

TOGETHER WE ARE STORIED!

'Together We Are Storied!' is an experiment in collaborative storytelling. Over the course of a month during the Covid-19 pandemic, anonymous contributors were able to access and edit a collective document, and at the end of that month, the document was edited into a cohesive story by artist Kevin Hallagan. What follows is the resulting short story.

This project is spearheaded by Kevin Hallagan, with support from the Level Ground Arts Collective.

- You can find more of Kevin's art at www.KevinHallagan.com or on Instagram @Kevin_Hallagan_Art
- Learn more about Level Ground at <http://levelground.co/>

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this project!

That night... was a night like any other. A dark and stormy night...

That day however... It was not an ordinary day unlike those ordinary beginnings. I knew there was something bizarre. I'd have sensed it, ordinarily. But today was not an ordinary day. Or was it? No... Today was an extraordinary day (as opposed to an extra-ordinary day).

It had been days since the sun had come, which seemed grammatically impossible, but as previously stated, it was an extraordinary day. A fluttering enigma lazily drifted past and let out an inaudible sigh, its translucent form shuddered in the wake of its boredom.

I was told that Enigmas thirst for ennui and that they congregate when it's thick, which is why the 'even' folks speak of them as bad luck. There was a time when being labeled a "depressive" was good for business. And boy was business booming! However, those were the times before the conceptual mantle cracked and the connotations started bleeding out, filling the oceans. The sky, though.. The sky remained uncannily concrete in its abstractions. Much like my train of thought.

I've been told I have a taste for adventure, something that is referred to more as a curse than a gift. And since the mantle shook and the pieces fell, I've been trapped inside. But the inside can get tedious when one wants for what one wants, and I am one for wanting. Thus the ennui. Thus the Enigmas. Thus the mildly destructive tendencies in the wake of a broken mindset.

I've considered leaving home, but home is where the heart is or the hearth is or the heart of the hearth is or something. Also I can't afford it. And also still there's an impenetrable razor-thin wall of indeterminate height that stands between me and the outside world. I might be able to jump it, but the wall is invisible and jumping it might be deadly (because of the razor thinness). So I stand in front of it waiting to jump but not jumping, wondering if I could wander but knowing I shouldn't. And it's just the way it is.

A friend tried to jump once, to keep me company. They're half a friend now. Although, to be fair, they were half a friend before. But in a different way. Most people are these days... Although when the wall is itself a solid abstraction, it's hard to know what way the different way is when all the ways are pretty much the same.

The wall is my friend. It wasn't but now is. So that's a difference. It's always there for me. I mean it's always there. For me.

And it's solid. A solid friend. Unwavering friendship is hard to come by, as I don't have a dog. A dog tried to jump the wall to be my friend. Good boy. Now a half-good boy. A half-boy that is good. Or maybe an all boy that is half good. We haven't figured it out yet. We call him "Alone."

The moon keeps me company at times. At times she hides, though. Once I found her in the pantry. She'd eaten all the Mallomars. I found that particularly upsetting as those mallomars had sentimental meaning. I don't recall what it was, but I remember I felt my mind pulled by them. A distant, foggy yearning bubbling up when I was in their presence. And my name had been written on the box. The moon, while a good listener, is a bad roommate. She's also a horrible gossip, and leaves her dirty dishes out longer than I prefer...

At night I hear sounds from downstairs. But they cannot be Alone because I am alone, and I cannot be alone with Alone, so Alone must have gone to be by himself. Leaving me alone. And I hear the sounds. From downstairs, but only when I'm alone.

The sound of the wind blaring through the house had the uncanny tone of bagpipes. And not like the bagpipes I'd seen in videos, though that would be awful enough. It sounded like bagpipes played by a dizzy goat in a competitive polka competition. The sound had been permeating my dreams, and on those days I didn't want to wake up. You'd think that after two weeks of this, I'd be used to it, but no, not at all. Polka is insufferable, and now I hate goats as well.

I've never found the stairs down, which seems odd. The down-stairs. Directionally, I mean. The ones that go down. I've found stairs that claim to come up from the basement, yet every time I try to go down, I end up back at the top. So apparently those are up-stairs only. And far be it from me to tell a stair who to be. I'm a respectful person.

I know there's a basement, even if I can't see it. I know it must be there from the sounds. The echoes have to be coming from somewhere. The rock beneath me isn't hollow, right? Because that would be crazy. And when trapped in a loop of causal distraction, all one can really depend on is one's grip on sanity. And I couldn't be crazy. Alone would tell me. Unless this is one of those times he's half-good. Or half a boy.

Startled by a tap on her shoulder, she ripped her headset off, and with it, the lonely, drafty home, wincing at the bright light of Laboratory E-05.

Let's add a dog; I know it's unconventional.. but I think what this plan needs is a dog. Look, I know I've opened a rift in the time space continuum before, but those attempts were so achingly slow. So...

We already tried a dog. It got halved on entry.

..But all of the platypodes were fine last week, a little shaken up, but biologically fine, all the atoms were still there, so I'm not too concerned about trying another dog. Dogs were the first to come into space. I'm just suggesting a different approach. I feel like a Corgi or two would do nicely. it might be the missing element we've been hoping for.

Corgi, you say? Well then I must correspond with the Queen. Are you suggesting that we go for the Pembroke or the Cardigan Corgi? A Pembroke weighs less, which could be necessary for our experiment.

But the Cardigan has rounded ears, which makes it more aerodynamic.

You know there's no air in a space-time rift, right? Plus, my first wife has a Pembroke... And I do have a key to her condo.

Also, must we involve the queen in this?

Aren't you always saying to follow proper protocol? She does approve funding for all of our pet projects, and I think this might pay handsomely if it's delivered just right.

Wait, they're paying you?

Well, sort of. I get... free dental and there is Pizza Fridays.

... We have Pizza Fridays? Why have I never heard of this? Does nobody want me at Pizza Friday? Not even her majesty?

Perhaps she suspects you of wishing to carry off her corgis.

Bite your tongue! Bite it! That tongue of yours, ohhh. Just who... argghh, how you need to bite the very tip off of it. No, bite all of it. Bite. We aren't trying to steal her corgis! We're legitimate scientists! Is it no longer appealing to you to try to open a rift in spacetime?

Of course. Carry on.

The alliterative element in "Cardigan Corgi" might damage the cathodes in the time-anvil. Perhaps the Pembroke would be best, but 'Pem-Brohk'.. it's so clunky. Wait, wait, hold it. One sec. I just need to...

Just change the name to whatever fits in under twelve characters. Too many and it's a real risk, like remembering a long password. I think this can go either way; the Queen will either be fully on board having the fastest Corgis lead the way in exploration, or she'll want "off with our

heads.”

Surely you mean that figuratively... Has anyone stopped to ask what the Queen will do after ripping a hole in time and space this time?

I've signed a non-disclosure.

Wait, you have clearance?

Wait, do you not have clearance?

Apparently I don't have enough clearance to get invited to Pizza Fridays if that's what you mean.

Look, don't feel too bad about Pizza Fridays. It's just a tight group of us that met up before space rips and bong trips, really. I think it was originally for someone's birthday. At the last party, there were really just 30 or so from the labs and staff...

There are only 32 of us working! And M011Y is just a roomba. Does SHE get invited?

A *hyper-intelligent* roomba. And well of course, she usually does the bartending. You literally wear a shirt that says you're lactose and gluten intolerant. Is that shirt supposed to be a joke? Why would anyone joke about Crohn's disease?

Grumbling God I hate that M011Y... Always riding around in little circles like she's something.
Louder Yeah! I guess she IS super cool.

Did you hear it's M011Y's 10th year with the company coming up? Perhaps we could get her a cake.

One decorated with the leftover pieces of broken machines. Like with the scraps of M010Y? You know, to razz her a little bit... certainly not to make her feel intimidated or unwanted or anything.

Hyper-intelligent roomba's tend not to have much of a sense of humor. Or maybe too much... And for all we know, she may be recording us.

So you're saying you don't trust M011Y? And that if someone, say, turned up dead in Earth Embassy and the only recording was from her sweeping up the dead body and cleansing the scene, that you would agree she probably did something terrible and should be deactivated? Is that what you're trying to say? Because I concur!

No, no. She has all the right clearances. Unlike some people who aren't allowed to attend...oh, nevermind.

Yeah? Well... I'll have my own pizza friday! With bigger pizzas than any of you have ever seen! And... and it'll happen every day! Friday every day with pizzas bigger than a house with nipples and none of you can come! *sniffle* None of you!

Nonsense. I don't think the Queen would fund that. And deactivating roombas? Honestly!

Mark my words: that roomba needs an adjustment to its attitude settings. You will all regret making her time-cop of the month, even if it got the blessing of the Queen. Mark. My. Words. She approves EVERYTHING.

Careful there, mate. Every now and then the things you say--just little things, mind you, and I'm sure they're inconsequential, but you've got to be careful how you phrase things. Wouldn't want to give the wrong impression, now, would you? I mean, the heat we get as scientists working on secret, high clearance projects for royalty--well, it's all too easy for the normies to get odd fancies in their heads.

No, no. No odd fancies.

There's no call for them judging, of course. I don't go round judging any of them for being so exhaustingly normal, now do I?

Well, they have their own concerns. We have our corgis, and continuum rifts, and high clearance research projects and they have... what do they have?

Golf, I imagine.

They have their roles in life, just as roombas--hyper intelligent roombas do, and we have ours, and right now it seems that role is Rift Duty.

Wait, isn't that the Normie anthem? Not the Rift Duty, but the roles and golfing. What was it? Something like, "From birth we knew our role in the hive. All of our roles are the same. Moving golfing equipment into the great archive."

Is that really something they say? It's oddly poetic.

It is, isn't it? As deep a concept as that vast golf course in the sky that we explore and examine and exploit, edging ever further from home and into the void.

Say instead of using animals again we try roombas for The Rift? It won't be nearly as 'fluffy,' per se, but there is a certain poetry to it, don't you think? Say it with me, Roomba-Rift.

Rift-Roomba.

Roomba-Rift, yes.... it sounds perfect, and we can apply for the Queen's illiteration fund.

Alliteration.. Are you sure you have clearance?

We'll lure--I mean invite--M011Y to be part of the rift solution and if she ends up swallowed by a void in spacetime or halved on entry, I guess we'll all just have to live with those consequences... and if M011Y succeeds she would undoubtedly be needed for every rift, and if she can't move up the ranks because she's too essential...well, there'd be an opening at Pizza Fridays, wouldn't there?

But I don't want to risk losing M011Y; she and I went through basics together, so she knows me better than anyone.

I never knew you were so close! Really, I've generally thought you quite the opposite...

Oh, definitely. I was the maid of honor at her wedding. She lent my ex a large amount towards the downpayment of the condo.

Ah! The condo! The Pemboke corgi was specifically considered for its weight. I wonder how M011Y compares in mass and weight to a Pembroke? One can't really ask her, can one? I mean, women and their comparative weight ratio...

I mean I'm her close close close friend, so it'd probably be alright. She's all curves, but it's really about the density. I'm also like her best friend though, so it's complicated, shooting her into the void.. Perhaps we should return to the corgi solution.

No no. I think we should stick with the very good plan of putting M011Y into a tube that gets shot at the edge of spacetime... where she can become time-cop for the universe, not just this little boring corner.

Hmm. It won't do, I don't think. No matter how you think on it, I think we're just going to keep circling back to the corgis. The corgis are the thing.

But M011Y!

Is not a corgi. Corgis, I really think, are ideal for space time continuum rifts. They go together like Beans and Rice, Jelly and Peanut Butter.

I suppose you're right, and pembrokes go better with Peanut Butter. Hands down.

Oh yes, clearly. Now the Cardigan Corgis, not so much. But Corgi Continuum... hmm. If we sew half a cardigan to half a pembroke..

You may just be on to something. Mind you, if corgi splicing goes sour, the queen won't be especially impressed.

We need to work on our branding. It's Corgi Spicing. Splicing would not go over well with .. well, with anyone

Anyone but M011Y..

(over the intercom)

The Queen bee releases a pheromone
Rendering her workers infertile
They can lay eggs until the day they die, but
Their children will never be queens, and
Neither shall they.

Striking how secretions of one so lofty can
Keep generations so low
A labor force secured week to week, year
To weary year, never venturing beyond the station
To which they were born.
Never even contemplating the existence of a 'beyond'.

Oh dear, the Queen's not going to like that.

No, not at all.

Was that Johnson? I feel like that announcement was a very Johnson thing to do.

I'm Johnson!

Oh. Not Johnson then.

Perhaps it was M011Y trying to stir up the dirt. Now mutinous announcements like that couldn't be made if she were, say, floating around in space in a little tube, heading for the space time border...

We've just been over this. It's corgis we want now, remember. Corgi Spicing!

I'm just putting this out there: what if instead we try, oh, I don't know, Roomba Spicing?

M011Y's already been spiced, mate. That's why she's hyper intelligent.

Pieceofevilstupidjunk! ... must have just been a little painful pod of gas in the tummy, no matter. I digress...

You always digress. Now go away, I need to get back to work.

And she put on her dreary headset back on.

I woke up one day and found myself in the basement. There must have been another crack in the mantle, because I couldn't remember finding the down stairs. I knew it was day although the sun wasn't out, because I was awake, and day is awake time, while night is when I sleep. I woke up alone in the dripping basement, which exists because the rock is not hollow and I am not crazy. I searched for hours and never found a door or a staircase or a ladder. It just seemed to exist... a room. The only stairs I knew were up-stairs. Now there were no stairs at all.

The days passed, and weeks passed, and I began to wonder why I didn't seem to feel hunger. Curious, though convenient, as I was fresh out of Mallomars, and anyway the pantry was upstairs. There was plenty of moisture to quench my thirst, I need only to absorb it through my skin... I stated aloud, "I am sala-MAN-der." And then I sat down again feeling better and pulled out my dream journal to try to describe the liminal space, so that it could feel just as real as life was at that very moment. I glanced at the last entry, which said 'The girl carries the nice basket. We are all eggplants. Together we roast slowly in the sun'. If this was a tercet, it wasn't a very good one, and if it was a dream I didn't remember having it. Such is the way with dreams, thus my journal.

I missed Alone, I missed the wall, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was supposed to be searching for the wrong clues and keys to leave the dark, dreary room.. but would Alone do that to me? I turned back to the journal and wrote

'The answer, I think... is a resounding probably' and underlined twice.

I laid down, and again came the night where a little girl carrying a nice basket walked along the busy street of a village where everyone lived off the grid because there was no grid to live on. The walls around the village had been strictly guarded since long before she was born, from what, she didn't know, so to have a shop in the market square meant the man she was headed to see was the sole provider of whatever was to be found within the barricades. Cigarettes, soda, newspapers, silly bands--the man had it all. His unique position allowed him to turn a healthy profit, but still he was known to have a soft side.

The girl paused a moment around the corner from the man's shop. She felt the sun warming her orange uncovered head, heard the rattling of a bike chain, and smelled the magnolia blossoms. she remembered the words of her mother:

"In the sunlight we are all together in our endeavor to be roasted slowly, like eggplants."

She took a deep breath and walked with purpose towards the open door of the shop.

"Good day!" she said, with as much bravado as she could muster.

"It is so good," the man said as he put down a tall stack of yesterday's newspapers. He turned around to see the girl. "O-ho my!"

"I'm.. sorry, did I startle you?"

"No, no! You just remind me of... my oral surgeon. How may I help you?"

The girl looked at him, puzzled, then blurted "I need three dozen packs of pembroke rations for my family! Please." then blushed. Damn it!

"Three dozen? Well, big family."

"..We are planning a trip."

"I hope not, in this drought."

"My father believes he can work for my Uncle at the casino in the next village." The girl hadn't eaten in days, and her status could be most accurately described by the word 'irritable'.

The man nodded. He removed his cap and rubbed his bald head. "I sold my last pack of rations this morning."

"The last pack, how is that possible? When will you get more?"

"Oh there's no telling, really. The drought.." She stared at him, speechless "But, look out this window." He pointed to a small window, no more than four-inches across or tall. "See that?" He pointed up at a steep angle which required the little girl to crane her neck. "That is my lucky star." Sure enough, even in the afternoon sun, a single white light was visible. "That is for you and your family."

"A star?"

He nodded "One of the biggest clouds of exploding gas, absolutely in its prime."

“A star is nothing more than a piece of trash stuck to the ceiling of the world. Why would you waste my time with such nonsense when I came here asking for food?” She turned and stormed out of the shop, and without missing a beat, spat on the door handle and slammed it shut.

The man scratched his whiskers, eyes closed, body stiffened against a wave of breaking memory.

It was a day like any other, the sun beat down on the village square without a cloud in sight. He heard a scream as a woman was chased past his shop. He ran out to find the crowd had stopped, encircling their prey. One of the villagers grabbed the shopkeeper’s arm and said “Did you hear? Molly Blevon tried making her own spices. The gall of that family, honestly. We already have a perfectly fine shop in this town. Dumb old Marlon Johnson tried some of her chilis and they burnt his insides right out!”

Kevin pushed through the crowd and was struck dumb by the beautiful sight of the sun shining off Molly’s beautiful orange head. The town prior had cornered her, with a spoon full of chilis shoved at her face. “In the sun we are all together!” he shouted, and the crowd responded

“In the shade, too, we are all together. There, within the shadows, we hide shadows of our own, and so together we persist in being alone!”

The prior continued “And I ask you, how can we remain alone if sinners allow smugglers through our walls? Molly Blevon, you will tell us how you got these ingredients, or be forced to eat your own devilish chilis!”

Kevin rushed in, yanking the spoon of chilis away from the prior. He turned to the crowd and shouted “In the Sun we are all together! In the Shade, too, we are all together! The Blevons are part of this village as surely as you or I, and they can do as they please!” He held up the spoon and said “Let my sacrifice be the end of this nonsense!” The crowd went silent.

He heard whispered remarks floating from his customers. “Is he really going to do it?” “why would we need two shops?” “He’s gonna need some milk.”

Kevin stared down the ghastly scoop of pain as his mouth opened wide. The crowd’s eyes opened wide. Molly’s heart opened wide to her savior.

He had always known that it hurts on the inside, love, that is, but pain had never stopped him before. *‘I’d do worse than this for her’*, he thinks.

Gulp.

He knew what would happen if he ate those chilis, he was, after all, a Galargian, and thus had a notoriously sensitive stomach. Even food with a two-pepper rating had been known to activate their mutative hormones, and from the news of dumb old Marlon Johnson, these chilis could earn a four-pepper rating on even the most conservative menu.

At first there would be absolute stillness, the calm of anticipation, stomach-churning and thrilling all at once. And then? Chernobyl on top of Fukushima inside of the Challenger explosion.

A geyser of pain would overwhelm every synapse, the architecture of his own nervous system burning. His exterior would begin to harden as he cocooned. Everyone romanticizes metamorphosis because butterflies come out beautiful. Galargians come out looking like a chewed up dumpling.

He couldn't do it; Kevin threw down the spoonful of chilis and ran through the gasping crowd, chased by Molly's scream.

Minder 067-A flicked the screen off. After over 30,000 generations of the K.E.V.I.N.S. c(K)onsciousness - Enhanced Volcanic Neurology Simulation it seemed they were no closer to tricking a Kevin into eating chilis. She wondered if her entire purpose, her creation in the bio-assembly facility, her training, and her grueling years of uninterrupted self-roomba research had been a waste. What was the purpose of the ever-growing, already planet-sized supercomputer, and the thousands of other Minders running K.E.V.I.N. simulations, if they couldn't even pull so simple of a ruse as to convince a Kevin to eat Chilis? She wondered how long the ancient beings that built this simulation would remain in cryo-sleep, and what will happen when they wake to find that their efforts had yielded only failure. She felt something primal bubbling up within her. Minder 067-A did not know the name of this feeling, it had been redacted from the system centuries ago, but it was like eating a spoonful of chilis.

"Reset all parameters to null, begin reboot sequence" she called.

"Running K.E.V.I.N. v.30001" responded the familiar synth voice over the loudspeaker. Minder 067-A took a deep breath, dialled the settings back to zero, and turned the initiation key. As the tadpole on the screen wormed its way into the egg for the 30001st time, she slammed her fist on the console, and walked out of the command station for her biannual thirty minute break. Behind her on the console, a little light began to blink over the word 'TRANSMIT'.

It was not an ordinary day unlike those ordinary beginnings. I knew there was something bizarre. I've sensed it, extraordinarily.

And I'm pretty sure I triple checked. It felt embarrassing to try a fourth time.

Kirishima jumped up in surprise as the computer began sputtering gibberish. "what the-" she exclaimed before being cut off by her mother stomping up the stairs.

She shook the keyboard, and crumbs fell out between the gaps. "What did you do to the-" her mother opened the door. "Kirishima, do you have a moment to talk?"

Kirishima raked a hand through her hair and glanced back at the computer screen. It continued to spew words. Strange words. "Corgi" and "Roomba" and "Drought" and "Chilis" "Cardigan" "Enigma". Words that had no evident connection, and that yet must be connected, had to be.

"Now's not a great time, Mom."

Was it something to do with the c's? No, definitely not an exercise in alliteration. Roomba and corgis? What did it mean?

Rift.

Bagpipes.

Queen.

"Not a great--See, this! This is what we have to talk about. Kirishima, you-- Will you stop looking at that screen and pay attention, Kirishima, this is important!"

"Mom, there's something I have to look into. I'll come down in a bit, OK? I promise."

Stairs.

Wall.

K.E.V.I.N.

"Kevin?"

"Kirishima, I don't know what you're doing or who Kevin is, but you need to get away from that computer of yours and come downstairs right now to have a HUMAN interaction."

"Who's Kevin?"

"Kirishima!"

"And what does he have to do with chilis and corgis?"

“Kirishima, now!”

Kirishima sat at the dinner table, eyes glazed over, still thinking about the shimmer of static that now flooded across her monitor. Her parents gave her another talk about declining grades and attention spans. They decided she was too irresponsible to have her own computer. They boxed it up, stored it in the attic, and told her she’d need to use the family computer, and only for schoolwork.

Lying on her bed, staring into the constellations of her popcorn ceiling, Kirishima’s mind was reaching out across the galaxy. The emptiness of this room, isolation, the authoritarianism of her parents, none of it mattered. She had seen enough in those final seconds of communication.

Kirishima awoke the next morning and wasn’t entirely surprised to find a not-entirely-corporeal dog staring at her. She knew the dog’s name was Alone, and knew the distance this creature had traveled.

Alone told Kirishima everything he knew with a voice like emptiness. A vital link in the ring of celestial bodies had been severed. Much was in disarray: the laws of physics were breaking down, corgis had been spliced, Kevin was misbehaving, and a roomba had just launched a scientist into deep space. Times were indeed dire.

Hope was not lost. The worker bees struggled tirelessly to help many pieces find their places.. The final need was a bridge.

Kirishima left her home, traveled far, and risked everything. At the end of her journey, staring into the event horizon, she thought of her mother saying “this is important”.

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A Note of Thanks

Thank you again to everyone who made this project possible! I had been dreaming for years about bringing complete strangers together to collaborate on a story, because storytelling is such an essential part of human culture and history. In a way, this short story is a time capsule, with its allusions to isolation, to loneliness, and to a sense of disarray on a systemic level. I look forward to reprising this project in the future, and hope you will all join me again on this journey.

-Kevin Hallagan