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Editors: James Wylder & James Hornby

Contributions by: Plum Pudding, Aidan Mason, Theta Mandel, Aristide Twain, Molly Warton, Leela Ross, and Hunter O'Connell.

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Edited by James Wylder and James Hornby

Formatting and design by James Wylder & Aristide Twain

Cover by Leela Ross

Featuring artwork by Plum Pudding

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From the Editor's Desk

Happy *Doctor Who* Day! As we celebrate Cwej's 30th Anniversary, it's another anniversary for, well, a certain friend of his. And what a day it is. I'm looking forward to watching *The War Between the Land and the Sea* next month, and I hope you are too.

I will of course be wondering how Cwej and Sang Mi would handle a bunch of fishy guys coming out of the sea. Please send us your thoughts on how they would as you watch it, nothing would make me more amused.

I'm writing this little forward from Indianapolis, Indiana. It's a wonderful city, they call it naptown. Unfortunately, while everyone else is napping, I'm getting things done. So it goes. But what a lovely thing to do with my life? Every day I'm grateful you give me, and everyone at Arcbeatle, the chance to tell such stories together. Truly, it's a blessing.

How are you spending your *Doctor Who* Day? If you know someone who is looking for something new to tide them over with adventure, consider sending *Shutter Speed* their way. Word of mouth *is* how stories spread, after all.

I'm getting nuzzled by a cat, which means its time to go pay attention to the cat (very important). I hope you'll join us next month for the big finale of *Cwej: Odyssey*!

And thanks for all these wonderful years of adventure together!

—James Wylder

CWEEJ

ODYSSEY



SPACE Opera

Written & illustrated by Plum Pudding

Dave was a collector, although it didn't actually amount to anything impressive. He had a shelf in his room which made him very happy, where he kept all of his CDs. It was a well organized shelf, each row a musical genre and then sorted alphabetically. The rest of Dave's house was a wreck; he didn't really care that much about organization usually. But the shelf. The shelf was important. An ex-girlfriend he'd had wasn't a fan of the shelf. She cattily nicknamed it the virginity shelf. Hence, ex. It was funny though. At one point during their breakup, she whined at Dave and said something along the lines of: "You care about that shelf

more than me!!” and all Dave could eventually say, looking at how much she hated something that he valued dearly, was a mild, “well, ...yes.”

The shelf was a thing of importance. Music could take you to other worlds, even when you were just sitting there in your car. Music made Dave feel safe when even the worst was happening. So it wasn't really that hard a decision. He just didn't know why a shelf made one a social pariah. He had thought it made him cooler.

This morning, a handful of CDs were missing from his shelf. He could see the gaps in the collection, as plain as day. He blinked at first, hoping he had been astonishingly out of character last night and, god forbid, mislaid a disc. But no. They were gone.

Dave spent nearly the whole morning looking through his apartment frantically. He spent nearly the whole morning holding back tears.

* * *

Concurrently, a small orange Honda Element drives past Dave's apartment building. Inside it, two passengers. Your average passerby, even if one happens to notice a bright orange car, will not anticipate these two passengers having a familiarity with righting wrongs and causing(?) wanton mayhem. However, they've stopped five semi-decent to large scale alien incursions on the most recent roadtrip, the fourth whilst picking up a soda at McDonalds.

These two legends are, incidentally, bored out of their minds.

Sang Mi, the first of the two passengers, has spent the past several nights in a motel room. (You know, because of the Targellan incident.) She has recently been introduced to the marvel of twenty-first century cable television. This has been, for the past few days, much of what she has been talking about. This fad will pass quickly.

Chris Cwej, the second of these two passengers, has spent the last several nights actually dealing with the Targellan incident, a situation far too bloody, interesting and devastating to bear mentioning further, except for the fact that it involved a rutabaga and a spaceship shaped like a spoon. He has, in fact, not been thinking about the marvel of twenty-first century cable television. He is not hopped up on sugar either.

“Last night, I watched The Good, the Bad and The Ugly,” Sang Mi explained. “I don't actually think I've seen a western before, well, except for the Ranger of Dallaspex, and, um, wait no, actually, I've seen a lot of Westerns but it was a really good one, except for the part where it kept pausing to advertise detergent and insurance.”

“Those are commercials,” Chris said, as Sang Mi barrelled further.

“Yeah, but I really liked it, except the old weird bits that I think were racist or something. Still. Great time. And I was thinking, I was just sort of thinking, maybe you're like, the guy in the poncho to these people or something. Semi-modern poncho man. You're the guy with no name, you come into town on your horse slash orange car thing, and you save the day, before vanishing off into the sunset. It's like a whole thing!”

Chris considered the parallel carefully. “You know, I don't quite see it. I mean, I have a name, and I tell people my name, and also you're there. Aren't cowboys sort of lonely and sad and friendless?”

“The cowboy has friends. I'm Tuco,” Sang Mi declared joyfully, in a statement that was hopefully a joke.

Chris didn't know how to respond to that. Thankfully, he didn't have to—they had just happened, once more, to run into something interesting.

There was a strange man in an utterly massive oversized trenchcoat, walking down the street, trying to hide (unsuccessfully) that he was carrying a large bag of various things.

“...Is that a burglar?” Chris asked out loud, a little surprised at the sight of a strange figure in broad daylight trying to hide a very large bag. It was certainly very weird. Chris pulled the car to a stop.

And then there was a strange note over the wind, like an odd flute, and like magic, the man on the street stepped into nothing. It was like he was never there, and not just in some kind of Invisible Man way, Chris could sense it. The figure had left this earth entirely... for parts unknown.

“Woah!” Sang Mi shouted, a bit too loudly. “What was that?”

Chris shrugged. His mind was already racing. He had absolutely no idea.

* * *

Dave did not understand what was happening. He had thought that he had seen a man try to leave his apartment, but it was hazy, leaving him this very moment, like he had dreamed the figure up in the first place.

Time felt wrong to Dave. There is no other way to describe that accurately. There is a feeling when one second follows the next — even if you have never noticed this feeling, because it has been there your entire life—and Dave was feeling something else. Like a headache, or when you've had too much water and your whole body feels like it's swimming. And nothing like that. It was a bizarre thing.

He was in his room, looking at the shelf, and he was also outside, chasing that man. The man who was stepping into nothing, the man who wasn't there. It hurt a little. Dave also saw the orange car. The orange car was important.

Dave put on his shoes, and began his trek down the stairs out towards the street, and where the orange car would be.

* * *

Chris and Sang Mi were still trying to figure out the next step of what precisely they should be doing when the next man approached them.

“Hi, I'm Dave,” Dave said, wearily. “Listen, do you guys know about a man, a weird man, possibly a CD stealer?”

“Just saw him, I believe,” Chris answered. “Weird overcoat, stepped into nothing...?”

“That'd be him, I think,” Dave said, feeling woozy again. “I had thought I'd imagined him.”

Sang Mi looked at Dave, concerned. It was the Delirium face. The face that Saki would sometimes make, when she was on Delirium. Those weird blissed out eyes... Yeah, drug city. Today wasn't making sense. The unlikelihood of all of this. Another strange man. You usually don't get two in a day. The coincidence felt bizarre, manufactured.

“Take this thing,” Dave said, handing Chris a CD.

“What is it? What are you going on about?” Chris asked, confused.

“A way, I think. In a direction,” Dave said, still not entirely there.

Music on the Honda’s stereo began to play of its own accord. And the car, entirely without Chris’s input, began to go. Chris and Sang Mi looked in wonderment as the music hit the air with a bizarre tone. Chris knew all about music. About its power. He had seen something almost like this before, but this... this was different.

Music can take you to other worlds.

And then, they were off. And for once, neither of them could even believe it.

* * *

2378

INITEC SPACE-CITY RR-ONE ORBITING RYTEL RIANA TROPOS

... What just happened exactly? Chris blinked to be sure. He certainly didn’t think he would ever be back here. His brain had sort of crossed the idea off. There was no conceivable way that he could possibly be on Rytel Riana Tropos, not after what had happened. Not after Glasst.

But here they were. An orange car, sitting right in the middle of the promenade on a space-station orbiting the finest resort planet in the cosmos.

Pity that the planet was going to die soon.

“Woah,” Sang Mi gasped. “Nice place. Finally, we get to the PRESENT!” She took it in stride. Chris grit his teeth. She didn’t know. She didn’t know how absolutely and magnificently wrong this all was. *I mean, it surely seemed to her as normal as their other hops in time.* She just didn’t know the rules.

The bustling station was perfectly and absolutely normal. Chris wildly glanced from place to place across the promenade. There was a view of space – which was perfectly normal, all the stars in the right place in the sky for these coordinates—there were little shops along the side, which again, were so utterly normal that Chris hardly noticed them. This was every space-station he had ever been on: silver and beige, glittering with bronze and muted colours that softened the idea of only living in space. All of those typical details he had learned to spot. The way people grew little saplings in pots to liven up all of this with some greenery, to stave off seasonal depression. This was space. How was this space?

Chris couldn’t begin to process exactly what was happening. He didn’t even have a theory. One moment, he had been on Earth, and now he was in orbit of a planet he knew would die, and everything was *fine*. Everything was *simple*.

And how had he gotten here? How was this even conceivable? Chris knew the jolt of time’s maelstrom, the strength of the bifrost. He had, under the Superiors, been to thousands of worlds under thousands of suns. Perhaps he understood what was normal, how it differed, how it didn’t, better than any other man.

He looked down. There was no CD in his hand. Dave had handed him nothing.

What was going on?

“Excuse me, you can’t park here,” said a supercilious looking non-binary parking attendant, who walked up to the car. “You’re blocking lots of people.”

“Apologies,” Chris said, trying to put on his most charming face. “But I’ve rather materialized without comprehending how this is physically possible. Could you please give us a minute?”

“That’s what they all say,” the Parking Attendant mumbled with a disappointed and condescending glare. “You should know that all materializations are to take place in sector seven, pylon G, and to have the requisite paperwork available.”

“Yes, but what if I don’t?” Chris spat, rather irritated that he was being attacked by bureaucracy for happening to have randomly broken every law of physics and time out there. His mind still racing, Chris examined the dashboard. He swore under his breath. There was no way the car could possibly have sustained a trip through the heart of the bifrost—it was a *car*. It couldn’t even sustain its own atmosphere—he and Sang Mi should have *popped*. Like balloons. Even if they had passed through some sort of anomalous field, some sort of hi-tech mitigator that could allow them to travel to this place, he would have *sensed* it. Those things were *far* from subtle.

“Could you please step out of the car, sir, madam, or variations thereupon,” the Parking Attendant intoned monotonously.

Chris sighed. Even if he was glad at the parking attendant’s inclusivity, this was looking to be a very long afternoon.

* * *

They can’t hold us for long, Chris told himself. They can’t hold us for long.

The cell, primarily a maroon room gilded with neon-blue force fields, wasn’t uncomfortable. Goddess knows he’d been in worse. But still, the existential dread was kicking in. Was he really here? Back here? Right before... and... and everything? How’d he get here? This had to be a trick.

Yes, a trick. That explained it. He must have been captured by an illusion-making species, such as the Morphiite, maybe he tripped into a Haunt manifest... It must be playing games with his guilt, his subconscious. Lots of creatures played games with open wounds like that...

“Gongen to Cwej,” Sang Mi announced, snapping her fingers a few times. “What’s going on, exactly? What makes this place such a big deal?”

Chris shrugged the question off. “We have to get out of here, we have very limited time.”

“Hey, we got time,” Sang Mi said gently. “We’re in a cell, aren’t we?”

“For parking evasion,” Chris said, mildly annoyed. “It’s not exactly grand theft larceny. We’ll be out shortly, and then—”

“Why does this place have you on edge?” Sang Mi asked him suddenly, and very astutely. Chris sighed. It was weird how she could just read him like a book. He could hardly finish a sentence these days.

The emotions around this place were strong, even coming through over the mist of memory. Sea surge. Music. Hyperspace. So many bodies. Chris tried to put the pain of the memories to the side, to focus. But he was around it again, it literally surrounded him. Because he was back here. He was a ghost...

“I don’t think I could ever... relay it to you.” Chris said, quietly, showing no emotion. This was the only way he could manage. “I was on, well, training wheels. It went haywire. Planets blew up.” He stated, which sounded matter of fact, but wasn’t. Despite the clarity of his voice, he nearly didn’t go on. He cared, he just

couldn't *process*. The pause was heavier than what he was actually saying. "Can you begin to understand that? Entire planets. Life lost on such a scale..." He trailed off again. He was incredibly close to being a wreck. Sang Mi was surprised to see him this low.

"Hey, Chris," Sang Mi feebly attempted. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize. If it's too hard, you—you don't have to tell me. I can..."

"No, no," said Cwej, forcing himself to be strong again once more. "You deserve to know. It affects you too, it's important information for you... even the hardest bits. I lost a good friend out there, though I knew her only briefly."

"Roz?" Sang Mi asked, trying to piece together what she had heard of Chris's past. She felt horribly insensitive, even just asking about this.

"No." Chris said, darkly. "No, someone else."

Sang Mi did not know how to say the next thing she needed to say politely. The circumstances were too big and dour for words, and Sang Mi, while many wonderful things, was never exactly a poet.

"I'm sorry, man," she said. She immediately cursed herself for not knowing to say anything *better*.

She did not ask about what bothered her most. If this other friend he met had died and *wasn't* Roz... How many people had Chris lost over the years? How many people was he not mentioning? She didn't want to ask. It was insensitive. But it felt like it almost applied to her too: The two of them working on borrowed time, and in a "profession" with a high mortality rate. Maybe she was in over her head or something.

Like that had ever stopped her before.

Something occurred to Sang Mi. "Wait, and despite the whole planets blowing up thing, you still got the job?"

Despite the sore topic, despite himself, Chris actually laughed at that. Not a big one, a quiet laugh, but it was funny, you know, and the alternative would be to cry.

A moment later, he was somber once more. He stared at the wall.

"I don't know when it happens. Will happen. I don't know the precise time. It's close. Soon, my past will show up, down below. And the continents will burn. The whole planet will crack like an egg.

* * *

A synth approached the cell doors an hour later, looking at them with animated, bulging and fluorescent yellow eyes. He deactivated the force-fields, wordlessly. Sang Mi and Chris looked at him with surprise mixed with confusion. They didn't move. This seemed to irritate the figure, who should rightly be emotionless. "Your debt has been deducted from your account. You are free to go."

"Debt? What account?" Chris asked. He did not like the sound of this.

"Your debt has been deducted from your account. You are free to go," the synth said, louder, assuming they had not heard him, which was additionally bizarre. It stalked out of the room at great speed, without bending its legs.

"You take me to the most normal places, you know that?" Sang Mi said, bewildered, but still finding room for sarcasm.

* * *

The promenade of the station was still as bustling as ever. It was a veritable Chinatown, a Little Italy of compression and maximalism, seeing how *much* one could put into a single place. There was hardly any area to stand thanks to the number of stalls and mini-buildings blocking the walking path Chris and Sang Mi took about, not even mentioning the probably hundreds of people, and that was just this floor. A few feet above them, through the literal glass ceiling, hundreds more people walked. The world smelled of sweat and also deodorant.

“There’s gotta be a manga shop somewhere around here,” Sang Mi said.

“We need to find out why we’re here, how this is all happening, where the car’s been moved. We have a litany of questions,” Chris said, though he didn’t want to once again spoil her mood.

“I’ve-been-very-good-lately,” Sang Mi said, speaking so fast she invented a new singular word.

For once though, they really couldn’t afford to waste time. This whole day had been an elaborate mystery, teasing Cwej with contradiction after contradiction. And Sang Mi had to admit, she was intrigued too. It’s just, when life’s mysteries were this vast and obtuse, she really liked to go shopping.

Ahead of them, down a “side street,” a difficult concept in a place where every inch of space had to be carefully accounted for and maximally utilized, the stepping man, (for that’s who he was—a man in lowercase...) the one who couldn’t be, sauntered vaguely upwards. His ballerina dance with no feet ascended steadily into the ceiling at a vertically diagonal angle, as if this was a reasonable path for a man. Though perhaps it was, as he stepped through the ceiling like anyone’s business. One supposes nobody ever told him the rules.

* * *

It was always difficult and intimidating, even for one as accomplished and heroic as Chris Cwej, to have to deal with the help-desk. A man in venomous green lipstick, every bit as sour as he looked, tapped his feet, glaring over half-moon hologlasses as Chris and Sang Mi approached. The man was certainly not pleased to see them, they could tell this instantly.

They could tell a lot about him instantly, really. He was the product of a union with a biosynthetic and a humanoid. The birds and the biorobot bees are, in this century, quite compatible. The nametag on his uniform stated his chosen name was Mr. Help Desk. Good taste was apparently not compatible this century.

“We’re looking for where our car is,” Chris said. “You see, it was sort of taken out of our hands when we showed up here.”

“You’re the guy [™] who managed to *park* in the middle of the prom...? Tsk, tsk,” said Mr. Help Desk.

“You aren’t supposed to actually say tsk, tsk, you’re just supposed to make the sound with your teeth.” Sang Mi said, and was instantly ignored.

“Well, yes, Mr. Cwej, is it?” Mr. Help Desk snipped, despite Chris never saying his name. “I believe your debt was deducted from your account.”

“We don’t have any debt, we don’t owe anyone anything” Chris said. “For that matter, I don’t think we even have money in your currency —”

“Well, yes, I know,” Mr. Help Desk said, again excessively unhelpfully. “It’s incredibly indecent of you. So, in the event of a lack of currency in your P@Y! account, your vehicle was claimed as collateral.”

“No!!” Sang Mi exclaimed. “Not the car!!”

“Yes, well, you shouldn’t have parked it illegally. It’s worth quite an amount of money too, I’m not quite sure why you did that.” Mr. Help Desk sighed melodramatically. “But your debt was thoroughly annihilated by such a venture. You’re lucky. 99.7% of illegal parkers 🤖 are unable to pay their debts to the station.”

Chris felt himself getting remarkably angry at the injustice of it all. He wanted to do something serious, but for once, he couldn’t decide what that would even be. Sang Mi rubbed her forehead aggressively, trying to work out the knots of tension. Were people like this everywhere?

“The car went to the antiques place,” Mr. Help Desk said, helping for the first time in the last four years. “Maybe it’s still there?”

Sang Mi had hardly blinked before Chris was off like a dash.

* * *

The antiques place, *Xotol Xoalaam’s Haberdashery and Antiquities*, was one of the largest establishments on the station, amounting to around half the size of your average antiques store. Xotol had, like Dave, shelves himself. He took the same neurotic pride in their specificity as Dave did. But Dave was an amateur, a hobbyist with a narrow curated lens of things he collected, whereas Xotol was unmistakably a professional; a legend in his field. And Xotol would take anything.

“Please, please, step inside,” Xotol would say cheerfully. And they always would.

The shelves in Xotol’s storeroom weren’t quite dimensionally transcendent, though they came close. The human perspective would view Xotol’s work on the subject as something aligning the idea of a “shrink ray.” There are all sorts of laws of conversation of mass and everything against the idea of a Shrink Ray, but Xotol had figured it out, something only a few others had, and in his drawers lay dozens of vast vehicles, subdued down to the size of your average hot-wheels and light as a feather, their mass invisible. Far more advanced than simplistic tissue compression; Xotol’s matter compressor was the pinnacle of design. Inside one of his drawers there was a 23rd century United States Aircraft Carrier, just sitting there, waiting to be reinstated upon the request of the right customer. Next to it, Xotol placed his newest treasure.

This Honda Element was a magnificent little thing, a lovely creation, in pristine condition, though he had to clear out a few chip bags strewn about the back seat, and occasional other bits of detritus. But still—these cars usually had decayed to ruin in the years since their inception. It was a rare, exciting find. Most antiquity dealers would be more excited over 19th and 20th century Earth vehicles, but Xotol was happy to see anything at all.

Someone at the door.

“do you still take cds?” asked the stepping man, half of their body subsumed into invisibility. It was not the same half as before. the stepping man would have half a head or no right leg, or any combination of missing things. Xotol never paid it any mind.

the stepping man knew Xotol would want the CDs. There were very few in the galaxy who were *interested* in CDs the way Xotol was. They were certainly fixated upon a particular era. And in addition, this was the ritual. the stepping man believed in ritual. He was mostly composed of it.

Xotol enthusiastically nodded. “Yes, yes. I’d be glad to,” the stepping man always had great things for him, even though he was quite a fright to look at. This arrangement had been beneficial to them both. He even never questioned why the stepping man exclusively obtained antiques of musicians of the twentieth and twenty-first earth centuries, when there were *many* successful musicians in the twenty-third and fourth.

the stepping man reached into the air where his pocket should be and retrieved a pile of discs in compact cases, ordinary CDs, except for the fact that they came out of absolutely nothing, the stepping man’s undulating invisible half.

“Very good. Very good. Though I don’t take the Beatles,” Xotol clarified. “Everybody has all sorts of Beatles’ stuff, it’s not worth a thing. Same with the Swift stuff.”

the stepping man huffed. “they’re good artists.”

“It’s not about that, it’s about scarcity, as you well know,” said Xotol, examining the atomic structure of the case for damages with his Zerto-eye. He flipped through the cases discerningly. “No, no. I’ll take the Doors, Jethro Tull, Au Revoir Simone, Supertramp and, oh, Gwen Stefani, now this is delightfully rare. One of the finest artists of the initial human age!”

“i thought we were talking about *scarcity*,” the stepping man insisted. “not taste.”

“Oh, yes, yes, sorry,” Xotol said. “But you know, Glasst has been looking to do a Stefani cover in his classics suite. Same with Kendrick, if you have any of his.”

“i’ll pick him up next time,” the stepping man said, droll as anything, “though you know that for twenties’ artists, there was a vinyl resurgence. that costs more.”

Xotol nodded. He had always been a man ready to pay a high price. “One more thing —” he said, a perfunctory reference to an ancient program of historical import in this classical era: “Do you have any of the work of Austentacia Wicker?”

the stepping man shook his half-head. While most people have to exaggerate when they say this, Xotol had in fact been looking for *ages*.

* * *

Sang Mi was astonished at how boldly Chris now moved through the crowds of the station. Though it did make a sort of sense that a quickly moving armored man of his size made people get out of his way. Sang Mi had no such luck parting the sea, continually pushed back by the surging masses of people.

Sang Mi had seen Chris in several life-and-death situations before, plenty of ‘em, but she certainly hadn’t seen Chris *this* wired. It was this place, the bustle and bureaucracy of it, but also his memories. Even at its worst, the road trip had been a place of a sort of relaxation for Chris, a quest that was *chosen*. This place was thoroughly against his will. He had never wanted to come back here.

And he was still forging ahead, deeper into the white noise. Frantic thoughts filled her head in the large crowd. Was he seriously forgetting about her? Or, and she wasn’t sure which option was worse, did she just slow him down?

* * *

Chris sped along on his circuitous path to the antiquery, which he was *certain* was close, he just knew it. He could almost sense where it was. He was almost certainly going around in circles, but he was making

progress. The storefronts were changing. He just kept looking at them. Looking at the people. Looking for, well, anything in particular.

But it was life overstimulating, a run on-sentence of distractions, the sheer variety of people was immense: a bald blue skinned woman in the uniform of a classical earth pirate, a man who looked almost human if not for latex-like forehead ridges, a tripedal cowlike but elfin figure carrying a babe in their arms, a mantis velkranoid, a wooden-fish like thing simply swimming through the atmosphere, a very attractive young man in a holographic cheerleader's outfit extending a beckoning finger—and *ANY other day*, any other day, he would like to investigate it all. Especially that last one.

But he had to do the proper thing. He had to get the car back, understand what was going on, get Sang Mi and him back home. He couldn't change history. There were rules regarding meta-time and dangerous people looking over his shoulder. His Superiors most of all. It was all so very dicy, him even being here. He kept thinking that, over and over—it was hard to pay attention to anything else.

Just when he nearly lost all track of where he was, he saw the antiquery on the side of the promenade. (He did not know this, but this is, of course, how one finds the antiquery.) Relieved at his bizarre luck, he approached the storefront.

* * *

The antiquery was a place of amber and copper. Orange and bronze and carved, grown, possibly of bioorganic material—he had seen many hive species build places like this, of alien honeycomb and precious metal, but it was stranger to see one in a predominantly human (or at the least post-human) settlement. Most hive species he knew didn't make friends outside the hive, after all, they were never alone, so there was a deep loneliness in the hollow. He was initially unsure if this was the right place.

It was a small place, too. Wait, were those shelves dimensionally modified? That technology probably shouldn't be here... maybe in an advanced INITEC starship, say, a hundred years from now, *maybe they might* have the prototypes, but not in an antiques store.

This whole mess was getting deeper and deeper.

"Good afternoon! Good afternoon! Good afternoon! Good afternoon!" Xotol said, rushing into the centre of the room. He was hyperactive, immensely pleased with himself.

Chris was, suffice it to say, a little baffled.

"All the pieces are here!" Xotol whispered, as if this whole thing was a gift from God. "All the pieces are here."

* * *

Sang Mi, like a shipwreck victim, washed ashore, gasping for oxygen. The fullness of it, the mass. There were far too many people. Standing by the hydro-stairwell, she had the most miniscule moment for herself. She felt terrible. Like fish in a barrel. Lemmings. It was the sort of place that developed one's claustrophobia.

Gongen wasn't like this. It encouraged entirely normal nervous breakdowns; it never physically felt like she was being crushed in a vice. She didn't like this place, she realized. It was a revelation. The fact that she did feel closer to home—it was soulcrushing. An ad appeared on the large screen across the way. Tourmaline Hawke blew a crimson kiss to the masses. "*Cupkeen. The number one brand in seven systems. And I say so.*"

People (and unpeoples) were starting to funnel towards Sang Mi again, her brief respite was coming to a close. Sang Mi began to feel terrible once more, and then she heard the bleak sound of a boy crying. Her soul steelled itself.

She could feel bad—that was fine—but someone else feeling miserable? Why, that was something of which she wouldn't put up with! She rushed off to discover the source of the noise.

Which was how Sang Mi found the cubbyhole.

* * *

Stars smeared in bright lines, like one was travelling in warp, into the depths of hyperspace. Flashes of bright garnet, magenta, cyan and other psychedelic colours blurred before Sang Mi's eyes. It was the opposite of the arrival when they found themselves on the space station—Sang Mi felt flung with immense momentum, every impact of the travel. It was the opposite of walking across a room.

The boy is by the mountaintop's point. A lonely peak, the tip of the world, or at least this part of it. It looks almost like Japan but the sky is a green-pink colour impossible for human minds to picture, the kind of colour that makes one's nose bleed. It looks almost like Sri Lanka except it's in technicolour, the grain of a classical 1960s picture. It's almost like Switzerland except it's far from neutral. The boy. He's by the mountain's peak and he's crying. He looks terrible in his loneliness. Too young to be left alone at his home, at the Ice Cream stand, much less a solitary mountain. He wails. His parents aren't coming back.

"It's okay," Sang Mi said, realizing very quickly that it isn't as she looks at the despair in the boy's eyes. It isn't okay at all. The emotion of the boy seeps into her. "...I mean, it's okay to cry."

* * *

Chris had no clue what any of this was about, which was becoming a frustrating theme. "Slight question: Have you been fooling with the fabric of spacetime lately?"

"The fabric of the universe is spongey, absorbent. It cleans up all sorts of things with the proper detergent!" Xotol said, not exactly beating the no-sense allegations.

"So... yes?" Chris asked.

"No." Xotol answered sharply.

Xotol turned to the nicest shelf of his antiquery. The bronze light reflected unfortunately upon his lilac face. He was about to spurt some more bullshit: "There are all sorts of results of the last great time problem in not-hell. The absorby-worby thingy mc-thingies, mainly. There are things in the thing container. For instance, one could find themselves caught in the couch cushions. The wrong loose change! The wrong loose change."

Chris subconsciously reached for his gun, perhaps out of fear, only to realize he didn't have it. Ah. All the better, probably.

"One of the benefits of being a time-aware collector," Xotol began, "is to have a variety of historical oddities. After all, it's why I'm here on this station right now. The planet's going bye-bye in a few hours, I doubt they'll miss much."

Xotol placed a brown shoebox on his pristine glass countertop. "What history are you in, Mr. Cwej?"

Chris hesitated. "I believe that's probably too complicated a question to explain in as many words," he said eventually.

"Exactly." Xotol answered. "We are all subject to revision. It is a byproduct of the conflict that has been and will be. It makes my job as a completionist exceptionally difficult. Which is why I have this," he said, pointing at the box. "Everything inside the box is unaffected by alterations to the timeline. You'd be amazed —"

"You're an antiques dealer. You're a time travelling antiques dealer. You're looking for old stuff." Chris said, genuinely baffled as to why anyone would really do this on such a scale.

"Time-aware please, I'm not so gauche as to *involve* myself. Butterflies. Euugh. Dreadful business." He trailed off. He tried to move for the door. Chris stopped him halfway there. This conversation wasn't just going to be another loose end, Chris swore.

"But..." Chris struggled to find the right word. "*Why* old things exactly?"

"Prioritization," Xotol said. "Everything gets old eventually."

* * *

Sang Mi was back where she *had* been, like a dream. But the promenade was empty. Blank. None of the surplus of people that there had been before. It was bizarre, this emptiness. She began to wander. The station was blue midnight. She could begin to see a sort of seclusion to the place. More of that loneliness. She could still smell where she had been before – the sweat of the place, the hundreds of people, the impending heart disease. But there was no incoming coronary here. Just the still blue and the bizarre contradiction of that stillness. She half fancied that she would wake up any moment now and Saki would tell her that she had a bad batch of delirium or something. Anything would make more sense than today.

"preach, sister," said the stepping man, who was not stepping, but sitting by a barstool. he was visibly depressed. In front of him was an enormous glacier of a window, half-opaque with discolouration.

Sang Mi had an unreasonable amount of questions, but she settled for "Hey, what the heck's going on? Who are you? Where have you brought me, what's your deal? What the—"

"it's the ephemerality of it really. you can see out the window." the stepping man said, even though Sang Mi really couldn't. the stepping man drew a line in the condensation of the glass with his finger, rubbing open a miniscule viewport.

Looking out of the glass, Sang Mi saw the rubble of an asteroid field. So many billions of rocks. The annihilation of a planet. She could hardly begin to comprehend it. The vastness was unbelievable. Looking at it, she thought that it would be like this, exactly like this, if Gongen or Earth went. You think about the end of the world, but now she saw what that looked like.

"he told you it goes," the stepping man said.

"I thought the station did too," Sang Mi said, confused.

"in most possibilities," the stepping man said, not elaborating-further. he did that very well. "besides, six billion casualties is probably enough."

Sang Mi scowled. She could feel tears welling behind her eyes, but spitefully refused to cry. She wouldn't be able to put herself back together if she did. She carefully thought about what she should say next to get

the most answers out of this imperious figure. She ran out of good ideas. "I hate to ask, do you have any water?"

the stepping man opened his un-coat and handed her a bottle of namebrand liquid, the kind that she had seen many times on earth. She uncapped the bottle and took a sip, nearly spitting it out.

It was hospital water, Sang Mi thought. The kind of water that they give you at hospitals. So cold that it's nearly frozen, so cold that it puts you into a kind of state of mini-shock. Well, maybe more surprise than shock. She was never sure why hospitals had water like that, and she had thought that it was entirely a hospital invention, that it was one of those weird solitary things that Earth and Gongen had in common. Bizarre that this guy had his own bottles of it. This weird substance was so cold that it probably wasn't water anymore, she joked to herself. But it was nothing but a joke. It was water. Very cold water.

"Thanks," she said, so as not to seem unpleasant.

A terrible awkward pause passed as they observed the newly formed asteroid belt of oblivion in front of them.

"i think sometimes, what if that happened to a place i know?" the stepping man mused. "you know, a real place, that i was close to, not some place i hardly know. if i had a connection to it. like, a place that's real to me because i understand it intimately, a hometown of sorts, if it happened to a place like that, then i might understand." he paused. "i don't really know what goes on in vancouver."

Sang Mi didn't know why he made the jump to that topic, but she doubted that this man was from Vancouver.

"whenever there's war or death it always seems i'm far away. usually on business to be fair... but i do think sometimes, what if it happened to a place i know?"

"Everyone knows *someplace*," Sang Mi said. "And don't you know here?"

"yes." the stepping man said, with more of that sense of realization. "i do know here. but there's no connection. hm. bit odd, that." he paused.

The two of them at the window, looking out there into the frost and oblivion. It was oddly striking, oddly beautiful, that there could still be condensation on glass. That in space, somebody could hear.

"i suppose i'm one of those people who's just run out of empathy. shame..." the stepping man murmured. It seemed to be a major realization for him. "yeah, that's really disappointing to think about. i should really fix that."

"Who are you, exactly?" Sang Mi asked, now for the second time. She was still very frightened of him, even though he had been nothing but personable.

"i steal things usually. i go somewhere and i steal things and then i sell them and it's usually for some big fancy time reason. i have employers, i think."

"You think?"

"look at me," the stepping man insisted. Sang Mi did, but she didn't notice anything about him that was any different than it had been. He was still the same strange partially invisible figure. "i'm not the kind of man who knows things one way or another. if i am halfway, then my employers are more so."

Sang Mi sighed. She clearly wasn't getting anything definite out of him. They stood there, continuing to watch the horrible view. It was a terrible future. Standing there by the glass in the dark blue room, she hoped against hope that this was only a possibility or something. That someone would make a big important change.

Change. They definitely needed change.

* * *

The station was electric with people, as per usual. Mr. Help Desk was un-thinking, sitting there without any real cognizance of the hustle and bustle of the people around him. Mr. Help Desk was an automatic man. He was excellent at that and had 483 preprogrammed phrases. Not that he was entirely synthetic in his un-thinking. These were phrases that everyone said. He was normal, he told himself, and very proud of it.

Unfortunately, that evening, he began to actually think. My goodness, what on earth was going on with that Mr. Cwej fellow? It didn't make a lick of sense—such things merit investigation, and really—why did we have to confiscate the man's antique car? He seemed dreadfully cut up about it, and just because *he didn't know the rules*—subsection B-D-841-BAGGAGE was very clear on the subject and there were no exceptions that were to be made, that was entirely important because the rules said so and he always had to refer to the rules, this was the glory of his position. The point of rules was that they were steadfast when people failed.

Myla Jessica Parker snapped xher fingers in Mr. Help Desk's face. Xhe had been in front of Mr. Help Desk for quite some time and was getting remarkably impatient. As one of the richest bioforms in the eleven microspans, this was a big deal. "Hellooooo?" Xhe scowled. "Where exactly is my room? I'm meant to have a room on Substrata-B."

"Apologies, madamex," Mr. Help Desk said. "I was distracted."

Myla Jessica Parker made a face. Xhe was very rich and very important and hadn't been disrespected this much since that thing with the beeswax. "Distracted?" Xhe insisted with great indignation. "Distracted? Why, I never... You should have that head of yours checked for anomalous sentiment."

Perhaps this was a very odd day or something, and he knew he absolutely should say, "Yes, my apologies, my apologies, my apologies," but what he actually said was, "Please piss off, Myx. Parker, I am rather busy."

And that did it. Xhe stomped off in remarkable indignation.

And Mr. Help Desk, having been unhelpful for the first time in all of his spans, had a moment to think.

* * *

Xotol sighed. "But now, I must be off," he said. "I have very much enjoyed this place, but every good salesman's gotta know when there's too much heat on his back."

Chris still did not budge. And Xotol realized, looking up to Chris's full height, he would not be able to move past him. Chris was a brick wall of a man compared to weird little Xotol.

"You know what I know, and you never once thought about actually helping people?" Chris asked. "Everyone's life is going to end and you've not done anything to help them?"

"Oh, no, no, any good time-aware has an excellent non-interference protocol," Xotol babbled, and looking up at Chris's uncaring expression on his face, completely changed tactics before whining: "Ah, c'mon man, I'm just a little guy, I ain't done no wrong, I'm just a little guy, *I'm just a little guy.*"

Chris couldn't believe the audacity of this uniquely terrible person. He could tell that Xotol was at least three-thousand—common for his species—and thusly he had been time aware for some time. How many atrocities had he done this little game with? Reverse-vulturing and picking at the scraps of a civilization before it even fell and then bugging off? How much death had this self proclaimed “little guy” seen?

Xotol put his shop into his bag, causing Chris to stumble as the entire building dissipated into a small cube which Xotol placed in his purse. And now in the bustle of the promenade, there were suddenly hundreds of people in all directions. Xotol made a break for it, and it all happened so fast even Chris couldn't catch up. *Damn it.*

* * *

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. They sat by the glass some more. “I can't be here. I need to get back to Chris.” Sang Mi said. the stepping man nodded. “i can take you,” the stepping man said. They looked out the window at the fog in space and the desolation. The apocalyptic end of Ritel Ryana Tropos. And then they weren't there anymore.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. They passed the store and picked up a copy of the Illiad, but it wasn't how either of them remembered it. They pay for the walkman.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. Where they were before. At the top of the mountain in Japan or Sri Lanka the boy bounces up and down in excitement.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. They slow down. They have to not do as much, be careful and delicate with this, because Sang Mi's only ever passed in his wake before, not touched the man itself. ... the world in one day.

Sang Mi and the stepping men were still there. *It's nice of him to do so* Sang Mi thinks, *but I still don't get it.* The dead sun twirls. Gongen smiles, and Au Revoir Simone sings Another Likely Story. It's one of the few CDs he has on him.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. the stepping man saw she was confused about all of this, the things that didn't make any sense, and he put on some music to comfort her.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. Where they were before. At the top of the mountain in Japan or Sri Lanka the boy bounces up and down in excitement. Nothing's changed.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. In the stepping man's invisible eyes, Sang Mi saw—no, not quite saw, that's not really the right word—she *sensed* what was to come. What would happen for everyone, even a universe away, back home. Her body shook.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. The window is still so still and heartless and cold. Looking at the dead planet still makes Sang Mi's heart ache. The longer they stay here, the less she can bear it. “When are we going to get going?” Sang Mi asked.

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. Where they had always been. walked in the room in the old video just to know what the room was and what it felt like. Baby steps. You don't change...

Sang Mi and the stepping man were still there. They were walking down the stepping man's corridor, a place of unplaces, which wrinkled like a bag of potato chips. “i'm sorry, you know,” the stepping man said, although he never explained why.

* * *

The planet. An orb in space. A tiny Christmas tree bauble in blackness so vast that there are hardly words to describe it. So much lack of meaning and presence that people can only call it “space.” Something between things. So, the orb. From an outward view of the totality of existence, remarkably small. A pinprick, hardly visible to the naked eye, although the naked eye can hardly perceive all this *everything* anyway. In the vast blackness of eternity that covers everything, the planet reflects the light of its sun just right, so that from far enough of a distance, it looks a bit like a star itself. The matter of scale is important, because what causes the planet’s end is damn near microscopic, insubstantial. It’s almost like a joke.

Someone played the wrong song on their little tour. A resonant tune, which echoed and built and vibrated to such a strange degree that steadily, the planet began to shatter, like a wine glass when the lady hits the high note. It’s a remarkably ridiculous way to die normally, all the more so when your entire planet goes while you’re at it. But the song begins playing out of those speakers anyway.

Our dear performer was still yet to hit the crescendo, but the song began at that moment. And the world began to shake.

* * *

Xotol made a whew(!) noise, stepping into the *Last Call’s* cockpit. There were a few other time-awares on board, from Tourmaline Hawke, to Myla Jessica Parker, to anyone else rich enough to have first dibs intel on history.

The *Last Call* was always the safe haven for time-awares’ like he to make a swift exit just before the inevitable occurred. But still, Xotol felt unsatisfied. He still didn’t have an Austentacia Wicker. Regularly regarded as the finest artist to ever hit the Mutter’s Spiral, thoroughly unappreciated in her time. A copy of her work *should* be easy to find, but still, his holy grail was always out of reach. He thought the stepping man would have found it for once. But no luck.

But there would be other opportunities.

After all, just a few years from now, Gggeelpaxacorionalisvertadownaeretrograd VII would combust, and there was plenty to nab there before it did. And the stepping man would continue to make his shipments, no matter where he was. the stepping man was kind like that.

The shuttle attendant’s perky voice chirped over the intercom. He was home free. He relaxed into his seat. Tuned out her miserably cheerful voice. But then the mindless droll of the please fasten your seatbelts and our flight time today will be and our estimated time of arrival—all that was completely interrupted. Xotol couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Hello there. Sorry to interrupt your evening, all. Except I’m not really sorry. Nice to meet you all. My name’s Chris Cwej. And all of you are going nowhere.”

* * *

And then, as naturally as anything, just how they drove here from 2025 like it was nothing, Sang Mi stepped onto the station once more, the moment she left it.

In her arms, there was a walkman with Au Revoir Simone in it, and she was holding a copy of a new edition of *Durarara!!* which she had been meaning to pick up. She had no clue how she had gotten it. She

squinted at the world in front of her, still reeling from the shock of everything that has happened to her today. Her throat was still exceptionally cold—like she swallowed ice or something.

“What?” She said out loud, although no one in particular was listening. She was in this state of stasis for about forty five seconds. She stared at the world, unblinking.

Then: “Chris!” she exclaimed. “Ohmigod, ohmigod, gotta go help Chris.”

* * *

The city in space was moving, faster than it ever had before. Not the station itself, that was thoroughly stationary, but the people at the heart of it, the *city* was moving even faster than the bustling crowds ever moved. Word had gotten out. None of them knew *how* it would happen, the actuality of Glasst’s influence, how this planet was going to go. But the news had hit. And thus the panic.

Mr. Help Desk watched the surge of terrified people beelining for shuttles and escape pods and transporters. It was worse than Galaxanioid Black Friday—people kicked and bit and did *whatever* they could to reach an exit. Chaos. People bumping into people, bumping into people. A lady shaking a sign with The End is Nigh scrawled on it.

Mr. Help Desk could not abide by this nonsense. “*EVERYONE!*” he yelled to the cacophonous crowd. “YOU MUST LISTEN TO ME!”

The crowd didn’t do so. They were all far too busy—yelling and fighting and shaking and crying and climbing and breaking glass and running as fast as they could.

Mr. Help Desk had been having a very difficult day of soul-searching up to this point, but a person can only change so much. He needed to do something. And he knew how to do one thing very well. He moved to action.

“You four, you four, and you three,” he pointed at groups in the crowd, “go to pylon twelve and board the G7 Gallant. You, you and you, go to Geraldine’s, get some coaxious-nitrade for the ship and bring it to cargo bay two, get on board there...”

He didn’t stop talking. He helped everyone he could. But everything still kept getting worse. The planet wasn’t even going to blow up yet, and fear was already breaking this place down.

* * *

The *Last Call* shook with outrage and indignation. Shrieking voices bounced around the cabin. “*Just who does this fellow think he is?!*” “*Why, I’ve never been treated with such indignity!*” “*This Chris Cwej, I want all his assets liquidated, I want him sold into servitude at the inhumanities auction—*” “*What on earth is happening here!? My darling, I need my beauty rest!*” “*He must be stopped!*”

Chris sat back in the cabin, leaning back into the seat, just for a moment. When the chaos finally began to die down, just a bit, he clicked on the intercom again.

“I don’t think you understand where I’m coming from,” Chris said, dangerously. “I think it’s time you all listened up.” He tapped controls in the cockpit, guiding the ship slightly away from the station.

Xotol impishly tapped the man sitting next to him, Peter Vuulye, an important posthuman business magnate in a dark black suit considered decidedly retro. Peter Vuulye got the hint, especially as it appealed to his ego, and rose to his feet. Only *he* could possibly represent all of them at a time like this.

“Mr. Cwej,” Vuulye said, stepping forward. “I am sure you are aware of me, Peter Vuulye, CEO of—”

“I really don’t care,” Chris said, the harsh words surprising himself. “All of you have had the chance to save people, all of you have known what’s coming, and you’ve all done nothing.” He paused, trying not to get too angry. “We’re doing something.”

Chris was all the more surprised by himself now that he had actually said it. He hadn’t realized what he was doing until he said it out loud. He really hadn’t. The impact on a grand scale that could result from what he was doing.

He was going to *change* something.

“This is a matter of established history,” Vuulye insisted, not one to be put down. “We are little, blessed to be aware of our place in that history—and you should know it too, especially considering your Superiors and Their rules, Their laws, Their *considerations*,” Vuulye was so incensed that little bits of spittle were forming at his mouth.

An insectoid woman in pearls near the back clapped a little at Vuulye’s words. She stood to her feet. “It is a matter of established fact that Grigori Glasst’s suite is responsible for the destruction of this planet and several others. It cannot be altered, as it has already happened. You should know this. You were there, weren’t you?”

He could not deny they were well informed. But it didn’t matter. His heart was thinking now, not his head. He had to do his part. He couldn’t just choose inaction, silent observation of a horror like this. He could not go through that suffering again, as selfish as that sounded. Let people die for no reason other than his bosses’ random values. He had his morals, he had to live with himself—and that was more important than anything else.

The law was never more important than what was *right*.

“You’re right, I was,” Cwej said to her. “I know the laws. And I don’t give a damn.”

He clicked buttons in the cockpit, adjusting the ship’s course further. Every instinct in his body railed against it, but he knew it was necessary.

“You mustn’t change history!” yelled Xotol from the cabin, figuring out what Cwej was about to do. “You mustn’t!”

“Well, if the rest of you aren’t going to help me, I may as well change history as dramatically as possible,” Chris announced, aiming the ship carefully. He was about to do something incredibly stupid. He desperately hoped it would pay off. “What do you think will happen if I aim this ship at Glasst’s? Stop the signal destroying the planet at it’s source?! Maximum speed, collision course, disregard all safety protocol!” he declared, as manically as he could manage. “Well?”

Fear gripped the cabin, exactly as Chris had hoped. “You can’t possibly be serious,” Vuulye declared. “You’d die horribly!”

“Eh, I’ve had a good innings,” Chris shrugged it off, hoping he was a good actor. “And hey, big heroic cause, great way to go.”

“His Superiors would just negate the paradox,” the insect woman said, trying desperately to smile and remain calm. “We will be perfectly fine, whatever happens, we—”

“Ever been a paradox, miss?” Chris asked rhetorically. “I don’t recommend it. You have to die and everything. You tend to remember that afterwards too. The pain of burning alive...”

“He’s—he’s insane!” Insect Lady declared. “Insane!”
“He’s bluffing,” Vuulye insisted, as the ship increased rapidly in speed.

“Oh, you think so?” Chris said, as pleasantly as he could manage. “I’m a serious person. Think about it.”

The engines moved to a fever pitch. The ship’s cabin turned to red alert, little oxygen masks helpfully falling from the ceiling, for all it did the passengers.

Chris was really hoping he wouldn’t have to *actually* do this. He probably would, but he was really hoping he wouldn’t. Oh dear. He really probably would.

“Are you proud of your collection, Xotol?” Chris snarled. “Your historical research? Well, I’ve got a real piece of history coming up for you now. I hope you enjoy the culmination of your work. A rare piece, dying by explosive paradox. And lucky for you, today it’s 100% off!”

Xotol squealed. The passengers screamed, all of them. It was the end of the line. They were time-aware, well-informed people, and this was not how history went. They were outside the possibilities that they had thought defined their life, and they were for the first time, in truly serious danger. It was strikingly terrible.

“STOP THE SHIP!” Vuulye shrieked in fearful despair.

And just in time, Chris pulled the breaks to a stop. The cabin breathed a heavy sigh of relief in unison as the ship shuddered to a halt. There was silence. The anticipation and dread they felt was palpable. They had known of this man but thought him surrounded by myth and overabundant exaggeration. They looked up in fear at the loudspeaker relaying Chris’s voice.

“Now, we can try that again and see if my piloting skills get any better, or we could stop wasting time and actually help some people,” he said sternly.

There were no dissenting voices from the cabin. CEO and conman alike opened their phones and began to make call after call.

* * *

The Moonlight Sonata. Not actually the name of Beethoven's piece, he himself called it the grand and estimable title of *Piano Sonata No. 14*, which just rolls off the tongue. Some historians think it was actually, according to the original notes, entitled “Sonata in the manner of a fantasy,” which isn’t really an excellent title either. But in times since, it has become *The Moonlight Sonata* by popular reputation. There can be many Sonatas by all sorts of composers that are the fourteenth one they did. There is only one *Moonlight Sonata*, or at least only one that matters.

The Moonlight Sonata now plays over the end of the world. It’s fitting, somehow. The notes already hold that friction in them. You can hear it even if Glasst isn’t playing. And it’s special. Usually it’s Glasst’s personal arrangements that cause these earth-shattering reactions. But *The Moonlight Sonata*...

It’s part of the Glasst repertoire at this stage, one of the finest examples of humanity’s musical work and thus preserved perfectly in the Sol Three tour, next to covers of Cher’s *Walking in Memphis* and some piece by Sinatra. But those aren’t what’s actually playing right now during the end of the world. They passed harmlessly and unheard.

The people of the station can see through the great big windows on the promenade. They can see the fires of the planet below. The planet's crust breaking. They *see it*. It makes them run. Mr. Help Desk has helped the best he can, but he's got nothing to Beethoven. The panic has been fed to a fever pitch, chaos is consuming the station. And all the while, they *hear* it. They should feel so honored – it's something Beethoven himself never did, at least not completely. But isn't the deterioration appropriate? The *Sonata*—so loud—it makes the station shake with every gentle frantic note. It goes on and on. The acoustic sessions of the end.

And Sang Mi at the window. Not knowing how to help. Remembering the future she's seen of that hollow shell of a planet below this, the dead promenade.

Sang Mi at the window.

"Chris is gonna come and get me. I know he's gonna come. I know it."

* * *

That single, crystalized moment of pure despair, and—Ships materialize out of the bifrost one by one. Like the Tholian Web, beams of light connect them in a lattice of lasers. A shield begins steadily to form around the space station.

It's the Time-awares. The people on board the *Last Call* had their contacts. Of course they did. People who would do anything to make sure that Uncle Vuulye is okay, or someone who owed Insect Lady a favor. Word gets around when it doesn't necessarily have to travel linearly. The lovers of paradox and the rebels of dissidence and various slug people and all of them come too, it's not *entirely* done via the conniving self-preservation instincts of the CEOs.

In the grand scheme of things, it's small. Infinitesimal on the grand scale of the universe. Except scales aren't grand. To the people on the station weeping and shrieking and begging to their Gods, it's everything.

The Superiors will probably be mad. If they actually hear about it. If this private act of rebellion actually makes waves across the grand cosmos of the universe. The motley crew coming out of spacetime for their own agendas are careful nobody hears about this due to fear of reprisal. *Nobody needs to know*, they keep saying.

Chris, still in the cockpit of the *Last Call*, looks at the planet below. It still burns. He sees the trail of Glasst's ship going off to its next destination. For a moment he thinks he hasn't changed anything. And then he reminds himself that he has changed things here. He's saved people.

But it's not *enough*.

He's not the Superiors. He's no God of Time, no grand Archon of important standing. He can't sit in inaction.

Would that make him an egotist if he kept trying to change history? Save the people that mattered? Doesn't everyone matter? He doesn't want to be like the Superiors one day, in their golden and time-soaked ivory towers overseeing the only *right* form of history.

He keeps thinking about Fionara. He's been thinking about her the whole day. Or trying not to. If he saves her, then he probably stops existing, doesn't he? Crossing his own timeline? Does it go by *Back to the Future* rules or does it do something else? Will Time Pterodactyls show up or something? The time stuff is never really consistent, doesn't make sense, not even to him.

His makeshift fleet is departing. They look at him with wary eyes as they go. He's made a name for himself here. More than ever.

Goddess. He just wishes they could just keep going. They won't—he's only managed this via mass CEO threat via spaceship. It's just... it's still so terrible. If only someday all of his mistakes didn't show up.

* * *

When the *Last Call* re-docked at the station for Chris to depart, Sang Mi was waiting. Chris sort of stumbled his way out, tripping over his own feet for no real reason. He was visibly very down, Sang Mi thought.

"Oh," he said, looking at the issue in her hand, "you found that manga shop."

Sang Mi felt confused. "Yeah," She said, eventually. They sat in awkward silence.

Behind Cwej, a little strange lime-green creature presented itself.

"Xotol," Chris said, surprised.

Xotol handed Chris a vast shelf of CDs and of course, the car, still shrunk down to a measly hot-wheels sized level. "Please," Xotol said. "*Never interact with me again.*"

* * *

After unshrinking the car to its usual size quotient at the local inflatomat, Chris sat in the front seat of the vehicle, still confused as to how they had even gotten here. It seemed so strange and... even felt a little bit irrelevant now. So much had happened.

Sang Mi sat in the seat beside him, placing her things in yet another bag on the floor. She was accumulating quite a few bags. "You alright, man?"

"Not satisfied..." Chris said eventually. "Don't really think I'll ever be satisfied."

Sang Mi thought about this and shrugged. "Me neither."

The words spilled out of Chris, suddenly, and without warning. "I just wish I could do more. I... I still don't understand what makes helping people here different from helping people in 2025. I've dealt with all sorts of paradoxes my whole life, all sorts of stuff about fixed points in time and temporal wobble-wobble. But I don't think I'll ever understand what's... *right*."

Sang Mi nodded solemnly. "You saved this place. That was... like a no, no or something, right? Laws of time?"

"Yes," Chris said, with some difficulty.

"Well, I mean, laws are laws. They're sort of, like, made by the, uh, in charge people. You can't follow them if they tell you to do something that's wrong." She shrugged. "Least that's what I think."

Chris thought about this. "Yeah," he agreed. It had been what he needed to hear, even if he sort of knew it already. "What next?"

Sang Mi shrugged. "I don't know how to get back."

A moment passed of further bewilderment as they really thought over events. How this all happened.

“Well, we do what we can, I guess.”

Sang Mi slotted open the CD player in the car. She tentatively slid in the copy of Au Revoir Simone’s *The Bird of Music* into the player. *Somebody Who* began to softly play in the background.

“Where’d you get that?”

“Dunno.”

“Fionara,” he said suddenly.

“What?”

“You asked me about her earlier. Who I’d lost here. Her name was Fionara.”

As the synth of the song surrounded them, it was happening again. Outside the car, the stepping man looked on in his world of lowercase. Half of his face was visible—far clearer than before in the open light of the station and not his typical shadowy hideaways. But whether that half-face looked like Chris, Sang Mi, Fionara, or even something else, no one could begin to say.

* * *

2025

The Road

Dave was a collector, but he was suddenly without a collection, really. He felt purposeless, confused and decaffeinated, although he had never really bothered with caffeine since his days at college. It was so weird. He was missing something now that the shelf was gone. He wasn’t one of those collectors that needed to constantly expand the shelf or he’d die—but not having the shelf there at all was its own little death. Days passed, two or three or something, of this sad and morose life. He drove to work everyday. He also drove back. There was hardly anything in between, great big swathes were just missing. But he was fine, really. Just a little emptier.

A girl came to his house on the fourth day or something. The girl. The same one from the car on the road with the second strange man. She apologized, as she stepped through the door, said that she just got back and everything.

“I’m Sang Mi,” she said. “Here’s my number. Let me know if anything else goes wrong.”

Dave nodded. It was, uh, fine. “Nice to see you,” he said. He didn’t expect anything.

She handed him the shelf. It took him a while to even understand. He went through the stacks, making sure it was complete, as it was. It was the very same shelf. It was impossible. There was absolutely no way. But it was absolute. There was the same crease on the inner sleeve of *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*. There was the same signed name on *Raye Genesis*. It was impossible!

Dave wept as the girl went. He didn’t understand, but he didn’t need to. There was proof of magic in the world, of *good people*.

Such a damn funny thing.

The girl—sorry, Sang Mi—excused herself to meet with the man, who was in the same spot as before, three or four days ago. It was exact. Even the car was on the exact same spot on the street as where it had

been. Dave had stored the image of that car in his photographic memory, expecting never to see it again—he certainly didn’t give CDs away for free, but something had compelled him to. That last copy of *The Bird of Music*...

Such a damn funny thing! He laughed and laughed and thanked the lord.

But that copy of *The Bird of Music* wasn’t there. Figured, he thought, he *had* given it to her, but still. That wasn’t the odd bit. The last CD on the shelf was by somebody named Austentacia Wicker. An album called *Living Halfway*. Dave shrugged. It was strange, but it probably wasn’t important.

The Space Between Destinations

By Aidan Mason

The screams echoed throughout the field and into the surrounding area. People covered their ears and tried to pretend it wasn't happening. Those who saw it, could scarcely describe what they saw.

Blue and gray. Bayonets against the enemy's chest. Blood spilled on the very ground as each side attacked the other. A battle beyond the other, a battle on the soil of Northern Pennsylvania, where wound after wound was dealt, stab after stab... and yet not a single man died.

And then, after all was said and done, they left. The dead would come after, falling away from the grasp of life in hospitals.

But not in the field. Never in the field.

* * *

"Airport parking prices are a scam," Sang Mi muttered as she and Chris Cwej walked away from their car towards the airport in the distance.

"It's not that much better out in space either," Chris replied.

Sang Mi merely nodded. She had far more pressing issues on her mind. Namely, her leg. She rubbed it, but the tension in her tendons was still there. An airport parking lot wasn't the best place to get it stretched out, but apparently there wasn't another good rest stop for a few miles.

"Any better?" Chris asked.

Sang Mi shook her head. "I'm gonna need to stretch it out more."

A driver honked, startling the two. They raced to the side. Sang Mi gave a quick apology wave before continuing to walk. It was then that she noticed that the parking lot was full. Disturbingly full.

"Not gonna lie, there are better places to take a walk," Chris said.

"Yeah," Sang Mi replied.

"Airport?"

"Sounds good."

Limping slightly, she continued to march with Cwej towards the airport. The automatic glass doors opened as they entered, only for Sang Mi to come close to faceplanting the back of an annoyed passenger. Chris barely managed to pull her back in time.

"This is inexcusable!" an old lady moaned, not noticing Chris and Sang Mi slowly walking away. "My luggage has been gone for thirty minutes!"

The two looked around and the lady wasn't the only one that was having issues. The entire baggage claim area seemed crowded, people hovering around waiting for their luggage. If the cars were crowding the parking lot, this was even worse. It was obvious: there was no way that Sang Mi was gonna get her leg stretched out here.

“Deeper in?” Chris asked.

“Deeper in,” Sang Mi confirmed. With a grunt, they pushed forward.

* * *

ATTENTION. FLIGHT 904, HEADING FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM AT 8 A.M., HAS BEEN DELAYED. WE EXPECT THE DELAY TO LAST TWO HOURS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE.

Harold Armstrong the Third groaned upon hearing the announcement. He leaned back in his seat in the waiting area, his pale British hands held firmly over his face. Scarlett Golding was much more muted in her response, letting out a little sigh.

“I thought that being government employees meant that we would get the easy flights out,” Harold muttered. “We come all this way to help them with their school problem and we can’t even get a private jet home?”

“Well to be fair, we did fail to figure out whatever it was,” Scarlett said. “And given the current political environment, the fact that we’re here in the first place is a damn miracle.”

“Yeah, but we deal with the... unusual. I thought we’d get a pass because of that.”

“The real world overtakes all, it seems.” Scarlett put her face back into the book she was reading. She got about four or five words in before she sniffed. “Great,” she muttered. “Got a bit of a runny now.”

“Need a tissue, love?”

“That’d be nice,” Scarlett said, sniffing harder. “This one doesn’t feel like it’s going away.”

Harold rustled through his backpack. Nothing. He swore under his breath. He knew he should’ve gotten some tissues from the school before they left.

“I’ll get some paper towels for you,” he said, hurriedly standing up. “I was gonna take a moment to fix my hair anyway.”

“Don’t fall in!” Scarlett teased as he walked away towards the nearby bathroom. If only her nose wasn’t running. She cringed, knowing that she was going to have to deal with this on the flight back.

* * *

“Ow!”

Chris swore under his breath as he was slammed against the wall by the crushing force of the crowd, Sang Mi following along. A prick of pain shot into him as he could feel the scrape of his flesh against a stray nail in the wall. His fingertips danced across his side, until he came across a wet feeling. He brought his hand up to check his suspicion. Yep. Blood. He leaned up against a little plaque on the wall, taking a glance at it while he wiped his bloody fingers on his pants.

“The Battle of the Northern Pennsylvania Range” it read. That was odd, thought Chris. There weren’t any Civil War battles in Northern Pennsylvania, were there? The Confederacy hadn’t gotten any farther than Sporting Hill and that was in the South of the state. He wasn’t exactly a history aficionado, but time traveling had given him a bit more of a perspective than he’d had before.

“You, okay?” Sang Mi asked, throwing him out of his thoughts and into reality.

“Yeah, just a cut,” he replied, patting the wound once more. “Probably gonna need a bandaid. Or at least a towel.”

“Well, there’s a bathroom over...” She looked across the room and saw a line leading out of the door. “...Nevermind,” she groaned. “Now what?”

“Maybe the ticket lines will be better?” Chris suggested.

“Probably not,” a man walking by interjected. “Those lines have been long as all hell for hours. Might as well just wait here for all the good that’s gonna do ya...”

Sang Mi’s shoulders slumped. “So that’s out then. What now?”

Chris paused. He pressed his shirt up against the wound. Still bleeding. He looked over at Sang Mi and noticed a pained look on her face. Her leg wasn’t getting any better and this area couldn’t be any worse.

“We’ll have to go to the departure terminal,” he said. “There’s gonna be security, but I can handle it.”

“You sure?” Sang Mi asked worriedly.

“It’ll be fine,” Chris said. “As long as we look like we know what we’re doing and speak in a really authoritative voice, people let us by. At least most of the time...”

Sang Mi raised her eyebrow, but they didn’t really seem to have many other options, so forward they went. Pushing past people in suits, sunglasses, all waiting around, not moving or advancing.

The ticket lines were as they were told: long and arduous. Grumbles and complaints surrounded them as the mid-morning sun shone through the large windows behind them. Sang Mi grimaced; her leg still ached, tendons and muscles pulling at each other in ways that should’ve fixed themselves by now.

“Okay, here we come,” Chris said. “There will be a Transport Security checkpoint, but we... *should* be able to bluff our way through it.”

“You don’t sound very sure.”

“It’ll be okay! See there’s... huh.”

They rounded the corner, and both of their eyes widened as they saw the long line to the T.S.A. checkpoint. What surprised them was that there were no T.S.A. officers in sight. Their chairs were empty. Because of this, the line wasn’t moving an inch.

The two looked at each other. Chris’s blood started to drip on the floor. Sang Mi’s leg spasmed. It was a good enough reason for them to run—or hobble, in Sang Mi’s case—for it, moving through the sea of human bodies.

“Out of the way!” Chris shouted. “Official airport business!”

A few people grumbled, and one teenage girl shouted various expletives at them, but most noticed the blood dripping from Chris and didn’t challenge it.

Pushing through the last groups of people, the two made it into the airport lobby. The room contained everything you would expect from a lobby: benches, restaurants and best of all, there was room. Room to walk. Room to breath. Room to stretch.

Sang Mi let out a sigh of relief. Chris smiled, catching sight of a bathroom with no line. Perfect. He motioned over to Sang Mi.

“Gonna see if I can stop the bleeding,” he said.

She nodded. “See you in five?”

“See you in five.”

* * *

Scarlette could barely breathe through her nose. Where was Harold with those tissues?

The bathroom door creaked and she hurriedly turned her head, but to her disappointment it was a blonde man going inside. With a sigh, she turned her head and saw a girl in a skirt limping over to a nearby bench. For some reason, the girl was grimacing.

She tried to return to her book, but couldn’t help but watch the girl. Sweat was dripping down her face. Whatever was wrong, it looked painful.

The girl looked relieved when she made it to the bench. Smiling, she put her leg up and leaned back. She stayed there for a few moments, as Scarlette turned to see what she was doing.

Then the girl’s smile fell. She put her leg down and knelt on the floor, holding it. And then she began to scream.

* * *

The bathroom smelled like absolute garbage, but Chris didn’t care. He made a beeline for the paper towel dispenser, yanking out as much as he could and pressing them against his side. The only person in there with him was standing over a sink, running his hands through his hair.

Chris held the paper towels hard and applied pressure. He counted down the seconds, making sure to regulate his breathing. Satisfied the bleeding had stopped, he removed the towels and held them up to see. Yep, pretty bloody, but at least it had stopped.

He started to feel lightheaded. He placed his hand back against his side. Blood. It was bleeding just the same as before.

“Goddamnit!” the man at the sink said. “How hard is it for my hair to look good?”

Chris turned around and caught a look at the man in the mirror, who yanked at the tips of his hair. He had been doing it since Chris had entered, which gave him pause for thought. Something was going on here, something that wasn’t entirely natural...

“Hey, do you need help?” Chris offered.

“Sure, yeah,” the man replied gratefully. From his accent, Chris noted he was British as well. Chris walked over and ran his hands through the man’s hair. He took a glance at the man’s nametag, noting the UK government credentials.

“Slicked back or more forward?” Chris asked.

“Slicked,” the man replied. “I’m Harold, by the way, Mr., er...”

“Cwej. Chris Cwej.”

Chris frowned as he felt the strands of hair in his fingers. This should’ve been easy, but for some reason, he couldn’t get it exactly right. He brushed them through again. Nothing. It was as though he hadn’t touched it at all, as if something was deliberately keeping it from being altered.

“Bloody hell mate, you’re bleeding,” Harold said, looking down to Chris’s abdomen. “You alright?”

“I’m fine,” Chris grunted. “It’s just a small cut.”

“Then why hasn’t it stopped bleeding?”

“One second,” said Chris said, trying again with Harold’s hair. At this point, sweat dripped down his cheeks. No matter how hard he tried, nothing seemed to change.

“I’m so sorry,” Chris said. “It’s like...”

“Like you can’t truly solve the problem?” Harold said.

Chris nodded. “Yeah...”

Chris looked at the man, then at his cut, two things which refused to be changed. Whatever this was, it was affecting both of them

“If you and I are suffering a similar affliction, that means we’re connected,” Chris said. “Come on, follow me.”

“Wait, wait, wait, hold on!” Harold protested. “What do you mean by that?”

Chris sighed. He really didn’t have time for this. “Look, I’m a time and space traveler from the future. Something alien or otherworldly is interfering here and I need to make sure that my companion is safe. So come on, let’s go.”

Harold opened his mouth to respond, but was interrupted by a scream. It came from the lobby. Chris didn’t hesitate. He ran for the door, grabbing Harold’s hand and pulling him along behind him.

* * *

Agony. Sang Mi was in utter agony. Worse pain she’d ever felt in her life. Her leg kept spasming, the muscles and tendons inside twisting. It wasn’t going away. It wasn’t going away, no matter how hard she stretched.

A young woman was kneeling over her, desperately trying to calm her down. Sang Mi barely could pay attention to what the woman was saying though. Hell, all that Sang Mi could really make out through her tears was the woman’s ginger hair and nametag with the word ‘Scarlette’ on it.

“Honey, honey? You okay?” Scarlette asked.

“NO!” Sang Mi screamed. “It won’t stop! It won’t go back!”

“Sang Mi!” a male voice shouted. Scarlett turned to see Harold along with a tall blond man. Said blond man raced over to the girl, who Scarlett guessed was Sang Mi, who was hyperventilating.

“Who’s that?” Scarlett whispered.

“Calls himself Chris Cwej,” Harold muttered. “He knows about... our line of work too.”

“Hey, hey,” Chris said, holding onto Sang Mi. “Calm down, calm down. Tell me what happened.”

“It won’t stop,” Sang Mi cried. “My leg is still cramping.”

Chris frowned. The wheels turned in his head. It was all coming together. “You’re not alone in that,” he said.

“So is it... alien?” Scarlett interjected. She sniffled. Why wouldn’t her nose feel normal, damn it? She’d wiped it at least a dozen times.

“Maybe,” Chris said. He helped Sang Mi to her feet. She held her stomach and her legs shook slightly. “But what exactly, I don’t know.”

“Well should we go into the airport itself then?” Harold suggested. “See what we can find?”

“Yeah,” Chris distractedly replied. “Sang Mi, can you walk?”

“I think so.” Her legs were still shaking, but the tears stopped. She took a deep breath and started to walk towards the T.S.A. line, Chris holding her hand as Scarlett and Harold followed behind them.

* * *

So much delicious suffering. So much delicious food. It watched, devouring the misery with an insatiable appetite. So many people. So many sources. Especially those four. It kept a close eye on them. Their misery was so satisfying. The blond one though... he looked like trouble. Felt like trouble too. So did the girl. It would have to hide in the shadows as usual.

But those two, oh their misery was so filling, regardless of the trouble. So delicious...

* * *

The main concourse of the airport didn’t seem to reveal anything unusual. Crying babies, the angry voices in the T.S.A. line and loudspeaker announcements of cancelled flights. Including Scarlett and Harold’s once again.

ATTENTION. FLIGHT 904, HEADING FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM AT 10 A.M., HAS BEEN DELAYED. WE EXPECT THE DELAY TO LAST TWO HOURS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATIENCE.

“Bloody hell,” Harold muttered. “Could this day get any worse?”

“Don’t jinx it, swee...snooort...sweetheart,” Scarlett said, blowing her nose yet again.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Harold mussed up his hair again. Damn it, why wouldn’t it stay the way he liked it?

“Yeah, it’s probably just allergies,” Scarlett replied.

“Or another part of what’s going on here,” Chris grunted. He started to sway. His vision grew spotty and he became light headed. A trail of blood trickled behind him.

“What do you mean by that?” Scarlett asked, nose dripping.

Chris didn’t respond right away. He turned around, facing the group, and looked them in the eyes.

“All of us have something going on that won’t stop,” he began. “Sang Mi’s leg is cramping, my cut won’t stop bleeding, Scarlett’s nose won’t stop dripping—”

“And I can’t get my hair right,” Harold finished.

“Precisely,” Chris said. “And no matter what we do, it won’t stop. That’s not natural. Something’s affecting us.”

“But what about everyone else?” Sang Mi asked. “They’re not like us. They’re acting normally...”

Chris racked his brain and spun in a circle to take in every inch of the airport: the screaming babies, people waiting in lines—everything that seemed normal. Just like it was when he’d entered.

“I’m not sure everything’s normal,” Chris said. “Take a look.”

“We did,” Scarlett said. “All typical airport bullshit.”

“Yes, and that’s the point,” Chris stood tall, spurned on by the discovery he’d made. “Come on, follow me.”

Harold and Scarlett marched on after him, Sang Mi limping along beside them. He stopped at the T.S.A. line that they’d run past only a few minutes before.

“Right here,” Chris said. “That’s the proof. What do you notice?”

Harold and Scarlett glanced at the scene: people waiting in line, the scanner beeping, the lack of a security guard in the chair...

“The guard isn’t there,” Scarlett answered.

“And because of that, they can’t move,” Chris said. “It’s all stopped. All the announcements, all the delays—nothing’s coming to a conclusion. All the most miserable parts of the airport experience, and they don’t seem to be ending anytime soon.”

“Like we’re frozen in time?” asked Harold.

“Maybe not time, but rather in state,” Chris said. “We’re in the space between destinations. Just like an airport.”

“So what are we gonna do now?” Sang Mi asked, fighting back her discomfort.

Chris frowned. He glanced at the plaque—the first red flag, that should have tipped him off from the very beginning.

“This whole airport is suspicious,” said Chris. “And if we’re in the space between destinations, then we need to choose a destination and leave.”

“How?” Harold asked. “Our plane’s delayed, and if you’re right, it’ll be delayed over and over again.”

“Hold on, let him cook,” said Scarlett. “You’re talking about leaving the airport, right?”

Chris nodded. “A destination doesn’t need to be forward. We can go backwards, and that means leaving.”

* * *

It scowled. The shadows surrounded it, turning itself into something corporeal, leaking from behind the plaque. They couldn’t leave. Not the two at least. They were in so much pain, it was delightful.

But for the briefest of moments, it wondered if the ones sure to be trouble were worth keeping. After all, they were out of sync. One wrong move and it would lose more than a meal, but its life.

The hesitation, however, lasted merely a moment. After all, it consoled itself, hadn’t it done riskier things before? Every single combatant was out of sync on the battlefield which it had fed back in 1863. They could’ve killed it with so little effort, and yet it had been so clever, hiding in the shadows, in the weeds, watching as the two sides fought.

It could handle these two. All it needed to do was keep them in.

* * *

“There’s the exit!” Scarlett shouted.

The four started making their way towards the doors, the very doors through which Chris and Sang Mi had entered. Around them were blissfully unaware travelers, their only certainty being long lines and wait times.

“Can’t we warn them?” Sang Mi croaked, still leaning on Chris. Her eyes were nearly dry, all moisture having been expelled through her tears.

Chris shook his head. “It’s too risky. We don’t know what’s causing this, and if we disrupt it, who knows what could happen.”

“Look,” Sang Mi protested, “whatever’s causing this clearly doesn’t want the people here dead. If it went to all the work to even create a fake plaque—”

“Let’s just get out of here,” said Harold, “before we alert any—”

Too late. A black shadow-like figure emerged from the wall, rippling and changing nearly every second. Its body shifted, shape to shape, from humanoid to monstrous, never staying in one for too long. Its only constant were dark tendrils that emerged from every orifice, thin and long, stretching out as far as the eye could see. The tendrils floated in front of the door, ripping Harold’s hand from the handle and knocking him back. The main body of the creature floated over to block the exit, glaring directly at the four as the rest of the airport ran in horror. A young boy tripped, falling into the luggage of a woman ahead of him. A man grabbed him, pulling him up into his arms as he ran, his bloodshot eyes looking back in terror.

To the confusion of those gathered, a crackly voice spoke over the chaos and screams, emitting from the shadow figure.

“For the record, there was a battle here,” the voice said. “Just not *that* battle. What happened here was more a heavenly conflict. Such a shame that humans are so fragile—they had to fill in their own war to make sense of it.”

Chris reached for his pocket, only to remember that he didn't have his gun on him. Biting his lip, he turned to Scarlett and Harold, who shook their heads. Sang Mi, meanwhile, was kneeling on the floor, the pain of her leg unable to be released, stabbing deep into her soul.

"So," he began, trying to sound intimidating. "What's all this, huh?"

The dark figure laughed. "Really? Did you think that I was going to reveal what I was doing, give a big villain speech so you could 'save the day'?"

"Maybe," Chris admitted. "Wouldn't be the first time. But I've fought in a war, darling, one where we didn't even know our enemy's name."

"I know your war, where time itself stretched from end to end, wrapping around and around and around," the creature said. "Oh what lovely days those were. Such a wonderful place, so many moments between life and death..."

"So that's what you feed on, huh?" said Scarlett. "I think I get it now. The space between destinations, the misery of people stuck in the middle of two points."

"And that's why you're in an airport," Harold interjected. "Where else, but the place in-between all others?"

Sang Mi just groaned as she knelt on the floor.

"Very clever," the creature hissed. "But sadly, clever doesn't save you."

Multiple tendrils flung out from the main mass and grasped onto Harold and Scarlett. Lifting up off the ground, Cwej thrust his hand out to grab them, but they were already out of reach. More tendrils surrounded him and Sang Mi, cutting the two off from each other.

"What is this?" Chris shouted.

"A warning," the creature snarled. "You're going exactly nowhere."

Grunting, Chris balled his fists and swung them at the creature. To his surprise, the tendrils slicked back, revealing a small opening where he could see Sang Mi. She cried out as her body spasmed. The tendrils moved away from her as well, just outside her reach.

"*Interesting*," Chris thought to himself. He stepped forward. The tendrils moved further back and the creature scowled and hissed.

"One more step and these two die," it said, motioning to Scarlett and Harold.

"So you're afraid of me," Chris muttered. "And Sang Mi too."

"I'm warning you!"

"Okay, okay," Chris said. "So what do you want me to do?"

"You'll stay here," the creature growled. "Right here in this airport."

"So you can feed on me even more?"

"Indeed," the creature smiled. "Forever and ever."

“And you’ll release these two?”

“When you’ve walked far away enough, yes.”

Chris took a second to respond. An idea was running through his head, potentially a good one, but he needed to be sure it was going to work. “And what do you think is gonna make me walk away?” He crossed his arms, trying to look more confident than he felt.

“Well,” the creature said. “You’re something special, all right. But you’re still humanoid. Very humanoid. If you bleed out, you’ll never be able to help anyone.”

“Fine,” said Chris. He gave a look at all three of his compatriots, desperately hoping that it would be enough to convey his intentions. With a sigh, he marched away.

And oh, did he march. He had no intention of staying away for that long. He brushed past the wreckage and abandoned wreckage that dotted the floor, each footstep faster than the last. With a grunt, Chris flexed his muscles, ignoring the blood dripping down his side. This was going to hurt, but it had to be done.

Grabbing the T.S.A. officer’s abandoned chair, he smashed it into the wall where the plaque was located. Over and over again. The wood crumpled and cracked. Splinters dug into his fingers, drawing even more blood. Black spots dug into his vision, but he didn’t care. As soon as there were enough holes in the wall, he tossed aside the remnants of the chair and dug his hands into the cracks. Screaming, he pulled out that entire section of the wall, the plaque along with it. The veins on his temples bulged as he lifted the section of drywall over his head and ferried it back down the halls.

Breadcrumb-trails of blood dotted the floor behind Chris as he walked. He tried his best to ignore it—his timing had to be perfect. Blood poured down his body, but he carried on. Step by step, he moved forwards.

Time was a blur. He was here now, at the edge of the hallway, vision so fuzzy he could barely see. The section of wall shook in his hands and he knew he would collapse any minute now. Except... maybe he wouldn’t. Maybe that creature’s little stunt meant that his muscles would never give out.

The creature was counting down. He could hear its slimy voice in the fringes of his perception. At least it seemed to be keeping his word. But that wasn’t good enough.

With a strained grunt, Chris heaved the drywall over his head and crashing down to the ground. The weakened structure exploded. A cloud of dust blew into the air, plaster and debris, flying in all directions. The plaque, severed from its mountings, ricocheted off the floor and spun in the air, right towards the creature. It hissed and ducked out of the way, dropping Harold and Scarlet in the process. Still spinning, the projectile smashed into the door behind it, embedding itself into the frame and shattering the glass in the process.

The creature turned towards Chris, but he was already in the air, diving towards the monster. With a smile, Chris slammed into the creature so hard that the two became one. Tendrils flailed as Chris clung tight.

“I know why you’re scared,” Chris snarled. “Sang Mi and I, we’re not traditional travelers. Our destinations are beyond the very boundaries of this universe. We’re beyond your space between destinations.”

Flesh melted, shadows folded. The two seemingly melded into each other. The creature’s body seemed to morph into memories, as Chris and it became intertwined.

Chris saw it: an unimaginable war, one he knew all too well, had been brought to a definitive conclusion by his own biodata. In that terrible conflict, the creature seemed to weave through it like a parasite, feeding off moments in time on the secondary fronts, trenches on the outskirts of the conflict.

When the battle came, Chris shivered at the sight. Whilst both sides sought death, the creature prevented any of it: a stalemate of perpetual injury. Not a single combatant would die. Not on that field in Northern Pennsylvania, where any native bystander would go mad at the sight.

But even that wasn't enough. When the war ended, the creature remained, starving. As V-Time moved on, it began to die. That was until the airport was built, a space where little miseries were commonplace. Not enough to sustain its voracious appetite, but enough to keep it alive. A black echo, feeding on scraps until it was strong enough to emerge.

The creature howled in pain. Its body contorted as it in turn saw Chris's memories: childhood, adolescence, meeting Roz, the Defector, the Superiors, W-Time, Larles and Kwol, rebellion. Change after change after change. And with each glimpse it saw, it began to shrink.

"You are just an echo," said Chris, emerging from the mass. "One that's long past its welcome."

The creature let out a scream, as its writhing form continued to shrink. The sound grew quieter and quieter, its body smaller and smaller, until nothing remained.

Normality returned. Crowds of people rushed around them, desperate to catch their flights. A crackle and bleep of a radio sounded to their left, as airport security returned to their post. And above it all came a cry of relief from Sang Mi.

Chris raced over to her, no longer afflicted by the cut to his side.

"Is it over?" she asked.

Chris nodded. "It's over."

* * *

ATTENTION. FLIGHT 904, HEADING FOR THE UNITED KINGDOM, WILL DEPART IN 25 MINUTES.

"Guess I'm gonna have to go soon,," said Harold. "I don't suppose there's time for a debrief?"

Chris shook his head. "That's probably for the best. No use letting that echo take up any more space in our heads. Time for it to fade away for good."

Reluctantly, Harold nodded. "Are you and Sang Mi going to be alright?"

"We'll be fine," Chris said. "We've been through worse on this odyssey of ours."

* * *

The car ride was silent. Sang Mi gazed out of the window as the airport passed out of sight, to be replaced with the trees and suburbs of Northern Pennsylvania. Golden edges of sunlight shone in their eyes. No one said anything. Not even the radio played. No echoes, just silence.

STOP!

By Theta Mandel

I've always thought it indicative of the arrogance of the human condition for people to assume they know of every monster.

Humans have this victim complex, you see; they like to imagine that the unknown is made up entirely of big bads that go bump in the night, licking their chops, desperate to skin alive any human being they come across. Survival mechanism, so they don't go looking for things in the dark and fall where no one can find them, or maybe they just want to imagine that they are hunted, so they can celebrate that they have survived. Whatever the reason, this complex blinds them, stopping them from taking something really quite obvious into account—any creature they can imagine is alive, and all living creatures share a common need. Do you know what it is?

That's alright, you'll figure it out.

Mighty presumptuous, to refuse to consider that the darkness doesn't have to be evil. Mighty lonely, too, if you happen to live in the dark.

Maybe there are some monsters they haven't met yet. Not under the bed, or in the closet, or even in the woods—this one, for example, lives in a stop sign. An abandoned stop sign, if such a thing is even possible; if you saw this stop sign, you would certainly think so. All rusted edges and peeling paint. You can't even read the word; you probably only know what it is because you recognise the shape. The blood-red paint is all but gone, the meaning eroded, and it is in this liminal space between "Stop!" and Gone that anything can happen. Anything in between.

There is a car, now, hurtling towards that stop sign. Its orange paint is eroding too, giving it that special touch of magic you only see in old cars and ghostly stop signs, but it is not quite kin. Will its occupants see the sign? Will they know its meaning, heed its warning?

"Hey, it's getting dark—we should probably pull in somewhere for the night soon," the larger human said, speeding right past the sign. "Though, I don't remember seeing a motel on the map... How do you feel about another night on the mattress in the back?"

The smaller human beside him groaned. "Again? How long is this journey, anyway?"

"Well, it didn't have to be as long as it has been, but..."

"We keep stopping?"

"We keep stopping," he confirmed, taking no notice as he passed the stop sign once again.

The same stop sign.

* * *

Cwej and Sang Mi were playing a game of Go Fish when they first sensed something was wrong.

Slap! Went Cwej's cards onto the mattress they'd wedged into the bed of the Honda. "And that's my fifth pair," he proclaimed, spreading out two sevens. "I'm winning."

“Still think we should be playing the version where you need all four, not just a pair,” Sang Mi grumbled. She’d only played three matches. “Would be more fun with more players, too—I wish my brother was here. We’d always play games together.”

The air grew colder, a sharp breeze striking through the trees around them. Sang Mi shivered.

“Well, don’t worry, you’ll be back with him soon. We’re not that far from West Virginia now. Could be there in another day or two, easy.”

She looked askance, before her attention shifted. “Do you feel that?”

Cwej looked up from his hand. “Feel what?”

His young charge drew her shoulders in, looking around nervously. “Like... someone watching us.”

They slept under the stars that night, trying to ignore the churning air and the whispers among leaves that sounded more like shrieks. Sang Mi tossed and turned, unable to shake the feeling, despite Cwej’s best assurances, that there was something not right. He did his best, he really did, but he just didn’t feel it like she did. *No monsters under the car, I checked. Well, check again!*

* * *

The next morning, they woke up to a cloudless sky, a couple hundred miles away. You can still feel them, where they slept, and you wonder if they have a way to check the date.

“Can you remember what you dreamed last night?” Sang Mi asked, stretching before getting back into the car. It smelled like doritos. It *always* smelled like doritos.

Cwej shrugged. “I don’t really dream.” *At least, not dreams I’d like to remember.*

“Everyone dreams.”

They got back into the car, and talked about mundane things. How she was doing at school, his more child-friendly missions. Neither noticed when they passed a stop sign. It was rather old, rusting and peeling and eroding into nothing, but the meaning was still there, if you cared to look.

That night, before going to bed, Cwej got out his pack of cards. There really did seem to be nothing that bag of his didn’t contain.

“Wanna play some Go Fish?”

Sang Mi frowned. “I don’t know, I’m kind of bored of... wait, no, when did we...” She shook her head. “How about you teach me a new game? One I don’t know.”

Cwej furrowed his brow, concerned, but quickly moved on. “Oh, alright—how about some Vexjhi?”

“What’s that one?”

“Well, it’s common among children on Merinos One, but I actually learned it from a smuggler. I was on a mission with my friends, you see, and Larles said something to one of the customers...”

The pair played a few rounds, but the rules were complicated, and Sang Mi quickly got tired of losing. She was used to being good at games. It was kind of her thing. This card game, however, was proving a

different story. She moved to gather up the cards to put back into the box, but when her hand touched the top of the pile...

“Hey, Chris?”

He turned to look at her from where he was wrestling with the mattress. “What’s up?”

“Well, it’s just... do you ever get *déjà vu*?”

He sighed. “All the time. I think everyone does, but, when your life’s as complicated as mine... let’s just say time travel and muddled memories don’t exactly make an ordered mind.”

She let out the kind of noise you make to show you’re listening, but don’t really have anything else to say, and went back to packing away the cards. They slept under the stars that night. Cwej knew that Sang Mi was having trouble sleeping, and he could feel why—something was watching them. He didn’t know who or what, but he could feel it, the same way he could feel something wrong with time. Something local, something personal, something on repeat... he usually had someone watching him, and that someone was usually messing with time, so, he tried not to think about it. And he really tried not to think about what it meant if his Superiors were watching, if they knew how far he was stretching their rules... it could be very, very bad for both of them.

Best to ignore it for now, and try to get some sleep.

* * *

The next day—the *same* day—Cwej and Sang Mi started a few hours away from the stop sign. Sang Mi happened to turn her head and spot it as they were passing, but they were not passing, they were Past, and it was Gone. The night was drawing in, and she didn’t really See—it was quite eroded, anyway, whatever it had been. Probably nothing.

That night, despite his best and most concerned protests, Cwej was convinced to teach Sang Mi poker. Neither of them slept more than a few fitful hours, and when they woke up, there was not a cloud in the sky, and they were a few hours away from the stop sign.

* * *

“The wind howls so mournfully,” Sang Mi remarked, “almost as if it wants something. Like a dog, left out in the cold.”

“Maybe it is,” Cwej mused. “Cold, or lonely. Maybe it’s been forgotten.”

It was an uneventful game of bridge. Sang Mi stayed up all night, just thinking, and yet didn’t see when the hours rolled over, and they were the same, recycled hours. Familiar, so familiar you don’t even notice that they’re there. *They never notice.*

* * *

Today was the same day and the same day would bring the same cloudless sky, the same tree-lined road, the same—

“STOP!” Sang Mi cried, and Cwej slammed on the breaks.

“What? What’s wrong?”

She looked to her right, taking notice of what no one ever does—something old and discarded on the side of the road. It was a rusty metal pole, the kind that was all spotted and covered in grime, but there was something so familiar about it. And then she looked up. Suddenly, she knew why she needed to stop—why they'd *been* stopped, stuck in some half-remembered dream of a pattern, why this road looked so familiar and why they couldn't move on. Because she was sure, now, that they hadn't moved in a while, even if the calendar said otherwise—hadn't moved in space, or in time. You shouldn't ignore a stop sign.

"Look, at the top of that pole... I recognise it, I think. Stop signs on Gongen aren't that shape, or that color, but... there's something about it. I can't explain it, it just *is* a stop sign."

Cwej looked around. "It's not like there's anyone watching."

"That doesn't mean we don't have to stop. The rules don't stop mattering just because no one's looking—you used to be in law enforcement, right? You should know that."

I don't just disappear because no one's looking.

Cwej sighed. "The rules don't mean as much to me nowadays... I rarely see a fair one. But, maybe there are still some that are necessary. Maybe I'd forgotten."

"Good job I'm here to remind you, then."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is." The air was still as the pair looked at the stop sign. It was old, probably meant to be removed, but received a stay of execution simply by virtue of being forgotten. There was a lot like that in the world, remnants of the past that had been left behind, for better or for worse.

The soldier and the student sat on the bed of their rusty old car as the night drew closer, playing a game to pass the time. They could have moved on, kept driving a little longer, but there was something in the air, like someone was begging for their companionship, just for a little while. They obliged.

Not all humans are arrogant. Not all the time.

Cwej thumbed through a pack of cards, shuffling them well. Sang Mi said she was ready to try Go Fish again—maybe this time would be different, not that there'd been a last time, not really. Maybe she'd find what she was looking for—and Cwej found himself dealing out three hands. One for him, one for Sang Mi, and one for...

"There's only two of us," Sang Mi remarked, and Cwej looked down at the third hand. He didn't know why he'd done that, but it felt kind. Drawing himself up, he looked at the sky—it was calm tonight, and the stars were showing. Maybe there was someone, out there, who was by themselves and just wanted someone to play with. Waiting to be included.

"It's like... Elijah's hand," he replied, and Sang Mi laughed.

"Like Passover! There's a girl in my class, Hannah, and she gave a presentation about it for culture week. It's a Jewish tradition of leaving out an extra cup during Seder for the prophet Elijah—it's an invitation for anyone to come and join the feast who needs to, and to bring hope for the future. Everyone could use a bit of hope."

Cwej smiled. They played a few rounds—which was a bit difficult, what with them missing seven cards, but it was a nice gesture. Offering a hand to anyone who needed it—you don't have to be scared of the dark. The monsters get lonely, too.

Maybe she felt it because she knew more of what it was like to be lonely. Maybe it was just because she was on the passenger side, closest to the side of the road. Or maybe she was just younger, and had not been so hardened by a cruel world as the puppet-soldier, beholden to unfair rules. Though, he had still noticed, even if it did take him a little longer... maybe, he was not as lost as he thought. Maybe there was still hope.

Have you worked out the answer to my question? Oh come on, you remember—I asked you if you knew what common need all living creatures share. I think you’ve worked it out now, but if you haven’t, I’ll tell you—it’s to belong. Everybody needs someplace to feel a part of, to be included in something bigger than yourself. The girl had her friends, and the man had his ideals, and together, they had hope.

Cwej and Sang Mi slept peacefully through the night, and, in the morning, they left the stop sign behind.

They may have taken the cards with them, but they left by that sign on the side of the road a little of the joy they had brought. Not gone, but multiplied, because it was shared. Even from a rusty old stop sign in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by nothing but trees, I was not forgotten. As long as a passing human would be willing to open up their hearts and leave a space for me, deal an extra hand—yes, I was sure.

I would not be lonely.

The Flatwoods Fractal

*By Aristide Twain
Illustrated on the cover by Leela Ross*

The woods were still, and dark, and silent.

Why did people speak of things going bump in the night? It wasn't even night, just late evening—and even now, watching the trees racing past the window of the Honda, Sang Mi found the silence far more uncanny than any mysterious growl. She was almost glad of the occasional, eerie glimpse of another pair of tail-lights ahead in the distance, matching their speed, dipping in and out of view as the road twisted.

Flatwoods. Somehow, the name fit. It wasn't that the terrain was particularly flat—not in any way that would register to a girl used to perfectly-even, terraformed environments—but there was an eerie evenness to these forests, as if the rows upon rows of pine trees on each side of the road were simply painted backdrops, and the road an oppressive corridor whose walls might at any moment press together and crush them.

Chris was driving slowly. He'd been driving slowly all throughout the trip; that was the point of this diversion, after all, as it had been the point of all the others. A bit more time. Taking things slow, one stop at a time. Somehow, irrationally, she found herself wishing he'd speed up; wishing this particular leg of their road trip could be over already. She repressed the urge to voice that need. She'd been the one to suggest they drive through Flatwoods, after all; the Phantom of Flatwoods had been one more name on the cryptid checklist, one more legend to *investigate* at a leisurely pace of their choosing. And they were nearly at the end of their journey, now—running out of viable ways to extend it. What sense would it make to call it off now, when they'd barely gotten started?

But the silence was *getting* to her, all the same, and by the looks of him, Chris Cwej himself seemed equally ill-at-ease. His chiseled jaw was clenched, and his hands gripped the primitive car's steering wheel more tightly than anything about the situation could rationally justify. Eventually, she worked up the will to speak.

"So," she said, in the kind of falsely casual tone that wasn't actually intended to fool anyone about her state of mind, "what do you think we'll find, if we find something?"

Sang Mi felt a momentary warmth, seeing a bit of tension leave her friend as the silence was broken.

"I'm not sure," he said finally. "A ship, maybe. According to those reports you found, some kind of spacecraft was seen landing here in 1952. But no one saw it leave."

"Could have been cloaked," she suggested.

"Well, maybe. But why would they let themselves be seen on the way down? No, this smells like a crash to me. Ship too wrecked to take off again, at a guess. The pilot clambered out, spooked those farm kids who called it in... and then, I don't know. They've never been seen again around these parts, and not for lack of people looking. Maybe they contacted someone up there and got picked up, or they made it to a bigger city and joined up with the local alien underground. Even without groups like SIGNET, castaways and refugees tend to help each other."

"Cool. Yeah, that all sounds... plausible."

They drove on for just long enough that the looping spectacle of trees whooshing past in the twilight gloom began to make Sang Mi's skin crawl anew.

"...But you don't sound very convinced," Sang Mi added.

"It's the *species*," Chris confessed. "You've seen what it looked like."

"What's wrong with that? Judging by that novelty chair we saw when we passed through the town, I think it looks pretty cute. That little round head!"

"Oh, sure," Chris agreed. "Love the chair, it's a great chair—they'd hardly put it in front of the town hall if it wasn't. Remind me to send you that picture I took, when this is all over." He blinked, as if sorry he'd brought up the endpoint of their odyssey. "But—it doesn't look like any species I know. And believe me, I *ought* to know. Back at the Academy, I was drilled on every spacefaring species in the quadrant. *None* of them fit the bill, not remotely."

He seemed about to say something more—then paused.

After a while, he took his eyes off the road to check on his friend in the passenger seat. Upon seeing the unmistakable I-saw-that look on Sang Mi's face, he reddened and instantly gave in.

"...None of them except... creatures I *really* hope we never meet," he admitted. "Creatures from the Time of Legends, unbound by the laws of the Superiors—hardly even a species, in the modern sense of the word. They're almost... elemental. Creatures of absolute fear. The stories say they looked sort of vegetal; big, round, reddish heads... You know jack-o'-lanterns? The Halloween tradition?"

"...Yeah?" Sang Mi blinked. "We've got Halloween back in Cheonsa. Never really got the pumpkin thing, though, to be honest. I hardly ate anything else when I was in the hospital, so I speak from experience when I say—pumpkin porridge is *not* spooky."

"No, it isn't, is it?" Chris said with wry tension. "But *Hervoken* are terrifying, and early humans got the image from them. The whole scary-scarecrows thing, actually. Why is a man made of twigs with a gourd for a head supposed to be *scary*? Well, *they're* why." Then he blinked. "Or anyway, that's where *this* Earth got it from. Not sure about *your* universe. But... let's just say—if your world ever *had* Hervoken, you'd better pray they're extinct *now*."

"Hervoken," Sang Mi repeated, tasting the word. Chris took his eyes off the road, driving on instinct, and met her eyes. "And they're supposed to be extinct here too?"

"That's what the Superiors say," Chris told her with a hint of weariness as well as unease. "But... well, you've got to wonder why they'd bother briefing me about them, if they *really* believed that."

"I think you might be right," said Sang Mi, rushing the words with a sudden urgency which vaguely confused Chris until she added, in a much louder shriek: "*Brake!*"

He stopped the car dead a few feet from the figure which stood, still as a tree, in the middle of the road.

"Bloody H—what is *that*?!"

It was lanky and strange, with a head like a big round tomato, its only features a pair of luminescent eyes. A collar shaped like the Ace of Spades framed that head from behind, but Chris and Sang Mi knew, somehow, that the creature wore no clothing. The flaps of the long skirt that shrouded its body looked more like vegetal fronds than any kind of cloth or armour. And then there were the arms, twig-like, thin, oddly

stunted, with long, clawed fingers. The left was hanging limply at its side, but it was holding the other out in front of its chest, claw-hand out-stretched, palm forwards. The gesture was jarringly human.

Chris's head moved quickly back and forth between Sang Mi and the creature. They'd seen worse things by now, stranger, angrier things. But their hearts were thumping just the same as if they'd been a pair of lost children, and they felt a strange vertigo rising up within their chests.

"Chris, I feel —"

"I know," he told her quickly, not raising his voice, hands gripping the wheel. "I'm getting it too."

"It's like... I've felt this before," she told him. "Once or twice. When I was using —"

She cut herself off before she said *Delirium*, but he seemed to take her meaning just the same.

"Like the ground's vanishing beneath your feet? Just sinking and sinking, and you're going to be sick—you're going to bleed out, and you don't know what to do?" He gulped and screwed up his face. "That's not drugs. It's because we're—sensitive. You and I. To certain things. You more than me, I think, but with what I've been around, the people I've worked with... I can feel it, too. Damn—never felt it this strongly before. But I know what it means. It's *reality* that's askew."

"And that thing is responsible?" asked Sang Mi, pointing at the alien.

The creature hadn't moved a muscle—if it even had muscles. Its eyes remained fixed on them, unblinking.

"But... but it just *appeared*," she went on. "One moment it was there, one moment it wasn't."

"Teleportation's fairly common tech by this century, in this dimension," Chris replied. "Well, not for humans. You know what I mean. But..."

She followed his train of thought exactly; neither of them bothered to say it. If the stranded alien had a working teleport, why would it still be here, five decades later? She found her gaze drawn back to the unmoving figure. There was something profoundly strange about it, something ghostly. It wasn't translucent or anything so theatrical, and it took a moment for Sang Mi to spot it. When she did, she froze a moment before getting Chris's attention and attempting a wordless gesture. After a moment his own eyes widened, and she knew he'd got it.

The Honda's headlights were shining directly upon the phantom. And still it cast no shadow on the road behind it.

Suddenly, as if sensing that its nature had been probed, the phantom stirred to life. It moved slowly, even so, gliding like mist; but all the same, it was moving, and moving towards them.

Chris and Sang Mi stared at each other out the corners of their eyes, neither of them now daring to stop watching the creature completely. They remained silent, breath bated, until the apparition reached the hood of the Honda—and went *through* it as if through a hologram.

"Get out of the car!" Chris shouted. "Out! Out! *Out!*"

Even as he spoke, he pushed the door open and unstrapped his seatbelt, jumping out of the vehicle like a trooper into action. Sang Mi hesitated for a moment, her hand halfway to the handle of her own door, before she decided that she had better not split up from him; unbuckling her own seatbelt, she crawled as fast as she

could over his empty driver's seat and followed him out of the door on *his* side of the car. Out in front, the creature was still slowly, slowly gliding *through* the engine; its outstretched hand was almost touching the windshield.

Chris took her hand as she got out of the car, and helped her find her footing; and then they were running, off the road, into the woods—hand in hand, without looking back.

* * *

Sang Mi couldn't have said how long they kept running. It didn't seem like a prolonged effort, more like a single moment of fear and exertion, stretched out until it was almost unbearable. Neither she nor Chris were strangers to running, to say the least, but eventually they had to stop, lungs burning, pulse beating a samba. Sang Mi collapsed into an almost foetal crouch, then, confirming with a glance that the ground was soft and mossy, let herself sit down in earnest. Chris stopped a second later, looking back to see her there, and he turned round to join her.

"...I don't think it's chasing us," she told him when their eyes met.

He swallowed, and nodded. "Agreed. I think... Goddess, it sounds stupid. I think it wanted the car."

Sang Mi felt herself chortling, despite the hoarseness of her throat and the adrenaline in her veins. "...*What?*"

"Think about it," he explained, tilting his head and spreading those thick, long arms of his. "It's a crashed pilot, yeah? Powers know what species, but *stranded*, anyway. Stranded here for decades, and it clearly didn't make contact with humanity, for whatever reason-. I think it wants off this planet. I think it must have recognised you and me—time-sensitives—as higher lifeforms, not native to this time and place... so it figures our vehicle must be advanced technology it could use to escape."

Sang Mi thought for a moment, and straightened, looking Chris dead in the eye.

"...Well, it's not entirely wrong, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well—you're saying it's basically a hitchhiker, aren't you?" Sang Mi replied. "Sure, the Honda won't get it where it wants to go, but maybe *we* can help. Can't you, I dunno, contact those Superiors of yours? You told me they see themselves as peacekeepers, sorting out Time and Space and all that. Sending a stranded creature home ought to be within their wheelhouse, even if it's dangerous."

"*Especially* if it's dangerous," Chris granted. "But—uhm—my T.M. comms unit was in the trunk."

She blinked at him. "I thought you had some sort of telepathic link to your bosses. Is it only one-way?"

"No..." groaned Chris as he began to stand up again, brushing twigs and dead leaves off his trousers. "But it's delicate stuff. See, it's not exactly *telepathy*. I'm connected to the Vicinity, and that means I'm connected to the Threads of the Infinite Spiral of Space-Time Itself—and the Base of Operations is built, basically, on *top* of the Astral Nexus, where all those threads converge. The eye of the storm."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

Chris shrugged. "It's... a place of power. They keep it in their basement."

“Uhuh,” Sang Mi nodded, not without sarcasm. “I hope you realise how that all sounded.”

He gave her a wan smile as he offered her a hand and helped her to her feet in turn. “You have no idea,” he told her. “But my point is, it only works when the structure of reality itself is nice and orderly. And let me tell you... What we’ve been feeling, you and I... There’s something *very wrong* with Space and Time in these woods.”

“Y-you can say that again,” said Sang Mi, letting go of his hand as she took a step back—then *pointed*, eyes wide, over his shoulder. “Look!”

Chris Cwej whirled round, bracing himself for the sight of the green phantom, the thing without a shadow, stalking them once more. What he found, what Sang Mi had spotted, was altogether more disquieting.

There, in the distance, barely visible in the gloom behind the black bars of the tree-trunks, were two human silhouettes, standing quite close together. Looking directly at them. One was a tall, broad man with long arms and square shoulders. The other was a girl with a skirt, her hair styled in a bob.

She was pointing.

Chris swallowed.

“Ah.”

He inched closer to Sang Mi and took her hand again. The other Cwej did the same with the other Sang Mi.

“*Ah*,” Chris said again, and Sang Mi felt a chill down her spine as she faintly heard the same remark coming from the duplicate Cwej, with not the slightest time-delay.

“Chris?” she asked him in barely more than a whisper, just so she wouldn’t hear those words coming out of her other self’s mouth. “What’s happening? It’s not a shapeshifter, is it?”

“No such luck. Don’t —” he paused “— be afraid. Not of... *them*,” he added with a vague gesture in the direction of their duplicates. “I don’t think they’re copies at all. I think they’re *us*. Literally us.”

“You don’t mean —”

“Oh, I do,” he exhaled, frowning with concentration. His grip felt tight around her fingers; not so tight that it was painful, but *anxious*. “Space-time is screwed up much worse than I thought. Gah, I should have seen it! That ride was taking *way* too long.”

“And those tail lights... Those car tail lights in the distance...” Sang Mi added in frightful realisation, still keeping her voice low.

“You’re right,” Chris confirmed grimly. “There was never anyone else on the road. It’s this forest. It’s folded up on itself, like—like a maze.”

“A fractal maze,” she added, staring, entranced, at her own face a hundred yards away. “No wonder that creature never found its way out, even after half a century. And—look,” she added.

So saying, she slipped her hand out of his grip and began to turn in place, scanning the dark horizon beyond the nearest trees. It didn't take long for her to spot yet another duo a quarter-turn away; a tall man standing still, and a girl spinning in place.

"Look over *there*," she said, grimly but without fear, pointing at that more distant pair.

Chris followed her gaze, and she saw in the way his eyes widened that he'd understood what she meant.

"...And *there*," he added in turn, pointing even further away.

"Chris," she asked him, turning back to him, in a level, serious voice. "How... How are we going to get out of here?"

"I... I don't know," he confessed.

She heard in his tone that he'd considered a comforting lie, for just a second, then chosen honesty. Just for that, she flashed him a brief, sad, but thankful smile. Then she took a moment to collect herself before smiling again, with as much genuine hope as she felt.

"There's got to be a way," she assured *him*. "We've been through worse. We've got our memories., this time. Our wits. And no one's *trying* to keep us here, are they?"

"No, I don't think so," he granted, drumming his fingers on his chin like a child playing at Sherlock Holmes. "I don't think it's a *trap*. Just an anomaly. A higher-dimensional ship crashed here, and it... cracked space itself. Like a crater tunneling into the fifth dimension. Accidental. Doesn't explain what the pilot is, how it could phase through the Honda like that, but... It's not malicious. Neither the place nor the creature."

"Exactly," said Sang Mi. "And if there was a way in, there must be a way out. We just have to find it. We just need..."

She trailed off, eyes widening again; Chris watched, confused, as she rocked back on a single heel and spun once more, then twice, then thrice. Suddenly she stopped and snapped her fingers.

"Of course. *Chris!* What was it you said? The *eye of the storm!*"

She fell to her knees and began to pat at the mossy forest-floor until she found a long, thin, sturdy twig.

"...what are you doing?"

"Space in this forest has been turned into a fractal," she explained with a kind of giddy franticness as she cleared away some of the moss and began to etch markings into the earth. "Don't you see? A spiraling fractal might be infinite, but it must have a *centre*. Like the Spiral of All Space and Time that your Superiors created. We just need... to find... the pattern."

She stepped back and beckoned Chris to look at her handiwork. With a remarkable eye for proportions, she had noted down the positions of all their duplicates in sight, then joined the dots to form a perfect spiral—and bisected it with a long, straight line. The path of their run.

"...Oh," said Chris, eyes shining with admiration. "Wow. I... wouldn't have thought of that."

"They do teach us a thing or two at Academy 27," she replied with an impish look that could not disguise her blush at the praise.

"I went to an Academy," he replied with a playful pout.

“Yeah, you said. And they taught you how to recognise every species in the galaxy except the one we needed today.”

They shared a stifled laugh, then joined hands again as they began to run anew. But this time—they knew where they were going.

* * *

The heart of the woods—the eye of the storm—didn’t look like much. It was barely worthy of being called a clearing; the trees were sparser here, younger, but it was the sort of thing which someone would only notice if they were already looking. Whatever area had been scorched clean by the original spaceship crash, the plant kingdom had begun to conquer anew half a century prior. There was no doubt that they had the right place, however. Stepping into the centre of the fractal, Chris and Sang Mi finally saw their spatial reflections vanish into an impossible angle and out of sight.

They looked at each other. It was Sang Mi who spoke.

“Well... we’ve made it. What now? We dig?”

“No,” Chris said with an odd graveness to his tone. “We’re going to have to do something much harder.”

Sang Mi repressed the urge to puncture that seriousness with some meaningless quip. Chris wouldn’t have said it that way unless he meant it, and what her friend needed right now, she felt, was for her to respect that fact. Hence, she slowly nodded, instead, repressing the urge to let her eyes wander over the trees and keeping her gaze fixed on the tall man’s face, in silent encouragement to continue his explanation.

“Most higher-dimensional ships have... minds of their own,” he told her. “Souls of their own. They’ve got to. A structure that complex, it can’t maintain itself without *knowing* itself. I think the ship that crashed in 1952 didn’t just bury itself down there from the force of the impact—I think it’s *hiding*, like a wounded animal. And that fear, that nausea we’ve been feeling... I got it wrong. Half-wrong. It *isn’t* the spatial distortion, not directly. We’re feeling what *it* feels.”

“And we need to draw it out? Gain its trust?” guessed a distressed Sang Mi. “But how do we do *that*?”

Chris tried to avert his gaze for just a moment, scratching the back of his head.

“Simple,” he replied. “We’ve got to show it that we understand it, that we understand its pain. That we want to help. Which means—that feeling of wrongness we’ve been talking about? That pain we’ve been distracting ourselves from?”

Sang Mi had guessed his next words many long seconds before he uttered them.

“We need to sit down and focus on it as hard as we can.”

* * *

No words could describe the work it took to summon the Ship. It wasn’t anything as trite as telepathy, as poetic as a wish upon a star. No sigils were etched, in skin or in the dirt; no incantations uttered. No palms were joined in prayer; not a word was uttered.

They simply stood in silence, side by side, at the eye of the storm—the man and the girl—and let themselves feel. The silent darkness of the woods was a blessing now; with only one another’s breathing to ignore, it was oddly easy to close their minds to the ills of the world and their situation; oddly natural to let

themselves *feel*. And all the things they'd been running from came flooding out. The fear, and the pain, and the *wrongness*.

She felt it clearly, keenly, intimately. A journey that should have been the briefest of visits, a little taste of that strange, beautiful place called Earth—extended, now, loop after loop, into an alluring fractal of places and people. And there was safety in that, though it should last forever. Who knew what lay beyond? They'd been away from home for such a long time, now. Had it changed? Had *they* changed? Home was such a tumultuous place, for all its allure.

How could they trade this silent peace for the chance of a war-song? Here, things were simple. Just them and their faithful companion. Their guide.

And things could *stay* that way forever, if they willed it hard enough. Making time was easy. Every loop could be looped back on itself, unto infinity. Fractal. How large was the forest? How far was it from Chicago to the Blue Ridge Mountain? As long as you liked. If you broke the rules, summer could last forever. And if not—if they let this *end* —

— they'd be alone. They might never see that special someone again. Friend. Companion. Mentor. *Pilot*.

And that hurt more than anything.

Sang Mi was crying. The tears were hot on her cheeks, and after all a while, she couldn't keep her eyes shut anymore. She opened them and wiped at them with the backs of her hands —

— and gasped in surprise.

There had been no great rumbling and moving of earth; no trees had been felled. But the Ship now hovered, suspended in front of Sang Mi and Chris, its geometrical form impossibly overlapping the tree-trunks like a poorly-rendered computer image. A perfect sphere, so flawless it looked unreal, its golden hull glowing with an inner light. Flawless in design, yes—

— but cracked.

“Well done,” said Chris, his wide eyes still brimming with tears of his own. “Well done... Well done,” he repeated, and Sang Mi didn't know if he was speaking to her or to the Ship. Perhaps, in this moment, there was no difference.

But it was definitely the Ship that he addressed when he stretched out a hand and touched the metal surface with boundless care.

“Now,” he asked it, “can you let us in?”

* * *

Dawn was breaking when they drove out of Flatwoods in the Honda. In silence. Only when the sign disappeared in the rear view mirror did Sang Mi dare to speak.

“Well... We found the Flatwoods Monster,” she said, wry, forlorn perhaps, but not unhappy. They'd done good—as good as anyone could have done. “And now it's gone forever.”

“I told the Ship to take its pilot home,” said Chris. “To its home planet. It's still there, I could promise it that much.”

Sang Mi nodded. She'd assumed as much, but the controls of the Ship had been nothing she could understand. Even Chris had seemed to struggle with them, after they'd moved the body—gently, ever so gently—out of the pilot's seat.

She didn't ask if Chris thought the creature would make it. They didn't know. *Couldn't* know. Nobody did; that was the point. The Ship itself hadn't known; it hadn't known if its pilot would heal from their injuries, it hadn't even known if *it* could survive the trip home without repairs that the pilot was in no condition to provide.

In both cases, it was... possible. They'd sensed that much from its aching, swirling thoughts. But the Ship hadn't wanted to gamble on those odds, whatever they were. For sixty years, it had delayed—hiding itself in a cocoon of repeated space-time, trapping an echo, a ghost of its pilot in the maze. Keeping them safe. Keeping them close. Keeping them lost and far from home.

But it had *known*, deep down, this couldn't last forever. All it had needed was a friend there to give it the strength to let go.

Sang Mi understood that. She understood it all too well.

So she didn't ask if the alien and Ship would survive; if they'd ever be reunited on other journeys, other adventures. Even if she could somehow get the answers, she didn't want to know. Not yet. The truth might hurt too much.

But the time for silence was past, so she asked a different question, using one hand to shield her eyes from the rays of the morning sun dead ahead.

"Do you know what it was, then? The pilot's home planet?"

Chris nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. "Yep. Ship was unmistakable—I know what species made it. And they're as old as the Hervoken, too, if you can believe it, only much... nicer. They're from another Galaxy altogether; I never expected to see one on Earth, and I'd never seen them in person. I only know about'em because they've been allies to my Superiors since, oh, before the Big Bang. If my bosses see to Time, *they're* the people who look after Space."

"Cool," said Sang Mi, her tone meditative. "I guess that makes sense." Then her mouth curled into a lopsided grin, and she elbowed the driver—lightly. "Well, go on then. Tell me the name."

He gave a subdued half-snort as he turned off the main road. "You'll laugh."

"Aw, I won't."

"You *will*! People always do, when they aren't *used* to intergalactic, uh, stuff. The universe is... big," he said, and she saw his hands twitch on the steering wheel, repressing the urge to spread out his arms for emphasis. "Big and populous. Which means there's bound to be coincidences. Sandy planets called Desertis Minor. Warrior races from the Militarius System. Doesn't mean anything, really, there's just as many punny planets in the sky no matter what language you speak—the ones I mentioned are just off the English list." He gave her an embarrassed smile. "I, er, don't know the Korean ones off the top of my head, sorry. Uhm... Okay. Here goes. The pilot... was what we call a Space Lord—from the planet Fractallax."

"*Hah!*" Sang Mi laughed, but the mirth of the joke was all in the telling; she doubted she'd have even noticed the oddly fitting syllables in that name, if Chris hadn't worked his way to it. "Frankly, I expected

worse. So the Lords of Space in your dimension are a bunch of plant people from a planet called Fractallax... Good for them. Good for them.”

“S’pose it is.” He was quiet for a moment—not meditative, just *thinking*. “Funny thing is, they usually keep to themselves. Sat out the Cosmic War and... everything. Wonder what one of them was doing on Earth, all on their own.”

“I think that’s their business,” she replied. “Don’t you? Oh, but about those planet names—one thing.”

“What’s that?” asked Chris Cwej.

The road ahead was clear and well-lit. He risked a head-turn, and found Jhe Sang Mi smiling at him with eyes full of hope.

“It’s okay you don’t know them off the top of your head—but next time, promise you’ll bring me a list of the funniest ones.”

He didn’t know whether to laugh, or to cry all over again. He settled for a smile to match hers. “Next time?”

She nodded decisively, and turned back to the road as Cwej did the same.

“Yeah. Next time.”

* * *

To be continued

Interview: Aristide Twain

Tell us a bit about yourself.

My name's Aristide Twain, and I'm an independent writer and editor based in France. I also dabble in translation and cartooning, I act a bit, I take close-up photographs of interesting plants, and I cook a smashing omelet. I'm also active in a number of online communities and projects, from Wikis to Forums, and I run the annual Jenny Everywhere Day event. Phew. Can you believe I have a life, as well?

Prose-wise, I've stuck my fingers in a lot of pies at Arcbeatle Press: I run the freshly-launched *Auteur* series, I've edited or co-edited a number of free holiday crossover anthologies from *The Book of the Snowstorm* to *The Noodle Incident*—and, of course, I've contributed to several preexisting ranges and projects, including *Cwej: The Series*. *The Flatwoods Fractal* is my first *Cwej* to hit the metaphorical stands, but it won't be the last, and it's not even the first one I wrote!

When did you know you wanted to be an author? Was it always something you considered a calling?

It would be simplest to say that I can't remember a time when I *haven't* thought of myself as a storyteller of some sort. I don't think of it as a *calling*, particularly, because I don't consider an artist to be a particular, exalted subtype of human being; creativity, in my view, is a pretty universal human trait. Everyone has stories to tell, if only to themselves. In my case, the awareness that I could and would create my own stories was not a separate epiphany but an inherent part of learning to read, even as quite a small child.

Because there's something active and playful about it, I've always felt—it's a two-person game, even when the author's long dead. Make-believe is at the very root of—well, of communication itself, really. Even with non-fiction, on some level, the medium requires you to pretend that you're engaging with a constructed author-persona who's no less imaginary than Doctor Watson. The Author is eloquent and relentless, it has all the facts in hand; it never stumbles or misspeaks; it has no face and it sounds like ink and paper. But as long as you're engrossed in the book, that incredible creature will coalesce in your mind, an unshakable fact of your mental universe.

As it stands, most of my earliest creative ventures were primary-school stabs at making comics—though somewhere on a dusty floppy disk, I probably still have a couple hundred words I typed at six or seven. I'd just begun secondary school when I wrote my first novella, which was absolutely wretched, though it had a madly ambitious premise that I think I might revisit one day, when I feel I can do it justice. No, I'm not telling. Then I just kept at it, and, hopefully, got better. I wish I could remember when I switched over from French to English as my creative language of choice; it was a function of the online company I keep, anyway, more than anything else.

Finally in 2019 I launched *The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids* with L. Alves, alias Lupan Evezan. At the time, it really didn't seem like the beginning of any kind of professional writing career; we did it because we had stories to tell, no more, no less. But little by little, that series opened doors for both of us, at Arcbeatle Press and beyond—and now look where that got you all, you can't get rid of me.

When did you first learn about Chris Cwej as a character? What were your takeaways on his portrayal? Have those changed since you got to know more about him in *Cwej: The Series*?

It's difficult for me to remember how I first learned of this or that character from the expanded *Doctor Who* universe, because I developed a working understanding of the deep magic very early on through many a happy night of Wiki-binging. Dreadful, I know, but I am who I am. Not for me the organic first meeting in *Original Sin*, or even a chance encounter in some latter-day novel; I knew who he was long before I read anything he was in. (Actually, thinking about it, I *believe* the first I heard of ol'Chris might have been a reference to his debatable status as the first bisexual *Doctor Who* companion—perhaps on El Sandifer's blog.)

As for the first actual Chris Cwej story I experienced, however, that's easy and perhaps cliché: yep, it's *Dead Romance*, Lawrence Miles's *New Adventures* novel which doubled as the backdoor pilot for *Faction Paradox*. Even coming to it with no prior firsthand experience of the more wholesome characterisation it sought to problematise, the character made quite a strong showing. He's so wonderfully broken in that one. And in all its myriad facets, I like the Third Universe as a setting because it's perfectly pitched to explore the relationship between the personal and the cosmic; Chris in *Dead Romance* is a kind of embodiment of that ethos, a likable man with simple needs and wants whom the grand space-wars of gods and monsters have shattered into a hundred jagged pieces then glued back together again, *almost* good as new.

Cwej: The Series builds squarely on those foundations, and for that reason, I wouldn't say that diving into the series radically altered my understanding of the character. But it takes everything I liked about him in *Dead Romance* and runs with it, while largely avoiding the pitfall of making him an overly generic vessel for sci-fi angst. Some of us might know people like him, but Chris is *not* an everyman; he's quite a specific and memorable character even when he's carefree and relaxed. That's why it's so interesting to put him through the wringer.

What are some of your favorite stories you've read with him? Arcbeatle or otherwise.

That's tough! That's tough. I'm on a first-name basis with half the *Cwej: The Series* writing team and a nonzero number of *New Adventures* veterans—what am I supposed to do, start a war? I can't just blather on about *Dead Romance* again, or even spring for something like Kate Orman's excellent *Room With No Doors*; it's facile, great as they are. You'd think the character hadn't advanced since the 1990s, and he has, he really has... I love cryptids and I love the Chris-Sang Mi friendship, so I've obviously been having a ball with *Odyssey*; but that's what you're all reading right now, there's no use recommending that—and besides, I'm in it. Too distant, too near: this is a proper *Goldilocks* predicament...

Alright: out of the stories in the seminal *Cwej: Down the Middle*, I suppose I'll spring for *The V Cwejes*. Five times the Cwej, a whirlwind of ideas, and all done up in Tyche McPhee Letts's peerless prose. If you look carefully through my *Cactus and the Corpse* (the *Auteur/Coloth* crossover in the 2023 Halloween anthology, *Horrors of Arcbeatle*), you'll find I even dropped it a little nod, as a token of admiration. It's also really quite witty, without ever feeling like it's digging an elbow into your ribs every other paragraph; that's a rare quality, but essential in this genre. Its Author never guffaws, but it has a twinkle in its paper eye.

Then of course there's Wylder's *And Today, You*, which achieves the rare feat of taking a cosmic smorgasbord of a premise that smashes three or four universes together, only to make it all feel intimate and organic. As I said before, that's exactly what I love about this universe and series.

I'll keep it at those two, but I could go on, I really could!

Are there some good experiences you wish to recall, regarding your work with Arcbeatle Press?

Well, obviously I've hated every minute of it, which is why I'm staying up late answering interview questions for a free digital zine—ach, of course I've loved it. It's really such a great community of creatives. If there's one thing I love in this world, it's Making Things Happen, and there's nothing more wonderful than seeing a long-form Arcbeatle project suddenly take shape. I hate storytelling-by-spreadsheet; fiction is a living thing, it shifts and evolves at the whim of those to make it. So some of my best memories at Arcbeatle involve those times when someone—sometimes worryingly close to the prospective deadline—will pipe up and say: 'well, what if we did X?', and, provided X is a good idea, a dozen talented people suddenly jump in and make it happen through the magic of teamwork.

Magic of teamwork—is that too corny for words? Ach, call it what you want, we put *Snowstorm* together in a month, and that was a monster so huge it skirted the limits of what we could physically print. *The Noodle Incident* was a faster turnaround still, and even when I thought I'd wrecked the whole thing by panicking on the big day, we pulled through and made a hilarious little thing I still remember fondly—just because everyone at Arcbeatle is so dashed friendly and go-getting. There's truly nothing like it.

And of course, *Cwej30* itself is another one of those lightning-in-a-bottle creations that wouldn't exist if not for the editors *and* community's shared willingness to jump in and give their all to a sudden burst of inspiration—because the moment was right, because we felt like it, because the tale of Chris and Sang Mi's oddball odyssey *wanted* to be told. I'm hugely grateful for the chance to pitch in myself, but even just *being* there as it all got started is a memory I'll treasure in itself.

What can you tell us about your future projects with Arcbeatle? Any details you wish to tease?

Well, right now the big one is *Auteur*. That's a whole new series—though it's been previewed in several of the holiday anthologies—spinning off one of *Faction Paradox*'s most outrageous and evocative characters, the mad bone god of writing and retcons, into an unfolding epic all his own.

Except it *isn't* all his own; where *Cwej: The Series* is very much the Further Adventures of Christopher Cwej, *Auteur* is largely about Auteur in the way that *Dracula* is about Dracula. Oh, you'll learn a great deal about what makes him tick, but he's the baddie, and each story in Volume One has its own protagonist I just can't wait for you to meet. *Auteur: Volume One* is moving, it's grand and gothic, it's clever, it's funny, and it's original. Or at least, that's the idea.

What else, *Auteur* aside? I'm still quite proud of the first *Cwej* I wrote: it's a tight little tale of dreams and desperation, and it's all about Death. Outside the Totality, I'm also working on an episode of *Steel Changelings* for the *Warsong* range. And with my editor hat on, I'll soon have the honour of introducing you all to *The Feline from the Stars*... but hush. All in good time.

Where can we find you on social media?

Well, I've got a good old-fashioned *website*, for starters; it's hosted at aristidetwain.neocities.org and hosts a complete list of my published work, a F.A.Q., recommendations for stuff to check out on the web, and plenty of other goodies besides.

But if that's not social enough, oh, there's no escaping me. I'm everywhere. I'm @aristidetwain on Tumblr and Discord, I'm /u/AristideTwain/ on Reddit, I'm even @AristideTwain on That Sodding Bird Site if you absolutely must.

Is there anything you'd like to say to fans on this 30th Anniversary?

Oh yes, and, besides the obvious heartfelt thanks for making this all worth it, what I want to say to them is this: *we're all counting on you!* I meant everything I said about writing being the next step to reading. *Cwej: The Series*, and indeed, Arcbeatle Press as we know it, would not exist if the previous generation of fans hadn't stepped up and made the jump. I can't wait to see what you'll all create in turn, in the coming thirty years;

Poetry

Fountain of Youth— Molly Warton

This death is no death to me; a birth
Is but a dying in the womb; a life
Is not so long I cannot live it; death
Is then a beauteous symphony in purple
And white, and yellow, and any other colour
That should cross my vision while I lie
In cold comfort. Men can only dream
Of darkness unlike the darkness known
Knowledge is a being of itself
A being of veils. Crude veils. Veils that block
Light and darkness, death and light, reality

Is this true? A truth is seldom found
So easy. But a lie is no foreigner
To this ease. Sussurance will bring
Cacophony to the silent one
Knowledge cannot be known, as death cannot be
Lived. From the afterbirth what
Can be divined but death? Two things are clear:
One, all things are murky. Two, that light
And darkness blind as well as the other
To one who looks. And looking is a death
And death is made of life for all that is.

In the Next Issue of
Cwej30

Cwej: Odyssey

*The journey has been long.
But every road trip comes to an end.
What has Sang Mi learned from Cwej?
Was learning from Cwej good?*

*Salome's auction awaits.
And something has been waiting in the wings
for a car to pull into town
for a long, long time...*

Don't miss the end of the Odyssey, next month.

See You Soon!

Avalabe Now: The Lost Fictionaut



Cosmic soldier Christopher Cwej is press-ganged by his old Superiors into a cryptic assassination mission—and soon finds himself trapped in the body of a fragile, mortal man, stranded in a bleak, monochromatic otherworld.

Dragged into a maelstrom of literary intrigue, pulp superheroics, and Ancient Greek arcana, Chris must forge himself a wildly new identity—or lose his soul in a war between gods.

A new standalone novel, by Gerard Power, in *Cwej: The Series*.

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