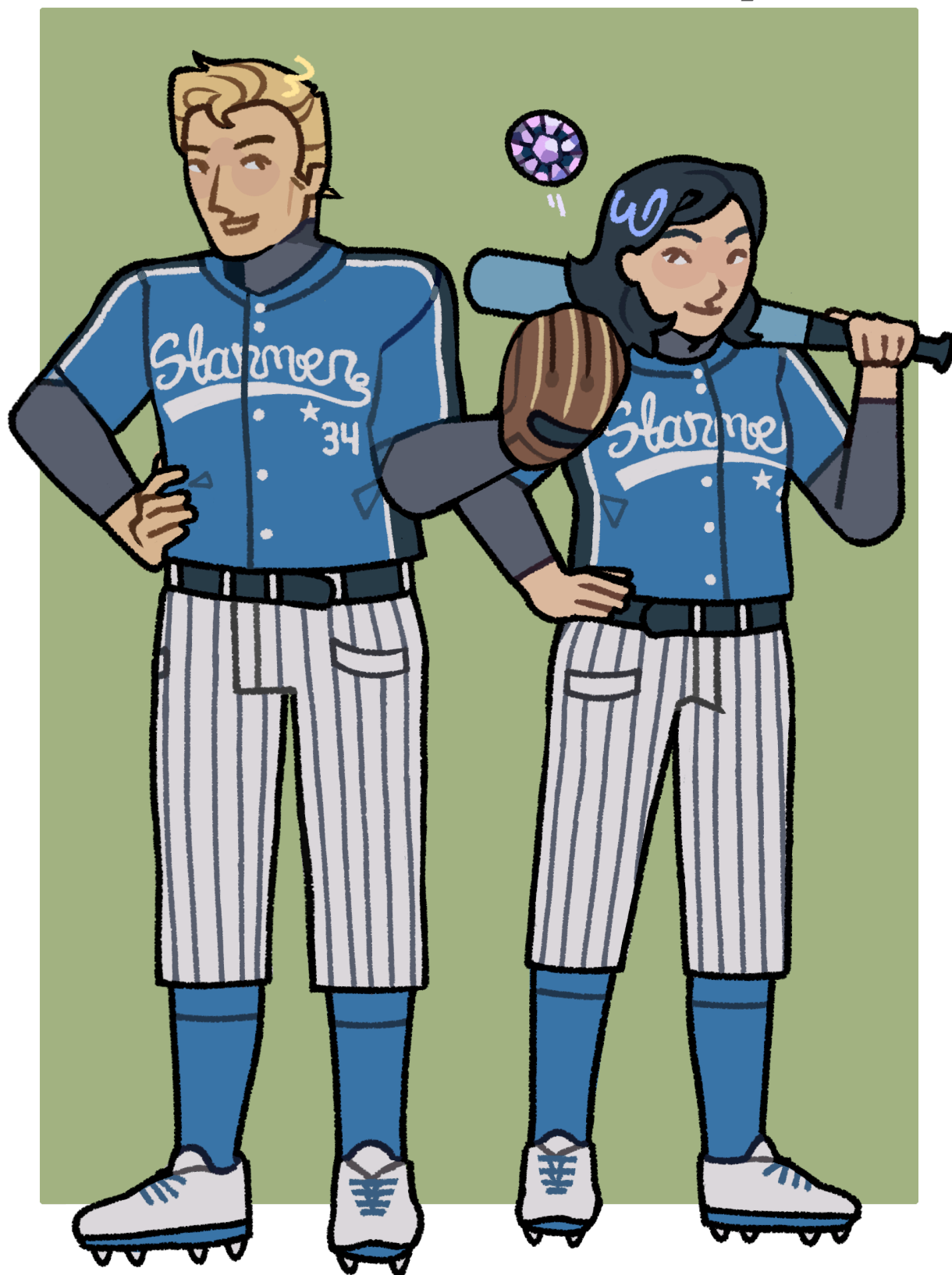


CWED 30

Issue 3, September 2025





Zine Issue 3

Editors: James Wylder & James Hornby

Contributions by: Xavier Llewellyn, L. Alves, Thien Valdram,
James Wylder, Hunter O'Connell, Dillon O'Hara, Leela Ross, Bex
Vee, and Aristide Twain

October 10th, 2025

(It's still the September issue, shh)

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Formatting and design by James Wylder & Aristide Twain

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From the Editor's Desk

Welcome back to *Cwej30*! We're celebrating the 30th Anniversary of Cwej, of course, but today I want to take a moment to remember someone who was an integral part of making *Cwej: Odyssey* happen. You see, Jhe Sang Mi comes from the universe of the *WARSONG* series, which was co-created by the amazing Chuck Kallenbach II. Chuck was a huge influence on me as a writer, and was integral in supporting us at Arcbeatle Press as we started working towards being a publishing house.

Chuck sadly passed away recently, leaving me devastated.

He was a good man, who taught me so many lessons, and who was always willing to help out and lend an ear. He invented so much of the amazing universe of *WARSONG*, and without him Chris and Sang Mi wouldn't be going on their amazing adventure together at all.

The world is a poorer place without him. He'll be greatly missed.

This is a difficult time in the world, and we hope that you're holdin' in there as best you can. As you see, this is the September issue. Only it's coming out on my birthday instead! Not in September! Life causes delays sometimes. But we keep pushing forward to tell stories, and we're glad you're along here for the ride.

Thanks for your patience.

This issue is special, we have two fantastic interviews about the amazing new *Cwej* two-in-one book (*Dread Mnemosyne* and *When Winter Comes*), as well as four incredible stories. Xavier Llewellyn, L. Alves, and Thien Valdram really came through here, and you're in for amazing treats from them

Enjoy!

—James Wylder

CWEEJ

ODYSSEY



Rodney Didn't Help Him

By Xavier Llewellyn

Illustrated by Bex Vee

The haze of the early morning sun filtered through the grease-stained windows of The Horned Bull as Rodney was guided to his high-top seat by a young waitress—young enough to be his daughter. She introduced herself, in a broad Appalachian accent, as Anna-Mae.

“I’m new here,” she went on, while sunlight sparkled in her dyed ash-blonde hair as he looked, fixated, at her chest. She downplayed her discomfort and continued her job, taking his order—a disappointingly ordinary request of ham and eggs on toast, and a cola to drink—which was the same meal Rodney had ordered virtually every morning for far too many decades to remember. Rodney liked predictability, although he wasn’t so much as *organized*; he was the type to meander through life, uninspired for anything grand.

He had wasted most of his life, never being one to take chances. He had never loved, always too afraid to ask girls out in his youth—or now, and spent his life alone, miserable, in a dead-end job. He made little money, had few possessions that meant anything to him, and his family had died long

ago. He had no pets. The only thing he did was sit on his couch, beer and chicken tenders in hand, watching late-night reruns.

He wasn't unique. There were a million people like him. His hair was grey and thin, skin ruddy and fattened, his clothing unremarkable. Just stained jeans and t-shirts.

There weren't many people in The Horned Bull at this hour, much less anyone he recognized. Even as insular as Rodney could be, all he recognized were the cowboy Miller brothers who claimed to be plumbers, who once somehow made his already broken sink trap spew dirty, smelly water all over his kitchen.

The bar itself was nothing amazing. It was a shabby-looking place, paint peeling, yellowed and faded, tabletops scratched and the varnish worn away, the fake wooden floor tacky as one stepped on it, and all illuminated by sickly orange bulbs. But the food was serviceable, and that's what mattered to Rodney.

All of a sudden, a woman sat herself besides Rodney, to his right, not even waiting for the waitress to greet her. Rodney paid her little attention, more focused on his rumbling stomach. After a minute, he realized that the woman hadn't called the waitress over, and he shot a sly look at her from the corner of his eye. He was taken aback by what he saw.

What stood out, most to him, was the fact she was dressed for a funeral; she was wearing a silken, voluminous, trailing gown, decorated with frills, lace and ruffles, with a thick, dense veil, preventing virtually any light from penetrating within. He let out a startled yelp, reminded of not only a horrible old hag from some late-night horror film, but of his long-dead, nasty, hateful grandmother, and he wasn't entirely sure which scared him most. In the middle of his shocked reaction, his steel-toed boot collided with something hard on the floor, which was neither the bar-table or the stools. For what he had kicked, moved... and clanged. The woman stooped over, not saying a word, and shifted what he took to be some sort of box draped in a black cloth, one just as ominous as the fabric of the woman's dress, to her side farthest away from him.

He reasserted himself, trying to make himself seem oblivious to his accident by looking around for the waitress, in a terribly unconvincing fashion that resembled a theatre kid who took themselves to be far better at acting than they really were.

"That's alright." She spoke coolly, responding to an apology he hadn't made. "Accidents happen."

He turned slowly to face her, wincing in discomfort. He felt as if hot lights were shining directly on him, as if his body itself had welded itself to the cracked leather seat. A bead of sweat ran down his forehead and dripped onto his cheek. He was entirely unable to move.

"...you're... going to a funeral, then?" he choked out, barely more than a whisper.

She continued to look at him, or at least Rodney guessed that she was, for it was hard to tell due to the veil, but didn't say a word. Rodney tried another track, with even less confidence.

"I can call the waitress over?"

“That will hardly be necessary, for I am not hungry.”

“I—um, then, why are you here?” he asked, more intrusively than he wanted. He immediately regretted the action, although the woman continued to remain still.

She didn’t respond.

“You remind me of my grandmother,” he added after a while.

“Do I?” she finally responded. Rodney was torn between mild relief and yet more horror as the woman seemed to be interested with small talk. “What was she like?”

Rodney swore reflexively, then winced. “I hated her,” he explained. “She used to hit me, to punish me, even if I hadn’t done anything wrong. But I still get awful nightmares about her.” Rodney, normally, would not have been so open, even if anyone had cared enough about him to ask about his childhood. But now? He felt as if he was a nut that had been hit with a hammer, his innards crumbling out of his cracked shell.

“I guess we’re all haunted by the ghosts of our past,” the woman responded sagely after a long moment, in a surprisingly apologetic tone. “I suppose you could make amends. Perhaps you could do me a favor?”

“How would that benefit me?” he frowned.

Despite being unable to meet her eyes, he had the distinct feeling she was glaring at him. All of a sudden, he decided, whatever this woman’s request was, he’d do it just to get rid of her. She appeared to understand this, somehow, and continued:

“Shortly, two people will come here. One of them will be a man, tall in height, blonde in hair. The other a teenager, dark haired and much shorter. What I ask of you is simple: tell them about your ghosts.”

With that, the woman, as abruptly as she appeared, stood up, her box in arm, and left, the glass door swinging behind her. Rodney slumped forwards, head in hands, processing whatever the Hell it was that just happened to him. Perhaps he had fallen asleep? He knew that not to be true, and, to that effect, Anna-Mae asked where his friend had gone as she brought over his breakfast, telling him that as soon as she turned to take the completed meal from the chef, the woman had simply vanished.

* * *

“What a dump.”

Sang Mi was not impressed. Chris had decided that they should wake up early that morning, and thus her anxiety about falling asleep quickly the previous night resulted in her being entirely unable to sleep at all. It didn’t help that she swore that she saw a cockroach in the bathtub in the shabby motel they stayed at, a few miles west in the denser area of Louisville. They had been driving all day, that day, and only crossed into Kentucky as the sun set and bathed the city in an orange blanket.

Not only was she irritable with Chris for his stunt, it was all for nothing anyway, as they didn't exactly have a schedule to stick to. A few minutes before she had said something to this effect, or perhaps, more accurately, snapped at him with cattiness atypical of her usual friendly nature. Chris had sensed his error and offered to take her to get a proper breakfast, something they had been unable to get so far on their trip.

"Come on, it's not *that* bad. It has character! Look at that authentic, side-of-the-road diner aesthetic! A true nineteen-sixties throwback. Something straight out of a movie."

"A horror movie, more like it. And it looks like it's from the nineteen-sixties because," she paused, gesticulating her arms towards the diner for dramatic effect, "It hasn't been redecorated *since* the sixties. With our luck, Norman Bates will be taking our order and Leatherface cooking our rashers. Human rashers made from dumb teens."

Chris shook and lowered his head in defeat and headed inside. Sang Mi wasn't too far behind.

Inside, Sang Mi only had to take a quick glance at the sordid state of the eatery to look up at her friend and glare. Chris, unaware of the death stare, was simultaneously engaged in polite chatter with the waitress whilst being entirely oblivious to her flirtatious advances. She led them to a booth, asked them for their order, and began walking backwards before stumbling into a table and knocking over a bottle of ketchup. She hurried off in embarrassment.

"Dude, you do realize she was flirting with you?"

"No she wasn't," Chris said too confidently, then stopping to consider the possibility. "Was she?"

Sang Mi rolled her eyes.

Chris was about to open his mouth to apologize again for the lack of sleep, but was interrupted when a greasy looking man sat next to him.

"I, uh, hi?" Chris offered a hand to shake; Rodney didn't take it.

"I've been told that I need to tell you something. I wouldn't normally talk to random folks like y'all, but this woman in this eerie black dress made me—" He stopped himself, realising he was sounding like a child, and changed his tune accordingly.

He began his tale of woe.

* * *

Many decades earlier, ten-year-old Rodney, on his brilliant blue bicycle, sped along Taylorsville Road, alongside his friend Michael, one wintery evening. Rodney's blue bike was the subject of envy of his fellow pupils, which he reveled in. He took a lot of joy parading it around and showing off, as he had worked hard to save up for it, and this was the first time he had something to be proud of. He had spent the past three summers running errands for his neighbors, and, when needed, cutting their lawns and shoveling snow. Given his despondent home life, even his clothes were ratty and several sizes too small, and his parents couldn't afford to buy him much of a daily lunch or school supplies; Rodney was often bullied, beaten and bruised, but he never seemed to let them get to him.

As the duo slowed down by the Pope Lick intersection, Michael suddenly had an idea.

“Hey Rod, I dare you to go onto the trestle bridge. For five minutes.” Michael had a wicked grin on his face, with the sharp angles of his sharp face illuminated by the cold sun.

“What, no!” Rodney argued. “That’s really dangerous! My old man told me never to go up there, or he’d hit me with his belt.”

“If you do, I’ll let you raid my candy jar...” Michael manipulated the situation, aware that Rodney never had the chance to have candy, especially as Michael always refused to share. It was a tempting offer and Rodney, pining for the taste of those chocolatey goods, couldn’t resist, even with the threat of his father’s punishments.

“You’ll have to leave your bike with me.” Michael tried pulling the blue bike from Rodney’s hands, but the poor child clung on.

“I, um, I’ll take it with me. On the bridge.” Rodney began to suspect his friend’s actual motive, but, as much as he didn’t want to believe it, he wasn’t going to take that chance. If Michael did take his bike, he’d have no chance of getting it back; Rodney’s father was a coward and a suck-up, and worse still Michael’s father was his boss.

They waited a while, without conversation, until a freight train thundered over the bridge. If a train was on the line, it would be a while before another came along. Rodney scrambled backwards up with the hill, dragging his bike behind him. The sun had now set and the area, shadowy, dark and cold, sent chills up his spine. He took a second to take in the reality of the situation, to see just how dumb he’d have to be to attempt this. He toed onto the railway track and inched closer to the beginning of the bridge, only now grasping just how high up he was. Worse still, there were gaps in the planks, so that he could see the earth beneath him, and there weren’t any sides to the bridge.

It was just a sheer drop down to the unforgiving, cruel ground below.

“Do it then,” Michael taunted.

Preoccupied with fear, he hadn’t noticed Michael follow him up.

“Mike, I’m really not sure about this. I wanna go home.” He pleaded.

“Too late, a dare’s a dare. And you wouldn’t want me to tell everyone you’re a chicken, are you? A wet, raggedy little chicken who’s too scared to even walk on a bridge?”

Rodney gulped, fortified himself, and began his treacherous feat.

Take one step, pull the bike close. Take on step, pull the bike close. Take one step, pull the bike close. Don’t look down. Don’t look down. Don’t look—

He looked down. Rodney was not quite midway across the bridge, but just over the creek. He wobbled. The world spun beneath him. He got down on his knees, grasping the rails for support. He felt like he was going to be sick.

He heard a laugh far below him. Michael had done a runner, got back on his bike, and hurried away at full speed.

Rodney was all alone.

The sun had fully set now and he was in near pitch blackness. He blindly fumbled with his schoolbag and retrieved his solid metal flashlight. Its dim orange glow did little to help, but he could just see the wooden beams beneath him.

He wept. He begged God for his mommy, but He didn't answer and his mom didn't save him.

"He-eh-eh-eh-ello?" came a voice, out of the void. Rodney tensed up, then began shaking as he panned the torch around him. "He-eh-eh-eh-eh-eh-ello?"

Rodney's mind had gone blank; he had forgotten how to move, how to crawl, how to flee.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Something was nearing him. Rodney swore it came from his left, so he jolted his flashlight in that direction, only to see the faint silhouette of a man bounding up the side of the steep bridge with impossible ease.

"He-eh-eh-eh-ello?"

"Please, luh-leave m-me al-al-lone," he wailed between sobs.

The shadowy figure flung himself onto the top of the bridge, crouching on all fours before standing up on his legs.

"Are you my frie-eh-eh-eh-end?" the strange man called to him. If Rodney wasn't any wiser, he would have thought that the man almost sounded... goat-like.

Rodney focused his flashlight towards the figure. The amber glow barely illuminated him, but Rodney could see that the man was only wearing pants; he was otherwise nude, but extremely hairy. Rodney then came to the realisation that the man's pants were, in fact, *not* pants, but thick, bushy hair, not unlike the shaggy strands that covered the man's head, face, chest and arms.

"I would really like a frie-eh-eh-eh-end. I'm lone-eh-eh-eh-ly!"

The man's legs were also weird. It wasn't just the hair; they were bent, crooked, misshapen. The joints went all in the wrong directions.

Rodney sobbed harder.

The man only now sensed the boy's fear and tried humming, as if he were a mother soothing her ailing baby, but this only freaked Rodney out more. Rodney let go of his bike and scrambled over it backwards, eyes and flashlight fixed on the being.

The man tried to follow him, his arms outstretched, attention likewise fixed on the boy, and this was his mistake. The man tripped over the bike. The bike tumbled off side, falling into the creek with a hefty splash. The man clung onto the side, hanging on with all his strength, but Rodney could see he was struggling. Rodney watched, petrified in fear, while the man's fingers slipped, one by one.

A minute later, Rodney was all alone.

An hour later, Rodney was still alone.

As the sun peaked, hours later, Rodney finally moved, and went back home.

He never again took any chances. He never took any risks. He never again hoped.

His spirit had been crushed, and a great guilt placed on his shoulders. He had realized, in the days and weeks that passed, after being grounded and punished by his father, that the man had meant him no harm, and had just been as lonely as he was.

And Rodney had not helped him.

* * *

Rodney's version of the story had left out many of the details. Rodney hadn't the strength to talk about his regrets, guilts and pains, and had only—in a frank and ineloquent manner—retold the tale hastily and cursorily.

As such, Chris was interested, but unsatisfied; he could tell there was more to the story, and hoped Rodney would elaborate, but nothing came, and he finished his coke.

"Well, I've done my part. I'll be gone." Rodney stood up and left the building without another word or so much as a glance backwards.

The duo was quiet as they heard the distinct splutter of a noise engine rev up and just as quickly fade into this distance.

Chris was the one to break the silence.

"Well, that was—"

"So help me if you make some cringey one-liner, Chris. I'm not in the mood." Sang Mi interrupted brusquely.

Chris tried a different tack.

"Do you reckon that man, whoever he was, had met... you know...?" he trailed off, not needing to specify the identity of the woman, as he and Sang Mi had only met her themselves not long prior.

"I guess so." She shrugged. "A woman in a creepy black dress sure does sound like Sal. And she told that man to tell us of that 'monster' he met; three guesses what she's trying to get us to do."

"Yes, it all adds up. After we finish up here, what say we go poke our noses at the railroad?"

Sang Mi grunted in agreement.

After a moment of silence and idle contemplation, Anna-Mae brought them their breakfast, balanced in her arms. She laid the plates in front of them, fixing a smile towards Chris.

“You have a really nice forehead,” Chris offered, remembering what his friend had told him and attempting to reciprocate the flirtation. He did not, however, think through what he said and it had the opposite effect that he intended; Anna-Mae’s smile dropped, replaced with a nonplussed frown. She abruptly left them to eat without another word.

* * *

They wasted no time in driving to the trestle bridge that ran over Pope Lick Creek. Chris parked their car safely down the road, a short distance down from the bridge. The bridge was next to an intersection, and on its opposite side lay a gas station. As the duo walked down to the bridge they had to avoid a couple of oncoming cars.

“You know,” Chris struck up conversation, “That guy’s description of the creature he saw reminds me of Greek mythology. You’ve heard of satyrs, right? Half-men, half-goat people?”

“Until recently I would have thought you were having me on, but now? Why does it not surprise me?” Sang Mi sighed. “So they exist, do they?”

“...and so do the Greek gods themselves. Sometimes. My employers have, uh, an understand with them. But people like them come and go, real one moment, then not a moment later.”

Sang Mi took this in her stride. Somehow a bunch of muscled men in togas commanding the elements didn’t surprise her any more than goatmen.

They had reached the trestle bridge, which contrary to the ethos of the stories told about it, was unexpectedly ordinary. The road and sidewalk were clean and well maintained, the grass well-trimmed, the foliage and trees thick and dense. The structure of the bridge itself was rusty, but not dilapidated.

“Let’s hope appearances can be deceiving, eh? ‘Cause this is anything *but* spooky.” Chris was obviously disappointed. “Shall we take a look around? You have a nosey at the creek while I wrestle with the bushes?”

“Can you do the creek? I actually can’t swim. Never had the opportunity to learn where I lived.”

“You know, that should have crossed my mind after our adventure with Oscar. Alright then, shall we meet back here in half an hour?”

“Sure.”

Chris took to the creek like a rabid dog. He quickly yanked off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers, and bounded into the flowing current. He splashed around, arching his posture to inspect the river bed and bank. Underneath the roadbridge that formed part of the intersection, the only notable find was a bit of vulgar graffiti.

He decided to move on and made his way further upstream after grabbing his footwear, in preparation for climbing over the mass of low-laying vegetation and underwood. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, as he used his right foot to push the growths away from the ground. Human-sized goat droppings, maybe? Evidence of weeds being nibbled at?

After spending ten or so minutes doing this without any success, even leaving the creek itself and traipsing a small distance under the shadow of the several-hundred foot long structure, let out a dry laugh, bored out of his mind. Yet, for good measure, he decided to give his method one last go, one last kick. He punted a rather snide-looking bramble, and—*CLUNK!* His foot collided with something.

Crouching, he inspected what he had struck: jutting out of the dried mud like some sort of ancient burial marker, was the rusted handle of a bike.

Chris grinned.

* * *

Sang Mi didn't share her companion's enthusiasm. Unlike him, she had little desire to hack through the thicket, to come out on the other side looking like a madman with twigs and leaves knotted in her hair. Besides, as she made her way along the raised tarmac path that went parallel to the road, she found that the far side was fenced off. Ominous 'DANGER' and 'NO TRESPASSING' signs placed by the Norfolk Southern Railway were obvious warnings to any foolhardy adventurers who found that a wire-mesh fence wasn't enough of an indicator that hiking up the embankment and onto the bridge that loomed dizzyingly high up off the ground was a bad idea.

Instead, she set her sights on the gas station.

She darted around a pick-up truck as she crossed the car park, nearing the building. Incidentally to the supposed satyr running around these parts, the physical architecture of the Circle K vaguely reminded her of a Greek temple, as the front of the store had some six concrete pillars holding up a canopy.

Inside the store, she grabbed a coffee for herself, a cola for Chris, and a handful of snacks, as she thought that not only would they need refreshments, it would give her an excuse to strike up a conversation with the clerk.

She glanced around for any sign of local memorabilia, but with no sign of any she plonked her goods down on the counter. The clerk,—Otis, going by the nametag on his red polo shirt—greeted her and started scanning. He was a thirty-something African-American man, with a fade and a wiry beard.

"So, Otis," she started. She saw Otis raise an eyebrow upon hearing his own name, but she didn't falter. "I hear that a goatman lives up on the bridge over there?"

"Let me tell you the truth," he laughed dryly. "It's a load of old nonsense. Just tall tales made by people who are bored or who have something to sell. There's nothing there but death—and not by

the hooves of some demonic creature, but by people climbing on that bridge and paying for it with their lives.”

The tone of the conversation had turned dour.

“So it’s all made up, yeah? But, like, what *are* those tall tales? I’m curious.”

“I don’t know the full details, not that anyone agrees on them, but one story claims there was this Satan-worshipping farmer who became half-goat after a sacrifice gone wrong. The other main story was that the goatman was a member of a circus train who swore revenge on its captors, and for some reason decided to do that by haunting a rickety old bridge—either that or it escaped after the train derailed on the bridge.”

“Pretty inventive, huh?” Sang Mi played along. She didn’t want to come across as a loon if she started insisting that the goatman was real.

“That’ll be \$12.98, including the bag. You paying with card?”

She looked at him with an empty expression. *Card?* she thought. *Oh right, yes, money.* She feigned a smile while Otis reciprocated with the blandly tired look of retail workers everywhere.

She shook her head as she dug out a couple of scrunched up bills from her back pocket, which Otis tried to flatten, with little success, before inserting them into the till. Sang Mi thanked him as she grabbed her plastic bag in one hand and her coffee in the other, left the shop, then jogged across the road back to the shadow of the bridge.

She saw Chris maniacally grinning from a mile off.

“Chris, what’s that smile for?”

He explained what he found.

“There’s a guy in that gas station who wouldn’t believe you and would think you’ve gone a little looney,” she jabbed an extended thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the building.

“Probably. Anyway, I don’t think there is anything more to do here. Reckon we should come back at night? Things do go bump in the night, after all.”

Sang Mi agreed, sipping her beverage as she shook the bag at Chris. He grabbed it and began rummaging around in it delightedly, finally pulling out what he wanted and plonking himself gracelessly on the grass. There, he crossed his legs like a child and tucked in. Sang Mi stood silently, continuing to sip at the hot drink. The more she drank the brighter her mood became.

“I’m sorry, Chris,” she attempted. “I’ve been grumpy. I really am.” She rubbed her head in a vain attempt to ease her thumping headache she only now realized she had.

“Honestly Sang Mi, I hadn’t noticed,” he lied, attempting to make her feel better.

They killed the rest of the day by visiting Louisville’s amenities; they wasted an unreasonable amount of time due to Chris’s prideful refusal to ask for directions; the Louisville Slugger Museum

& Factory was an enjoyable visit, even in spite of their shared ignorance of baseball; they were impressed by the veneration of the late Muhammad Ali at his eponymous museum; and they spent the rest of the day at NuLu, topping everything off with a meal at an oven-baked pizza place. They were living in the moment, basking in the wonder of life itself.

* * *

They were welcomed back to Pope Lick Creek by the hoots of an owl, perched on a tree, high up and out of sight. Chris parked the car in the same place as earlier, and while he grabbed a pair of flashlights for himself and Sang Mi, he was taken aback by what she was preparing.

“The baseball bat? Do you really think that’s necessary?”

From the baseball factory they visited earlier, Sang Mi had insisted on having a personalized bat to commemorate the visit, which had cost a small fortune. Yet Chris thought it a small price to pay for her joy over the stained, wooden-bodied club, which she had customized with a blue barrel and a short, inscribed message:

Kalangkata: The Wandering Star.

“Absolutely!” she grinned. The angle of light from Chris’s flashlight cast shadows in the recesses of her face that made her expression look more akin to that of a maniacal nutjob. He let out a laugh then tossed her the other flashlight before she remembered to ask: “Considering we’re about to trespass, do you have those wire cutters on you?”

Chris promptly dug the pair out from the trunk and brandished them in the air triumphantly.

They wasted no time in cutting through the fence and ignoring the multiple and very literal warning signs, checking over their shoulders to make sure nobody was near, climbing up the very same bank the man at the diner had described, and making it onto the railroad line. They safely crouched in the shadows for a while, telling jokes as they waited for a train to pass them. After the train thundered past, which took an annoyingly long time given its length and slow speed, Sang Mi realized that they could have just waited in the car. Chris aptly facepalmed. They got up and brushed the dirt off their trousers.

“That guy wasn’t exaggerating when he described this thing,” Sang Mi groaned as she tentatively placed a foot onto the first beam.

“Hey, it’s not that bad!” Chris made a show of confidence, walking backwards along the bridge with ease. “Just don’t look down.”

Sang Mi shot him a look but he was too oblivious to notice, caught up in the exhilaration of the height. Up here, the breeze tousled Chris’s hair majestically. Yet for Sang Mi, it seemed to unfairly whip across her face.

“Ahoy there, Goatman!” Chris called out into the void. “We’re here to talk! We’re your friends!”

“CHRIS!” Sang Mi worriedly hissed at him. “Keep it down! Someone could still hear us.”

“Such as?” He heeded little for the fact that unwanted attention could actually land them in trouble with the authorities.

Instead of replying, Sang Mi merely pointed in the direction of the gas station and, as he followed the direction of her finger, he let out a deflated “Ah”.

They continued on, now in silence, hoping for any sign of anything out of the ordinary. Although they didn’t admit it to each other, they felt as if they were wasting their time. Even though they knew Sal expected them to find something, this felt to them more as if she were playing an unfunny prank and was about to appear any moment and shout “Bool!”, as nonsensical and dangerous an act like that would be right now.

It was lucky for them, for at that precise moment, the fabled goatman made an appearance.

Yet, in spite of them being prepared for everything...

...they weren’t prepared for this.

“Is that...?” Sang Mi started.

“What the *Hell*?” Chris finished.

The goatman was decidedly translucent and glowed a pale blue light.

“*It’s a ghost?!*” Sang Mi was dumbfounded.

Chris scratched his head, entirely unsure what to do.

“He-eh-eh-eh-ello?” the goatman wailed eerily. “Fri-eh-eh-eh-ends?”

“Yes, yes we are!” Chris’s instincts kicked in and his mind snapped into action. “We are your friends and we’re here to help! So what do you need help *with*, Mr Goatman...? Uhhh, do you have a name?”

As the spectral being neared them, Chris and Sang Mi tried to get a better look by illuminating it with their flashlights, but the light passed right through.

“If any physicists were here they’d have a field day with this.” Sang Mi grinned. “This is fascinating.”

“Frie-eh-eh-eh-end?”

Chris sighed. He had hoped that communicating with a ghost wouldn’t have been like in stories. Still, he tried again.

“Yes, we are. I’m Chris Cwej, and this is my friend Sang Mi. And we’re *your* friends too.”

“Fri-eh-eh-eh-ends.” It said more assertively. It had now reached, more-or-less, the midpoint of the bridge—

—and, without warning, fell sideways into the darkness below. The duo craned their necks over, just as its unearthly illuminance disappeared. Without words, they ran back to the end of the bridge

and slid down the embankment. Chris grabbed a spade from the car, Sang Mi left her baseball bat, and they made their way to where the goatman fell, marked by the rusted handle of a bike.

“We should help him pass on, shouldn’t we?” Sang Mi suggested. “Find his bones and give him a proper farewell, from friends. That should work, shouldn’t it?”

“Worth a shot!”

Sang Mi held her flashlight steady as Chris rested his on the ground and started digging around the bike, using the edge of the shovel itself to hack through the web of roots. His strength made quick work of the job; as Sang Mi hauled the bike backwards, out of Chris’s way, he started digging with his hands and placing any bones he found in a neat pile.

There weren’t many. Over the course of decades, the goatman’s corpse had likely been scavenged by wildlife, and the remnants further distributed by weather. In all, there appeared to be a few odd fingers, a femur, a few ribs and a fractured skull.

* * *

As the sun rose once again, Chris and Sang Mi had work to do.

After a quick minute of research on Google, they decided on Jefferson Memorial Forest as the perfect place to lay the goatman’s body to rest. They carried its bones in a cardboard box they plucked from the gas station as they walked deep into the forest, ascending the terrain to a high point that overlooked downtown Louisville. Chris dug a grave and lowered the remains into it.

“Sang Mi, do you want to say a few words?”

“Sure. Um, Mr. Goatman, while we didn’t really know you, you were probably really nice, and it’s awful the way you died. I’m sorry you never had friends in life, but now, you have us.” She spoke softly, yet uncertainly. The city caught her eye and she added: “And the city and the forest. You’ll have the world of humans and the world of nature buzzing around you, forever, and you can become one with the Earth itself.”

“That was lovely,” Chris smiled with great sincerity.

“I wasn’t that good. I just said the first thing that came to mind. I keep thinking I should just say a prayer—I just didn’t know if that would be...” She trailed off, and repeated a muttered: “It wasn’t that good.”

“You *are* that good,” Chris insisted. “Now, we’ve someone to visit.”

* * *

Rodney had just finished his meal of ham and eggs on toast and was heading back to his rusty, beaten truck. To his horror he noticed a car pull up with those two strangers from the day before and he rushed into his truck. They ran over, shouting hello, and began knocking on his window. He was just about to tell them to leave him alone when he noticed what the girl was holding.

No.

It couldn't be.

It was his bike. It was mangled, bent, rusted, muddy, and overall just scrap at this point, but *it was his bike!*

He slowly got out and fell to his knees, in complete shock.

“W-where did you find it?” he stammered.

“Pretty much exactly where you said it was,” blond man told him. “Same with the goatman.”

Rodney looked up at the man, his eyes filled with fright.

“Yes, that goatman. It never meant you any harm, you know. But we found it, or what was left of it, and gave it a proper farewell.” The man smiled reassuringly.

“And I think that’ll be the last people see of the goatman. It can be at peace and people won’t have a reason to risk their lives trying to find it.” The girl added.

Rodney was at a loss for words. He shook the hands of the pair and got back in his truck after putting his bike in the truck bed, and drove off.

He took in the rays of the summer sun, feeling the warm rays dance on his skin.

He felt renewed. The incident in his past, that had eaten so thoroughly at his mind for countless years, was now not so bad. He was feeling so much better, anticipatory of what the world could offer him. That night was far behind him.

And now?

A new lease of life lay ahead.

Always Be a Part of Me

By L. Alves

The gentle omnipresent rhythm of the road beneath the tires seemed of a piece with the night itself. Low and dark; as oddly comforting as it was vast and lonely; and nearly eternal—broken only by the occasional lane change or brief collision with a rumble strip in the case of the former, and by the illuminated signs and roadside lights which cut through the latter, seeming to hang at odd angles halfway to the pitch-dark sky.

There had been no roads like this on Gongen. The highways of America, on this parallel Earth in a distant past, were a much vaster and stranger network than any streets Jhe Sang Mi had ever travelled back home. Liminal. Liminal and lonely, especially after nightfall. There was a sense of total isolation out here, traversing the endless miles between destinations, one which was only intensified by the occasional reminders of human existence—the brief flicker of headlights from a passing car, the burning orange-on-black notice signs looming from the roadside, the occasional oasis of light stretched around a gas station or convenience store. Reminders which only served to bring the emptiness into starker relief. It was somehow hard to imagine the architects of any of these signs and signals as fellow people. They were simply a distant and unnerving presence, casting messages out into the eerie silence—like strange shapes passing beneath dark waters, or a fisherman's lure dropping in from somewhere distant.

Sang Mi sighed, leaning her head up against the closed passenger-side window and letting the gentle vibrations and the meaningless smear of roadside lights draw her mind from such gloomy thoughts. A dark highway past midnight was no time or place for deep thinking, especially not for someone who'd spent the evening reading all the best and scariest of this Earth's urban legends and creepypastas on the ancient mini-tablet device which Cwej had purchased. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. They *had* been encountering a lot of that sort of thing lately. It was good to be prepared.

She glanced at Cwej, who was staring straight ahead through the front window, making occasional adjustments to the wheel. She wanted to speak to him to relieve some of the loneliness of the dark highway—but it was strangely difficult, at night, in a place like this. The easy chatter which filled their daylight adventures seemed to dissipate at this hour, replaced with a soft and vaguely stifling veil which was nearly impossible to penetrate. It felt wrong to try to talk, this late at night. Their mutual state of awakesness was merely a practical necessity brought about by the strange realm that was the highway, one which it seemed somehow rude to acknowledge.

It was odd, she supposed, that the night should seem so lonely with her friend by her side. But the melancholy feeling was there nonetheless. A road, after all, was nothing more than an extension of its inevitable end. Every further mile that they travelled, the pressing awareness that their travels would soon be over weighed ever more heavily on Sang Mi's mind.

There was something comforting about travelling with Cwej. They *understood* each other, in a way that was unique among her friendships. There were parts of herself, and of her life, that Sang Mi didn't like, and she suspected that the same was true of Cwej. But when they were with each other—things seemed more balanced, somehow. More manageable. More able to be overcome. But the fundamental truth of their time together was that it couldn't last forever.

They were from different worlds, she and Cwej—different universes and times altogether, but also different lives. At the end of the day, she still had school, and friends, and things which she simply couldn't put on hold forever to travel the multiverse. Not to mention an uncertain future to face after that, the same which faced all of Gongen. And Cwej—Cwej had responsibilities which she still didn't fully understand, to Superiors whose identities she still couldn't quite grasp. Massive responsibilities, cosmic responsibilities - responsibilities which this final road trip could only delay for so long. Soon, very soon, their time together would end. And while that was a truth which Sang Mi had assured herself she could face, it wasn't a truth which she could face at two in the morning on the loneliest highway in the world. Not without letting that eerie melancholy feeling creep in.

The car jolted lightly as Cwej changed lanes, snapping Sang Mi once more from her silent ruminations. It was getting hot in the rubberized interior of this awful orange cube, she realized. She cracked the window, letting a fast-rushing burst of cool air hit her face, bringing with it the smell of gasoline and distant fried food and, somewhere beneath it all, the fresh scent of a summer night. She sighed. It reminded her of nostalgic nights on Gongen, time spent with dear friends. But just now, the thought of being back on Gongen was a sad one. It was an odd feeling, to think of her life and her friends that way. But it was difficult to avoid.

The glowing orange sign ahead read 'Slow Down. Sharp Turn Approaching.' Cwej leaned smoothly into the curve, then reached to turn on the radio. In the few seconds before the sign vanished from view, Sang Mi glanced back at it and read the words 'Fueling Up Ahead. Don't Want to Show Up at Simone's on Empty. I'm Not Staying.' Then it was lost in the darkness behind them.

But those signs didn't change. And what kind of message was that, anyway?

Static flared on the radio for a moment, snatches of random stations coming through. Cwej cursed lightly. The primitive device was never able to pick up a signal this far out—Sang Mi had realized that by now. They'd picked up a few CDs at a second-hand store called Sullivan's Curios, but those were still wrapped up in a bag in the back, alongside the projector which they still had yet to deliver. Sang Mi sat back in her seat, intending to let the rumble of the tires lull her to sleep.

The radio static suddenly pared into sharpness, the notes of a twentieth-century synth-pop song dancing forth into the night. She glanced at Cwej, hoping that the familiarity of their now-usual routine would break the awkward silence. He hesitated for a moment, listening, then shook his head.

"Nope," he said in Korean, his voice husky with tiredness. "Too old. Space Age music all sounds the same to me."

Sang Mi nodded, biting her lip as she listened to the song herself, trying to remember. She'd taken a class on twentieth-century popular media at Academy 27, and several of her friends were, as she'd have happily teased them, notorious nerds who had assailed her with music of approximately this vintage countless times. But in her case, their little contest had the added complication that any given song which might play on the radio station of this past era might simply not ever have existed at all in her universe.

After a few more seconds, she had it. They'd definitely covered this one during the Anglo-American unit, and it helped that the English title was right there in the lyrics.

"'Always Something There to Remind Me'," she proudly announced. "By..." She faltered. "I don't know," she admitted, scrambling for vaguely-remembered names. "...Duran Duran? Måneskin? Punchdown Krone?"

"The Naked Eyes!" Cwej exclaimed, snapping his fingers triumphantly. "I remember that one now!"

Sang Mi crossed her arms playfully. Cwej might have hailed from even further ahead of this era than she did, but he had the advantage of regular time travel under his belt, and she didn't.

She didn't.

She wasn't part of that world. And it was going to have to carry on without her, soon enough.

Feeling the melancholy tendrils creeping around her again, Sang Mi leaned back in her seat. The chorus of the song blared on as she finally let the rumble of the road carry her off to sleep.

* * *

Careful to keep glancing back at the road ahead, Cara lifted the worn old cassette from the centre console compartment and popped it into the tape deck, pressing play. She needed music right now. And 'Always Something There to Remind Me' seemed fitting. Happy that she'd rewound after the last time she'd listened to it—it was easy to remember when she only ever wanted to listen to the first song on the tape anyway—she let the music wash through the car as she turned onto a sudden dirt pathway and began the bumpy crawl towards the second-hand store which she'd discovered the day before. Simone had always made fun of her for her intensely mainstream taste in music—she was more of the Bikini Kill and Team Dresch persuasion of cutting-edge punk rock, while Cara couldn't stand the stuff—but honestly, she'd never minded. It was hard for her to mind anything that Simone did.

But there was no point in thinking about that. That was in the past. Almost. It *would* be, soon enough. After she'd taken care of this one last thing.

Pulling the car to a stop by the side of the path as the clanging synths of the song chimed, she pushed the door open and hopped down onto the gravel which lined the drive. The tiny shop—Sullivan's Curios—was almost a mile from her parents' town, and she wanted to be on the highway before sundown—but she hadn't had her wallet with her when she'd taken a nostalgic last look

around yesterday afternoon, and there was something in the shop that she needed. She only hoped it hadn't sold. But given how empty the place had been both times she'd seen it, that didn't seem like much of a possibility.

The ring of the bell as she pushed the door open alerted the shopkeeper, a cranky man in his mid-forties who'd refused to set anything aside for her, even when she'd promised to be back the next day. He frowned irritably, then returned to his paper. Cara nodded briskly back, then made directly for the shelves in the far corner.

It was still there. Relieved, Cara hefted the heavy wooden deer from its place near the top, leaving its matching double behind. She ran a finger along the dust-encrusted details; the careful lines of its muzzle and hooves. The adhesive sticker on the underside declared a price of thirty dollars, which was steep—but worth it, she thought. Fastening her grip around the middle of the sculpture, she lugged it back to the counter and placed it in front of the shopkeeper, wincing slightly at the fortunately-unwarranted thought that it might shatter the glass surface, then fished the money out of her wallet.

"This is a real classic piece," the man said as he counted the money, as if vaguely suspicious that Cara was not the right buyer for such an item. "There's a matching one, you know. I'd really have preferred to sell them as a set..."

"I can't afford both," Cara replied. "Is that a problem?"

The man hesitated for a moment.

"I suppose not..." the man replied, frowning as he wrapped the deer in newspaper. "But take care of it, will ya?"

She nodded, looking out through the transom window. The light was waning. It was time to go.

Back outside, she set the deer gingerly on the gravel, then popped the trunk. There was still a little space left next to all of her earthly possessions. She slid the deer in, newspaper and all, and pushed the lid shut. Back in the front seat, she started the tape playing again, and put the car into drive, turning back onto the dirt path and starting for the main road. The highway beckoned. She shuffled her hand around in the cup holder—enough change there to handle the upcoming toll booths. With any luck, she'd be at her new apartment by Thursday. Just one small detour to make first...

* * *

Sang Mi woke up, feeling an ache all down her back. That was the problem with sleeping while on the road, she thought—it wasn't nearly as comfortable as a motel, not that those were the height of luxury either. But they'd planned to drive this night through and only stop for a rest come the next afternoon, a plan which had seemed entirely sensible in the cheerful light of morning.

She peered through the front window. Cwej had slowed the car to turn into a gas station, which was probably what had jolted her from her uneasy slumber. The lot was eerily empty. They pulled up

between two pumps, and Chris leaned out the window, squinting at the prices. Rubbing her eyes, Sang Mi turned up the radio, hoping that they were now close enough to inhabited civilisation to have a choice of channels. There was a brief burst of static, and then it resolved into the distinctive opening notes of 'Always Something There to Remind Me'.

"This again?" she asked.

Cwej glanced over.

"Yeah, still static," he answered. "Sorry."

He pushed open the driver's-side door, then stepped out.

"I won't be long," he continued, before pushing the door shut again.

Sang Mi frowned—what had he meant by 'still static'? Still mildly unnerved by her earlier reading, she turned the radio off again, then glanced out the window. Cwej waved to her from the pump as he began filling up the tank. She waved back, then sat back in her seat, gazing out into the darkness. It was eerily black beyond the great overhead lights of the gas station—a silent wilderness, in which anything at all might lurk. One keenly felt the sense that this was an outpost in the wasteland; a fragile oasis surrounded by vast and unknowable things.

Sang Mi shook her head, resolving not to read any more scary stories for the duration of the trip. Probably best to try to sleep again, she thought, uncomfortable as it was. She settled in her seat and stretched her legs into the space beneath the dashboard, gazing vaguely through the window towards the starless ink of the sky above and listening to the soft clunk of the fuel nozzle in the gas tank. She let her eyes flicker from the lightly-glowing dials behind the wheel to the blinking radio clock to the rearview mirror above the window, in which she could see the row of gas pumps stretching out into the darkness behind the car.

Something tingled oddly in her peripheral vision as she stared through the reflected back-window. She sat up again. Her heart beating faster, though she didn't yet know why, Sang Mi shifted her gaze to the reflected forms of the backseat headrests which loomed behind her. There was something else in front of the one directly at her back, another form, partially obscuring her view.

Someone.

"Cwej!" she called, whipping fearfully around to look in the backseat. "There's—"

There was no one there. She turned back to look in the rearview mirror again, and saw only empty seats.

Cwej pulled open the door, looking concerned.

"What is it?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

Sang Mi looked in the backseat again, still seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

"There was someone in the car," she said. "In the mirror, anyway. Behind me, in the back seat."

“Damn it,” Cwej replied. “Was it another... thing? Another one of these *things*?”

“Creepypastas,” Sang Mi put in, nodding.

“I’m not calling them that,” Cwej said.

Stepping out, he took the fuel pump out of the car and got back in, then glanced in the mirror himself.

“After your time?” Sang Mi asked.

“*Before*,” he groaned. “You sound like a period novel.”

Sang Mi crossed her arms.

“It had a comeback,” she said. “Part of my gen’s slang.”

“And my grandma’s gen’s,” Cwej replied. “So... are we haunted, then?”

Sang Mi watched the mirror for a moment more.

“No, maybe not,” she replied. “I’m really tired. I think I might have just imagined it. But I’ll let you know if there’s anything else.”

Cwej nodded.

“Well, get some rest,” he said. “We still have a ways to go.”

That was good, Sang Mi thought, as she settled back in her seat. That was very good.

When next she awoke, there was a line of unmanned toll booths stretching across several lanes ahead, lights flashing and gates down. A white-on-green sign proclaimed that the cost was \$1.90, and also instructed passengers to have their money ready, an instruction which Cwej was rapidly attempting to obey as he fumbled in his wallet for the required change.

“They really charge people to use the roads?” Sang Mi asked drowsily. “I knew Earth was capitalist, but this is ridiculous.”

“I just can’t believe it isn’t all electronic yet,” Cwej mumbled back. “These must be the last vestiges.”

The car approached the toll booth, and Cwej rolled his window down to put the money into the tray. A few moments passed in silence, the gate not raising—then the booth speaker crackled on.

“Sorry for the delay,” came a pre-recorded voice in overly-cheerful tones. “Please wait.”

Then there was silence again.

“Now what?” Sang Mi asked.

Cwej shrugged.

“Hope it opens, I suppose?” he said, with a touch of weariness in his voice. He patted the wheel. “That or I’ll drive on through the gate and see what happens.”

Sang Mi laughed.

Outside the window, the toll booth speaker crackled on again, and Sang Mi strained to listen. But it wasn’t the pre-recorded voice this time. It was a woman’s voice, faded and fragmented—hard to make out.

“Can’t stay too long,” Sang Mi heard the voice mutter. “But I need to deliver it.”

“What?” she said aloud, unsure whether she was speaking to the voice or to Cwej.

“It’s important,” the static-choked voice murmured. “We won’t see each other again. I can’t let her forget me.”

The speaker fell silent.

“Did you say something?” Cwej asked, looking up from the awful book of jokes which he’d bought at Sullivan’s Curios. He had been reading to pass the time whenever they had nothing to do.

“I was just wondering what the heck the speaker was saying.” She frowned. “...You did hear it, right?”

“After the first time, you mean?” Cwej asked, looking mildly concerned. “No, I didn’t hear anything else. Did you?”

The speaker crackled again.

“Going to turn off at the convenience store a few miles from here,” came the voice. “Then straight on till morning. Can’t let her forget.”

There was a pause.

“Please help me,” said the voice. “Our time is ending. Don’t let her forget.”

“Sang Mi?” Cwej repeated, concerned.

Sang Mi was silent for a moment, thinking. Something in the strange voice’s plea had struck a chord for her. Whatever it was, it sounded like it really did need help.

“Yeah, I did,” Sang Mi finally replied. “There was a voice. Talking to me, asking for help.”

“Uh oh,” Cwej said wearily. “That doesn’t sound like the best of news.”

“No, I know,” Sang Mi said. “But it sounded... genuine. Is there a convenience store up ahead?”

Cwej unfolded his map.

“Yes,” he replied. “A few miles on. Why?”

Sang Mi hesitated for a moment. “I think we should stop there. That’s what the voice was saying, and I kind of want to check it out.”

“Are you sure?” Cwej asked. “We could have an anglerfish situation on our hands.”

Sang Mi nodded. “I know,” she said. “But we can handle that, right?”

Cwej grinned. “Oh, yes,” he laughed. “Together, I’m sure we could.”

Outside, the speaker crackled on again. Sang Mi listened for the voice—but it was the automated message, instead.

“All set!” it chimed. “Please move up.”

The gate lifted, and Cwej put the car into drive, picking up speed as he left the toll booth behind.

Yes, Sang Mi thought, staring ahead—together, they probably could. Together, they could probably do anything.

But their time was ending. She sighed, then turned up the radio to hear the sounds of ‘Always Something There to Remind Me’.

* * *

Cara stepped through the automatic doors of the convenience store, nodding to the tired-looking young woman at the counter. She needed the bathroom, and a map.

The first of her tasks completed, she crumpled up the paper seat cover (you couldn’t be too careful) and began to wash her hands at the only sink in the tiny convenience store restroom. Staring blankly at her own reflection in the mirror beneath the harsh unnatural lighting, Cara felt her thoughts drifting inexorably back towards Simone. Both a longing for the past, and a mild dread of the future. Those days weren’t behind her yet—she was still going to see Simone, one more time. And the thought that the end of the most important relationship of her life was still approaching even as it was long over made her feel mildly nauseated. Maybe it would be better if that end never arrived, she thought. Maybe it would be better to travel the final road forever, and never quite reach its finish. Delay the journey’s end into eternity, and always remain in the moment before the close.

She splashed water in her face, then stepped back into the convenience store proper. She put a quarter into an arcade machine called Blox Stacker and quickly lost, then took a map from the rack and brought it to the counter. The clerk took her money with one hand, sipping boredly at a cherry cola held in the other. Cara glanced down at the row of newspapers beneath the counter. *At Fifth Avenue Parade, Thousands Celebrate Gay Pride*, proclaimed the New York Times, halfway down the page beneath a headline announcing the death of Warren Burger. She looked away, busying herself with the map.

A shelf of tacky souvenirs caught her eye, and she sidled aimlessly over to it. Cheap keychains and bumper stickers. Items meant to be introduced into a journey solely for the purpose of serving as eventual mementoes of it. Premature earthly remnants of something which was not yet quite

over. To buy a souvenir was to declare the present moment past before you could even see the end of it.

But then, you could always see the end of a road. It was all around you, down the whole length of it. Souvenirs made sense, Cara supposed. Things always ended, no matter how great they were, and then they faded away. And when they ceased to be present, they were inevitably forgotten. Unless you preserved the remnants—encased them in a little plastic trinket, a totem of the past, which could spark the last little flecks of memory.

Of course, it didn't have to be plastic. And, she thought ruefully, it didn't have to be cheap.

Tucking the map into her pocket, she headed back towards the doors. She had a deer to deliver.

* * *

"Don't mix all of those flavors," Cwej said.

"Why not?" Sang Mi asked, as she ran her hand along the row of dispensing levers on the convenience store slushie machine, depositing a pump of each into her plastic cup.

"It won't taste good," Cwej replied, shaking his head, as Sang Mi popped the cap on and put in the straw. "So... this toll booth voice. What was it saying?"

"She said she needed help delivering something," she said. "Because... because she was afraid that she was going to be forgotten. And she said she was going to this convenience store."

She took a sip of her slushie, then cringed at the taste.

"It just sounded like she really needed help," she continued. "Even if she *was* a demon or something. So... I don't know. I'm going to take a look around."

Cwej nodded.

"Alright," he said. "Be careful. And don't wander off. I need the toilet."

Now alone but for the clerk, Sang Mi cast her gaze around the store. The speakers were playing 'Always Something There to Remind Me', faintly. Nothing much out of the ordinary—except for one thing which caught her eye: a battered old arcade machine with the words 'Blox Stacker' painted at the top. The screen was flashing and flickering strangely. She drew closer. The falling blocks of pixels had formed themselves into rows, and were gnashing like teeth. Sang Mi fished a quarter from her pocket and put it into the machine, and the blocks vanished—replaced by words.

HELP ME, they read. I NEED HELP.

"Who are you?" Sang Mi asked, leaning closer.

I NEED HELP, the pixels spelled. OUR TIME IS ENDING. BUT I WANT HER TO REMEMBER ME.

“I understand,” Sang Mi said. “But you have to tell me more.”

SIMONE, read the screen. SHE NEEDS TO HAVE THIS.

The words split apart, and the pixels reformed themselves into the image of a deer. Sang Mi’s eyes widened.

I’m CHECKING INTO THREADS BUDGET MOTEL, said the pixels. AND THEN ON TO HER HOUSE. BUT I NEED H E L P...

An address flashed on the screen. Then the screen flashed, and went out.

“Everything alright?” Cwej asked, appearing behind Sang Mi. She jumped, then nodded.

“Yes,” she said. “I think so. But we need to go to the Threads Budget Motel.”

Cwej frowned.

“But we have a reservation at-”

“I know,” she interrupted. “But I think it’s important.”

She strode towards the doors, then paused and turned to the clerk.

“Do you know where Threads Budget Motel is?” she asked.

The clerk frowned.

“Just a few exits from here, I think,” she replied. “I haven’t heard anyone mention that place in ages.”

Sang Mi thanked her, put her unappealing brown slushie into the trash, then turned to walk through the doors. As she did, she caught a strange sight reflected in the glass—a woman whom she didn’t recognize, blurred and distant.

Sang Mi nodded to her, then stepped through the doors, Cwej following closely behind.

* * *

Walking through the fog of chlorine which clung to the carpeting outside the room housing the shabby motel pool, Cara approached the front desk of the Threads Budget Motel. The desk clerk was typing on a bulky beige IBM, working beneath the crackling flicker of a sparking ceiling light on a cheap countertop which had seen better days.

“Check in?” she asked.

“Yes,” Cara replied, handing over her ID. “I have a reservation.”

The clerk glanced at the ID, then nodded and handed it back.

“Second floor,” she said. “Room 220.”

Upstairs, sitting on her bed, Cara found that the TV flickered on and off just as much as all of the lights did. Sighing, she turned it off, then lay silently in the darkness.

It shouldn't have been like this. She was moving into a new city in just a day. A new apartment, a new job, a new life. It should have been good. Except, of course, that it couldn't possibly have been.

She couldn't be with Simone. Not in this life. Not if she wanted to *have* a life.

But a life without Simone was no life anyway.

Things were changing, Simone had said. Things wouldn't be the way they were now forever. But Cara couldn't quite believe that. Maybe things would be different someday, but she couldn't see the end from where she stood now.

Her time with Simone was coming to an end, and it hurt terribly. But she couldn't bear the thought of it all fading away. She patted the wooden deer from Sullivan's Curios, which was sitting on the bedside table. A deer, just as they'd seen on their first hike together. A memento. A remnant. A souvenir. One last stop.

Cara turned off the flickering lights and went to sleep.

* * *

Sang Mi stared in shock at the burnt-out wreck which stood before her.

"Yeah, this was it," the jogger they'd stopped was saying. "Threads. Big deal when I was a kid, I remember. Thirty years ago this month, actually. Some kind of electrical problem."

Sang Mi shared a concerned glance with Cwej, then turned back to the jogger.

"And... everyone died?" she asked.

The jogger frowned awkwardly, rubbing at her head.

"Well, yeah, I'm afraid so," she replied. "Awful."

Cwej nodded.

"Thank you."

"No problem," the jogger replied, heading up the road again.

They stood in silence for a moment.

"Well... I guess it *was* a ghost," Cwej said.

"Yeah, but—she needed *help*," Sang Mi replied. "She needed to deliver something. A deer."

Cwej nodded.

"I know, but—I doubt anything she needed to deliver survived *this*," he said sadly.

Sang Mi mirrored his nod.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “I guess Simone will have forgotten her, whoever she was.”

“Why do you say that?” Cwej asked.

Sang Mi felt tears welling in her eyes.

“Because... because their time came to an end,” she replied. “That’s what she was saying. It ended, because it had to end. And now it can never begin again. I don’t know.”

She wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

“Sang Mi—” Cwej began, concerned.

Something caught Sang Mi’s eyes among the rubble, and she ran to it, then pulled it from the wreckage. It was a board—a board with words burned into it. *She patted the wooden deer from Sullivan’s Curios, which was sitting on the bedside table, the ashes spelled. Cara hefted the heavy wooden deer from its place near the top, leaving its matching double behind,* they said in another place.

She looked at it for a moment. Then her eyes widened.

“Cwej!” she said, determination setting in again. “We need to go back to Sullivan’s Curios!”

“What?” Cwej asked. “But that was half a day back!”

She ran to the car.

“We have to,” she said. “And then... we’re going to Simone’s house.”

* * *

As the chiming tones of ‘Always Something There to Remind Me’ faded out for the hundredth time, Cwej stopped the car by the house bearing the address which Sang Mi had glimpsed on an arcade machine’s screen. Sang Mi popped open the door, hauling the heavy wooden deer—marked up to \$70 after three decades on a shelf—along with her.

“Are you sure about this?” Cwej called.

“Always,” Sang Mi replied, marching up to the door. She rang the bell.

A woman in her 60s opened the door, then looked confusedly at Sang Mi.

“Are you Simone?” Sang Mi asked in English.

“Yes?” the woman replied. “Do I know you?”

Sang Mi took a breath.

“Don’t ask me how,” she said, lifting the deer as high as she could manage, “But this is supposed to be a gift from—”

“Cara,” the woman breathed, tears shining in her eyes.

Sang Mi nodded, setting the deer down on the doorstep.

“You remember,” she said. “I... wasn’t sure you would.”

“Always,” Simone replied. “It’s been thirty years. But she’ll always be a part of me.”

She lifted the sculpture.

“We loved deer,” she said wistfully.

“So do I,” Sang Mi said, nodding.

Simone smiled.

“Then you should have it,” she said, putting the deer back into Sang Mi’s arms.

“Wh—but what about—?”

“You drove all this way,” Simone said, nodding to Cwej, who waved back. “Damned if I know how or why. But you deserve it. I’ve got something better: all the memories.”

* * *

Back in the car, Sang Mi sat quietly for a while as Cwej drove away, on towards their next destination.

“Cwej,” she said at last, holding up the deer. “I want you to have this.”

Cwej chuckled.

“Nope,” he replied. “You’re stuck with that thing now.”

He paused, then sighed.

“Look, Sang Mi,” he said. “Everything has to end eventually. But—that woman was right. We’ll *always* have the memories.”

Sang Mi nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

Cwej smiled. “I’ve been around a bit. So take it from me: you don’t need souvenirs,” he said. “Because the journey never really ends. There’ll always be a little piece of us left travelling these roads forever.”

Sang Mi smiled back.

“Then let’s make sure it’s a really good one,” she said.

“You know, I’ll bet we could get some actual radio stations out here,” Cwej said. He turned on the radio.

They roared down the highways of America beneath the rays of the shining sun, 'Always
Something There to Remind Me' playing at full blast.

The Warehouse Anomaly

By Thien Valdram

“I got it!”

Stan Roberts turned from his chair, eyebrow raised, as Edward dropped a series of tapes on his desk. Analogue tapes.

“Got what, exactly?”

“The footage, the *proof*.” Edward was agitated, almost jumping up and down. “This is the remaining security footage from the haunted warehouse...”

Stan sighed. “For the last time, it’s *not* haunted. Some kids made that up. The story’s been done, the source was tracked down.”

Edward pointed at the tapes. “But you didn’t have *these*. Security tapes going back to the late nineties. It’s all I could get, but these ones were all held for review. They’re important... I know it.”

“Alright, alright. I’ll humour you,” Stan conceded. It was a slow newsweek anyways, and perhaps there was *something* worthwhile in them. He gestured over to the VCR, which lay gathering dust. “But if this is a waste of time, then we’re not calling you back”.

“Oh I assure you, it won’t be.”

Edward excitedly put in the first tape. It showed an hour of footage of military equipment being loaded into a warehouse, dated 12/19/1998. Stamped for retention from erasure due to ‘proof of previous ownership’.

And so the trend began.

Three hours of darkness with occasional animal scratching noises, dated 01/10/2004, marked for ‘lawsuit against pest control’.

Half an hour of darkness interrupted by a ball of light that blew out the camera, dated 05/16/2017 and labeled ‘Insurance claim for faulty electronics’.

Edwards was particularly excited about a tape dated 02/23/2020 that contained a broken window and evidence of animal activity. Until a teenager snuck through the window, scooped up a cat, and climbed back out. The label was ‘Vandalism’.

Until they, at last, reached the final three tapes. Dated 05/02/2025—three months ago, and just four months after the site had been purchased by its current owners, some new-age spiritualist group called the Ascendancy.

Edward’s excited demeanor had given way to nervousness as the tapes revealed years and years of nothing. Every single one a dud. He’d of course argued the evidence meant something, but without a smoking gun he was pointing at nothing.

The first of the last three tapes was of the warehouse entrance, and was the earliest timestamped of the three.

Edward put it into the VCR with bated breath. Stan was tired now, tired and annoyed. The fate of Edward's job hinged on the contents of these tapes.

ASCN WRH ENT.—2:30 05/02/2025

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY—DO NOT COPY

The following tape contains the first of three accounts of a break in dated 2nd May 2025 at the Canton Ohio Ascendancy Warehouse. The culprits have been identified as 'Sarah Jhe', a former student of Violethill Illinois's Hughes High School and 'Christopher Cwej', a former teacher at the school. Records indicate the two to be related, but attempts to contact them after the break in have been unsuccessful. Their whereabouts are presently unknown.

The recording has been subtitled from Korean.

The warehouse door swung open with a creak and two figures, Chris Cwej and Sarah Jhe stood in the light. Dropping a crowbar, Chris reached over and turned on the lights.

"Is this really the place?" Sarah asked.

"That's what the kids said: 'haunted'." Chris gestured towards the camera. "It's worth checking it out. Could be alien."

Sarah smiled nonchalantly. "Part of the mission, of course.

"Naturally." Chris grinned back. "We have to make sure there aren't any other projectors lying about. If there was one it would explain the noises they'd heard from here, and the disappearances. Although that doesn't rule out the supernatural of some kind," he said, oddly excited.

"Then let's look around!" Sarah dashed forwards into the room, before glancing back. "Y'know, to make sure it's safe and all."

"Alright, I'll search the boxes back there." He pointed behind the camera. "You check the offices. Call me if you see anything strange."

"Got it." Sarah held a thumbs up, and the two left in either direction, out of the camera's view.

Several minutes of silence followed, broken up by occasional shuffling or muffled muttering offscreen.

The silence broke with a crash, followed by Sarah's call: "Chris! Something here!"

Chris came back into view, running past. The camera went still again for a minute or so, before the two came walking back into shot. "I could've sworn there was something there," Sarah said.

“Are you sure?” asked Chris. “I checked, and there was nothing.”

“I saw something,” Sarah insisted. “I mean it. I think we better keep looking, just in case.”

“Maybe a little longer,” Chris conceded. “Just... no more knocking things over. We’re not supposed to be in here, remember?”

“Right, yeah, sorry,” Sarah replied.

Chris put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s fine Sang Mi. It’ll just make things a little awkward when whoever owns this place comes looking for who broke in here.”

“Can’t you just wipe the cameras?” Sarah asked.

“They’re analog— old technology, chemicals on film rather than numbers on a hard-drive” Chris answered. “Either way there’ll be evidence: you can’t wipe analogue without destroying the footage outright. People would notice.”

Together with Sarah—or, as he’d always known her, Sang Mi—Chris walked off once more in either direction.

After a few more minutes of silence, Chris called out once again. “Sang Mi! I’ve got something!”

“Hold on... hold on!” Edward interrupted. “We have those tapes too! We can see what they saw!”

He hurriedly removed the tape that was playing and replaced it with another. By now, Stan was at the very least intrigued. Edward pressed play on the second tape, labeled ‘Security office’. The VCR whirled as it began playing...

ASCN WRH OFF—2:32 05/02/2025

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY—DO NOT COPY

The following tape contains the second of three accounts of a break in dated 2nd May 2025 at the Chicago Ascendancy Warehouse. For more detailed information see the first account.

The recording has been subtitled from Korean.

Sang Mi swung the office door open and came inside, turning on the lights to reveal the room. The place was abandoned, filled with cobwebs. It clearly hadn’t been used since the warehouse transferred ownership.

“Well this is creepy,” said Sang Mi. She walked over to a set of drawers and idly opened them. Inside were a few pages of documentation. She leafed through them, decently uninterested, until she stopped on a newspaper clipping and read out, “Teenagers fake ghost sighting? Gab, a hoax! We’ve been tricked...”

She sat back on the chair. “Back to the car I guess...” She sighed. “But we just got here, and Chris was so excited by their story...”

She paused for a moment, before walking over to the closet and opening it. Inside were old military uniforms.

“Well, when there’s no ghost...” Sang Mi pushed the closet over, the contents spilling out across the floor. She called out, “Chris! Something here!”

Chris kicked the door down as he entered. “What happened?”

“I saw something moving, it went through the closet. I tried to see what it was but...”

Chris walked over to the wall, pulling out some sort of device. He ran it over the wall. “Not detecting anything,” he announced. “Are you sure it wasn’t your imagination?”

“No.” Sang Mi turned away.

Chris sighed. “Well, there’s nothing here now...” Still holding the device aloft, he left through the door, Sang Mi in tow.

The camera recorded an empty room for a few minutes before Sang Mi reappeared, shut the door and hung her head. “That was stupid. Why did I do that?”

She sat down against the wall, holding her head in her hands. “I just... I don’t want it to end... The longer it takes...”

Chris called out, “Sang Mi! Got something!”

The tape ended, and Stan glared at Edward who, more nervously, said, “I... I have one more showing the back of the warehouse. We’ve almost got the proof now...”

He ejected the second tape and put in the third.

ASCN WRH BCK—2:32 05/02/2025

FOR INTERNAL USE ONLY—DO NOT COPY

The following tape contains the second of three accounts of a break in dated 2nd May 2025 at the Chicago Ascendancy Warehouse. For more detailed information see the first account.

The recording has been subtitled from Korean.

Chris strolled in from off camera and swept his device over the boxes. He sighed. “Nothing.”

He glanced off camera. “Sang Mi was looking forward to a genuine ghost hunt,” he said, disappointed. He sat down near the boxes with his thoughts. “Surely it couldn’t hurt to be absolutely sure. After all, you never know...”

He began opening the boxes, discarding the arbitrary items of Ascendancy property that could be considered as potentially connected to a haunting.

He was interrupted by a cry from offscreen. “Chris! Something here!”

He darted off camera, leaving several minutes of footage of the artefacts strewn across the floor. When he returned, he took his device and waved it back over the boxes. He hit the side of one in frustration.

“Still nothing...”

He put his hand on his chin, setting his device down beneath the boxes. He pressed a button and the image of a ghost appeared, humanoid, translucent, pale and cloaked in an old robe. Some tropes he’d pulled from some low budget horror schlock he’d watched during a previous trip to Earth.

Chris called out, “Sang Mi! Got something!”

The girl was with him in moments. “God,” she gasped. “What is that?”

“I don’t know,” Chris replied.

Sang Mi stared at it in disbelief. Then it flickered. Sang Mi raised an eyebrow. “Uh... Isn’t that...”

She waved a hand in front of it and nothing happened. Then she reached down and collected Chris’s device from the ground. The hologram disappeared. Sang Mi held the device up to Chris.

“Sorry.” He smiled sheepishly. “You just seemed so excited and I didn’t want you to think you were just seeing things.”

Sang Mi laughed, and the tension she held about lying to Chris fell away. “And here I was thinking I was immature for lying.”

“You did?”

Sang Mi held her hands up. “I found an old newspaper saying teenagers made the whole thing up. You’d all but jumped at the chance to come here, so I didn’t want to just leave right away...”

“You could’ve just said, so you know.”

Sang Mi laughed. “Right back at you.”

Chris held out his hand. “Alright, we should probably get going. And Sang Mi?”

“Yeah?”

“Best we don’t try to make things interesting for one another like that again. I’m sure this trip’ll be plenty interesting on its own. Ghosts or no ghosts.”

Sang Mi smiled. “Yeah, alright.”

The two walked offscreen, and there the tape ended.

Edward stammered “No... Wait... There’s still the first tape, there’s still evidence, something has to happen...”

Stan tapped his watch, irritated. “You’re trying my patience, Edward.”

“Please!” Edward desperately reached for the first tape and put it back in. Stan raised his eyebrow, but allowed it, though his fury was obvious.

Cont.

Sang Mi and Chris arrived back at the warehouse door.

“D’you ever think there was anything here?” Sang Mi asked.

“I had the footage cross referenced against the internet and my Superiors’ records. All resolved and settled. Nothing supernatural, nothing paranormal.”

Sang Mi shrugged. “Ah well, maybe next time.”

Chris nodded in agreement, and the two left the warehouse behind.

Edward turned to his boss, who glared daggers at him. “I swear, something weird happened in this warehouse,” he pleaded. “I mean it. How did that Chris guy create a hologram otherwise?”

Stan sat back against his chair. “Edward...”

“No, wait—please.” Edward was practically begging. “I can get more proof. You just have to give me time.”

“Edward,” Stan said again — “You’re fired.”



The World Series

*By James Wylder
Illustrated by Bex Vee*

Deep in the trees, where the branches crowd out the light like intertwined fingers, there was a madman. He needed subjects for his experiments, subjects who wouldn't be missed. He found them in children—abandoned and forgotten. Orphans who had been shunted off to the local asylum.

The madman was named Doctor Crow, and he had been working on a secret serum, which he injected into the children's heads—causing them to swell up like melons.

The children turned feral—their teeth grew sharp, and they ate anything they could.

Nurses.

Each other.

And finally Doctor Crow himself.

Now they roam the forests, feasting on flesh, wandering in the darkness—”

“With their melon-heads?” Sang Mi cut in, her voice as dreary as her disposition. The black suits and ties she and Chris were wearing certainly didn't help that.

Carol looked to Cwej hoping desperately he'd back her up. "It's a real local legend!" She held up the bobblehead of the melon-headed child. "And that's why we're naming the baseball team after them."

Chris looked over at Sang Mi, trying to keep his composure better than her. Unfortunately, he was well aware Sang Mi was a better liar than him, and he also knew she was doing a bad job that was better than his own bad job right now. "...It's certainly an interesting proposition but, uh, you don't hear people saying to name their team after say, the Jersey Devil."

Carol crossed her arms, still holding the bobblehead. "You mean like the New Jersey Devils? The hockey team?"

"Oh shit, really?" Chris gave Sang Mi a look of pleasant surprise. She shrugged. "Well I still don't think it's a very catchy name."

"With all due respect, you're just consultants, and this is my team. Starting a minor league team isn't easy, and I've invested everything I have into buying this baseball field, renovating it, and scouting out players. And we have a backer who's going to make this place a real success... even if they keep saying we should name the team the Corvids."

Chris raised an eyebrow. "Like that Doctor Crow?"

"I guess. I think we should stick with the simpler reference. Regardless, I appreciate that a generous donor paid for you to come here to assist us, Mr. Rodonanté and Ms. Kim, but I really think the Melonheads name is what suits our community."

Sang Mi, aka Ms. Kim, scooted her chair back and got up. "Okay, well, I think we should go then, Mr. Rodonanté."

Cwej nodded. "Sure. Not sure how much good we'll be here at this point. Hopefully some of our suggestions were helpful."

"Yes, I mean you did realize we were getting double billed by a few of our vendors, which is going to reduce our overhead tremendously, so I do thank you for coming."

They each shook Carol's hand, and filtered out. Chris made his way from the office to look out over the small stadium. Sang Mi scampered to follow him. "Did we really have to wear the suits? And why did we use our mothers' maiden names?"

Chris stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "I really wanted to feel like we were undercover."

"You didn't change your name at the school, and we were undercover there for like, a while."

That was a good point, and he didn't have a good answer, so he changed the subject. "So, what do you think, about the Melonheads?"

"I think that she's going to need to rebrand as fast as she can once it sinks in that It's a terrible name for a sports team."

He twitched and looked over at her. “No, the cryptids! The legends!” He threw his hands out, trying to gesture in a way that captured the mystery of it, but instead made him look like an insecure bird trying to take off.

“Oh. Well, I mean, they’re in our book, aren’t they? They don’t sound real, but *nothing* has sounded real. It’s not like I expected to meet vampires, or shadow people, or giant turtles.”

“There’s a lot of strange things in the world. And this trip has been filled with coincidences. I knew a Dr. Crow a long time ago, well, nearly the same name. So, I was curious.”

“I’m guessing you’ve concluded it’s nothing?”

He nodded. Then he shrugged. Then, as if hoping it would make him look more confident, he gave a second firmer nod. “Well, whatever. Let’s hit the road. Not every town is going to have a real mystery.”

* * *

And so, they abandoned the search for the Melonheads. Sang Mi already had their hardcover copy of *Roadside Oddities of America* out on her lap, flipping through the pages for something interesting. Chris shifted into his seat, turning out onto a country road. “Sorry that was a waste of time.”

Sang Mi screwed her lips to the side, holding a page of the book in the air as it bounced on her lap. “Isn’t that the whole point of what we’re doing, wasting time?”

“I wouldn’t call it a waste, we’re on an important mission.”

The page stayed held in stasis between her fingertips.

He glanced over, flicking the turn signal as he did so. “Are you getting homesick?”

“No, no, it’s not that. I don’t want to go home. It’s just...”

Trees flicked past the window. A stray dog perked its head up from some roadkill as they zipped by. “I can’t know unless you tell me.”

“It’s nothing, don’t worry about it.”

“It’s really okay—”

“I said don’t worry about it!”

He held his gaze on her—probably too long for someone who was trying to pretend they were a safe driver—but as she leaned over and let her head bang at the window, he couldn’t help but go through an incredible list of improbable possibilities about what was bothering her. He started with fairly reasonable thoughts:

“Hey, Sang Mi, you’re not... in a love triangle with a dog-person and a pirate, are you?”

She tilted her head up from the window. “Stop kidding arou —” She saw the look in his eyes. “Oh, you’re serious. Are uh, dog-people real? And why was that example so specific?”

“Never mind, happened to a friend of mine,” he mumbled. “I’m just worried about you.”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s just the storm clouds in my head. Just ignore me,” she said as she went back to flipping through the book, examining an illustration of not a cryptid, but what looked like a very large ball of twine.

He tried to think of what to say, but it wasn’t long before the first roar of thunder—and *that* thunder was far from metaphorical.

“I don’t remember rain in the forecast?” Sang Mi said, looking up from a page on the Flatwoods Monster. She blinked, then rubbed her eyes to check if she was seeing things right. “Hey, Chris, the sky went dark? It was blue just a second ago.”

Of course the sky had gone dark. He really should have been expecting more things like this when they were looking for monsters. It almost made him want to call it quits and just drive to the lodge early and hope they didn’t get bored in the mountains playing board games. “Yeah, that’s bad.”

She pulled her shoulders in. She was probably thinking of their car wreck by Elkhart that had put her in the hospital when the same thing had happened there. “It’s not just like, when they turn the lights off in the dome instead of dimming them?”

Chris glanced at her. “Shouldn’t that all be automated?”

She shrugged, and he realized her eyes were filled with draining hope.

“No, it’s not like that. But we’re going to be okay I—”

Chris looked back to the road, and with a curse hit the brakes hard. But not fast enough—the sound of their front tires popping caused both of them to groan.

Then it started raining.

“...Was that a strip of spikes in the road?” Sang Mi asked.

“Sure looked like it.”

“That’s not normal either, right?” He could feel the spiking anxiety in her voice.

Chris shook his head, and looked out his side window. The forest on that slide sloped up onto a hill, and at its peak was a large and aged brick building, either a boxy manor or a fancy sanitarium. “I’ll call for roadside assistance. But it might be a little, considering the sudden and unnatural night.”

“We should just wait this out. Take turns napping and being on watch til the lights come back?”

Cwej bit his lip, pulling it back over his teeth till it snapped back into place. “...Yeah. Yeah, let’s do—”

Something rammed into the car.

Not with the force of another car, it had come from the side facing the forest after all, causing the Honda Element they'd dubbed 'Odyssey' to rock, just like Ulysses's boat buffeted on Neptune's waves.

Chris and Sang Mi looked at each other, and Sang Mi gestured for Chris to look behind him. He turned in his seat, only to see a being with a bulbous head, light purple skin, yellow eyes, sharp teeth, and claws, dressed in hospital clothes—and balancing on the shoulders of another small bulbous-headed being.

"It's a freaking Melonhead!" Sang Mi said.

"It's kinda cute, in a weird way," Chris said.

"Seriously?"

As they bantered, more of the Melonheads started to make their way through the treeline, poking their heads out from behind trunks at first, and shuffling their way forward curiously. Some were holding hands delicately, comforting their friends as they approached the car.

Sang Mi softened. "I guess they *are* kinda cute, now that you say it—"

The Melonhead by the window let out an ear-piercing shriek, its mouth wide showing all its razor teeth in full gleam, and started pushing the car again. The car rocked harder.

Sang Mi un-softened. "They're going to turn us over, we have to get out—"

The assembled Melonheads charged the car, and Chris's eyes turned serious and cold. He reached over, and opened Sang Mi's door, unbuckling her, and shoving her out the door as he leapt after her. She stumbled out into the rain, gaining her footing, and Chris grabbed her wrist. "Run!"

As the Melonheads screeched, she complied wholeheartedly. They ran across the road, and up the muddy hill towards the old brick building on the hill, the lights in the windows a guiding light. The sound of a swarm of feet splashing through the damp earth followed them. Sang Mi's time as a runner was clearly paying off for her as she kept her footing in the muck better than Chris had expected.

Behind them, the Melonheads scrambled and screamed. Sang Mi had gotten ahead of Chris, and he could tell she was slowing her pace to not lose him. "Just go!"

She nodded, and bolted.

Looking along the path, Chris saw a fallen log, a bit rotted, but it met what he needed. Hefting it up, the Melonheads closing in, he dropped it, and pushed it with his foot down the hill. Most of the Melonheads scrambled out of the way, but the closest pair were knocked over like bowling pins as the rotting log broke apart upon impact. The pair thrashed their limbs and rolled around crying while the others went to try and help them.

Good, they'd be fine. He hadn't wanted to hurt them at all, but he also didn't feel like getting chomped on today.

He charged up the hill after Sang Mi, finding her banging on the door.

“It won’t open—uh—should we break it d—?”

Before she could even finish her question, Chris took in a deep breath and bellowed: “OPEN THIS DAMN DOOR!”

Sang Mi blinked, and the door creaked open. A Melonhead wearing a miniature orderly’s outfit with a suit jacket lazily placed over it opened the door.

“Mrah?” the Melonhead asked.

“Could we come inside?” Sang Mi asked, with a surreal politeness.

“Mrah,” they replied with a nod, and gestured that they follow them in. After they slipped in the door, Chris and Sang Mi scrambled to shut the door, turn every lock, slide the deadbolts, and then shove a nearby chair under the knob. Only then did they allow themselves to catch their breath and examine their surroundings.

The building was something between an old-timey hospital and a manor house. Clean white tile, interrupted by a grand wooden staircase in the center. A purple carpet rolled down it all the way to the doorway. The walls were decorated with framed baseball jerseys and cards. Slightly obscured by a great chandelier, were a set of five pictures of various people, two in black robes, three in medical gear. And above that, a great sign:

DR. CROW’S ORPHANAGE, SANATARIUM, AND HOTEL’.

Sang Mi looked at the sign, looked back at Chris, and then repeated the motion three more times.

“That is not a serious sign,” she said.

“No, no, it is,” Chris said with an exhausted acceptance.

“You said you knew a Dr. Crow, this is them, isn’t it?”

Chris pursed his lips.

“What are they like?”

He scratched his nose.

She squinted.

He glanced away.

“Oh no,” Sang Mi said, realization hitting her.

“I didn’t say anything!” Chris said, way too defensively.

“You and this Dr. Crow... you guys were like... an item?”

Chris sighed again, performatively louder. “Yeah. Guess there's no fooling you there. He and I uh... my Superiors trained me in Japan for a while.”

Sang Mi blinked. “Wait, you said your ‘superiors’ run the Universe—so why, like, Japan?”

There was a certain lack of respect in the way she said the word ‘Superiors’, as if she didn’t grant it the proper, awe-inspiring capital letter. He felt like he should probably correct her, but he couldn’t find the words, and anyway, this wasn’t the time. “It’s a long story. Dr. Crow, or the Corvid as I knew him then, was sort of a... trainer? Physical therapist? He monitored how I was doing for my Superiors. We may have uh, gotten a bit closer while he was helping me stretch my hamstrings—”

“Chris, I mean this with all the love in the world, please do not tell me more, ever.”

“Sorry—anyway, he got reassigned before I finished there, due to some, uh, unauthorized experiments.”

“*Please* no more euphemisms.”

“No, like, he did experiments on people without their consent. Which... lines up with the Melonheads legend. I assumed he went home, but maybe he didn’t. Maybe he was just wandering the Earth for centuries.”

“Hundreds of years of medical malpractice,” Sang Mi mumbled.

“But apparently he got eaten. That’s... well, if the legend is true, he might not come back from that one.”

“...Being cannibalized would do that, yes?”

There was banging on the door, he looked over at the friendly melonhead who had let them in. “This guy seems okay. Maybe the others are trying to get him?”

That didn’t seem quite right, they were holding hands with a sweet compassion. But maybe they were in factions? Sang Mi turned this over in her head like a pancake: quickly and without the desire to flip it again. “Yeah, that tracks. If they ate their creator like you said, they might eat each other?”

The kind melonhead tugged at Chris’s sleeve with a “Mrah!” and pointed at the doorway to the right. “Want us to go in there?”

“I’ll watch for traps!” Sang Mi volunteered as he went and opened the door.

Beyond it was a grand dining hall. A long table extended out, with a huge golden chair at the far end, and beautiful and expensive but less grand chairs lining the table on either side. On the table was a blue tablecloth, a noticeably empty spot for plates, cups and silverware, and an elaborate centerpiece depicting a star.

Two places already had glasses filled with water, and one with wine and the other with milk, to the left and right of the golden chair which had a stuffed toy of a crow sitting on it.

“Mrah!” the kind melonhead said.

“Are you serving us dinner? Mr.... Uh...”

The melonhead pointed to a pin on his jacket with the number ‘Five’ on it.

“Five? That’s your name?”

He nodded.

“You look more like a Ji Ho.”

He shrugged, and gestured again to the table. They sat, scooting in the rather heavy wooden chairs. In just a moment, Five came back with a large cart containing several plates under covers, which he pulled off with a flourish and set down before each of them. The plates were fine china with gold-leaf filigree, and on them was food that was rather unlike anything Sang Mi was familiar with. But as Chris saw it, his face drooped. Sang Mi looked up at him, eyes bright with excitement, which dimmed just like the light in the domes was supposed to at twilight.

“Something wrong with the food?” When they were alone in the car, Chris and her talked almost exclusively in Korean. When they were around others, they usually spoke English. But Sang Mi asked this question in Korean, even with Five right there.

“Yeah,” Chris replied in turn. “It’s made from local ingredients, but this is trying to emulate food from the Base of Operations. The home-world of my Superiors.”

The food was a fried chicken cutlet, the breading thick with herbs, with several parallel cuts down it, and a dark blue seasoned sauce made primarily from berries laid into each of the trenches. To the side was a set of what looked like kebabs on wooden skewers, but made of peppers and Brussel spouts, slightly charred and smoked. Finally there were small pieces of bread, each the size of a golf-ball, soft and drizzled in butter and honey with nutmeg.

Sang Mi picked up her knife and fork, and cut into the chicken, taking a bite. The roller coaster of the light in her eyes continued, as they lit up again. “It’s good! It’s sweet and savory, and it’s got the crunchy coating, juicy meat, and the texture from the berry goop.” She immediately went to the bread. “That’s yummy too!” She rushed into a bite of the veggie kebab. “...A bit of a weirder taste, but I could get used to it?”

Reluctantly, Chris tasted it too. They probably should have been more cautious about eating it, but well, Sang Mi seemed fine. She was right—it was good.

“It’s been a long time since I had this.”

“Is it like, a delicacy?”

He shook his head. “No, honestly it’s probably the closest thing to home cooking they have up there. Food isn’t common among them.”

She perked up, strangely. “Food scarcity? Like three years ago when the hydroponics failed back home?”

“Er, no, nothing like that. They have *enough* to eat,” he clarified. “They just sort of mostly... don’t? Not proper meals, I mean. Fun ones. Mostly, they just eat these, I don’t know, nutrition pills.”

Sang Mi chewed and swallowed. “That *has* to be boring.”

“They *love* being boring. It’s one of Their biggest talents.”

“Huh. Then when did you try this before?”

“Oh, with friends...” he said vaguely. “Leaving home isn’t the only way you can rebel.”

She picked up the last of the mini-breads, turning it around in her fingers. “I can understand that. Even getting a good grade can be rebellion sometimes. My mom always said so.”

“Speaking of home... earlier, you were saying something about going back?”

She stopped spinning the bread in her hands, and shoved it in her mouth, looking away from him as she chewed. “Hey, Chris, why are they serving Superior food here?”

He was trying to figure out if he should call her out for dodging the question when the music kicked in, and the doors to the dining room swung out. Five stood there, in a half-bow, holding his hand out gesturing for them to

“I don’t know this song.”

“It’s called *Science Fiction Double Feature*,” Chris said, suddenly looking dreary. “Well, we’d better go see the Show.”

“The Show?”

He got up, and she scampered up as he gestured for her to follow.

The lights in the entry hall dimmed, as they approached the center, where they stood together, tense.

From the great stairwell came a spotlight, then awkwardly timed in the wrong order, the lights then went off. Framed there was a woman in a long white lab coat with long raven hair, posed with her arms out, staring them down like she was trying to mimic a bird in flight.

“Chris Cwej,” a musical cue followed, and she changed her pose dramatically with the beat. “It’s been a while.”

Chris and Sang Mi were of one mind. They immediately turned around and ran for the door. However, that door shot open, and the Melonheads that had been chasing them from the car up the hill waddled in, looking unhappy, dirty, and tired, but no longer like they were going to take a bite of them. They were, however, glaring at them with malice. Naturally, the duo took a few steps towards the staircase. One of the Melonheads hissed at them, supporting one of the pair Chris had hit with the log, who was sucking their thumb.

“Oh, uh, hey Corvid... How’s it been? I see you’ve, uh...” Chris gestured at the Melonheads. “...been keeping busy?”

She effortlessly leapt onto the banister, landing side-saddle, and sliding down to hop off with a perfect gymnast's landing. The Melonheads all clapped.

"Thank you, thank you." She tossed her raven-black hair back. "I see you've been busy as well. Who's this child?" She gestured at Sang Mi with feigned disinterest. "I heard you'd been travelling with some Grigori, but she doesn't have four arms."

"This is..." he trailed off, so she cut in.

"Jhe Sang Mi, I'm from Gongen."

She tapped her cheek. "Gongen? Never heard of it. At least you look human."

Sang Mi furrowed her brow. "I *am* human!"

Dr. Crow laughed, covering her mouth with one hand and flapping her other hand in the air. "I'm sure you'd like to think so. How much genetic modification did they have to do so you could survive on this *Gongen*? Look at you, your DNA is a mess."

"You can't just see my DNA," she said dryly.

"Actually, she can," Chris said. "She's a Superior, and her eyes aren't those of a normal Superior, let alone a normal person. She's always been one for customizing her bodies."

Dr. Crow grinned.

Sang Mi nodded slowly. "I've met people who modify themselves like that, I get—wait, what do you mean, *bodies*? Like, plural?"

"This little hatchling really doesn't even know *that*? Tsk tsk, you never were much of an educator, were you..."

Drained, Chris looked back to Sang Mi, as if explaining this was taking a year off his life.

"Her People can... reform themselves, he began, "After death. Construct and inhabit a whole new body. She's less a person and more a forest fire that's been bottled in skin. She didn't have a medical procedure to change herself from the man I knew before—he was a man then, and in this body she's a woman. She'll change bodies again in the future, and she could be any gender or sex in any combination. Her features could be anything. But she'll always be a Superior. An inferno kept in check with manners and smiles. That's what they are. That's who *she* is."

"Very poetic," Dr. Crow said. "You could have just said I'm like a god and be done with it."

"I have strong feelings on that word," Sang Mi said.

Crow's face hardened. "I bet you do. A little girl with insignificant superstitions."

Chris moved protectively in front of Sang Mi, and Dr. Crow took that opportunity to stroke his face, which caused him to back up, bumping Sang Mi on the nose, who promptly yelped.

Dr. Crow smiled. “Did you enjoy the meal? You used to love that. I cooked it for you. I couldn’t get the turoon but I made do.”

“Substituting the chicken for a vegetable worked better than it should have.”

Her hand crept up to stroke his face again. “Why don’t you stay the night here? I promise you’ll be safe, and it’s so wet outside. Plus what a tragic accident that happened to your car—”

“The strip of nails literally right in front of your house with your minions waiting to flush us to the front door?”

She smiled wide. “Whatever could give you that impression?”

“Every single thing that happened gives us that impression,” Sang Mi said, still rubbing her nose. “We thought poor Five here was under siege, but it looks like this was all choreographed.”

“Well, what can you do?” Crow said, throwing her hands up and shifting them side to side in the air with her palms up a few times while bobbing her head. “Guess you caught me. But more accurate to say, I caught you.”

“Okay, well, I think that’s our cue to...” At that, Sang Mi bolted again for the door, causing the surprised Melonheads in the way to scatter. She rattled the handle, and then rammed her shoulder into it.

“It won’t budge,” Crow called coolly. “But you’re welcome to leave anytime.”

Chris knew that way she was talking. That was the way the Corvid talked when he had already won. “What’s your game?” He clenched his fists and stomped towards her. “You experimented on these children—”

“They would have died anyway, I saved their lives, give me a little credit.”

“I bet you didn’t ask them if they wanted to get turned into melonheads.”

She shrugged. “Well, no, but look, I already paid for that—how do you think I lost my last body?” She leaned in. “They did eat me, you know. That was hard to come back from. And look at me, I’m still caring for the little carnivores!”

“You always think things are okay if you just *do things* and ask forgiveness afterwards. That’s why we broke up.”

She grabbed the lapels of his suit jacket, drawing him closer. “We broke up ‘cause I got fired.”

“It was a two-for-one,” he said, trying to brush her hands off his chest, but she grabbed his hand instead, intertwining their fingers. He glowered at her. “You’re not as slick as you think.”

“But you haven’t let go,” she said, then pushed up on her toes.

He dodged her lips.

“Sang Mi, *now*.”

Crow raised an eyebrow, but didn't look away from him as Sang Mi sucker-punched her in the jaw.

“OW! What the heck!?”

It was Sang Mi's turn to grab his hand and pull him away—why was it hard to be pulled away? Was there something in the food? They ran down the hall to the left of the staircase—the rooms were labeled with big numbers, one through nine, with child-sized beds in each one, the floor checkerboard tiles, the rest all white and fluorescent lights. He didn't know where this hallway led, but at the very least it was leading somewhere away.

He let himself feel a moment of relief, before Sang Mi stopped. He didn't quite halt his momentum, and rammed into her. But she just stayed staring, her body swaying along with her tie like a pendulum.

“We have to keep—”

“I get it now. I get it. Why we came here.”

He stared into the room. It had a larger bed than the others, but otherwise looked the same. A signed picture of some baseball player on the wall. Hospital monitoring equipment there. She stepped into the room, and took her suit jacket off, then her tie, sitting down on the bed, eyes somewhat vacant. He rushed over, shaking her by the shoulders.

“Sang Mi, we have to go. Now. NOW!”

She looked up, glassy eyed. “This is my room, though. It's okay. I understand.” She placed a hand gently on his own, and patted it. “This is where I get left behind. I knew it would happen. The road trip ends. And you forget about me. Everyone forgets about me. This is where it ends.”

He shook her harder. “No—no, stop talking like that. I came back for you, remember? That's why we're here.”

She shrugged. “I wanted to keep it going. Force this to never end. I'm just a fool. Everyone should stay away from me.” She seemed to realize he was there. “Stay away from me!” She shoved him back, and ran over to the wall, she pulled her head back, ready to smash it into the plaster, but he put her into a bear-hug, and tore her back as she thrashed.

“Sang Mi, listen to me, you're not yourself! Something—AGH!” She whacked him in the face. She'd gotten better at that, all due to him, and it was a bad way to learn she'd picked things up. “Let me go!”

“Not if you're going to smash your head into the wall, stars above!”

A voice called from the doorway. “Number Five, sedate her.”

Before he could let go and try to stop it, the little Melonhead slipped over and jabbed something into Sang Mi's leg. It wasn't an ideal spot to inject a person, but it still worked pretty effectively. He held her as she slowly grew limp, and lay her down gently on the bed. Looking over her, his heart

ached at her heavy breathing, the pained look on her face, the way her closed eyes seemed to clench, and her hands ended in curled fingers that neither clenched or straightened.

He closed his own eyes, and turned to face Dr. Crow in the doorway. “What did you do to her?”

“Do to her?” she scoffed. “I didn’t ‘do’ anything.”

“Bullshit.”

“This place, this building, this is a place where your desires are let loose,” she said as she posed in the doorway, in an attempt at sexiness that would have worked a lot better if she was still in her last body. Still, there was a certain appeal... She approached him again, and he didn’t step back.

“It was the food,” he spat.

“The food is a part of the experience.”

“Sang Mi has fought harder to grow to where she is now with her mental health than you’ve fought for anything in your immortal life.”

She tilted her head, and after all her smarmy cockiness she finally sounded serious. “You took a mentally unstable girl off her home-world, and brought her on a road trip? You’re not being kind by taking her on this trip; she’s going to break because she’s already broken. Chris, she’s not the kind of girl you take on an adventure. Do you think your mentor would have?”

“I’m not him,” he shot back without thinking. He would have stopped to sit down and think about it, but things kept going too fast for self-reflection

She stroked his chest. “Oh, I know you’re not. Trust me.”

“This girl—Sang Mi—she deserves this. She deserves to... travel, and see amazing things. She deserves someone to believe in her.”

“There’s a difference between believing in someone and ignoring that their deepest desires are to be abandoned and harm themselves.” She snaked a hand under his shirt. It felt good. It... No. He pulled away. He had to pull away. He pinched his own cheek.

“She was holding herself together until she came here!”

“Oh? She never broke down and curled up in the corner? She never started having a panic attack and had to convince you to keep going?”

He stomped his foot. “That doesn’t mean she’s broken! She’s kept going. She’s kept fighting.”

“This is what she *wants*, Chris. You strip away all the coping, all the filigree, all the ways she’s taped herself together, she wants to be here. Wants to stop being a burden. Just like you want to be comforted right now.”

What was this place?

She was a Superior, and this place was her forest that she could burn at her leisure. Her eyes cut into him like torches, and the world was warm and dangerous. He needed to focus. Needed to stay in control.

But she was right.

She wasn't a good person. But he did want her. He'd wanted him back then, and he wanted her now. And he shouldn't. And something was wrong about this place, the laws of reality were wrong here.

He should be able to control what he wanted.

But...

"You said I never asked permission Chris," she whispered as she wrapped her arms around him. "So I'm asking."

Oh, to Hell with it.

He kissed her.

And they left the room, and shut the door behind them.

* * *

4th August, 1869, Future Site of Kobe, Japan

It wasn't so long ago that no one could walk the shores of the city from the training center. And even now they weren't supposed to be, but that made it all the more exciting. It didn't smell great up here, but that was how it often went with the past. The great ships that had come into port belched smoke and steam, and the foreigners and locals mingled about the docks.

"It wasn't too long ago we wouldn't fit in at all here," the Corvid said.

"We still don't," Chris replied, tipping his hat to a woman carrying a huge basket on her back as they passed.

"You know what I mean. This whole country was closed off. Now we can get some fresh air."

"You shouldn't let your friends down there hear you, next they'll be whispering you're touching plants, or some other heinous deed."

He laughed, and nudged Cwej in the arm, then shifted to feeling his bicep. "That's pretty nice. You've gotten more muscle mass."

Chris pulled his arm away. "Don't make it sound so clinical."

"I'm not trying to, I was trying to sound sexy. Was I not sexy?" He leaned in and whispered. "Can I prove to you that I'm sexy?"

Raising a hand to cover the blush on his face, Chris gave a small nod. "...Later though," he added aloud. "Hey, what's going on over there?"

On a rough patch of dirt, four chalk squares forming a diamond had been drawn, with two groups of men—one made up of sailors, the other of locals—gathered together. A local, a Japanese man with a well-trimmed beard, was holding a ball in the center of the diamond. He pulled his arm back, and hurled the ball at one of the sailors, an American man with a thick moustache. The sailor was holding a wooden bat, which he struck the ball with, an action which caused all the locals on the pitch to go running for the ball to catch it. The sailors cheered as their batter started running for the next chalk square.

“What in the Architect’s schematics are they playing?” the Corvid leaned in, using the excuse to press into Chris’s side as he performatively stroked his beard in curiosity.

“Its one of those old-timey sports, I don’t really know which one...”

The Corvid noted this, and called out to a well-dressed Japanese man holding a notepad. “You sir, what game are they playing?”

He looked up. “Baseball, I take it’s not played in your outsider country?”

“Not so much,” Chris answered curtly. “Its interesting though.”

“Quite! I’m covering it for the Hiogo News. I humbly ask you buy a copy if you see one,” the reporter said brazenly, giving a bow of his head to offset it.

“Sure,” The Corvid replied, fixated on the game. “Baseball. I like it. Let’s get some food, and watch it together. It can be our first date.”

“Our first...” Cwej folded. “You really are forward, you know. You can’t just decide we’re dating.”

“But I kinda just did, and you’re kind of into it, aren’t you?”

Cwej looked away.

“You’re blushing.”

“I am not.”

“If you turned around your face would be as red as a cardinal.”

Cwej knew he was right on every count. But if he turned around he’d have to admit that. The Corvid put an arm around his shoulder, like a sheltering wing.

“Come on then, let’s watch some baseball. If the sport survives, we can go on another date and be all wistful. What do you say?”

Cwej just nodded.

He probably should have paid more attention to the game they were supposed to be watching, but his attention wasn’t focused on the pitch, the ships, or the great bustle of history all around him. Instead, he looked at a face, and let his cheeks get red again.

The Present, 2025

One Week Since Cwej and Sang Mi arrived at the Mansion

Sang Mi stretched as she woke up to the sunlight stroking her face through the window. She slipped her feet into the bunny slippers she'd been provided, threw on her robe, and stumbled her way down the hall.

"Morning, Eight," she said.

"Mrah!" Eight replied, carrying a basket of laundry to the chute.

She made her way down the staircase, and over to the dining hall where Chris and Crow were already eating together. She went over to the buffet and grabbed a plate of more food than she was going to eat—waffles, bacon, scrambled eggs, copious syrup and hot sauce, a banana, and three beverages (orange juice, milk, and coffee). Balancing it all precariously, she slipped back out before they could notice her. They'd probably be sucking face before she made it back to her room.

She set her tray down on the bed, and turned the TV on, then the Super Nintendo. They didn't let her have many games, and right now the only one was *Super Baseball Simulator 1.000*. She pulled the controller over to the bed—it wasn't wireless, which was, frankly, silly, and the wire hung awkwardly between the TV stand and the bed. She shoveled some eggs into her mouth, and got started. The game was kind of weird—she was an RPG and open world girlie, not a sports game gal—and it had taken her a bit to figure out the mechanics. At first she'd just button-mashed and hoped she could hit the ball or throw it, struggling to pass the ball around to the right places as the game shifted what player she was every time she did. But she was getting the hang of it now. She wasn't good at it, hell no, but getting better.

"Mrah?" Five said, poking his head in the door.

"Yeah, sure, take a seat. You can take controller two on the next round."

"Mrah!" Five said, sitting down in excitement, rocking back and forth.

She tapped the button right, and her batter whacked the ball far into the outfield! She ran her little guys around the bases, and pumped her fist. "Yes! I am the queen of Baseball. Or at least of *Super Baseball Simulator 1.000* on the SNES."

"Mrah," Five agreed.

She was glad Chris didn't have to worry about her.

She knew her mom, dad, and brothers had to be relieved to be done with her now. They'd feign sadness, but she knew they'd be happier without her.

She was content here. Hidden away.

Something about that was wrong. But she couldn't hold onto it, and went up to bat again.

* * *

Chris shot up in bed, just like he had every night. The Corvid rolled over and moaned. “Oh, stop having nightmares,” she mumbled.

Not like he could help it.

He slid out of bed, and washed his face off. The dreams weren’t the same. They were more like a collage of bad memories. A blade in his hand red with blood, and the sky cracking open in response. A fierce hunger in the desert, and only his own flesh to sate it as he grew more ravenous. His friend Kwol becoming more erratic, threatening his life, and only violence could stop it. His friend Roz charging off across a battlefield into death. Sang Mi, doing the same back on Gongen, suited up in yellow armor, charging across a field of invading soldiers. No, no, that last one hadn’t happened. Wouldn’t happen.

She’d be okay, wouldn’t she?

Or...

He looked into the mirror, and hated who he saw. He couldn’t be like Charles Zoltan, and solve a problem with peace and dignity. He couldn’t even save his friends. He couldn’t even make the right choices. Sang Mi looked at him like he was someone, like he was a hero. Like she wanted to grow up to be him. He couldn’t think of a worse prospect than that.

When he was with Corvid, he didn’t have to think about that. Did he like her, or did he like that she made him forget, just for a little, what he saw in the mirror? There was something wrong with all of this—

Whenever he tried to think past that though, he came back to the mirror, to the dreams, and to that boiling pit of self-hatred that he’d kept capped off.

He put on a robe, and went out to the living room of the suite, turning on a radio.

Chris Cwej froze in place.

Always Something There to Remind Me.

He knew that song.

That song was... part of something.

It came back to him; he’d been there with Sang Mi. They’d gone back for the deer statue.

Sang Mi, a scared little girl, looking down from her lonely hospital bed, seeing him standing by the deer statue in the Cheonsa West General Hospital courtyard. Waving at him. And he waved back.

Seeing him again, and bravely coming down to help him with the strange cat.

He’d bought her a baseball bat in Louisville.

She called him her deer, guiding her through the dark forest.

And it was dark.

And The Corvid had lit the trees on fire.

Always Something There to Remind Me.

The Deer.

The Forest.

The Song.

The Bat.

The Crow.

She was here. Sang Mi was still here. It didn't matter how much he hated himself, and right now that was quite a bit, but he couldn't keep drowning himself in bed with his ex and keep forgetting this.

Her family had smiled, and left her at the hospital. They were good people, really. She loved them. But they hadn't visited her. He knew they'd have refused to let her go on this adventure. They treated her like a fragile cup that could shatter at any time. But she was a living person, damn it, she was his friend. He was the only person who could tell her she wasn't crazy and mean it.

He looked down from the mirror, into the sink. This place amplified your desires till you couldn't control them. Good ones and bad ones, it made no difference.

But he'd woken up now. And one desire rose in his heart above all others: he was going to save his friend.

He didn't wait, he didn't plan. He ran.

Chris flew out the door, down the stairs, past Melonheads Six and Three, and skidded a turn on his bare feet towards the ward where the Melonheads and Sang Mi's rooms were. He charged in, flung open her door, and she blinked and looked over from where she was playing video games with Melonhead Five.

"Hi?" she said.

Chris knew what he had to do, and it wouldn't be dignified, but dignity be damned. He took a deep breath, and started belting out *Always Something There To Remind Me*. He even did his best vocal approximation of the solo synth riffs.

She and the Melonhead stared at him.

"Chris, I gotta be real with you, you should not join a band."

"That's too bad, cause I was thinking of playing bass, now come on," he held a hand out. "We've been trapped here like Lotus Eaters, but I'm the deer that leads you out of the darkness, remember?"

Her eyes focused. “You... wait a second, why have I spent the last week playing *Super Baseball Simulator 1.000*? I don’t even like sports games?!”

He tilted his head a little. “Not the weirdest thing, but I’ll take it—let’s go!”

She began to get up. She froze. “No... No, I...”

He held his hand out. “Sang Mi. I want you to take my hand. So—please.”

She took his hand, and as the Melonhead scrambled up behind them, they rushed out back to the lobby.

“How are we going to escape? Won’t we just... go back into whatever loop we were in?”

“This place amplifies our desires. And I’m betting that includes hers too.”

They skidded to a halt together in front of the grand staircase as Dr. Crow marched down it, stopping in the center of the staircase, for what seemed to be no reason other than to dramatically frame herself in her kimono and nightie.

“I didn’t think listening to The Naked Eyes would have such a strong effect. Oh well. You still can’t escape.”

Chris pointed at her. “If you want us to stay, then let’s make it permanent one way or the other. Stop this cat and mouse game. I challenge you to a contest of skill.”

Sang Mi raised an eyebrow. “Not a duel?”

“It has to be something she’d actually accept,” he mumbled.

The Corvid tapped her cheek. “...Perhaps. Perhaps. It... you’d really stay here, if I won?”

“If you win. And if we win, you let us go.”

Sang Mi jumped between them. “She could just, you know, not do what she’s saying! Lying is real, Chris!”

He shook his head. “No, for all her faults, she’ll hold to this.”

“But I’ll hold you to it too. No running away. If you try to escape, you’ll be here forever.”

“Fine,” he said, lightly stomping his foot.

“And what contest did you have in mind?”

Chris had not thought that far. He stood awkwardly, finger in the air, his brain feeling like mush, until he looked at Sang Mi, hoping she had an idea.

“Of course we have our challenge,” she said. “Doctor Crow, we challenge you to a game of *Super Baseball*—”

“I ACCEPT!”

“...*Simulator 1.000*.”

“No, I accepted baseball.”

“You accepted Super Baseball, which isn’t a thing.”

“Baseball *is* super, just because I am playing it.”

Chris scoffed. “Baseball. I guess it’s full circle. Works for me.”

“Very well, we will play against each other tomorrow. Assemble your team, and meet me at the Melonhead baseball diamond I helped fund. Thankfully, there are eight Melonheads and myself. Good luck finding your own team. It would be a pity if you had to forfeit.”

Chris and Sang Mi looked at each other, nodded, and gave her each a different rude hand gesture before turning for the door, which opened without a hitch.

“And don’t you dare think of running. I’ll be watching you.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

They shut the door. It was a warm morning, and the forest was alive with noises and life.

“You’re still wearing just a bathrobe,” Sang Mi noted.

“So I am,” Chris replied, stretching his arms up. “That’s the least of our problems, but I think I know the first person to recruit for our team.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You don’t mean the French lady, right?”

“She’s a short drive away, and she’s still studying Oscar!”

Sang Mi sighed. “I don’t think she knows anything about baseball.”

Chris put his hands on his hips to mirror hers. “And you do?”

“Uh, baseball is one of the most popular sports on Gongen, I’ll have you know.”

“Have you ever played it?”

She looked down at her slippers. “...In gym class? And I played *Super Baseball Simulator 1.000* for like, a full week.”

His arms moved from his hips to crossing his chest, and she knew she’d lost this round.

“Find, we call Odette Caron. Who next?”

He grinned. “Some friendly faces.”

* * *

When Sang Mi and her twin brother Sang Eun were six years old, their father took them to a baseball game for the first time. It was the Takumi Tengu versus the Hongtu Cannonballs, and both

of them were more interested in the scripted antics of the two animatronic mascots for the teams that were doing live-action cartoon comedy on the sidelines.

They got a big thing of ttekbokki, and of popcorn, and shoved their faces while the match progressed. Moreso than the game, the twins enjoyed the chants and cheers, the songs and pageantry. All these years later, Sang Mi couldn't remember who won that game. She knew she'd be able to look it up easily, but she didn't want to. What had been important was her father reaching over and tousling her hair, and her brother stealing "her" popcorn (that had been expressly bought to share) and them squabbling over it til their dad got them both ice cream to shut them up.

He held their hands on the way back to the train station, one on each side of him, mouths ringed a little in strawberry ice cream he'd only mostly been able to wipe off.

They went again years later, and she'd regretted it because she and Sang Eun had been messaging their friends their whole time and didn't pay attention to the game. At the time she hadn't cared, but now she looked back on her father's blank face and knew it was masking a hurt as he wanted to share that precious time he had off from the factories with them.

What a selfish thing I am, she thought.

But she would still look back at that memory when she was six with a deep fondness.

Now, she stood in a parking lot doing practice swings of the baseball her friend Chris had bought her. She'd had her nickname, Kalingkata, engraved on it along with a little reference. She pulled the bat back, and swung at the air.

"You're pretty good."

It was Chris, walking up with most of their team. A few of them were familiar faces. Back during the big storm on Gongen, when she and Chris filmed that TV show together, Lady Aesculapius and her girlfriend Blanche had helped solve that whole affair with them. Aesc had curly black hair and brown skin, and looked incredibly confident in her baseball uniform, but also gave off the vibe she didn't know why she was here. Blanche, on the other hand, had tied her white hair back in a tight bun, and looked prepared but like she'd rather be anywhere else.

"Blanche, look, it's Sang Mi!" Aesc exclaimed while pointing at her, a few feet away.

"Yeah, I see her. Hi."

Sang Mi waved. "Good to see you both and—COLOTH!"

She dropped the bat and ran over to Coloth. The two high fived, which turned into a spin and then a handshake. Coloth had also been a part of that whole debacle, only he'd been in the cast of the TV show with her, so they'd spent a lot of time backstage hanging out.

"Oh, okay, didn't expect such a warm welcome!" he said, a little bashfully.

"Hey so, before I thought you were a guy in prosthetics, but you're actually an alien who looks like a cactus-person right?"

“More like you’re an alien who looks like a shaved monkey, and my species aren’t *supposed* to look like cacti, but uh, yes, something like that.”

She squealed a little. “Chris, Coloth is an alien!”

“So is Lady Aesc, you know,” Chris deadpanned. “Honest!”

She looked over at her. “Well, she isn’t green.”

Aesc sulked.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, everyone with good taste likes Coloth. I get it.”

She picked her bat up. “Baseball teams have nine people, right? So that puts us at five.”

A car pulled into the parking lot, and Chris nudged her. “A little more than that.”

Odette Caron of C.R.U.X exited the car, followed by another familiar face—

“Is... is that Bill Murray?”

“Yeah.”

“Like, the actor?”

“In the flesh.”

“Does he know how to play baseball?”

Chris considered this. “Well it’s cool that he’s here, right?”

Sang Mi stared him down til he looked away.

“Okay, but I do have a surprise you might actually like. Maybe not better than Coloth but,” he gestured with both hands, waggling his fingers in a way which was trying to be both magician- and cheerleader-like, and was hitting neither. From Odette’s car, the back doors opened, and out stepped the pair of Megan Grabowski and Martha Sandalwood.

Well, she’d give this one to Chris—she bolted for her friends from Hughes High. She’d spent weeks there with Chris under cover, and Megan had been her closest friend there. Martha was Megan’s friend, and Sang Mi and Chris had saved her from being kidnapped and trapped inside a movie projector, and it’s hard not to be friends after that.

“SARAH!” they yelled, which was her undercover name, but whatever.

“MEGAN! MARTHA!” she yelled back.

The three girls promptly hugged, and then jumped up and down together while cheering.

“Thank you so much for coming!”

“Of course, like we’d leave you in the lurch!” Megan said. “When Mr. Cwej called, we got packed right away! What are you doing anyway, is like, part the secret agent stuff you guys were doing when you saved us? Are there more people trapped in movie projectors?”

Sang Mi blinked. “Well uh, right now we’re playing baseball against monsters from urban legends and an immortal mad scientist, so... kinda?”

Megan and Martha were very excited by this turn of events. After they’d caught up, Chris clapped and got everyone to order. “Alright everyone, today is the first ever game of our team, the Starmen, against the Corvids. It’ll also be our only game.”

Aesc’s hand shot up. Reluctantly, Chris called on her. “Hello, yes, what game are we playing again?”

He stared at her, the mirth gone from his face. “Baseball.”

“Right, right,” she noted this down on a clay tablet she had with her for some reason.

Bill Murray’s hand went up, so Chris called on him too. “Sorry, uh, so is this for a documentary? Or a movie? Is there a script or am I just improv-ing? My agent said this would pay off that bad trip to Monaco, and so I’m all in, just uh. Why is he a cactus?”

“Why were you in *Garfield*?” Coloth shot back.

“You know what, that’s fair,” he replied.

“Don’t worry about anything. Just do your best, and have fun. No script, just... make sure to treat the Melonheads with respect and kindness, they’re just little guys.”

“Melonheads?” Martha asked.

Odette chimed in. “You’ll know them when you see them. The name explains it.”

“What about—”

The questions continued, and as they did Sang Mi watched as Chris fielded them expertly. Megan and Martha were right on things. Coloth was cool as always. Aesc and Blanche were fun. Odette Caron was clever and analytical. Bill Murray was, well, Bill Murray.

She wondered if she walked away now if anyone would even notice.

Eventually, she did.

* * *

When the team meeting was over, Chris realized that Sang Mi was gone. There had been a lot of questions, and he may have gotten a little too long winded and passionate answering a few of them, but he still felt awkward he’d missed when she slipped out. Had she just gone to the bathroom? He poked around, only to find her right outside the locker room entrance from the parking lot, whacking a set of cardboard boxes by the trashbin with her bat. It was a halfhearted effort though. Like she wanted to look angrier than she was.

“Hey, I was looking for you,” he waved. She looked up at him, and then kicked one of the boxes. Finally catching up, he tried to be cheerful. “Ready for the big game?”

“You’ve got everyone else, you don’t need me.”

“Where’s that coming from? Most of these people are here because I thought it would be fun for them to be here with you. Megan and Martha especially.”

She nodded, then Sang Mi turned to face the wall, putting a hand against the concrete bricks and digging her nails in with a clawed scraping sound. “Hey Chris... You know that... you know you can stop this whenever you want, right? I want this to go on forever but... you don’t have to force yourself. Really.”

He didn’t know where she was going with this. And he quickly decided he didn’t want to.

“...Well, I *don’t* want to stop this,” he said, “so let’s just forget about whatever is bothering you and get to the game. Everyone is waiting for us.”

She pressed her forehead into the wall, and for a moment a spark of fear ran through him, and he felt bad about that as her shoulders pulsed and she let out a pained laugh. “You were worried, right? That I was going to smash my head into the wall? I did that when I was a kid, you know.”

“You’re still a kid,” he countered.

“A *little* kid. I rammed my head into the wall. Split my head right open. When we got there the E.R. was full—I don’t know why, maybe there was a big accident or something—and they had to put a curtain around me and my mom while they waited for a bed to open up for me. I think they just thought it was one of those wacky little childhood accidents, you know, you think you can fly if you flap your wings so you jump off the table and break your arm.”

“I did that,” Chris said.

“I bet you did. But that’s the thing, Chris...” She moved her hands from digging into the wall. “I *wanted* to hurt myself. I knew I deserved it. But I didn’t tell anyone, maybe I just didn’t realize everyone didn’t feel like that. Maybe I didn’t want to worry my mom. I don’t know... There was something wrong with me then, and there is something wrong with me now.” He could hear the tears between her words. He hesitated, not sure what the right move was.

Sweep her up in a hug?

Give her a speech about how she was special?

Nothing felt right. And so he just stood there.

“I know what the Corvid said. I heard her. The Defector, that superior who took you across the stars on all those adventures... They wouldn’t have taken me. They wouldn’t have. Because I’m broken. I’m broken and everyone can see it.”

“You’re not broken,” he said, maybe too simply.

She spun around, the tears she's kept imprisoned flying out in a splatter as she did so. "Of course I am! I've... I've had how many breakdowns while we've been travelling together? I broke down when you came to pick me up for the World's Fair. I broke down the night you took me to Violethill. I broke down on the *Point of Know Return* trying to help you. I broke down at Dr. Crow's... and... and I guess I'm breaking down now! Why not!"

"You're just feeling things. That doesn't mean you're breaking down."

"Does it? *Does* it, Chris!? I was so moody in Louisville we barely got what we needed done." She covered her face again. "I did it. I got out of the hospital. I learned to control all these feelings inside me, all these urges to hurt myself, to hate myself. And I have medicine that lets me do it. But they don't go away. They won't go away. I tried to get better but I can't. I keep trying but I can't make these feelings disappear. I can't win."

Chris untensed, and strode up to her. He put his hands gently on her forearms, and tugged a little. She relented, and showed her puffy face. In return, he gave her a warm and gentle smile.

"Getting better isn't one victory. That's not why it's good. Getting better is having another day. Cause no matter how bad that day is, it's yours. And it can always be yours. Right now, right here, it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks about you. It matters that I want you here, I chose you to come with me."

"But Dr. Crow, she said your old friend—"

"I'm not him." The words came out fast, and when he said them, he had to stop, because he knew he meant them. The honesty of that confession churned his stomach, he could feel a muscle in the side of his neck tensing and pulling at his collar. But Sang Mi's face softened too.

"Yeah. Yeah, you're not."

"And I'm sorry, I wish I could be—"

"I don't want him. I don't give a shit about him, you believed in me, you came back for me, don't you get it!" She shoved him lightly. "Don't you?"

They stood together, Sang Mi catching her breath.

"Yeah, I think I do." He didn't, but it was the right thing to say. And even though it wasn't quite true, he meant it with all his heart. He'd work through that contradiction later. He slowly and gently wrapped her in a hug, watching for any sign she was uncomfortable with it—but part way through she rushed him and buried her face in his chest, sobbing.

He held her there, for however long it took her to cry it out. He didn't keep track. Just waited.

When she finished, she pulled back, wiping her face on her sleeve. "...I really am a mess, you know. I'm not stable. I'm not... pretty, or—or as clever as I think I am."

"You're exactly who I want you to be." And that, he meant all the way. He could see himself in that moment. Not at her age, he was a lot less world-weary than she was then. No, at his failures. At

the points where everyone had turned their backs on him. He could hear their voices, churlish and harsh: he was a little kid in a man's body, he always tried to do the right thing but failed at it, he was one card short of a deck.

He'd come back for her. And the way she tried to mimic him terrified him.

He'd tried to bring people along on his adventures before. Larles and Kwol, two friends he'd tried to reform from their misdeeds, and one of them had spat in his face by working for the very people who hurt him.

A girl turned away from him in 1970s London and never looked back, and he couldn't blame her.

And despite everything, Sang Mi'd come back for him. She'd packed a bag and ran after him, begging and bargaining to join him.

She stood in front of him, 17 and a little kid, hands balled up at her sides. She still believed in heroes.

She believed they could be as screwed up as she was.

"You're the kind of girl who goes on an adventure with me. Everyone else, all the other space swashbucklers and time-travelers, they can go to Hell." He held a hand out to her. "Now let's go play some baseball, defeat my ex, and save the day. And it will be your day. No, our day."

She put her hand out, it shook, hovering over his. "...And you're sure? You can't go backsies on this. You can't... tell me you accept me and turn around later. You just can't."

"That's never been on the table to begin with."

She took his hand. Slowly, the edge of her lip turned up a little. "Hey Chris, I have a confession."

"Yeah? You've already had some doozies."

"I can bat really well, but I can't throw a ball to save my life."

He pulled his head back as he took that in, and when it finally sunk in, he laughed hard. "You'll do just what we need you to. Let's go, your cola is getting warm, and somewhere down the road there's creatures made of starlight, and doors that lead to dreams. Come on, Sang Mi, we've got a game to play."

She smiled, and gave him a big nod. It was time to play ball.

* * *

"Hello and welcome to the opening exhibition game here at Melonhead Field—and it's opening early, which has been a real surprise, isn't that right, Greg?"

"Yeah."

“Fans are filling up the seats, and it looks like those commemorative Melonhead bobbleheads sure are popular. I got one myself, how about you, Greg?”

“Yep.”

“Oh! And it looks like our home team is taking the pitch. It’s the Corvids! Now I’ve never seen anything like this team before, these little guys are purple—why I think they’re costumed as the fictitious Melonheads themselves! What a treat. I wonder how they did that.”

“Eh.”

“And their team captain—wow she’s a looker, and for some reason is wearing a labcoat with her number on it on the back! She’s waving to the crowd and—it looks like our visiting team is here! The Starmen, that’s a musical reference if I’m not wrong?”

“Bowie.”

“Oh you’re so right, Greg, referencing the classic album by David Bowie, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*. What a hoot. This team has a lot more variety to it—including a boy in cactus makeup! And... wait, is that Bill Murray?”

* * *

Chris was first up to bat. He stared down Melonhead number Six who was winding her pitch up. The two team mascots—he was very surprised they had been pulled together in 24 hours—a crow boy and a star man, were pulling hijinks on each other on the sidelines. He and Six stared each other down.

Come on Melonhead. Give me your best shot.

He was ready for this.

Six’s arm moved forward. The ball was loosed from her hand.

And dropped to the grass two feet away.

“Ball? I think?” the Umpire called. The crowd, which was much larger than Chris had expected, laughed.

Dr. Crow stomped her feet and flapped her arms. “SIX, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?! THROW THE BALL!!!”

Six started bawling, rubbing her eyes with her fists.

“There’s no crying in super baseball!”

Cwej picked up the ball, and carried it to the mound, putting a hand on Six’s shoulder. “Hey kid, cheer up. It’s just your first throw. You can try again. Don’t listen to those idiots laughing up there. Here, watch me.” He straightened up, and mimed throwing the ball. “See how I moved. Try doing that. And let the ball go when your arm is—*here*.” He demonstrated as much. “Don’t worry if you don’t get it at first. So are you willing to try again?”

Six sniffled. “Mrah.”

“That’s a brave girl.”

“CHRIS CWEJ, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU SAYING TO MY MELONHEADS!?”

He put the ball gently into her hand, and walked back to the batter’s box.

Six tossed the ball in the air, catching it, and took a calming breath through her fangs. She pulled her body back into position, trying to mirror Cwej, and threw!

It dropped three quarters of the way to the batter.

The crowd laughed again.

Chris was about to start saying some choice words to the audience, when he heard Sang Mi call out from the dugout. “Come on Six, you can do it!” He looked over to see her nudging each of her teammates.

“Yeah, you can do it, Six!” Megan yelled. Martha joined her.

Coloth joined in too, and then the whole team did. Bill Murray looked somewhat confused, and made sure he was in view of the stadium cameras the whole time.

Six threw it again. It was low and slow, but it worked. Chris swung, and the ball went awkwardly to the left. The Melonheads struggled to scramble for it, as he ran for first base. Two of the melonheads were struggling over the ball, and a third decided to mediate the situation by eating it.

“Mrah!” he said, proud of himself for solving the dispute.

Chris probably could have gone further than first base, but this was good enough.

The umpire got another ball.

Lady Aesc was up next. She picked the bat up, went up to bat, and...

“Aesc, that’s not how you hold the bat!” Blanche yelled from the sidelines.

“No no, I’ve played this before!”

“*Cricket!* You’re holding it like it’s a cricket bat!” Aesc was, as a matter of fact, holding the bat upside down.

“I got this!” she waved.

Six hurled the ball. Aesc swung.

“STRIKE!” called the umpire.

She swung twice more, and was quickly out. Blanche held her head in her hands.

Odette went up, and did hold the bat correctly. She got one strike and then a hit, and made it to first—Chris, to second.

Next up was Megan who bunted and very sloppily got to first, pushing everyone one base ahead.

Bases were loaded, which meant everyone was very excited when Coloth got to bat, waved to the crowd, and missed every single swing.

“Good try, Coloth!” Sang Mi yelled, as he went back to the dugout embarrassed.

Chris gritted his teeth. They had two outs, one more and they would rotate so that the other team would have the chance to go to bat at score runs.

Sang Mi was up to bat.

* * *

When Chris Cwej asked her what she wanted engraved on her baseball bat, Jhe Sang Mi wasn't sure. She paced around in the lobby for a while, and pulled up all sorts of quotes and sayings on her phone. She nearly settled on a few of them. Ironic or funny quotes—gag sayings like having the bat say ‘Sorry’ on it, like it was saying that before whacking someone in the face. But in the end, she'd chosen something personal.

Kalingkata

The Wandering Star

Kalingkata was her screen name, and her nickname. It was what most of her close friends called her. Her brother had been nicknamed Talinata, after the video game console, and she'd made up her own name to fit in. It was a nonsense word meant to sound like it naturally paired with her brother's nickname. So they'd always be together. Even then, a part of her knew she was forcing it.

And that led to part two. The wandering star. It was a bible reference to the book of Jude. Wandering stars had the gloom of darkness reserved for them forever, or so it was said. And so she felt. Life was the shadow of a cloud over her head. A terrifying journey where loneliness was always at the other end. The goatman at Pope's Lick had been lonely. Rodney too. How long had Simone waited for the closure they'd given her? To stave off that loneliness, she and Chris had played pretend in a warehouse together. This journey would end too. And she'd watch more people leave.

But as she walked up to bat, Chris giving her a thumbs up from third base, the sun warming her shoulders, Sang Mi felt something she hadn't allowed herself to feel in some time.

She allowed herself to feel wanted.

She raised the bat—blue-barreled and black-handled—stretching it up like a salute, or a flag. She'd survived today, and it was their day. Everyone who had come here for them. For Chris. For herself.

She'd been told she was good at kendo.

Six wound her pitch up, staring her down. She threw the ball.

And Sang Mi swung.

With a crack, it struck the ball. She put her hand up to block the sun and watch its course. She should have started running, but she was just amazed she'd hit the damn thing.

It flew up into the air, and somewhere into the back of the stands where a little kid scrambled to pick it up.

She grinned, and she ran.

Chris, Odette, and Megan all scored runs, and then so did she, crossing home plate as the crowd clapped and cheered.

Everyone clapped her on the back as she got into the dugout. Chris was smug. "I knew you'd do great."

She smiled back. "Guess I can't argue with excellence."

"Psh, keep your head on, we're not done yet. But great work."

"Yeah, she did good," Bill Murray said. "Guess it's my go."

He wandered up to bat as Megan and Martha hugged her.

"Does uh, Bill Murray know how to play this game?" she asked Chris.

"Oh," Chris laughed. "Yeah so, he actually owns some minor league teams."

They weren't watching when he hit the ball, but they all cheered as he ran the bases.

A pretty good start.

* * *

When the teams swapped places, Dr. Crow went up to bat first. Blanche volunteered to pitch, which turned out to be a great choice because, unlike everyone else (except perhaps Bill Murray), it turned out she was good at it. Even so, her first pitch didn't give that impression because Dr. Crow immediately hit the ball out of the stadium, and off into the horizon.

"Ha! See that Chris, I've been practicing!" she called out to him as she started circling the bases.

Sang Mi looked over at Chris from second base. "Shouldn't she have batted later, so that like, other people could score too?"

"Yep. But she couldn't resist showing off..."

Five went next, and got to first. Two was next, and Blanche pitched three strikes, putting her out.

One got a bad hit, and it should have been an out, but Sang Mi failed to catch it, and then failed to throw it. Martha picked up the slack (and the ball) and stoped Five and One from making it to home base and scoring.

Things progressed from there.

Bill Murray and Sang Mi proved to be killer at bat, and so did Five and Seven.

Blanche and Six both improved their pitching inning after inning.

In the 7th inning stretch, everyone rose for a rousing chorus of 'Take Me Out to the Ball Game', a song which was seemingly only known by Megan, Martha, and Dr. Crow between both teams. But everyone did their best.

It was unclear if the Melonheads knew it or not, though they definitely sang along with their most passionate "Mrah!"s.

All in all, the game bounced back and forth, the Starmen took an early lead, but lost it in the 5th inning, before catching up, and in the final 9th inning, both teams were tied up.

Chris gathered the team together for one last pep talk.

"Alright, so we all remember why we're here today right?"

Aesc's hand shot up; Chris pointed at her. "Because if we lose the game you and Sang Mi will be trapped inside Dr. Crow's mansion for all eternity!"

There was a long pause.

"What!?" Martha, Megan, Odette, and Bill Murray all said in near unison, with Bill Murray being the most off.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Blanche said blandly. "What a surprise, Chris Cwej left important details out," she deadpanned.

"...If you didn't know, why did you come?" Coloth asked.

"Cause she's our friend!" Megan and Martha said in actual and impressive unison.

"Sang Mi is a friend to animals, and science," Odette said

"I thought this was like, a direct to streaming movie set or something?" Bill Murray said. "What exactly are we doing? And am I getting paid?"

"You're getting paid," Chris answered partially.

"Good enough for me," Murray concluded.

Sang Mi tapped her bat against a metal support pole. "Hey hey, back to the important thing! We actually have to win this game."

Chris cut in. "And on that note, I do have a plan. I just need everyone's help here. Just trust me on this."

He explained his plan.

Blanche sighed. "I don't really know what I expected. But sure."

* * *

The Corvids went to bat first. Dr. Crow chewed on a shiny coin she kept in her pocket just for these scenarios when she was nervous. She was so close. The game was tied. She just needed to get ahead and shut Cwej's team out. Her melonheads could do it.

"Alright, all of you! We're winning this. No crying—" she snatched a juicebox from Four's hands. "And no snacks! Not until we win."

"...Mrah," Four opined.

"And no complaining. I know Cwej has to have something up his sleeve, but your goal is to score as many runs as you can! For every run you get, I'll get you a new video game. And... a cupcake?"

"Mrah!" The Melonheads cheered.

"But if we lose, you'll all suffer in ways you haven't even imagined!"

"Mrah..." the Melonheads moaned.

"Now get out there, and *WIN*."

First up to bat was Five. Reliable hitter, and reliable he was. He got to second base. Nice.

Next up was Eight. She wasn't quite as reliable, but she hit the ball, and started scampering for first base.

She got halfway there before she lost balance with her big head, and fell face first into the pitch.

"Eight, get your ass up! Eight you better not get out or I swear—"

"You can do it, Eight!"

Dr. Crow blinked, she looked around to see who had said it. It was one of that Sang Mi girl's friends? She couldn't tell the difference between them. It didn't matter, because the other one chimed in too.

"Yeah, it's okay Eight, don't give up!" Sang Mi yelled.

Eight slowly pushed herself up, teary eyed.

"You're okay, Eight," Chris called.

"Uh, yeah, small... melon-headed child who is purple," Bill Murray added. "You can absolutely do whatever you set your mind to. As long as it only involves saying the word 'Mrah', I guess."

"You can make it to first!" Aesc, Blanche, and Coloth said in a sing-song voice together.

Eight dusted herself off, and started jogging to first base.

The whole Starmen team clapped and cheered as she reached it.

"What," Dr. Crow said, "the Hell is going on?"

This same pattern was repeated, over and over. Batter after batter. The melonheads got lots of runs, and lots of cheers, and when it finally turned over, they had a sizable lead.

This would have brought Dr. Crow joy, except that as soon as the Starmen went to bat, they were blazing through just as fast, if not faster.

Five let Coloth get to second, and Dr. Crow was stomping and cawing at him, but while five cringed, he didn't relent.

Soon enough, with a great set of runs propelled by Sang Mi and Bill Murray, they had caught up.

As Chris Cwej himself went up to bat, she put the coin back in her mouth. Everything was falling apart.

Chris looked her in the eyes, and winked.

And as Six threw a pitch at him, he didn't swing.

"Strike!" the umpire called.

And again. "Strike two!"

And... Six wound up, and threw her pitch. Chris readied his bat.

Of course. He was just being dramatic. Showing off. She should have known.

And then he lowered the bat, and stuck his tongue out at her.

"STRIKE THREE, you're out!"

With that, Sang Mi tossed him a megaphone from the dugout. Well, mostly, he had to move to actually catch it from her poor throw, but he did get it, and lifting it to his mouth, spoke to the field. "Wow, who would have guessed the game would end in a tie!"

"We go into extra-innings—" Dr. Crow tried to yell over him.

"And since it's a tie... I guess that can only mean I have to take all you Melonheads out for ICE CREAM!"

The Melonheads leapt up into the air, cheering—"Mrah! Mraaah!!!"—and rushed over to Chris excitedly, where he started congratulating each of them on a good game.

Dr. Crow stood stunned.

She didn't really understand.

She knew she had just lost control, but she wasn't sure how it happened. There were rules to this game. It had had two set outcomes. But now a third thing had happened.

Chris directed the Melonheads over to the rest of the team, who took over the congratulation duties, and he started his way across the field to her.

She straightened her shoulders, and raised her chin. So be it.

“You win, Chris Cwej.”

He shrugged. “This never needed to be a competition.”

She kicked up the dirt. “You could have stayed with me! We would have been happy. I put all this together for you, you know. Like our first date!”

He thought back. “Oh yeah, in Kobe. You know, I barely remember the game cause I was watching you the whole time. You were handsome, clever, confident. I didn’t know that you were vain, conceited and controlling.”

“Oh haha, laugh it up. I bet you’re enjoying this, humiliating me.”

Chris puffed his cheeks out like a chipmunk, and blew the air out. “No—no. That’s not what I’m feeling. Corvid, I’m sad. Cause the truth is, if you’d just welcomed us in, and given us normal food you hadn’t drugged, and hadn’t driven my friend to a breakdown, I might have stayed. I can’t say what I would have done for sure. Maybe I’d have invited you along. But... you’re just mean. Controlling.”

“You didn’t mind when we were screwing each other’s brains out.”

He sighed. “Yeah. I didn’t. And I can’t say I didn’t want that. I did. I wanted that a lot. And that’s the thing Corvid, I would have been with you even without all your plotting. If you had just treated me with respect, we’d have made love and not screwed.”

“There’s not really a difference.”

“I’ve not found it to be so.” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. We’re through. You had your second chance. And you tried to force me and Sang Mi into a situation outside our control. We’re going to find a new home for your Melonheads. And I’m... going to let you walk away.”

She blinked. “Sorry? You’re not going to kill me?”

He shook his head. “You really don’t get it, do you? I’m going to tell you something Sang Mi told someone recently. Go get some therapy, and get a damn cat.”

She clicked her teeth. “Don’t condescend—”

“I’m not. I really mean it, cat and all. I’m giving you a third chance. You don’t deserve it... but I know what you went through. How lonely you were back on the Base of Operations. Those secret dinner parties you’d throw, hoping you could make friends, even though it risked exile. Remember how they’d teased and mock you, just because you were interested in the biology of life? Because you liked dissecting flowers and fruits. You used to be... soft. And the world broke you.”

She felt something churning in her chest. It was too many feelings. Anger. Love. Fear. Acceptance. Being seen. She felt her head spin. “I don’t need your pity.”

“And you’re not getting it. Sang Mi is an insignificant human from a universe without any beings like you Superiors. Far as we know, the hands of the clock move themselves, back there.”

“Sounds barbaric.”

“Kind of is. And yet. She’s been abandoned. She’s been cracked, she’s taken hit after hit. And you hurt her, and I don’t forgive you for that. But I want you to know—she didn’t let the cruelty of the world break her. She still tries to do good.”

“So you’re shaming me now?”

“I’m saying if you really are as powerful as you think, then do better than she is! I’m saying that you failed today, but... healing isn’t one big victory. It’s... winning one day at a time. And today isn’t your day. But maybe tomorrow can be. You don’t deserve a third chance. I probably should kill you. My Superiors and your kin wouldn’t even blink if I did. But I can see how conflicted you are. You’re a force of nature inside.”

“I know, I’m a wildfire. I burn the forest down.”

“No, I was wrong. You’re a wildfire today. But tomorrow, maybe you could plant a tree.”

She was struck dumb, and as what he said sunk in, she felt something she had never felt before in her centuries of life: she was fairly certain it was called ‘shame’.

Chris gave her a smile, and started to turn around.

“Wait!”

He stopped.

She ran over to the dugout, pulled something out of a bag, and ran back, holding it out to him. It was a great purple amethyst. Huge, the size of a baseball.

“Take it.”

He didn’t touch it. “What... is it?”

“It’s a gem, a powerful one. It has certain powers. I used it to create the Melonheads. You can use it to create serums, liquids, medicines...”

Chris picked it up, and turned it over in his hands. It resembled the ruby they’d found in 1893 Chicago that had allowed the Yssgaroth to break into reality. “You’re sure you’re okay giving this up?”

She nodded. “Think of it as... a sign of goodwill, that I... will think about what you said.”

She didn’t say another word. She took two steps back, activated a device on her wrist, and vanished.

Superiors. Always doing that.

He tossed the gem in the air, walking back over to the team and the Melonheads.

“Good news!” Sang Mi said running over. “Bill Murray is going to help fund a new home for the Melonheads. He’s not entirely sure what’s going on, but whatever!”

He smiled. “That *is* good news. Here, take a look at this.”

She took the amethyst from him, and raised an eyebrow.

“Like the ruby...?”

“Yep.”

“Did it...”

“Help make the Melonheads? Absolutely.”

“...Huh. That’s... concerning?”

He nodded. “We’ll just keep a lookout going forward.”

“What happened with Dr. Crow?”

“I let her go. With a stern warning. I told her to get therapy and a cat.”

She gave a small ‘hah’. After a while, she added, a touch more seriously: “Think that’ll work?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t forgive her. But... I want to be the kind of person who gives people a chance.”

Sang Mi nodded. “Yeah, I think I want to be that too.”

“You’re just saying that cause I said it.”

“Maybe I am!”

He laughed, and put an arm around her. “Come on kid, we’ve got an ice cream parlor to devour.”

She looked over at the Melonheads, at their friends and guest. “Maybe today, I’m not the worst.”

“I think that about you every day. Cause I want to be not the worst too. Now what do you want, chocolate or vanilla?”

“Strawberry.”

He laughed. She laughed.

Today was their day. □

Interview: Callum Phillpott

Tell us a little about yourself.

Somehow, that's always the trickiest question for me to answer. As of now, I'm a 20-something with a BSc in Forensic Psychology, and an interest in old comic books, pulp novels, and other niche things that inform my largely comedic body of work—but that's hardly the same Callum Phillpott who wrote *When Winter Comes*.

Back then, I was staring down the barrel of University and barely knew anything else. I was starting to get back into *Doctor Who* and, through that interest, discovered Arcbeatle Press. On a whim, I'd submitted a short story for their *10,000 Dawns* anthology, *How to Survive the Winter*, and from that, I ended up being asked if I wanted to write *When Winter Comes*, based on an outline by Hunter. I hadn't done anything professional before that point. It's all so different now.

What was the process like, writing *When Winter Comes* based on Hunter's notes?

It was definitely more of a challenge for me back then than it would be now. At that point, I'd only written short stories (most of which were around 2000 words long), and here I was with the task of writing a novella with enough plot and words to fill it without padding it.

Hunter's outline was helpful in this regard, as it gave me a solid skeleton to clamber around and add meat to, which usually ended up being inner politics, character interactions, and a well-placed scary event to make sure you don't think this is just *Swiss Family Robinson* with an entire cruise liner. Hunter would also give suggestions as I went along for elements to add, including one that was so horrific in nature that I couldn't help but amend my loose plans to include that beat as soon as possible.

My biggest hurdle was, through various factors, not being able to make consistent progress when writing this. To push myself through that, I ended up getting this shiny blue notebook and, every day, writing down how many words I wrote, a summary of what I wrote exactly, and then what I needed to write in the immediate future. This turned out to be really helpful for me, as it forced me to constantly think about what the characters are going through, how they'd react, and ways to disrupt order before anything could settle into a routine.

What did you come away from the project thinking?

In the words of the aforementioned notebook:

I DID IT!!!

Well, technically, those were my thoughts upon finishing the first draft, which was nearly 5 years ago, but I still felt something close to this when it finally came time to publish this. Here it was, my first piece of professional writing—a novella that I was asked to write for the biggest license Arcbeatle Press has access to. I'd proven myself in a space I was just starting to get acclimated to.

Is there anything you had to leave on the cutting room floor, but wanted to include?

I don't remember cutting much of anything, unfortunately. Not that I didn't revise, remove, add anything, of course, but usually when I'm at the stage of removing something, I'm of the mind that it's for the greater good, and I don't tend to dwell on it that much (I certainly didn't specify much in my notes beyond "Change happened.", basically).

The biggest thing I remember changing was us wanting to get this one licensed element that, for me and nobody else, would've been very cool to utilise in this story, but even now I look at it and go "Yeah, maybe the work was better off without this basically optional element that would've also required further edits to incorporate it properly".

Without spoiling too much, what can readers look forward to in *When Winter Comes*?

Things will get worse. Things will get horrible. Inevitably, winter will come.

Where can people find you on social media? Any other projects you'd like the readers to know about?

I'm @MarvelousMop on most things, mainly Bluesky and Tumblr—I usually end up posting about random books I'm reading or TV shows I'm watching.

As for projects, my main one has been this ongoing surreal comedy project called *The Nine-Two-Five Universe* — a world where superheroes, cults and magical lands all collide with the crushing mundanity of our corporate overlords. You might recognize some of the characters if you've been keeping up with Arcbeatle Press's anthology releases — *The Book of the Snowstorm*, in particular, features various side-characters from it in the framing device, as well as a story by me featuring Jenny Over-There, the somewhat grouchy, underdescribed protagonist of *Tales from the M.F.S.*. You might also recognize Aristide Twain, the lovely chap who's provided many an illustration for this series in that wonderfully scratchy style of his.

Any closing thoughts?

Well, I suppose after all of this, I'm grateful for being given this opportunity to write for the character of Chris Cwej, and I hope you enjoy what I've written. I can't really say more than that.

Interview: Dillon O'Hara

Tell us a little about yourself.

There's a photograph of me, two years old, painting onto paper with no paint on the brush, just doing it to do it. I'm still at it.

I'm Irish, and I grew up in the countryside in County Kilkenny. Nowadays, I live in and work in and write about Limerick city. YA fantasy is the current project: a novel based on Irish mythology, with more than a dash of *Who* for flavor.

I was the Vice President of Arcbeatle Press from 2021 to 2023, but now I'm not. I wrote a few stories for *WARSONG*, a few stories for *10,000 Dawns*, *Rebel Rebel* in *Cwej: Down the Middle*, and now *Dread Mnemosyne*.

What was the process like, writing *Dread Mnemosyne*? Was writing it alongside someone else a different experience than usual?

Dread Mnemosyne was an unusual writing process. I expect Hunter may disagree, but I'd say this is their story first and foremost. They're the singer and I'm the band. They're the one who came to me with a brief for a story about Larles and Kwol, a proper character piece for them. Later, they jumped in and co-wrote with me as their idea expanded to include an adventure for Chris.

Even as the story changed, my main focus was the Larles and Kwol plotline. I had the raw materials handed to me right away, so there wasn't the usual kind of early stage of writing a story, the grasping around in the dark for ideas. It was more like starting with developmental edit work, mounting the ideas onto a scaffolding.

It was also my idea to bring back Frey and Tina from *Rebel Rebel*. I was conscious that those two characters had been left with an unresolved story, and I was keen to tie that off.

It wasn't a firm split, to be clear. Hunter rewrote my bits, and I drafted a couple of scenes for Chris. We both wrote at least a little of everything.

What did you come away from the project thinking?

I came away with the hope that something of a human experience came across. It's a gonzo story within the context of an epic, sweeping series, and certainly the situation for Larles and Kwol hasn't literally happened to anyone. But there are plenty of people in relationships that don't feel good. If this story can meet someone and soothe them a little, then I consider that an absolute win.

What do you hope the reaction to the novel from the casual Cwej fan will be?

I'm not sure there's such a thing as a casual Cwej fan! If you know who Chris Cwej is, you're probably pretty deep in the mines. All the same, if someone has been following along with the series up to this point, then I hope this story brings them in on Larles. This is a character who's been

through a lot, and much of it has been strange. She's positioned to have a pretty odd, fraught psychology, and I was happy to give her room to breathe.

Without spoiling too much, what can readers look forward to in *Dread Mnemosyne*?

Here is what *Dread Mnemosyne* is, to me. For years, Larles and her friend Kwol have been in an arranged marriage. One morning, Larles wakes up to find herself trapped in her ship, and Kwol is treating her all lovey-dovey, as if they've been actually married the whole time. Larles needs to figure out how to escape, or she'll be trapped forever—but as she uncovers what's going on, uncomfortable truths about her false marriage are brought to light.

Meanwhile, Chris Cwej goes to the bank and nothing goes well.

Where can people find you on social media? Any other projects you'd like the readers to know about?

You can find me on Instagram at [claralaherty](#) and Bluesky at [claralaherty.bsky.social](#). It'll be a few years yet before my current project is published, but that's where you'll hear about it when I do.

Any closing thoughts?

My work for Arcbeatle Press, especially my editorial work, brought me back to a place in my life where I felt confident enough to write my own original fiction. For that and for everything else, I will always be grateful.

Continue the adventure in
**Cwej: Hidden Truths:
Dread Mnemosyne
and
When Winter Comes**



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Cwej30

Cwej: Odyssey

*Cwej and Sang Mi encounter Little Green Men,
the secret history of an enemy,
and the mystery behind the silent film studio
in Betzwood Pennsylvania.*

But what's the mystery behind the gems they've been finding?

And what creature await down the highway?

Find out in October's Spooktacular issue of Cwej30!

Plus: new interviews!

See You Soon!