

Ghost of a Change

a *Peacemaker* fanfic

by Rodo

for *Muccamukk*

SIX MONTHS. THAT'S how long it had been. Well, six months, one week, and three days, but who was counting? Amanda Waller, maybe, Leota thought. Her mother could be into details like that. It was what made her good at her job and a nightmare of a mother when you wanted to get away with not doing your chores on time. Anyway. It had been six months since she'd last been in Evergreen, since the last time she'd felt like a normal person, and also since the world was busy enacting a low-budget version of an alien body snatcher movie. *Rise of the Body-Snatching Alien Butterflies*. Sometimes, she still couldn't believe that this was her life, and her mother was *Amanda Waller*. That got you used to some shit early on.

Evergreen hadn't changed. Not much, at least, or not to the degree where she'd really notice. The trailer park hadn't changed either. There were still kids running around as she made her way to Chris's trailer – which was where she was in for a surprise. Leota couldn't imagine Christopher Smith had ever been the type of person to have a perfectly manicured lawn, even before his four-year stint in Belle Reve. Grass had been merrily sprouting in the cracks around his trailer thanks to benign neglect the last time she'd been here, and the lawn ornaments had always been crooked and scattered around haphazardly. Now, it seemed Chris had graduated from benign to pernicious neglect. In the space in front of his trailer, she counted no less than twenty empty bottles of all shapes and sizes, one upside down in the basket of a terracotta donkey planter, one leaning against one of the garden gnomes, another hiding in the grass growing next to the trailer... and then there were the numerous dead animals strewn about. One half-decayed opossum stared at her with an empty eye socket. Eagly's work, no doubt. And finally, she noticed a small wooden cross over a slightly raised tiny mound of not-so-recently disturbed dry earth in the left

corner, close to the trees. She walked over and knelt before it to make out the roughly carved name on it. It read “GOFF.”

“Huh, guess that answers that question,” Leota muttered to herself.

Time to get back to what she’d come to do. She knocked on the door. No answer. Leota waited for a moment, then tried the doorknob, and lo and behold, the door opened to reveal a messy interior that matched the exterior. Dude was having problems, and it would be obvious to everyone who bothered to look. Except “people who bothered to look” was probably just Vigilante these days, and if there was one person who wouldn’t notice his best friend descending into a self-destructive spiral of depression and alcohol addiction, it was him. His brain just wasn’t wired that way.

Leota found Chris passed out on the couch while Eagly eyed her apprehensively from his perch and the record player turned fruitlessly, with the needle back in the starting position for who knew how long. What had her mother badgered her into now? Oh, who was she kidding; Chris was her friend, and if she’d known what state he was in she would have swung by earlier. Life had been crazy, but not that crazy.

Tentatively, she reached out and shook his shoulder. Gently. He huffed in his sleep and batted at her hand with all the coordination of a newborn baby elephant.

“Chris?” she said and shook him a bit more forcefully.

He moaned and turned to face the back of the couch.

“Peacemaker!” she barked. That got his attention. He scrambled into wakefulness, arms flailing as he tried to figure out what had happened, and how his legs worked. When his eyes settled on Leota, he froze for a second before letting himself fall back into the couch. A concerned Eagly hopped over with a single beat of his wings and cooed at him.

“Adebayo. What are you doing here?” he asked. She watched as he let his hands glide over the eagle’s feathers. She wasn’t jealous. No, sir. Not jealous at all.

“Can’t I visit a friend?”

Chris looked at her. Leota looked back.

“Okay, so I do actually have an ulterior motive here,” she admitted, “but I don’t think that’s important right now. What the hell happened to you, man?” She gestured at the mess surrounding them – old take-out boxes so ancient even the flies had abandoned them, empty bottles everywhere, dishes piling up in the sink, and bags of chips everywhere – probably been Eagly’s go-to snack recently. Never mind the stench. There was no way Chris had showered in the past week or so; he had that funky man-reek thing going on that wasn’t even attractive to straight women, and Leota was anything but.

Chris stared at her. Then stared at her some more. And some more. Then he blinked. And stared. She was tempted to say something, but she wasn't sure what would come out if she poked this particular bear.

“Do you ever feel like someone is watching you, like, even though you know they're not really there, you know they're there, that sort of thing?” he asked.

Well, that got surprisingly heavy surprisingly fast. She was not equipped to deal with this, Leota thought. She'd gotten the Psychology For Spies 101 briefing her mom had set up, but it had been unsurprisingly light on paranoia and psychosis, and instead had been full of nonsense about how to tell when someone's lying (spoiler alert: some people are damn good liars and some look like they're lying even when telling the truth), with a side of How To Torture Someone Without Breaking The No-Torture Laws.

“You know who my mom is, right?” she asked, because what else could she say? “I'm not certain that there's not a spy satellite following my every move right now.”

“No,” he said, doing that exasperated not-quite-a-shake head movement thing. “I mean, like...” he paused, visibly grasping for the right words. “You know, a ghost, sort of. Like a dead grandparent whose funeral you went to, and who keeps showing up to your birthday anyway to fuck with you because they're a giant asshole who wouldn't even let death stop them from ruining your life.”

Yeah. Okay. Chris really sucked at metaphors and was about as transparent as a pane of glass, so that cleared some things up. She'd be drinking if she were in his shoes too. Eagly, meanwhile, had apparently decided that Chris would be as okay as he could be and abandoned his place on the couch to go hunt for errant chips in the many, many, many empty plastic bags littering every surface imaginable, which meant Leota could sit down next to him.

“Yeah, that's never happened to me,” she started when she sat, eyes fixed on the eagle on his hunt. “But you know, if my grandparents were that shitty, I wouldn't let them ruin my life, even if they decided to haunt me from beyond the grave. Fuck them and their fucking corpses.” She tried to put on an encouraging smile, but it felt incredibly awkward on her face, so she dropped it. “So, your dad, huh?”

His head snapped around at lightning speed. Then he nodded.

“It's probably just some weird brain-misfiring thing, you know. Not an actual ghost or anything. Just your brain trying to make sense of what happened. Completely normal, happens to a lot of people who went through traumatic shit,” Leota assured him, even though it wasn't. He should probably be in a psych ward somewhere to deal with his

hallucinations like a functional, normal human being. But Chris being Chris, she figured it would only make things worse. And she was here for a reason, she remembered.

“Yeah, completely normal,” Chris said with a thousand-yard stare and a hollow voice.

“Have you seen any other ghosts?”

There was that silence again. He definitely had, she thought, and he’d never admitted it to anyone. His father would have called him a sissy boy over it, and Vigilante would have skipped over it with his rat’s nest of a mind. Chris needed a psychiatrist, she thought, but he’d never. Too much baggage.

“Keith, when I was little. And Flag, at the hospital.”

Okay, so there was definitely a pattern there, and that pattern was guilt that he didn’t cope with in a constructive, healthy manner. And murder. Yeah, definitely can’t forget about the murder part.

“That must have sucked.” About as much as she sucked at expressing sympathy.

There was a huff of a laugh, and that was enough to lighten her heart a little. “Tell me about it. Flag is an asshole and he has the worst bedside manner ever.”

“I can imagine.”

They shared a smile. Leota was pretty sure what Chris needed was a distraction. He needed to get out of this literal dump, the company of somebody who could distract him – Eagly was awesome, but not a human – and most importantly, he needed something to do that made him feel good about himself and not guilty. Or maybe she just told herself that because she’d come here for a reason and her brain had decided to justify her actions because she was too much like her mother.

“So, my mom wants your help,” she said.

Chris frowned at her. “I thought we were all on her shit list after Project Butterfly.”

Leota shrugged. “You know my mom.”

“The coldest ass bitch in the world? Yeah. What does she want to frame me for this time?”

“Nothing. As far as I know. She just needs a team of people who can do some off-the-books super black black-ops shit, so she’s getting the team back together. She’s got a contract drawn up and everything.” Including a very long non-disclosure agreement that wasn’t a dig at her *at all*.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“She just forgot that bit where you exposed her super evil plot to the entire world as if nothing happened?” There was a hint of jealousy in his voice. Leota got it, really. Her mother was a bitch, but at least she wasn’t the White Dragon.

“I wouldn’t say that. She’s... complicated. Would you believe it, she was even kind of proud, in her own way. I may have thrown a grenade in her operations and set her career on fire for a while, but she said she wasn’t a hundred percent sure I had it in me before. And that she respected that I had the balls to stand up to her.” There had also been some stuff about Leota reminding her of her father that she wasn’t ready to unpack.

“And now she’s getting the band back together.”

“Yeah.”

“Harcourt is in?”

“She got certified field-ready again last month. The physical therapy took a while, but you know her. And Economos says he’s sick of his job at Belle Reve.”

Chris looked at her in thought, but she knew she had him. He was sick of hanging around his trailer and occasionally going out with Vigilante to beat up some lowlifes who deserved it, but not as much as the butterflies had. Everything was a bit of a let-down if you dealt with enemies like giant starfish and alien butterflies possessing gorillas while keeping an alien cow the size of a building under a farm.

“I’ll need to talk to V,” he said.

“Economos is doing that right now.”

“Seriously?” He looked kind of hurt. It was a bit hilarious. And cute. A couple of minutes and he’d already been looking forward to telling his friend about the metric fuckton of mayhem and murder in their immediate future. “Economos?”

Leota nodded. “Yeah. They’ve been texting each other for the last couple of months, you know?”

Chris blinked at her with a bland face. That had been her reaction as well. Apparently a bored vigilante-slash-busboy with zero people skills and a vanilla tech guy stuck with a boring desk job that was the textbook definition of underwork had shit to talk about. Maybe it involved murdering gorillas with chainsaws, who knew?

“Plus,” she added, “you know I’m his least favorite. And Harcourt is already setting up our new headquarters.”

“Bet she loves that.”

Leota nodded. Harcourt loved being in charge, and she loved that she had a team that wanted her to be in charge too, even if they were the most chaotic bunch of losers the intelligence community had ever seen.

“So, you in?”

Chris looked at her for a second and shrugged. “Yeah. Can Eagly come?”

Leota laughed, sparing the eagle still desperately searching for snacks a glance. When he noticed the attention, he looked from one human to the other, then screeched and beat his wings, sending empty chip bags flying.

“I think that’s a yes,” she concluded.

“So, what’s the mission called?”

“Project Shark.”

He looked at her, and that look said more than a thousand words. She knew exactly what he was going to say.

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