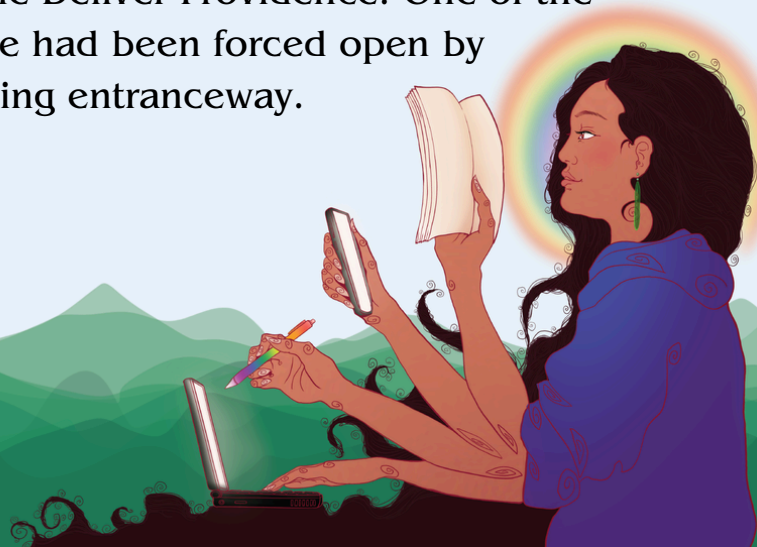


# DELIVER PROVIDENCE

Rose Leighton

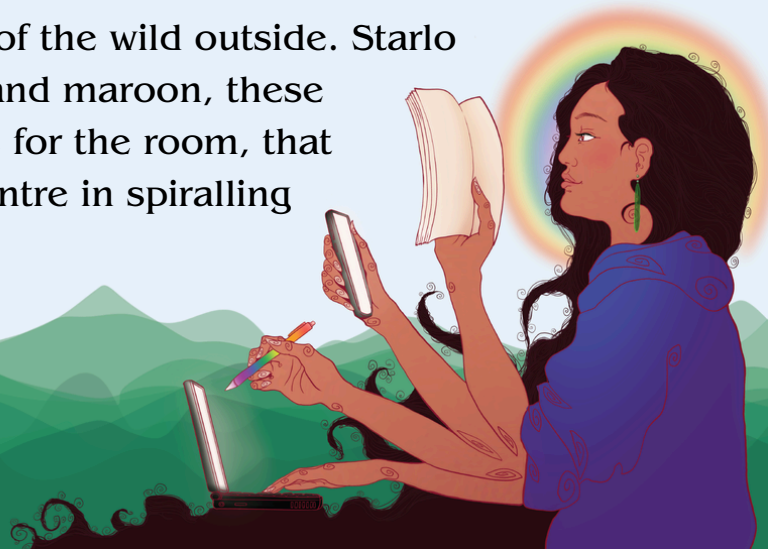
## The Cardinal

As the sun's blinding glitter-rays faded on the secluded clearing in the middle of the woods of Northern Maine, darkness crept into sovereignty. Clouds fought for dominance of the sky, rife with electricity and passion before submitting to their god: the moon. A pale spotlight fell on the grim silhouette of a man, The Cardinal. He gazed at the lettering on the front of the military base that stood before him. It had been half-claimed by the forest, slowly surrendering what man would never let it. "MTA Deliver Providence," it read. The Cardinal could still smell the metallic excretion of old machines underscoring the dusty odour of disuse. Underneath it all though, he could taste the filth that brought him to the base. Throughout the course of his storied career, John Starlo had acquired the title, 'The Cardinal,' due to the fact that he was often seen covered in red after hunting prey that had been deemed equal in worth to the insects upon which a cardinal would prey. No one quite knew how he hunted and dispatched of the monsters that had felled countless others, but they knew he was dangerous enough not to question. The prey that Starlo hunted to Deliver Providence was a local cryptid known as the Red Rat-Man, not due to the colour of its fur, but rather its proximity to the town of Red, Maine. Reportedly, the beast had been stealing food and merchandise from local businesses for over a month now, causing would-be monster hunters to set some haphazard traps for it. Upon its kidnapping of Red's mayor's daughter though, the local council decided to hire someone with a bit more experience. Over the course of three days, Starlo had tracked the rat-man to its lair, a military communications base about eight kilometres out from Red: the Deliver Providence. One of the large steel doors at the front of the base had been forced open by the undergrowth, forming a titanic arching entranceway. Starlo stepped through.



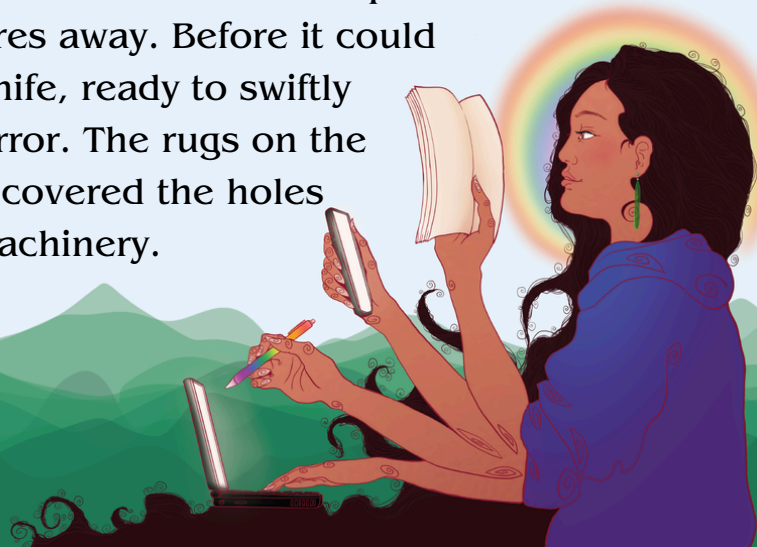
The inside of the base was a large, stark grey hallway connected to a series of smaller halls and rooms. A path of inhuman footsteps carved its way through the dust that coated the floor. There was no doubt now. Close, close, close. Wind whistled through the open door, leaving Starlo with a chill that struck deep into his bones. Stalking gently by the flickering illumination of the ancient lights, he could see areas where the old communications equipment had been ripped from its place, leaving each room he came across bare. As he crept, he searched each room for the strengthened stench of the creature he came for. It was a distinct combination of sweat and petrol that made it easy to smell but hard to pinpoint. Not here, but closer, neither here, but even closer. Stronger and stronger still the scent grew as Starlo plunged deeper into the steel tomb. As he reached the end of the main hallway, the lights above him began to grow dimmer and more sparse, showering him with darkness. Wary of danger, he pressed himself against the side of the hallway and edged his way down it until he thudded against a wall. Feeling out a metal door built into this wall, he knocked gently and listened to the resonance it produced at various points. After a calculated moment, he reached into his coat and produced a small metal tube. He placed it onto a ridge on the doorframe, then tapped a button on the side and leaped backwards. A moment passed, then the door exploded outwards off of its top two hinges, leaving it to dangle dumbly by its final one. The base rumbled and creaked with the blast. Starlo kicked the door loose and sent it to the ground with a jarring clang. He stepped through the now-gaping portal.

The room he ended up in contrasted the front of the base heavily. For starters, the lights in this room worked well and were complimented by a cosier orange light emanating from lamps spaced seemingly randomly across the room. This area was also much wider than the hallway, emulating an amphitheatre in its size. It seemed to be built to be insulated, protecting it from the winds of the wild outside. Starlo took note of the various rugs in beige and maroon, these seeming to be the main colour scheme for the room, that covered the floors, converging at its centre in spiralling patterns.



He also scrutinised the various pieces of amateur art that hung in makeshift frames on the walls. All of the portraits were notably human. Starlo figured the maggot must have stolen them away from the townspeople and mimicked the way they decorated their homes. It was possible to happen upon a monster that held some form of sentience, but it was extremely rare. Why would it matter anyways? Monsters are pests to be eradicated. No two ways about it. Starlo shook himself back to the present and continued his scan. Two chairs and a small side table sat against the leftmost wall and various containers full of trinkets were placed neatly against the remaining three. At the far side of the room from Starlo, a space was left clear for another metal door similar to the one he entered through. He sniffed deeply. The stench was sickening. The beast was close.

Starlo produced a set of goggles from his coat and placed them over his eyes. Flipping through the settings, he found heat-seeking and began to scan the room. As he searched the ceiling, he soon found a solid body of heat seeping through the metal, moving slowly across the room. This was it. The rat was attempting to ambush him in this room, likely hearing his movements. Starlo padded lightly backwards. The rat would drop from the ceiling right in front of him and he would skewer it. He produced a dagger from his coat and stood ready. Moments ticked by in silent readiness as the beast grew closer to him. Suddenly, it burst from the ceiling, grotesque claws flailing. It had broken through just before Starlo had predicted it would, leaving it outside of his reach. He took a step back. It was even more hideous than he had imagined, its black fur oily and patchy and its beady eyes unnervingly twitchy. The beast began to babble incoherently in place. Starlo tensed, ready for anything. He could see it telegraph a leap forward with arms outstretched. Before the beast could execute its strike, The Cardinal was upon it. He delivered a precise blow to its gut, tossing it to the floor a few metres away. Before it could recover, he pounced upon it with his knife, ready to swiftly finish the job. He had made a crucial error. The rugs on the floor were not just for decoration, they covered the holes left from the extraction of the base's machinery.





His foot had been caught in one of these holes. He tumbled to the ground, his dagger falling from his grip. Before the beast could fall upon him, he spun to his right, flinging out a pocketful of black powder into the air. As the beast set upon the place he was just moments before, Starlo struck a match and set the powder in the air alight. The rat-man was flung against the far door by the force of the blast, causing another rumble in the building. It hung limply where it sat, its beady eyes stunned into a low twitch.

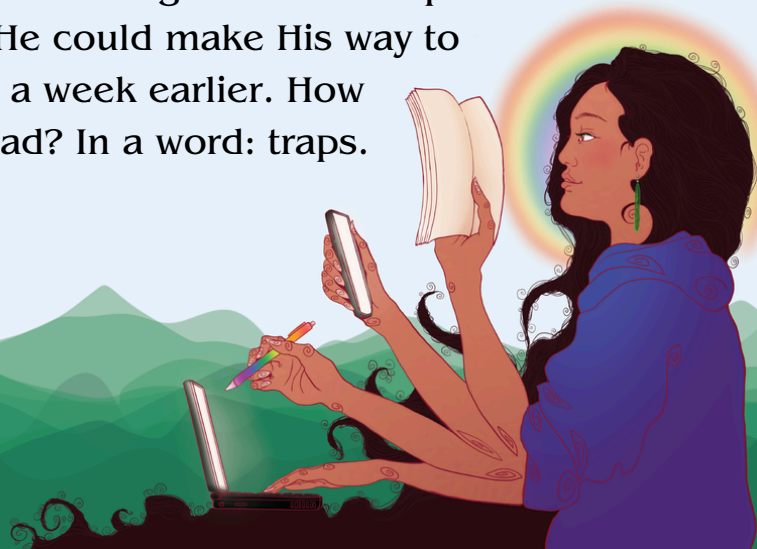
Starlo strode up to the beast and gripped it by the neck. It scrambled in place and clawed at his gloved hands to no avail. He tossed it aside, this time flinging it to the floor. Its hand caught in one of the equipment-holes, causing it to fall awkwardly onto its side. This again caused a deep rumbling throughout the building. Starlo now drew a new dagger from his coat and advanced with grim solemnity as the beast scrambled to get to its feet. Each small, precise step was like an earthquake as the building rumbled and swayed around him. The beast began to babble more incessantly now as its eyes widened, desperately trying to stay its untimely end. Starlo took his final step and crouched, poised to strike. Moments before the killing blow would arrive, Starlo felt a large impact on his stomach and was sent hurtling to the opposite side of the room. He crumpled against the far wall. In his place now lay a massive pile of collapsed rock and metal. He had been saved from being crushed somehow. As he fell unconscious from the impact, his last thoughts were frenzied and confused. Had the maggot saved his life?



## The Maggot

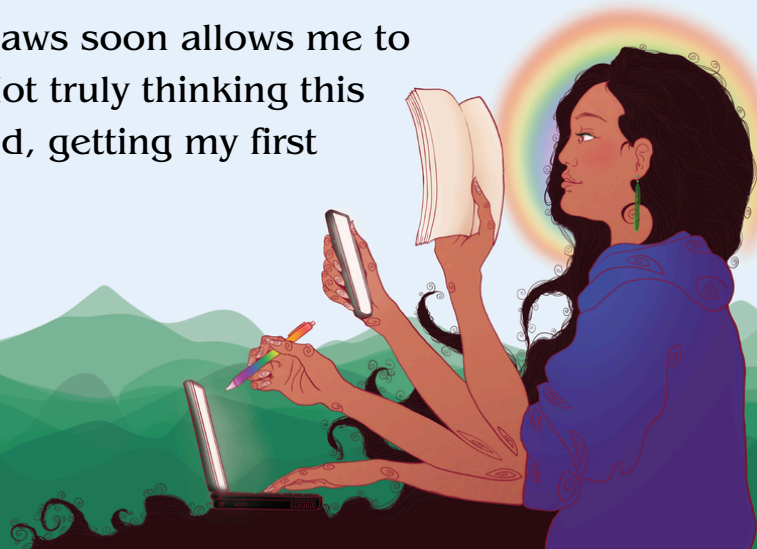
I take another look in the smudged pawn-shop mirror I bought before the townspeople of Red started putting up the wanted posters. Sighing, I sink to my knees. My fur looks oily and patchy and my eyes have gone all twitchy like they do whenever I get nervous. I should have bought another bottle of shampoo back when I was still welcome. The Cardinal will be here today and I haven't even cleaned the front hallway, much less gotten rid of all of the boxes of spare scrap in the living room. The paintings in there weren't my finest work either. At very least I had covered the unseemly holes in the floor from all the communications equipment I had removed for scrap. Three days ago, I noticed my hunter. I was out scavenging in the outskirts of the woods when I heard a steady breathing and hushed gait from afar. Scrambling up onto a nearby tree, I peered at this figure. Even someone like me could recognize The Cardinal with His iconic cloak and dagger. He was clearly trying to find me, scouring the ground and triumphantly producing a piece of my fur for His efforts. All rational thoughts of fleeing faded away as my eyes fixated on Him. He was quiet and controlled, yet He moved with purpose and fire, a great cloud giant. Perfect futures flashed before my eyes: dancing on the tip of the Eiffel Tower, running in the dead of night, fistfighting a crowd together in the rain. His eyes were moons and I was a bed of a thousand stars. Never had I felt this way about another person, especially one who was attempting to slaughter me. I considered dropping to the ground right then and there and introducing myself before my eyes caught on the dagger strapped to his belt. At that, I watched him go, wiping the drool from my mouth and keeping an agonisingly safe distance between us while following Him back to Red, stopping just short of the edge of the forest.

Since that day, I had tracked The Cardinal throughout each step of His journey, leaving little clues for Him so He could make His way to the army base I had holed myself up in a week earlier. How would I prevent Him from taking my head? In a word: traps.



The rest of the time I had left over from guiding my love was spent building one large trap a few metres from the door to the living room. I assembled it using the scrap from the communications equipment scattered across the base and by following a manual I found in Red's pawn shop. When a person walks over it, it gives way and causes them to fall into a pit that I can fish them out of later to officially "meet." I also made sure to dim the lights around that area so The Cardinal would not see any signs of the trap. Placed in a bottleneck in the base, He has to go past it if he wants to reach me. Since the trapdoors open through a slit in the centre, as long as He steps through the middle of the hallway and doesn't edge along the side, he should be stored securely below. I doubted he would overestimate me enough to edge along the side of the hallway considering his obliviousness thus far. Unfortunately, through all this, I had neglected the meet-cute aspect of our encounter. After all that work, He's going to be here today and my nice shirt isn't even dry from the river I washed it in. Sighing again, I put on my second-least holey shirt and turn to the mirror again, stopping suddenly. My ears prick. Footsteps. He's here! The knots in my stomach are tight enough to hold up a sail. I throw on my sweatpants and sweater and make my way out of my bedroom. Pouring over the script I had prepared in my head, I jog to the stairwell to open the door to the living room. A large boom and the rumble and creak that follow almost knock me off my feet. Did He just... explode my door? He just exploded my door! Did He get past my trap? God! I should have known He would be more cautious than I could have anticipated! Is He going to hate me now? Is He going to kill me now? Nausea sweeps through my body and I fall to my knees.

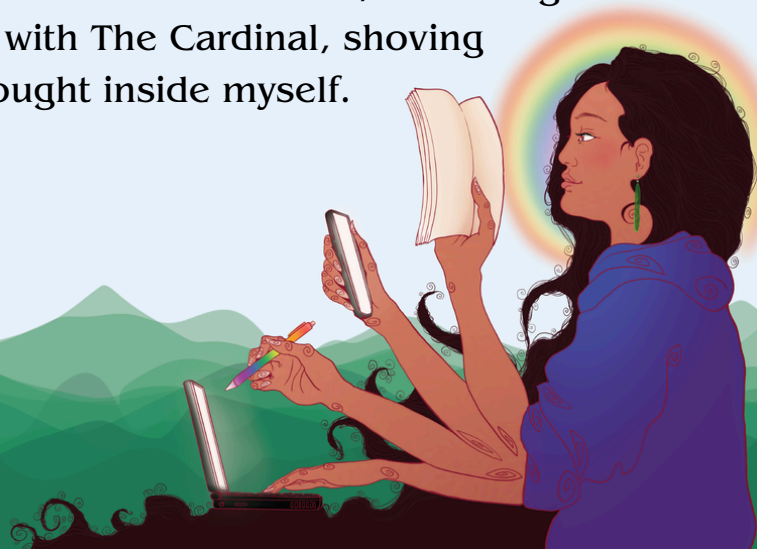
Thoughts ablaze, I feel the script crumble from my mind. I need to get down to the living room as soon as possible. I wait until His footsteps stop, then extend my claws, scrabbling at the floor about a metre from where He stands. The unnatural strength of my claws soon allows me to pierce through the metal of the floor. Not truly thinking this through, I flail and tumble to the ground, getting my first close-up look of The Cardinal.





He stands tall and solemn, His dark eyes boring into mine, His body calm yet tense, His lips locked in a tight line, His jaw... I find myself staring. Putting all my body parts in their right places and rising to my feet, I frantically think back to my script. "Uh, hi I'm The Car- wait no, that's uh... I'm Issac. Just Issac. How's your weather?" I'm babbling, I need to start again. "Huh hoh. Um, how are-" Before I can reach my arm out towards The Cardinal for a handshake, I feel His padded fist embedded deep in my gut. I fly backwards, hitting the floor hard. Staggering to my feet, I level my gaze at The Cardinal. As tears blur my vision, I watch Him fall to the floor, snarling wildly. His foot has been caught in one of the holes in my floor. Thank god I didn't have the means to fill that up before our date.

The only way out of the room is past The Cardinal. If I try to dig my way out, He will catch me before I escape. As fast as my raggedy muscles can take me, I dash past His recovering form. Another explosion sounds and I am sent flying once more. Through wide eyes, I watch His Holiness wreathed in fire and light, flying away from me, or vice versa. I hit the unexploded door and land awkwardly, scrambling weakly to right myself in time. He advances, gripping me by my throat. The taste of copper and salt fills my mouth. This is as close as I have ever been to Him. My heart somehow beats even harder than it already was. I scrabble at His gloved hands, frightened eyes twitching once more. I wish the first time we held hands was during a sunset on a boardwalk, not here. Anywhere but here. He flings me aside, a ragdoll to His Real Boy. My hand is stuck, my body is crumpled paper. I should have run away when I had the chance. I could have left as soon as I heard explosions. I could have not led a monster hunter into my den. I could ha—. A series of rumbles from above cut through my train of thought. Something is about to crush my God to death. I babble inanely to stay His untimely end. He will not listen. His eyes are so sad from up close. My legs tense, then shoot backwards, launching me forward. My torn and bent arms collide with The Cardinal, shoving him with a force I never would have thought inside myself. Then comes the pain.



Ten tonnes of sharp, raggedy steel fall from the heavens directly onto my forearms. His Holiness is safe. Pain sears its way through my mind like a cattle brand through butter. This many explosions were clearly not good for a base this old. My ears are ringing. I rip and tug at my tangled flesh, hoping for merciful release where there is none. I bear my teeth. My biceps quiver as I lean towards my left arm. I begin to gnaw. Out of the corner of my eye, I see My Cardinal. In His placid stillness, love replaces ruthlessness. Hours pass. Severed ligaments, shrapnel, and the outline of a knife fight for prominence in my vision. When I scream, He comforts me. When I bleed, He sings. It is soft but it grows constant. I sing along. It is a song about dancing in a crowd of people. We perfectly harmonise dissonant chords. In that moment we are two choir boys locked accidentally in the music department overnight. We are lying on the front porch of the house the party is happening at, laughing together. We are gleefully butchering roadkill, not caring if the guts get on our clothing. I nibble through the final tendon, grinning madly. Falling onto my back, I giggle gaily. Glitter-rays of moonlight filter through the rubble of the ceiling. Spotlight on the lovers. I plead to be brought to him. There is not enough of me left to get there.

I fall gravely ill.

I love you, Jesus Christ.

I do.

