

CWED 30

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Zine Issue 2

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From the Editor's Desk

We're back, and sorry about the wait. The *Cwej30* Zine is now moving to a monthly format, and I'm being joined by the amazing and talented James Hornby in getting these stories out to you. We've got a lot of exciting stuff coming, and things should be a lot smoother from here on out. Well, knock on wood.

It seems like Cwej as a series has been defined by hard times and getting through them. And also by hospitals. There's a reason that my novel *And Today, You* and the opening story of *Cwej: Odyssey*, *Shutter Speed*, focus in so much on hospitals. So much of Cwej has been born from the roughest and darkest experiences of our lives.

And from surviving them.

And so *Cwej30* has been yet again. Too much of this has been worked on in hospital waiting rooms, at bedsides, and in-between all sorts of problems and worries. I never thought that I'd have a loved one in the hospital again while doing Cwej30, but life happened. And so it was. And so we're here. But everyone on the team has been incredibly supportive—and we pushed through. You're reading this zine, after all!

Oh, and what a zine it is!

First off, we have *Cwej: Odyssey*! Yes, Chris and Sang Mi's adventures together all have a name. Their journey, their Odyssey, that started in *Shutter Speed*, continued in *The Book of the Fair*, and now blossoms here in four stories by myself, James Hornby, and Theta Mandel, is one I can't wait for you to follow. There's so much coming. So join us on this Odyssey. You're in for a treat.

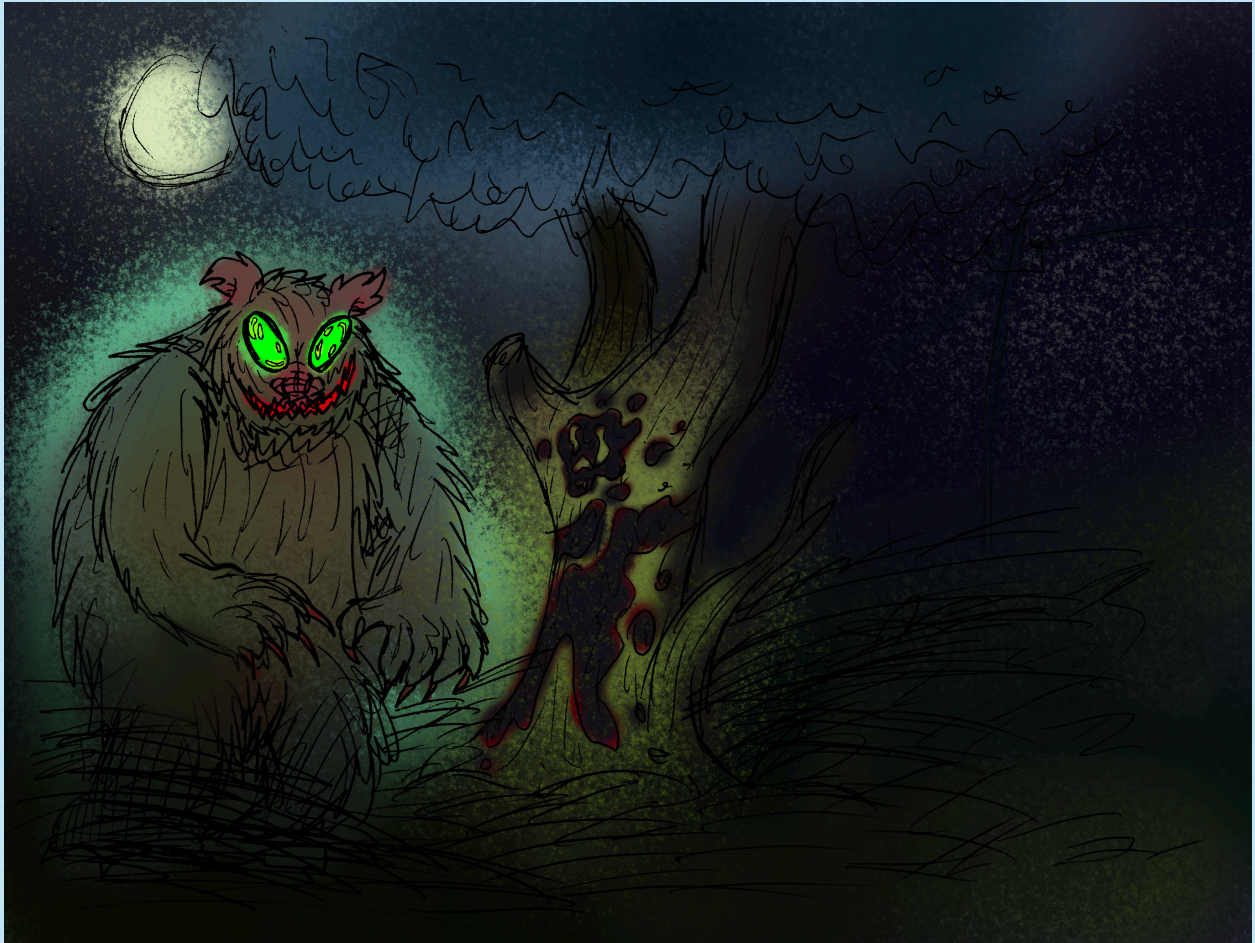
Plus, we have interviews with the incredible Rebecca Levene, and Rosalie Mauer! Wonderful times.

Thank you all for your patience. We'll see you next month for your next dose of Cwej.

—James Wylder

CWEEJ

ODYSSEY



Cable Line Road

By James Wylder

Illustrated by Aristide Twain

America was vast, or at least it was supposed to be. It certainly didn't feel like that when they'd been stuck in traffic for three hours.

"A lot of people are honking, will that help?" Sang Mi asked.

"It won't help," Chris replied. He thought about it for a moment, and then honked the horn a few times just in case he was wrong.

Sang Mi banged her head against the window. Continue your adventures with Cwej against all odds, she'd told herself, it'll be everything you'd dreamed of, she'd told herself. She hadn't anticipated that they'd move only a hundred and fifty feet over the course of an afternoon. They were stuck in their orange Honda Element, and she was becoming too familiar with it, and also too familiar with an audio stream the car picked up called NPR. She perked up. The car!

"Maybe we should name the car," she said.

"The *Vicinity III*," Chris said quickly.

"That sounds like you're naming a boat."

Chris mumbled that it was a really good name before conceding the point.

“What about Ol’Bessie? Like the cow that burned down Chicago?”

“There are about seven reasons I’m vetoing that,” he replied. “Number one, that’s too close to something else. Number two, O’Leary’s cow wasn’t named Bessie. Number three, that cow didn’t start the Chicago fire.” Chris stroked his chin. “Never mind, I guess I just have three reasons.”

She slumped. “It’s more fun if the cow started it.”

“The truth isn’t always fun.”

She banged her head against the window again. “I know that.” The line of cars suddenly started moving again, and she felt a brief rush as they moved a full hundred and twenty two meters before stopping again. But this time there was something to actually divert her.

“Exit! Food at the exit!”

He glanced at the sign. “Every exit has food. That’s how these roads work.”

“Yes, and I’m sure the good people of,” she squinted, “Elkhart, Indiana, will appreciate our patronage of... wherever!”

He sighed. “You just want to get out of this traffic jam.”

“I would sell one of my kidneys at this point.”

“Say no more,” he grumbled, but she could tell he was relieved at her suggestion too.

* * *

It took them half an hour to actually get to the exit—and as they got off they could see that some combination of a semi-truck turning over and construction on the road was making it a nightmare to get through. They weren’t the only people getting off, and Chris got frustrated at the slow driving from their fellow detour takers that he took his own detour. The roads and buildings had been interspersed with farms and fields for some time, but wherever they were thinned out even more.

“Sorry, I’m not actually getting us anywhere practical,” he said.

She smiled, and she meant it. “Nah, this is nice.” The world outside the window was different, and different was enough.

“Hey what’s that?” she said pointing at the plants she’d seen plenty of.

“Corn,” Chris answered.

“And that?”

“Soybeans.”

“And that?”

“More corn.”

Sang Mi squinted. There was something off about that tree—it looked weird. But she admitted she wasn’t familiar with most plants, let alone trees. Its trunk was stained, a dark reddish black.

“And that?”

“Grass.”

“No, the tree.”

He shrugged. “Missed it.”

They started cresting a hill, accelerating all the way, and Chris started to frown. He hit the brakes and, turning his head to look behind them, backed the car down again. Sang Mi watched the whole scene curiously, especially as he started up the hill once more. They climbed up at an even speed... and then she realized he wasn't touching the acceleration pedal with his foot.

He gave her a look as her own face was clearly showing confusion. “That's weird, right?”

“They didn't invent gravity manipulation here early, did they? Like, that's not for decades yet.”

“They sure haven't.” He put his foot down on the accelerator.

They crested the hill, and the sun went out.

Chris put the headlights on, the bright ones, but they could only barely see the road ahead of them.

They were going faster. And faster.

On either side of the road there was something, a dark blur. It would appear there, then flutter by like telephone poles out of sight.

“Chris, slow down.”

“I can't,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Slow down!”

“I CAN'T!”

The road was going by too fast; the blur had been going by at even intervals, and now as the world itself blurred it began to move like a butterfly: it was dancing, darker than darkness. Its eyes began to glow as the sole source of light in this bleak vision: they were green, but their light illuminated nothing. Sang Mi clutched the door of the car, as Chris struggled to control the wheel. The speedometer of the car had topped out, the needle shaking, trying to push onward.

“Can we... reverse?”

“We can't—wait—there's a switch by the gearshift, you have to pull out a little cover to hit it. I can't let go of the wheel. Hold it down and you can shift it.”

The speed they were going made it hard to move, but she leaned over--there was a little cover, she tried to pull it off with her fingernails but it didn't budge. She glanced around, and picked up a metal pen Cwej had been using—it was monogrammed. She slammed it into the cover. The tip of the pen smashed, but the cover remained. She tried again—and the little bit of plastic cracked in two. She ripped it off, and pushed the switch down with the broken pen, then pulled as hard as she could on the gearshift.

The car made a horrible screeching tearing noise—and then went in reverse.

Sort of.

Something was still pulling them forward, and the opposite forces made Sang Mi's stomach churn, and the car start to first fish tail and then spin, and then they were off the road, and the car started spinning vertically instead of horizontally.

And the sun returned.

And the world returned.

And the car hit the ground.

* * *

Saki held the pill out to her. Sang Mi's hand hung in the air trembling.

"Come on, we've done this countless times before. Stop wasting my time," Saki said.

Sang Mi shook her head. "We've been taking the Delirium for a while now; what if I'm, like, getting addicted?"

Saki scoffed, loudly. "It's not that kind of drug. It's prescription."

"A discontinued medicine neither of us have been prescribed!"

Saki only shrugged, and held the pill out closer to Sang Mi.

Her hand hesitated another moment before grabbing it, and downing it with a hefty slurp of water.

The two girls lay down. They'd done this before. You take the medicine, it puts you to sleep...

She drifted off.

And when her dreams started, the medicine kicked in.

Sang Mi found herself in a dark place, lit only by a faint purple-blue glow. Her feet were ankle deep in dark water. She held her hand out, and felt ahead of her. With the medicine, she could control the dream. She could do anything here. Well, nearly anything. She closed her eyes, and reached further until her hand touched something that wasn't there.

And then it was.

"Doctor, she's waking up." There was the noise of footsteps, and Sang Mi opened her eyes to see bright lights.

"She shouldn't be—was there something wrong with the anesthetics?"

She held her hand up to block the light—it was wrapped in a bandage. There was a mask over her face pumping air in, and she could feel something plugged into her arm—some sort of medieval version of an IV. She tried to sit up, but her head was spinning as soon as she moved, and she felt hands move to keep her down.

"You're okay, just stay laying down—"

She reached for the mask and pulled it down—she could breathe just fine, well, mostly. "Where's Chris?"

"You're at Elkhart General Hospital."

"Chris! Is Chris okay!?"

“The driver of the car is fine. Do you know what year it is?”

“2387. No, sorry, 2025, ignore the first thing.”

The nurse and the doctor glanced at each other.

“What’s your name?”

“Jhe Sang Mi—or Sarah Jhe depending on what piece of ID you’re looking at. One is my Gongen—er, Korean name, the other is my English one.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“The car wouldn’t stop accelerating, the brakes wouldn’t work, and we sped off the road.”

“Right, we have a few more questions.”

They did not have a few more questions. They had many, and then she got a break to take a nap and eat, and then they had even more questions. She’d apparently broken a few ribs and gotten cut up from the window breaking when the car rolled over. But considering the speed they were going she’d ended up in pretty good shape. Apparently the 2007 Honda Element was a good choice on Chris’s part.

The most annoying part of their questioning wasn’t the part where the cop came in and tried to get her to say the driver had been inebriated, surprisingly, but the part where the doctor came in and said.

“Your blood tests came back and... we did them a second time just to be sure there was no mistake.”

She sipped her juice box. “And?”

“You have fatal levels of petrochlorides in your bloodstream. Actually, not just fatal, your blood might be a biohazard.”

Sang Mi laughed. “Oh, yeah, rookie Earther mistake. I’m fine, those things are just littered in the soil where I’m from. If I couldn’t survive with those in my body nobody would be alive there.”

The doctor nodded very slowly. “...I was unfamiliar with that. Still, your blood could be lethal to... Americans?” She said, clearly hoping she was getting the vibe right. “So please be careful with any open cuts.”

She brushed it off. “Yeah yeah, no worries. How are my ribs?”

“Doing well. We should be able to discharge you soon. We weren’t allowed to let your uncle see you due to the police trying to detain him, but it looks like that’s sorted so he’ll be in to see you soon.”

That proved to be true, and a belabored Chris came in, clearly relieved to see she was doing well.

“How are you doing, kid?”

“Don’t call me kid, and pretty good aside from these primitive needles they’re using. Hey, did you hear my blood is a biohazard? That’s pretty cool, right?”

His face twitched. “...I would not use those words no. I’ve been on the phone with a lot of folks: the JDS, Geneva, SIGNET... I even deigned to call Blue Candle.”

“Oof, thank you for your service.”

He nodded. “Anyway, I think I’ve sorted it all out. We should be able to get your hospital records here sealed, the car is getting fixed, the cops ruled the crash an accident... all that’s left is dealing with the problem.”

She straightened up as much as one could in a hospital bed. “The thing that knocked us off the road.”

He nodded. “We can’t let it do that to any more people.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“The plan is, I get a hotel room for you, and you wait there till I deal with this.”

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “Really? I have a right to go with you on this!”

He shook his head. “You got hurt. Under my watch.”

“I’m fine! Once they let me out of here we can fix my ribs up no problem.”

He rubbed his hands together. “I didn’t think we were in danger on the road my—”

“I didn’t either! Who could have guessed that?”

“I should have.”

“Bullshit. Bullshit and you know it. Stop blaming yourself.”

“But—”

“Ah—no buts! You couldn’t have known, I couldn’t have known. Let’s get out of here, figure out how to beat this thingy, and pick our car up.”

He smiled. “Yeah. Sounds like a plan. Stop making me look like the kid here though.”

She stuck her tongue out.

“Mission accomplished,” he laughed.

* * *

They made their way downtown, and slipped into a restaurant next to an outdoor ice-rink, one that naturally didn’t have any ice on it since it was April. After their waitress took their order, Sang Mi slid (a polite word for lightly threw) her phone across the table to Chris, who picked it up and read.

“The Cable Line Road Monster?”

“It’s a very creative name,” she sighed. “And mind you, most sources call it the Cable Line Monster.”

“Most sources?”

“Okay, like, nearly all of them, but ‘Cable Line Road Monster’ sounds cooler, so I’m saying that.” Chris nodded, bemused. “But yeah, it’s a local urban legend. Though it doesn’t seem like there is a consistent version of the story.” Sang Mi adopted her spookiest demeanor. It wasn’t that spooky. “Sometimes it starts with a guy on a motorbike—sometimes the guy and his girlfriend are in a car. Sometimes it’s a dad and his son in the car. And more. So let’s just choose one—a man and his girlfriend are zooming down the road on a motorcycle—only it doesn’t hover, it just has wheels because they haven’t invented the GravDrive yet.”

Chris smiled politely.

“He’s driving fast, she’s clutched to him, holding on tight. And then they see it there in front of them—the green-eyed creature. Maybe it’s furry. Maybe it’s a shadow. But it’s there, sudden and swift and there’s not enough time to think as the man reacts—he veers off the road! The wheels churn up grass as the motorcycle accelerates even faster—and then there is a tree. He hits it, head on, splattered in a human-shaped mark of blood and shadow that sinks in. And the mark stays there on that tree.”

“What about the girl?”

“Oh, sometimes she isn’t there,” she noted as the waitress handed them plates of food.

“She was there when you told it,” Chris noted.

“Oh right.” She raised her hands back up and resumed the spooky voice. “The girl survived, horrifically mangled, and in the hospital she described the creature, how it watched her lying there on the ground. Just staring.” She paused. “Actually, it makes sense she was there to tell the story, cause how else would we know what happened?”

Chris folded his arms and laughed. “Some ghost story.” He sat on his reaction a moment. “No... that’s not fair. It’s clearly real. You nearly died.”

She flapped her hand at him. “I’m fine! Barely injured!”

He didn’t argue the point, but his concern was evident. “Wait a second, there was no tree?”

“And then there was,” Sang Mi noted. “They cut the tree down in 1994.” She pulled a picture of the tree up on her phone. “So if the tree is gone, how is there even still a legend?”

Chris looked at the dark stain on the tree, and took a bite of his burger. “That is the question to answer, isn’t it?”

* * *

It was after dark when the pair of travelers returned to Cable Line Road. This time, they pulled over and stepped out to look at the drying grass where the tree had once been. Sang Mi raised her phone, and lined up the photograph of the tree on her screen with the place it would have been as best she could. Lowering it, to reveal the empty space, she felt like the darkness was thicker there. There was no truth to that objectively, it was the same color of night as the rest of the world. But still, there it felt. A hollow and invisible pulse drawing her in from the shadows.

“How do we deal with something that isn’t there?” she asked. She felt like she should have asked earlier.

“Easy,” Chris said. “We go where it is.”

She tried to gauge his face in the shadows. “Where do things go that don’t exist?”

He walked forward, gesturing for her to follow. They stopped in front of where the tree was, and Chris took her hand, and raised it up with his own. “Close your eyes. We’re going to reach out and touch the tree. Where the tree is.”

“...You mean like in a dream?”

“Sorry?”

“Saki and I, when we were experimenting with Delirium... when you got control of the dream, you could find things that weren’t there. Find them in the dream. You weren’t really creating them, just...”

He nodded. “Just like that. That’s good, this has a better chance of working. Now close your eyes like I asked.”

“Right, sorry.”

She did, and their hands reached out together. She thought about the tree, the tree that was definitely there. Like it was there in the dream, an image waiting to be carved out of stone just waiting within the block of marble. Their hands pressed forward.

And touched bark, scratchy and rough.

They opened their eyes, and there it was. A tree, stained dark with a shadow like a person. The world around the tree was strange, it seemed to be half remembered—like a dream. Turning her gaze, the details of the world didn’t stay consistent. Stones along the road moved, or vanished, between the movements of her eyes.

The tree seemed to stretch higher into the sky, its branches twisting and segmenting, covering the stars in a spider-web curtain.

Chris too rose to a new height. “You don’t scare me.”

The wind blew, and the grass, corn, and branches rattled with laughter. “I nearly drank that girl’s blood,” said the wind.

Sang Mi tensed, but Chris put a hand on her shoulder. “I’ve faced things far worse than a roadside monster. You survive feasting on death and pain. On whispers in schoolyards.”

“I survived being cast into a darkness beyond darkness. And someday my master,” there was a coarse chattering noise like teeth gnashing and grinding, “Will return for me.”

Chris furrowed his brow.

“Do you know what this is?”

“Maybe,” he answered quickly. “It’s from a time before time. When there was less of a barrier between things like dreams and the tactile. Which doesn’t make it as special as it thinks.”

The world laughed again.

“You’re just a bad dream,” Chris shouted. But Sang Mi could see he was becoming less confident.

She looked at the stain. It seemed to radiate death. She reached her hand out, her fingers curled with hesitation. “It’s a bad dream...” She squinted, and then looked back at Cwej. “Wait, normally dreams aren’t real.”

“Well, yes, but I think we’re in sort of—”

"I know what it's like to confuse dreams for reality. Too well." As her hands reached into the shadow, she could touch it like wet silk. "And I know what it's like to lose someone I love. And Chris does too. More than me, probably," she clenched her hands around the darkness. "And I know something else. I know that Mrs. O'malley's cow didn't start the Chicago Fire. You're just a story."

The voice spoke up with anger. "You nearly died! Your bones cracked and your blood should have spelled into the soil—"

"Shoulda-coulda-woulda," Chris cut in. "I'm sure someone died here, at some point." He reached his hands over Sang Mi's shoulders to grasp the darkness as well. Four hands now gripped the stain tightly. "But not every version of your story could happen. Which means your power is in the telling. So we're going to dream bigger than you."

"Which isn't too hard," Sang Mi noted.

They pulled at the stain, and it started to rip off the tree with a sticky ripping sound. The branches of the tree tried to curl around them, but with a heave, they gave one final yank, and dropped to the ground, Sang Mi landing on Chris's chest. She pushed herself up, making Chris wince, and there was the bloody stain.

A two-dimensional cut-out of blood and shadow stumbling through the grass on its stubby feet.

Chris raised his eyes and hand to the sky, and mumbled, "Sun and rain."

The stain didn't have eyes, but it seemed to watch them as the night broke into day. The sky cracked for rain, washing away the shadows and the blood into wisps.

The dream vanished, and they stood together again in a treeless world by the roadside.

Sang Mi looked around, everything seemed normal. "Is it gone?"

Chris nodded with a smile, then shrugged. "Probably. I think so, its hard to tell. But it won't be back for a long time certainly. This road will be a lot safer."

She nodded, and looked down the concrete stretching to the horizon. "I guess we'd better get back on it."

* * *

Chris handed the cashier a twenty—he was running lower on cash than he expected. He'd have to make sure to get more before the next snack run. Oh well, he was sure he wouldn't forget.

"Hey Chris, look!" Sang Mi had been looking at the rest stop's limited book selection, most of which was local tourism pamphlets. But she'd found a hardback book called *Roadside Oddities of America*. "This has information on all sorts of critters. Like look," she opened it up. "Mothman! He's a man, and a moth! And..." She turned to a different page. "The Beast of Busco, a big turtle!"

Chris thought about it, and gestured for her to bring it over. "Alright, you got it. Might as well see the sights on our way there." He added it to their purchase, and they got back in the Honda Element. Sang Mi excitedly flipped through the pages of the used book.

"Oh yeah, I thought of a name for the car!" she said.

He turned it on. "Oh yeah? Better than The Vicinity III?"

"Way better." She gestured with both hands. "The Odyssey!"

Chris pursed his lips.

“What? What!? It’s a cool name!”

“There’s already a car called the Honda Odyssey.”

She pouted. “Well this is ours.”

He laughed. Sure, why not. “Fair enough. Chris Cwej and Jhe Sang Mi, on the inaugural voyage of the Odyssey.” He put the car into drive, and as they got back on the road it hit him. “Uh, Sang Mi? Didn’t the Odyssey take... a long time, with a lot of hardship?”

“It’s just a name,” she replied.

He nodded. But he couldn’t help but think her words had stained the world just like that tree.

Eh, it was just a feeling.

It’ll be fine.

Shadow and Stone

By James Hornby

Chris and Jhe Sang Mi cruised down the open road, the bright orange bodywork of the Honda Element shining ever brighter in the light of the dusk sky. Sang Mi's eyes began to droop as the falling sun became masked by a border of tall trees.

"Get some shut-eye if you need it," said Chris. "It'll be some time before the next stop."

"It's alright," said Sang Mi, rubbing her eyes. "It's not fair for you to drive in the dark without some distraction." She grinned. "Besides, my world isn't exactly known for its lush greenery. Who knows what's hiding beneath those trees."

"Exactly," said Chris, a little graver than Sang Mi was expecting.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Not a fan of the big spooky woods?"

He shuffled in his seat, adjusting the seat belt. "I'm not sure," he said with a frown. "I've just got a weird feeling, that's all."

"A weird feeling because of the big spooky woods?" Sang Mi poked.

Chris's frown deepened, and Sang Mi cottoned on that it wasn't the sort of conversation to joke around in.

"Chris, what's wrong?"

"I don't know," he repeated, cracking his neck and wincing. "I can... *feel* that something isn't right, like, in my bones."

Sang Mi held back on making a joke about his age. "I don't feel anything," she said.

"Hmm," said Chris. "I'm sure it's nothing." He offered her a weak smile. "Anyways, the sun's hanging low. Let's push on and try to find a motel before morning."

The car drove into the treeline, and after how long the day had been darkness descended too quickly. Sang Mi got a buzz of excitement watching the trees whiz past. The trees looked alien to her. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that feeling felt wrong. This was humanity's home, or so they said. Her world had no trees, and instead huge machines provided the oxygen she needed to breathe. Somehow, she felt cheated by that.

A blur of movement caught her attention. Sang Mi craned her neck to see a deer galloping through the woodland. She beamed at the sight.

"Hey, look!" she called to Chris, nudging him with her elbow so hard that he almost lost control of the wheel.

"What?" asked Chris, desperately assessing the road in front of him to make sure there wasn't anything he'd missed.

“A deer in the trees,” Sang Mi explained, and pointed in the direction she’d made the sighting.

When she looked back, the deer was gone without a trace.

A twinge of disappointment washed over her. Still, she continued to look out of the window, hopeful of seeing something else in the wilderness beyond their vehicle.

“This is really exciting you, isn’t it?” said Chris, with his amazing talent for pointing out the obvious.

“It’s the mystery of it all,” said Sang Mi, grinning with all the joy of a child in a toy shop. “Nature is just allowed to do what it wants here. Within those trees could be absolutely anything. Back on Gongen, we sort of know what to expect: everything was built with schematics. Nature is just... wild.”

“Most people find that scary,” said Chris.

Not me, thought Sang Mi. If she had the choice, she’d have places planted like this all over Gongen. Perhaps one day she would.

Peering out of the window once more, she studied the strips of grass at the side of the road. They had clearly been trimmed by humans to stop foliage from encroaching onto the travel route, but even so, compressed patches could be seen throughout, hinting at activity from the area wildlife. Sang Mi assumed that local fauna crossed the road often, oblivious of its significance to humans.

Again Sang Mi’s eyes were drawn to movement. This time she gasped in terror.

At the side of the road, peering out from behind the trunk of a tree, was a figure.

It was around six feet tall, and vaguely humanoid in shape. Apart from that, Sang Mi could tell nothing more. Its features were non-existent. Not shadowed by the scarcity of light. Black. And as quickly as Sang Mi had spotted the figure, its rounded head slunk back behind the tree and out of sight.

“What’s wrong?” asked Chris, this time making sure to keep his eyes on the road to avoid an accident.

Sang Mi was as white as a sheet. “There was... *something* out there.”

“What do you mean ‘something’?” asked Chris, dismissively. “Of course there is. They’ll be foxes and all sorts out there.”

“No, no, no,” said Sang Mi, trying to convey her seriousness. “It was something else. Something *odd*.”

“Odd,” said Chris, not totally buying in, likely due to her overexcitement at seeing a deer.

“It was a figure,” Sang Mi explained, or at least tried to. “Except, everything about it was just... black.”

Chris frowned. "Are you sure you don't need that nap? I really don't mind. After that scare you gave me with the deer, I think I will be alert for hours."

Sang Mi was starting to get irritated. "Chris, I'm serious. There was something out there."

"Alright, I believe you," Chris said, in the most unconvincing way possible.

Sang Mi rolled her eyes in annoyance, and tried to resist the urge to punch him in the arm. Instead, she took a deep breath, and refocused her attention outside.

Another figure, ahead, peering out from behind a tree on her side of the road.

"There!" Sang Mi bellowed, pointing.

Chris leaned over the steering wheel to get a closer look. His straining eyes and rapid blinks told Sang Mi he hadn't seen anything.

"Sorry," he told her, "I didn't see anything." This time, however, something about his tone told her he wasn't quite ready to dismiss it.

"Do you still have that weird feeling?" Sang Mi asked.

"It never went away," Chris confirmed.

Sang Mi kept her eyes on the treeline, and sure enough, another black figure came into view, staring at them, just like the others, from the cover of a trunk.

"Don't worry, I see it this time," said Chris, before Sang Mi had the chance.

The two of them both tried to grasp something, anything they could of what the creature looked like, but again, even in the headlights of the car, aside from its otherwise human-like shape, all they saw of it was shadow.

"What the hell is it?" asked Sang Mi. Her heart raced as she watched the figure retreat behind the tree once the car drew near.

"No idea," said Chris. "But I'm willing to bet it has something to do with my weird feeling."

Chris drove the Honda down the lonely forest track, and as they spied, once every ten or twenty trees they passed, more figures cloaked in darkness spied back.

"There's more of them now," said Sang Mi, pointing to a tree at Chris's side of the road, where the silhouette of two heads were visible behind a nearby tree. Slightly further ahead, two more figures stood at the side of the road on the grass verge. Even in the full beam of the headlights, and obscured by no obstacle, the figures remained bathed in darkness. The only new feature they could see was that they were truly humanoid: two arms, two legs, one head. Everything else was black.

"Chris, watch out!"

Another humanoid figure appeared in the headlights. Sang Mi only had time to notice a mop of long curly hair and a red coat before Chris slammed on the breaks. Tyres screeched and the two of them clenched their teeth. The car came skidding to a halt in the nick of time.

Standing, bathed in the glow of the headlights, was an elderly man dressed in tattered jeans and a thick burgundy pea coat. His bedraggled grey hair and untrimmed beard made him look like he hadn't washed in weeks.

Sang Mi breathed a sigh of relief. Their trip across America had been weird enough without killing Santa as well.

"I don't believe it," said Chris, unlocking the doors.

Sang Mi grabbed his arm. "What are you doing?" she hissed. "Those creatures are out there!"

Chris ignored her protest and yanked himself free of her grasp. He opened the door, planted one foot on the ground and hauled himself out of the car.

"Of all the places in the world to run into Charles Zoltan, a dark forest in the middle of America was the last place I would have expected."

Sang Mi was surprised, and quietly relieved, to see that the old man was familiar to Chris.

"Christopher Cwej!" The old man beamed with the kindest smile Sang Mi had ever seen. *Maybe he is Santa*, she thought. "What in the heavens are you doing here?"

"I'm on a road trip," said Chris, by way of piss poor explanation. "What about you?"

"I think you might have a good idea," said Zoltan, "If you've seen our friends in the woods."

Sang Mi wanted to leave the car and join them, but the thought of the shadowy figures kept her inside.

"They must be trouble if they've got you on a plane from England." He paused for a moment, scratching his head. "I have got the year right, haven't I? You are working for SIGNET?"

"Yes, yes," the kindly old man replied. "Thought let's try and stay light on the spoilers, if you don't mind."

"Sorry," said Chris. "I forgot that you don't like time travellers."

"It's not that I don't like time travellers," Charles explained. "It's that I don't like having things spoiled. Loose lips can reveal all sorts of things, and I prefer ignorance. How can life be fun if you know what's coming?" He caught sight of Sang Mi watching from the passenger seat. "Who is your friend? She doesn't look like Yanna or Roslyn."

"Sang Mi," said Chris. "Come on out," he called to her. "Charles won't bite."

"What about those creatures?" she called back, heart pounding. "They don't seem to be as nice."

"It's alright," said Charles. "You're safe enough with us."

Something about the old man made Sang Mi instantly believe him. She unbuckled her seat belt, opened the door, and raced over to them as fast as her legs could carry her. Instinctively casting a look behind her, she started as three figures stood in the middle of the road behind the car. Motionless. Watching.

“It’s okay,” said Charles, pulling her close. “They’re here for the same reason as me.”

“What are they?” asked Chris. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

“They’re known as shadow people,” Charles answered. “Beyond that, I know as little as you. They show up at the scene of mysterious events. Or don’t. There’s never any pattern to their behaviour.”

“And what brings them to the woods in the middle of Indiana is...?”

“I’m not yet sure,” admitted Charles. “But we’ll get no answers standing around here. Come on.”

He set off in the direction of the woods.

“Hold on,” said Chris, “Let me get my rifle.”

“You won’t need that,” Charles chided. “You never do!”

“And a torch,” said Chris, paying no heed.

Chris headed to the car and returned a moment later with his hefty space-age laser rifle and a bog standard 21st century LED torch. “Sorry,” he said to Sang Mi. “I only have one.”

“I can help you there, young lady,” said Charles, delving into the inside pockets of his coat. “I always carry a spare after watching those horror films: why do they only ever have one torch - It’s obvious the batteries are going to run out!” He handed a small, pencil shaped torch to her.

Sang Mi pressed the button on the base of the torch and a surprisingly strong beam of light came forth, lighting up the silhouette of another shadow figure in the treeline. Sang Mi’s heart skipped a beat, and to her relief, the shadow figure skulked out of sight soon after.

* * *

The walk through the woods was arduous. Every step of the way, Sang Mi’s heart banged like a drum. Although Charles and Chris by now were happy to ignore the shadow figures as they traversed the network of brambles and thickets, Sang Mi felt the same pang of fear each time one of them came into view.

“Have they been known to hurt people before?”

The question had been burning on Sang Mi’s mind for some time, and until now had been too scared to ask through fear of what the answer may be.

“Not by any testimony I’ve heard,” answered Charles. “Though they are able to interact with our world with some manner of physicality.”

Sang Mi sighed. That wasn't the answer she had wanted to hear.

As Charles carved the path forwards, Chris dropped back to stay with Sang Mi.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm a girl from Gongen being led through a thick woodland in the dead of night by a man I don't know with featureless shadow creatures watching me at every turn." She looked Chris in the eyes. "I've been better."

Chris threw her a look that said, "I know this isn't ideal, but let's just stick with it and see what happens."

It didn't placate her, so Sang Mi asked: "Who is Charles anyway? How do you know him?"

"Charles runs an investigative group called SIGNET, who look into weird goings on in the hopes of saving people. We left the projector with their receptionist, before, well, the whole World's Fair thing. They're a bit like us, I suppose, but a little more domestic. I've met Charles a few times over the years, battling cosmic threats, and a particularly nasty Korrovax in Manchester. His mother was a nice lady too: unapologetically kind. Losing her really affected him."

"So he's here investigating the shadow people?"

"Investigating what's brought them here!" Charles called back, from quite a distance ahead.

Chris and Sang Mi shared a look. He must have heard everything they were saying!

"And what is that, Charles?" asked Chris. "We're clearly heading somewhere!"

Ahead, Charles stopped in his tracks, and shone his torch in the distance. Through a jagged sea of branches, Sang Mi could make out the outlines of buildings. Chris quickened his pace, and Sang Mi followed.

"They look like farm buildings," said Chris as they neared the structures.

Already Sang Mi could see shadow people gathered in groups of threes and fours around bails of hay and stacks of farm equipment. One shadow person in particular had three long, slender fingers that reached down to where Sang Mi assumed were its knees. The sight freaked her out more.

"If they're here for a reason, then why are they just standing around?" asked Sang Mi.

"I wish I had an answer for you," said Charles. "Whenever shadow people have been said to interact with the physical world, it always seems to happen when they aren't being observed."

"Where do we go now?" asked Chris, shuffling uncomfortably. "These things are really starting to make me feel--"

"Like something bad is going to happen?" finished Charles.

"Yeah," said Chris. "I've felt it ever since we entered these woods."

“They have a habit of making people feel like that,” said Charles, stroking his beard. “I’ve felt it ever since I got off the plane in Indianapolis.”

“I haven’t felt like that at all,” said Sang Mi. “Just absolutely freaking terrified.”

Chris shrugged. “Must be universal differences,” he said. “I get the sense that these things, whatever they are, are very primal to our universe. It’s very likely that yours doesn’t have them at all.”

“I should hope not!” said Sang Mi. And for the first time in a while, she longed to be back in her own bed in Gongen.

Charles led them into the centre of the farmyard. Three buildings surrounded them: a shed for livestock, a barn, and a farmhouse.

“Where first?” asked Sang Mi.

Chris began striding towards the farmhouse. “In there,” he said. “Look!”

At first glance, Sang Mi thought she saw a shadow figure, slumped against a window. However, as Chris shone his torch over it, she instead saw a decaying face of rotting flesh staring back at her, jaw open in abject terror. She froze, and immediately turned away, stumbling. Closing her eyes, she tried to push the image out of her head, and the numbing feeling flowing through her like she wasn’t quite in her own body. She ran her hands over each other, trying to focus on the feeling and blot the corpse behind her out of her mind.

She jumped a little when she felt Chris hand on her shoulder. “Will you be okay?”

Nodding, she tried to give him a reassuring smile. “Y-yeah. I’ve got this one under control.”

“You sure?”

She nodded, and he squeezed her shoulder and walked past her to inspect the remains.

Charles was looking at her, his eyes filled with a pained wisdom that showed he knew exactly what she was dealing with in that moment. That he’d seen it countless times before.

“Chin up, we won’t leave you behind.”

She gave him a reassuring smile too, but it had become a little more honest. “Thanks, you should go help Chris.”

In a moment, Charles was at Chris’s side, keeping pace despite his advanced age. Sang Mi steadied herself, and by the time she caught up, the two men were standing over the body, making assessments over what had happened. She kept her distance, but despite her stomach rolling over in her chest and a bit of lightheadedness, was holding it together better than she expected with the presence of Charles and Chris.

“No immediate cause of death,” Chris noted, examining the way the corpse was leaning against the window, as though trying to open the door.

“Her clothes seem intact,” agreed Charles, shining his torch over what Sang Mi assumed, beneath the maggots and grime, was a dress.

Sang Mi cast her torch across the room, looking for anything that could have caused the unfortunate lady’s death, and eager for an excuse to look away from the body. Aside from a thin layer of dust, the room appeared to be an otherwise normal kitchen: empty worktops, a cooker, and fridge unit against the back wall. It was only when she shone her torch into the adjoining room, that Sang Mi found something else amiss.

“Guys, in here...”

Sang Mi’s torch focused on another body, lying face down on the carpet. He was male, so far as could be seen from his broad build. Charles was the first to reach the body, and gently rolled him over with his foot. The decaying face staring back at them was young, barely any older than Sang Mi herself.

She looked at Chris, and saw his jaw set with rage.

“Chris?” she asked with concern.

He didn’t reply. Instead he raised his rifle, returned to the kitchen and aimed it at the three shadow figures visible through the window. Without warning, he fired. The sound of shattering glass was almost cacophonous after the silence that preceded it.

“What are you doing!” Charles bellowed, running into the kitchen.

“They’ve killed these people,” said Chris, tears of anger streaming down his face. “He was just a boy!”

Sang Mi looked through the window. The shadow people hadn’t moved, and seemed completely unphased by the laser bolt that had passed through them.

“They haven’t killed anyone,” said Charles. His tone was as soft as velvet. Sang Mi wasn’t aware of how anxious she was feeling until it soothed her restless nerves. Charles placed a hand on Chris’s shoulder. “I know it’s made you angry, Chris. The thought that he could be Sang Mi must have been overwhelming to think about. But it isn’t the shadow people who have done this. Something else is at fault here, and violence won’t be the way we’ll put things right.”

Sang Mi was taken aback by Charles’ words, his ability to think clearly despite discovering the loss of a young life. While Chris’s way of doing things was looking danger in the eye, rifle in hand, she saw that Charles’ was compassion, patience, and the conviction to resolve a situation without violence. She began to realise that much could be learned from the old man, by both herself and Chris.

“So what do we do?” asked Chris, brought firmly back down to calm.

“What we always do,” said Charles with a wink. “Put wrongs to right.”

Leaving the house behind, Charles walked out into the middle of the farmstead, and closed his eyes. Chris and Sang Mi followed, watching as Charles slowed to a stop, closed his eyes, and faced each building in turn. As they watched, Sang Mi noticed Charles fiddling with something in his pocket. Sang Mi placed herself behind the old man in an attempt to view the contents. All she could see behind his fumbling hands was a warm glow of blue light. The sight of it soothed Sang Mi's fears, even from the brief glimpses she caught.

"It's in there," Charles announced, and strode off in the direction of the barn.

"What is?" Sang Mi whispered to Chris. "And what on earth is in his pocket?"

"It's a pendant that once belonged to his mother," Chris replied. "I'm not sure where it comes from, but it has remarkable divining abilities. I'd imagine it's how Charles knew to come here all the way from England."

Charles, Chris and Sang Mi entered the barn by way of a large arched door that had been left ajar. From the moment they entered, the stench of death was overpowering.

The barn contained several bales of hay that dominated one end of the room. In the centre was a tractor, fitted with a large scoop. Beside the tractor was a sizable ditch, and a mound of loose soil.

As the trio approached the ditch, they all seemed to know what they would find. Sure enough, at the centre of the ditch, was the body of a man staring up at them with a pained expression. He wore a checkered shirt, utility trousers, and thick brown boots.

Charles held up his pendant in an outstretched hand. "Whatever caused this is here, with him."

Wasting no time, Chris jumped into the ditch and began to examine the body. "I can't see anything obvious," said Chris. "Aside from the dirt on his clothes there isn't a mark on him." He thought for a moment. "Do you think the people inside the house were his family?"

"It would reckon so," said Charles, shining his torch upon the body. His eyes narrowed as something caught his eye. "Something looks off about his neck," he said. "Check his mouth."

Crouching down, Chris pushed a finger between the man's lips. Even this slightest of disturbances caused his jaw to snap. He leaned in for a closer look. "There's something in here," he said, pushing his hand in further.

Chris turned back to his friends holding a smooth-faced stone, almost rectangular in shape. "There's writing on it," he added. "Not in any language I can read though, and I'm told I can read pretty much anything."

"Give it here," said Charles, and Chris threw the stone up to him.

Sang Mi watched him examine the marble-like object. The colour of the stone was jet black, not too dissimilar from the shadow people, she noted. Etched upon it were a series of runes that appeared to defy observance. Each time Sang Mi tried to focus on a singular letter, its shape seemed to twist and morph before her eyes, and something in her mind willed her to look away. Charles

seemed to be having the same problem, frowning and blinking as he attempted to will the words to reveal themselves.

“It’s quite something,” Charles announced, giving up. “I can feel it tugging at my perceptions, trying to enter my mind. “I would say it’s Yssgarothic, but the runes on the tablet shard we have back at HQ are legible. Nothing like this.”

Sang Mi noticed that the pendant in his hand seemed to glow brighter as he held the stone. She looked down to Chris in the ditch, noticing how quiet he had been. The former Adjudicator stood motionless, head bowed, as if someone had flipped a switch and turned him off.

“Chris, are you okay?”

Chris’s neck snapped around like a whip. Sang Mi gasped.

His eyes looked to have sunk into his sockets, his skin pale and lifeless, veins visible beneath. He tried to speak, but only guttural, groaning noises were voiced. When Sang Mi looked into his eyes, he seemed to be begging her to help him.

“What’s happened to him?” Sang Mi yelled.

“The same thing that happened to those who lived here,” concluded Charles. “We have to do something before Chris joins them!”

Sang Mi looked around in panic. In the doorway, outside the windows, at the edges of the room by the hay bales, stood shadow people.

“We’re trapped!” Sang Mi cried in panic. Whatever courage Charles’ stone had given her had long since melted away. Chris was going to die here, and she would be left alone here, with those *things*.

“We’re not trapped,” insisted Charles. “They’re here because of the stone, just like we are.”

“Then why aren’t they doing anything?” said Sang Mi, tears of frustration forming in her eyes.

“Who says they aren’t?” Charles replied. “We know virtually nothing about them.”

He held the stone out in front of him and tossed it up and down in his hand, thinking frantically of what to do. All the while, Chris grew more emaciated by the second.

“The others died in the house,” Charles said suddenly. “So why is he here...”

Sang Mi’s mind raced faster than a gazelle on a dinner menu. “Because he was the last to die!” she realised. She surveyed her surroundings - ignoring the flocks of shadow people - noticing the tractor, its scoop, and the ditch. “He was trying to bury it!”

“And when he realised his time was short, tried to swallow it and threw himself in the ditch...” Charles finished.

“So what do we do - try to finish the job he started?”

“It must have been how it was found,” Charles realised. “Somewhere here on the farm.” He looked up to the driving seat of the tractor. “It’s been a while since I’ve used one of these, but needs must!”

With the sprightliness of an acrobat, Charles mounted the tractor and climbed into the operator’s station. With the turn of a key the engines fired, spewing acrid fumes into the air. Sang Mi gagged - it was worse for the environment than the Honda!

A nearby thump gave Sang Mi cause for alarm. Chris had fallen to his knees, no longer able to stand. Without thinking, she jumped into the ditch after him, and began to pull him out of the way.

“What are you doing?” Charles shouted over the roar of the engine. “I was going to dig a new ditch.”

“No time,” Sang Mi replied. “The deeper it goes, the better. Hurry!”

Chris’s skin had become taught and leathery. Still, he held on, staring up at Sang Mi with apologetic eyes.

“Don’t you get all soppy on me,” she cried. “We’ve got our road trip to finish.”

She held onto his hand, trying to ignore how much they felt like bone.

The scoop of the tractor lowered, with impressive precision, as Charles sat at the controls, sweat beading on his brow. He cleaved several depressions into the dirt, delving deeper and deeper into the earth. Once satisfied, he cast the stone into the chasm he’d created and set to work filling it back in. Heap upon heap of earth was added on top of where the stone was buried. When the work was done, Charles raced over to Sang Mi and Chris.

Sang Mi sobbed, holding onto Chris’s clammy hand. His face was gaunt, almost corpse-like. He tried to speak, but nothing more than a moan passed his leathery lips.

“Why isn’t it working?” Sang Mi barked at Charles.

The old man looked perplexed.

“The stone is buried,” he muttered. “It should be finished, done!” He started to panic, fumbling in his pockets. His eyes widened. “The pendant!” He thrust the blue stone on its string into Chris’s open palm and closed it tight. “Come on. Don’t fail me now...”

The stone shone brighter than it had all night. Sang Mi had to avert her eyes, unable to look at it directly. Still Chris remained in his husk-like state.

Sang Mi felt the hope drain from her soul. This was it, wasn’t it? Chris was going to die here, and she’d never be able to return home to Gongen.

In the corner of her vision, the shadow people moved back and forth. “Stay away from him,” Sang Mi cried. “Leave him alone!”

As she watched, the shadow people seemed to shuffle anxiously, like a toilet queue at a busy concert. They were closer than ever now, but didn't seem to want to come any closer.

"No, no," said Charles. "We're missing something. The stone has gone, yes, but *they* haven't."

Sang Mi looked to the mound of dirt where the stone had been buried. Shadow people gathered around it like it was an epitaph. "They never stood near the stone before it was buried," she said. "Now they're all over it." She looked behind her, spotting more shadow people there also.

"Of course!" exclaimed Charles. "That's why they didn't leave when the stone was buried." He grabbed Sang Mi by the wrist and pulled her behind him. Chris slid from her grip and hit the floor like a paperweight.

"No!" Sang Mi bellowed. "We can't leave him!"

"I'm sorry, Sang Mi," said Charles. "But that's *exactly* what we have to do."

Charles dragged Sang Mi along behind him like a strolling child. Every step of the way she fought, kicked and screamed at him to release her, to return her to Chris. With each step she fought, Charles held firm, refusing to look back, not even for a second.

Once they were outside of the barn, Charles closed the door, and released Sang Mi from his grasp. Sang Mi didn't hesitate to try and return to the barn, but Charles stood by the door, as strong and passive as a bouncer at a nightclub.

"Let me in!" she screamed.

"Not yet," he pleaded. "Please."

"He'll die in there," she begged, tears streaming. "I won't let him die alone."

"No one ever said it would come to that."

Charles embraced Sang Mi in a bear hug. She crumbled, sinking to her knees in despair. The old man held on tight and, whilst she sobbed in his arms, he sang an old tune, of sailors lost and lovers found. Sang Mi found it oddly soothing, yet the tears continued to flood.

Sang Mi cried for an age. She only stopped upon hearing the creak of wood. When she looked up she saw Chris staring down at her, a confused look etched across his brow.

"What on earth are you crying for?"

Sang Mi blinked, stared, and blinked again. She rubbed her eyes and looked once more. Chris was standing there, as fresh as he had looked that morning.

"Am I dead?" she asked.

"Nope," said Chris. "Am I?"

"She thought you were," said Charles, releasing her from his embrace. "She just needed to have a little faith."

Sang Mi wiped the tears from her face. “But how?”

“I’ve got no idea,” admitted Chris. “Last thing I remember is picking up that stone. Ask him,” he said, pointing to Charles.

“Thank the shadow people. They seemed pretty eager to help once the stone had been buried. But they never do anything whilst others are watching,” Charles said with a wink.

Sang Mi couldn’t believe her eyes or ears. “I thought the shadow people were evil.”

“Perhaps they are,” said Charles. “But even the evil have a capacity to be good. We live in a universe of colour, not black and white.”

Chris chuckled. “Always the philosopher, Charles.”

“I’ll add it to my many titles,” Charles laughed in reply.

Sang Mi looked around. The sun was starting to rise, and to her relief, there wasn’t a shadow person to be seen. “Which way is the car?” she asked.

Chris and Charles scratched their heads in unison. “That might take some working out,” said Chris.

“When we do find your car,” said Charles. “Could I trouble you both for a ride?”

“Of course,” Chris beamed. “Where to?”

“Oh, nowhere far,” Charles replied. “The nearest phone will do. I’m not wholly happy leaving the stone here to be dug up by any old randomer. I’ll call my friends at the JDS and make sure they seal this place up as a quarantine zone.”

“That sounds like a deal.”

As the sun began to rise in the sky, the trio headed towards it, delighted to leave the shadow behind.

The Search for Francis Bilge

By Theta Mandel

Chris Cwej was getting wary of rest stops.

He and Sang Mi had been on the road for days now, covering the same stretch of land, over and over. At least, that's what it felt like—there was no variety, nothing to mark the miles save an ever-increasing milometer and a litany of *Are we nearly there yet?*s. Even the rest stops looked the same—after days on end of such monotony, Cwej was desperate for even the slightest hint at something new. Rest stops were meant to break from the boredom, but alas, even they were all identical. Really rather the opposite of what they were supposed to be—Cwej found that made them hard to trust.

Sliding back into the car—a 2007 Honda Element that gave new meaning to the term ‘rundown’—he turned to his travelling companion, Sang Mi.

“Hey, come on, are you sure you don’t want to stretch your legs before we set off again? I don’t know how long it’ll be before we get another chance.”

Sang Mi shrugged. She was staring out the window, which felt sad, because even if there wasn’t much else to do on this kind of road trip, not even trying to pretend otherwise somehow made it worse. Cwej slapped his hands down on the driver’s seat, making her jump.

“Come on! Earth to Sang Mi!”

“Huh? Oh, no, it’s fine. Let’s just get going.”

Cwej sighed, then glanced back at the rest stop. “The little shop has candy.”

“Oh-okay-I-guess-I’ll-stretch-my-legs-for-just-a-minute-if-you-insist!” Sang Mi’s quick string of words bounded out of her mouth faster than Cwej could follow. By the time he worked out what she’d said, she was already entering the shop.

It didn’t take the pair long to grab some snacks, Sang Mi already munching down on some chocolate by the time they reached the register. A bored twenty-something with spiky neon green hair stood behind the till, watching as Cwej fumbled around for his wallet inside his bag. They sighed as he began shaking out the bag’s contents, tipping out various odds and ends all over the counter, mumbling all the while about his wallet “Being in here somewhere”. Sang Mi continued to eat her chocolate.

“Look, I need some form of payment—cash, card, either is fine. Though we don’t take amex,” the cashier told him as he shook a metal sphere out of the bag. Defying all known laws of physics, it stubbornly bounced on the counter, and then right over the side, disappearing into thin air. The cashier didn’t raise an eyebrow. They worked at a gas station shop in the middle of nowhere—it was hardly the most unusual thing they’d seen in the last few days. At least this one wasn’t trying to bring a crocodile into the store. “You can pay with your phone, if that’s easier.”

“Aha!” Cwej exclaimed, and triumphantly presented a blackberry. He held it out towards the cashier, then frowned, looking down at the phone. “Uh, how exactly do I do that?”

“They mean a smartphone,” Sang Mi supplied, and Cwej swore before sliding the phone back into his pocket.

“Right, right... Look, okay, I’m really sorry, but, I think I’ve lost my wallet.” He stood there, panicking, as if he didn’t face deadly danger on a daily basis and losing his wallet really was the end of the world. The cashier sighed again.

“Look, usually I’d just say to put everything back, but, your friend there has already eaten several items,” Sang Mi was indeed breaking into a fruit-and-nuts snack pack as they spoke, “so, I don’t really know what to do. I’m probably supposed to call the cops —” Sang Mi dropped her snack pack. “—but you both seem innocent enough, and... I’m not a snitch. Look, no one else has come in all day—I’ll let you take the snacks, say they got lost, if you just make my day a bit more interesting.”

Sang Mi, who had picked up her snack pack and moved to help Cwej with his attempts to cram everything back into his bag. “How?”

The cashier shrugged. “Up to you. I’m just really bored of everything being the same, day in, day out. Maybe you can change that, even if it’s just for a few minutes.”

Cwej smiled. “I know how you feel.” He glanced down at the piece of paper he had been trying to fit in his bag, and then handed it to the cashier. He squinted to read their nametag. “Okay then, Lance, how about a story? I’m Chris Cwej, and this is my friend, Sang Mi. For the last couple weeks, I’ve been her teacher at a high school in Illinois. We saw a lot of strange things at that high school, but perhaps nothing as strange as what we uncovered during her final theater project...”

* * *

“The Search for Francis Bilge”

Junior theater club end of spring semester final project. Task: create your own short film. Students: Megan Grabowski, Sarah Jhe, Martha Sandalwood. Assessor: Mr. Cwej.

Of all the local legends that the students of Hughes High have grown up with, none is more intriguing than the tale of Francis Bilge, our very own school founder. Very little is known about the man, his reclusive nature and desire for privacy becoming not only legendary, but infectious—each of his predecessors follow in his footsteps, anonymising themselves until they disappear entirely. Our own headmistress, Ms. Suenne, remains unseen, not even having a photograph on our school brochure! So, we chose to explore this mystery in our film, “The Search for Francis Bilge”, as it is one that is close to our hearts, and has an effect on our lives to this day.

With Martha as our camerawoman, Sarah taking the lead on research, and Megan on production, we worked together to create a short documentary about three schoolgirls’ attempts to locate that

great figure of mystery—the man who created their school. We used a Canon EOS DSLR camera, Adobe for editing, and our school library, council records, teachers’ memories, and other sources for our information, as detailed in the attached ‘sources’ doc. The raw footage and the final video are on the USB stick in the attached envelope.

Although our group had differing opinions on how best to present the story, we were able to overcome these through discussion, and compromised by including elements of each of our ideas. For example, Martha wanted to focus on the terror of someone who had such a lasting impact going missing so completely, so we started the documentary with a voiceover similar in tone to a ‘true crime’ report. Sarah wanted to get to the truth of what really happened to Bilge, rather than focusing on the impact, so she played the part of investigator and led the audience through the research we were doing around the mystery. Megan was more concerned about the pacing, so we made sure to include action shots at appropriate moments.

Creating this short film has taught us about teamwork, camerawork, and the effort that goes into making a film.

What Went Well: We were able to balance everyone’s ideas fairly through frequent discussions.

Even Better If: Next time, we would spend longer in the editing stage, to make sure that our final product is fully cohesive in tone.

We hope you enjoy our exploration of the greatest mystery our school has ever known.

‘ ‘ ‘ **click play to continue** ’ ’ ’

Fading in from black, a black-and-white shot of the school door, which slowly pans out to show the rest of the school as MARTHA begins speaking.

MARTHA (VOICEOVER)

In 1964, a man named Francis Bilge opened the doors of his home on Darmire Road, Violethill, to the children of the local area. His former students claim that he had some prior teaching experience, though we could find no records of this held in the council archives. In fact, there are no records of anything to do with the man... It’s almost as if he has been erased...

The video takes on color, the sounds of traffic becoming louder. A very modern-looking car zooms past the school, and MEGAN, a brown-haired girl about seventeen years old, walks into frame, followed by SARAH, a girl with short black hair around

the same age. They stop in the middle, and MEGAN stares into the camera.

MEGAN

Here we stand today, students of what was once Bilge's school, and we barely know a thing about him, including why he stepped down as headmaster, or what became of him after leaving Hughes High. Journey with us today as we try to uncover the truth behind Francis Bilge's disappearance.

The camera shakes slightly as its holder, MARTHA, nods at MEGAN, who then spreads her arms wide before the school. SARAH takes a step forward, and the camera zooms in on her face –

SARAH

Whatever that may be.

*Fade to black, then to a porch door, on which SARAH knocks.
Cut to –*

OLD WOMAN

He was a good teacher, all things considered. A bit gruff, but, very memorable. Had all sorts of little tricks to help us learn.

A banner appears at the bottom of the screen: MIRIAM, seventy, former student of Francis Bilge.

SARAH (OFF-SCREEN)

And, did you ever notice anything strange about him?

MIRIAM

Well, he kept to himself, that's for sure. Never knew a thing about him. Though, there was one thing...

The image stills, and SARAH's voice can be heard.

SARAH

We talked to several of Bilge's students, and they all said similar things about his teaching style, personality, and one other thing...

We see different people, all in their seventies or older, with their names and the note that they were former students of Bilge's appearing on banners as they spoke.

GEORGE

He was my first teacher. Because of his lessons, I was able to get into a proper high school.

LOUIS

Even though I was a weird kid, didn't exactly fit into the norms, he never made me feel like an outsider. That was something I didn't get from many other teachers.

KELLY

It was harder for girls back then in areas like this to get a proper education. He didn't just teach me the basics—he taught proper algebra, history with real sources, the works. I'd never have been able to go to university if it weren't for him. Not that he was there to support me through, by that time...

MIRIAM

Something I'll always remember...

GEORGE

But, there was that one thing...

LOUIS

The thing none of us really brought up, even though we all knew it...

KELLY

I always wondered if he ever worked things out with that man.

SARAH (OFF-SCREEN)

What do you mean? What man?

KELLY

Well, there was this man who we'd sometimes see around his house, or talking to him in the garden. Well-dressed fellow.

GEORGE

I saw them together a lot.

LOUIS

They seemed real close, if you know what I mean... Though, I think they fought a lot. I could often hear them when I stopped by to deliver homework, arguing, all hushed and quiet, even when there was no-one else there. I always did wonder, you know, if we were outsiders in the same way. Their relationship certainly seemed... well...

GEORGE

Definitely a homo. Him and that other bloke.

SARAH

Do you know where we could find that other man now?

MIRIAM

Of course! He was on the local council at the time, half the town knew him—a Harry something. Harold Marsh, maybe? Something like that. The town hall's probably got a picture of him, stuffed in one of those dreary offices, or at least some information about him, locked in a filing cabinet somewhere. I'm sure they'll tell you all about him if you ask. Good luck, dearies—and, do tell Francis I asked after him if you find him, won't you? I don't know where I'd be without his lessons.

The camera zooms out to show several diplomas hanging behind Miriam's head, as well as an educator's license.

SARAH

Of course we will.

MEGAN and SARAH walk along a residential street.

MEGAN

Of course, the odds of finding Francis Bilge after all this time seem slim, but we're determined to give it a go. Armed with our first real lead, we're heading to the archives at City Hall for any information about our first headmaster's alleged paramour.

Cut to: City Hall—it's an ugly yellow building with modern grey automatic doors. MEGAN tries to push one of them, then looks embarrassed while she waits for it to open before confidently striding through. Inside —

MEGAN

Here we are, City Hall, home to records of death, birth, marriage, arrests, and so much more. We have already gone through the publicly available parts of the archives, looking for anything to do with Francis Bilge —

Cut to: SARAH, knelt by a low table, furiously flipping through piles and piles of paper. Images of increasing mounds of records piling up around her are superimposed onto one another, the old one fading out just as yet another stack of papers appears by her head. Dramatic classical music builds, and, at the crescendo—cuts back to City Hall, no music.

MEGAN

But, we were unsuccessful.

SARAH

However, last time, we were only looking for mentions of Bilge. Now, we have a new name to try.

Messy footage with intense background fuzz. SARAH's question can barely be made out as she speaks to the figure behind the desk—a purple-haired lanky person with a name-badge pinned to their button-down. 'dEBS'.

SARAH

Hey, we're here for information for a student film project—can you give us any information on a former councilman, Harold Marshal?

DEBS

Uh, yeah, I remember hearing about him from some of the councillors. There's some public records about him—file room's downstairs, first door on your left. Though actually, if you don't mind coming back on Thursday, he —

Suddenly, the video cuts. When it returns, the audio is cleaner, and the camera is closer to DEBS.

DEBS

(a bit forced)

You are in luck! Harry Marshal, the man you seek, is in this very building today!

MARTHA

(from behind the camera, also forced)

Oh wow, it must be fate! Where can we find him?

Cut to: MEGAN, looking serious as she checks around her to make sure it's only her, SARAH, and MARTHA, before sneaking exaggeratedly up to a nondescript door. Straightening, she knocks.

A VOICE FROM WITHIN

Come in.

They do. Inside is a man in a tweed suit, tidying up an office —he is old, though doesn't appear old enough to have been a councilman in the 1960s. Despite this, his lanyard reads 'HAROLD MARSHAL'. He glances towards the girls.

HARRY MARSHAL

Ah, you must be the students Debs told me about. I understand you want to know more about my time in the council? It's wonderful to see you young 'uns taking an interest in local politics and history.

He smiles, perching on the edge of the table and leaning back.

HARRY MARSHAL

So, what did you want to ask me?

MEGAN

Well actually, we wanted to ask about a man you knew, back in the 60s. Does the name 'Francis Bilge' mean anything to you?

HARRY looks wistful for a moment, and then freezes. His eyes seem cold as he answers.

HARRY MARSHAL

I think you'd better leave.

The camera looks between SARAH and MEGAN's confused faces then back at HARRY.

SARAH

We didn't mean to offend, we were just curious –

HARRY MARSHAL

(almost shouting)

LEAVE! I have... things to attend to. If you'll excuse me.

He quickly shepherds the trio out of the room, slamming the door. The camera focuses on that closed door, and we hear a cross between a scream and a sob before the screen fades to black. When we fade in again, we see MEGAN and SARAH, on a street.

MEGAN

After that strange reaction, we knew we were on the right track. We –

There is a cough from behind her.

MEGAN

– Sarah read through Marshal's public records from City Hall, but what she found didn't help much.

As SARAH speaks, various scans of documents like marriage licenses and property records appear on screen.

SARAH

While Bilge likely never married, the same could not be said of Marshal, who married a woman named Esther in the 1980s, though they didn't live together for long. They divorced the day after same-sex marriage was legalized, and she remarried to a woman named Joan the following year. Considering the students' stories, is it possible that Esther and Harold were mutual beards, pretending to be straight through marriage in order to hide their sexuality? With this in mind, it's possible that –

SARAH looks at MEGAN, who gives her an encouraging nod. There's a sigh from behind the camera before SARAH continues –

Marshal and Bilge were lovers, and Bilge's disappearance was something more sinister than a man trying to escape from the public eye. Could it have been a lover's spat with a horrible ending? Is it possible that we are about to uncover a decades-old murder? Despite the lack of fresh leads, we are more determined than ever to uncover the truth.

MEGAN

We're journeying to the city library in order to read old transcripts of council meetings. Could Bilge's disappearance be related to a dispute over something Marshal did in an official capacity? One thing is certain: we're onto something, something big. And we can't stop now.

Cut to SARAH flicking through pieces of paper with MEGAN leaning close by. The camera lens is adjusted, minutely, again and again, almost bored. MEGAN notices.

MEGAN,

(hushed but desperate)

Martha, do something!

Once again, the screen shows superimposed clips of SARAH slogging through mounds of research, against a classical music score. Suddenly, this jolts to a stop –

SARAH

I've found something!

The camera and MEGAN crowd around to see the papers SARAH is holding -- transcripts of a council meeting from 1978.

SARAH

I've found a few transcripts where Bilge and Marshal appear together--after the council gets wind of the school and starts to take it seriously, they talk about incorporating it into the city properly. Making it a public institution. Marshal argues it's good because the school will get more funding, but Bilge always sounds... angry. Like he's having something taken away.

But, listen to this bit:

MARSHAL: I'm only doing what's best for you.

BILGE: You don't get to decide what's best for me! You don't know me, Harry.

MARSHAL: Of course I know you, and I know that with time, you'll come around. But this school needs federal funding, and it needs it now. We can't wait for you to come around--just skip the theatrics and do what's right for your school.

BILGE: You dare make those kinds of assumptions about me and mine? Go ruin some other institution--take over another school. Build a new one if you have to, just, stay away from mine. This isn't what I want. You don't know me as well as you think you do.

MARSHAL: Frankie –

BILGE: Don't. Just... don't. The day the government gets its grubby hands on my school is the last day I'm ever seen in this town.

MEGAN

That... that sounds like he followed through on his promise. Maybe he really did choose to leave. Couldn't bear to see his beloved institution of privacy turned into something so public.

MARTHA

But this way, more kids get to learn from the place he built. And, the headteachers still honor his legacy now—it's not like what he was working for was all swept away.

SARAH

I don't think it's only about that. Back home, our schools are controlled by the government—which is miles better than ones who only let kids in who can pay to go, of course! But, the specific way the system is configured means our teachers and students aren't free. We learn only what the people in power think we should be learning, and behave only the way we are told we must behave. That's not freedom.

MEGAN

So, if Bilge just wanted to be free from surveillance, from judgement, from the law... where would he go? Sarah, did you find anything else?

SARAH

Wait, there's something else... It might be nothing, but, in 1979, when the council was finalising its transfer of power over Hughes, an objector came into the town hall, and was dragged out after he was recognized.

MARTHA (OS)

(from behind the camera)

Wait, I thought the council got involved in the late Sixties?

SARAH

Yeah, that's when they started to take notice of Bilge's little operation, but they were convinced to stay pretty hands-off until around the time the school moved location, in 1975. And it looks like the man who was keeping them away was the same man who confronted the objector in 1979—one Councilman Harold Marshal.

MEGAN

Gasp!

MARTHA

Did you just. Did you just *say the word 'gasp'* –

MEGAN

This is it! This has to mean something! Look at the transcript

–

She snatches a piece of paper away from SARAH, clears her throat, and begins to read.

MEGAN

COUNCILMAN HUGHES: Okay, any final comments on the upcoming school acquisition?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have a comment.

HUGHES: Alright, but, make it quick. Please state your name for the record.

AUDIENCE MEMBER (READING FROM NOTES): My name is Mr. Townsend, and I am a local resident who is thoroughly concerned about this acquisition. This school is currently a bastion of independent learning, unmarred by the fickle whims of the status quo. What that school teaches does not change based on the current administration's beliefs—they teach the truth, whatever that happens to be, and they prepare young people for further education in a way that cannot be wholly entrusted to an increasingly corrupt and deceitful –

COUNCILMAN MARSHAL: Townsend? I know that name –

TOWNSEND:—government, which refuses to prioritize the real and immediate needs of its people, serving themselves and their party above –

MARSHAL: No, I know that voice! Francis Bilge, you have been banned from this hall, you cannot simply don a fake beard and expect us to listen to your unhinged ramblings!

"TOWNSEND":—the constituents they are meant to be serving.

And, it is with this in mind –

MARSHAL: Stop talking, Frankie, you're embarrassing yourself.

"TOWNSEND":—that I strongly oppose the –

MARSHAL: SECURITY!

MARTHA

Woah, that got out of hand.

SARAH

All of Bilge's students said they were close... What happened?
Could this be motive?

MEGAN

Wait, there's more—it looks like the stenographer caught part
of a conversation between Marshal and Bilge, after Bilge was
dragged out of the meeting:

MARSHAL: I can't believe you. And, this disguise, really? I'd
recognize you anywhere, especially with that damn alias. I *know*
you. I know you love that show. What were you going to tell us
your first name was, Charlie?

BILGE: Didn't expect to get that far.

MARSHAL: That's your problem—you never think these things
through. You see yourself as fighting for justice, but you're
really just fighting against progress. You'll see—this'll be
good for the school. Could even be good for you. I can make your
life better, if you let me.

BILGE: This isn't what I want. I won't stand for it.

MARSHAL: Well, you'll have to, because the motion's passing.
Your school's ours, Frankie.

BILGE: Don't call me that. Not anymore.

MARSHAL: Frank —

BILGE: If you do this, don't expect me to just stand here and
watch. I won't let this happen.

MARSHAL: And, when it does?

BILGE: I don't expect to be around to see it.

MARSHAL: Frank —

BILGE: Goodbye, Harry.

MARTHA

Wow.

SARAH

Yeah.

MEGAN

Gay people were even more dramatic in the Seventies...

MARTHA

That's homophobic, Megan.

MEGAN

I'm a lesbian, Martha.

MARTHA

Oh. Makes sense.

MEGAN

What?

MARTHA

All those carabinieri you wear. I did wonder—good for you!

SARAH

Anyway, as touching as all this is, it sounds like we have a new lead.

MEGAN

What do you mean?

SARAH

Look there, at the top of the page—it gives descriptions of the people talking. And it says that our 'Charlie Townsend' had a bag with a pizza box sticking out of it. Look at the brand.

MEGAN

Volare. They're on the high street—let's move.

The girls are now entering Volare, an Italian restaurant. The sign above the door reads, "Proudly serving Violethill since 1964". MEGAN strides confidently up to the counter.

MEGAN

Hello, we're here looking for someone. Might've been a regular, a while back. Does the name 'Bilge' mean anything to you?

WOMAN BEHIND THE COUNTER

Uh, no, but I haven't been here as long as my grandmother—let me get her for you.

She leaves, returning with an old lady, at least in her eighties.

VALENTINA

Hello, I'm Valentina, I've been here since this place first opened. Who are you looking for, lovelies?

MEGAN

Francis Bilge. It's for a school project.

VALENTINA

Oh, how wonderful! But I'm afraid I can't help you—no Bilge. I'd know.

MEGAN

That's a shame. Thanks anyway.

SARAH

Wait, I've got another idea—Valentina, how about a Charles Townsend?

VALENTINA

Oh, yes, Charles! We get orders for him all the time. Delivers out to the middle of the woods. Impossible to get to, but my girls always find a way. No idea what he looks like, though.

SARAH

That's alright, you've been a big help. I don't suppose someone could show us where exactly he can be found?

Cut to: SARAH and MEGAN are trailing through the woods, their clothes dirty and covered in twigs.

MEGAN

I. Regret. Everything.

SARAH

Aren't you excited? We must be close... There, just up ahead!

MEGAN

Yep, that sure is a creepy cabin.

SARAH

It's exactly where the woman said it was. This is it, I can feel it!

The camera swivels to focus on her.

SARAH

The electricity, running through my veins... We're finally going to find out the truth. He really might still be alive...

She finishes the hike up the door and raises her fist, ready to knock.

SARAH

You ready?

MEGAN nods, as does the camera.

SARAH

Then here. We. G—

There's a small cut, probably just a glitch, and the camera swivels to show an OLD MAN, brandishing a rifle.

MAN

What are you doing here?? Damn kids—get off my property!!

SARAH

Wait, are you—Ahh!

The MAN shoots once, into the air, then levels the gun at SARAH.

MAN
I SAID, GET!

The girls shriek and start running. The camera drops, bumpily filming the forest floor, and the students' laboured breathing is loud and clear as they race away from the cabin. Finally, some safe distance away, they stop and catch their breaths.

MEGAN
Could that have been him? Really, actually him?

MARTHA
No! You idiots, that was some wacko who was probably going to kill us! I don't care how engrossed you are in this mystery-theater club isn't worth dying for! We don't even get a damn credit!

SARAH
I don't care. I have to know! Aren't you curious? Aren't you excited? We are on the verge of uncovering something big!

MEGAN
Martha's right, Sarah. Recent experiences have taught me to be more cautious-the only thing we're on the verge of is being the subjects of our own missing person's documentary. I've had enough of that for one lifetime. Come on, let's go back.

SARAH
I'm sorry, I didn't think... You shouldn't have to risk yourselves just to satisfy my curiosity. You're right-the tale of Francis Bilge ends here.

The camera fades out as the girls start walking back. The screen stays back for a few moments, then...

SARAH
(whispering)
Okay, it's late now, and it's just me. If I have to do this on my own, I will.

The camera swings to show the street ahead as SARAH walks. It's dark out, and she's wearing all black. She reaches the edge of the forest, and turns the camera back around to face herself.

SARAH
Whatever the cost.

For a while, she's just picking her way through the leaves. It's calm at night. Peaceful. Suddenly, she lets out a cry—the camera turns to show her leg tangled around some barbed wire.

SARAH
Shit, shit!

She struggles to pull it off, scraping her hands, until the sound of footsteps makes her stop.

OLD MAN
So, you didn't listen.

The camera cuts to SARAH and the MAN sitting inside a log cabin, an empty box from Volare sitting by the lit fireplace.

MAN
Yes, I am Francis Bilge. I retired quietly many years ago to this little spot of land. It's technically not under any council, and so I can do what I like here. This is my place. I miss the children, shaping young minds, but leaving was necessary—I had to escape, before it became impossible. You can't just hide from the world anymore. You can't be alone.

SARAH
Most people don't want to be alone.

BILGE
Better than being trapped, believe me. But I've had a good life—I carve bug hotels now.

SARAH
Huh.

BILGE

What, there's something wrong with bug hotels? You have a problem with a bug the size of your pinkie nail?

SARAH

No, no, of course not! I'm not feuding with bugs. I just thought, I don't know... If you've spent all this time away from people, you might be starting to miss the company.

BILGE

Sometimes.

SARAH

You know, your school still honors your legacy. There's over a thousand students now, and they're taught the importance of privacy and anonymity—the headteachers set an example. There aren't even any photos of the current head! I've never even seen her, only heard her voice. The school never moved on, Mr. Bilge—it's still very much yours.

BILGE

Thank you, Sarah. If you hadn't come here tonight, I never would have known all the good that managed to survive.

The video fades to be the walk back down the forest, and towards the school, as BILGE's voice continues over the top.

BILGE

My goal when I started teaching the local children was simple: provide the education they just weren't getting anywhere else. I was filling a niche, that's all. But, as the years went by, I quickly realized that I had become something more for these children—a place of refuge from a propagandized world. I wasn't just teaching them their letters and numbers; I was teaching them how to be themselves, individuals, without complying to the rules. I was teaching them how to be free.

I saw the way such tight documentation meant risk. It meant kids who just wanted to learn could be identified and ripped

away because some politician decided they shouldn't be there; meant people who wanted to live as themselves had a paper trail to their former lives; meant women couldn't escape abusive situations. People knew too much about other people, could keep track... It's dangerous. We need to learn how to help people hide... and how to stay hidden.

Having reached the school, the video fades to an image at the same angle in black-and-white, of the school from decades ago.

Finally, words appear on the screen:

The search for Francis Bilge is over.

We will continue his legacy by making sure that this film is never seen by the public. This way, he can remain, forever,

Hidden.

' ' ' click restart to watch again' ' '

As the screen faded to black, Cwej put his hands together and started clapping. "Woo, yeah, brilliant documentary! Well done! Though, Sang Mi," he said, turning to the girl sitting on the sofa next to him, popcorn bowl in hand, "You may be able to fool other people, but you can't fool me. I know you too well by now."

Sang Mi put on her most innocent face, toying with an unpopped kernel absent-mindedly as she answered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you were in real danger, I know you would have told me. And you definitely would have told him about the impact he had on his students, just like you promised, if that had been the real Bilge. Besides, your acting was good, but the editing was far from perfect—it couldn't hide the glitches of cut footage. What really happened when you went into that cabin?" Cwej's voice was stern; it was his best teacher's voice. He was rather proud of it, and, after spending so much effort perfecting it, he was a little annoyed at the idea that he was unlikely to ever need it again.

Sang Mi sighed, but relented. "Fiiiiinneee. Megan said the truth was too boring, so we roped Martha's grandpa into playing Bilge. If you want to see what we found, the raw footage is there if you scroll through the drive—there was nothing. Totally empty, save for that pizza box, and an old encyclopedia. Probably just a squatter." Her words came too fast, and her shrug was a little too practised. Cwej told her as much.

"Come on. You don't really buy that. The girl who saw the same cat years apart and dropped everything to go chasing after it would never accept that it was 'just a squatter'. What about the alias

used to order the pizzas being the same one Francis Bilge used in that town hall? How would a squatter have known that?”

“Okay, yes, it is bothering me, but there’s nothing more I can do. We’re leaving too soon to keep investigating—and besides, if this has taught me anything, it’s that some stones are best left unturned.” She stood up, looking around at the few things she’d brought with her from Gongen, all scattered around. “I’d better pack. Goodnight, Chris.”

“Wait, Sang Mi?”

She stopped, turning. “Yeah?”

“Who did you get to play the Councilman?”

She frowned. “Marshal? No one, that bit was real—well, he wasn’t ‘conveniently on site’, we had to wait a couple days, but, that really was him. Why?”

Cwej stared at her, hard, like he was trying to see through her lies. There weren’t any. He shook his head. “Nothing, nevermind. Go, get some sleep.”

Even after she’d left the room, Cwej still couldn’t stop thinking about the mystery of Francis Bilge. It just didn’t make any sense—he could almost buy into the conspiracy theories that he’d been murdered by his lover in a fit of passion, or taken out by Councilman Hughes so the council could take over his school once and for all... but no matter what he came up with, none of it could explain how a man who was at the very least in his thirties, likely older, still looked middle-aged nearly fifty years later. Like a dog with a bone, he couldn’t let it go—determined, almost shaking with anticipation, he played the raw footage, scanning for any possible clue.

It was all like Sang Mi said. The girls had entered the cabin to find nothing more than a pizza box and a book. No man. No clues. Nothing. Wait —
“Is that...”

Cwej squinted at the book on the screen. It was an old, leatherbound thing, cracked and worn, but the title was just about visible. He should have noticed. He should have remembered...

Bilge’s Encyclopedia of the Universe. Known by every universal traveller, it contained information on anything and everything the universe had to offer, fitting an impossible amount of information into what was surely a limited-space hologrammic book. The handy guide to everywhere... and no one knew where it came from.

He’d always wondered if he had an entry.

Cwej closed the computer and looked back towards the stairs towards where Sang Mi must by now be asleep, and then towards the door.

The choice was easy.

He slipped out of the rented house and towards the forest, burdened by only a little guilt at not involving his travelling companion. His heart hammered out a rhythm too fast to count. He picked

his way through the pathless woods—he remembered the direction the students had taken well, as it was shown in the documentary several times—and soon arrived at the cabin.

This was alien. This was time-travel. This was big, and here he was, alone and unarmed with enough adrenaline coursing through his system to make him feel every soft whisper of wind like a slice across his cheek, every twig like a sword and every sound, every sound...

The forest was different at night.

Sang Mi hadn't found anything, but she hadn't been here when it was like *this*. In the dark, no one could see you move. In the dark, cold, dead of night, no one save the birds and the insects were there to hear. In the dark...

It didn't matter. If Bilge showed himself, it would only be to Chris Cwej, and no one else would know. He could stay invisible, if he chose. And Cwej would be happy, if only he knew the truth, just for him, a little secret to wrap it all up in a neat little bow and satisfy his curiosity. Curiosity killed the cat, not the Cwej. Curiosity kills those who need to stay hidden.

He couldn't stop himself. Hand on the door now, he pushed, hard. No need to knock—there would have been no answer. Not here. Too dangerous.

Cwej slammed his body against the door until it gave, and stepped inside.

And, as to what he found there? That's anyone's guess. Some things we aren't meant to know. For safety, for privacy, for the sake of a quiet life, a little piece of freedom. Some things are best kept hidden.

One thing that we can know is that, when Cwej got back to the house that night, he picked up a red pen. On the top right-hand corner of the theater club final project cover letter, he wrote down a letter, wrapped in a loose circle.

This truth does not have to remain hidden: Sang Mi, Megan, and Martha's project received a very well-deserved 'A'.

* * *

Lance had been perching on the countertop during much of Cwej's story. They looked down at the piece of paper Cwej had handed them: it was the cover letter of the project, detailing the reasons the students had chosen to delve into the history of their school's elusive founder. They handed it back to Cwej, then smiled.

"Good story. Shame you won't tell me what you really saw in that cabin, though."

"Yeah, I've been wondering that too." Sang Mi narrowed her eyes at Cwej, who floundered under the glare.

"I was trying to create mystique! Some questions aren't meant to be answered. So, was it good enough to pay for our snacks?"

Lance laughed. “Well, it better be, considering you’ve already eaten most of them. Though, before you get back to, well, wherever it is you’re going, I was wondering something.”

“Oh?”

“What were you two doing at that school, anyway?”

Cwej looked at Sang Mi, and then back at the cashier. “That’s a long story. And, I think the cost of telling it would be more inventory than your shop holds.”

Lance smirked. “Alright, keep your secrets. Thanks for making my day a little more interesting.”

“Any time,” Cwej said, and he and Sang Mi made their way back to the car. They had many miles of humdrum, identical stretches of road to go, but they were both in slightly higher spirits. At least today, even if only for a few minutes, got to be a little different. □

A Banquet for Beasts

By James Wylder

She'd literally been in a car crash, and fought a giant vampire with sword in hand, but no; this was the thing that had her so scared her legs were trembling. This. Her mom would be laughing at her.

"Oh, come on, just get on the boat."

She shook her head, rapidly. "No thank you. I mean, people used to go on boats, but Blackbeard was a pirate then!"

Chris sighed. "People used boats long after Blackbeard died."

"Not on Gongen!"

"What, are there no oceans or lakes on Gongen—oh." Suddenly Chris got it, and his demeanor softened. "You really haven't been on a boat before, have you? Sorry, I don't know, I just sort of assumed."

She squinted. "Is it safe, like, you can't see the bottom of the water, and what if I fall off?"

"You can just swim to shore!" Chris said cheerily. Then the next thought hit him. "You uh, *can* swim right?"

She shook her head rapidly a second time.

"Oh. Really? They don't teach you that at school?"

"Where do you think my family would go to swim? The desert? Do you know how expensive a swimming pool is on a desert planet?"

"There's an artificial beach, right? Don't you take school trips there?"

She held a look at him.

"Right, okay. Well with the life vest, you'll float on top of the water if you fall off, and it's a sturdy boat! I inspected it myself." He sighed. "Wish I could have grabbed the *Vicinity II*."

She put a foot out, and touched it on the hull of the boat.

It jiggled slightly and she immediately pulled back. "I'm telling you Chris, this amount of water is not normal. Humans were not meant to be on boats; they should be in their natural habitats—big glass domes."

Chris looked over the side of the boat and watched the fishes swimming around below them. "If you get in the boat you can pick dinner tonight, anything you want." He turned his eyes back to her; she was clearly chewing on that.

"...Even cheonggukjang jjigae?"

He would simply have to accept this loss. “Even cheonggukjang jjigae.” He didn’t quite hide his dreariness at the idea, or his queasiness just thinking of its pungent aroma, but his willingness to go that far despite all that seemed to sell her on getting past her own discomfort. She reached her foot out, pulled it back. Reached out, pulled back, and then finally set it in the boat, which wobbled, and caused her to wobble too.

She yelped as she lost her balance, and Chris was quick to catch her, helping her down onto the seat on the rowboat. She clutched the sides of the boat cautiously and looked over the edge into the water. “And you’re sure it’s safe?”

He unmoored the boat and pushed off. “We’ll be fine.”

They started rowing. Chris felt his worries slide away, the calming waters and the gentle sunlight letting him feel a peace he hadn’t felt in ages, while Sang Mi repeatedly grabbed a hold of things, and whispered a long prayer apologizing for everything she had done wrong in the last few months.

Eventually, she calmed down (a bit) and while still tense, was able to look around. “So... The Beast of Busco? From the picture in the book, it just looks like a big turtle.”

“That’s ‘cause it’s a big turtle.”

Sang Mi nodded slowly, then caught herself on the side of the boat again. “I know we’re looking for aliens and cryptids and mysteries, but what if it’s like... just a big turtle?”

Chris shrugged. “What’s the biggest turtle you’ve ever seen?”

“...Size of a pie plate at the pet shop.”

“This would be a lot bigger, so at the very least, we’ll be seeing something new.”

“Honestly, this is something new enough. I never thought I’d be on a boat.”

His smile was as gentle as the sunlight. “So not so bad?”

“No so bad,” she agreed.

The sun got lower, until it was a golden-orange crest on the horizon. At that point, Sang Mi had actually gotten calm, and had gotten comfortable enough she was letting her fingertips trace the water’s surface.

That was when they saw it.

At first, it was a small stream of bubbles. Then the water rippled, and then a head poked out of the water, along with the top of a huge shell. It was indeed a very large snapping turtle. Though perhaps not exactly one, its features were a little more... prehistoric, perhaps?

Sang Mi looked over at Chris, her face glowing with an open-mouthed smile. He returned it. It was indeed wonderful. Neither spoke, for fear of disturbing it. It was good enough just to see it. It lifted its jaw up and sniffed the air.

Then the noise came.

The pair looked over—coming towards the lake was a black helicopter. Sang Mi pulled up her binoculars, and tried to focus in the dusk.

“...E... D.E.M. Oh damn it—Chris, it’s those guys who did the child kidnapping in Violethill?”

Cursing, Chris stood up, unbalancing the boat and causing Sang Mi to curl up clutching the bench, waving his arms and yelling: “Go back under water! Shoo! Shoo!”

He pulled a pair of sunglasses out of his pocket, and hurled them into the water with a plop, “SHOO!”

The Beast was spooked, and went under the water, and they both deflated in relief. Which was short lived, as things began to drop out of the helicopter into the water.

Things that exploded.

They hit the surface with a splash, then sank for just long enough it seemed like nothing would happen. But then huge bursts came up in columns as they exploded under the surface, sending waves out in all directions. The boat rolled and Sang Mi yelped as she was thrown overboard. Chris held on, but this wasn’t as useful as he hoped as the boat kept rolling and capsized, his head bobbing up above the water into the overturned hull.

He took a deep breath, and swam down and out from under the boat, rising to the surface. He scanned the water, seeing Sang Mi floating safely (if panicked) in her life-vest, and on the shore a group of black SUVs and a huge flatbed truck. The SUVs were pulling on metal cords that sank into the water, which quickly turned into a net holding a huge snapping turtle, crying out in pain. It thrashed against the net, trying to break free, bellowing to the sky as armed E.D.E.M agents shot it over and over with tranquilizers, the SUVs dragging it up the ramp on to the truck as it screamed.

“We have to help it!” Sang Mi yelled, trying to figure out how to swim towards it in real time.

Chris gritted his teeth. “We will. I promise.”

* * *

Getting to shore was difficult, but worse: it was time-consuming. By the time they’d reached land, they were both exhausted, soaked, and their targets had long since driven away. If time weren’t an issue, they’d have stopped for the evening right then and there. But instead, they changed into new clothes quickly in the Honda, and Chris gave Sang Mi an important job.

“You’re still good with computers, right? You can still do hacking and—” he wagged his fingers over her laptop, “—fancy tech stuff?”

She nodded. “I mean, I didn’t lose the ability. The operating systems are different here, but that doesn’t stop me from using my ultimate skill.”

Chris furrowed his brow. “Okay. Cause we need to find where they took Oscar.”

“Oscar?”

“The local nickname for the creature.”

She nodded, and instead of opening her laptop pulled her phone out, searched for a few things, then pulled up a phone number, and called.

“Hello, Mr. Johnson? Haha, yes. This is Grace from tech support, it looks like we’ve seen some unusual activity from your account. I’d like to take a look if you don’t mind. It’s nice to talk to someone with such a strong voice on these calls, it’s really—oh you run marathons? I might have guessed you were muscular. Could I get your num—I mean your password, haha, so I can check the issue on my end?”

She said it all with a completely emotionless expression.

“Well, I guess that’s hacking,” Chris mumbled.

* * *

They followed the address Sang Mi had gotten, and as she read internal emails from E.D.E.M out loud, they were both intrigued by the idea that there was a secret meeting taking place where they were going to, and also annoyed at the sheer ineptitude of the people writing the emails.

“A lot of these read like a guy who won’t leave you alone after you told him to go away,” Sang Mi said.

“Yeah, that’s their target recruitment demographic,” Cwej said unironically.

“I sort of assumed they’d be like... smarter? Is that rude? Elitist?”

Chris shook his head as he squeaked a tight turn. “Nah. You just feel like bad guys should have an evil plan that makes sense. I get that. It’s nice to believe, that there’s some sort of hidden meaning to it all. But a lot of the time, bad guys aren’t motivated by brilliance. They’re boring bullies who just like being bullies.”

Sang Mi frowned, and looked out the window at the darkening sky. “That’s disappointing.”

“Say more.”

“It... makes the world feel hollow?”

Chris took one hand off the wheel and put it on her shoulder, which he was clearly surprised he had done and caused the car to do a little squiggle on the road. “Someone else’s life feeling hollow doesn’t mean yours is.”

She smiled, and then looked down at her phone. “Thanks Ch—WAIT TURN RIGHT.”

* * *

They drove past their destination, and parked in a field behind some trees. They had seen what it was, and while they had been prepared for most things, they had assumed they had been prepared for anything, but they had not in fact been prepared for ‘generic Italian restaurant’. They trudged

through the underbrush, and poked their heads out, Sang Mi using her binoculars to read out the 'restaurant closed for special event' sign.

"I can see some of the guests going in. Maybe my phone can recognize them?" She awkwardly zoomed in and snapped a picture. "Maurice Gibbons, owner of... child sweatshops in three countries? What the heck?"

Chris rubbed his nose. "Well, if this is what it looks like, and they're taking Oscar into a restaurant kitchen..."

Sang Mi felt her whole body go cold. "We have to rescue him!"

"We will. I promise. Who else do you see?"

She snapped another picture, and waited a moment. "Search says... Janette Coolidge. Escaped conviction for poisoning two-thousand of her workers through unsafe practices that resulted in cancer ... are all of them like this?"

"Yeah," Chris said. "That's the clientele here. Beasts, all of them."

Sang Mi nodded. "So how do we want to play this, I mean we can't just walk in?"

"Oh, we can just walk in, just not through the front. There was a convenience store down the road, right?"

Sang Mi's eyes lit up. "Oh, I get you."

* * *

Manuel wiped his hands off and went to the back door where the knocking had not let up. He swung it open. "Yeah?"

There was a tall white man and an Asian teenage girl there, each carrying cases of cheap Seven Veils Beer stacked on each other.

"Where should we put it?" asked the man.

"We weren't expecting any delivery?"

The man sighed. "Look I can show you the order on my phone, it's not my problem what you do with it."

Manuel hesitated, and then heard Mr. Mitchell yell for him to get back to prepping the salads. Whatever, he wasn't being paid enough to figure this out. "Whatever, look, just uh, put 'em in the storage room, it's down the hall to the left, says *storage room* on the door."

"Right, got it," he put his foot in the door to keep it open. "Come on then," he said to the girl, who shuffled along behind him.

Manuel went back to the kitchen, and got back to salad prep, trying to ignore the giant turtle in the middle of the room. Nina nudged him. “Hey, uh, do you know what’s up with the turtle? They’re not *usually* that big, right?”

The turtle looked at them through the cage, the muzzle around its mouth straining for a moment as if it wanted to answer.

“Just ignore it, that’s part of the job.”

“What if it’s like, endangered? Won’t we get in trouble?”

He went over and grabbed another bag of lettuce, “We’re already in trouble or we wouldn’t be working here.”

“But—”

“HEY,” the other white man, the balding one in the tuxedo at the back, yelled from his folding chair. “Could you keep it down, I’m trying to get ready back here.”

They shut up and worked in silence.

“God, seven billionaires in the audience and they can’t even give me a goddamn green room...”

He leaned back, shaking his head.

“Hey, sweet cheeks, yeah, you, by the ugly guy. Why don’t you come back here and gimme a kiss?”

Nina ignored him.

“I’m talking to you sweetheart. I was on the billboard charts, you know.” He patted his lap. “Come on, take a break.”

Nina’s lip was trembling. Manuel tried to decide what he should do. How bad did he want this job? He knew that hesitating here made him a coward. But he’d been through worse.

“HEY. You can’t talk to her that way!” the girl who’d come in earlier said, storming up to Mr. Tuxedo.

He stood up. “Who the hell are you?”

She poked him in the chest. “I’m the person telling you to leave her alone.”

He scowled. “I’m getting Gerry—you’re all going to be fired; you don’t get to disrespect me like this.” He threw his arms out. “I was on the Billboard charts! Who do you think you are!?”

“You can’t talk to her that way!” the blond man said as he stormed out from the back.”

“People keep saying that but I sure can, I can say whatever I want.”

“I have no idea who you are,” the girl said, blandly.

He moved to shove her, and the blond man instinctively clocked him in the jaw. He tumbled over and hit the tiled floor.

All work stopped. All eyes turned to the scene.

“Uhhh,” the girl said.

Manuel rushed to the man, checking his pulse. He was out cold, but he’d be fine. He looked up at the pair of interlopers from where he was squatted over the now unconscious MC. “What the hell are we supposed to do, he’s supposed to go out there in five minutes introducing the main dish.” He pointed at the turtle.

“There’s Oscar!” the girl said. “Well, that’s a mystery solved.”

“Main dish isn’t good,” the blond man mumbled.

Manuel looked around, “Anyone ever been on stage? Know how to sing?”

The girl looked at the man, who shrugged, and she turned back to him unsure. “I’ve done standup comedy—oh, and I was in a TV show once, but that’s...”

“Good enough. Nina, get her into one of the tuxes in the back.”

“But—” the girl and man said in unison.

“NO BUTS, you’re on as soon as you’re dressed.” He picked the script up off the floor and shoved it into her hands. “Get reading.”

* * *

Sang Mi stumbled out, then forced herself into a faux-confident stride. The tux didn’t fit, but it had been pinned so that it looked like it was hand tailored. That didn’t make it comfortable. She’d barely had time to look at the script, so she’d be winging most of this.

She looked at Oscar, who looked back at her with what she was probably projecting was a sad hope.

“Don’t worry lil guy, we’ll get you out of here,” she whispered to him, before raising her microphone, and as the band started to play strode up to the microphone smiling and waving like she was supposed to be there.

“How are we doing tonight?” There was applause. People always applauded when you asked that, like clapping was words. “Wonderful, wonderful. Great to be here in beautiful Churubusco Indiana. Uh,” she pulled the microphone off the stand, and wandered around the front, gesturing finally at a group of men at a table. “And where are you folks visiting from this evening?”

“Florida!” one yelled.

“Idaho!” another chimed in.

“I’m from here...” a third said meekly.

She shrugged. “Wow, travelled a long way.” That got a laugh, somehow. “So, what do you boys do?”

“We’re uh, E.D.E.M agents,” one said.

“Well, I knew that,” she said, as convincingly as she could manage under the circumstances. “Have any hobbies?”

“Uhhh...”

She moved on. “And I hear we have some very special guests this evening!” She scanned the room looking for the people who thought they were special. “Ah, there we go, round of applause please! We’re so honored you’re here!” *Whoever you are!*

A man and woman, the man with the air of a politician, stood up and waved, and a group of other men at a table stood but didn’t wave and looked a little more awkward about the whole thing.

“Lovely, lovely. I’m your host tonight, Sang Mi Jhe. You might know me from uh... stuff.” She was running out of steam and so was relieved when a voice came in over the intercom. “Everyone rise for the singing of the national anthem.”

“Oh, thank god,” she mumbled, and started right in.

*“Glory to Gongen, you shall live forever
your people who love you will stand by your side
to live and to serve you, to fight and defend you,
through war and through peace we will stand tall with pride!
Forever live Shochol!
Long live the Gongen people!
We’ll beat the Earthers back once and for all
From Phobos to Deimos shining bright
to Olympus Mons at its proud height
Gongen forever, we fight for you!”*

Everyone expected her to stop, like it was a gag, but she was getting really into it and barreled right into the next verse.

* * *

They shoved Sang Mi out on stage, and as soon as he’d waved her off and given her a double thumbs up as she and Oscar, now laying tied to a giant silver platter, disappeared past the curtain, Chris pushed past the staff, opening door after door.

“Hey, you can’t do that!” Manuel said, tailing him.

He shoved another door open. “Looks like I can.”

“No, you don’t understand—”

He tried the next door. It didn’t open. “Ah, there we go. That’s what I’m looking for.” He squatted down and inspected the lock. “You know, normally I’d just break this, but my friend there taught me a special technique, an original from the hacker Kalingkata.” He winked, and reached into his pocket and pulled out... a screwdriver.

He then proceeded to unscrew the lock mechanism from the door.

Manuel was so surprised he just stood there, blinking away.

The door opened up, and from rows of cages and tanks, animals looked up at them—strange herd animals the color of red sand called Morning Star Cows—a singular detached llama foot that nonetheless turned to face them—blue animals called caffalumps, with too many legs, looking something like a camel mixed with an elephant—a singular timefish in a tank—a two-headed purple lizard with gills—even a beautiful half-humanoid being with long brown hair, wearing a sports-bra; its bottom half was made of a serpent’s tail and... a lot of dog heads?

Then from the back, a woman called in a faintly French accent from where she was hanging upside down from the ceiling. “Hello there, might I bother you for a rescue? The blood is going to my head.”

* * *

There was faint confused applause after Sang Mi finished the entire Gongen National Anthem.

A voice came over the intercom. “And now for uh... the actual national anthem?”

Sang Mi mumbled a curse and pulled her phone out. She’d have to wing this one.

To her credit, she hit most of the notes.

* * *

Chris rushed forward, and cut the woman down, then got to work severing her bonds. The half-woman half-monster creature watched closely from the cage next to them.

Rubbing her wrists and ankles, the tied-up woman gave him a smile. “Thanks, who knew this one would go so sideways. You’re Cwej, right? I recognize the face from my training.”

He startled, “You do?”

With her hands now free, she pulled a badge from within her bosom. “Odette Caron, from C.R.O.I.X.—that is, C.R.U.X., in English.”

It was such a bizarre occurrence he really had no reason to doubt it. “And why is someone from a French research institute studying alien lifeforms operating in Indiana?”

She gestured at the animals, and the glowering half-woman. “We can’t have private individuals destroying live specimens just for their own, sick amusement. It’s immoral *and* it’s un-scientific. Besides, this is against international law—and interplanetary law as far as we know it. Aliens have threatened to wipe Earth out for less than this.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong. “So, are they really... eating all these creatures?”

She nodded, disgust washing over her face. “It’s barbarism, plain and simple. And E.D.E.M is running it, so no one stops them. When they decided they were going to eat Scylla, no one questioned whether we had to step in.”

Chris looked over at the cage. The half dog-serpent woman waved, menacingly.

“... The man-eating creature from the *Odyssey*? The one that attacked Odysseus and his men?”

“The very same,” Scylla said.

“Ah,” Chris concluded lamely.

A voice called out from the doorway: “Monsters and aliens don’t have rights, and we can eat them if we want to.” He was a surprisingly young man for the authority he clearly carried, with an aura of haughtiness that seemed to radiate out from him, his hair in a lazy buzzcut, his suit expensive but badly tailored. Behind him stood a pair of armed guards in full tactical gear.

Odette’s scowl deepened. “May I introduce Mark Ronaldson, the head of E.D.E.M.”

“DIRECTOR Mark Ronaldson!!!!” he screamed back, stomping his foot. “The *President* gave me a title! It’s my title! I’m important! Use it!” He pulled out his own gun, with its safety.

Chris tried to put on his most diplomatic tone, holding up one hand peacefully.

“Okay, no one has to die here, we can talk—”

“*Shut up!*” Director Ronaldson screamed back. “None of you are walking out of here alive!”

Chris sighed. He had wanted to end this in a way that he could brag to Charles about later, but well, necessity called. He pulled out the screwdriver. “No need for introductions. You should really buy better doors, these things really are embarrassingly cheap,” he sighed again, as he unscrewed the lock mechanism from the cage door. “Not that you’ll probably get a chance to use that advice.”

Scylla pushed the door open, and gave an ear shattering scream as she launched herself at Mark Ronaldson, who didn’t need his introduction anymore as various bits of him splattered the wall. Odette quickly began opening the other cages—the caffalumps reared on their legs out of their cages and charged the wall. The sound of machine-gun fire briefly occurred, only to be silenced with the wet sound of meat being ripped by teeth.

Chris and Odette shared a look of relief, and then a terrible thought struck Chris: Sang Mi was still on-stage.

* * *

“The Beast of Busco, what a wonderful creature. Sure would be a shame to eat it huh?” The audience looked back at her awkwardly. “Wow, tough crowd!” she said; a desperate attempt to recover that worked better than she expected as some people actually laughed. “We’re uh, waiting for our special guest to return before we send Oscar here back to the kitchen—”

“JUST GET ON WITH IT!” the senator called from the back. “They have to butcher and cook the damn thing, he’ll be back by then.”

The sound of screams and machine gun fire echoed from the back.

“...All part of the show folks, all part of the show...” She edged back over to Oscar, and began to hastily start pulling off his restraints and muzzle.

People began to rise from their seats, some beelining for the exit, some coming up towards the stage asking what was going on, to see a manager, or saying she’d never work in this town again, etc. Guards, some in suits, some in tactical gear, also were rushing forward.

She ignored them, and focused on getting Oscar free. The last restraint came loose, and he gave a great bellow of freedom, as through the curtains a half-woman, half-serpent-and-dogs person came barreling through. Hugging Oscar’s side, she gave the monster-woman a thumbs up, and Oscar leaned into her protectively.

The woman seemed to accept this, and moved on quickly—leaping from the stage into the audience, her many dog heads biting, her tail lashing, her eyes filled with rage.

The guards lined up by the left wall raised their guns, only for the wall to collapse on top of them as great blue beasts charged in, stomping their way through the crowd. A strange, eyeless fish leapt from the gap; a woman caught hold of its tail, only to turn into a baby, and then an old woman, and finally a skeleton. Something that looked like a llama foot flew out and went for a man’s jugular. Still more creatures followed.

But Sang Mi had stopped looking, and focused on guiding Oscar off stage. “We uh... well, don’t worry about all that, big guy. Let’s get you home.”

He gave an affirmative bass noise.

As they pushed through the curtains, through the small backstage, and back into the kitchen, she saw a relieved Chris who was already running towards her.

“We’re okay!” she said. “Granted, a lot of people are *not* okay, but me and Oscar are!”

“That’s all that matters,” Chris said. Then paused. “Don’t tell Charles I said that.”

Sang Mi gave a thumbs up, and they both looked at Odette. “Who is she?”

“Odette Caron. She’s like... from the French SIGNET, if that makes sense.”

“Sorta,” Sang Mi replied.

“Hello there! And don’t worry, I’m perfectly fine with letting Scylla do her thing,” Odette said, mimicking Sang Mi’s thumbs up.

Chris awkwardly also gave a thumbs up, all three of them in the same pose as they stood in silence while horrific noises came from the room beyond.

“E-excuse me,” Manuel said, poking his head out from where the kitchen staff had apparently been hiding behind an overturned steel table. “Are we, uh...”

“On the menu? Nah,” Chris tried to casually wave the concerns out of the air.

“What should we do, the owner was out there in the crowd...”

Odette smiled, which was a little awkward with the background noise. “Don’t worry, we’ll get things cleaned up, you won’t have anything pinned on you. Oh, they’re probably worried about their jobs!”

“Are they?” Sang Mi asked quietly.

“We’ll make sure one of you gets the deed transferred to you. Any volunteers?”

Manuel bit his lip for a moment. “It should be Nina.”

Everyone else seemed to agree with that.

“Great! Well once things get settled down, we’ll iron this all out.”

Chris and Sang Mi raised their thumbs up again, and everyone settled in.

* * *

“E.D.E.M is getting an entirely new leadership, as it appears the director and every department head have resigned to spend more time with their families. None of them could be reached for comment, despite repeated attempts by our reporting staff. Concerns that this new leadership were even less experienced than the last set were quashed by officials, who said everything is fine and to not ask questions. Senator Griffith described their resignation as a tragedy, but refused to explain why his arm was in a cast, nor why spending more time with their families was tragic.

“In other news, the return of missing students in Violetthill Illinois—”

Manuel turned the radio off. “Enough of that. Who is on the grill?”

“Sorry!” Maria rushed back over to it.

He shook his head. “We have to get things ready for the investor today, Nina won’t like it if—”

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that, your funding is secure.” All eyes turned to the woman speaking, who had entered in through the back. He thought they’d fixed the locks; oh well. She was dressed head to toe in black, with a veil covering her face. In one hand she held a gold birdcage that was covered by a burgundy cloth. She was flanked by a pair of bodyguards in suits and sunglasses. She extended a hand, “Sal H., your new investor.”

He shook it. “A pleasure, if you’ll—”

“Like I said, your funding is secure. On the condition you tell me all about the visit Chris Cwej and Sang Mi paid here. I have a lot of questions.”

He swallowed—something about her gave him the creeps. But he’d do it for Nina.

* * *

The three of them, Odette, Sang Mi, and Chris, sat in the rowboat watching Oscar paddle around.

“A beautiful creature. You did a good thing rescuing him—and rescuing me, for the record,” Odette said. “Why are you here, anyway; you didn’t seem to know I’d be here?”

“Oh, we’re...” Chris fumbled around for a moment, and then decided being honest was better than the awkward silence. “We’re going to an auction. It’s in the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

Odette’s eyes lit up. “Ah, we at the *Conservatoire* have heard of it. It’s famous, and exclusive. You’re lucky to attend.”

Sang Mi looked down into the water, her face solemn. “Isn’t it kind of odd? We get a letter from Salome, she sends us on a road trip, and we start running into creatures and monsters and people from organizations with acronyms for names? And we even ran into someone from the Odyssey after we named our car that! Isn’t that all just... too co-incidental?”

Chris had considered this, but had written it off as needless worry. “We’re just trying to spend as much time together as we can before I have to send you back. I don’t think there’s anything more to all this.”

Sang Mi nodded, but he could tell she didn’t believe him.

“Oh, look!” Odette called. He turned to see Oscar diving under the water, and then leaping out from it, high into the air in a joyous burst, before splashing back down.

“Well, whatever, even if it was messy we saved the day,” Sang Mi said.

“Sure did,” Chris replied. And he meant it.

They stayed there till the sun set, and then parted ways with Odette. The road awaited them, and who knew what they’d see next. □

Interview: Rebecca Levene

Welcome to the *Cwej30* Zine, Rebecca. Tell us a bit about yourself. General details, plus any interesting personal trivia, hobbies, etc.

Hi! Working on the *Doctor Who* books was my first creative job—and I’ve been a professional writer and editor ever since. I was story editor on *Emmerdale*, sub-edited a magazine (where one of my jobs was to make up the astrology column) and more recently have just finished the last book of a four-part epic fantasy series with Hodder.

On the weird trivia front, I know how to milk goats—we used to have them when I was a kid (pun not intended). I sail and have the Day Skipper qualification that lets me charter a yacht anywhere in the world. Although, if I owned my own yacht (chance’d be a fine thing) I wouldn’t need the qualification. Fun fact: you don’t need a licence to sail a boat but you do need a licence to operate the radio on it. Go figure.

When did you first get into *Doctor Who* as a TV series?

I watched it pretty much from birth. I have the usual story about hiding behind a sofa from the Daleks. But I suppose I became a fan around the age of eight, when I came back to the country from three years living abroad and saw *The Deadly Assassin*, which scared the daylights out of me at the time.

What was the catalyst for you getting into editing for the *Doctor Who* novels at Virgin? Are there any other main inspirations besides *Who* that you used for your editing work?

I was about to be made redundant and I spotted the ad for the job in the Guardian—which at the time was to work on *Doctor Who*, erotica and *Judge Dredd* books. It honestly couldn’t have been any more appealing to me.

I learned editing as a general skill rather than one that applied to *Doctor Who* specifically. Most of the rules apply across genres and a good book is a good book, no matter what it’s about.

Are there any fun stories you can share with us about the process of working with so many authors with different visions for where the series should go in prose?

Nothing springs to mind, I’m afraid—like I warned you, I have a terrible memory!

Could you give the readers a bit of insight on what you considered so companion-worthy of Chris and Roz when reading *Original Sin*?

Fundamentally, it was that they were enjoyable to spend time with, and readers have to spend a lot of time with companion characters. I liked the contrast, Cwej’s optimism, Roz’s pessimism, his innocence and her experience—but they were fully rounded characters, not simply types. They bounced really well off each other and they weren’t like any companions we’d had in the NAs previously.

Do you have a favorite novel featuring Chris and Roz as companions? Any specific scenes you found quite impactful while editing?

I'm going to recuse myself from this one. I don't think it would be very nice for any of my authors reading this whose novels I *didn't* name.

Fair enough! Many of the people now working on *Cwej: The Series* are in their mid-to-late 20s, and thus weren't yet born when he was introduced 30 years ago. How does it feel to know many fans continue to gravitate toward the novels you worked on three decades ago?

It's honestly wonderful. And very touching. As a writer, you often feel as if you're shouting into the void. You very seldom have a sense of how your work has impacted readers. To know that something I was a part of, and that was such a joyful part of my life, is bringing joy to other people is a real gift.

Many authors of the *New Adventures* were fans who learned to write from the experience of doing their novels. What advice would you give to independent authors in the modern day who are trying to jump into more professional roles?

Well firstly, don't follow other writers' advice! Everyone's process is different, and what works for them might not work for you. But if you keep at it, you'll find your voice. Just try to be truthful. I think a lot of early career writers strain to be clever or witty, and obviously that's great if you can pull it off. But the thing that readers respond to is truthfulness—and I don't mean write what you know, I mean believe what you write. If you don't actually believe e.g. that a character would act in the way you have them acting, how can you possibly expect readers to believe it?

Other than that, the most important thing is to be open to editing. You'll bristle when you first get the notes from your editor—we all do—but leave them from a day, come back and you'll realise that most of them are right.

Equally, when your editors—or beta readers—tell you there's a problem, listen to them. Especially if more than one person identifies the same problem. But you don't have to listen to their suggested *solution*. You'll almost certainly come up with a way to solve the problem that's better than theirs and they won't care as long as it's addressed.

Is there anything we didn't ask you about that you'd like to tell readers?

Can't think of anything!

Lastly, where can we find you, and what are your future creative endeavors? The floor is yours to advertise what you wish.

The last book of my epic fantasy series *The Hollow Gods* is coming out in January. It's been a long, tough journey to finish the series, but I'm tremendously proud of it. I'm also working with Naomi Alderman on developing a new game, but I can't say much about it for now. And I can say

even less about my other new project, because it's under a pseudonym, but I'm launching myself into the world of queer romance...

Thank you for joining us!

Interview: Rosalie Mauer

First off, tell us about yourself.

Absolutely—I'm Rosalie and I'm an artist living in Los Angeles. I've been out here for about ten years now after moving from Indiana. When I'm not drawing, you can often find me at a theme park.

How did you first learn about Chris Cwej?

I've been friends with Wylder for a long time and learned about Cwej through them. Actually, that's who I originally learned about *Doctor Who* from too, funny enough. It's been amazing fun journey.

What did you enjoy most about the process of creating your illustration?

I think playing with and figuring out the lighting was my favorite part. I wanted to showcase these two characters and let them both shine, and the lighting combined with their back to back pose really let me explore that in a fun way.

What mediums do you prefer working with for your art?

Listen I love a sketchbook and pencil. But most of the work I share is done digitally these days. I love the flexibility it gives. It saves on paper too so I feel like I'm doing the environment a tiny favor.

It makes it easy to try different things to see if they work without wasting any resources.

Did you have any inspirations while working on your piece?

Honestly, I've had *Wicked* on the brain for a while. When I heard we wanted to feature Cwej and Sang Mi, I adapted an idea I'd had for Elphaba and Glinda and I think it actually worked out really nicely.

Do you have any words for fans during this 30th Anniversary Year for Cwej?

30 years is amazing! I hope you're all enjoying this very special anniversary and all the content along with it.

Where can people find more from you?

I'm honestly so bad at this part, haha. I do most of my art for myself, and forget to post. But I am on Bluesky (@rosalie-m.bluesky.social).

Thank you for joining us!

Poetry

In the Loop – James Wylder

Wasn't it great

In 1968

When all your dreams were still flowing

Down the river of time

But it can't come back

It can't return

Your regrets will fester in the water

Your sins will come back

To manifest your lies

And so you'll wait

Mumbling again

Wasn't it great

In 1968

In the Next Issue of
Cwej30

Cwej: Odyssey

*Cwej and Sang Mi continue down the road,
and they're not done meeting
new creatures,
new friends,
and new mysteries!*

Expect
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!