

# CWEJ-THE BOOK OF THE FAIR

BY JAMES WYLDER

1893



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*The Book of the Fair Expanded Storytelling* edited by James Wylder and Hunter O'Connell

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## From the Editor's Desk

Welcome to the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Chris Cwej! You're looking at the first issue of the *Cwej30* Zine, a publication that will be celebrating the history of Chris Cwej past, present, and future. Getting this out has been a labor of love—honestly going through all the trials and tribulations it took to get this first issue out would be ridiculous (would you believe I wrote parts of this at the hospital, and worked on parts of it with burned hands, and I wasn't at the hospital for my hands?) it's been a wild time, but we're here!

Inside you'll find a brand-new story, interviews with writer-editor Gerard Power and artist Bex Vee, poetry, and more.

The story is especially exciting—continuing on from the events of our Easter Special *Shutter Speed*, meant to be a fresh introduction to Cwej for new readers, we travel to the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 for a new journey that will start us off on a new Odyssey of adventures that will continue in the following Zines! So, if you're new to Cwej and want to learn more, *Shutter Speed* and these Zines are the place to start. We're building this journey for you to hop in and join the ride, and if you love Cwej, you're going to love where we're going

After all, our favorite Adjudicator deserves to have a great anniversary.

I first encountered Cwej in the novel *Dead Romance*, and I immediately wanted to learn more. All these years later after contributing a few stories to Cwej the series, here I am as the editor of the Cwej 30th anniversary project!? Sometimes life takes you places you'd never expect.

I hope you enjoy this debut issue, and you follow us every two weeks for new adventures, new looks into the creators behind Cwej, and more fun.

I'll see you then.

—James Wylder

CWEJ—THE  
BOOK OF THE FAIR  
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# Cwej: The Book of the Fair

*By James Wylder*

*With Contributions by Theta Mandel and Sean Dillon*

What do you do after the best day of your life?

Despite a week passing, Jhe Sang Mi had yet to come up with an answer to that question. She was beginning to worry that she simply wouldn't. The question didn't depress her—that came naturally without any hard work on her part—but it did bother her. Like a sore in your mouth you can't stop thinking about whenever you move your lips. She had returned to classes at Academy 27, her friends coming over to her desk with gossip and complaints before class. She had returned to family dinners, and arguing with her twin brother Sang Eun about the latest update to Drakensword XIV. She'd returned to running on familiar streets, looking out past the glass dome that surrounded her home at the ochre soil blowing up in dusty bursts by freezing wind.

And she thought about her time at Hughes High. In a lot of ways, it didn't feel real. Like it had all been a hallucination. That school had been noisier and messier, but also more colorful. Academy 27 was mostly grays and whites with splashes of Gongen red and Takumi yellow. There had been a rainbow vibrancy to Hughes High. Not to mention the students didn't have to wear uniforms. Had she invented it all like a dream? Perhaps the Delirium pills she and Saki had taken as an experiment had permanently screwed her brain up and she was even crazier than she had been before her family had put her in the hospital. But a part of her knew that, at least in this case, she wasn't crazy. She really had gone on adventures, to another place, in another time. She had really been there, her lungs breathing different air, the strange weight of stronger gravity pulling down on her shoulders.

As she looked out the window of her classroom, she sighed. They were getting a lecture about civic pride today, and had all been given gift bags, with yellow t-shirts inside that said "Proud to Be From Takumi!" on it in several languages, in red lettering. She sighed a second time.

The man giving the speech, who had come in a kimono that could politely be called "Gaudy", continued rambling on. "And this is why as citizens of Gongen—as citizens of the city of Takumi—we must hold onto this mother soil, even at the expense of our own blood."

Her brother looked over at her with an expression that said, "Oh cool, more military recruitment propaganda."

She gave a dead-eyed smile back that said, "I am thinking of pretending to be sick to get out of class immediately." To which he nodded, and tried to gather a few of his things so they could make a quick exit when she started feigning illness and he would shoot his hand up to ask to be excused, when the classroom door shot open instead.

In the doorway was a blond man—tall and broad shouldered, and dressed in weathered blue armor with a symbol like an upward pointing silver arrowhead, all covered with a dusty brown cloak and thick goggles on his forehead. He looked ragged, there were red lines in his eyes, and Sang Mi was immediately worried what had happened to Chris Cwej.

"Hi, sorry, I need Sang Mi. Jhe Sang Mi." He looked around the room, and then pointed at her, and rushed over to her desk, starting to shove her stuff into her bag without asking.

"Uh, sir, who exactly are..." the speaker said.

"Oh sorry." He reached into a satchel on his side, pulled out a pile of IDs, shuffled through them for a moment, then gave up and threw them all in a pile on Sang Mi's desk. "I'm with the government, here, take your pick."

“... You're back?” Sang Mi said, blindsided.

“We need to go. Now. I need you,” he said, and there was none of his charm or sparkle.

“Wait, isn't he the actor from that TV show?” Bashrat asked.

He grabbed Sang Mi's wrist, and she obliged, grabbing her bag as he dragged her out the door, despite the teacher and the speaker voicing their protests, and her brother charging through the door after them.

“Hey! Where the hell do you think you're going?”

She pulled her hand free of Chris' grip, and turned to her twin. He was concerned. Confused.

“Hey, look, do you trust me?”

“Yeah, but why is he *here*?”

“Listen. I'll explain later. But you have to trust me, cause I trust him, and whatever is going on has to be important to him.”

He crinkled his brow, and she gave him a hug. “I'll be back, it'll be like I wasn't even gone. Just... trust me.”

He hugged her back. “... Alright. I trust you. What should I tell everyone?”

She broke the hug and shrugged. “Tell them they want me to act in some government video. Or something.”

He nodded, still frowning, but accepting. “Alright, sure, that sounds terrible but we'll go with that—”

“Sang Mi, let's go,” Chris cut in, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Now,” he added.

And with a wave to her brother, she ran after Chris Cwej.

\* \* \*

They arrived at a door she didn't remember being in the hallway, and that Chris had to unlock with a real legitimate old-school physical key. She followed him across the boundary, and was pretty darn sure there wasn't a room like this in the school. The walls were shifting gears and pistons made of bronze and crystal, and the floor was bronze too, but with a teal carpet that led to a semi-circular control set up that looked like it had been crafted by a steampunk artist with too little self-control. The ceiling had a few cogs that jutted down a bit too low, and made them both duck as they made their way in.

“... Is this your time machine? Is this... how you travel?”

He rushed over to said controls, and started pulling levers, glancing back at her. “No. It's not my time machine.”

“Whose is it?”

“The owner... won't need it anymore.”

She nodded, and approached him slowly. “Okay, something is clearly wrong.”

“Yes,” he replied, and pulled another lever which made no noise but caused her stomach to flip. “We're here.”

“Where?”

He turned to her, closed his eyes, taking a moment to center himself, before opening them as he spoke. “Do you remember how I promised to keep you safe when we traveled together?”

She nodded.

“I can't promise that here. And I want you to forgive me ahead of time, because I need your help. Need, capital N. And so do my Superiors. So do... a lot of people.”

She chewed on the edge of her lip, and looked around the strange room. “You still haven't told me what's going on.”

He gestured to the door. “Open it.”

“So this is a machine that takes us different places, right? What's outside the door isn't my school, or even my home at all, right?”

He nodded. "Open it."

She frowned, and glancing back at him three times on the way, made her way over to the door. The inside had a big brass handle, which she turned, and pulled open.

She recognized the skyline. It was Chicago, the same way she saw it from nearby Violet Hill Illinois at Hughes High. Only, it wasn't really Chicago.

The buildings were crumbling. The sky was a swirl of iodine clouds and red light that shone from a small red point floating in the sky over the city center of Chicago. Not that there was much left of it. Around it all, things flew. Winged, but loosely like people. Fanged.

There was nearly silence, but a wind whistled through the rubble like a quiet scream, and every so often a low moan would pierce the desolation.

Around the remains of the houses shambled the ruins of people, skin pallid, rotting.

She slammed the door, and ran to the other side of the room, trying to find the closest thing to a corner she could.

Her heart was pounding, her breath was heavy. She could feel bile coming up her throat.

She felt a comforting hand on her shoulder, and pushed it off. "Take me home, take me home now. I can't. I can't do that. I can't, no. No!"

*She was back there.*

*Back at the street that had put her in the hospital.*

*Back when she'd seen her.*

*The woman walking towards her, a trickle of blood down her face, calling out deliriously for her case worker.*

*Her hands, holding her hat to the wound, waiting for the ambulance.*

*The froth at the woman's mouth.*

Sang Mi covered her face. She had to escape. She had to leave.

"I can't, I can't, I can't," she repeated.

Chris examined her for a moment, he was squatting next to her, face impassive. Finally he nodded. "Right. I'm sorry. It's too much. I really am sorry. I'll... I'll find a way. Let's get you home. This was never your problem, I shouldn't have... I'm sorry."

He sat with her for a moment in silence, then got up, and started towards the console.

Sang Mi focused on her breath. She rubbed the pad of her thumb against each of her fingers in turn.

"Ch-Chris?"

He turned his head.

"Ask me... ask... ask me what I feel?"

"I don't have to. I know you've survived your own trauma, and—"

"No, what I feel. Touch. Sense. That."

He grasped it. "What do you feel right now?"

"My finger tips. I'm rubbing my thumb against them."

"What do you hear?"

"All these stupid pistons and gears. I don't even think they do anything."

"What do you smell?"

"It smells like oil and lemon. I don't know why."

"What do you see?"

She squinted, "You. You're wearing your usual outfit but then this dumb cloak and some goggles."

He smirked. "That's all correct. Good job."

She pulled herself up on a brass railing. Her heart was still pounding. "You came to get me because people are in danger, and I can help, right?"

He nodded.

"I... might be a hindrance. I'm kinda messed up."

The smirk became a smile. “Kid, if you're messed up, who knows what I am.”

She gave a small laugh. “If you want me to come with you, I'll help. I want to help.”

He came back over, and the comforting hand returned to her shoulder, only this time she didn't push it away as he squeezed. “I want you to help. I need your help. You're braver than you think.”

She shook her head. “I'm kind of a scaredy cat, but I'm in.”

They sat together for a time, till she felt calm enough. Then he put his arm around her, and led her back to the console.

“Something went wrong—very wrong. My Superiors either couldn't stop it, or ignored the warning signs. And now They want me to fix it.”

She nodded. “Okay, so... your Superiors, are they like... the time cops?”

He blinked, then chuckled despite himself. “Never let Them know you said that, They'd hate that. But... kinda. Regardless, if we don't fix it, a lot of people are going to suffer.”

She put a hand on the console, and gripped it tightly, focusing on her breathing again, and the feeling of the brass. He needed her, so she had to keep herself together. She had to. Chris flipped a switch, and some of the gears started turning on the wall, and they rolled out of the way to reveal a screen. On it popped up an image that Sang Mi immediately recognized.

“That's... the Chicago World's Fair? Of 1893?”

“You're familiar?”

She nodded. “I read books, you know. I read *Devil in the White City* for my English Foreign Language class.”

“That's where things went wrong. Something there happens, and it spreads out from there and tears things apart. Tears... everything apart.”

“What do you mean everything?”

He flicked another switch on the console. “I mean everything. Every living thing. But whatever has happened, it's preventing us from stopping it.”

The image was beautiful—the golden statue of Columbia, the giant Ferris Wheel... “Okay, so, I'm just taking a guess, but this... bad thing, it's stopping you from going there to fix it, but because this isn't my home, because I'm from a place that your Superiors think is crappy and don't care about, you think I can get us there? Somehow?”

He nodded. “More specifically, you've been to Chicago before, and this isn't your home. Whatever has been tearing my home apart and corrupting it, it hasn't touched you. But you've been to the place it took root. This machine, it can focus in on that, use it to break through a sort of... wall of rot keeping us from saving the day. Does that make sense?”

She wobbled the hand she wasn't gripping the console with back and forth. “Sort of. But I believe you. So what do we have to do?”

“We have to go to the fair, investigate what's going on there, and stop it. And you have to be the one to pull the lever to travel there.”

She nodded. “You got it. I'm a mean lever puller. I've pulled so many levers, you don't even know. More than two.” She glanced back at Chris' outfit, looked down at her own, and then back at him. “Hey uh, we're not exactly dressed for the time period. Won't they notice?”

“Ah,” he said. “Well, luckily we do have a costume closet.”

He snapped, and the gears rolled out of the way to reveal a doorway.

“The war robe in the spare oom!” she said.

“... The what?”

She sighed. “I'll lend you a Narnia book sometime.”

\* \* \*

“Look! Look, hey-hey look at me!”

Chris looked up. “You look very pretty, it’s a good outfit.”

Sang Mi waddled around the room for a moment, getting used to the layers of skirts and the unusual shoes. She usually just wore track shorts or a skirt after all. It was a very nice dress, in a cheery yellow, perfectly in style for 1893 America. “Why didn’t we go to more places where we got to dress up? I don’t even really like dressing up—my mom is always having to drag me to get me into anything fancier than a hoodie—but look at this!” She twirled her parasol. “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain, Professor Higgins!”

He tried to give a smile. “You’re about twenty years past where we’re going with that reference.”

She lowered the parasol mopingly. “Well I was close. You look nice too.”

He was wearing a black period suit, complete with waistcoat and a straw pie-plate cap. “Thanks, means a lot. Well, now comes the hard part.”

She tilted her head. “You mean… pulling the lever?”

He gestured with both hands to the controls. “If I’m wrong and this doesn’t work this is going to be very embarrassing.”

“Wow,” she mumbled. “You really sold the confidence earlier.” She stepped up to it, and held a silk-gloved hand over the handle, centimeters away from touching it. “... What happens if you’re wrong?”

“Well, we’ll learn something new about the Universe.”

“Without the bullcrap?”

“This machine will do the equivalent of crash into a brick wall.”

“Cool.” Well, she’d come this far. She said a silent prayer, then said a bonus second prayer just for good measure, and gripping the lever, pulled it down.

The noise was incredible.

It was like the Universe was made of metal gears scraping against each other, glass shattering, kettles boiling over and screeching, and whispers too quiet to hear and so loud they were deafening. The world itself was visually stretching and tearing, like light itself was being pulled like putty. Sang Mi hugged the console, trying to ignore that the walls seemed to be not just tearing themselves apart but devouring themselves as the gears turned faster and faster, the pistons pumping so hard they popped.

Then there was a final lurch, throwing her to the floor, and they stopped.

“... Did that work?” she groaned, cheek to the carpet.

The room was filled with smoke, bits of torn metal littered the ground, and it stank of burnt oil.

Chris stumbled over to her, and helped her up, then went to the door.

His hesitation to turn the handle said he didn’t know.

She put his hand on his. “Together? Three, two, one...”

They turned the handle.

And the door opened.

Beyond the door was a street: rough brick paving filled with the clip-clopping of carriages, men and women in clothes that were probably much more casual to them than they felt to Chris and Sang Mi, and the wafting smell of smoke and meat packing plants.

“Wow!” Sang Mi said. “It smells terrible!”

“Yeah,” Chris sighed. “Sorry about that. Welcome to the past.”

She scrunched her nose up. “How do you get used to it?”

He shrugged in a way that said he wanted to give her an answer that made him look cool but couldn’t. “Yeah, I don’t know. You just kinda do.”

She readied her parasol. “We didn't stop to grab anything so I don't have my sword, or... well most of my stuff. I have my running shoes and my sticky shoes in my school bag?”

“Sticky—never mind. You should be avoiding danger if possible. Let me handle it if we get in a tussle. We don't know what we're dealing with.”

She held a long look at him. Too long. And then averted her face too quickly. “Sure. Let's get going then.”

Smell aside, the 1890s were cleaner than she expected. Not that there wasn't trash, but it did strike her that maybe in the past most people also liked things like ‘enjoying their lives’. Not that they could control the stench from the factories and plants. But things were going... boringly well.

“Uh, hey, do you know where we're going?”

“Oh yeah, of course,” Chris said. “Maybe we should buy a map though.”

“You have no idea.”

He didn't answer and just hustled over to a news-vendor, and was able to grab a program for what seemed a very small amount of money—at least compared to what they'd been paying in 2025. Inspecting it, they promptly turned left.

When the gates of the fair came into view, though, all her perceptions about the past being cleaner than she expected went out the window—because if the gates were anything to go by, the fair was going to put the city to shame.

She grinned at Chris. “You know this was the place the Ferris Wheel was invented?”

“Yup.”

“We should go on it.”

“This isn't a sightseeing tour.”

“But how else are we going to get a view of the whole fair to figure out where to go if we don't go on the world's first Ferris Wheel?”

He held up the map he had literally just bought five minutes ago.

She stopped in front of a slew of posters advertising fair attractions plastered on the wall, and threw her hands up, gesturing wildly with her parasol in a way that caused a few rude remarks from passers by. “Okay, but we don't know where we're going once we get in there.”

Chris pointed to the wall, and her eyes followed.

There was a poster next to her that read:

*“Incredible Sights Never Before Seen!”*

*The legendary collection of the legendary collector Sal H. exhibited TO THE PUBLIC for the FIRST TIME at the World's Columbian Exposition!”*

Below the text was a drawing of a woman, arms outstretched, a giant ruby hovering there above her hands, rays of red light coming out from it. The maker of the poster had only paid for black and red ink, apparently.

*“See it yourself, only 5 cents in the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts building!”*

Looking at the giant ruby, it was obvious to both of them.

That was the thing that had been in the sky above the ruins of Chicago.

Sang Mi sighed.

She'd really wanted to go on the Ferris Wheel.

\* \* \*

The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 was often called the White City, because it was an accurate description. The buildings had been spray-painted white, a choice that was both aesthetic and practical. Everything there had to be constructed quickly, and exist only for a fleeting half-a-year, but also look as though it was a monument that would last forever.

When you saw the White City though, the effect was magnificent. Rolling green spaces, interspersed with pristine white buildings of magnificent size. A huge central pond presided over by a towering golden statue of Columbia.

For many in times that followed, the sight might not inspire the awe it did for those who first saw it. After all, it was so beautiful that it was copied over and over by those who saw it, and those copies were copied, and so on and so forth.

So it was perhaps with luck that the person viewing it for the first time was a girl who had grown up in tightly spaced housing complexes with bland rolling wasteland nearby.

When she looked out at the White City, she was struck with awe. She froze, her eyes watering, her lips parting so slightly, and she reached a hand over to lightly touch Cwej's arm.

"It's... beautiful," she said. And she meant it. And it was.

Cwej didn't see it through her eyes; he didn't know what she felt. He'd seen copies on copies. Whole worlds stapled together from the dregs at the bottom of the White City's cup. But he could see Sang Mi's eyes, and the way the fair sparkled in them.

And for him, that was the White City.

"Yeah, it is," he agreed.

They walked down the street, passing some picnickers on the lawn flirting very loudly as they joked around feeding each other brownies, and passed a pair of guards with conspicuous sabers at their hips.

"You'd think they'd have stuck to guns," Cwej commented after the men had passed.

"We use swords on Gongen," Sang Mi said. "I'm pretty good, even." She folded up her parasol and mimed swiping it around.

Cwej was, despite himself, pretty amused. "Put that thing away, you'll show the guards you're a threat."

She stuck her tongue out, and they laughed.

"Oh! Chris, look, it's one of the fair's famous thingies, Orange Cider!" she pointed at a stall, it was in fact labeled with those exact words.

Well, he was thirsty. They went up to the counter, and ordered two cups.

They clinked their cups, and took a sip.

And both spat it out almost immediately.

"No refunds," the vendor said.

"Yeah, I see why. Is there vinegar in this?" Sang Mi asked, still gagging.

"It's a secret recipe," the vendor continued.

As they poured their cups out on the grass, both felt a tap on their shoulder. "Uh, hey! The real Orange Cider booth is over there, there are a lot of copycats now..."

They both turned, and saw a young lady who was around Sang Mi's age, with puffy brown hair she'd barely contained and a huge swath of freckles.

"You wouldn't happen to be employed by the other Cider Booth, would you?" Chris asked.

The girl shook her head. "I'm—oh right—" she reached into a bag and held out a cheap paper flier advertising the Switzerland Pavilion which apparently had chocolate. "Please come see and taste the amazing confectionaries at the Switzerland Pavilion!"

They examined the paper, and Sang Mi leaned up on her toes to try to whisper to Cwej. "If we save the world we have to ride the Ferris Wheel and eat chocolate."

Well, she had the spirit. "I'm always making bad deals with you around."

"You get to eat the chocolate too."

He couldn't argue with that, and turned back to the girl. "We'll stop by later. Have you seen the Sal H. Collection?"

She nodded furiously. "There's so many amazing things there! I thought the Street from Cairo they brought here was amazing, but there's stuff like I've never seen! Are you thinking of stopping by?" She squinted at that last part.

"That's why we're here." He flicked her a coin, which had slipped into his hand without either girl noticing. She caught it expertly. "Thanks for the help Miss..."

"McNully, Edith McNully."

"Thanks, Edith!" Sang Mi concluded, and they slipped off quickly into the crowd. "She was friendly."

Cwej shrugged. "Maybe."

The Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building was huge, and it was hard not to gawk at it as they got closer. "It's the size of two of the Great Pyramids of Giza," Chris noted. "It's actually the largest building on Earth right now."

There was a bridge crossing sparkling water that led to the great gates of the building, and they crossed through inside. The high arched ceilings were hung with flags of different countries, and as they passed they paused here and there to peer at a weaving machine, or a wondrous painting. But when a piece of music caught Sang Mi's ear, her whole attention shifted.

"That's Ariyang. That's like, the song they made us sing the most in elementary school."

Chris tilted his head.

"That means... I mean there has to be a Korea Pavilion here? One from before we all left for Gongen, or before the division, or before the occupation..." She looked back up at him. "We have to see it, right?"

"Yeah, we definitely do." He checked the program. "They misspelled Korea as Corea though."

Sang Mi just sighed and threw her hands up. Yeah.

"You head that way, I'll go see what's at our target."

She gestured with her folded parasol. "Hey, no way, you need my help."

"No. I said I'd do my best to keep you safe. I'll judge how dangerous it is, and if I need your help I know where to find you."

She mulled this over, and with a nod consented to split.

They turned, and in opposite directions, began the next step of their journey. Though perhaps if they'd known what would follow, they wouldn't have gone alone.

\* \* \*

The pavilion was somewhere right on the knife's edge of elegant and gaudy. A great ruffled banner hung over the front, and a pair of girls, dressed in what for a fair you could take the family to in public was provocative for 1893, flanked the entryway, out of which rolled the thick scent of incense. Cwej pushed his way through the entry, which was covered in a veil of silk threads that rolled over him gently as he passed through. The inside took that gentle balance between gaudy and elegant and threw a fifty-pound weight onto the gaudy side. Taking a stroll around the room, he saw some things amazing and historical: a circlet said to belong to Helen of Troy he was pretty sure actually had, a note on aged parchment written by Julius Caesar, a hat belonging to the Chinese alchemist Xu Fu. There were also things he was pretty sure were pure hokum: a jackalope he could see the taxidermy stitches on, and the world's largest ball of twine (it was not). But the things that really stuck out to him were the curiosities that he could place all too well: a severed hand that was said to be that of a demon (a Kelphan hand with the feathers removed), an elaborate music box that played

the song you were last thinking of he knew was of Gendar manufacture, and most worrisome a metal chest with the writing of his Superiors on it.

“Not many take interest in that piece.”

He turned to face the voice behind him. It was a woman, dressed all in black from her head to her toes—which included her face, covered by a black veil. The only things that weren't that color about her was a golden birdcage she carried, which had a human skull in it positioned on a purple pillow, and a single silver ring.

This was not the kind of person one sees every day, even in a place built upon seeing curiosities.

The place had made him curious at least, and he made the natural assumption. “Sal H., famous collector?”

“The very same.” She held her gloved hand out to him, and he leaned down to kiss it. As he did so he could have sworn something on the ring moved. “Don't worry, I'm familiar with you as well. Christopher Rodonanté Cwej. Servant of the ones who claim to run the gears turning beneath the world.”

He looked up from her hand in shock. “... You are well versed.”

“You shouldn't be surprised.” She pulled her hand back. “You've seen my collection after all. Most people whisper about how it couldn't be a circlet of the real Helen of Troy, or I can see the doubt in their eyes. You knew it immediately as real. Let alone the hand from that bird-woman.”

He glanced around the room. No one seemed to be paying attention to them. “... Is the bird-woman still alive.”

“Oh no, was shot dead by Napoleon's army in Northern Africa crawling out of the shooting star it had crashed to Earth in. I was able to barter with the soldiers for one hand from the body.”

It was sad, but there was nothing to be done about it now. “I'm sorry to hear that. Who are you, exactly? Sal H. leaves a lot to the imagination.”

She held the birdcage up, and the skull's empty socket stared back at him. “There's your answer.”

That didn't answer anything for him.

“You claim to have been alive during the time of Napoleon.”

She tilted her head, almost at the same angle as he had with Sang Mi earlier. “Why are you surprised? You surely don't think you're the only person who consorts with gods and monsters.”

“Even so, most people die.”

“Do you know the legends of King Solomon? They say he sealed ten demons in ten rings, and made them do his will.” She held up the hand with a single silver ring on her forefinger. “I am no Solomon, but I am of a line of Kings.”

Cwej looked at the ring. He assumed he would be calling her bluff, or rolling his eyes, but... something shifted in the silver. For a moment, there was a sliver of a face. An eye, wide and whose blue iris had the depth of oceans. And then it was gone. She grinned, teeth wide and white enough they shone through the veil. “There are things beyond the depths of death, Mr. Cwej. I'm sure you already know that. Death has little hold on you.”

He straightened his back and raised his chin. “Alright, let's stop playing around then. I'm here to see something in your collection. I'm sure you know what?”

She froze a moment, the gilded cage swinging in her hand lazily counting the moments.

“He told me you'd be here. Obviously I knew it was you the moment I saw you, but I didn't think you'd be so quick on the uptake.”

He had been quick on the uptake, sure, but that didn't stop her words from chilling his blood. “What do you mean ‘he told me’ I'd be here?”

\* \* \*

The Korean Pavilion wasn't as big as Sang Mi had hoped. She'd seen the size of many of the other nations' presentations here, and in comparison Korea's was definitely the scrappy upstart. But that gave her a different sense of pride—and a strange one. Her ancestors had left Earth and helped settle the planet now called Gongen by her people. It was a cold and frigid place, the soil riddled in toxins, the air still thin after centuries of attempts to build a stable atmosphere. She'd heard about where her ancestors had come from, certainly, but it was a place she'd never be able to visit. Perhaps with Cwej, she could. Perhaps. But this was here, and present.

As she approached, a few attendees were standing around listening to the music—played by a whole gaggle of musicians which seemed to be the majority of the delegation. The musicians were good—really good. Which was definitely a wise choice because she could already tell that the Korean Pavilion simply couldn't afford a booth the size of many of the other nations here. As the musicians finished, the watchers applauded, and they stopped for a break. A man in a fine suit came up, greeting some of the listeners and encouraging them to check out the rest of the booth. He made his way through the line giving his spiel in English, till he reached her. He began his speech, then stopped.

The man's eyes lit up.

"Are you from Joseon?" he asked in Korean.

"Sorta," she replied, suddenly realizing she hadn't come up with any sort of cover story for this situation, let alone a good one. "I haven't been there in a long time."

Long time could mean so long it had never happened, right? Sure, she'd go with that.

"I live with my uncle from England right now." Well, Chris was from Spaceport Five Overcity, that was close enough to being English.

The man nodded, clearly with some questions about what her family history was but being too polite to dig in.

She quickly extended a hand. "My name is Jhe Sang Mi."

He took her hand, and gave a bow while holding it instead of shaking it, which made Sang Mi feel like she was in a period drama. "I'm Interior Minister Jeong Gyeongwon."

"It's an honor."

"The honor is all mine," he rose, and gestured to the musicians. "Did you enjoy their performance?"

She nodded a few too many times. "They're very good."

"We appreciate that!" one called, with a bow of the head.

"That's Park Yonggu," Gyeongwon said.

"We got to play for President Grover Cleveland, which was an honor, but I never expected to see someone from our homeland outside our delegation," Yonggu said.

"You're doing great!" For a moment Sang Mi was going to be purely respectful and reply with only niceties, when she got an idea. And she tried to push that idea down. And Chris would have pushed it down, but he wasn't there. "Hey, do you have any interest in learning a new song?"

\* \* \*

The crowd over by the Korean Pavilion was drawing more people over by the minute, and Edith wasn't about to get shut out. She hustled through the crowd, trying to get closer as the strange music echoed out from the red-robed musicians. She got pretty close to the front, and stopped to listen. It was catchy, and like nothing else she'd ever heard. She would have kept listening in rapture, but she noticed that the girl from the Orange Cider booth was there too—examining the artifacts brought over from Korea. She looked oddly guilty.

Coming up to her, she poked her in the shoulder, which caused her to yelp and jump, spinning around and brandishing her parasol like a sword.

“—Oh, it's you, Edith right?”

She nodded. “Sang Mi, right?”

“Yep.”

She looked over at the musicians, then back at her. “The song is really good, have you heard it before?”

“Heard it before? Ha, haha, no of course not... no... yeah no I know it sorry.”

“I don't know why you're apologizing?”

She tapped the parasol against her skirts. “I couldn't resist being a lil rascal and probably will be getting chewed out by my uncle later. Hey—know anywhere else cool we can go? I uh...”

Edith didn't really understand what was going on, but she knew a girl looking for an exit strategy when she saw one. “Of course! I know just the place. And they won't be playing *After the Ball* there either.”

“... *After the Ball*?”

Edith's demeanor drooped. “They've been playing it everywhere the whole fair. I'm so tired of it... but I promise you this place is fun!”

“Great, just let me tell the Minister what to tell Cwej—my uncle—if he comes by.”

In just a minute, Edith was leading the way. She was hoping this would intrigue Sang Mi just like it did her. She was cute, well put together, but something of a troublemaker. But also seemed to not be able to handle the trouble she made for a second. She liked something about that too, and when Sang Mi reached out to grab her hand whining a little pathetically about how she was going to get lost in the crowd, she felt a thrill up her spine she couldn't easily explain.

Thankfully, she was able to put these odd thoughts out of her mind as they reached their destination. “Chocolate!” Sang Mi said with a simple excitement that made Edith happy. The Swiss had brought huge chocolate rollers over from Europe, able to make chocolate in a way no one had before! And it was tasty too. Watching the rollers was mesmerizing. So mesmerizing that Edith was almost able to ignore how her heart was fluttering when she realized Sang Mi hadn't let go of her hand. The pair watched the chocolate roll through it for a few minutes, until Sang Mi jolted realizing they weren't alone.

“Bwah!” she said.

The gentleman raised his hands in peace. “Ah, apologies, ladies. I come here to watch the chocolate rollers every day of my trip.”

“They're pretty cool,” Sang Mi noted.

The man looked befuddled.

“Er, it's very... shinkihayo? Amazing? Amazing.”

“Yes, they are. I'm thinking of purchasing them when the fair ends.”

“No shi—I mean, oh really? I love chocolate, you should do it.”

He sighed. “The Hershey Chocolate company, it's a dream but it's such a risk.”

Sang Mi looked at Edith, and Edith tried to decipher the look on her face. She failed however, because Edith was not from the future, and therefore had no idea why Sang Mi was being smug. “Oh I think you're going to do just fine, you should go for it.”

Edith frowned. “You can't make a whole business out of chocolate, there aren't enough rich people, and the rich people already have their own shops.”

Sang Mi tapped her nose. “I have a special sixth sense that's telling me this is a good idea,” she lied through her teeth.

“Well, thank you for the encouragement young lady, I—”

But Sang Mi's gaze had shot across the way, to where a tall blond man was walking back the way they'd came.

“What the heck is Chris doing here? Sorry, must dash, good luck, Milton Hershey! The kids will love Reese's Cups.”

Edith tried to grab her sleeve, but she moved faster than she expected in the dress pulling the skirts up.

As she disappeared into the crowd, Edith folded her arms in annoyance, and Hershey realized: “I never said my name was Milton?”

\* \* \*

Pushing her way through the throngs of fairgoers, Sang Mi had more than a few insults thrown her way as she bumped shoulders and hurled apologies. Admittedly she didn't know what all the things being yelled at her meant, so maybe some of them weren't insults?

Well, she was pretty sure they were insults. But she could pretend.

Finally, her hand shot forward and grabbed Chris' sleeve.

“Geez, I told Minister Jeong we were going to the Swiss Pavilion, you didn't have to walk past us. Come on, what'd you learn, did you meet Sal?”

He turned, and looked down at her.

It was an odd moment. Because he looked just like Chris Cwej, it was the same face, the same hair. But it wasn't him. She knew immediately it wasn't him. His whole demeanor was off, his face was pale. He did not look kind. And it was that realization that made her inspect other details she hadn't noticed. The light in his eyes wasn't there at all. He'd also taken way better care of his fingernails, and he was wearing a completely different suit. There was a long dark scar on the back of his hand, and a few thin short ones on his neck.

She let go of his sleeve.

“Oh, uh, my mistake.”

“No mistake. You know who I am.” It was his voice, but it wasn't.

“Nope, clearly not, you're not uh... Milton Hershey?” She knocked on her head with her knuckles like she was testing if it was hollow.

“I don't look anything like Milton Hershey. And you know I'm Chris Cwej.”

She kept backing up. “Chris... Cwej? I don't even know how I'd spell that, what a weird—”

“You're only saying that because you know how it's spelled,” he deadpanned.

She tried to turn to flee faster, but she found a hand on either one of her arms. He leaned in to speak into her ear. “Let's have a chat. If you make a scene, I'll have to start killing people. Do you think I am kidding?”

She shook her head. It was still Chris enough that she could read his face.

\* \* \*

Sal grinned. “What do you think the reason is?”

Chris clenched his teeth. Sang Mi was out there. He hadn't told her. Images flashed through his head. Images of failures. Images of Death.

“Suddenly eager to leave, are you? Why, you haven't even taken a look at what you came to see in my little collection yet, have you?”

Chris realized that ushers were moving the other viewers out of the pavilion, issuing a few refunds along the way. He could bolt for it. He doubted he wouldn't be able to overpower the staff and break through.

But he had to stay. This mission was about more than just himself. And he had to trust that Sang Mi could handle herself for a little. He had to believe she'd be okay. Because if he failed...

He'd planned to show Sang Mi more than just the ruins of Chicago. But that had been too much. He'd spent a month digging through wreckage and death to find the timeship they'd used to get here.

He'd been right to take her with him, she'd helped break through to the past like he'd thought. But maybe he should have told her he also chose her for the mission because she wasn't dead and would return his calls.

Or maybe not.

Maybe just keep that to himself.

Along with the image of a corpse on a faraway battlefield.

So he didn't bolt. He stood still, firm if he was being generous to himself, and watched Sal.

"Now then, it looks like we're all alone, so why don't we show you what you came here for?"

A pair of goons walked towards him, a large chest carried between them, its weight drooping their arms.

They dropped it down in front of him.

Sal began dancing around the room with surprising elegance, cage swinging around as she spoke. "I found it in the snow-capped mountains of Appalachia, a beating heart of shadow and screams that pulled all life from the soil around it. The Ruby of Desolation, a prison for an idea, crafted from blood and nightmares by the Yssgaroth. A horror that holds a dream of another world. A dream shrieking to awaken."

"Stop being so dramatic," he said as he moved to lift the lid.

"Dear, you wouldn't be here if it wasn't dramatic."

The lid opened, and he gasped.

\* \* \*

Sang Mi had expected to be thrown into a dungeon, tied to a chair, and have people start asking her questions while she tried to talk through a gag as they beat her up. That's what happened in the movies, at any rate.

But instead, she was surrounded by oddly pallid men and women, a pair of whom were fair guards with their swords rattling at their side, following this man who wasn't quite Cwej.

"Welcome to the Midway Plaisance. Pretty, isn't it? The fun and glory of the White City." It was a long strip jutting out from the rest of the fair, more like a carnival than an elegant theme park. Far down she could see the Ferris Wheel, the Midway's grand capstone, and even if the place had a seedier vibe than the White City proper, the Wheel was undoubtedly majestic.

She shrugged. "Well, it's nifty? I think?" He pointed, and she had a truncheon poked into her shoulder till she turned to look. There was a group of people in Native American clothing—and she was pretty sure not all from the same tribe—sitting around inside a fenced area.

Sang Mi pursed her lips, and looked back at him. "... Okay, so there is a human zoo. That's pretty bad. I revoke the nifty, that's bad."

He gave a slow sweeping bow. "I'm glad to see I'm travelling with someone I don't need to explain that to."

She threw her hands up, which caused one of the guards to start to draw his sword, and she lowered her hands right back down. "I can see with my eyes, probably-Chris-Cwej!"

He turned around, and gestured for them to follow. She tried to look for a break in the entourage to try to sprint through, but alas, they were actually good at their jobs. They really did look sickly though, maybe she could overpower one?

She was trying to size them up when she got (politely) shoved through a door into a music hall, where a jazz band was playing a song she knew was very much written for the fair and was not at all from the Middle East while a woman belly danced for an ogling crowd.

"Just in time," probably-Cwej said.

A man came up to the front, and gave a few lighthearted jokes about some of the more drooly men in attendance. "But that's not all folks, that's not all. You've all been waiting for it, the dance of the seven veils!"

"Why did you bring me here? Is this the torture?" Sang Mi deadpanned. "If you're evil because of a club where ladies do sexy dances, that's your own issue."

"Just watch," he replied.

Sang Mi looked back at Cwej. "You can leer at ladies on your own time?"

"All will be revealed."

\* \* \*

The chest opened.

It was empty.

Cwej cursed.

"Now now," said Sal, "No need for language, this is a family event," Sal said, smugly.

He kicked the box. "Where is it?"

"You haven't even been asking the right questions. Of course it's not here, come on now."

"Stop toying with me."

"You haven't even asked who I am! You know exactly what I'm doing. But you haven't even had the grace to ask why!"

\* \* \*

A woman came out in a dancer's outfit, along with several actors.

"It was in the reign of King Herod that he asked his niece to perform a dance for him, a choice that would change the course of history!" the announcer called.

Sang Mi sighed. "I know this story. I'm Catholic, you idiot."

"Oh," Cwej mumbled.

The woman began to dance, pulling off a series of seven veils, each one getting progressively more scintillating. Sang Mi watched with all the interest of watching concrete set.

The king rose, and applauded. "I have never seen such a wondrous dance. I will grant you one wish, whatever you wish that to be!"

The dancer's mother slipped in, holding a hand in an exaggerated fashion next to her ear. "Now then, there is only one thing I want..."

\* \* \*

Chris Cwej squinted. "You're ending the world. Not really any excuse for that."

Sal pulled her veil up. She looked young, but her eyes were ancient. "I want to die, Mr. Cwej. I have wanted to die for a long time. And I can't. I keep trying. Trying and trying and nothing works."

"Everyone else will die too."

She shrugged. "The Yssgaroth will make them something different. They need not be alive to enjoy existing. But I will be free."

"You can't control the Yssgaroth."

She held the birdcage up. "I really don't care. I made one mistake when I was just a girl, one mistake. I listened to my mother, and something horrible happened. And nothing I did could make up for it. I tried, I promise you I tried. I was a queen. I ruled a nation. I gave to the needy. But some traveller like you thought I wasn't punished enough by my guilt. They cursed me to live forever. I don't know how, but no one has been able to fix it. One mistake. Can you imagine your whole life being defined by one mistake?"

"Yes," Cwej answered cleanly.

She lowered the cage. "Your life is defined by so much more than that. You have countless stories, you've traveled with heroes and villains. When people hear your name they don't just think of one singular sentence. But if you say my name immediately it's—"

\* \* \*

“Bring me the head of John the Baptist, Salome!”

The girl playing Salome the dancer went up to her uncle, and told him as such. The king was horrified, but relented, and in shadow play John the Baptist was executed, and a (not very realistic) prop head was brought in on a silver platter, which Salome took to her mother.

Sang Mi looked back at Cwej. “I don't understand. I know this story. This isn't even a good telling of it?”

He grabbed her by the arm, pulling her up. “One mistake. That's the point. Can you forgive one mistake?”

“Depends?” she yelped, as he jolted her back through the door.

\* \* \*

“Sal H. Salome Herodian. Well that explains that. You've had nearly two millenia to build your collection.”

“Two millennia to wish for death that won't come. Immortality is fun for a while. But it... gets old after a few centuries. You think all the time in the world will let you do everything you've wanted. But then you do that.”

“Your boredom isn't cause to end the world.”

She looked him deep in the eyes. She was tired, tired in a way that he had rarely ever seen. “It is to me. I need this to end. I can't do this any longer. Every moment is torture. All because...” She set the birdcage down, pulled the skull out, and hurled it against a display stand. It should have broken, but it just bounced off lightly. She fumed as she picked it up again and stuffed it back in the birdcage.

“So uh, that's the real skull of John the Baptist, huh?”

“I can't seem to get rid of it,” she mumbled. “It always comes back to me.”

“Well, I think we need to...” Chris dug in his pockets. It was gone.

“Looking for this?” Salome held up his blaster. She tried pointing it at something and pulled the trigger. “Only works for you I'm guessing. Oh well.” Sighing, she crossed her arms. “I was hoping you'd have some sympathy for me. But it looks like I was able to achieve my other objective.”

“Stalling?” Cwej said.

She looked miffed he'd taken the wind out of her sails.

“Sorry. I mean, I'm not that sorry, but still.” He took his jacket off, and rolled his sleeves up. “If you don't mind, it's time for me to go regardless.”

She raised a hand, and the goons and staff began to descend on him. That, he'd predicted.

He hadn't predicted them to suddenly spout mouths of razor sharp fangs and their finger nails to grow into claws.

He backed up, looking around for something—anything—that might be helpful, and bumped into the wooden chest.

A man in a pinstripe suit and a straw hat similar to his own got tired of the slow creeping in, and charged him.

Cwej looked surprised, panicked, and then as the man got just within reach—his face darkened, and in a fluid motion he spun, grabbed the chest from the ground, and used the motion of the spin to knock the man right in the side of the head with enough force he went flying into a display case of priceless artifacts.

“Next?” he asked, and the attackers hesitated.

“Just rush him all at once you nimrods!” Salome yelled.

They did, but Cwej was ready. He hurled the chest into a woman and man who were elbow to elbow, and ran forward. The chest hit them in the ribs, sending them falling over, as Chris took a leap, his foot landing on

the side of the box, accelerating its descent, and causing him to land standing on the box on the prone attackers.

He didn't need to finish the fight. Claws reached for him, but Cwej kept running, bull rushing through the exit and into the night air of the White City.

He had to find Sang Mi.

\* \* \*

She was led to a cafe, sat down, and given a brownie and a coffee, which as far as the possibilities running through her head had gone seemed like it was a pretty good result all things considered. Definitely top 10% of outcomes.

The man with Chris' face slid in across from her. "So you're my other self's companion. I thought I, or I suppose he, was travelling with those Grigori, what were their names?"

Sang Mi shrugged. "I don't know. Grigori like Rasputin or Angels?"

"Like neither. Forget it." He intertwined his fingers and leaned back. "Let's skip pretending that we don't know why the other one of us is here. You came with me to stop myself and Sal H. from letting the Yssgaroth into this reality."

Sang Mi nodded slowly as she chomped down on the brownie. "Yep. Exactly. Guess you read me like a book."

He sighed, looking up at the ceiling. "You had no idea, did you?"

"None at all."

"And I just gave that away?"

"Hey, what's an Yssgaroth?" she said, still chewing, which was kinda gross.

"Oh, so you're at that level of not knowing."

She took a big glug of coffee and gave him a thumbs up. "I'm here to learn! And you're like... Chris from the future, right? Like something happens to you and you turn evil or something?"

He blinked. "What? No, of course not."

She slumped a little. "Okay I was wrong, sorry I'll shut up forever."

"What!? No, we just started talking, uh..." he awkwardly reached over and patted her on the ruffled shoulder.

"You should get better at being evil," she said in a downcast tone.

"I'm not evil. I'm doing what needs to be done."

"See? That sounded evil, that's a step in the right direction."

He sighed. "Your Chris, your me, he's not the man you think he is."

She shrugged, and took another bite of her brownie. "Who cares? I'm not the girl most people think I am. He's not a creeper, and he helps people."

"He's keeping things from you."

She just took another bite of the brownie, her apathy clear.

"You didn't even suspect that the coffee or brownie were poisoned."

She held a finger up, chewed and swallowed, and took another sip of coffee. "Okay but you didn't, did you?"

"You're not wrong. You must know me pretty well."

"Yeah, I guess. I've always wondered if he was like me when he was a teenager. Were you?"

"More than I'd like to admit."

She pointed at him, waving her hand around as she did so. "See I knew it. And right now you're like, broody dark Cwej. You're trying so hard to look..." She trailed off, her eyes growing wide as a realization blossomed. "Oh my god, you're Cwej Alter!"

He paused, "Sorry, I'm what?"

"You're the dark mirror of Cwej! You're even wearing all black! It's just like in Fate Stay/Night! You know when Saber—that is Artoria Pendragon, which is King Arthur but a girl, she was always secretly a girl, and sometimes they translate it in English as Altria and I don't know why—she gets corrupted by the goo in the corrupted Holy Grail and she becomes a goth chick and wears all black and becomes Saber Alter!"

Cwej Alter took a moment to take that in, process it, and then he looked down at his lap. "... I'm not Cwej Alter. I'm not even like your Chris Cwej at all."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"You are because you're absolutely about to give up and agree you're Cwej Alter."

He looked up and they stared at each other. "... I'm Cwej Alter."

"You're Cwej Alter."

"Yeah..."

"Then stop all this. Whatever this is. Honestly I still don't know what an Yssgaroth is, but I know you're going to end the world. Which, and I hate to make such a bland moral judgement but I kinda have to, is pretty darn bad. So, stop it."

He turned his head as though it would hide his shame. "I can't."

"You mean you won't."

He pushed his hands down on the table. "It's not that simple. I used to be you. Just like you. I travelled with someone. Someone amazing. But it all ended really badly."

She inched her hand across the table towards him, leaning in gently. "I know what it's like, to feel like you've been left behind."

"I wasn't travelling alone. I had a friend. A partner. Has your Chris talked about her at all?"

"About who?"

He shot up, kicking his chair back, his hand balling into fists. "He hasn't even said her name?"

"Who?"

"Roz!"

"I don't know who that is!"

He glowered. "That's the difference between me and him. I'm the man who wouldn't forget. And if something happened to you, I wouldn't forget either."

She held both hands up. "Okay, look, I don't know you, but I also sort of know you. So let's sit you down, and you can tell me about this. You clearly want to talk about it."

He fumed for a moment, and sat down after righting his chair. She held a hand out to him. "I'm Jhe Sang Mi. Jhe is my family name. My friends call me Kalingkata, which is a long story. You met me at a hospital where my family had put me after I had a mental breakdown from a... traumatic incident. Everyone stopped visiting me. But you didn't. I sort of tricked you into promising to take me somewhere cool. And here we are."

He shook her hand. "And you already know who I am, mostly. But tell me, what have I told you about the Superiors?"

She pressed a finger into her cheek as she thought. "Well, they're your bosses, and they're sort of like time cops, but they'd hate it if they knew I'd called them that."

He laughed, and it was Chris' laugh. "Not the worst summary. But... it's also underselling it." He raised a hand, and snapped.

The room was filled with a starry night sky, from the floor below them to the sky above. Sang Mi rose, and took a tentative step from the cafe table, it and its chairs seeming to be the only thing remaining. As her foot hit the ground, it felt like glass. She looked back at Cwej Alter. "This isn't the cafe."

"It is the cafe. The cafe just wasn't ever a cafe."

She thought that through for a moment, then nodded. In the starscape, two figures formed: both were scribbles, incomplete. But one gave the impression of a great hero. The other of a warrior of justice. Neither had faces, just scribbles, but she could tell the hero was pale skinned and the warrior dark skinned.

Cwej Alter paced around the figures. "I travelled with the Defector. Some call him a hero; I wouldn't. But he took me places, like I'm apparently taking you. Along with my friend Roz. She was my partner in the Guild of Adjudicators—an order of justice keepers we were a part of." He leaned in, the crayon-like lines of Roz's face wiggling and fluctuating. "I can't even remember her face. Do you know how awful that is? I spent so long with her at my side as my comrade, and I can't even remember it."

Sang Mi bit her lip, and then decided to approach and pat him on the shoulder since he had done that earlier for her. "I'm sorry, uh... that has to be awful. I've forgotten plenty of important things in my life."

He turned his face to her. "I didn't forget it by accident. It was taken from me. And from your Chris."

He snapped again, and the scribbled figures morphed into new ones, clearer, that rose into the stars. "You don't understand who the Superiors are, do you? You think They're time cops? You think They care? They're more like forces of nature. Fighting Them is like throwing a rock in the ocean."

He straightened his back. "Your Chris signed up to serve Them. To fight for Them. To kill for Them. And now he's carting you around just like we were carted around. He can play nice, pretend he doesn't know the smell of blood like the feeling of his tongue against his teeth. But there's no good ending coming for you. You should run."

He snapped a third time, and the figures in the stars morphed back down into two scribbles, and a crayon-drawn Cwej. Cwej was kneeling in front of a body, Roz's body, covered in red crayon. The hero, the Defector, stood to the side watching. Chris wept as the Defector stood impassively.

"He got her killed." Cwej Alter spun around, pointing back at the scene and facing Sang Mi. "Roz died. And I couldn't forgive that. The Defector kept so many secrets from me, told so many lies, and..." He was silent for a moment as he seethed. "The Superiors are basically gods. Our lives are nothing to Them. Roz could be sacrificed. You're a teenage girl, and they're throwing you at doomsday. And as for me—"

The stars vanished, and the door swung open.

In the entryway stood Chris Cwej, gun drawn, next to the unconscious forms of the goons who had dragged her here. Her Chris.

She bolted towards him, as Cwej Alter straightened his spine, and his tie.

"Hey there, me," Alter said.

Chris nodded at him. "Stay away from Sang Mi."

"I'm not the one who put her in the line of fire."

Sang Mi glanced between them. "He was kind of explaining a lot of traumatic stuff. Roz and... stuff like that."

At Roz's name, Chris' face grew pale. "... Right. I see. We need to go."

She picked up her parasol. "What about Cwej Alter?"

Chris blinked. "... What?"

"That's what I said," Cwej Alter said.

"Like in Fate Stay—never mind! We can't just leave him here," Sang Mi added hastily.

Chris narrowed his gaze as he kept his gun level.

"We can't do that either!"

He reached into a pocket, and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. "Put these on him. He can lead us to what we need."

\* \* \*

Edith McNully had a job to do, but she was too busy stomping around knee-deep in her own feelings. Who was this Sang Mi girl to make her feel such weird feelings and then just run off? She picked up a bottle someone had left on the lawn and deposited it into a trashcan—but angrily.

She had made her way over towards the Ferris Wheel; she liked watching it even more than the chocolate rollers. But everyone knew the Ferris Wheel was here, so the chocolate rollers felt more special to her.

Is that why she'd taken Sang Mi there?

Even more annoyed, she kicked the trashcan which just caused her toes to hurt. The pain cleared her thoughts enough that she overheard a group of nearby folks who were gathered around a cart they appeared to be taking over to the Ferris Wheel. After dark? Odd.

“Sal said it was supposed to be glowing?” the man said as he kicked the thing on the cart, and as he also hopped in pain just as she had a moment before, the thing on the cart glowed.

It wasn't just anything—it was some sort of giant gem. But it didn't just light up... things swirled inside it. Wisps like blood. Glimpses of something like screaming faces.

In her 16 years of life, Edith hadn't seen anything outside of Chicago, but she'd seen enough to know she needed to get away.

She tried to do just that, but when she put her foot down, she let out a noise that told her she'd probably done more than just bruised a toe.

The eyes of the whole throng carrying the gem had turned towards her. She tried to run, but the shooting pains in her foot made that a doomed endeavor even before the woman slid in front of her path. Edith had been in a few tussles before, and readied her fists.

Then the woman's fingers grew claws the length of silver dollars, and her teeth elongated into sharp fangs.

Edith froze up, unsure if what she was seeing was real—if it even could be real. And as she hesitated, sharp hands grabbed her shoulders.

\* \* \*

Cwej Alter was at first somewhat uncooperative, until normal Chris Cwej asked him if he really thought they didn't know where they needed to be going.

He scoffed. “I'm not telling you.”

“It's the Ferris Wheel,” Chris and Sang Mi said in unison.

Cwej Alter's awkward silence was all the confirmation they needed. “How did you know?” he asked as they shoved him along.

“You said it's a ritual, right?” Sang Mi asked. “What's the biggest, most important circle here? I mean, I was pretty sure that you needed a circle for a ritual. Mostly from movies. But it turns out I was right, right?”

Cwej Alter grumbled acknowledgement. Chris patted Sang Mi on the shoulder with a mix of pride and utter smugness.

The fair felt like it should be darker than it was, but the newfangled electric lights lit the streets and paths there up, which made it all the more odd when Cwej looked up and saw something barreling down from the sky.

“I didn't think they had planes yet? That's 1903, right?” Sang Mi asked, putting a flat hand above her eyes to reduce the glare from the electric lamps.

Chris threw an arm in front of her, pushing her back. “Not a plane.”

As it got closer, Sang Mi recognized it: it was one of those things in the sky from when the world was ruins. Sang Mi had called things “Monstrous” before, but in truth this revised all her definitions of the term. Much of it seemed to be made of muscle—literally, with strings of pulsing flesh on wings attached to a

leathery body with fangs and claws. Its eyes were red and vicious. It was, in the most literal sense she had ever known, a monster. Readymade to crawl out from under her bed.

As it swooped down, the many fairgoers looked up at the night sky. Many a hat was removed as if taking it off would reveal the truth of what was in the sky. But as it got closer, people stepped back, then walked faster, and then the crowd began to run, screaming and fleeing as a howl as loud as a jet engine screeched out from it. It landed with a crushing thud, breaking the pavement between themselves and Cwej Alter, who didn't waste a breath in making a break for the Ferris Wheel.

If that had been it, maybe they'd have stood their ground, but from around the Ferris Wheel, a throng of what at first seemed to be fairgoers and staff began marching towards them too.

When the claws and teeth became visible, the running and screaming of the crowd only grew faster and louder, and the monster took its opportunity—it reached at Sang Mi with clawed hands and a wide toothy jaw.

She raised her parasol, and whacked one of the claws out of the way, and as her mind raced on how to dodge the other claw the creature was hit in the head with an entire trashcan—as she scampered back, she saw a panting Chris who had tossed the whole thing. The monster wasn't hurt, but as it wiped the slop from its face, it gave them a moment to flee and regroup, ducking behind yet another Orange Cider stand.

Behind it there was a pair of trembling Fair Guards who had ran for safety.

“They're going to kill the fairgoers!” Sang Mi shouted. She couldn't help it, even though she was supposed to be hiding.

“We won't let that happen.” Chris flitted through his pockets. “They got my blaster.”

He turned to the guards, who looked terrified.

“Mind if we borrow those?” He pointed at the swords at their hips.

They quickly unhooked them and handed them over. “Uh, sir?” One of them, a young man who was barely of age, asked. “Is that... the Devil?”

Chris screwed his lips to the side as he tried to decide how to answer that, but before he could Sang Mi had risen and began to test the weight of the saber. “Not the Devil, just a demon. You two fellas stay safe. We're professionals.”

“Exorcists?” the young guard asked.

“He's an Adjudicator!” Sang Mi said.

This noun meant nothing to the men, but she said it with such confidence that it was somehow reassuring.

“Th-then we'll help too!” the guard got up, and his friend got up too, but more shakily.

“Good. Thank you for being brave. Keep them from biting the fairgoers, that's your job,” Chris said.

“B-Biting?”

“Yeah, biting. You have your orders. Hop to it.”

They saluted, and ran off towards the civilians.

Chris got up, and tested the blade himself. It was better quality than he expected. “You ready, kid?”

She saluted with the sword. “For once, I'm glad they made me take kendo class.”

They walked out from behind the cider stand, and side by side, began to walk towards the monster.

It grinned, but it looked like it was only trying to mimic something it had heard about once called a grin.

“We know of you; you are one of the apostles of one of our greatest foes. It will be pleasurable to make your end.”

“You're not going to kill him, or these people!” Sang Mi yelled, brandishing the sword.

It turned to her. “You are no one, outsider.”

“I'm his apprentice, so you should be afraid.”

Chris wasn't sure to think about her saying that, but there wasn't time to dwell on it. The monster grinned, better this time, and flapping its wings to rise up, rushed them. It was funny, they hadn't discussed a gameplan, but he found that Sang Mi was doing just what he'd hoped. The monster closed in, and he ducked

left while she ducked right, its claws meeting empty air, and their swords rising up to slice through its sinewy wings. The thing screamed and crashed to the ground, flailing. It tried to flap its wings, and seemed shocked that they were cut.

“Why... they should be healing!?”

Chris strode towards it. “Welcome to the White City. It might be false hope, but it’s hope nonetheless, and you’re the one who wanted to make it into some sort of ritual. You’re playing by its rules now.” He formed a stance. “Sang Mi, I’ll catch up. Go get the gem.”

“You got it!” she ran, and she ran fast.

The monster glowered and hissed, furious, clawing at the grass as it righted itself. “You’ll die here, nonetheless. That little girl—”

“Is going to end this. Now come on and stop wasting my time.”

It roared, and charged him once again. As its claw came down, Cwej barely blocked it. It grinned again, and this time it got it right.

\* \* \*

Cwej had avoided calling the people with the fangs what they were, but Sang Mi wasn’t going to avoid the term. “Out of my way, you damn vampires!”

Luckily, they weren’t quite as skilled as the monster. They seemed to have the combat abilities of your average fairgoer, which meant that she was trying to get slowed down by them as little as possible while stabbing them in the legs and arms, and then rushing past as they screamed in pain at their wounds.

“Sorry! Sorry!” she said as she stabbed another woman in the leg who hissed at her while crying. This was not as easy as she’d expected. Sure, these people were clearly vampires. They were clearly trying to eat people. But when she stabbed them, they still felt pain. They cried, and wailed, and fell over. The best she could do was try not to do any damage that wouldn’t be too hard to heal, but her anxiety was a rushing tide.

She stabbed one in the arm, and then kicked them back, and realized she’d finally reached the base of the Ferris Wheel, she panted, and then as her brain caught up to reality said a few family-friendly curse words.

“You’re too late, it’s already started!” the vampire on the ground laughed. The Ferris Wheel had started its rotation, the cars moving in their circular journey. She looked up at the Ferris Wheel, then back down at the vampire.

“... You do realize this thing takes like twenty minutes to do a rotation?” It was indeed moving pretty slowly.

The vampire looked up at it, then looked away a bit embarrassed, which, fair enough. Even so, she’d just talked a big game and now she had to get up to whatever car they’d loaded the gem into. She got up to the entry gate, sheathed the sword, made sure it was fastened, and walked the distance to the end of the path leading up to the door on the first car, walked back, and took a running leap. It was harder with the skirts—she had to hike them up and then let go and reach out, but thankfully it wasn’t too far. She hit the side of the car, and grabbed hold. She searched for footholds, and slowly pulled herself up, until she flopped onto the roof of the car. It was big—the Ferris Wheel cars were meant to hold forty people, and so there was more room on the top than she expected. Then she felt silly.

Because the car stopped.

From the depths of her brain, the fact came that the Ferris Wheel made two rotations, the first one to allow people to get on, the cars stopping for load in.

Which meant there was no reason for her to make that daring leap. But it also meant that the next car up had to be the one she needed to get to. The metal framework of the Wheel holding the cars in place was intimidating, but as long as she could climb it while they were stopped...

She made her way to the edge of the car, stumbling as it wobbled, and took a deep breath.

Climbing wasn't something she was particularly skilled at, but she'd done a few rock walls in physical education class, as well as climbing around in the wastes outside the city. She tried to make her move, but her hands and feet just wouldn't move. She stood there awkwardly trying to will it to happen, but no.

If she screwed this up she would fall and die, plain and simple. She trembled. Chris had trusted her with this. She needed to do this. She couldn't freeze up like this. She couldn't.

But she stayed frozen.

Until the door to the car above them swung open and she saw a girl poke her freckled head out, hair dangling down.

"You have to go! Get out of here!" Edith called down. And then hands grabbed her, yanking her back in.

Sang Mi's jaw dropped, and she shook her head, and bit her knuckle, then shook her limbs out. She didn't know what was going on but there was no way in hell she was leaving Edith in danger. She stepped out onto the metal bars that made up the Wheel, and began to climb.

\* \* \*

Chris parried another swipe of the claws, yelling commands to the guards, who had done a respectable job of accepting him as their temporary commander. The frightened guards had rallied their comrades, and they were holding off the swarm of Yssgaroth-tainted fairgoers, and protecting the civilians from them. It had been a great help, but they were also not used to dealing with people given alien superpowers, a fact that was evened out by the fairgoers' lack of combat training. But the guards were tiring out, and the tainted were not.

"Hold strong, boys!"

The monstrous Yssgaroth swung at Chris again, a blow he took at face value only for the real blow to come from the thing's now flightless wing. He felt himself hit the grass, and as he opened his eyes with a moan rolled out of the way of its foot coming down on his head. Damn it. He scampered up, but got his arm lightly clawed on the way. It wasn't deep at least. It grinned again.

And then was hit in the face by a bucket of something hot and brown.

"Get back from that man, you devil!" his savior called. He didn't wait to see who.

Chris grabbed his sword from the grass and charged the monster, as it tried to wipe the substance off its face.

It was just the distraction he needed.

Just as it cleared its eyes, he gave a great yell, and slammed the sword into the beast's heart.

It looked at him in shock, and then crumbled into something like coal, and a red mist that slipped up into the air, heading back towards the Ferris Wheel.

Still panting, Chris turned to see who saved him. "Hold up, Milton Hershey?"

The man blinked. "You know of me?"

"Yeah, uh... look, I always preferred Cadbury, but thanks, and I always respected you starting the orphanage, so good on you."

The man blinked. "People are really telling me such strange things today."

He clapped the man on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I need to go save my friend. Thanks again."

Cwej charged towards the Ferris Wheel, but he found he wasn't alone—the guard had rallied from his victory and were pushing the tainted back, and they were being joined by some of the fairgoers too.

When he got to the area in front of the Wheel, he was a little surprised to see who was right behind him—ten men in red clothing, carrying instruments.

He squinted at them.

"We all saw her climb up there, Sang Mi!" one called to him. "We're giving her our support."

*Ab, they must be from the Korean booth.* He just gave them a thumbs up.

They set up, and started playing as the crowd gathered beneath the Wheel.  
And as they did, Chris promised he was going to chew Sang Mi out if they got through this alive.

\* \* \*

Climbing onto the side of the car, Sang Mi tried to reach for the door handle, but every time she did she felt her grip slip. She could feel the sweat beading on her forehead. Her hands felt exhausted, her fingers strained to hold herself.

She took a breath, and reached out as far as she could—her hands grasped the handle to the car door, and she swung herself out toward it. She hadn't planned that putting her weight on it like that would turn the handle, and swing the door open, but it did, and she found herself scrambling and yelping as she started to be carried out by the door but caught one of her feet on the door frame, and awkwardly pulled herself in, dropping onto the deck of the car feeling absolutely spent.

Never again.

"I could have kicked the door open with you on it, you should thank me," Cwej Alter said.

She staggered up, trying to get a read on the room.

There were four baddies: Cwej Alter, a woman in a full mourning dress complete with black veil holding a golden birdcage with a skull in it, which, sure, okay, and two vampires who were holding Edith at claw-point.

In the center of the car was a huge ruby, only there was more to it than that. Things swirled beneath its surface. Terrible things.

"You wouldn't kick me down, you're still Cwej," Sang Mi managed.

"I can do it for you," the woman said.

He scowled at her. "I'm not killing a child, Salome."

Sang Mi gestured dramatically, throwing her hands around like the more she moved the more seriously she'd be taken. "You're killing the whole world—wait, did you say Salome? Like from the Bible?"

The woman gave a half-hearted wave.

Sang Mi tried to process all this. "... Is she a vampire? Is that how she's still alive?"

"What? No?" she seemed offended, so Sang Mi dropped it.

She put both hands out. "Okay, look, both of you want to end the world. I get it."

"No you don't," Salome said. "You don't think of gutting yourself with a knife every day, or putting a gun to your head. I can't bear this anymore. I can't. You don't know what—"

"I do, though," Sang Mi replied. "I think about putting a gun to my head every day." She said it plainly and honestly. "They give me meds, and it lets me control those thoughts, but they still pop in... and I can push them out but..." She shrugged. "Look, let Edith go, she didn't do anything. Or... oh do you need a sacrifice or something?" She followed that shrug with a sigh. "Dark ritual and everything? God, could you two grow up?"

Salome balled her fists. "Grow up? I'm over 1800 years old—"

"Yeah, grow up," she yelled, which was harder than she expected it to be after all the effort. She pointed at Cwej Alter. "Your friend died. You know how often I wanted everything to end after my grandma died? The last thing I said about her before she died was an insult. I have to live with that. And sure, you think that everything is going to be different and better, but you don't get to throw everyone else into the meat grinder just because your heart is broken."

"Listen, it's not just that," Cwej Alter protested. "The Superiors have done horrible things—"

"I don't care!" she replied, throwing her hands up, and keeping up her volume. "Cool, they're horrible, the Yssgaroth don't seem great either. Super great you found an alternative to the guys you hate, but I'm not going to lie, they seem like they'd be worse. They're trying to eat people."

"We don't need to be lectured by this child, just kill the girl and get on with the ritual," Salome said.

Cwej Alter hesitated, and Sang Mi narrowed her eyes.

And then it hit her.

"... You can't do this by yourself, Ms. Sal H., can you? It's like why Chris needed me to pull the lever—not that that means anything to you—it has to be Chris. Because this is some sort of ritual, not that I think that's real but that's a whole other story—and you're using that—"

She pointed out at the White City, lit up and glowing beyond the glass of the Wheel. "A sprawling city of people's dreams, and the most crass horrors. And Chris is a hero."

Cwej Alter turned his eyes away from the White City, even as they glistened in its light. "I'm not—"

"YES YOU ARE," she screamed, and stomped her foot. "Why do you think I didn't put a gun to my head, Chris? It wasn't just because they gave me some meds. It wasn't just 'cause my family would miss me. It was because of you, you goddamn idiot. And, sure, you specifically didn't do that, but once again you have the problem that I don't care about your rules, or your technicalities. You did that. You saved me. You gave me hope when I felt hopeless and alone in that hospital. That I might be able to... to find some meaning in this world outside the dark clouds in my head. You saved me. So stop being an idiot, and go to therapy! Get a cat! Something!"

Cwej Alter's shoulder's slumped.

"I wish I could."

"You can!"

"It's too late, it's already started. Killing Edith would just accelerate it."

"Then stop it!?"

Salome smiled. "Could you lower your voice? The adults are talking now."

Salome started trying to talk Cwej Alter into finishing the ritual, and Sang Mi just stood there. She'd opened her heart and said everything she could.

And then it happened.

Sometimes there are moments where something just goes right, that you never could have predicted, that you never could have planned, but which is nonetheless the consequences of your own actions. You're nice to the guy at the register at the gas station and he comps your slushie. You do a good job and get an extra tip, and it ends up being exactly what you need for a sudden expense. These moments don't happen often, but when they do, they feel like destiny. Like they were always meant to happen like this for you.

And so it was at that moment that the Orchestra from the Korean Pavilion started playing.

Sang Mi rushed over to the window—there was a huge crowd below the Wheel, and there was the Orchestra, playing the song she'd taught them.

"... Is that Lone Digger?" Cwej Alter said.

"Yeah!" Sang Mi said.

"... By Caravan Palace, a band from over a century in the future?"

"That's not what's important right now." She pointed down at the crowd. "You say you can't stop this, but I say you can. Because of that."

Cwej Alter and Salome glanced at each other. "Because you messed up history?"

"No! Because all those people, they don't know what's going on here, they probably wouldn't believe it if I told them there was an evil ruby that was going to turn them all into vampires and zombies—"

"That's not what—" Sal began.

"—And they're down there, playing music, and rooting for us to do the right thing. They don't know what that is, but if that's not a ritual, I don't know what is."

The ruby suddenly began to wobble.

“Because guess what? I don't really care about your rules, but I do know that rituals are about belief. And I may not believe in myself right now, and I know you don't either, Cwej Alter, but for the moment, they believe in us.”

She reached a hand out to him.

He hesitantly reached back out towards her.

Salome rushed over to the ruby.

And then Cwej Alter lowered his hand.

Sang Mi's heart fell.

And then he drew a pistol and pointed it at the goons. “Let the girl go.”

Very quickly, they obliged. Edith ran to Sang Mi, and threw herself into her arms, sobbing. She tried to shush her and tell her it was all right, turning her gaze back to Sal who was lifting the ruby up, straining at it.

“You... I won't let you stop... this.”

Sang Mi squeezed Edith in the embrace, and let go, stomping her way towards Salome.

She backed away, trying to figure out her next move.

“I don't want to kill anyone—neither does my Cwej,” said Sang Mi. “But guess what you shouldn't have told me?”

Salome glanced at Cwej Alter.

“I... don't know?”

Sang Mi rushed at her, grabbing the ruby, and putting a foot on her chest. Salome realized all too late what was happening as Sang Mi's foot kicked forward—her gloved hands slipping off the ruby, and her body falling through the door, and out the car.

She hit one of the rungs of the Wheel on the way down, with a nasty sound, and then hit the ground. Nervously, Sang Mi peered out, and hoped to god Salome had been telling the truth, which was confirmed when she started squirming on the dirt below.

She sighed in relief, and set the ruby down.

“Okay, how do we get rid of this then?”

Cwej Alter rubbed his chin. “Well, we're in the middle of the ritual... if we can change the meaning of it. Get all the people down there involved somehow.”

Edith's eyes lit up, and then they drooped. “Oh. I know how.”

“You don't need to look so down about it.”

She shook her head, and went over to the door, and took in a heaving breath. “HEY EVERYONE! PLAY AFTER THE BALL!”

“Oh,” Sang Mi said. “Well, everyone knows the lyrics...”

The orchestra began to play, and the crowd began to sing.

*“A little maiden climbed the old man's knee...”*

Reluctantly, Cwej Alter, Sang Mi, and Edith began to sing.

\* \* \*

Chris heard the words called down, and ran up and down the lines of the crowd. “*After the Ball* singalong! Everyone sing! You know the words right? Of course you do, let's go! Orchestra, get us started.”

The song began to play, and from the Ferris Wheel a light began to glow.

\* \* \*

The ruby shook, and cracked, and wobbled.

They sang through the lyrics, and it cracked further, as the Ferris Wheel car carrying Sang Mi rose to its height.

But then the song ended.

And it was still whole.

It bled a black miasma. It was cracked so much it seemed it couldn't possibly stay together, but it was.

"Shit," Cwej Alter said. "We need something more."

"Like what?" Sang Mi cried.

"I don't know, rituals are stupid, they're not supposed to be real!"

"That's what I've been saying!" Sang Mi replied.

"So, maybe the power of love?" Cwej Alter bit his thumbnail. "Damn it. I can only think of cliches."

Edith looked down bashfully. "Well, I suppose it's worth a try..." She walked over to Sang Mi, reached up to cradle her face in her hands, and leaned up to press her lips to hers. First gently, and then as Sang Mi kissed her back, with more passion, their arms wrapping around each other.

And the gem shook, vibrating, and shattered into dust.

"You did it!" Cwej Alter cheered, and looked over at the girls. "I said you did it?" They continued their current activity. "You can do that later, you know..." He sighed. Teenagers.

\* \* \*

Cwej Alter slipped out sometime during the rotation back down. Sang Mi and Edith stopped making out long enough to wish him farewell and good luck.

"I think I'll get a cat, like you said."

"And therapy," Sang Mi added.

He smiled. "Yeah. And that, see ya, kid."

And he was out the door and into the night. Then she and Edith continued, though of course stopped again before they actually reached the bottom, since Sang Mi knew enough Earth history and Edith knew enough of 1890s American society to know they sadly needed to do that. But they absolutely wanted to continue.

Chris, her Chris, was right there to greet her, picking her up and throwing her on his shoulder. "The hero of the hour!"

Everyone cheered. Did they know why they were cheering or what she'd done? Not really! But as she gazed around she saw that some of the folks she'd stabbed earlier were looking decidedly not like vampires as their wounds were being treated.

They were carted out to the Midway, and given tons of food.

As Sang Mi, Chris, and Edith chowed down together, the lights of the White City warmed them.

"Hey, we saved the world, why don't we enjoy the fair for a little?" Chris said.

Sang Mi perked up. "I'd love that. I barely got to see anything."

"We will have to head home after that." He paused. "You two girls won't see each other after that, I'm afraid we're going off a long way."

Edith gave a bittersweet smile. "I know, but we'll enjoy the time we have."

They raised a glass of Orange Cider together, and clinked to a better world.

Eventually, the celebrations died down, and people filtered out back home. Edith left a scrap of paper with her contact info, and Cwej paid her to go rent them a hotel room somewhere for the evening once they finished so they could sleep immediately.

When it was just the two of them, they sat down by the golden Statue of the Republic at the waterside, watching it shimmer in the electric lights that illuminated the night.

“Cwej Alter told me that they’d done something to you. That he existed because of that.”

He picked a stone up, and hurled it into the pond, watching it plop, the ripples extending out from it. “My Superiors recruited me, after I finished travelling the Universe like you are with me. They... didn’t just want my skills.”

She looked at him seriously, and let him continue.

“They wanted...” he sighed. “It won’t sound real to you. This kind of thing doesn’t happen where you come from. You live in a world of logic and sanity.”

“I live in a world where I care what happened to you.”

He simmered on that a moment. “Alright... you know They built the time machine we came here in, right?”

“I didn’t but I guessed they did.”

“They’re good with that sort of thing. They... They wanted an army. And They used me to make it.”

She furrowed her brow. “You mean they cloned you? Like in Star Wars?”

He shook his head. “No. They... tore out my possibilities. Different versions of me who could have been, who could be. An army of everything I could have been or could be, ripped out of me. Torn away and... made real.”

He stared at the water for a little, but when he turned back to Sang Mi she was still staring at him. Her face was a mask of horror.

“Are... you okay?” he asked.

“You’re serious? They did that too? I can’t even... that doesn’t even make sense? They did that to you?”

He tried to give her a smile. It wasn’t very convincing. “Yeah, They do things like that.”

“Chris, I’m not allowed to say the F-Word, but I want to, because that is really effed up.”

“It is what it is.”

She grabbed his arm. “You can’t just say that like it’s nothing. You can’t just pretend these things don’t hurt you. They did something horrible to you, and I’m sorry.”

He hadn’t been prepared for that. He opened his mouth, and shut it again. And tried to blink back something bubbling from within him.

“I told your other self to get therapy, to get a cat. He wasn’t you, he sort of was, but he’s not. You are. And you deserve to cry. Lord knows I cry all the time, so... it’s okay to feel like it was awful. Because I gotta tell you, it really effing was.”

He wanted to laugh at her not cursing, but the more the words sank in, the more he tried to blink away the tears, the more they started to actually burst forth. They sat there together, until the tears ran dry, and the future seemed a little more real.

\* \* \*

When they finally got back to the timeship a week later, they did so reluctantly. Edith gave Sang Mi a goodbye kiss, and they shut the door.

They stood quietly together, the gears moving around them. “... That was really fun Chris, I’ll never forget all this. Ever.”

He tried not to look at her. He’d stretched things out a little longer than he should have, but his Superiors could cope. Even so... it was likely going to be their last trip together.

He tried to think of some words to reply to her with, but he couldn’t, so he just gave her a smile, and turned to pull the lever.

He walked over to the door, and opened it, gesturing for Sang Mi to step out.

She lifted the green skirt of her dress up from the petticoat with one hand and waved it around. "I haven't even gotten changed from my 1890s—"

"Trust me, take a look."

She stepped out. It was their house in Violethill, Illinois. She ran to the window—the world was there outside it, and alive. The houses weren't crumbling. The people walking the streets were talking, or listening to music on their headphones. The sky was mostly blue with a few clouds.

"We did it."

"I thought you deserved to see it—"

There was a knock on the door. Chris and Sang Mi glanced at each other, uncertain if they should ignore it.

"It's probably nothing," Chris said.

Sang Mi pursed her lips and held a look at him.

"Okay fine it's probably not nothing." He wandered away, grumbling, and opened the door—aware that Sang Mi was peeking around the corner after him. At the door was a teenage boy in a white shirt with blue pants and a blue jacket over it with the logo of the Blue Candle Coffee Company on the breast. He was holding a folded black paper with a gold wax seal.

"Special delivery!" the boy said with a cheery awkwardness.

"I thought Flickers were like, boom-boom-pow kind of guys?" Sang Mi said from around the corner.

"They do a lot of jobs. Courier stuff is common," Chris answered, snatching the letter away and pulling it open.

*Dear Mr. Cwej,*

*I have recently become aware that you are both in possession of a very useful projector, and have gained a keen interest in the silent film "The Soldiers of the Stone". I'm privy to be hostess to an auction at the Oak Bear Lodge, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in a few weeks time on June 20th. I'd be honored if you'd join me, and allow me to use your projector to screen this rare surviving print of the film. You'll of course be welcome to bid on any of the items there, including the film itself.*

*I am also aware that you have a very capable apprentice or assistant, and you may bring them as well. Please reply to the courier with your response.*

*Sincerely,*

*Sal H.*

He read it over, and then called Sang Mi to come over and read it too. Her eyes lit up as she read it, and then drooped. "Well, it sure sounds like an adventure. I guess Sal H. is still around."

"I take it you want to go?"

"I can't go. You said your Superiors are against me travelling with you."

"I said on another mission. Unfortunately," he grinned, "It looks like we have to extend this mission a little longer. No choice. Unfinished business, after all. We can't risk the same hands that brought that ruby to the fair auctioning off something even worse, right?"

She bounced up and down on her heels. "Oh yes. No choice. Right! So how are we going to get there?"

Chris looked at the Flicker. "Tell Miss Sal H. yes, we are attending." He turned back to Sang Mi. "I don't want to chance traveling by my usual means till we're ready to leave so... I guess we'll see if I can get a car. Maybe the same Honda Element we had before. We'll drive there."

The Flicker boy looked between them. "You're going to drive from Illinois to the Blue Ridge Mountains?!"

Sang Mi shrugged. "I don't know, is that far?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed.

“Well,” said Chris, “Looks like we’re taking a road trip!”

“... A what?” Sang Mi replied.

“You know, bundle into a car, drive off, enjoy the open road and explore as you make your way to where you’re going. You don’t do that on Gongen?”

“On where?” the boy said.

“Hush,” Sang Mi said. “Also, leave.”

“Yeah, sorry, bye,” he mumbled and obliged.

“No, we don’t have road trips on Gongen. We have a working public transit system.”

“Ah,” Chris answered.

“What about the projector? We gave that back?”

“I’ll call up the head of SIGNET, we can probably get it back here by the time I get the car sorted out. Well, regardless, I think you’ll have fun. I said we had one last stop... it’s just going to take us a little longer to reach it.”

Sang Mi danced her way back to their luggage. “That’s the best kind of finality, one that’s only technically true!”

\* \* \*

Another courier delivered the projector, far faster than they probably should have been able to, and Cwej pulled into the driveway a little later with a banged up orange Honda Element.

They loaded their luggage into the car, and stopped at a store, grabbing some winter coats, and some supplies. Chris pulled the car out onto the highway, and the pair drove out of town, passing the sign that said: “Now leaving: Violethill, Illinois. Hope to see you again soon!”



# Cwej: The Book of the Fair

## Expanded Storytelling

### ***Entry: Orange Cider – James Wylder***

Created by Floridian orange seller Huelsenkamp, the Orange Cider brought to the 1893 Chicago World's Fair quickly became one of its most popular—and imitated—treats. But the imitation wasn't exactly the sincerest form of flattery. While the original beverage was called refreshing and delectable, the imitations didn't even bother flavoring it with orange. Somehow, they decided using citric acid and vinegar would work just as well. Somehow, they thought that people would not be able to tell the difference between the flavor "Orange" and "Vinegar". But people could. And did, quickly.

The reputation of the drink thus became much more conflicted. What might have become a drink that had a long lasting worldwide popularity became an oddity of the Fair. A piece of trivia that should have been a legacy.

— *Bilge's Encyclopedia of the Universe*

### ***Entry: Brownie – James Wylder***

Some things feel like they always existed, and yet all things have an origin. Such it is with the Brownie, a delectable yet simple dessert invented by the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago for the 1893 World's Fair.

Brownies have been found on planets across the universe: from human colony worlds as you'd expect, to far off planets like Gellariya II. But perhaps the most notable brownie on record is the one which was eaten during a climatic showdown between noted agent of the Superiors Chris Cwej, and the [entry redacted from this point on].

— *Bilge's Encyclopedia of the Universe*

### ***Entry: Ferris Wheel – Theta Mandel***

A Ferris wheel must always be capitalized because it is named after a person—George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. (not to be confused with the first US President, Ferris Sr, or Dorothy). Mr. Ferris Jr. did not invent the wheel. Nor did he reinvent it. That honour goes to Daniel Burnham, who quickly abandoned the idea over safety concerns, leaving it to be picked up and made reality by Mr. Ferris Jr. and his team of metalworkers. Though the first Ferris Wheel is no doubt one of the most famous inventions to debut at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, that particular wheel will one day be surpassed in fame by [ERROR: This information is not available in your timezone].

Evidently, Burnham and Ferris' invention caught on, the idea blazing a legacy through history, much like the blaze that destroyed Chicago and led to the fair the wheel debuted at in the first place, or the blaze that destroyed a swathe of the fair (though, not the wheel, which was moved, and eventually deconstructed). However, some still fear the power of the wheel, and there is cause to wonder if Burnham was right to pull out of the project over safety concerns. From expositions to monuments to fair grounds, the Ferris wheel has proven itself to be a danger to the body and spirit on many an occasion, including at its debut (see: Chicago Inter Ocean Newspaper, 'Madman in mid-air'). Technological advancements never come without a cost.

— *Bilge's Encyclopedia of the Universe*

***Entry: Madman in mid-air – Theta Mandel***

In 1893, the Ferris wheel was introduced to the world. With every new wonder born unto this Earth, a new demon is born with it; in this case, a petrifying fear of heights. Of course, the demon would be forgotten and wither away were it not for the heroic intervention of the sensationalising press, who were luckily available to share the story of the first man documented as being sent mad by the wheel. The story of Mr. A.G. Wherrit, as told to the Chicago Inter Ocean Newspaper, became entirely crazed during his eventful circuit within the world's first Ferris wheel. Despite his history of temporary insanity in relation to heights, he and his wife journeyed around the great wheel for the standard two rotations, during which time he attempted to throw himself off the structure, and had to be restrained by the attendant and other passengers. Eventually, a brave woman who wished to remain anonymous wrapped her skirt about his head, calming him until he could be safely removed from the ride.

It's a good thing he didn't attempt the captive balloon ride, or who knows what articles of clothing may have been savaged in the process.

— *Bilge's Encyclopedia of the Universe*

***Entry: Korean Pavilion, Chicago World's Fair – James Wylder***

With the Joseon Kingdom of Korea opening its borders to the world in the previous years, King Gojong decided to make their nation known across the world in the world expos and fairs that had begun to crop up in various countries. Thus, in February of 1893 he sent assistant interior minister Jeong Gyeongwon to America to participate in the World's Columbian Exhibition. With him were five other staff, and ten court musicians: Park Yonggu, Lee Chaeyeon, Choe Munhyeon, An Giseon, Yi Gyeongryong, Choe Eulryong, Shin Heungseok, Jeong Giyong, Yi Changeop, and Yi Jaeryong. They set up a Pavilion with a traditional Korean roof in the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts building, which was sadly dwarfed in size by their rival nation of Japan's gigantic display on the fair's wooded isle. But their gambit of making ten of their sixteen member entourage musicians paid off. Korea was recognized for their excellent music, and president Grover Cleveland even heard them play.

Some records seem to indicate they played a strangely anachronistic song during the fair, but with no sheet music records surviving it is hard to tell the accuracy of this.

— *Bilge's Encyclopedia of the Universe*

***Sept. 27th, 1893 – Theta Mandel***

Sept. 27th, 1893—Officer Porkington's private notes (keep clear—police property)

Questioning commenced: 11:14 p.m.

Subject: Ella Blake, Thwarted Singer

Miss Blake claimed that she merely wanted to sing. She and her sister (Miss Helen Blake) began an impromptu performance of fair hit 'After the Ball', but were quickly met with protest, including from Miss Madge Heath, a dancer within the Mexican Theater where the women were attempting to sing. Although chaos ensued, it still seems unlikely that she didn't see the weapon until it was too late. Confused beyond reasonable, given the circumstances? Under the influence, perhaps, or overcome with hysterics.

Ended 11:22.

Questioning commenced: 11:23 p.m.

Subject: Madge Heath, Dancer

"If you coulda heard 'em, you woulda shot 'em too." Incriminating words from the dancer who the Blake sisters claim started the hullabaloo. My job would be a lot easier, if only she were the shooter! Still, like the last, there's something more than you'd expect from a little frustration. Something under the eyes. Something mighty queer... like an infection, a shadow. Can't quite shake the horrors to which she bore witness earlier this evening.

Ended 11:32.

Questioning commenced: 11:33 p.m.

Subject: Officer Pearce

Accompanied Blake sisters. Diligently attempted to prevent escalation between the women. Unable to prevent the tragedy, he seems now ashamed of failing in his duty. Under the awful chaos, he could hear something, an echo—although the Blake sisters were unable to perform, someone did, for you are never out of earshot at the fair. He tried to impress upon me the atmosphere of the fair, the sublime majesty of the excitement and the bustle and the fast-moving crowds desperate for a taste of this turning point in modern history, but I suppose you had to be there. Which I wasn't. Couldn't get leave; been stuck processing the backlog from the dozens arrested at the fair. At least

they got to be there... lucky sods. I don't feel so lucky, though, when I think about why I can't interview Sergeant Gleason of the Columbian Guard. Morgan claimed he was 'just passing through', noticed the commotion, tried to help out. Poor man...

Ended 11:57.

Just shy of midnight, discussed case with two men from some federal government agency. Black-suited, all official-like, well above my pay grade. I told them the particulars of the case, and they kind of nodded and seemed happy with it all. I don't know what there is to smile about... a man was shot, after all. Still, they seemed satisfied. Mentioned something about the "repeated melody's potential for Project Bluechick", whatever that means. They departed, and Lizzie brought me some cider from the fair, but I think it must have been a knock-off. Didn't taste orange at all.

Questioning commenced: 12:03 a.m.

Subject: George F. Morgan, Theater Manager

Firing into a crowd because of some commotion is one thing. Hitting a Sergeant is worse. When I saw Morgan's trembling hands, I was certain that he would carry his actions with him for the rest of his life. And yet, this was a man in shock, not guilt; no premeditation, I am certain. Whatever compelled George to such violence, it may be powerful, but it is no quality within himself. He is not a violent man; that, at least, may provide him some comfort.

Ended 12:34 a.m.

I was permitted to journey to the scene of the crime. My first taste of the fair. What had been missing from my beverage was present in the air; some orange tang, some magic, even after everyone had gone. Surrounded by towers of light so wondrous I would have thought the creation impossible, had I not seen one with my own eyes. And further structures, such as the salt-Lady Liberty, ice that refused to melt, and yes, that mystical fruit which somehow remained fresh. There was something here, moving underneath it all, even without the people to do all the hustling and bustling. The movement was there regardless. Upon reaching the Mexican Theater where the calamity had occurred, the rustle of the air grew to a crescendo, and I found myself wishing for a sturdy weapon, certain that I could not be alone. And yet, alone I was, despite the sounds of movement giving way to a melody. A most familiar melody to any fairgoer, one that had breached the bounds of the fair and made its way even to my lowly station.

A little copper climbed an old fair's knee,

Begged for a story— "Do, Chicago, please.

Why are you single; why all alone?

Have you no visitors; have you no love?"

"I had much company hours, hours ago;

Where they now sleep, you will soon know.

List' to my story, I'll tell it at once,

I found them all faithless, after the ball"

After the fun is over,

After the break of morn—

After the dancers' leaving;

After the stars are gone;

Many a heart is aching,

If you could read them all;

Many the hopes that have vanished,

After the ball.

Not even the melody remained of this twisted song after it's first refrain, and I clutched my ears and tried to drown it out as it beat down upon my ears like iron hammers, hellbent on destruction

---

THEY LEFT ME, ALL

THE FAIRGOERS WHO SWORE

THEY WOULD NEVER LEAVE

AFTER THE BALL.

THEY HAD THEIR FUN

WHY WOULD THEY STAY?

SEE WHAT THEY CREATE

AFTER THE BALL!

I believe it is at this point when I finally passed out from the strain of withstanding such onslaught; the empty echo of the mournful but violent music had ended by the time I awoke, which was to the first trickle of fair-hands, setting up for the day. One of them, a strapping yellow-haired man, placed a hand on my shoulder and gave me some advice:

“Never go to a place that should be busy when it is abandoned. Not unless you intend to restore it to life.”

I think I shall heed his words from now on.

### **Entry: Project Bluechick - Theta Mandel**

The CIA project created to develop mind control techniques known as ‘Project Bluebird’ is widely known, many documents relating to the operation eventually having been declassified. However, what was not previously widely known was that the project began with the CIA’s precursor in a proto-form known as “Project Bluechick”. The name implies the organisation was aware of the fledgling nature of the project, and that it may one day be succeeded by a more advanced operation.

### ***The Devil in the White City – Theta Mandel***

Chicago Inter Ocean Newspaper - May 7th, 1896

#### **DEVIL IN THE WHITE CITY FINALLY HANGED!**

By Massachino Cleverly

Today, on the 7th of May 1896, the man who terrorized the beautiful white city of the World's Columbian Exposition three years past was at last consigned to his fate. His head hung loosely over his neck as the rope was lowered after that most terrible of punishments had been carried out, choked to death. A most fitting end for a man known for asphyxiating his victims, depriving them of oxygen after securing access to their wealth. Typically targeting young women and killing even children, it was a relief to all when this monster was captured by private detective agency Pinkerton two years previously, and sentenced to the execution which has now been carried out! May this menace's potentially two hundred victims finally find peace.

### ***Early history class report: World's Columbian Exposition – Theta Mandel***

*Written by Jbe Sang Mi*

In 1893, elements from dozens of cultures from across the Earth were gathered and displayed in one place: the World's Columbian Exposition, also known as the Chicago World's Fair. Abundant with cutting-edge technological marvels, the exposition was intended not only to show that Chicago had recovered well after the disastrous fire two decades earlier, but also to bring together examples of culture from across the globe. One of these cultures included Korea.

The royal band of Korea led a carriage tour around the fairgrounds, leading the way for the President himself, Grover Cleveland. Dignitaries in traditional colourful, heavy silk dress (hanbok) emerged from the administration building to welcome the President on the opening day—May 1st, 1893. After centuries of isolation, Korea's presence at the World Fair, even hosting their own pavilion, was a turning point in their engagement with the outside world.

However, it wasn't all community bonding and delicious orange cider; many of the non-white cultures were only permitted to be in the fair in order to be made a laughing stock, belittled and exploited for white American enjoyment. One such example is the deplorable Dahomey village, where a white minstrel troupe performed the role of slaves, wearing blackface and depicting West Africans in particular as savages. Our Korean ancestors would have no doubt faced humiliation and fear on the fairground, and that is something we cannot dismiss in our discussion of the cultural impact of the Chicago World's Fair.

### ***Entry: Panic – Sean Dillon***

Painted by Wellmainer Jones (1868-1961) over the course of the World's Fair, Panic depicts a man descending in free fall in a landscape overwhelmed by buildings. Stylistically, the painting has

been compared to the works of Edvard Munch (1863-1944). While famous for paintings such as *The Scream*, *Madonna*, or *The Sick Child*, it is his 1910 painting *The Sun* and his 1896 work *Lady from the Sea* that most evokes the visual style and implications of *Panic*. Of particular note is the painting's use of nudity to depict the fragility of the falling man. Quite controversially, the painting fully depicts the falling man's genitalia, though in the expressionistic style that Jones was well known for.

The painting has been interpreted by many art scholars of the early 1900s as a response to the then ongoing economic panic of 1893, the then largest economic crisis in history, with particular note being made towards the people within the buildings, in particular the one on the far left clearly being People's Party candidates James B Weaver and James G Field laughing at the falling man's plight. However, more modern critics in-tune with the cosmological implications of the 1893 World's Fair note an eerie precursor of nuclear imagery. Specifically, with regards to the general shape of the painting as a collective whole alongside the blinding color pallet portraying the image of nuclear fallout. The falling man, curiously enough, bears an unmistakable similarity to J Robert Oppenheimer in his late thirties or early forties.

Other implications make themselves apparent to a larger concern than mere nuclear annihilation. Of note are the men in black suits in the building that curls like a decayed finger. The men are each wearing masks that would be widely worn in the trenches of World War I. Equally, there's the smallest of the buildings, wherein a pair of men dressed for the late 20th century sits by a fire throwing British Pounds with the face of Queen Elizabeth II. The smoke from the fire is consumed by another building like noodles.

When asked about the origins of the painting in 1900, Jones was noted to claim that he initially came up with the idea after experiencing a brief psychotic episode in early November of 1888. He put the idea aside for many years before recalling the incident in a dream shortly after the World's Fair began. When pressed for more detail regarding the psychotic episode, Jones claimed to have been visited by the devil dressed like a royal doctor. The cold eyes, Jones described, were the most terrifying thing he'd ever seen. He would also note that whenever he looks at the painting, it seems to change. Jones would joke that perhaps that's true of all art. But the interviewer would note a rather pained expression on his face while saying that line.

Reputedly, the only other time Jones would talk about *Panic* would be in 1960, two months before his death. At a Christmas party held by a notorious New York gangster of ill repute, an art student by the name of Philip Thompkins (1932-2023) studied the painting (which, at the time, was owned by said gangster) for a half hour before stepping outside for a smoke. A nearby vagrant muttered a few words to himself before approaching Thompkins. Claiming to be the artist of the painting, the vagrant demanded the painting to be destroyed due to it creating evil, going so far as to attack the young art student. The vagrant was taken away by the police shortly thereafter.

Thompkins would go on to write a number of books claiming the vagrant was indeed Wellmainer Jones, though it remains unconfirmed if this is true. It should be noted that Jones would ultimately perish in a New York hospital, having been brought in by a good samaritan whose name

has been lost to time. The cause of death would be ruled as resulting from untreated injuries from an incident two months prior.

The location of the painting is currently unknown.

## Interview: Gerard Power

**Tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I'm from Ireland. I've studied game design and worked as a web developer and a videographer. Maybe you'll even have seen me as Bastard #7 in the background of certain locally produced films or TV shows.

**How did you begin your interest in Chris Cwej as a character? What does he mean to you?**

I read *Dead Romance* and liked it: ironic metaphysical SF up there with Vonnegut or the best of Philip K. Dick, but largely ignored owing to its franchise connections. I'm not too sentimental about characters: they're just bits of structural scaffolding used to hold up stories. That's not to say I don't take them and the little details of their lives grievously seriously. Know your scaffolding.

***The Ursine Brood* has received incredible reviews from readers across the fandom, with particular praise being shared to me by Lars Pearson of Mad Norwegian Press. What were your main inspirations?**

That's news to me. Well, the story is basically a retelling of *The Time Machine* but with certain symbolic relations collapsed into literal ones; I remember also coming across Wells's lesser-known story *The Country of the Blind* while writing. The whole stylistic approach is just the best attempt at Nabokov I could manage at the time. A key sequence is modelled on Dante's guidance by Virgil, another on the ridge-cresting revelation from *The Wicker Man*. One structural element was actually lifted directly from the *Adventure Time* episode *Puboy*. As for *Doctor Who* media, the whole thing is obviously built around a certain detail from Andy Lane's *Original Sin*; at different times I also thought of the story as either an epilogue to *Dead Romance* or an experiment to see whether I could abstract or distil the essentials of the episode *Heaven Sent* from their unique context, without copying anything from it directly, so as to demonstrate a viable genre, a "Heavensentlike" to go along with base-under-siege, pseudohistorical, etc; both ideas are probably still legible in the finished story.

**Are there any concepts from it you would like to expand upon in future contributions?**

No, not at all. It's a story about the outer edge of things. There's nothing beyond it. With that said, I did once think about bringing back the priest character in a different context. But it's not a good idea to get hung up on one's own minutiae.

**What was your general takeaway from working collaboratively with other authors for *Down the Middle*?**

I had a good time coordinating with Tyche ML, who indirectly prompted the addition of a certain line that contains the phrase "Iridescent blue" and adds a world of implications. I also enjoyed reading the very oblique and estranging appearance of my guys in *The V Cwejes*.

**Coming soon is your incredible novel, *The Lost Fictionaut*, which sees Chris get transported to an alternate world where fiction comes to life. What was the process of working on this novel like?**

I'm glad that the book is finally coming out, but it's been so long since I wrote it that I really have no idea. I imagine that it involved a good deal of compulsive research, given that the book's subject seems to be the trajectory of Western civilisation, from the Olympus of Plato and Homer to the Tartarean murk in which you and I have found ourselves, and the necessity of articulating some way forward.

**What can readers expect from *The Lost Fictionaut*?**

*Mind Robber, Meglos, State of Decay, Swamp Thing, Miracleman, Jerusalem, D'Commedia, Thomas Covenant, Dark Tower, Amber Spyglass, Penda's Fen, Return to Oz, Sunshine, The Fountain, Dr Sleep, NGE, Angel's Egg, Digimon Adventure.* The Enneads. Homer Cubed. Something like these and not like these.

**For those reading who want to get their foot in the door with regard to being an author, what advice do you have?**

My own foot is firmly wedged between the door and its frame, and also I've sprained my ankle. My advice is not to listen to friends who will only praise you. Instead look up *The Submission Grinder* and see who's looking for what and do your best. You'll get rejected. Get used to it. Get better. Resist the temptation to self-publish. There are shortcuts through these woods but they're full of thorns. Choose humility. Read Samuel R. Delany's *About Writing*. Then read it again.

**Where can we find you online? Do you have any final thoughts?**

I am called this\_regard on X, formerly known as Twitter. No final thoughts: mind clean, head empty. Going for a walk by the river.

## Interview: Bex Vee

**First off, tell us about yourself.**

I've known I wanted to make stories, music, animation, and art since I was small, and I feel like that drive is injected into a lot of the work I do and mediums I work with.

I was lucky to grow up in the 2000s and be computer literate as early as I was, especially access to word, movie maker, and ms paint, and PowerPoint and that allowed me to experiment with different mediums at an early age. Despite this, I create a lot of physical art and work with acrylic paint and sharpie.

So much of what I do and make is informed by what I could find or had on me, and the compulsive drive to make, write, or do something that connects with people.

It was easy to get into different mediums and combine them because of the time and era that I was coming of age.

I try to do a bit of it all, but my use of sharpie also comes from that 'what do you have on you' philosophy.

I've spent the last 5 years on my life working to produce art, costumes, and scripts for an animated series I'm hoping to produce, and honing my skills in as many mediums as I can.

I've been lucky to have had a family that has supported my work and focus in creating, and I've got a lot to say and make on the horizon.

**How did you first hear about the 1893 Chicago World's Fair?**

The special interest runs in the family. I feel like I've been learning about it since early elementary.

My Dad really prided himself on antiques from the fair. Before my parents split up, we had a lot of antiques like a WCD Guard Sword, and a miniature car from the Ferris Wheel.

It's weird. I can feel the sword's weight and shape in my hand, and the weird leathery quality of its sheath. Giving it to Cwej felt appropriate.

I've also worked with the Columbian Exposition in my art, especially regarding my show scripts and concept art.



The fair was fascinating to see and learn about growing up, but was something I distanced from before coming back into my art and identity in college.

**Do you have a favorite part of the fair?**

I love the Architecture, the surviving art and structures, the culture and time it existed in, and its impermanence.

I feel like I always grew up envying the fact that I couldn't go back and experience something as wild, unpredictable and beautiful as the 1893 Chicago World's Fair - but now I kind of take comfort in what survives of it.

Like all things Chicago, the fair has a really complex history, and an undeniable draw - but I love the darker undercurrent as well.

Knowing about a lot of the horrors going on at the time, and especially what we know about Columbus makes a lot of this complex, despite being a celebration of culture and beauty.

The fair is temporary. It's beautiful, it showcased a lot of the best humanity had to offer, in electricity, innovation and art.

It exists in a fascinating beautiful time of equal innovation and horror, and I find that to be the biggest draw for me as an artist.

I take joy in knowing The Palace of Fine Arts became The Museum as Science and Industry.

My mom used to take me there a lot when I was a toddler. I was born in Chicago, and I keep finding ways to come back to it. It's my history.

**What drew you to drawing for Cwej and Sang Mi's adventures?**

I connected with Sang Mi first as a character in "And Today You" but got to know her a lot more as a character off the page in connecting and collaborating with my partner, James Wylder in talking through aspects of this and other stories.

Regarding Cwej, I must admit I knew nothing deep about him as a character at first. But we named one of our two first Chao in our Anniversary Copy of *Sonic Adventure 2* after him and came to really dig in and research his history as a queer icon in science fiction.

It's been nice to see them explore a part of history and space I care deeply about.

**Your piece is modeled after a cover to a book about the fair from the period, what drew you to that cover?**

I work in a lot of art deco and art nouveau so the framing, colors, and character illustrations felt like a perfect match for *The Book of the Fair*.

Especially the graphic use of black, teal, gold, copper and white.

### **What was your favorite part of your piece to draw?**

I was both really intimidated and excited to draw both the Administration building because I love creating structures and buildings, through color and the places it's left absent.

### **What is your process like?**

When I work on a drawing or painting, I build the bones of what I'm making with simple shapes, and when I'm working they shift a lot.

My lines tend to overlap in a way that often only make sense to me before I add color.

Even then, most of my sharpie and ink work rely on those lines. The overlapping and crosshatching, and the absence of space.

I feel as an artist we're always in conversation with history and other artists themselves. What we add or take from the process and things we're influenced by defines who we are in art; and it may not make sense to everyone—but someone will see you maybe if just to them it will all make sense.

### **Any words for fans on this 30th Anniversary?**

Cwej means a lot of things to a lot of people. Getting to know and connect with not only the character, but how other people interpret that character and how he's shaped for other people has been really affirming.

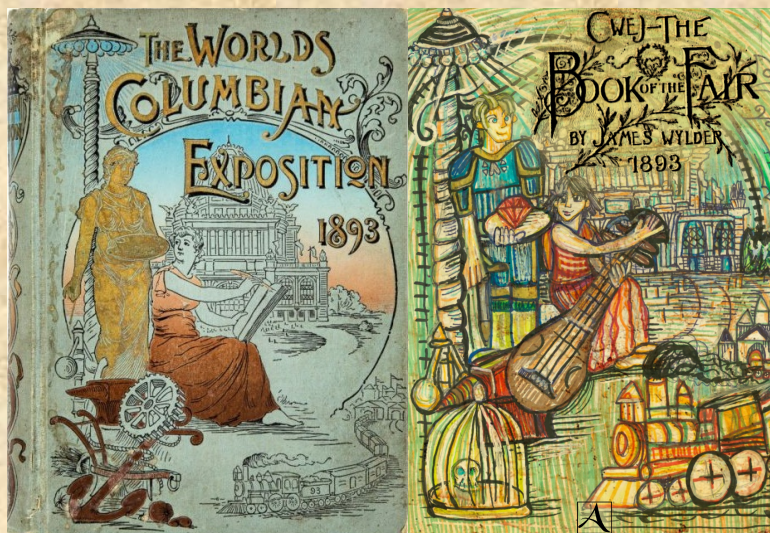
We're all just using lines to interpret the characters that mean the most to us. In the text we read, and illustrations we make and audio we hear.

We all take a little bit of something from the characters we love and give it back to those that care about them most.

This is my contribution to you.

### **Thank you for speaking with us!**

Thank you. It's been incredible. I am honored to contribute and celebrate Cwej's history.



# Poetry

## *Crushing Reality* – Hunter O'Connell

The walls, the walls, the white padded walls,  
closing in, closing in, the white padded walls.  
The straightjacket tightens, the room never brightens,  
when you are within the white padded walls.

It was the man, the man in the blue!  
The man in the blue, I say!  
And without a knife, his friend took a life,  
and left me back here on that one fateful day.

My memory clouds as the man in blue sprints,  
condoning his good friend's sin.  
They battled a creature who left monstrous prints,  
on my old hometown's nootropic skin.  
And after they won, and t'was all said and done,  
the blue man had left with a terrible grin.

The walls, the walls, the white padded walls,  
closing in, closing in, the white padded walls.  
The world falls still with ethereal pills  
beginning to fade into black.  
My timeline reknits and I go through no fits,

as my current form withers and cracks.

“Harlan, dear Harlan, your food’s getting cold!

Don’t you want it?” my dear mother calls.

I get up to join her, my joints much less old,

and I was released from the white padded walls.

In the Next Issue of  
**Cwej30**

*Cwej and Sang Mi's  
road trip begins as our serial*

**Cwej: Odyssey**

*truly hits the road!*

*Also featuring new interviews,  
new poems, and new art!*

**And Watch Soon For:**

**Cwej: Dread Mnemosyne / When Winter Comes**

*A science fiction novel double feature.*

**See You Soon!**