her ear, looked down. "I don't see how, you have some of the best designs in the class."

Chic laughed "Ok, now you're just outright lying about me. So I know you want something."

Cele looked hurt. "Oh, no. Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to —"

Chic rested a hand lightly on her upper arm, and shook her head. "You really meant that, didn't you? I'm the one who's sorry. I was making one of my serious jokes. I'm stupid like that sometimes."



"Oh, I don't think you are stupid at all. I think you're one of the smartest people in class. Even that Devin guy isn't as smart, and he's jealous of you."

Chic blinked, having no idea who that was.

Cele flustered again. "I, I, I'm sorry. I babble like that when I'm nervous. Um, I was, um, wondering if I could ask you something?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"Would you partner with me on the Wedding Dress project?"

Chic reeled, and at that moment remembered a bit more about this girl. She did sit behind her, and was one of the quiet ones who asked really good questions that also showed she had a great grasp of her own weakest area – the drawing portion. She was a sophomore, as well, taking higher level classes.

"You're the one that does those amazing portraits of movie stars wearing her designs, aren't you?"

Cele nodded hesitantly.

"Well, dang, girl, I should be the one fluttering asking you! Heck yeah I'll tam with you!"

"Fluttering?" Cele puzzled along for a moment, and Chic could see the fatigue in her eyes just before they brightened up. "Oh! Oh, you said yes! Oh my God, thank you!"

The hug nearly bowled Chic over, Cele's books and papers scattering everywhere, and they were both laughing just loud enough that the gym started to pay attention. One of the girls on the free weights cleared her throat a little louder, and made an extra loud clang with something.

As she regained her balance, Chic rolled her eyes. "I was thinking I was going to have to take a drop on that one since it is a team project and I figured everyone was already taken." She crouched down to help pick up the books, her own skirt a bit too short for bending over and old habits from when her knees had been less strong keeping her from flat out kneeling.

Cele shook her head as she dug around in her purse for her phone. "Oh, no. You're the top of the lists. I mean, you've got patterning down, and you do these amazing fantasies."

"Really? You're the first to say anything though."

"Well, you can be kinda intimidating, You always look like you are mad about something or thinking hard. The little lines." She pointed to Chic's face. "Plus, I'm a Sister. Although I've been looking for you for hours."

"It's a gift. I was once the Empress of the known Universes. Comes with the territory."

Cele looked shocked again, then slowly realized she was being teased. "You are funny! This is gonna be great Again, thank you, so much. When can we set our meetings?"



Chic pulled her PED out with one hand as she handed the stack she'd collected to Celestia with the other and stood up. She tapped her calendar. "Wednesdays and Sundays sound good I tend to get called away unexpectedly, but how about 3 both days?"

Cele frowned. "I have Wednesdays blocked then. Stupid Econ 101. Can we do it later? Maybe, um, I dunno, six-ish?"

"Works for me, Sister." Chicory felt good saying that for some reason. "Here's my digits."

"You're digits? Oh, your phone number! Duh. Thanks!" She tapped them in, then snapped a quick photo. "All set. See you soon!"

Chicory smiled. "Only if Stacey leaves enough of me. On my way to see her."

Celestia rolled her eyes. "Oh no. I thought you Juniors were immune to that! It's a blind date, isn't it? She keeps trying with me, I guess she forgets about Todd."

"Todd? Boyfriend?"

She nodded. "Yeah. He calls me Tia. You've probably seen him. He's sure seen you. But then, I guess you get that a lot with the girls and all." She waved her hands at Chic's chest.

Chic looked at the heavens. "Yeah, I do. I've grown to ignore it for the most part. They're why I'm not down here as much as I likely should be. Afraid they'll poke my eye out or something."

Celestia giggled at the image. "You're really different, Chic. Is that really your name?"

Chicory sighed. "Chic is short for Chicory. It's my middle name, and what I use and go by. My first name is Maribelle."

"Chicory? Isn't that like a pretend coffee or something?"

"Yep. Used as a coffee substitute. Kinda strong, a bit more bitter. "

"is that like a tribal name?"

Chic was taken aback. "Eh?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Forget I asked, please. I didn't mean to pry."

"Huh? Oh, no, hon, it's ok. I'm just not used to people asking me that. No, it isn't anything my tribe gave me. And I was surprised because I don't exactly meet the usual appearance criteria for someone to identify me as native."

"But you. No, I'm sorry, I'm being a country girl again. Like some backwoods girl, and I've never even seen the woods! I'll let you go, and I'm sure Todd is waiting for me upstairs."

Chicory motioned towards the elevators, and they headed that way. "Hot date?"



"Well, no, not really." She managed a shrug. "Just going to the café here. He doesn't have his turn tonight, and I've, um, I've got something to do later. Kinda a nightly deal I can't get out of."

"Cramps the style, I bet." The doors dinged, and the harried gal moved out, turning to speak as the doors started to close again. "Have fun!"

She was alone again. The gal was going to be interesting to work with.

Chic checked her watch and adjusted her book bag. Yeah, she'd be in the cafeteria. The Monthly dance deal, which always got a couple of the frat's involved and usually had Gamma Rho come over as partners. TMI had the largest dance space, and the cafeteria was popular if the DJ was any good.

All of which it surprised Chic to realize she knew. She hadn't been here that long, after all.

She headed straight there out of the elevators. As always, she cast her eyes about for Whisk, who would prowl the hallways at the oddest times, but she knew the fox girl was out and about. She'd said as much this morning in a text to everyone.

Getting help, she'd said, and Chic had yet to see another one of these bad guys she was supposed to fight.

Sure enough, Stacey was holding court with nearly the whole chapter council. There was Helen of the beady mean eyes and the L'Oréal hair, Davina of the twice a month salon trip, Terry of the tight and high braids, and, as always, Julie the girl who you just knew couldn't stand you but never showed it enough to matter.

"There you are! I've been sending runners out all day!"

"Sorry, Stacey. Coursework is heavy. You aren't going to set me up again, are you?"

Stacey laughed lightly. How some girls could do that was beyond Chic. Like, truly beyond her. She'd tried, and it never sounded even halfway genuine. Stacey managed to make it sound like her everyday laugh. She motioned Chic off to the side.

"Well, now that you mention it, I do have someone. He's a baseball player. Not as cute as the one you spilled your drink on, but from all accounts much more of a gentleman. But that wasn't why I needed you."

Chic managed a smile. "Oh."

"Oh, indeed! Look, I know something's up with you, but right now you're still number one to be the President next year if you put in the effort. And you haven't been putting in the effort. You've missed a volunteering, and you haven't even tried to get involved in the dance or the game plans. And the grapevine says your grades are even slipping a little. You used to be so much the booster, and yet lately you've just been a drag."

Chic was startled by the sense of sincerity in Stacey's concern. She had no idea what the gal was talking about, but she could make a few guesses.

"Look, I'm sorry. That week I lost when I was sick. I'll get back to my old self."

Stacey leaned down for a quick little hug. "I so hope so. I'm counting on you. As much as I like her, Helen is just not Presidential material. Still too much of her family in her, you know?"



Helen's family had been one of the original sponsors, Chic's mind supplied unbidden. That was somewhat bothersome. Handy, but bothersome.

New Lives were a lot more complicated than they sounded.

Helen threw her family's wealth, influence, and power around. With the current administration, she had some sort of line to the White House she was fond of telling girls. Given the philanthropic mission of the sorority, though, Chic suspected that went over like lead balloons.

TMI's open goal was to end Oppression, everywhere and anywhere. Its secret goal was to end wealth disparity. Of which Helen was a living example.

Chic nodded. "Yeah, I know. Thanks. Can we push the date out a little? I'm willing, but I need a bit of time to get caught up. And I just had a team project dropped on me. Wedding dresses!"

"Oh! You've got Hermann's course, don't you? That was one of the best projects ever! I totally wore our project to the Promenade last year. Although he is such a bear on grading, isn't he? Anyway, back to work for me. Head and hands!"

"Head and hands, Stacey."

And like that, she was gone.

Chicory sighed and shook her head, headed back to the elevator. Her fob triggered the call this time, and she figured she'd head up to her room and get some more studying done.

She stomped her foot. She could enjoy popcorn again, and had been doing it religiously. She wasn't technically supposed to have a microwave in her room, but no one had stopped her or said anything, and she'd seen a few others.

But she was out of popcorn.

She reached in her purse and pulled out her PED as the doors opened. It was empty, and she stepped inside and triggered the voice program.

"Mimi, how do I get money to buy food?"

"You get money by using your bank card or through any RFID payment device and your PED."

"Mimi, how much money do I have in the bank?"

"You have four thousand, two hundred twenty seven dollars and seventeen cents in your checking account. Would you like you other accounts?"

"Mimi, how do we girls make money?"

"You make money by applying a small amount of Dust to the particular denomination you wish to create and focusing your will."



Chic blinked. She could just make money?

The doors opened, and she put her phone away. More questions than answers there. But at least that meant she wouldn't need to get a job.

Wouldn't that make for a great heroine of the hour – I'm sorry, boss, I have to stop working and go kick demon butt. Should I clock out or will you count it as my lunch hour?

She reached her room and gratefully tossed the book bag and her purse on the bed.

Popcorn. She had to have popcorn.

Bathroom. She had to have bathroom.

She sighed. Life was not nearly as easy as it had been, someday.



CHAPTER 8

Think like a queen. A queen is not afraid to fail. Failure is another steppingstone to greatness.

Oprah Winfrey

One of the best things about living in the sorority was the way that it seemed like the corporate overlords wanted to make sure that everything was perfect for girls in college.

Including that they didn't have to go far for vitals.

Like underwear. And pads. For when you've never had a period in your entire life, and discover you've started one sometime in the afternoon of one stupid day in your third week in a new life.

No wonder Whisk had vanished. Probably smelled it or something. Or knew it. Or planned it out this way.

She only owned three pairs of jeans. Thankfully she wasn't wearing them today. She'd looked everywhere through the room for a diary or a calendar, tried to comb through memories that she magically had been finding she had.

Nothing.

Chic didn't get scared by much. She'd been shot, stabbed, beaten, bloodied, and worse in her life. Her old life.

But this? This scared her so deeply and completely she was nearly in tears, and could be at any moment, and no, it was not because she was bleeding, it was because she was scared.

She made a face as she turned the corner for the convenience store that was on the first floor of the building, her PED the only thing in her hand. She could just tap it there. Mimi had assured her.

She needed a pad now. She turned to make sure she wasn't showing on the backside of her skirt, and suddenly hit a wall.

Her PED went clattering along the sidewalk. Her breath left her.

The sun was in her eyes as she looked up at the man that had been the wall. He was tall. Thin. Nicely muscled. She couldn't see his face.

"Sorry, girl." He said. He had an accent. She couldn't place it, but it was familiar.

"Well, be more careful next time!"

"Sure thing, miss." There was a laugh in his voice.



Suddenly she felt lonely. She looked for her PED, and stopped to pick it up. "Darn it!" she muttered. This had to be psychosomatic. There is no way that all of this could be happening at once to her emotionally as a result of just getting a gosh darn period.

At 50 years old, Chicory had been a woman who had rarely been denied in her quest to do anything. Part of the reason for that was that she valued knowledge. She knew what to do. If she didn't know, she didn't do it.

It had taken her most of her youth to fully embrace that inner thing about her. It had made her sometimes a bear to be around. To the point she ended up embracing pedantic as an "accurate description of her."

She had absolutely no idea what to do right now. And she was terrified. And now she was feeling alone, because for some damn reason she was thinking of her husband again, and how whenever she'd been scared, he was there to back her up, and remind her she had this.

It had taken her three years and change to get over losing him.

And that was all sitting there right on her heart, right now.

She made it to the store.

"Everything alright, Miss?"

She'd been called ma'am for so long it jarred her, for the first time.

"Um, yes, Fine. Sorry, just having a day."

He was young. Blonde hair so pale it was almost white. He wasn't much darker himself. Taller than her.

There. She grabbed the pack. The price made her balk, a feeling made her decide to go with it anyway. She grabbed a packet of Excedrin. A Coke. Microwave Popcorn. Kleenex. A tiny little container of chocolate ice cream.

At least she hoped it was chocolate. It was getting hard to see.

She kept her head down as she reached the counter.

She started to ask for cigarettes again. Not because she needed one. That was definitely over. But out of old habits. Habits which were rising again.

"Will that be all?"

She nodded, staring at the counter with its hand printed signs taped to the top of it. Need Fives. Need Ones. No Bus Passes until Wednesday.

She passed the PED over the scanner, put her thumb on the reader, heard the beep.

"Oh my gosh!" Her face shot up, and she found herself looking at the chest of the young guy. He smiled at her, somewhat surprised.

"Forget something?"



Chic shook her head. "Um no, Sorry. Just realized something. Um, do you have a restroom I could use here?" She looked at his name tag. "Troy?"

He smiled sadly, shook his head. "No, sorry. We have to use the one in the building proper. It's right around the corner though."

She smiled a thanks at him as best she could. "Yeah, thanks, I know. I live here." She took her bag, headed out, the door dinging its little song as she left and someone went in.

The accent. It was Midwestern. Iowa.

Like His.

She quickened her pace, hoping against hope it wouldn't make what she was feeling in one place worse and trying hard to keep what she was feeling in another under wraps as long as she could.

And being thankful that none of it was because of her damned period.

The ring of her PED startled her enough she fumbled it and nearly dropped it before finally swiping and answering.

"Hello?"

"Hi! It's Lydia! I've been trying to, like, um, reach, um, Tallow? Yeah, Tallow, but she's not answering and so I tried the next number."

"Um, ok?"

"Yeah, well, like, I've got one for ya and we're on our way. Harold wants us back as soon as possible, but says he'll come by to do introductions and stuff like that, ok?"

There was a noise on the other end of the phone, muffled speaking. "Could you be a doll and, like, let Tallow know for us?"

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

"Lydia. From the Rebels. Whisk came and got us to help."

That explained absolutely nothing, Chic wryly observed. And she was way too chipper right now. And she was almost to the door.

"Ok, yeah, sure, whatever. Look, I've gotta go."

"Ok!" The voice sounded a bit less chipper, which gave Chic a small bit of feel good for no good reason. "See ya soon!"

Funny thing, though, is that Chic knew she sounded just as mercilessly cheerful. It was like she was filled with the stuff.

Except right now. Right now she was filled with a serious need to get to those restrooms right there.



"Hey, you ok, Chic?"

She pulled up short, put a smile on, turned to Celeste. "Oh, Hi Celeste." She waved. She wished she could trust her more. "I, um, uh, I've got a thing."

She didn't wait for a response, went straight to the restroom.

There was an empty stall, and she let out a sigh of gratitude that had a little exasperation in it.

Door shut, Ped out, scroll, scroll, dial.

"Yo."

"Hey, um, Lark. You real busy right this second?"

"Yes."

Of course she was. "Look, I, um, I have a problem that I really need some help with, and I'd ask Tally, but she's at practice, and since I don't know anyone else really all that well who is aware of my, um, er, history, oh gosh, oh my, it's horrible, I mean, sorry, oh hell. I need help. I'm having my first period."

The silence was palpable until she heard the muffling end and the unquenchable giggles and chuckles.

"It really isn't that funny."

"You are scared out of your mind, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not."

"Liar."

"Maybe, but hey, I'm in the first floor restroom by the north entrance. Can you help me or not?"

The knock scared her so much she dropped the phone. Again.

"I can help."

It was Celestia. Sounding as meek and friendly as all get out.

It was the last straw.

Maribelle Chicory Domane, who had earned a purple heart and five commendations for what was called uncompromising bravery instead of the foolish lunacy borne of not knowing better, who had been shot and stabbed and beaten and worse, felt her knees give way and dropped to the floor, sobbing.



"Your ice cream is melted."

Celestia looked at Lark and smiled gently. She put her hair dryer in the bag and then rubbed Chicory's back.

The sobs had mostly faded, but the heaves were still there.

"I know you said it's a long story, but I still can't believe you've never had a period."

"She's kinda weird. I think that's why I like her." Lark struck Celestia as some kind of black goth princess. That she was friends with Chicory was almost as surprising as seeing the normally unflappable and incredibly strong woman in tears.

"Me, too. Cele."

They shook hands. "Lark. Nerd."

"I thought you were in Dance?"

Lark nodded. "Love it. But programming is my bae."

Celestia giggled. "You really are a nerd."

Lark shrugged, but a smile peeked through.

Chicory gasped a bit. She and Cele were on the floor of the stall, the door open, Lark just outside, giving the look to anyone who started to come in and doing enough of a job that they usually backed out.

"Not so scary, is it, Chica?"

Chicory shook her head. Her throat was lumpy, raw, sore.

"Nothing a little cold water, a hair dryer, some Kleenex, and friends can't fix. That's what Sisters are for. You taught me that, Remember?"

Chicory lifted red rimmed eyes to the soft brown of Celestia and held them for a moment, her gaze vacant at first, then clearing as she nodded and gave a halfhearted smile.

Lark rose. "My work is done. Tally texted me. She'll catch up with you later." She turned on a toe and started out, pausing at the door to hold up the melted ice cream. "Can I have?"

Despite herself, Chicory smiled and nodded.

Lark was gone.

"That is one nice phone, by the way."

Chicory nodded, grabbed Celestia's hand and squeezed tight for a moment.

She smiled. "You're welcome. Though I may have to drag you on a double date to make it up to Todd."



Chicory gave a smile frown.

"I know. You are going to have to wash this skirt like right away. No blood, but God knows what's on the floor."

Chicory gave a little hand wave, indicating she could go.

"You sure? "

Chicory nodded.

"Ok, then. Let me know if you need anything more tough, ok."

Chicory nodded.

With that, her rescuer got up and left the restroom, and Chicory was alone. She pulled herself up slowly, taking deep breaths, and staggered to the sink counter to stare at her reflection in the gosh awful light of the restrooms.

She used to hardly ever wear mascara, and her new life was like a ritual of it and more every morning she hardly had to think about it, except of course, now, with it reaching her chin. Her nose was red and runny. Her lips puffy, her eyes red rimmed and swollen.

Her hair was everywhere.

She was mortified.

"Flutter. Fudgesicles. Fahrfeugen."

She looked away.

She'd always been afraid of intimacy. Because she was never right, never good enough, never real enough.

It had even colored her love with her husband.

Yet she craved it, so strongly. And suddenly, without real warning, she was right, and good enough, and real enough.

Better yet, she was young again, and pretty, and she could be that thing she knew was lurking behind all her deeply felt modesty and horribly efficient inhibition.

But instead of grasping it, instead of indulging in it like she had never done before, she was petrified.

She was stuck in her own head. Still a five decade old woman in her head and heart and hands. Scared and young and alone, and knowing that even if she had a chance, she wasn't ready for anything yet.

And now she was going to have to find a way to head back up to her room, with security, because like a ding dong she had left her key fob in her room, looking like a wreck.

She looked at the PED. "I hate you." She croaked out.



She waved a hand under a faucet and rinsed her face as best she could. She scrubbed, like she knew she shouldn't because like all trans women she had paid attention to every detail in everything she saw, since she'd never had someone to walk her through little things that mattered in moments like this.

She seemed marginally passable again in a moment. She sighed, picked up her phone, pushed her shoulders back, and tried a scowl.

"Don't do that." She said to her reflection. "If your face freezes like that, no one will like you. Which, right now, is probably a good idea."

She smiled at herself a little, and headed out to begin the walk of shame of a different sort.



CHAPTER 9

Women and cats will do as they please, and men and dogs should relax and get used to the idea.

Robert A. Heinlein

The alarm was not her friend on this weekend morning.

Then again, as bloated as she felt, nothing was her friend this weekend morning. Which was just as well. Tests had been brutal, although by all accounts she'd aced them, and she'd even managed to put in a brief appearance at the dance to keep Stacey happy.

She'd learned the rituals fairly quickly, and everything was good, at last, and she grabbed her robe and headed towards the bathroom. This going out into the daylight thing every morning was going to get really old come spring.

As she opened the door, a shadow fell over her. She looked up.

"Hi, Tally." She rubbed her eyes. "What's up?"

"Whisk. She's on her way here, right now."

"She's back?"

Tally nodded and barged past her. "You know how when she's making that offer or deal or whatever she's all nice to you, but after that she's like some ice cold mean girl wanna be?"

"Um, can it wait? I just got up. Have to deal, 'k"

Tally shrugged, sat down at her vanity. "Go on. I can wait."

Chic nodded and after a quick face rinse and other things was back, slightly more alert. "Ok, it must be important, since you were standing at my door before I've even taken a shower."

Tally put down a necklace. "She was in mean girl mode. Like she was mad at us or something."

Chic rolled her eyes and flopped on her bed. "Mad at us? For what? For going to school? For being pushed into blind dates and getting pinched? For studying since we came in late?" She sighed. "For dealing with stuff we were just not equipped to handle."

Tally smiled gently. "Sorry about that. I hear that gal everyone likes helped out a lot."

Chic shrugged it off. "Whatever. At least for another month. So, did she at least say what was up?"



There was a knock at her door, and then Whisk entered. She was dressed much the same as when they had first met. Head covering, modest dress, bright blue eyes, foxy little smile.

"I did not, Chicory. And I am not in a mode or a mood that is related to being a mean girl, Tallow. I am not angry with you, either. I have not finished my task. It is irksome. Your group appears to be scattered far more broadly than others.

"In any case, I have come to teach you how to use your Tracker. On your PEDs."

Chicory sighed, only afterwards realizing how much she suddenly must have looked and sounded like an actual 21 year old. You might have a lot of extra years, and more experience, but you always felt like you were still the same. She grabbed her PED from her purse, hanging on the chair next to Tally, and winked at the taller girl.

"On your primary screen, tap the flowery radar image."

Chic and Tally scrolled. The main screen could have all but a handful of apps on it, while the internal screens tended to group them into folders. Both had been rather liberal with their additions of useful apps. Tally far more so than Chic.

"Ok, got it." Chic said as she tapped the icon. "Wow!"

The screen was of an area at least five miles around, and showed a basic roadmap, buildings in a kind of 3D that you could tilt the phone to check height on, and little blips all over the place. You could zoom in and out with a pinch or expand, and when you tapped on a building, details about it came up.

Between the Sorority and the University, at an area where a cluster of old building due for demolition eventually by some big company were clustered, there was a bright red dot that had waves coming off of it.

"Hey, what's this." Tally held her phone out, and Whisk frowned.

"It is as I feared." She seemed to shrink a little, but her annoying perfect posture never wavered. "My failures have left you open. That is an Agent."

"An agent? You mean like that thing I fought when you found me?"

"Yes. Only much worse. The one you fought was a newer one. This one appears to have been gathering Entropic power for some time, and has become much stronger."

"Let me guess. We get to go and give him a bad day." Tally was starting to bubble with nervous energy.

"Can it at least wait until after I have a shower? Maybe some breakfast? I know that's pretty unreasonable, but really, I think I would do better with some food."

Tally nodded appreciatively. "I kinda have to agree."

Whisk was stunned. "You would delay for personal wants?"

"Where's Lark?"



Tally shook her head. "She's got an early class today or something. Something about a recital."

"So just the two of us. Ok, then, yeah, Whiskers. I am going to delay for a want. Because I don't think he's going anywhere and if we aren't at full strength and he's a tougher one than the last, who nearly killed me, I'll note, I want to be at my best. It won't be long, I promise, but not doing so would be really fluttery silly. I mean, silly."

She glared at Whisk. "You added silly to the list?"

Whisk smiled secretively. "I add nothing to the list. Your intent does that."

Chicory twitched. "Wait, you mean it's based on how I mean it? Like as an insult?"

"Yes. As well as its role in oppressing others. There may be times when you can use some terms but others will leave you without it. Also, very well, your point is well made. Whilst you get ready, I shall endeavor to find and then follow with Lark. And finally, Maribelle Chicory Domane, my name is Whisk. Not whiskers. Do that again at your own peril."

She turned and left in a whisper of cloth, a soft gust of air, and a gentle click of the door.

"She's creepy as flutter."

Chicory laughed. "She is, isn't she? She also makes me feel really stupid. Wait, I said it! How come I, oh, wait, I get it. Ok. It was about me. This whole superhero thing is annoying."

Tally grinned. "Magical Girl. Jay keeps reminding me we are magical girls. Like the Animes."

Chic shrugged. "I have no clue what that means."

Tally rose. "Well, hurry and get ready, I'm hungry now that you talked about food. And I will get you some good examples of anime to watch so you can get a clue while you do it. Use your laptop?"

"Sure." She grabbed her shower bag and towels. "Back in a flash."

Tally nodded as she sat down and lifted up the pink shelled computer. "I'll be here."



CHAPTER 10

I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves.

Mary Shelley

The building had sat there for years, boarded up, the little shop spaces sealed behind pull down panel doors and slide across locked grates, the locks rusted and corroded, the slim back alley too narrow for any vehicle down one side filled with refuse and palettes and moving on occasion with rats among the detritus.

At first it had fallen into decay slowly. One shop at a time slowly closing as the rates for the building went too high for them to stay, over years. Then it had been boarded, and the for-sale sign put up. After that it had been one corporation after another bidding on, winning, and then suddenly stopping in moving forward with whatever amazing, incredible, revitalizing project they had planned for the area.

The dilapidated signs for a half dozen abandoned projects still hung on the building still, ratty and half legible, banners at an angle, the strange consequence of the peculiar way this three-story brick edifice had sat there.

It was as if two buildings had been built, then collided, then merged into a massive one of four stories. Office windows, cracked, brown grey with filth, sometimes absent save for an occasionally fluttering ancient, tattered yellow window shade, one with the string still intact, peeked out over the street irregularly, unlike the neighboring buildings where everything was at a nice and predictable spacing, as if the architecture of the building itself had somehow begun to fall apart as well.

A chain link fence, prominently marked to "keep out" surrounded it, supposedly closing off the alley and doing the task for which it had been planned. Yet graffiti and street art and the cockeyed panels and pulled loose sections revealed the truth to even the most casual passerby, had they even bothered to look.

And therein lay the problem, the rub as it were, for no one ever seemed to do even that. It was obvious the roof had collapsed after some unseasonably strong storm, and yet there was still no condemnation notice on the building, and the public records that the PED pulled up spoke of no awareness or action pending or ever regarding the building.

The building sat on a major street, passed by on foot and bicycle and moped and car by hundreds every day if not thousands, was one that Chic herself had walked by on her way to class, and yet it was as if it didn't exist in the public mind, and it was only because of the PED itself that Chic stood beside Tally looking up at it as people walked around them, oblivious to the fact that the girls were staring at a disaster in front of them.

"This doesn't look that bad." Tally said unconvincingly.

Chic looked back down the street, spotted the corner of the sorority a few short blocks away. "I can't believe it was right fluttering next to us this whole time. Something's off about that."



"Duh. Magic, Chic. Which way you want to go in?"

"I think there was a window opening around the other side. I don't like the look of that alley. Rats and roaches."

Tally shivered. "Uh, yeah, I'll take the broken window and the sharp glass myself, please."

They giggled together. Chic had to admit this was feeling really silly, the two of them in their jeans and tees and sneakers and purses poking around in an abandoned and falling apart building looking for a blip that, if you titled the PED, was up on the third floor near the alley side. Another blip kept fading in and out in the area, as well, as if the device couldn't determine if it was a friendly or not.

"Mimi, you should find a way to make a yellow blip for those you don't know." She said aloud.

"As per your request, yellow is now a signifying color."

Tally's eyebrows shot up. "Hey, yours talked to you!"

Chic nodded. "Yours does to. It's the voice assistant. Though it can be as snarky as me at times. Watch. Mimi, what's the verdict on the second Justice League film?"

"You should not be watching such tripe, and instead spend your time and money following Wonder Woman 2."

Tally grinned. "It's not wrong."

"There. See. I think we can get through over there, where the links are loose."

"You know, I'm supposed to be the leader."

Chic nodded. "Yep. And you are. But I suspect I'm the strategist, and I don't think the Navy trained you for infil ops."

Tally giggled, caught it, changed it to a chuckle. "You're not wrong."

Tally went first, bending back the chain easily, and holding it for her shorter companion, then the two of them stepped gingerly and carefully among the paper, broken glass, building something or other, and assorted trash that lined the narrow way between the fence and the storefronts.

"Oh my gosh! It stinks to high heaven."

Chic nodded and waved the air around her nose. "Oh, Gosh, it's horrible. How did we not smell it from the other side of the fence?"

"You know the answer to that."

"No, I don't. Magic is not an all-purpose answer."

"Ow! Hey!"

Talley jumped back with a squeak, hands to her face, and then blushed at the onslaught of profane invective hurled at her from a pile of newspapers that she had stepped on.



The man was filthy, hairy, unkempt, matted hair that clumped around the left side of his head, and incredibly upset that his morning nap had been interrupted by two college girls “playing around in places they shouldn’t”.

“Sorry.” Tally managed as she moved past him, leaving Chic to step gently by and give the man a dirty look.

“This is going to need to be a bit bigger. Your hips aren’t going to fit.”

Chic looked up at her with a scowl. “Really? Really?”

Tally shrugged, “You’d know if you weren’t still getting used to them. I’ve watched you walk into everything the last few weeks.”

“Flutter you, Tally.”

Tally chuckled and looked around.

“Whatcha need?”

“Something to break the glass with.”

Chic joined in, spotted a piece of lumber a short bit ahead, grabbed it. “This work?”

Tally nodded, and took it when it was handed over, then struck the glass to make the opening wider. The Board across the window had been pulled down, and one pane partially broken, the opening barely large enough for a child, let alone an adult.

Chic looked over at the bum, who seemed to have forgotten about them.

After a moment, Tally stepped up and over the plywood sheet, ducking carefully and slowly through the opening to avoid the glass, and into the building.

Chic looked around, wiped her palms on her thighs. She closed her eyes a moment, reached into herself to find that ugly place that was always where she drew from when she fought in the past.

It wasn’t there. Her eyes popped open, a hint of panic in them.

“You coming or what?”

Chic nodded. “Yeah, yeah, just getting my head right.” She took a deep breath, held it, Exhaled, and then tried to get over the wood and sill, failed for being too short. “Dang it!”

A hand popped out of the gloom. “Here. Come on.”

She took hold and let Tally pull as she scrambled over the barrier, and finally ended up in the empty shop. The street noises, already muffled on this side of the fence, were suddenly gone as she crossed over the sill.

“Ok, that’s way too creepy. I feel like we’re in some sort of horror flick.”

“Better hope not. I don’t think either of us qualify as last girl material. Too ethnic.”



“Ethnic. Yeah, that’s it.” She smiled despite herself. Tally could make a friend out of a mortal enemy if she wanted to. Probably even if she didn’t. And her love of all things genre was probably a big part of it. “Lead on, Leader.”

Tally looked at her cross eyed. “Was your idea to come this way. But how about that door over there?”

Chic nodded. Not that there was much choice, it being the only door. Tally tried to open it, failed at first, then gave it a push with her shoulder and they both heard the crunch and grind of wood splintering and metal scraping against metal.

“Um, you know, maybe we should put on our powers and stuff first.”

Chic giggled before she could stop it, rolled her eyes, and nodded. “Um, yeah. Especially now that there is no chance that whoever is here doesn’t know we are.”

Tally stepped towards the center of the room, placed her legs apart, and held her PED out. “By the struggles of Freedom, I am Hispania!”

The PED sparked once, twice, and as the third began she heard Chic.

“By the Life of –“

And she was alone, in her private space, floating over the endless expanse of molten rock and stone and steel and silver, an elemental force about which the winds roared in a primal landscape that could only exist in her dreams. She was raw, primal, untouched, and she raised her arms above her head, hands dangling, palms down, and pulled the magma up from beneath her, around her, over her, letting it wrap around her like the coarse caress of a lover, the spinning of it setting her to spin as she let the world itself drape her in its embrace, the metals sticking as a wave washed over her from one side, her arms coming down as a second wave of magma washed over her from the other, her legs encased in rough stone that cooled too fast into granite, her arms bent at the elbows and pulled tight as they became encrusted themselves, her torso struck and wrapped by a wave from the front, her head covered the last from a backslash from the rear, and she was a woman shaped pile of stone on a pillar, and then she flexed, and her leg stones shattered and went flying in all directions, revealing the shimmery, shiny armor that now covered them.

She flexed, thrusting out her arms, first forward and then to the sides in a broad y shape above her, the bracers and padded joints meshing well, as she flexed them, her staff appearing in her right hand as she spun it, and she flexed and her torso shattered and the skirt dropped to just above her knees, covering the tops of her armor on her legs and hiding the padding above them, and the gleaming armor on her torso was draped by the vast cloak like robe that flared out behind her as she spun, the stone on her head shattering in all directions, revealing her high ponytail in its steel band flying wildly over the skullcap from which draped strands on either side of her face of the white hair she now had, her red eyes shining with a light of their own as the visor flickered into place, and she completed the movements, staff before her, striking it firmly on the ground, and returning in time to hear Chic’s words once again.

“... am Columbia!”



Chic felt a chill run down her spine this time as she said it, and the PED sparked once, twice, thrice and she was there, in that vastness, that awe-inspiring eternity once more, her toes pointed down, her whole being pulled in every direction, expanding and becoming ever more tenuous, and she could hear the song once more.

She lifted her left leg behind her as she bent her right arm at the elbow and placed it before her, her left arm out at her side straight, the two parallel as she began her spin, pulling her leg forward as she changed the positions of her arms, bending back until she was as far as she could go, and the sand began to swirl around her as the spinning pattern split and split again and surrounded her, and she bent at the knee on her right leg as she continued her spin, her arms reaching above her to be embraced by the sands, her left leg bending now to come in front of her right leg, now taking the weight as she rose, her right leg going back behind her as she reached her arms in front of herself, the fingerless gloves and their fancy base popping out from her wrists, the skirt popping out around her waist and settling over the underskirts that seemed to flow like water below it, her breasts lifted slightly as the bodice formed tight around her, squeezing her waist and chest tightly, her feet adjusting as the bows and ribbon ties on her upper thighs formed and dropped their long billowing leggings to just above her newly formed wedges, the matching ribbon ties on her upper arms spilling out the voluminous sleeves that reaches to her fingertips as she dropped once more to her knees, arms slightly bent and before her in offering, and then she was turning again as she rose into the ready stance she had first done, the one that reminded her of the matrix every time, as the visor slid around her hair into place, and her hair seemed to puff out even larger, the curls jiggling all around her face at the corner of her vision as her staff formed in the hand behind her, tight and centered and so well balanced, her left hand ready to give the beckoning, and then she was back in the dusty, smelly, grimy feeling room in a building she had somehow forgotten she was even near in the few moments she had been moving.

“...-ink we got upgrades.”

Chic blinked at Tally. She was even more imposing that before, more strongly armored. The robe or cloak or whatever it was that billowed out behind her was still as red as ever, and the padding along her upper arms and other spots was still as black as ever, but somehow it was as if she was in a new and improved version of her old armor.

“Um, I’m sorry, what? I’m still kinda disoriented. That is one heckfire of a trip.”

Tally smiled. “You do get used to it. I said I think we got upgrades. You were right to study that stuff on the PEDs.”

“You sure did! Wow!”

“You did as well. More skirts. And the bow at your back is bigger, but the one in your hair is gone.”

“Oh, thank Gosh! I hated that fluttery thing! OK, you ready?”

Tally nodded and gave the still only partially opened door a shove with one hand, tearing it from its hinges and sending it to the ground, clouds of dust wafting up. Looks good.

“Hold up.” Chic stepped up to the giant. “Can you not see them?”

“See what?”

“The minions. The corrupted genius. They are squirming all over the place right in front of you.”



“Whoa, the what?”

Chic reached out and laid a soft hand on the upper shoulder blade of her friend and teammate.

“Oh my Gosh!” She shouted, hopping back and knocking Chicory over. “Columbia, what the heckfire are those things!”

Chicory picked herself up, went to dust herself off and saw the dust falling away from her skirts as if it couldn't cling to them. “I told you. Minions. The miasma of this place does that to the critters and these weren't very good critters in the first place.”

“Oh, eww, they have teeth!”

“Really? You're getting icked out by them. You? The big one.”

“You don't have a problem with them, then you go first, Oh, eww.”

Chicory smiled and stepped around Tally and watched some of the things try to squirm through the door in their sickening globby way, and realized she could hear them, like a soft version of the sound of balloons rubbing together, squishy, and the stench they emitted was of putrescence and that throat catching scent of maggots.

She wrinkled her nose and tried to remember carefully what to do. She switched her staff to her right hand, and then lightly touched her fingers to her sigil, dangling between her breasts on the necklace she could no longer remove. Her visor lit up, and she suddenly realized that it had words she could read, telling her what to say in the lower left corner of her vision, a visual of what to do before her that didn't obscure anything yet was there.

“By the Hope of Freedom, let the harm done to you be past.”

Her sigil felt warm and seemed to vibrate and that grew into a hum and she took her fingers away and a light spilled forth from her sigil, spreading to envelope her and then spilling out from her. Where it touched the minions it was as if they were blown on by some unseen wind, the black sliminess whisked away, revealing tiny forms that looked so woeful and sad she felt her heart reach out to them.

They had been deprived of purpose and value and the very power that gave them strength and life by whatever it was that had taken this building as its home.

“Oh, wow! Columbia, that's amazing!”

She smiled and looked back over her shoulder. “Hey, thanks. Though to be honest, I wasn't sure it would work.”

“I can't believe I couldn't see them before. Poor things. We need to get that whatever out of here.”

Chic nodded. “I'll take point?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely.”

Chic's visor had three small circles on the right side of the screen. Two were like some version of the key fob, with four little swirls around a central square like shape, and the third was like a yin-yang symbol. Each was colored, the pink, blue, seafoam, and lavender in the top two, and a pale, pastel yellow and pastel orange in the bottom one.



The orange light was flickering slightly, and she realized it was like a way of tracking her use of whatever it was that let her make the light that was healing the genius.

“Ooh, sorry little guy.” She said as she accidentally stepped on a healed genius. It looked up at her gratefully.

“There, Chic. The stairs.” Tally pointed.

Chic nodded and headed over there a bit further. “Hey, you know much about these visor thingies?”

“You mean the power meters on the side? Yeah, kinda not fair.”

“Mine just went up a little when I was nice to the little thing. But no, I mean the way it reads out. When I first changed, it was in like some ancient language or something.”

“Oh! Yeah, they take time to get to know you. It’s actually your PED.”

“That makes sense. Kinda bugged me a, hey, did you hear that?”

They were both still for a few moments. It sounded like kids playing. Coming from below them somewhere.

“Oh, I really hope that’s outside or some kinda bad guy trick, Columbia.”

Chic swallowed. “Me, too, Hispania.” She blinked. She’d meant to say Tally, but, like with the cussing, it came out different. Probably just as well, though.

She gripped her staff tightly in both hands as she set foot on the first step.

The roiling mass of thick, oily smoke came flowing in a billowy layer about three feet high, rushing silently down the steps, a stench of rotting meat and something else, something she couldn’t quite place – no, it was like the smell after puking, when the nasty stuff came out after there was nothing else, the bile.

“Back, back!” she cried out as she stumbled back herself, but Tally wasn’t listening. She heard a thud and a crack like thunder that obscured something said, and suddenly an enormous battle-axe pushed past her, followed by the armor-clad giantess, who swung it to make a breeze and push back the stuff.

“Not this time, bad guy!” Tally nearly laughed as she rushed the steps.

“Bad guy?”

The sound of the voice was deep, deeper than anything, and was like the opposite of Morgan Freeman, in a sepulchral way, rumbling and filled with the sound of every whiny child that had ever stood its ground at the same time.

“You are the one that is trespassing. It’s your fault, not mine. You are the bad guy here, guttersnipe.”

There was none of the hissing kind of sound of the last one. This one was much more fully formed. Chic wanted to reach out, pull Tally back, but it was too late, as she’d already rounded the first landing and was headed up the second flight. She lifted her skirts a bit for no good reason, right hand doing double duty to hold her staff, and quickly stepped up behind her partner. As she rounded the landing, Tally was already on the next floor, her heavy



steps dull and hollow sounding on the floor. She let go her skirt and as she reached the floor struck her staff on the ground.

“By the edge of Freedom, woe to those who oppose it!”

Her scythe blade popped out of nowhere, and the rest handle dropped down from the body of the staff about three quarters of the way down it. The blade was enormous, nearly as big as she was, yet handled as if it was barely anything in her hands.

Tally was rushing. She was a sight to behold, her long legs in a run giving her a stride that was longer than Chic was tall normally. The cloak, overskirt, whatever it was billowed back behind her, a scarlet shadow, her axe blades high.

Her target was a man. Not a half-formed thing, but a man. Hunched or stooped, round head and face, pear shaped body, thin, stringy hair slicked straight back, dressed in a business suit and tie, with penny loafers on his feet. The cut of the suit was bad for him, the buttoned front pinching as if over a large gut.

He wasn't even a little afraid of Tally.

“Hispania!” Chic cried out, and as she did so, the man waved his right hand from the elbow, and a massive thick cloud formed between the two of them.

Tally skidded to a stop, no longer in sight of her prey, as the cloud billowed out around the areas edges, obscuring the windows and darkening the room to a point where only Chic's light was letting them see, and it was rapidly closing in on her.

“Stupid children. Stupid, stupid children. Look at what you've done!”

Tally snorted. “Coward!”

“Blame.” Chic was surprised she figured it out so quick. “It's Blame, Hispania.”

Tally shot her a look.

One of the things they had done as a team was to start reading up on the information in the PED. Within it was a listing of many of the more powerful Agents that were in action around the world and how they operated.

One of the top-level ones was Blame.

Agents were demigods. Personifications of the particular quality they drew their name from. Blame was the personification of blame, of shifting responsibility, of avoiding it. He was a member of the group called the Abuses. They, in turn, worked for Apathy, who was one of the most powerful of all the Agents on the planet.

And there were only two of them.

This wasn't good.

“We need to get away, Hispania.”

Tally shook her head. “No. This blossom is mine. He and I have business to finish. Don't we, you little blossom?”



She spun as laughter echoed around the room, the thick smoke ever creeping in on the area that was lit by Chic, forcing them closer together, which would cramp Tally's style.

It was pretty sharp. "He's forcing us together, Hispania."

"Show yourself, you coward, or I will!"

"As if you could, Look at you. You're a monster who only hurts whatever you get near. Thumping around on those size ninety feet of yours. Dumpty dumpta dump."

The cloud kept pushing them closer together, and both needed room for their weapons.

"Mimi, I don't know if you can hear me, but I could really use a suggestion from you right now about handling this smoke." Chic said under her breath. To her surprise, her visor let up with a display.

AS PER YOUR REQUEST.

She blinked, looked around. Tally stiffened, then grinned wickedly. "By the breath of Freedom, I plead the Winds of Change!" She intoned formally, the reverb giving it an eerie quality in the confines of the small space.

Her sigil glowed a fierce scarlet, and then a wind pushed out away from her, shoving the thick, greasy cloud away from where she faced, roiling the whole thing. For a moment, they both saw Blame, who was stunned by his vapours parting, and leaped nearly simultaneous at him.

The enormous axe cleaved down on him, splitting him from crown to sternum, and the scythe disemboweled him, cutting him early to the spine.

As the weapons pulled away, both girls gasped. Tendrils of smoky ugliness puffed out of the mangled remains, connected to the other side or pulled spilled entrails up, slowly returning him to a whole state except for his clothing.

"Eww."

As he finished reforming, both girls backed up, watching as the smoke began to reassemble his clothing as well. Chic stepped back further, trying to get a handle on the situation, her eyes flicking back and forth between Tally and Blame, trying to get a handle on the situation and she wasn't sure why but this couldn't be her fault, could it?

The smell of cypress and mulberry was heavy in the air, barely masking the stench of the smoldering ruins of the NOW Home, the ashes everywhere, the donations ruined, and the terrifying remains of a corpse still in a bed inside. She hadn't done this, she couldn't have, this was what she had spent so many days and nights and weeks and months and years making possible and

"How could you!"

The slap rocked her head hard, and she blinked, her mind spinning. It was Queenie, her face a twisted mask of rage and pain, and she'd just hit her, but why? Queenie would never hit her, they were like Sisters.

She looked down, and she was herself, but something was off, something wasn't right. This couldn't be it.



"Look what you did, you bitch!" Queenie screamed at her, grabbing her head and wrenching it around, forcing her to look at the still smoking ruins of the small house that had been the greatest resource for trans women in the area.

Her breath was knocked out of her by the punch, and she was certain one of her ribs had cracked, as her weak and old bones were wont to do when hit. She staggered forward, trying to get away from her friend before she hit her again and bent over backwards as the backswing of the battle-axe passed over her, scant inches from her face. As she straightened, she looked behind her, and put two and two together.

"Hispania! Stay away from the smoke. It throws illusions at you."

Tally leaped into the air and brought the butt of her staff down into the man's forehead, and you could see the bone crunch and shatter beneath the force of the blow, but he just waved an arm and battered her across the empty space into and through a wall.

"Hispania!"

"By the Strength of Freedom, I call on the Bolt of Heaven!"

Chic blinked.

From the rubble of the next room, Tally came through and her staff was now a charged crossbow that had three levels to it. Chic looked at her staff, looked back at Tally as the girl let loose a volley at the round Blame, who slipped by one but was nailed by two, pinning him in place and shocking him with some sort of charge.

Chic didn't wait, and rushed him with speedy blows to the body and head, her gloves flinging blood as she did, and pausing only when she realized that even through a broken jaw he was laughing at her.

As she stepped back again, careful of the cloud that was roiling around the area, his jaw healed and he looked at her dead in the eyes.

"You hit like a girl! Figures. Can't even do that right!" He spat blood at her.

The spittle struck her legging and she moved in to strike him again only to pause as she *felt* it wriggle up her leg, through the leggings.

"Oh, eww, Gosh, gross!" It wriggled around to the back of her leg as she watched, and she could feel it growing hot.

Really hot.

She screamed as it hit her flesh just above the ties that held her leggings on.

"Stupid cunt. Look what you made me do. Serves you right."

Chic collapsed to the floor, her leg a blazing agony, screams escaping from her even as she glared back at him.

He winked at her.



There was a blur, and his face sagged as his head struck hard into the wall, buckling the brickwork, the blow an opening salvo in a punctuating volley.

“You don’t talk to my friend like that!” Bellowed Tally, who added extra heft to each one with a slight jump, leaning into each one.

Chic scrambled back, away from the scene, her leg nearly useless, the spittle burrowing into her. This was not supposed to be this hard. It was as if everything they did was useless against him.

“How the heckfire are we going to beat him?” She muttered aloud.

USE THE POWER OF FEMININITY.

The words scrolled by on her screen, and she glanced at Tally to confirm that she, too was getting the same message.

This was not encouraging information, Chic reflected as she found her hand on a piece of discarded newspaper. She grabbed it, reached around under her skirts, wiped at the spittle, managing to get it off and out of the wound that it had left.

It was dry, as if it had been cauterized, but her leg was useless.

Meanwhile, Tally continued to hammer at Blame, the humours that composed him swirling around her, constantly under attack from the wind she was blowing before her, each blow causing the whole room to shake.

The floor gave way beneath all of them.

As she fell, Chic focused on the things they had learned about their powers, about how their greatest strength came from like thirty things that they each carried within them, a core part of their beings, and part of the reason they had been chosen to become the warriors they were.

She hit the second floor hard, and it, too gave way beneath her. She screamed and gasped as she fell again, this time hitting the ground hard and with a bounce that was stopped by the debris falling on top of her.

Things seemed hopeless.

She smiled. When things seemed the most hopeless was when Hope was strongest. And hope was one of the powers of femininity. A Girl Power. Backed by Tenacity. Never give in, no matter how dark the situation, no matter how overwhelming the odds, because nothing stops a girl.

“I think I may be getting the hang of this after all.”

“Are you ok?”

“Are you an angel?”

She blinked. Lifting her head, a piece of drywall slid off to the side, and she was looking in the faces of four kids. Couldn’t have been more than eight, ten.



So far, she'd done pretty much nothing in this fight as Tally had done all the heavy lifting, which irked her, but as she stared into the faces of the kids, one of whom looked up at the hole in the roof and the sounds of battle above then back down to her in pure awe, she realized why she'd felt so useless.

She fought to protect.

In a jungle, she had been part of a team, and she would always get teased for being the last in and the last out. It had colored her service time, had given her a bad reputation, but there had always been a basic reason for it. Her skill set was not one that was well suited for close quarters fighting. Then or now. Now her gifts were mostly healing and helping, and aside from strength and a wickedly sharp scythe, she hadn't yet figured a way to be nearly as harmful as Tally.

But here, on the ground, her leg pain slowly fading, her energy level dropping as she kept up her glow, her eyes locked on innocent faces smeared with chocolate and dust and the buried guilt of a hidden secret discovered by a grown up, she remembered not only that she had a power that could defy Blame, but she had a further purpose.

"Mimi, how do I protect these children?"

IN ADDITION TO YOUR RURAL AND FLORAL SHIELDS, YOU HAVE YOUR DEFENSE OF THE INNOCENT.

She shifted in the rubble as she rose, and the kids looked scared and backed up. "It's ok, kids. I'm ok. Well, mostly. But I think that won't be long. Look, we need to get you outta here. It's not safe. You could get hurt. "

The pain in her leg was down to a dull ache, but it took her weight. She looked and reached around, feeling with her hand, and the wound had closed but there was still a divot in her upper thigh, just below her buttock.

"Wow! Are you a superhero?"

"Hee hee, Dana's go never gonna believe this!"

"You're so tall! I bet your taller than my dad!"

"Who's Mimi?"

The last voice sounded the youngest, but came from the tallest. Chic squinted, and sure enough it was a young girl, a tomboyish sort. She smiled at her. "Mimi is my secret helper. I'm a Heroine. And not very super right now. My name's Columbia. What's yours?"

"Oh my God, her voice is so cool!"

"Can you fly? Can you shoot laser beams from your eyes?"

"How did you get down here?"

"Is that your stick?"

Chic stretched as she looked around, the babble continuing from the kids, who managed to convey that they were Henry, Deedle who was really Dee, Ricky, and Justin, all while somehow still wanting to know if she could shoot webbing or lift a car or slide across floors like Wonder Woman. The door was the best shot, even if it led to the



alley. It was a large metal double door set, and partially open; just enough to let four intrepid and accidentally brave souls find a new secret place to feast on their latest allowance acquisitions and play Urban Explorers in the Wasteland. It was with solemn face that everyone said the Deedle was being Katniss. Justin was Kid Flash, better even than Indiana Jones.

She interrupted them as an enormous crash came from the floor above, and a bolt of electricity dashed down through the opening that Chic had made to leave a large crater in the concrete of the floor. "Wow! All of that is really awesome. I like Katniss a lot, too. I think we best get over to the door though, or you could get hurt a lot worse than she did in the Games." They kept up the commentary, somehow not affected by the incredibly scary sounds above them, even as she spread her arms and moved forward to urge them towards the door.

The explosion was enormous, knocking all of them back and to the ground, their ears ringing, eyes stinging. The kids cried out, suddenly afraid, and Chic blinked away the dust and filth to see the smoke roiling down in a heavy, drippy, slimy path from a new hole, beneath which a bloody and horribly bruised Tally was slugging it out, gritted teeth in a grim face, with a leering, half grinning mockery of life that was giving as good as he was getting. She could hear the creaking of the bones beneath the squish of the bruised flesh and the amazing armor of Tally was dented in places and ways that no armor was ever meant to be twisted.

The rubble from their fight had blocked the door. The kids had nosebleeds and were sobbing, the noxious vapour was settling down around the two combatants, seeking out the children, along with a few squirming, writhing, gelatinous, rubbery blobs that fell from the openings to wriggle towards the kids, ravenous and sharp toothed.

Those at least Chic knew would be cleansed as soon as they got close enough, but now the plan for the kids was over, and she had to find a space to keep them safe.

The best bet was a corner behind a half wall. No windows, and though it wasn't the best, it was better than nothing for the moment, and might give her a chance to get in there herself.

She heard Blame hock. "Hispania, watch out!"

Tally ducked the spittle, which sailed past her shoulder and landed on the floor, where it smoldered and gave off a weird, strangely frightening green smoke, the dirt and filth beneath it burning with a greenish flame. "Thanks! Get those kids outta here!"

"Working on it. Hispania, try the stuff we learned that day below the gym! The girl stuff."

Chic picked up a child in each arm and dashed, with that uncanny speed she now had, to the corner, dropping them and then returning for the second group, having to weave around an edge of the illusion smoke on the second go and nearly losing her footing.

"Ok, stay here, together, and don't move. Stay together. You have to be brave for me, okay? Watch out for each other. I'll watch out for you, but I have to keep my eye on everything else." She waved away a tendril of something that was trying to reach over the wall, dissipating it.

"Who'll watch out for you?" It was Justin, his dust coated face streaked with tears, his eyes bright.

"I'm a Heroine, remember? I've got help coming, because friends always help each other."



It was right then that she noted the flex in her power levels. She was right. The mote she used the girl power they had learned about, the stronger she got.

The smile that spread across her face as she turned to stand between the kids and the fight was one those who had known her in a past life would recognize immediately.

Head a bit down, eyes glittering, it was a knowing, confident, and slightly scary smile. She crouched a little, raising the staff in her left hand and striking the ground with it firmly, right arm spread, legs apart, fists clenched.

Tally went flying and crashed through the wall to her left, leaving her facing Blame alone.

“By the shield maidens of Freedom, I summon Protection of the Innocent!”

As she spoke, ribbons of light formed around her, filled with the peculiar cuneiform script she had first seen, spinning, separated by a few inches, like half circles of light filled with runes, blue on the pink, and an enormous bright pink bubble formed around the kids at her back, as her own shield, a glowing flower of some sort she couldn't recognize, formed on her right arm, enormous, curved, shimmering.

“Ok, you big patootie, let's get it on.”

She groaned inwardly. That had so totally taken the moment away.

“Call me a son of a bitch, will you? Look at you, pretender. You let those children get hurt.” He lingered on the word children, drawing it out in a leering tone that sent shivers down her spine. “They're bleeding, and you let it happen instead of keeping them safe. And look at your partner, faker.” Smoke began to swirl around him, along his legs, his arms, a vapour trail that she just knew couldn't be good. “Look at what you made me do to her. Look at her, half dead and heading the rest of the way.”

“Nice try, but I'm not the one that punched her. Seems to me that was you.”

He laughed, coughed, and she spotted the smoke's sharp congealing. He hurled another of those spit wads at her as his right hand came up with a pistol, the sharp crack deafening in the confined space, two, three, four, seven shots.

The spit wad struck her shield like a physical blow, pushing it back, but sparking off it and bursting into an ugly fire flash. The bullets ricocheted off her shield, and he had reloaded and was firing again, arm outstretched, stalking towards her.

She decided to wing it, reaching out with her feelings.

“By the Sands of Freedom, let the wall of Hope come to me!”

She felt it, deep inside her, a rushing, swirling, flowing, giddy rush, a surge of something, something she had never considered possible, and then it came pouring down around her as the bullets pinged and bounced and crackled off her shield, each one seemingly forcing her back, her feet solidly planted but sliding over the dirt and filth and grime as the Dust came from everywhere and formed into a swirling, sparkling, glittery cloud of its own before cycling around Blame and slowly stiffening into a semicircular barrier, floor to ceiling, around her and the children.



“Holy Shootfire, I did it!” it escaped her lips before she could stop it in her excitement.

She spared a glance towards where Tally had flown, yet couldn't see her. This didn't bode well.

A scream of rage and frustration turned her head back towards Blame, who was venting his rage on the wall her Dust had formed. It shook, but held, somehow.

Stalemate.

She breathed. This was going to be nothing like her last fight.

