

A Christmas Codex



Edited by
James Wylder
& Aristide Twain

A Christmas Codex

Edited by
James Wylder & Aristide Twain
Associate Editors James Hornby,
Hunter O'Connell, Molly Warton



© 2024 Arcbeatle Press, All Rights Reserved

Stories included in this book are the properties of their respective writers, aside from any licensed elements.

These stories are works of fiction, any resemblance between persons living or dead, or events past or present, is purely coincidental. Any resemblance between other narratives or stories is purely coincidental or has been done firmly within the bounds of parody or satire. Names, character, locations, and events featured in this publication are either the product of the writer's imagination or used fictitiously. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means without express written permission of either the story's owner or Arcbeatle Press.

A publication of Arcbeatle Press, 2024. Arcbeatle Press is located in beautiful Elkhart, Indiana and is owned and operated by James Wylder.

This Book was typeset using a template provided by Eruditorum Press.

The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids & associated concepts © L. Alves & Aristide Twain

Auteur © Jayce Black

Coloth, *Cho*, Ulk © Simon Bucher-Jones

The Bookkeepers of the Plume Coteries, Callum, the Library, Maritsa, Rich © Nate Bumber

The Birdhemoths © Nate Bumber & Tyche McPhee Letts
Dionus & associated concepts, Charles Zoltan © James Hornby

Polyphilos, the Stranger © John Peel

Gods of the Fourth, Lune Forest, Mount Plutarch © Dan Freeman and used with kind permission.

Chris Cwej and associated concepts © Andy Lane

Alien Wars, Gevity, and Pierre Montgomerie © Xavier Llewellyn

Zadellin & associated concepts © Theta Mandel

Jillian © Theta Mandel & Aristide Twain

Starlight Endeavours © Lena Mactíre & James Wylder

Archon, the Bookwyrms, Celestials, C.R.U.X., the Father of Christmas, the Hyperspace Tyrants, the Snowstorm © Aristide Twain

The Goblins of Gendar © Molly Warton

The Firmament and associated concepts, Gendar and associated concepts, the Goddess of Gendar, Silka Corp, Virtuoso, © James Wylder

Professor X is used with permission from Paul Cornell.

With additional thanks to Jamie H. Cowan.

Jae-Sun Park created by David A. McIntee

Grand Markham created by Steve Lyons

The Cortez Project © David A. McIntee, and used with his kind permission and direction.

The character of Jenny Anywhere is available for use by anyone, with only one condition. This paragraph must be included in any publication involving Jenny Anywhere, in order that others may use this property as they wish. All rights reversed.

The character of Laura Drake was created by Jeanne Morningstar and is available for use by anyone.

WARSONG, the WARS TCG and associated concepts are the property and © of Decipher, Inc.

Academy 27, Jhe Sang Mi, and other associated characters and concepts are the property of and © Arcbeatle Press and James Wylder.

Merry Christmas, and Happy Holidays

There almost wasn't a Christmas this year. Well, at least our traditional Christmas treat. Every year we do one at Arcbeatle Press, but due to many tumultuous events in my life, and the lives of those around me, it looked like we just weren't going to be able to make it in time. Santa started putting away the reindeer to let the readers of the world know Christmas was cancelled—but then a miracle. Writers came together, and put this book together, with a communal spirit that can't be understated.

I spent my time organizing the project and the stories, but was still swamped to the gills, and I have to give incredible credit to Aristide Twain for doing the lions share of actually hammering these stories into place, and to the other creatives who stepped in to help with a few stories edits. The book was my idea, but ideas are cheap, and they're the ones who pulled the most weight this time around. And I'm very grateful.

I've been dealing with many medical emergencies, both this year and during the making of this book, and if I've learned anything from all that it's that none of us are in this alone. I couldn't have made it this far without the love and support of so many people, and it's those people that make Arcbeatle Press special. I think you can feel that love in these stories, and I hope you spread that love to the people around you.

We live in a world that can be cold, and dark, and cruel. But we can be warm, and bright, and kind. Be that warmth. That light. That kindness. The people you help might pass it on themselves one day, and isn't that what this season is all about?

Merry Christmas, and Happy Holidays from Arcbeatle,
-James Wylder, 2024

Table of Contents

Merry Christmas, and Happy Holidays	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
1: The Judas Bargain: <i>Cwej: The Series</i> by Aidan Mason.....	1
2: [A Title will be established forthwith. You mustn't rush these things, really. Indeed, Titles can be so revealing. Titles can tell us exactly where we are...] <i>Coloth</i> by Plum Pudding.....	14
3: <i>Snowfall A Story From the Worlds of SIGNET</i> by Xavier Llewellyn.....	34
4: <i>Potestas Trium Starlight Endeavours</i> by Lena Mactíre.....	52
5: <i>A Feast to Remember Dionus</i> by James Hornby	66
6: <i>Alone</i> by Molly Warton	78
7: <i>In Which Nardeth Contemplates the Value of a Thank You Note Zadellin</i> by Theta Mandel	80
8: <i>Christmas on Gendar Auteur</i> by Aristide Twain	91
9: <i>All Wrapped Up The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids</i> by Aristide Twain.....	98
10: <i>The Vanishing of Jhe Sang Mi Academy 27</i> by James Wylder	106
11: <i>To Absent Friends SIGNET</i> by James Hornby	124

1:
The Judas Bargain:
Cwej: The Series
by Aidan Mason

December 1st

Dasju didn't know where he was amidst the flurries of snow. His feet slipped ever so slightly on the icy tundra as he looked around. All he could see was the winter landscape surrounded by a starry sky, a nearby planet stationed in the corner. Was it a planet? It looked like a planet, but the surface seemed to be full of river-like lines of gray, cutting through the green and blue like a dagger.

He wracked his mind, trying to remember how he'd gotten here. One minute he was at home, sitting on the sofa and watching the latest ships land at the port. The apartment had cost a fortune, but the view was worth the price alone. Then there was fire and screaming and shouts... and then he was here.

The wind howled. Dasju shivered. His thin shirt built for the weather of Parako-14 was not cut out for the weather here. Wherever he was, he wasn't gonna last long.

And then he felt a hand grasp his. A fellow human hand, calloused and rough with pale skin that had a Polish distinct air. He looked up to see a blond man in bright blue armor, a gun at his side and a slight scar on his cheek. "Name's Chris Cwej," he said. "I'm assuming you got transported here too, without rhyme or reason?"

Dasju nodded. He shivered, his pale skin starting to show wisps of blue from the chill. Chris noticed almost instantly, a look of concern on his face.

“Come on, follow me,” he said, pulling Dasju along as he started to run. Dasju followed the man, not entirely sure what else he could do. So he ran, through the piles of snow and over the buried rocks, till a massive fortress surrounded by a steel gate came into view, just a few miles from where he’d originally appeared.

“What is this?” Dasju asked in astonishment.

“They call it the Outpost!” Cwej said over the harsh wind. “Not entirely sure why, but it’s a safe place!”

Dasju simply nodded and kept following him. The massive gates opened so quickly, he barely had time to register it. Chris pulled him through and the two fell to the paved ground of the Outpost. The gates slammed shut almost instantly with a loud thud.

The two men stood up, Dasju still shivering. He looked around to find himself in the front of a ramshackle city, with skyscrapers and cabins sprinkled all over the landscape. Streetlights lit the city and heat generators were dotted across the sidewalks.

“Over here, over here!” a voice shouted. Dasju turned to see a couple of people in yellow jumpsuits and parkas racing over to them. One of them threw a blanket over his shoulders, while the others handed Chris a pair of gloves. Dasju muttered a thank you as another one gave him a hot chocolate.

“Follow me,” the hot chocolate giver said, leading him to a big cabin to the left zone of the city.

The next few hours were a blur. Dasju could remember warming up in the nice cabin with two others, Larles and Kwol they said their names were. One of them, maybe both, seemed to have four arms, which for a moment made Dasju wonder if frostbite could give him brain damage.

There was a small moment that he remembered clearly. He went to the bathroom, a neat little room with a round mirror over the sink. He’d looked at his face, pale with the blue eyes and dark brown hair that he’d lived with since he was born. Except now he had an ashen look all over, the burnt remains of his homeworld etched into his skin. Even his

clothes were singed, the green tinged with black edges and torn pieces.

He remembered going to a massive tower after a few hours, when he'd gotten all warm and, well, not frozen. He'd sat on a big bench with Chris and the two, who appeared to be married. At least that's what Chris said; given the way they argued, Dasju wondered just how stable said marriage was. He decided to focus on the big stage that sat in the center of the tower with a podium, and flags of a shadow figure with a clock face flew around the edge of the circular stage. A woman near him talked about a Grand Wanderer and how it was their influence that had allowed them to exist, and that unlike the Slicers they truly understood what the Grand Wanderer was all about.

Then there was a figure at the podium, a young woman with golden hair. She'd asked him and Chris' group to come onto the stage. Dasju didn't remember most of the faces, but he did remember that people cheered as they walked up. There was a lot of talk about how they'd been saved from something called the Slicers and that they'd help them win in the upcoming days.

And then the last thing he remembered was the soft pillow he fell on before passing out into sleep.

* * *

December 3rd

It took two days for him to see a Slicer attack. It was, according to Chris, one of the less impressive methods that they'd tried in the past few days. Laser blasts rocked the Outpost's shield, held back by the electromagnetic field surrounding their world. They ripped into the surface of the planet, but the Outpost's defenses held.

The Slicers. The woman onstage had said that name, but he hadn't really understood who they were until Chris explained them to him a day or so later. Well, understood in the loosest sense possible.

“Gotta admit, I only arrived a couple hours before you did,” Chris had said as the two sat on top of the fortress alongside Larles and Kwol, all four of them bundled up in blankets and jackets. “Didn’t have too much time to brush up on the situation.” But he did his best. The Slicers, as far as Dasju understood, were a bunch of puritans who didn’t take very kindly to anyone they considered ‘outside’ what they considered ‘the universal path’. And as luck would have it, he, Cwej, Larles, and Kwol were all targets. In fact, everyone at the Outpost was.

“Hence why your world was destroyed,” Kwol said, a look of apology on their face.

Dasju took it in for a moment.

“Did... did we deserve it?” he asked.

“Course not,” Chris said. “Your reality wasn’t an unnatural timeline or something causing the Universe pain. Our reality’s just built like that.”

Larles nodded. “Chris told me it’s like... a variation. Like for example, 2020’s the year that Earth gets COVID and everyone goes crazy. 2020’s also the year where humanity’s got colonies on planets they named after *Star Trek*.”

“But that doesn’t make sense?” Dasju questioned.

“Pretty much,” Chris said. “It’s all part of the variation.”

“Not an alternate timeline?”

“Nope. Just a variation on the same timeline. It’s just how our Universe was made. Best not to dwell on it too much.”

The shield shook slightly as another attack bombarded the outer shell. Dasju watched as the shield shook, in awe and terrified at the same time.

* * *

December 5th

For some reason that Dasju couldn’t quite understand, the Outpost had an arcade room. Machines, computers, even

VR dotted the three-story tower that sat in its own little corner of the Outpost.

Regardless of why it was here, Dasju appreciated it. It was a nice distraction from everything going on outside. Here he didn't have to think of the Slicers or... the reality of his situation. Just focus on the ball, hitting the ball, making it go through the holes and traps and...

"Pinball, huh?" Chris said, leaning up against the machine. "I was there when they invented it, you know."

"Really?"

"You better believe it. I've traveled to a lot of places, more than you can probably count."

"That sounds nice. I've never been anywhere. Well, apart from..."

"Apart from?"

Dasju opened his mouth, as if to try and speak. But he couldn't. The memories, the reality of his situation flooded in. He tried to focus on the ball. Hit. Hit. Bounce. Hit. Think about the ball. Not...

"My home," he choked out. Tears spilled from his eyes as he let the ball fall into the pit. He leaned up against the glass and let it all out. Chris' hand came onto his shoulder and he knelt down next to Dasju.

"Hey. Hey. Let it all out," Chris said.

Dasju sniffed and nodded. Chris gave him a pat on the back and let him stand up, turning back to the pinball game.

"Thanks," Dasju said.

"No problem. Hey, if it makes you feel better, I get it."

"You do?"

"Well, not one hundred percent. But that loss? That hopelessness? I know it far too well. I've seen so many people come and go, so many places fall to dust..."

"How... how do you go on?"

Chris shrugged. "Just keep moving on. Go forward with all that drive in your heart and do what you have to do. Keep your ball in the field."

Dasju nodded. That made sense.

“Just keep the ball moving. No matter what.”

* * *

December 8th

“What’s that light I see sometimes, near the Slicer planet?” Dasju asked as he sipped on some tea. The blonde woman, who’d he come to know as Jeyanna, finished hers before answering.

“Oh, the Grand Wanderer,” she said, her eyes full of wonder.

“The one on the banner?”

“Of course! He’s our protector, the one protecting us from the worst of the Slicers. It’s funny; they worship him too. Don’t listen to a word he says though.”

“I see,” Dasju said, sipping his tea. “Was... was he the one that saved me when the Slicers destroyed everything?”

“Nah, that was us. The last head of the Outpost said he gifted us a scooper sixty-one thousand years ago. Grabs people from ‘unworthy’ planets the Slicers attack, cause we can’t keep them distracted all the time, no matter how hard we try.”

“I see,” Dasju said. That at least clarified why they were so close to the enemy’s planet. Bit of a sad situation really. The Outpost had to be both a guardian and a place of refuge when they failed.

“Technically the full name is, “Person Pooper Scooper 9000”, but we decided it didn’t sound very impressive,” Jeyanna clarified.

“This Grand Wanderer sure has a sense of humor.”
“Oh he does. He does...”

Jeyanna trailed off, pure near-cultish adoration in her eyes. Dasju looked at her and wondered what the hell he’d gotten himself into.

* * *

December 15th

“They’ve been going on for hours,” Chris said as he, Dasju, Larles, and Kwol leaned against the walls of the communications tower. The massive dish on top cast shadows over the circular bottom, leaving the four to rely on the streetlights to see one another.

More shouts came from inside, further proving Chris’ point. Jeyanna’s voice was the loudest amidst her lieutenants, only dwarfed by a booming shout that seemed to come from the Slicers on the call.

“Have the Slicers already threatened to erase them from existence to restore universal balance?” Larles asked.

“Twice,” Kwol replied. “No, wait, hold on. Three times now.”

“Four,” Dasju interjected.

“Sorry, four.”

“Isn’t there something we can do?” Larles asked Cwej. “This is getting concerning.”

“I’ve tried, but the Slicer planet’s way too heavily defended. If we even tried to get close we’d end up with significantly less limbs than we started out with.”

“So we’re just stuck here?” Dasju said.

“Afraid so.”

Dasju sighed. He knew there wasn’t much else that he could do, his planet gone and all, but he still hated the feeling of powerlessness. There had to be something. He didn’t want to die on some Outpost he barely knew.

But what else could he do?

* * *

December 20th

He could hear them. Whispers, as he was shown by a singing umbrella of how to operate the shield. People silently talking among each other about the recent Slicer attack. This one was much more than a simple laser blast or sending in some monstrosity to try and take over the Outpost. The Slicers had sent a de-aging gas that filtered right through the field,

right at the operators of the shield. Half of them had died before the antidote was given and now they were short on staff to keep it running. Hence why he was here.

Dasju's arms shook as he learned about the mechanics of the shield generator, the code to keep it running, the danger if the Slicers ever knew of it. He tried to put on a brave face. After all, he had to survive, right? Otherwise the Slicers would kill him or erase him from reality.

He wished Chris was here. He didn't know the man too well, but for some reason Chris had always had a sort of "teddy bear guardian" feel to him. But the man and his companions had left two days ago, right after a hearty drinking game where Chris went on about "Renegades" and cocaine and sex with men. It was a fun tale, even though Dasju was too buzzed to remember much of it. And now he was gone, off to find some sort of "temple" that he'd heard would save them from this hell they were in.

But the reality was, Dasju was, for now, alone. So he listened to the umbrella, learning all the ins and outs of the generator as a new, dangerous idea came into his head.

* * *

December 23rd

It was snowing again tonight. It always snowed. Yet these flakes weren't just white. Some were red, mists of blood raining down from the sky after the latest sky battle. The Outpost had sent some ships to counter a few that had snuck by the planet's defenses. Apparently the very sky was supposed to have a spell that stopped most planetary invasion craft.

"Like a magic spell?" Dasju had asked.

"Yep!" Jeyanna said. "Seems to be a lot more common nowadays. Not that I'm complaining of course."

That had made Dasju feel safer at first. But when the Slicers had broken it, all that safety fell away. Now all he remembered was the screams and shouts as the opposed airships opened fire on each other, the blood-soaked sky as

Outpost ships exploding, and the smell of smoke coming from the wreckage.

Even the warmth of the bed wasn't enough to keep him down. He tossed and turned, his mind racing. The sheets weren't keeping him warm; they were suffocating him alive. Dasju's heart beat faster than it ever should. He tried to convince himself that he didn't need to do this. Chris would come back. He would be saved. He would be saved. He would be killed...

The snow wasn't so cold anymore as he raced towards the communications tower. The night provided him cover as he ducked through the streetlights, knowing exactly who to call.

* * *

December 24th

The Slicers were, disappointingly, unable to live up to the sound of their name. Rather than a shadowy group of gods or inhuman monstrosities, they were just humans, aliens, and a whole mixture in between. If you got him drunk, he wouldn't have been able to tell the difference.

A convoy had already arrived to escort him by the time his ship landed on the dock, the morning sun gleaming as it touched down. Since said craft was automatic, Dasju had just spent the whole flight looking out the window, staring at the stars. What a change of pace. What he'd once watched, he was now a part of.

He'd seen a comet as he descended. It was a strange comet, one that twisted around the gravity of the planet in strange and odd ways. Familiar ways, like the streak in the sky that he'd seen.

"*Grand Wanderer indeed,*" he thought to himself. Although a small part of his mind wondered if the comet was the answer or if he was just trying to make himself feel better for what he was about to do.

Hopping into the truck, he looked out yet another window as the tour guide, a young Octoplasm, explained the various different weapons structures and the history of how they'd terraformed the planet. But all Dasju could think about was the banners, the same banners that they had at the Outpost. Worshipping the same figure, yet stuck in an endless war.

When they finally arrived at what appeared to be the tallest building on the planet, the convoy stopped and let him out. A dark-skinned man with green lines across his forehead wearing a crisp silver uniform was waiting for him with a satchel on his side.

"Kaiden," the man said, hand outstretched.

"Dasju," Dasju said, shaking Kaiden's hand. "You told me that we could make me and my... my home a part of the universal path?"

"Indeed," Kaiden replied. "Your existence isn't too damaging in the path that we must maintain. Nothing about your planet would disrupt the canon as of now, if that makes sense."

Dasju nodded.

"It's ironic," Kaiden continued. "Your name."

"My name?"

"Yes. If I didn't know any better, I would've said that someone had given it to you just for that anagram alone. There are so many anagrams in the Universe these days."

Dasju looked at him in utter confusion. Kaiden sighed and dropped the matter. He pulled out a pad from his satchel and began to jot down notes on the holographic display.

"Well the Council of the Universal Timeline has given me full power to authorize this. All you'll need to do is lower the shields and we'll be able to move in.

"Sounds reasonable," Dasju said.

"Indeed," Kaiden said. "Just a simple Judas bargain."

* * *

December 25th

Fire. Fire everywhere. Dasju stumbled around as a stray rocket exploded right beside him, falling into a scorched tree and against the snow. Rocks the size of houses were falling through the sky as the massive hole in the heart of the Slicer planet burst.

It had all gone wrong. So so wrong. Dasju flung himself behind the tree while discarded ammo packages went off, throwing snow into the air. The entire planet felt warm now, millions of drops of water falling from the leaves of trees as the remnants of the Slicers' world started to fall.

The invasion had gone perfect at first. He'd been able to get the shield down no problem, the code burned into his memory. From there it was supposed to be simple: the planetary cannons would bombard the Outpost to oblivion and any survivors would be picked off by Slicer shock troopers. Quick, simple, easy, and guaranteed to set the universal path in the right direction.

The shield had indeed come down. And the cannons started the bombardment. But then Chris appeared, floating in the sky as if he were possessed. Larles and Kwol were beside him, as if they were harbingers to Chris' newfound godlike powers. Everything after that was a blur, just like it had been during the first day he'd arrived. Only this blur was a blur of fire, of smoke and death and screams. Jeyanna was leading people somewhere, disappearing into a purple portal. The Slicers' ships melted. A parchment paper in the shape of a temple unfolded and burned... and then Chris flew right into the Slicers' planet, Larles and Kwol right after him.

Except... did he? Then who was the man standing in front of him right now, bright blue armor, Larles and Kwol beside him, with blond hair and... no scar on his cheek. And was that another Larles? He blinked. Yep. This one was older, but very much recognizable next to her younger self.

"They... they were variations," Dasju said, his mouth wide open. Of course. It all made sense now.

“And?” Chris said. “Did that mean their lives were worth less than yours?”

“I... I just wanted to be on the universal path.”

“And who decides the path? The Slicers aren’t gods or anything of the sort. All these people, those that died today, those that are now scattered throughout the Universe, they weren’t part of an alternate timeline or bad offshoot. They were just variations.”

Dasju didn’t have anything else to say. He fell to the ground, exhausted. When he looked up next, Chris and his companions were gone and he was alone as the two planets began to collide.

“I... I just wanted to survive,” Dasju moaned. “Just live.”

Almost as soon as the words came out of his mouth, a bright light streaked across the sky, landing just at the edge of the horizon a few miles away from Dasju. That light... he recognized it instantly. The light of the Grand Wanderer.

“No, *not the Grand Wanderer. Just a comet,*” Dasju thought to himself. It made sense. The two planets were about to burn, so the gravity from the Slicer planet probably let the comet go.

But what if it wasn’t? Dasju let himself hope, just a tiny little bit. What if this Grand Wanderer, whoever it was, would save him? And thinking about it, that comet had to be manipulated by **something**. That flight pattern wasn’t natural at all.

It was a chance. A small chance. But if this Grand Wanderer was as special as Jeyanna said, then maybe he would be the way to Dasju’s survival. To his salvation.

So he walked. Towards the light, as the planet burned around him, as the world came to an end.

* * *

December 26th (and beyond)

History does not know the fate of Dasju. The surviving Slicers say that he died, a consequence of not being a part of

the universal path. The Outpost escapees do not speak of him. Some historians believe that he did survive. But was it truly the Grand Wanderer that saved him? And who even was the Grand Wanderer anyway? There's certainly theories, but what's the chance that it's the man that you're thinking of? It's not like this Universe has a shortage of travelers who like meddling.

In the end, it all comes down to what you choose to believe. What you think the universal path is. What you're willing to fight for. What you're willing to die for.

2:

[A Title will be established forthwith. You mustn't rush these things, really. Indeed, Titles can be so revealing. Titles can tell us exactly where we are...]

Coloth

by Plum Pudding

Reclining There were not many trees in the library — it was not that sort of forest — and as such, it was a fairly surprising thing to see one. Maritsa was certainly surprised that there was a little tree at all. It was potted, a matter-of-fact sort of thing. It hadn't bothered with a major debut of any sort; it was merely there, not prefaced with any sort of fanfare or introductory lament as important visitors sometimes were. But perhaps this was a good thing. You were meant to be quiet in a library, and so the little tree fit. Little fronds and squirrely bark — yes, it was quite right. It reminded Maritsa of what had to be done.

Notwithstanding a sort of blip in April (which she couldn't seem to recall, though it *seemed* to have been eventful), Maritsa felt it had been... a good year. She would have hesitated to call it *uneventful*, but in all respects it had been far superior to what had come before. A time of adjustment to their new life, to a life where they were *allowed*. Allowed to exist, and even, for the first time in all their lives, to flourish. Stability had helped her greatly; where once she'd had trouble sleeping, afraid she'd wake up to some new catastrophe, she now rested soundly, secure in the easy certainty that they were all safe and close by. Coloth was here, Callum was here, Rich was here, and none of

them were on the run from any sort of shadow governments, skeletal sorcerers or incredibly determined overdue book collectors. The Library was still *changing* in a myriad subtle ways, but it hadn't suffered anything quite as seismic as the Snowstorm in that span of time.

In short, they were all together for once, things were well, and —

— it was going to be Coloth's *first proper Christmas*.

Oh, certainly, *last year's* Christmas had seen them get involved in an enormous Christmas ordeal, a truly massive Christmas Adventure to end all Christmas Adventures, with the page count for it too. But for that very reason, they'd been separated for most of it; until the very end, they hadn't gotten to truly *celebrate*, at least not properly. By the closing of their tribulations, they'd all been too tired to pass around personal gifts or do any of the other traditional things which the Bookkeepers had carried over — in cultural fits and starts — from their distant Terran forebears. Not that any of the group were Scrooges. It just... hadn't happened.

Surely, Maritsa thought, it was her responsibility to make the season special. For the others! It was her responsibility. So she had begun to decorate the tree. It seemed only right. The pathetic little thing had almost a *Charlie-Brown* sort of quality to it, and so it felt remarkably seasonal. Proper. She kept coming back to that word, proper.

Proper! She was going to do things properly.

Which is why she was rather concerned when the tree began to *bleed*.

* * *

She had immediately brought it to the Master Librarian, Aloysius Scuzz, to whose oversight they had recently been transferred. Scuzz was a sour-faced but reasonable woman, a proud deputy of her station. They'd first met her in the earliest days of their amnesty, when she had helped to get them settled and back into business. Maritsa liked her very much; there was

an efficiency to the woman that was precisely the quality to which the girl aspired. For all that, she wasn't sure Scuzz really gave her and her friends much mind after they were initially sorted — but then, that was good too. They were allowed *leeway*, of all things.

Standing in front of Scuzz's desk, she felt very small. She tapped the desk peevisly, attempting to get the woman's attention. Eventually Scuzz leant over the desk, hanging uncharitably over Maritsa to see what the matter was.

"Yees?" she asked in a full, blubbery voice.

"Excuse me, Master," Maritsa said, holding up the plant, "but — it's bleeding."

Scuzz raised a scintillating eyebrow. The rest of her face did not move from its original position.

"Th-the plant, it's a bleeding plant," Maritsa repeated, on the off-chance that Scuzz had suddenly gone deaf. "A plant that bleeds, I mean. It's got what looks like human blood coming out of it."

It did. Maritsa knew the sight and smell of blood by now, including her own. There was no mistaking the stuff that dripped from the potted plant.

"Yes, I suppose it does," Scuzz conceded after what felt like an inordinate span of time. "You should probably check on that."

With that, the Master Librarian turned back to her work in studied silence — a Bookkeeper's unmistakable signal that an interaction was at an end, and silence should resume. Maritsa padded politely out of the office, tree in hand, more than a little confused. Apathy was not unknown among the Coteries' leadership, to be sure, but Scuzz had seemed, if not different, then at least tractable. Her very willingness to accept prolonged contact with Coloth and his allies proved that she was not as *completely* ossified as the average Librarian. From *her*, Maritsa had expected a little more of a response, some sort of call to action.

Who on Earth should she even ‘check on that’ with? It was a bleeding plant! She couldn’t exactly go to the bleeding plant division. What was she meant to do?

* * *

She’d been thinking about the plant, these last few days; she’d been thinking about it rather a lot.

What it was. What, exactly, she was meant to do about it, or with it, or *to* it. Those were the things she’d been mulling on. The plant took up a lot of her thinking, in short.

Even Callum had begun to notice that something had her preoccupied.

“Are you doing alright, Rits?” he had asked, as they busied themselves with a bit of reshelving work in Sector 6,994,856,322,811,042,546,432,901,248,573,921,573,281,042,820–D.

The work was simple, and frankly, beneath the ambiguous but clearly elevated status which Coloth’s promotion had conferred on his posthuman friends. It was the sort of thing which *normal* novices did. But for exactly that reason, Maritsa found it relaxing — grounding, perhaps — to lend a hand, and if they gave some other set of kids a break, so much the better, an argument which Callum and Coloth happily seconded.

They did this sort of thing with some frequency, in-between missions, with the tacit approval of Scuzz. It always brought out a good mood in Maritsa. No wonder, then, that Callum had noticed her more distant, taciturn disposition.

“Yes, I’m alright,” she had said, and a little too impatiently too.

“It’s only, it looks like there’s something on your mind.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with *that*, I’ll have you know,” she replied, trusting he wouldn’t mistake the over-theatrical primness for actual hostility. “My mind’s full of all sorts of things. Oh, and don’t call me Rits.”

“Aw.”

“Unless you want me to start calling you *Lum*...”

With that, and an impish wink, all was forgotten and they slipped back into the groove of carefully arranging the books by the hue of their spine, as was, for some reason, the policy of this particular sector. Though Callum had dropped the subject, and Maritsa made sure to plaster on a smile, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of remorse at the deception by omission. She didn't often lie to her friends.

But the whole thing would be ruined if she couldn't *surprise* the three of them. *They* had hardly seemed to notice it was December; in Coloth's case, she couldn't be totally sure he even grasped the concept of a twelve-month calendar. So it was all up to her, really.

But she could handle it. She was *great* at responsibility. Organisation. She could focus on what had to be done. Christmas would be perfect this year. And so would the plant.

* * *

<WE ARE HERE FOR THE PLANT,> they announced.

"What?" Coloth asked. "Can you be more specific?"

<THE BLEEDIN' PLANT! Y'KNOW THE ONE!>

"I'm really afraid I don't," Coloth explained.

Today he had been lending a hand at Inquiries Division 929410-73578-124-B, trying to guide those who needed guiding to specific volumes. This was an involved task, to say the least; locating a single book or two could take several hours, and sometimes a bit of swashbuckling. But then, that was why the Bookkeepers' Inquisitors had at least 929410-73578-123 other divisions.

It was also why he'd been assigned this task today. He'd have rather stuck with Callum and Maritsa, but Scuzz had ruled that if he *insisted* on volunteering for intra-Library work, the Plume Coteries' field agent had really ought to focus on tasks which required a degree of proficiency and daring. She wouldn't have him seen carrying out work meant for mere Novices.

Ah, well. It beat sitting alone with his thoughts, or playing the gadfly with his friends without being allowed to help.

He didn't know why these particular patrons wanted the Plant. Or what Plant they were referring to, really. Linguistics were always difficult with other species. The Librarian's Gift made ordinary Bookkeepers capable of communicating with all who were willing to listen ("some exceptions may apply"), and the store of linguistic information in Coloth's data-cube was arguably better still, there was always something lost in inflection or dialect, some *je-ne-sais-quoi* which even the most advanced cybernetics, or the most thinly-defined of gifts, could not allow for.

Some cases were worse than others.

"I'm sorry, are you looking for books about plants?" Coloth asked.

<THE PLANT,> they huffed irritably.

Coloth was still at a loss. This assignment didn't feel quite *right* for him somehow. It had only felt like moments since their last adventure had concluded. He hadn't really adjusted at all. But — oh, he simply wouldn't be himself if he didn't try his best to help these people, at the very least.

"Come on," he said. "Let's see what we can do."

* * *

In the entirety of existence across the fabric of anywhere the Library touches, only a few species — and by "a few", we here mean "six" — had ever succeeded in actually finding themselves *banned* from the Plume Coteries' halls.

Just as certain decontextualised holiday traditions had remained with-it for at least some of the Bookkeepers, humanity's far-flung descendants had not completely forgotten the fascist excesses of their 20th century and beyond. Some hushed memory, some ancient, holy terror remained, stoked anew every few millennia by a fresh bunch of monsters. Book bans were bad enough: it would take a lot for the Plume Coteries, even at their most insular, to turn away an entire race,

an entire people, let alone an entire *species*. Any functionally infinite Universe, of course, was bound to yield creatures who'd test the limits of these noble principles, but the Bookkeepers hadn't made it easy. Only the truly scandalous would land even a temporary ban. Plenty of representatives from dreaded warrior-races (some infamous for genocidal policies all their own) had come and gone, respecting the Library as a "safe zone" of sorts.

First of the infamous six to push the Master Librarians' leniency to their breaking point had been the Tyrants of Hyperspace. In Carcosa's children they had quickly recognised a close-mindedness which dwarfed their own, and a paranoia fit to make titans of bellflowers. Even that, they could have overlooked, if a certain platoon of accursed Carcosan Knights had not been told by *someone*, at *some* point, that books were "living things"; that they had souls and personalities. Somewhere inside those thick, gleaming helmets, the idea had sprouted that books were therefore an unclean and malicious infestation, and that the very existence of the Library in which they all stood ought to be regarded as a pernicious ambush of unprecedented audacity. What one Tyrant learned, it seemed all the others clung to forever, uncritically, unscientifically. Pretty soon they'd started pouring in by the hundreds, stomping around with comically-large blowtorches in hand, shouting things like "INCINERATE! INCINERATE!". After considerable efforts to get them to reconsider and behave like civilised patrons had failed, the higher councils had shrugged and slapped them with a permanent ban.

Next, there were the Nastons from Zeltrox Nine, who had a religious grievance against the use of paper or holo-paper; two more species we cannot legally mention here; and the Gentile Republic, who were, as is well-known, just plain fascists.

Of course, that adds up to five.

At this very moment in our tale, Coloth was leading the Sixth Species to the 3,495,863rd HX49G Nature and Gardening Section.

* * *

Maritsa had decided to read up on plants and blood. As some of you might already have surmised, that was always the thing to do in a library with infinite information.

The trouble with infinite information was it was so often useless; even the vetted valid sections were a vast pool of treacly trivia to wade through. According to *Miriam Hettythrop's Guide to Gardens*, injured plants often “bled” by leaking sap. That was irrelevant. This wasn't sap. According to Janister Mekklesdeal the plants on HeraldSpark could excrete out excess Orithon Blood after swallowing an Orithon whole. Given Orithon Blood was blue, Maritsa disregarded this. Besides, this thing was too small to eat anyone. And according to the *Sacred Emporium of Infinite Monkeys*, the fact of the matter was that “*Ooob Oob Ah Ah ! Eek! Eek! Eek!*”.

Suffice to say Maritsa wasn't finding anything. Which was infuriating.

She had been *blessed* with the strange chance that she had stumbled onto such a wonderful, albeit weary-looking Christmas Tree, at exactly the time she'd have wished to find one. It had been an extraordinarily lucky thing. And now that the thing was, what ... bleeding? In pain? Or at the very least not suitable for Christmas Tree duties — she just felt miserable. Just keeping it in her corner of their shared bedroom, *leaking* like that. It was disquieting — at first she told herself it was merely compassion for the odd little thing, but in truth, it made her distinctly, increasingly uncomfortable.

And thus, the dilemma returned. Should she tell anyone about it? She'd have to, eventually. What if it started singing *Feed Me Seymour* one day?

She placed her head in her hands as she closed her volume of *Emporium of Infinite Monkeys*. It squeaked and yelped as she

placed the lock on the tome's cover shut, as if it was a secret diary. Security purposes.

"Maritsa!" she heard a voice call from down the hall; Coloth's voice, to be exact, and coming closer with every second. "Maritsa!"

Oh no —

She had to hide the plant — he shouldn't see it like this, so grotesque and sickly and *gotbic*, or any chance of him learning to think of Christmas as a time of peace and good cheer would be spoiled. The room's four walls, of course, were thickly-stocked shelves, and she'd worked out a secret compartment between two rows of faded-looking cycling encyclopaedias. There, she would safely conceal it while the others were here, among a few other knick-knacks she preferred to keep to herself. It was a simple matter of taking the books out, one by one, and carefully replacing them in the same order when she was done.

But even with the skills of a fully-trained Novice, there was no time to place the potted plant back there now. Where in the world could she put it instead? Not seeing another option, she stuffed it in her book-bag.

Just then, *they* entered the room.

"...Coloth, are you *kidding* me?!?" she shouted, at once, when she saw them.

She didn't often scold him — though he had courage to spare, he had, when dealing with friends, a more sensitive nature than Callum — but *this* was ridiculous. Surely he had to know better. Surely *everyone* knew better than to trust *them!*

"What?" Coloth asked, confused. "What did I do?"

Maritsa could hardly put it into words. The error was too horrible, too vile to articulate in terms she cared to repeat in front of Coloth, or indeed, anyone whatsoever.

Luckily, Callum chose this precise moment to enter the room. He looked at the individuals standing behind Coloth. He, too, was struck, utterly and completely by the unique horror of the situation. He had thought they were mere legends. Horror stories whispered to little Librarians to make

them behave in the Christmas Season. The born enemies of all knowledge.

They stood there, just behind Coloth, mildly bemused by the world. Their lips were both thin and lumpy, and their eyes had strange rectangular slits for pupils. Their fur was matted and white, but dirty to the point of being almost beige. They looked like animals, but make no mistake, there was intelligence behind their dopey-looking eyes. Intelligence that planned to chew on books, intelligence that planned to chew on people.

Callum felt an exclamation building up from within him. He had to warn his friend, let him know exactly what he was dealing with here. The deadliest force in the entire cosmos. The creatures so advanced that all valid books agreed they could have ripped reality apart, if they had involved themselves in the cosmic wars; beings so ruthless they were dreaded by Archons and Tyrants alike. They had come to the Third Universe from a dimension of which nothing now survived, except for them.

And now they'd come here. They were *here*. Didn't Coloth know anything?

Callum desperately shouted out a refrain of terror, a shriek of horror that was positively titular:

2.5:
**COLOTH! YOU'RE STANDING NEXT TO
THE MURDER LLAMAS FROM THE
LLAMA DIMENSION!**
COLOTH!
By Plum Pudding

(See? Didn't I tell you it's better to wait on these things?)

“Meeeeeeehhhhhhaaaaa!” bleated the Murder Llamas from the Llama Dimension, in startling, practiced unison. <WE SHALL TEAR OFF YOUR THUMBS.>

“WHAT THE HELL,” Coloth shouted.

He was not usually one to exclaim in such a manner; in fact, he hadn't done so now. But in this context, there was only one proper English translation his cube's programming could give for the Ulk-Ra word which had burst from Coloth's innards, that simple, three-letter word that meant death and danger and many other things besides.

Oh, what *Cbo*. He had never felt its like. How could he have missed them? He had hardly registered them before; it was as if he had been forced not to think about them at all. But there they were. There were four Murder Llamas in the room.

No doubt that you, happy reader, have never been blighted with the sight of a Murder Llama. Know then, that they were a bit like murder-hornets, except for the fact but they were llamas. Learn, also, that their mere presence, their mere involvement meant that entire civilisations were now doomed. Planets died as they walked. *They were here. They were here.*

<GET LLAMA-ED,> the Lead Murder Llama resonated with its telepathic intonation.

A Murder Llama grabbed Maritsa by the neck with its mouth and pinned her against the wall. Its square teeth jutted against Maritsa's throat. She tried desperately not to scream, to even move her throat against the herbivore's jaw. Its ridiculously long llama neck held her in place as the Llama moved its head and began to chew at her right ear, sharply, and with little hesitation. She screamed.

Another Llama menacingly approached Maritsa and began to do as it promised. One at a time, the Llama began to gnaw at Maritsa's fingers, attempting to snap them off with a methodical precision that was clearly mixed with sheer cruelty.

<WHERE IS THE PLANT?> it spoke into her head. She could hear it in her own thoughts. Her own thoughts were not her own. There was Llama up there now. They were here. They were here.

Callum screamed gutterally at the creatures. "LET HER GO!" he bellowed, his voice going deeper than his young throat had ever managed.

But the Llamas did not care. They looked at him with their strange, stupid-looking funny faces in an expression of pleasant amusement. They were doing nothing different from what they always did; they could have been mindlessly chewing grass.

The Llama approached him. It did not care that they were children. It was simply a Llama. And Callum began to notice what it was doing. Everything the Llama touched changed. It changed into another Llama. Everything.

The floor. The ground. The books, the tables, the chairs. The air. It all changed into a substance that Callum could only describe as 'like' the Llama. The floor, the wood, the air around the Llama became furry, solid, with four legs and the silly Llama face. It was just as the legends had claimed. Legends! He'd thought of them as little more than *myths*, safe in the knowledge that they dwelled on the other side of the Universe altogether, nowhere near the Library.

“Meeaaeeehhh,” the Llama bleated again, almost to itself. Callum watched as the creature approached. He could not run. Every time he tried to think “run away, run away,” to himself, the next thought in his head became <LLAMA>.

No escape. Oh, how could he have run, in any case? He couldn’t abandon Coloth and Maritsa to that thing’s mercies anyway. They had no mercy to give.

Looking around the room, he saw that Coloth had already been taken by the Llamas. Another Llama was devouring his flesh, screaming at him. It did not care that he was a cactus. It gnawed at some quills without pain. The screaming was merely for intimidation. Coloth did not scream back. Coloth had been through difficult hardships before. He was very very scared, petrified, frightened too; and how could it have been otherwise? But he could keep it together, as long as his cube was unharmed. Callum wasn’t that strong. He couldn’t bear to listen to Maritsa’s pain. The fourth Llama looked at him, and stood there, patiently. As if it *knew* the worst torture would just be for him to watch.

* * *

Maritsa had lost consciousness eventually; Perhaps they all had. Possibly from the pain; most likely from the sheer, overwhelming shock.

When she came to, the Llamas were standing around passively, guarding the exits of the bookshelves of their little library cubicle they were in. Although the room around them was tainted by their odious presence, there were still only four true Murder Llamas.

<YOU ARE AWAKE,> their leader announced.

Maritsa, her thoughts still distant and matter-of-fact in her blariness, realised there was nothing to even indicate this particular Llama as the Llama Commander. It had placed the idea within her own mind. What kind of power did this thing have? And it was *scanning her mind!* Every thought in her head

— even *this* thought — was at the Llama’s perusal. She could hide nothing.

She could feel a Llama huffing at the back of her neck. It began tearing at her hair.

<CEASE,> the Llama Commander ordered. <WE SHALL NOT PLAY YET.>

“Beeehhh hh h h,” the dissenting Llama garbled, grabbing a book from the shelf and beginning to chew it in displeasure.

Maritsa looked around, looking for something, *anything* to give herself an edge: but there was little to grasp at. The Llama substance had utterly taken over the room. The floor was Llama; the ceiling, hundreds of feet up, that was Llama too. Llama had overtaken the bookshelves, and copies of books were furry and made bleating noises. Colours were becoming Llama. Ordinary objects were steadily becoming Llama shaped. Llama shaped protrusions grew from wood, from wall, from shelf. It was like a cancer. It shouldn’t be possible, but it was happening.

She could not tolerate the silence. It was too total, she almost preferred the deafening screaming.

...No she didn’t. What was she thinking?

“What are you?” she forced out; the sound of her own voice, now *that* was at least mildly comforting. “How — *why* are you doing this?!”

The Llama looked at her again. A cacophony of images — hours and hours of information — was immediately forced into her mind, and it *hurt*. She cried out, but it was no use. The Llamas found this *simplest*.

They had come from another dimension before they came to the Third Universe, then to the Library. They had spent too much time in their home, and now it was a dimension of a single congealing substance, an entire universe of singular mind, thought, and fur. Maritsa wasn’t religious, but suddenly she understood what it meant for something to be *against God*. It was so wrong! An entire universe out there, the Singularity of Llama, a universe of a giant heartbeat, a universe from which these hellish demons, these Llamas were merely flecks of skin

from a greater thing. And they had been discarded like the dust they were.

They had come to the Third Universe to try and *be*. To... play. But their great parent and its gift was still a part of their flesh. They had never been disconnected from its power, not truly. They would still spread. They *must* spread. Slowly, they had taken what they could. It was not an exponential process, not really. But they had a name for themselves. A name whispered in fear.

One day, the universe would end, and that last person alive at the end of everything would play Chess at the edge. She would look onto the horizon, see the stars fade into the inky black, and not know, because how could she see exactly, without light — that the Llamas had taken it all.

Maritsa fell back in pain. They had already taken the information from her mind. They *should* know where the plant was — is — couldn't they just *take it* and **go** ??? Leave her friends alone. Stop it . Stop it . Stop hurting them ,, they don't ??! *they don't deserve this !*

< WHERE IS THE PLANT >

THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE! YOU KNOW WHERE IT IS! PLEASE ! PLEASE, I'LL DO ANYTHING! JUST STOP!

A Llama-like protrusion was growing from Coloth's cactus-flesh, where he had been bitten by the Llamas. There were bulges across his vegetal body. The Llama substance had gotten underneath his familiar green skin.

They would all die here.

They would aLL die here And they wouldn't be perMitted to sAY goodbye for even a moment .

what couLD she do. They Loved this. They enjoyed their pAin! The MAniacs!

She felt furious. She tried to beg, if not with her voice, with her thoughts!

Let CoLoth And cAlluM go . pleAse. please!!

This was the worst Christmas ever — they're after the Plant because of me — I ruined everything!

And with that thought, a revelation. Her rucksack began to overflow. Every negative thought, every bit of fear she had had all day — about Christmas, the pressure of being Perfect that was *always* there for her, however slightly, being tortured by maniacs, watching her friends in pain, all of it — it had *gone* into the plant. Somehow, that was what was coming out of the plant. And it was...

...it was *gigantic!* A massive *flood* of red, bursting water flew out of the rucksack and towards the Llamas.

The red water targeted the Llamas and blasted them away with such force that the evil things could hardly bleat an indignant *Meeeahhh* before they were consigned to oblivion. Hit by the tidal wave and forced out. As if by magic.

Was it the Library, defending itself? The Bookworm or Rich come to their rescue? It made no sense, but just like that, she could see the Llamas forced out of the Library and *falling*, deep, deep, perhaps all the way to the Conceptual Core. The one thing that might be able to contain them? She didn't know. She had the dark suspicion somehow they would be fine. But they wouldn't harm her friends any further. For that small blessing, she breathed a sigh of relief, and watched — although she wasn't sure quite how she could see it — as the Llamas went away.

She collapsed onto the ground, which still made faint sounds of Llama. She looked at the others — thankful, however briefly, that they were here for her. The stomping of boots surrounded her, but it was too late for that to bother her. She was already unconscious.

* * *

She awoke to find Rich at the foot of a hospital bed. A hospital bed she was lying in.

How peculiar...

“You're all right!” said Rich. “Oh good.”

The comment was matter-of-fact, but she could tell he was overjoyed. The Birdhemoth did not hide his feelings

particularly *well* at the best of times. He felt responsible for the trio, really, and she could see in his eyes he felt immensely guilty that he had not been present during the Llamas ‘intrusion. Not that he could have done anything; even the greatest of world-birds would have been as nothing next to the odious camelids.

He didn’t fit in the med room that well. Of course, he could shrink himself these days, with his special supply of shrinking potions; but they only shrunk him so much, he had been trying to conserve them, and it *was* quite a small room.

“You’re the last to recover,” he told her once he saw that she was truly awake, and not half-dreaming; Maritsa wondered if he’d greeted her several times already, only to watch her drift gently back to sleep. “I’ve heard everything from Coloth and Callum,” he added. “Poor things. Though you seem to have received the brunt of it. The *Librarians Medica* had quite some trouble patching you up.”

Maritsa reached up at her ear with one arm and looked down at the hand that had been bitten by the Llamas. Both her ear and hand were entirely numb. They didn’t feel painful, but they were absolutely *wrong*.

“What did they do?” Maritsa asked.

“Quite intensive surgery. They had to extricate every bit of Llama from your body,” Rich said, a bit squeamishly. “Coloth had the worst of that. There was, what I believe is called a *chest...burster...* in his stomach lining?”

“Is he okay?” Maritsa asked, intently. She no longer cared for the feeling that it wasn’t quite her skin anymore. It didn’t matter. What mattered was that he was safe —

“He’s a cactus,” Rich replied. “They grow fast and hardy, or so I’m told, even in the most desolate conditions.”

Maritsa nodded in agreement. “Can I see Callum?” Maritsa sighed, leaning her head back into the pillow.

Rich nodded, and his head created a small indent in the ceiling. “I think he’s coming by shortly with Coloth.”

As if by magical cue, the door knocked. Callum and Coloth entered, both looking relatively *well*, to Maritsa's surprise and delight.

"What improbable coincidence! You're here!" Rich proclaimed. "I do find it so endearing."

Now they were closer, Maritsa could see Coloth and Callum more clearly. Coloth had some pieces of him missing, revealing the soft plant-like tissue beneath his exterior, but it didn't seem to bother him. He'd regrow. Come to that, he could have switched off this hard-light projection altogether, and started afresh; she supposed he hadn't been conscious to remind the doctors of that, and now he'd have felt rather awkward showing them that their careful surgery had been redundant. That was him — considerate to a fault.

Callum's robe was off; glancing around, she noticed her own, folded neatly on a chair near the bed, with her socks and her book-bag beside it — she felt suddenly thankful for the bedcover. Looking over the shirtless boy, she spotted that a very small patch of skin on his shoulder, where he had been attacked, was now a stark purple. A graft then — from an alien donor, or anyway a rather exotic one. But the job was a clean one; it could have been mistaken for a birthmark, or a rather abstract-looking tattoo. He didn't seem to mind, smiling brightly as he met her eyes.

"What... happened?" she asked, their gazes greeting enough in private. "To the... You know. How are we alive?" She blinked, straining to remember. "There was a..."

Coloth stepped closer to the bed and revealed to her the plant from her bag, the one that had started all of this.

"You should have told me," he smiled. "It's from my planet, Ulk. I thought they must be extinct — I'd only ever saw one, back when I was..." He hesitated; Maritsa guessed he'd almost said *alive*. "When I was young," he finished instead, a little timidly, but soon his mirth returned. "It's a psychic barberry. They're attracted to negative thoughts."

Maritsa was confused, a bit. "You mean —"

“Yeah,” Callum stepped in, “you can imagine why the Murder Llamas wanted one. Psychic species and all. Constantly looking for any way to up their game, I’d imagine. I mean, look at the power it gave *you*, even for a few moments.”

Maritsa nodded. It made sense. “So it was bleeding, because...”

Coloth smiled, gently and sensitively. “Because you were nervous.”

It all made perfect sense, but it didn’t make Maritsa feel any better. Why did all this have to happen to them, to *her*? It was so cruel and pointless, and frankly at the same time, it was all so ridiculous and stupid that she felt somehow that it was *her* fault. Beaten up by a bunch of Sodden Llamas.

“It’s okay,” Callum said, instinctively. “We’re all fine, aren’t we?”

“None of that explains though, why the plant was even here in the first place,” Maritsa sighed.

“Seems lucky that it was,” Rich said. “Maybe it was a gift.”

Maritsa tried to nod in agreement, because she couldn’t bring herself to say anything, but unfortunately she still couldn’t bring herself to do even that. She leaned back against her pillow some more. If she put all her bad feelings into a plant and made it explode, then why did she still feel so miserable? Why was it all like this? In a hospital, hurting? This was meant to be a proper Christmas. Coloth’s proper Christmas — *her* first proper Christmas with real friends... with the family she’d built. Her family.

But still... at the same time...

They were all *here*. Around her. And it still *was* Christmas, even if it was rubbish. Maybe that was a part of Christmas, really. It had been, last year.

And even then — hadn’t they had a grand old time, with all those stories in front of the fire? Hadn’t that been a good Christmas too? Maybe just a bit? Maybe the point was to focus on the good bits, without being... oh... *unhealthily* happy. Maybe the point was to be normal-happy. A minute at a time. Otherwise you let the Murder Llamas win.

“Alright, budge up,” Maritsa said to the three of them. “We gotta do something Christmas-y.”

Carefully, Coloth and Callum moved closer to Maritsa — not on the hospital bed, but beside it. Maritsa clicked a small remote on the table next to them. A screen-in front of them blazed to life. The face of Jim Carrey in too much weird furry green-make up resolved itself onto the screen. He pulled a blanket off a table perfectly, and then, disappointed, went back and kicked the table over.

Coloth laughed in bewilderment. “What is this?”

Rich smiled. “Oh, this is Television. It’s like a book, but schlockier, and nothing like a book at all.”

Coloth smiled happily in response. They all did. The world was sad and difficult and sometimes pointless. But they didn’t think about that just then. And even if it was just for a minute and a half — they had a perfect Christmas.

3: Snowfall

A Story From the Worlds of SIGNET
by Xavier Llewellyn

In the cold of the early night, Luna pulled the collar of her oversized green hoodie tighter around her neck. Standing against a low wall that separated the steps from the fountain that ran parallel, she avoided the bustle of the Christmas shoppers as they paced towards the warmth of Birmingham's Christmas Market.

She was waiting patiently for any sight of her frail old grandfather. She could find no sign of him yet, however. She tried not to let herself panic, outwardly at least, as she checked the time on her smartphone and saw that he was now late by several minutes, going by the time he had told her over the phone the day earlier. But she could not stop her mind from contriving any number of dreadful, albeit unlikely, possibilities as to what could have befallen him. Could his plane have crashed? Or perhaps his taxi driver had abducted him. Or — okay, not *that*. But a lot of things could happen to an old man his age as his mind started to go. What if he suddenly didn't care about her anymore, what if he'd decided to cancel without so much as an apology? What if he'd forgotten her altogether? What if he'd forgotten what he was doing, where he lived, everything — what if he was wandering around somewhere, dazed and lost, hundreds of miles away?

She mentally scolded herself, all too aware of how her frenzied thoughts would have sounded. Her grandfather,

physically weakened though he might these days, had once been part of an overseas intelligence organisation.

Not that Dad had ever known quite what he *did*, let alone told Luna, but it was clear from the secondhand hints and cryptic remarks that the old chap had been a proper spook, resourceful and formidable — the stuff of childhood fantasies. Per her father's stories, Grandfather had once saved him from some kind of peril in the depths of the *forêt d'Orléans*. He couldn't remember much about that day; perhaps a trauma response, or perhaps he'd just been too young to remember. He certainly didn't mind bringing it up, and telling the story again as he remembered it. Luna used to joke that he must have been abducted by aliens, and Grandfather had shown the Martians what-for.

The old man had overheard her, once, and got the strangest look on his face. Almost forlorn. She'd never cracked that joke again.

But that just went to show. The old boy was sound as ever of body and mind. Slower, frailer, but sharp as a tack.

No, her grandfather must just be late.

She hadn't seen much of the old man for... God, it was *years* now. Since she had moved to the United Kingdom with Dad, some five years before in 2019, the number of times she'd seen him could have been counted on the fingers of one hand. A couple of Christmases, a couple of birthdays. She missed him so much that she physically ached; before she moved, she and her grandfather would spend hours playing games, dressing up, and going on walks where he would tell her tall tales of strange monsters and daring exploits.

Really, he'd been no more of an adult than her, his stories more whimsy than reminiscence. Good old Grandfather. Dad often gave him a hard stare as they returned home under the starlit sky, or came to dinner so late that everything was cold, but he never seemed to mind too much. She used to think it was just because he loved him too, with all his quirks; and certainly, that was part of it, but in hindsight, she suspected he'd also been glad that his lonely, lonely child had finally

found solace and company, albeit in the company of a man decades her senior.

From the midst of the crowd, she saw his balding crown, flecked with a smattering of thin grey hair.

“Pierre!” she ecstatically called out. “Grandfather!”

She stood up and raced to him, hurrying down the steps and around everyone around her, racing towards his embrace as his face lit up. She felt herself nestle into his navy, woolen turtleneck, the one with all the patched holes she had known him to wear for as long as she could remember. She felt the bristle of his patchy facial hair stroke against her cheek, and smelt the warm scent of coffee on his breath.

“My dear Luna, you’ve grown so much,” he grinned warmly at her as he pulled back, resting his hands on her shoulders. “So, so much.”

She smiled so hard she thought she may cry. She hugged him again. As they began to walk down New Street and browsed the stalls, all filled with wooden knick-knacks and Christmas tree decorations and chocolate confections, they were deep in conversation.

“It’s been overwhelming, my life,” Luna explained solemnly, timidly fidgeting with her choker. “I mean, you know what’s happened to me.”

He nodded.

“I’ve had a lot of time, after college, to really reflect on myself. Really listen to that voice, my heart’s, deep inside. I never listened to it before, I’ve always tried so hard to fit in. I mean, there were always the signs! I always liked playing the girl, in our games.”

“Rather modern girls, though, as I recall” the old man said with a wink.

“Well, sure, I was the one to save *you*,” she laughed. “But, you know. It was always what came... *naturally*.”

“Truth be told, I always suspected...” the old man began, tapping his cheek. “Well, I sensed *something* about you. It’s why I made an effort to never push you to do any one thing. I always wanted to give you the freedom to express yourself,

without defining... how do I put it..? Rules? No, that's not quite it," Pierre assured her. His voice was gentle, delicate — shallow and cracked with age — with a soulful fervour. "Not rules, no. I've never been one for rules, myself. I've always been a bit of a troublemaker! Many men in suits had colourful words for me, and me for them. But — I understand you."

"You do?"

"Well — can you keep a secret?" he asked in a hushed, mischievous voice that cast Luna back to bedtime stories of bygone years, with that same old twinkle in the same old eyes. "I couldn't tell you until you were older, of course..." He leaned in closer as he whispered: "I've always had a fancy for 'Martians'."

She looked at him with piqued curiosity, not quite following his thread. He blinked for a moment and his eyes crinkled with mirth.

"Men, Luna!" He attempted to laugh heartily, but began coughing hoarsely as he choked on the noise.

Luna looked at him intently as he cleared his throat; he must have noticed her pitiful expression, and felt it stung his pride, for he made a show of straightening as he finished his explanation, as if to assure her he was hale and hearty, thank you.

"...You know?" he said. "'Men are from Mars, women are from Venus'. *Allons, je suis bien sûr que l'expression existe en anglais,*" he added, muttering good-naturedly.

She feigned a slap to the forehead. Of course, now that he said it — it was obvious. She had never known her grandmother, and now it was plainly obvious it was because she'd never existed. She had often leafed through the thick, heavy, plastic coated and musty smelling pages of Dad's photo albums, and, in the back of one, there was a faded photograph of Pierre with another man. She had assumed he was just a friend, but now? Of course, this man had to have been more than that.

"What happened to... him?" she gently asked, before quickly adding, fearful she was being too invasive. "Er, that is — if you're comfortable telling me — I wouldn't want —"

“I... it’s not a story for now,” he kindly interrupted — then looked at her, a wistful sheen coating his deep green eyes, and changed the subject. “Why, after all, we’re talking about you, *ma petite fleur*. I know what it’s like to not ‘fit’ into what is expected of you, how just being who you are is something that is demonised and used as a tool to scare people. I know it can be rough, and there are times you think ‘what’s the point of it all, nothing can get better’, and the —”

He paused, frowning, as if trying to conjure up an appropriately rude word in English.

“— the *arses* who think they can bring you down — but, Luna, if anyone ever lays a finger on you, or speaks a word against you, I will be on the first flight to you to make their life a living Hell. Nobody will get away with hurting you.”

He brushed a lock of her golden hair that had fallen across her face to behind her ear. She looked up at him, eyes watering. Tears pooled from the corners of her eyes, running down her cheeks and sparkling against the lights of the night-time city. She brushed them away as she turned her gaze to the side, sheepish. Her Dad did care for her, he was always supportive in his own way, but he’d had a level of emotional detachment, since — since 2019. Since the move. Since Mum had died.

She looked at the mascara that had now smeared across her hand. As she looked back at her Grandfather, a weak and sorrowful smile emerging on her face, she saw, in his outstretched hand, a tissue, clean and soft. She licked her thumb on her other hand and rubbed it against the makeup, using the tissue to wipe it all away, before blotting her tears.

“I don’t know about you,” she spoke — quietly, her voice catching in her throat. “But I really could do with a drink.”

They walked into the nearest shop, a Tesco, and found the chilled drinks area while their eyes adjusted to the bright lights inside, and the commotion of the people outside subsided to a mere soft chatter, overlaid with faint lyrics coming from the speakers above. Luna recognised it within a few moments as ‘Time’s Memory’ — she’d heard it before, somewhere or other, though the name of the band eluded her. She had other things

to think about right now. She and Pierre stood in front of the glass door, casually looking at the options.

“Oh look! There’s Gevity,” Pierre suggested. “Gevity’s good; I’m surprised they’re still around, after all these years. I once —”

He paused. Luna turned to face him, scanning his face. He was evidently mulling on something. What he said next, she suspected, wasn’t quite true.

“I’ve always liked Gevity. It’s a good drink.”

“What were you going to say?”

His eyes flickered towards her, with a wary, fox-like intelligence, then just as quickly returned to the display case, another exaggerated smile lighting up his features. “I say! Super Strawb! Would you like that? There’s also OMG Orange... or Radiant Raspberry Ripple? That one,” he squinted at the label on the plastic bottle, focusing his eyes on the colourful label, “that one is a limited edition.”

Luna frowned briefly, but decided against badgering him. They’d only just reunited, after all.

And besides, her Google skills were nothing to sneeze at. Gevity, eh? She made a mental note for later.

“Sure,” she answered, with a bright smile to assure the old man she wouldn’t press him further. “Um. I like oranges. Can you get the orange one?”

He opened the door and extracted the bottle, its surface quickly being covered by a layer of condensation from the change in temperature.

He paid for the drink as she browsed the magazines and newspapers. Something about the rack bothered her, ever-so-subtly. As if the evidence of her own eyes disagreed with itself about how many there really were. She counted the newspapers again. Seven... eight... ten — no. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, ten, eleven — hang on —

Well, never mind.

Outside, Pierre handed her the bottle and she twisted off its cap, taking multiple deep glugs, watering her parched mouth with the tangy, bubbly fluid.

She felt as if she had awoken from a deep sleep. The emotions she had felt, the psychological fatigue, just minutes before, felt easier to handle. She looked at her Grandfather and his expectant look. She looked at his knitted, turtleneck jumper with its pleasing bottle-green hue.

“All better?” he asked.

She frowned. She felt a little... dizzy.

Bottle-green.

No.

That wasn't right.

It was blue.

Navy blue.

Pierre Montgomerie, her Grandfather, had always worn a *navy blue* turtleneck jumper. She was sure of it. She had pulled at the unravelling ends of that jumper, when she was tiny, widening the holes, before he gently pulled these threads from her baby hands. He'd always sewed the holes closed by the next time she'd see him — the holes in his navy blue jumper. That's how much he liked that old thing.

She lost her balance and leant against a stall, keeping herself upright. Her Grandfather placed a hand on her arm.

“You alright?”

“I... your... your jumper... it's the *wrong colour*...”

Pierre's brow furrowed, his bushy grey eyebrows nearly joining. He asked her to repeat herself. She found the words came easier this time.

“Grandfather, your jumper... it changed colour. It was blue, now it's *green!*”

“Hm. That shouldn't happen,” he commented.

His concerned frown hadn't budged. Luna took a deep breath, and realised how she must sound.

“...Oh, God, what am I saying?!” she groaned. “I must sound insane! Sorry, I'm a bit — I must have just misremembered —”

“Luna, I believe you.”

“You what?” she ejaculated an incredulous laugh.

“There is much I haven’t told you. Much I can’t. Much that most can never know. But I never expected... I thought it had been dealt with...”

“What has? What are you talking about?” She began to think that maybe her Grandfather’s mind was deteriorating after all.

“Gevity, I — *we*, me and my... friends —” He stumbled over his words, and then breathed in slowly. “We investigated the company that used to make this drink, decades ago. I can’t really explain why in the middle of a street, but imagine something off of *Professor X* — it was beyond imagination. I — oh, give me that.”

He plucked the half-empty bottle from her grasp with surprising force.

“Luna, I need to make a phone call. Stay here, I’ll only be a minute.”

She went to object but he was already moving towards an alley some metres away, phone in his left hand, the fizzy drink in his right. Within moments he had turned the corner. Luna, not having any of this — she was beginning to worry, to overthink — she wanted to know what on Earth her Grandfather was going on about.

“— I have the drink with me, yes. Do you want me to hold onto it, or are you going to get your own sample?” Pierre, back turned from the street, was engrossed in conversation. Luna began to speak, to ask what he was doing, and he spun around and mouthed at her to go back to the street, gesturing with a pointed, wrinkled finger. But before he continued, he looked at Luna again, catching her eyes. He saw her deep blue eyes, filled with a fire that burned bright in spite of everything she had been through.

“You’re going to hate me, Zoltan, but I can’t get to York tonight.” Her Grandfather’s frailty had now dissipated, with a determined vigor in its stead; his response to whatever this ‘Zoltan’ had said was incredibly assertive. “I’m with my Granddaughter! I can’t abandon her, especially not after all this time. You’re going to have to make the trip down to us.”

Luna heard the audible groan that came over the phone, even from the distance she was from her Grandfather. He flashed an encouraging smile at her as he asked her for her address, which he relayed to his correspondent. With a customary ‘goodbye’, he finished the call and stowed the phone securely into his pocket.

“What was all *that* about?” Luna inquired, then quickly added, before he even had a chance to respond: “Thank you so much for staying with me. You’ve no idea how much it means to me.”

“Luna, I wouldn’t think of doing any less. I couldn’t leave you now. Not now. Not when it matters most. But —” He paused, quickly deliberating on a response to her question. “— oh, I don’t think discussing it here, in the middle of Birmingham, would be remotely intelligent. I’m not even sure I should tell you, if I’d be *allowed*, but... but I think you deserve to know.”

“Grandfather, I’m not really feeling in the mood to traipse around the rest of the market — even if I was, I don’t think it would be worth it as I think it’s just cheap stuff bought online — what say we go home? You haven’t even seen Dad yet!”

Pierre grinned and nodded to her suggestion.

And so, as the skies opened and the snowfall began enveloping the streets of the United Kingdom’s second city, the generational duo headed across the streets to the Grand Central car park.

As they sheltered their vision with their hands against the billowing ice, they didn’t notice that they were being watched. As they travelled along, the same emaciated figure, obscured by shadows and the snow itself, kept appearing at regular intervals, intently watching. If they had stopped and looked at this inexplicable individual, they would have been surprised to see that the figure never seemed to move — and then perturbed by its actual appearance. The face, framed by a few curled locks of colourless hair, was almost skeletal, the skin stretched tight across their features; the being’s eyes were

deeply sunken, and they wore a plain white tunic, with white trousers and white shoes.

But, of course, they hadn't seen them; they'd never spotted them, not once. They'd seen to that. Nor did they see them fasten the straps of an ancient, ornate copper mask over their cold, pallid face. It was covered in a patina of oxidation, like something pulled out of an ancient tomb. Nobody noticed anything strange at all.

* * *

Luna led the way through the concrete rat race. She had parked her car by a corner of the multi-storey, in a 'safe spot', as she had put it when Pierre asked her why she'd parked so far from the doors that led to the shopping centre below. She opened the door for her Grandfather and aided him into the vehicle, before walking around to the driver's side and getting in herself.

"So this is my car," she introduced the car to him as if it were a good friend. "Her name's Geraldine!"

He chuckled as he shifted in his seat, getting comfortable. Realising he was still holding the bottle of Gevity, he placed it in the drinks holder with inordinate care.

As she turned the car on, she saw her Grandfather's eyebrows lift up, hearing — or rather, not hearing — the sound of Geraldine's engine.

"Oh, yeah — she's an electric," she explained before he opened his mouth. "Not that I'd want to drive anything else, given the 'Clean Air Zone' regulations."

He nodded in approval.

As she drove out of the multi-storey, and away from the centre of Birmingham towards her home a few miles away in Edgbaston, she didn't take her eyes off the road, not for a moment. Pierre was watching how she drove, of course, though she didn't notice, and he noted how cautious she was being through the late-December traffic. He tried making conversation but she politely asked him to allow her to focus

— and the music she put on, Chappell Roan’s *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* seemed to help her concentration.

For many minutes they moved very little, and with nothing else to do he looked around the car. There wasn’t much to note: it was clean, evidently freshly vacuumed, and there was no clutter up front or even in the back. The only thing stuck out to him were the decorations hanging from her rear-view mirror: a pine air freshener in the shape of a Christmas tree, a lone *Pokémon* card — a ‘Breloom’, as he angled it towards the light — and a flag of blue, white and pink.

Soon, after a quick stop at Pierre’s hotel so that he could grab a large paper bag that she expected contained several Christmas presents, Luna had entered the suburban sprawl; they were nearing their destination. She turned into Carpenter Road, and slowed outside one of the houses. A large, gated Victorian home — no, a mansion, decorated with strands of festive fairy-lights. By now, the ground, the bushes, rooftops — anything flat — was covered in a thin layer of snow.

The iron gates, already open, allowed the precautious driver to reverse onto the driveway without issue. She helped her Grandfather out of the car and led him to the front door, where her Dad — Gérard — was patiently sitting on the stone steps which preceded the open door, cigarette in hand. He extinguished the stub in a ceramic ashtray and rose to his feet.

“Hi Dad,” Luna hugged him heartily briefly before quickly slipping into the warmth of the hallway.

Gérard put his hands on his hips as Pierre came to face him. He feigned a hard stare. “Well then, Father — out late with Luna again?”

“Oh hush boy, it’s only, what —” He looked down at his wrist for a watch that wasn’t there, before leaning to the side to look at Luna. “What’s the time?”

She took a moment away from untying the laces of her Converse and picked up her phone. “Uh, just past half five?”

“Half five. I expect you haven’t even had dinner yet! Just like old times.”

“Just like old times,” Gérard laughed as he embraced Pierre tightly.

As Gérard made his way to her car to carry in the paper bag and the fizzy drinks bottle, Pierre gazed at the photographs of his son and granddaughter that decorated the patterned, cream-coloured wallpaper-covered walls.

They were all recent; no photographs here of when Luna was young. There were more recent ones though: pictures of her outside a college; in what appeared to be the London Eye, and a particularly recent one at that if that ugly skyscraper in the background was anything to go by; one on a beach next to a sign saying ‘Tenby’; and the final one of her in an abandoned building. There was also one other photograph — a candid photograph of Luna’s Mum, Jeanne, smiling as she painted a landscape.

Luna’s Dad returned through the front door, closing it with a slippersed foot behind him as he handed the bag to him. Marvelling at the Gothic grandeur of the building, Pierre wasted no time in asking his son how he could afford it.

“Well, between the insurance payout, and my job at Silka Corp, I only had to do a little bit of budgeting.”

“Silka Corp?” Pierre was unfamiliar with them.

“Just some R&D firm that has some offices in the city centre. It’s pretty dull, I manage accounting. But it pays well enough.”

Pierre was then directed towards one of the reception rooms to put the bag, while Luna made her way into the dining room, where she took a seat.

Pierre joined her after a few moments and sat opposite. He pushed the plate that had been laid out aside, resting his elbows on the table boyishly. Luna had taken off her hoodie and now her black t-shirt underneath was visible, one that had an inexplicable sequence of four white squares, the first featuring a single vertical black line, then the following two featuring two vertical lines each, and the fourth with one vertical line and one horizontal line. Pierre didn’t get it and frowned to that effect. Presently, she was intently reading a paperback book, although

its cover was obscured as she had bent the latter half of the book's pages backwards.

"What have you got there?" Pierre asked. "And I'm rather disappointed in you, doing that. You should know to treat books better!"

At this she looked up and saw the stare she was being given, and, without looking down, unbent the back pages. She then raised the book up so that its cover was in Pierre's line of sight.

"It's some tatty true crime book I picked from a charity shop. The story is interesting but the writer's prose leaves a lot to be desired; I'm thinking of finding a documentary instead."

Just then Gérard entered the room, now wearing an apron. Pierre looked up at his son, now seeing in the light that spots of sauce had landed in his black beard and hair, his eyes ringed with tiredness.

"Dad, get your arms off the table!" Gérard scolded his father, hitting him with the handle of a wooden spoon. "I expected you'd be back a bit later, Luna. I was hoping to have dinner prepared for you and Dad. Now you'll just have to wait."

He turned and left the room to return to the kitchen.

"Bit of a sourpuss, don't you think Luna? I thought I taught him better than that."

"Don't be too harsh on him. He's been through a lot these past few years. He's a hard worker. He doesn't speak about her often, he bottles up his feelings. But..." She took a moment to ready herself. "...late at night, when he thinks I'm sleeping... I hear him, sometimes. Sobbing, by — by himself. He does it in the garden, to not disturb me, I guess, but I hear him. My gut feels horrible when he does. I wish I had the courage to go out to comfort him, but I think if I did we'd both just sob together. Neither of us would be able to comfort the other, we'd just be too busy being messes."

She turned her head from the direction to the kitchen to focus her view on her Grandfather, although she didn't make eye contact. Her book was now face down, forgotten.

“I struggle. I really do. I can’t help but blame myself for what happened. Dad’s told me, when he does speak about it, that it wasn’t my fault, that I could never have seen that bastard running a red light —”

She caught herself. She pushed back her chair and left the room.

Pierre noticed how quick she was to open up. Those five years prior, he had received the phone call from Gérard, and heard how agonised he was. He’d sped over in his car to Luna’s home, in the outskirts of Orléans, to pick him up to take him to the hospital. Though she’d been rushed to the I.C.U., Jeanne had passed from her injuries just a day later. Luna herself had suffered a broken rib and some other minor injuries, but she’d recovered without much issue. Physically, at any rate.

While Gérard kept him in the loop, Pierre soon found that he had begun the preparations to move to England. He had confronted him at the time, demanding he did what was best for Luna — and he was convincing. A new start, somewhere completely disconnecting from the harrowing events of just a couple months prior. Pierre had made his peace and let them go.

He had, of course, hoped to see them more frequently, but things just kept getting in the way, so the times he did see them were too few. He had to be the one to fly to them — they clearly weren’t able to go back.

But now it was so clear to him that his family were grieving. The move hadn’t helped as much as Gérard had hoped.

He couldn’t leave them, not again.

Luna returned to her seat, her remnants of make-up completely gone, and her eyes were now puffy and red.

“Luna, I...” He trailed off, feeling a stab in his heart upon seeing her state. He moved to a chair next to her, pushed it closer and wrapped an arm over her shoulder. She whispered a thank-you.

They sat for a while, in silence. They didn’t have the words to express what they felt.

Eventually, Gérard began coming to the room with various platters and dishes, all filled with festive foods. A tray of roasted potatoes and carrots, a tray of nut-roast, a bowl of bread, a platter of fruits, a jug of gravy... more than enough for several nights' worth of meals. When all this was laid out, Gérard took a seat, oblivious to his family's disposition and merrily told them to tuck in.

As he began serving himself a healthy portion of everything, Pierre cleared his throat.

"You can't keep doing this."

Luna looked at her Grandfather, startled. "Grandfather, this isn't the time. It'll be better if we just eat."

"It won't though. I can see that as plainly as the plate beneath me. You two need help and, frankly, I'm not sure how you've managed these past few years."

Gérard kept eating, eyes locked on his food.

"Son... Luna's heart has been breaking in front of me, just now. *Breaking*. She needs your support! You need support! If you don't you'll end up being sucked into a whirlpool of despair you won't be able to escape."

He looked up.

Pierre continued.

"Luna knows about how you grieve, how you bottle everything up and then release it in such a volatile way. She *hears* you, and she knows how much you're going through, yet can't find the way to help you. Let *me* help you. Let me... *Let me help you.*"

He put down his fork and just looked into Pierre's eyes. Pierre saw the torment behind them, the pain. The anguish. Those same eyes welled up and he began a choking sob. Pierre and Luna got up and held him. Comforting him. Luna then took her turn to speak.

"Dad, it's okay to miss her. But please, *please*, stop internalising how you feel. Please, just talk to me about it. Just talk."

"I need some air." He stood and left the table, and they heard the door open and close around him.

They followed him.

Outside, underneath the snow, her Dad sat, arms around his legs, hands over his face.

“I’m sorry, Luna. I’m sorry you had to hear me. Your Grandfather and you are right, I’ve been keeping all this to myself, all these years. Hoping that, if I just ignored it, it’d all just fuck off and go away, so I stop feeling it all. I was wrong. Just so damn wrong, and I made it worse for you too.”

“Then let it out!” she exclaimed. “Let it all out.”

“I-I’m not quite ready, yet. There’s so much, and I want to, but I can’t even find the words to begin. Not yet.”

Pierre saw his child, as vulnerable as he had been as a boy, and pulled him up onto his feet and helped him inside, brushing off the speckles of snow that had sprinkled on him like sugar. They made their way back to the dinner table, and began eating. They reminisced about Jeanne, exchanging stories about her laugh, her smile, and her warmth. They looked back on all the good, and knew that, if she could speak to them now, she’d want them to embrace the future.

To love and to care for each other, even if she couldn’t be with them.

Then came a knock at the door. Gérard went to see who their late night guest was, and back came a shout to Pierre.

“There’s a man here named Mr Sultan,” Gérard then spoke, in an indoor voice, to his guest, but nevertheless Pierre could still hear from some distance. “Is that right? Oh, *Zol-tan*. Sorry ‘bout that.”

Pierre joined them.

Before him stood a stout man, bundled up in a charcoal beanie and a heavy, teal-and-chestnut knitted scarf, which covered the shoulders of a bulky, double-breasted burgundy peacoat. The man rubbed his hands together, blowing on them, to take the chill away. Pierre saw that his crimson gloves, now tucked into his pockets, hadn't done anything to keep him warm.

Charles Zoltan was not a man with whom Pierre had met face-to-face many times; but he’d known *of* him for simply

ages, first by reputation, and later through letters — and later still, emails. Their similar lines of work had made their interactions, over the decades, entirely inevitable. Charles wasn't the only person in such a field he had spoken to, but he was the only one he liked. Something about the others irritated him.

They shook hands, as expected.

“Say, Mr Zoltan, you look as though you're positively freezing — we've another spot at the table, fancy a meal and some wine?” Gérard courteously offered, sensing that the man could do well with getting out of the cold.

“I daresay I absolutely *would!*” he chuckled, not without a sense of urgency, and hurried in. “Thank you most kindly.”

Gérard returned to the dining room as Charles took off some of his layers and began speaking to Pierre.

“So, Pierre. Good to meet you again after all this time. 'Fraid it wasn't under these circumstances. It would be nice to get a beer or two with you, one of these days.”

“I'd like that. And the drink, it's just... where did he put it...” Pierre began looking around.

Within a few moments, he'd located the half-empty bottle, which had been placed atop a narrow table pushed against the hallway wall.

“Good, Pierre. Thanks for keeping it, but there's no need to hand it to me now — I'll grab it on my way out.”

Pierre gently placed the can back down.

“Now, about this food — I am *starving*. Unlike you Pierre, I had to drive for three hours non-stop in a car whose air conditioning system decided that *today* was the day to off itself. Thankfully my friends, Xana and Claire, are spending Christmas together, so they can manage for a few hours without me.”

“You sound lonely. Come on, get yourself a plate. Another hour won't do any harm.”

Over the next few hours, the dysfunctional, yet complete, family and their well-mannered guest got lost in conversation,

expressing not their issues, ones that they were powerless to resolve, but instead...

...their dreams. ...their hopes.

They now looked forward to the future, instead of being trapped in the past.

They had each other.

Friends. Family.

After all this time, they were no longer alone.

4:
Potestas Trium
Starlight Endeavours
by **Lena Mactíre**

Snowflakes drifted slowly down from the sky as Ellissia Heios, one-time princess of the Outer Confederacy, stared out the window of her bedroom.

Months had passed since the signing of the armistice that finally brought an end to the New Civil War between the two human factions. Now, unification had begun, but it was a slow and gradual process. Some people believed that the leaders of the OC had all been weak, mueling quims, and if only *they* had been put in charge, they might have led the Confederates to victory...

Such counterfactuals were pointless, as Ellissia knew all too well. After all, she'd been the one who *ended* the New Civil War. But that was a story for another time. All Ellissia wanted to do *now* was get to grips with how her life had changed.

For one thing, she now lived in a country house somewhere in rural England. It was called Shadowfall Manor, and was said to be the ancestral home of the Shadows, a family of witches stretching back some two hundred years. The family's sole surviving member, Gemini, had taken Ellissia in after the peace treaty was signed, believing that orphans needed to stick together, no matter the circumstance.

It was optimism that Ellissia really, *really* needed, if she was honest with herself. She'd never known such kindness, between her abusive father and her equally repugnant older

brother. Gem was the closest thing she had to a mother at this point... but for whatever reason, she couldn't bring herself to say so out loud.

Not yet, anyway.

"Ellissia? Breakfast is ready!" a voice called, jarring the teen from her thoughts. It was exceedingly posh and upper-class sounding... which, now that Ellissia thought about it, fit the voice's owner perfectly.

"COMING, GEM!" Ellissia shouted back. Turning away from the window, she ran past the four-poster bed she now slept in and hurried down the stairs in socks and pajamas, soon arriving in the large kitchen.

Seated at the head of the table was a woman with reddish-brown hair and piercing green eyes, dressed this morning in a navy blue cardigan with a white dress shirt and black slacks. Around her neck was a silver triquetra necklace. This, of course, was Gemini Shadow: captain of United Humanity's flagship, the UHS *Endeavour*... and a practicing witch.

Ellissia had heard rumors about that second part during her years in the OC. They said she worshipped the Devil and used dark magic to subdue her enemies in battle, but in the six months Ellissia had been living here, she had yet to see evidence of either. Go figure.

"Go on, eat up!" Gem said, smiling warmly at the young woman as she came in. Two bowls of oatmeal sat steaming on the old wooden table, mixed with brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg, apple slices, and cranberries. "How did you sleep?"

"Fine, I guess," Ellissia said, shrugging. "That dreamless sleep spell you cast on me seems to be doing its job."

That got an approving nod. "Excellent. And have you been working on your meditations?"

Ellissia nodded in confirmation. "Yeah... I still don't quite understand how it helps me, but it does."

Gem smiled kindly. "That, my dear, is the essence of the magical arts," she said. "I have always believed that magic is a law of physics unto itself, very much including the more... *mundane* aspects like meditation. To paraphrase the Bard, 'there

are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in most philosophies.”

“Yeah, about that,” Ellissia said. “I get that magic exists... I’ve lived here too long *not* to believe in it. But why does it have to come from a god? The last god I believed in turned out to be a computer program, after all.”

“Do I take this to mean that you do not believe in the gods?” Gem asked curiously.

Ellissia shook her head. “Oh I believe in gods, I just don’t respect them,” she said. I mean, what kind of a god would go to all this trouble creating a universe, and then turn around and have half of one species slaughter the other half? It makes no sense!” She paused to take several deep breaths. “Uh... no offense.”

“None taken,” Gem replied, dabbing at her mouth between spoonfuls of oatmeal. “Actually, I find your opinion on matters of the divine to be quite diverting.”

Ellissia blinked. “...Really?”

Gem nodded. “Quite so. Having been raised with a belief in multiple gods, it’s rather refreshing to meet someone with such different views on the subject.”

“Okay, so tell me,” Ellissia said. “Why do you still respect your gods?”

“It’s not quite a question of respect,” Gem explained. “Though I *do* respect them. I have simply found that I’ve never needed to question their existence or their motives, even in times of war, for one very simple reason.”

“What’s that?” Ellissia asked.

“The gods,” Gem said, “are not responsible for everything.”

Ellissia blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“The gods do watch over us from their places in the Otherworld,” Gem said, “but by and large, they intervene only when directly asked, or in cases of direst emergency. The rest of the time, they simply allow us mortals to do as we will... provided that we harm none.” She smiled wryly. “As you may imagine, that is rather more difficult than it seems.”

Ellissia laughed quietly, amazed at the weight such an understatement could carry. “So... if they aren’t responsible for everything we do, where does the magic come in?”

“It is a blessing, and that’s all,” Gem answered. “No more and no less. Magic is neither black nor white, it simply *is*. What matters is how the practitioner chooses to wield that blessing.” She paused to take a sip of her earl grey tea. “The first thing you should know about magic, Ellissia, is that it is about one thing: Power.”

“How’s that?” Ellissia asked, staring in wonderment at the various crystals, candles, and spell books that surrounded them. “How do all these things make you powerful?”

“I wondered that too, when I was your age,” Gem answered. “But as a former high priestess of mine once said, ‘magic is not in the tools: it’s in the witch.’” She sipped her tea again. “For centuries, the downtrodden and marginalized have turned to witchcraft as a means of taking power back from those who would deny it to them. It is our way of... evening the odds, so to speak.”

Ellissia nodded, and found herself staring around the room toward a small bookshelf near the door, crammed with books. (Mainly about cooking.) Her gaze fell on one book in particular: *Wicca — A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner*, by someone called Scott Cunningham.

Finishing her oatmeal, she crossed the room to the bookshelf and picked it up, turning the book over in her hands. “So... just anyone can be a witch?” she asked. “You don’t have to be born with like... I don’t know, a magic gene or something?”

Gem laughed softly, walking over to stand beside the young woman. “Not at all,” she said, a warm, patient smile on her face. “The Craft comes to all who seek it out, no matter their station in life. The gods will welcome you home, no matter when, or why, you’ve come to them.”

“Why?” Ellissia asked, puzzled.

“You ask an excellent question,” said Gem, staring contemplatively at the ceiling. “What I would say is that what

guides the gods, more than anything, is an intense love for we mortals. A desire to see us become our best selves. And they, I find, are uniquely placed to help us get there.”

“Even me?” Ellissia wondered, looking down at her shoes. “After all I’ve done...”

“...You will still be loved,” Gem answered. “Wiccans do not have a concept of sin, Ellissia. Balance, certainly. And the importance of righting that balance once it has been upset. But in my faith, there is no judgement day, no casting down of ‘bad souls’ into the fires of some dreary Hell, no permanent separation from the gods. There is simply love, and personal empowerment.”

Ellissia did not reply for a long time, as she turned all this over in her mind. She’d spent her whole life feeling like the puppet of others... sometimes literally so, as in the last phases of the war. But now, with the OC buried and her parents gone... there was no one left to tell her what to do. Maybe she could claim herself.

At length, Ellissia held up the book. “Can I borrow this?”

“By all means,” Gem said, smiling proudly. “I have an entire library of books, after all, and all of them are yours to peruse at your leisure.”

Ellissia blushed. “Thanks... for everything.”

Gem embraced Ellissia, stroking the girl’s hair in the same way her mother, Octavia, once had, though Ellissia was not to know this. “You are quite welcome, my dear,” she whispered.

The two of them left the kitchen, each feeling lighter than they had in some time... but none more so than Ellissia Heios.

* * *

It was still dark as Gem came downstairs to prepare for the Yuletide sunrise ritual. She circled the living room, lighting candles and the fireplace with the tap of a finger, humming *The Holly and the Ivy* all the while.

For those who didn’t know her well, one might have thought that Shadowfall’s living room had been decorated for

Christmas. A large tree covered in lights and colorful ornaments stood in one corner, red and green tinsel hung from the mantelpiece, and there was even a small pile of gifts under the tree, neatly wrapped and waiting to be opened.

But where most people might have placed a nativity scene, Gem had a tastefully-decorated seasonal altar. Resting on a dark green altar cloth were four candles: gold, silver, red, and green. (All were currently unlit.) These were surrounded by statues of reindeer, wolves, ravens, and cats. Joining those were two deity statues - one of Aradia, the Mother Goddess, and Cernunnos, the Horned God.

“Did you convert to Terran Wicca and not tell me?” Bex Taylor asked with an amused grin as she entered the living room and spotted the two statues. “I thought you were strictly a goddesses-only kind of witch.”

“I used to be,” Gem admitted as she lit a couple of evergreen and bayberry incense sticks. “But my beliefs have shifted somewhat over the past few years, and... well. I’m spending more time on Earth these days than Mars, so I thought, why not honor the local deities? I’d think they ought to appreciate it.”

Bex nodded and sighed a little, glancing to a framed photograph that had pride of place on the mantelpiece, right next to the altar. It showed Raven Sable, Gem’s former first officer, who had been killed in the line of duty during the war. She too had been a witch, forming the third part of a three-woman coven.

“Gods, I miss her,” Bex said quietly. “The Samhain ritual we did for her was nice, and it felt good to feel her presence again... but it’s not the same, you know?”

“I know,” Gem said, gazing sadly at the picture. “I’ve been hoping we might find a third witch to complete the Power of Three, but despite my prayers, none have appeared... *however.*”

Bex looked up. “However?”

“However, Ellissia was asking me about magic at breakfast yesterday,” Gem said, “And over the course of the conversation, I gave her Cunningham’s masterpiece. Since

then, she's spent all her time in the witchcraft section of the library." She smiled. "Bex, I think we may have a convert on our hands."

"Let's check in on her after the ritual, huh?" Bex suggested, glancing at the grandfather clock in the corner of the room. "Sun'll be rising soon."

Gem opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything, Ellissia herself came down the stairs. "I just came down for a glass of water," she said, before stopping to really look at what Gem and Bex were up to. They were both dressed in dark green ritual cloaks, and silver necklaces with charms: a triquetra for Gem, and a pentacle for Bex. A wooden box, containing Gem's collection of ritual tools, sat open on a side table.

Ellissia took all this in, looking adorably confused and bewildered. "Uh... what's this?"

"Our morning Yule ritual, of course," said Gem pleasantly, as if this were perfectly normal. "Would you like to watch us?"

"Sure," Ellissia said, sitting down on the bottom step.

Gem nodded. "Splendid." She turned back to Bex. "Ready?"

Bex nodded. "Ready."

Gem closed her eyes for a moment, getting herself into the magical frame of mind. When she opened her eyes again a short while later, Ellissia suddenly understood *why* the Outer Confederacy, her father in particular, had tried to bring her down. Those green eyes almost seemed to glow with unearthly power and might... and as goosebumps appeared on her skin, Ellissia found herself afraid, if only for a moment.

The moment passed as the ritual began. With the sky beginning to lighten from the approach of dawn, Gem began to speak, in her role as High Priestess: "Tonight, we honor the darkness, for from darkness is born the light! From the void, the darkest night of the year is at its threshold, and the sun is born again!"

Bex began to light the altar candles: First gold, then red, silver, and green. When this was done, she said, "Powers of

Air, Fire, Water, and Earth, come forward from the darkness! Enter our circle, as dark gives way to light! Bring with you the essence of the pine trees, the first glint of tomorrow, the bitter sweet memories, the land that now sleeps! Remind us of spring, summer, and winter, on this solstice night!”

Gem took up her athame, faced east, and began to cast the circle. A white light came from the tip of the athame and followed her, slowly turning clockwise with her movements. As the circle was complete, the line blossomed into a semi-transparent perfect sphere.

“Mother Aradia, Goddess of All Seasons, we see you now as mother with child,” Gem said. “Be with us tonight.”

“Father Cernunnos, God of All Seasons, we see you now as the dying sun, and also as a tiny baby, the sun reborn,” said Bex. “Be with us tonight.”

Ellissia clapped her hands over her mouth to stifle her gasp. Two ancient presences now filled the room... impossibly old. But they were not scary or frightening, like the Alien God of the Tabernacle had been. These were warm, welcoming, gentle, and endlessly loving. For the first time, she felt entirely at peace... it was like nothing she’d ever known before.

But how could this be? It made no sense!

Deciding she’d figure it out later, Ellissia settled in to watch the rest of the ritual.

Gem lit a golden pillar candle, then spoke once more: “As the darkness grows, I feel the passing of the sun king,” she proclaimed. “Yet, in the darkest hour of winter, he is reborn as the light of the infant son! The great mother who gives birth to Him, who brought the child of promise to the earth! It is the lord of light and life who is born once more!”

“Awake now, Goddess of Life, Death, and Rebirth!” Bex chanted. “Awaken lady, look upon your divine child, his rebirth while you slept was subtle and silent! The sun lord awaits your awakening!”

As the sun rose, the two witches reached the final part of the rite. This, they chanted in unison: “Hail the oak king, his rebirth a promise! Hail the divine child, giver of life! Hail the

Blesséd Sun, reborn of the Mother! For he retakes his throne at the end of Solstice Night!”

And on cue, as if conjured by magic, the sun rose, its warm, golden light streaming in through the window.

“Lovely mother and tiny child, thank you for blessing us with your presence tonight,” said Gem, as the ritual concluded. “As the days grow longer, we will know you are always with us. Hail to you and blesséd be, may the new year shine brighter than the old.”

“Blesséd be,” echoed Bex.

And the ritual was over.

As the circle dispersed, Ellissia got to her feet, wide-eyed. “That was... that was... *incredible*...” she whispered. “You people can do stuff like that all the time?”

“Not all the time,” Bex said, beginning to extinguish the candles while Gem put away her tools. “Just on the Sabbats and the Esbats. But yeah, it’s pretty cool.” She grinned. “Don’t think I’ve ever looked at the Craft through a mortal’s eyes before. Glad we impressed you!”

“More like, enraptured,” Ellissia said. “During the war, when I learned what the Alien God *really* was... I thought I knew how the universe worked. That gods were all just big fakers pulling the wool over our eyes. But after what I just saw today, and what I felt... I think I’m starting to understand.”

She took a deep breath. “You two... I think you both know I didn’t exactly have the best family life before, right?”

Gem chuckled bitterly. “Oh, I’m quite aware. The kind of man your father was, murdering my commanding officer and asking me to betray my government, as he had done...”

Bex nodded, picking up her captain’s unfinished thought. “I can’t imagine what that was like to live with.”

“As bad as you’d think, and sometimes worse,” Ellissia said. “But today? I felt the presence of a father who knows what *real* love is. Like he’ll take care of me, no matter what happens. So I guess what I’m saying is...” She paused to gather her words. “Whatever it is you do to become Wiccan... can I do it too?”

“You most certainly can, my dear,” said Gem, wrapping Ellissia up in a warm hug. “Let us open presents first, and then...” She smiled. “I have an initiation ritual to write.”

* * *

The moon shone brightly through the living room windows, illuminating the space as the sun had. Candles burned as they had that morning, and burning incense filled the room with the smell of the season. The time for ritual had come once again, but this was a night for the most sacred form of magic of all...

Initiation.

Gem and Bex stood in the center of the newly-cast circle, acting their roles as priestesses. Ellissia stood in the kitchen doorway, waiting her turn. Though all three now wore green cloaks, only Gem and Bex wore the silver ritual jewelry... at least, for the moment. After spending the afternoon rehearsing, now was the moment of truth. It was all very theatrical, Ellissia had thought. Like a play... albeit one performed for an audience of gods.

As the ritual began, Gem spoke first. “Let there be none who suffer loneliness; none who are friendless and without family! For all may find love and peace within the Circle! With open arms, the Lord and Lady welcome all!”

Bex spoke up next: “Lady Shadow, I bring news of one who has traveled far, seeking that which we enjoy. Long has been her journey, but now she feels an end is near.”

“Of whom do you speak?” Gem asked.

“Of she who, even now, waits outside our temple, seeking entry,” Bex replied.

“Who caused her to come here?” wondered Gem.

“She came herself, of her own free will,” said Bex.

Gem nodded. “And what does she seek?”

“She seeks to become one with the Lord and the Lady,” answered Bex. “She seeks to join with us in our worship of them.”

Gem smiled. "Can she be brought before us?"

"Indeed she can," Bex answered.

Gem nodded one more time, and pointed forward. "Then make it so."

That was Ellissia's cue. Stepping out from her place in the kitchen doorway, she approached the edge of the circle, but did not yet cross the threshold.

Gem turned to gaze at her, as if staring into her soul. "What is your name, Initiate?"

"My name is Ellissia Heios," Ellissia answered. "I beg entry."

It was Bex's turn next. She faced Ellissia, looking deeply serious. "Ellissia, why do you come here?"

"To worship the gods in whom I believe, and to become one with them and my family of the Craft," answered Ellissia. "I bring nothing but my true self, pure as the driven snow."

Gem nodded. "Then I bid you enter this our Circle of worship and magic," she said. Taking up her wand, she cut a door into the sphere, and after a moment's hesitation, Ellissia stepped across the threshold.

In the swirling white light of the semi-transparent sphere around her, Ellissia thought she could see two shapes - one female, and one male, with antlers adorning his head. The same warm, loving feeling that she'd felt that morning had returned, but stronger now inside the circle.

"As you enter our Sacred Circle, I here duly consecrate you, in the names of the God and the Goddess," said Gem, gently sprinkling droplets of consecrated water on Ellissia's head from a nearby chalice. Then a lit candle floated briefly over the teenager, while Bex waved rosemary incense smoke gently toward Ellissia's face.

"We bless you with Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, four Elements do we freely give," Bex said. "The fifth is Spirit, that comes only from the Goddess." She stared very intently into Ellissia's eyes. "Do you wish to receive the blessing of Spirit? No harm will come to you if not."

"I do," said Ellissia, without hesitation.

Gem nodded, satisfied by this reply. Turning to the statue of Aradia that stood at the center of the altar, she cried, “Oh Mother Goddess, creatrix of all, I beseech you! Bless unto young Ellissia with the most sacred of all powers!”

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen... but then, very slowly, a low hum filled the air, rising in pitch as Ellissia was surrounded by a mystical aura. She rose into the air and floated near the top of the magical sphere, supported by the weight of these two ancient beings.

Then there was a bright flash... and the blessing was complete.

For a moment, Ellissia simply stood there, feeling very strange. Still human, of course, but something *more* than that as well... exactly what that was, she couldn't figure out. The only thing she knew for certain was that whatever this power was, it was very intense... like standing outside on a stormy day, in the instant between the lightning strike and the downpour of rain.

At length, Bex turned to Ellissia once more: “Know you the Wiccan Rede?”

Ellissia nodded. “I do. An' it harm none, do what ye will.”

“And do you abide by that Rede?” Gem asked.

Ellissia nodded once more. “I do.”

Gem smiled a little, then took up a small vial of anointing oil, drawing the shape of a pentacle on Ellissia's forehead. “With this sacred oil, I anoint and cleanse you, giving new life to one of the children of the gods. So mote it be!”

“So mote it be!” cried Bex and Ellissia together.

Bex then placed a silver ritual necklace around Ellissia's neck - this time, the charm was crescent moon shaped. “Now you are truly one of us,” she said. “As one of us, you will share our knowledge of the gods and of the arts of healing, of divination, of magic, and of all the mystic arts. These shall you learn as you progress.”

“But we caution you ever to remember the Wiccan Rede,” Gem added. “An' it harm none, do what ye will.”

“I will remember it always,” Ellissia said, feeling a warm glow of love envelop her.

“Then our ritual is ended,” said Gem, dismissing the circle with a light tap of her wand. “Now it is truly a time for celebration.”

“Huzzah!” cried the other two witches, and the three of them left the living room, making for the kitchen.

Behind them, the silver triquetra inscribed on Gem’s Book of Shadows glowed with white light, as its three leaves were unified once more. The Power of Three had been restored.

* * *

“So this is magic, huh?” Ellissia said, making a flicking gesture with her hand. Milk simply seemed to *teleport* into her mug, and heat itself. In an instant, what had been a pile of dry cocoa powder was now a steaming mug of hot chocolate. “Can we ride broomsticks too?”

“It is, and we can,” Gem said airily, unable to hide her smile. “Though, I think learning to fly is best done in warmer weather... maybe in the spring. Wouldn’t you say, Bex?”

Bex chuckled. “Yeah, maybe, provided the ol’ girl isn’t out of spacedock by then. Otherwise we’ll have to use the holosims, and those... not quite the same as the real thing. Too perfect.”

Ellissia giggled. “I don’t care if it’s perfect or not, I’m just happy to learn!”

Gem smiled fondly. “Then you will do quite well as a witch, my dear. Our Craft, like so many other things in this life, is an ever-evolving thing. I’ve been a witch since the day I was born, and even after four decades, I still haven’t learned it all.”

“What will we do tomorrow?” Ellissia asked curiously, unable to hide a yawn.

“First thing is gonna be starting your Book of Shadows,” answered Bex. “Every witch has her own, unique to them. After that, we’ll show you how to make your ritual tools, and

cast a few basic spells. It might seem like a lot at first, but trust me, you'll adapt quickly. I know *I* did."

Ellissia blinked. "You mean, you weren't born a witch?"

Bex shook her head. "Nope. I didn't even know Wicca was a thing until I met Gem at the Academy. She initiated me, just like we did tonight."

"Welcome to the Stargazer coven, Ellissia," Gem said, hugging the girl close. "May the gods keep you safe, on this night and every other."

"Thanks... *Mom*," said Ellissia, hugging Gem back. "I have to say, after everything I've been through... I never dreamed anything like this was possible. I thought I'd end up in an orphanage or something, you know? This is *way* better." She grinned. "Here's to a fresh start!" She raised her mug.

"So mote it be!" cried Bex, clinking her mug against Gem's and Ellissia's.

"So mote it be!" echoed the other two.

And soon, with her cocoa mug empty, Ellissia went up the stairs to bed, closing her door with a flick of her fingers.

It felt *good* to be a witch.

5:
A Feast to Remember
Dionus
by James Hornby

A roaring fire spat and crackled in the Great Hall of House Avarna, bathing the room in a warm, orange glow. At the fireside, Dionus, a houseling not long of age, groaned in delight as he reclined in the embrace of a large, leather armchair. In his slender hands he held a leatherbound book, the size and weight of a boulder. Its title read: *Stranger Secrets of a Founding Age*.

Dionus drank in its words like fine wine. The book was but the latest he had unearthed in the vast depths of the House Library. Countless generations of his family had lived out their lives in blissful ignorance of the knowledge right under their noses. The words upon the pages spoke of ancient secrets, forgotten fables and altermimes — stark contradictions to what his lecturers were attempting to impart on him. If these books were to be believed, the vast swathes of his people's history — the universe's history — was a lie. Whilst his kin would surely find such claims blasphemous, Dionus had found them fascinating. Not only had they expanded his knowledge, but in turn they had kindled the fires of his imagination. If tales such as that of the stranger or the alternate accounts of the Vampire Wars had but a grain of truth to them, then the ramifications were endless. If his own people's infallible history could be so wrong, or indeed changed by the influence of others, then by definition anything could be possible. As Dionus read on, his youthful features could barely contain his excitement.

As the evening drew in, and the suns fell in the sky, the Great Hall soon started to fill with the hard-faced folk he knew

as his kin. For the most part, Dionus was happy to let their chatter become background noise, and continue his reading uninterrupted. Whilst Dionus loved his family, they were far from the conversationalists he'd grown up hoping they would be. It was only when Alontus, one of the House Fathers arrived at the fireside, casting him a gaze that could freeze a mosrat, that Dionus found his reverie broken.

“Another damn book, boy?” Alontus spat.

Whilst Dionus tried not to let it show, inside he cowered like a snail in its shell.

Alontus looked down at him with revulsion. “Service, responsibility, that's what you need to learn.” He sneered. “We of House Avarna have served the ruling powers for millennia, and the rewards have been bountiful. The only one you seem to serve is yourself. Your brothers have spent the day hunting brishtics in Lune Forest for the feast. *They* know the importance of their duties.”

Dionus couldn't help but scoff. If Alontus knew that they had actually stolen the brishtics from a market stall in Wainstrike, and spent the rest of the day drinking in the tavern, he would perhaps think differently. Or maybe he wouldn't: Alontus had never allowed himself to think highly of Dionus. Even now his face reddened, and Dionus steeled himself for the tirade to come.

“You scoff at *me*, boy?” Alontus leaned in so close that Dionus could feel droplets of spittle leave his lips when he spoke. “You mark my words: if I had my way you would be banished from this house and live a life of exile like that damn witch on Mount Plutarch. If you don't start —”

“Alontus,” called a frail voice, “may Father Bansall have your attention in the orrery?”

Dionus resisted the urge to smirk. Despite his frailty, Father Winsley's status in the House had Alontus know that it was no mere request. Still oozing with rage, the elder peeled himself away from Dionus, shooting him a look that said: ‘this isn't over’.

Alontus stormed away, crimson-hemmed ceremonial robes flapping angrily behind him. It was only when he was far across the other side of the hall did Winsley approach, his long robes giving the impression he was floating over the bare stone floor.

“Dionus, my child, another book in your hand. I trust the knowledge they are imparting has proved of great benefit to your studies?”

Dionus beamed. “Oh they have, sir. The Academics have accepted my area of study and my first paper is due at the end of this Segment.”

Eyebrows raised, Winsley nodded in approval. “Temporal theory and biological application, wasn’t it?” His lip curved upwards. “That’s quite a niche you’ve found. Our people largely turned their back on the medical sciences, in, oh, in the dark days.”

“If I want to make a difference in this world, sir, I’m going to have to try something new.”

Winsley smiled at him politely, but it was clear he didn’t approve. Change was a concept very alien to their people. For a race as old as the cosmos itself, Dionus thought it a tragedy they didn’t embrace its inevitability. In his darkest moments, he feared it would one day spell their downfall...

The conversation seemed to end, yet Winsley lingered. Dionus thought about returning to his book, but the Father’s gaze held firm.

“Is there anything I can help you with, sir?” Dionus asked after an awkward moment that seemed to last an age.

Winsley waited for another epoch before he spoke.

“There is, my boy. It’s...” He was about to continue, when he suddenly became self-conscious. Checking over his shoulder for eavesdroppers, he moved in closer. “I think we both know that the food for tonight’s feast wasn’t gathered by the most... ethical of means.”

Dionus let out a laugh. He promptly covered his embarrassment with a cough and cast his eyes to the floor.

“My concern is that pilfered meat from a market stall in Wainstrike is but one contribution to our special night. The Feast of Polyphilos should be remembered by our kin for more than ill-gotten meat; it should stand in their minds for centuries to come.”

Dionus arched his brow. “What does that have to do with me, sir?”

Winsley clasped his hands together. “Father Krontus and I believe every member of our House family should bring something to the table. Our House hasn’t nurtured a bookworm in living memory, and if we’re lucky, your contribution might be something truly special.”

Dionus felt his stomach perform a backflip. “I’ll certainly try my best, sir. What would you like me to bring?” he asked, and his hands began to fumble with the cuffs of his robe.

“That, my boy, is for you to decide, but remember, night is about to fall: you won’t be able to go far.”

* * *

And so it came to pass that Dionus found himself shivering at the edge of Lune Forest, book in hand, beneath a canopy of moonlit leaves. Chronoflies clicked and mightbees buzzed, while he sat hopeless, perched on the edge of a frost-flecked tree stump.

The whole thing felt like a set up. What was he, one boy with knowledge of a dozen heretic books, going to do to make the Feast of Polyphilos more memorable?

Did they merely want him out of the House for the night? If truth be told they need only have asked. It was never easy to concentrate with Beltar, Jesnix, and Sandus charging around — and they were only the first that sprang to mind. Today was one of the few days he’d actually had some peace, whilst they were out getting unceremoniously drunk in some backwater tavern. With a sigh, Dionus cast his eyes through the trees to the small collection of hills upon which sat House Avarna, its

grand folly towering over the landscape. He bet the others were having a whale of a time without him.

Springing up from the stump, Dionus kicked up a pile of fallen leaves and stormed further into the forest in a huff, feet crunching on the frozen soil. He was but a child in the eyes of his people, and should not be out alone on a night such as this. Perhaps the family truly did want rid of him.

As he traversed the rarely trodden path, floobles scuttled by his feet and chronoflies gathered around his face, barely deterred by his attempts to brush them away. Dionus often enjoyed his jaunts in Lune Forest on a fresh summer's day, finding a space beneath the twinkling leaves of a Leathorn tree to be alone with his thoughts. A winter's night in the forest, on the other hand, was an entirely different affair. He pushed his hands into the sleeves of his robe, already feeling numbness in his extremities. His world was one of comfort and safety, squirreled away in the rooms of his House or in the lecture halls of the Academy. To be this close to the alien and unpredictable side of nature than he was accustomed to set him on edge.

Dionus continued down the path, wondering what he could possibly find to contribute to tonight's festivities in a place such as this. He looked at a cluster of mushrooms at the base of a tree and wondered whether some addition to the feast would be fitting. When had this area last been surveyed? Perhaps millions of years. Certainly tens of thousands. Long enough, then, for evolution to take its course and create whole new wonders. Perhaps some hitherto-undiscovered herb lay hidden in the undergrowth, ready to dazzle the taste buds of everyone at the dinner table. He chuckled to himself. Who was he kidding? He was more likely to poison the whole House if he brought something like that home.

Perhaps something on a smaller scale would be more manageable, he decided. There was enough hanging fruit around to make some form of accompaniment to the main course.

A shadow moved across his path. Dionus turned his head to see the silhouette of a long-snouted beast ahead. A distinct howl followed, tearing through the night air. Dionus froze in terror, recognising it all too well.

“Skreewolf...”

The skreewolf howled once more, shrill and piercing. Dionus felt his feet melting into the ground beneath him. The beast’s cries similarly sent much of Lune Forest’s inhabitants into a frenzy: birds fled their nests, insects hid in their crevices, and any critter unable to do either simply fled. One such creature, a nimble mosrat, scurried past Dionus, brushing his leg. The sensation made him squirm, which in turn released him from his mental prison. Following the mosrat’s leave, Dionus turned heel and ran, trying his best to ignore the sharp and jagged branches as they tugged at his clothes. All the while, Dionus heard the hoarse pants of the skreewolf as it gave chase. Dionus ran as fast as his short legs could carry him. Risking a glance behind him, mouth widening in horror as he saw its jagged teeth barred, primed and ready for the kill. Dionus maintained his speed, lungs heaving with each breath. He had quickly lost track of the path, now contending with the unpredictable and uneven forest floor. The skreewolf was unceasing in its efforts, gaining ground with each moment that passed.

Dionus felt his muscles burning, screaming with exhaustion, and knew it wouldn’t be long before the wolf closed in, and the only feast he entered this evening being one where he was the main course.

Dionus gasped as his foot snagged on a tangle of exposed roots. He fell, head first, into the undergrowth. The book he carried sprang from his hands, landing open on the ground in front of him. Instinctively, Dionus closed his eyes and waited for the end.

Beyond his clamped lids, however, shone a distinct bluish hue. For the first few moments, Dionus ignored this, expecting to be torn to pieces before being consumed in a particularly

vicious and gruesome fashion. When this fate did not come to pass, Dionus was quick to wonder why.

Opening his eyes, Dionus found himself staring at the hologramatic boots of another person. Dionus blinked, for a moment wondering whether he had entered the Beyond. Then, realising an afterlife probably wouldn't contain holograms — or at least that if it did, they'd be rather better than this one — he arched his head to find the visage of an elderly woman staring down at him. Her hair was wild, sprouting off in all directions from her wrinkled scalp. She stared at him through eyes framed by crow's feet.

“Are you alright there, young man?” she asked.

His eyes widened as recent events caught up with him. Dionus spun around, expecting the skreewolf to pounce at any moment. To his relief, the beast was some distance away, racing off through the trees and into the night.

“Yes,” he wheezed, sucking in breaths.

The woman placed her hands on her hips. “Well you certainly don't look like it.” She let out a sigh, a caring sigh mixed with exasperation. He was distinctly reminded of his mother. “Come on now,” she said, her tone noticeably softer. “Take a seat on that rock and catch your breath.”

Dionus did as she asked, inhaling deep breaths of forest air. His lungs filled with the scent of lemonsuckle, and his tense shoulders melted away.

“There we are, much better.”

“Thanks,” said Dionus, and he meant it.

Now that he could take her in, Dionus saw that the woman wore long robes, stretching down to the top of her boots. He had to double take as he recognised the seal embroidered into the collar. “You're from House Avarna!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” she replied, thumbs brushing the pattern of the house seal.

Dionus frowned. “But how?”

He knew every member of his family, from Mother Esparus to Brother Sandus. *She can't be...*

"Because I'm from your past," she explained, a little too patronisingly for Dionus' liking. "Oh how linear-minded we Gods of the Fourth are to become."

Dionus scratched the back of his neck as his cheeks reddened. "Oh yeah — that does explain it."

He looked to her feet to see that her image seemed to shine out of the book he was carrying, the words on the page rising up to give her form.

"You're... being projected from my book?" he asked. "But I've been reading it all day... why now?"

"My program only runs once a millennium, on this very night," the woman explained. "In the right conditions..."

"For the Feast?" queried Dionus. *That can't be a coincidence.*

"Feast?" the hologram queried back. "I know nothing of any feast. I'm but a spectre of a bygone age. I no longer have a need for feasting."

"What is your name?" asked Dionus.

"Mother Kinratus," she answered. "Graduate of our world's first cohort of academics."

Dionus shot her an incredulous look.

"You were an *academic*?" Dionus asked, wide-eyed.

"Of course," she replied, sounding almost insulted. "The book I'm standing on is my own work. In my later days I recorded a snapshot of myself in its pages."

"The book is your book?"

Dionus clamped his eyes shut the moment the words left his lips.

The ancient's eyebrows nosedived. "You are quick to offend, young brother. What surprises you about my writing a book?"

"No, no," said Dionus, waving his hands in apology. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend. It's just... our House isn't exactly known for its novelists."

Now Kinratus really looked hurt. "Truly? Then what has become of our House?"

Dionus hesitated, not sure how to answer without causing further offense. "House Avarna is a House of service:

nowadays most join the Military. Others serve the ruling Spheres, and some still enlist in the Ceremonial Guard.”

Kinratus pursed her lips. “And what of you?” she asked, in a clear effort to suppress her true feelings.

“Much like you,” said Dionus, bashfully. “I’m currently writing my initial thoughts on temporal theory and its biological application.”

“Temporal theory,” the words brought joy to the hologram’s face. “I’m relieved to hear the legacy of our dominion over Polyphilos lives on to this day.”

“Indeed,” beamed Dionus. “Tonight is the Feast of Polyphilos, in memory of the event.”

“The same night you just happened to read my book.” Kinratus smiled. “It seems Fate has brought us together, young one.”

“Is this what you meant by the right conditions of your program?”

The hologram nodded. “I was writing this book that night, in this very place. When Polyphilos was destroyed, I watched as the night’s sky exploded in heavenly light, and our people gained mastery over time itself.”

“The dawn of our civilisation,” Dionus mouthed in awe.

“The light that ended the time of darkness,” Kinratus added.

“Is that the purpose of your program, to record the event for future generations?”

The hologram’s gaze fell. “At first,” she admitted. “Though as the years passed I’m ashamed to admit a more personal reason took precedence.”

“Oh?” His interest piqued, Dionus offered his ancestor a warm smile. “What was it?”

The hologram slipped him a humble look. “To be remembered.”

Her admittance almost brought Dionus to tears. “I can assure you that you will be.”

Their eyes locked, and the ancient academic studied her descendant with newfound warmth. “What brings a young one

out here at this time of night?” she asked, pointing out his dirt-smearred robe.

Dionus gasped as his hearts skipped a beat. He had become so engrossed in his adventure that he had all but forgotten about his reason for being here. “The Fathers asked me to bring something to tonight’s feast.” He looked around in panic. “If I don’t make it back soon I’ll miss the Feast altogether!”

The holographic Mother raised a hand to sooth him. “In that case, I may know a way to help both of us tonight.”

Dionus calmed in an instant, all ears. “What do I need to do?”

For a brief moment, the hologram’s glow shone all the brighter.

“Take me home.”

* * *

In the Grand Hall of House Avarna, the Feast of Polyphilos was well underway. The banquet table groaned with a plethora of meats, cheeses, and the rare smattering of salads. Hungry hands reached for whatever they could find, ripping flesh from bone; vicious chomps, smacking lips. When mouths weren’t filled, tankards were chugged, liquids dripping from food-stained lips.

As his family gorged themselves on whatever lay in front of them, Dionus watched in disdain. Bite by delicate bite, he tucked into his single leg of brishtic, trying his best to mentally check out. At the end of the table, a sole harp played a soft tune, at odds to the chaos unfolding before it.

It wasn’t long before the meat began to dwindle, and tensions frayed. Multiple hands grasped the same brishtic, and a dangerous game of tug and war ensued. When the loser was decided, insults were thrown, and from there the only place to go was an argument.

Whilst his kin bickered and fought, none of them noticed their quietest brother slip away from the meal and approach the fireplace. Placing a hand on the mantelpiece, Dionus

examined the intricate trimetrical pattern of the House Avarna crest, carved into the stone of the chimney breast. Sure enough, as Dionus traced his fingers along it, he found a rectangular depression, large enough to place his book in. As he did so, the crest itself began to glow a deep shade of green, almost seeming to leap out of the stonework. Dionus staggered backwards, shocked by the spectacle unfolding before him. He quickly rushed back to his seat, alarmed he might be noticed by the others.

To his relief, no one seemed to notice, some too busy breaking up fights, others throwing the next punch. A wave of disappointment fell over Dionus as he watched them, as his contribution went entirely overlooked. Even Winsley, at the far end of the table, failed to look up from his meal, ashamed by the actions of the others.

As Alontus bellowed above the din for quiet, Dionus feared the night would go remembered for all the wrong reasons. That was until, for a very unexpected reason, the hall fell silent, and the family of House Avarna all looked up in unison.

The ceiling above them grew dark, the light from the chandeliers blotted out by a thick black mist. The family gasped, fearing some sort of doom was about to befall them, until a single speck of light appeared in the middle of the gloom.

The whole room gasped as the light was soon joined by several others, smaller and twinkling, resembling the stars in the night's sky. Faint chatter spread across the table, speculation rife. Dionus sat as awestruck as the others, eager for what was to come.

The first light seemed to grow in size as the other faded, becoming a large growing orb of heavenly light.

“Polyphilos,” cried Winsley, “the Providing Star.”

The House erupted in cheer, raising their tankards in the air. The star reciprocated, exploding in a rainbow of fireworks that showered the room in its magnificence.

A moment later, the dark fog had disappeared, and to all intents and purposes, the room was back to normal.

For the members of House Avarna, however, nothing was to remain the same. The family cheered, embracing each other in renewed spirits, drinking, dancing and having the time of their lives. Any grudges they once held seemed to have melted away, and none of them seemed to suspect that Dionus, the black sheep of the House, could have been behind the evening's spectacle.

Dionus himself was more than happy to sneak away, first to the fireplace to retrieve his book, then to the fireside to continue reading. Turning the pages back to where he left off, he made sure to whisper his thanks to his ancestor, stored forevermore within its binding.

“Until next time.”

6: Alone

by Molly Warton

The silence fell as the falling snow, soft and furious, wrapped its way about the house that sat, lonely and desolate, atop the mountain at the end of the world. Wendy lay upon the bed, slowly tracing circles in the woodwork of the cabinet, as each incessant *tick, tock* of the clock upon the wall filled the room like the beating of a drum. This was the pastime of winter, when the sun never graced the place with its presence and the only colour was a dreary monochrome that seemed to pervade all things. Oh, how Wendy longed to once more see colour, *real* colour!

She thought that she should probably get up and try to do something, but the sheets seemed to form a sort of sinkhole so that she could not escape their warm embrace.

The smell of woodsmoke from the waifish fire filled the room, tickling her nostrils. Wendy gazed into its soporific glow, and time seemed to form a gauzy haze as the smoke from the fire languidly sprawled into the rafters.

Rat-a-tat-tat.

The *fortissimo* rapping on the door jerked Wendy from her stupor, and blood coursed through her veins as she jumped at the noise. Out here, on the edge of everything, nobody ever visited. Who could be now standing, waiting by the door?

The door opened and Wendy was affronted by a whirl of red and blue and sparkling teeth like the snow in the evening.

She realised she was in her pyjamas.

“Hello!” said the person stood upon the doorway at the edge of the world, slightly apologetically.

A smile flitted across Wendy's face briefly, and she caught it and held it there.

"Hi," she said, somewhat more apologetically.

"Um!" said the doorway person, more apologetically still, "I don't suppose I could come in?"

"Oh!" said Wendy, "Of course."

The doorway person bustled in. Her eyes were like music in the firelight.

Luckily, there was water in the kettle, so tea was quickly forthcoming. The tea grounds seemed to dance at the bottom of the cup, in harmony like starlings murmuring. The stranger's name, she told Wendy as she sipped her tea, was Feyza, and she was a traveller, caught in the storm that was even now whipping its way about the wood-built hut.

The wind whistled as the falling snow, soft and furious, wrapped its way about the house that stood, hugged by drifts and dunes of the stuff that still fell fast, atop the mountain at the beginning of the world. Wendy and Feyza lay upon the bed slowly tracing spirals in topics of conversation about everything and nothing while the clock ticked by unheeded and the warm hues of the embers of the fire seemed to suffuse the room so that it softly slipped the pair into slumber, and they lay together as the snow started to settle and the golden light of the winter evening shone through the clouds.

7:
In Which Nardeth Contemplates the Value of a
Thank You Note
Zadellin
by Theta Mandel

The Cheshire Cat grinned his Cheshire Grin, widening his maw as you closed the door — have to keep the snow out, oh, how it's thundering down! It was Winter now; a warm red fire crackled in the hearth, and the Cat closed his mouth as you sat on the Cheshire Rug, patiently awaiting another story to go along with your cup of cocoa.

You had been there for ages; surely not since Easter? Had it really been that long since you left your ordinary life to spend months with a most unsettling cat, forgoing the safe familiarity of your home and family to risk the company of a stranger, all cosied up amongst the fantastical worlds that now surrounded you?

“Have I really been here that long?” you asked, and the Cat smiled.

“Why are you still here?” The Cat didn't seem to move his lips as he spoke.

Could cats even speak? Physiologically?

“This is fiction,” smiled the Cat disconcertingly, “Cats can do anything.”

‘Anything’ including, apparently, telepathy.

“I think... I think I'm not done. I want to hear more stories!”

The Cat grinned again; it looked far more natural, the grinning, than a toothless expression.

“What have you got for me?” you continued. “Something to go along with the change in seasons. Something... wintry.”

The Cat seemed to pull books off of the shelf without moving a muscle. How odd! Well, one must excuse cats for their eccentricities. "I think I might have just the thing. Unless you're after a tale about a religious holiday."

You cocked your head to the side. "Why would I expect that?"

"Humans do that, sometimes."

"Who said I'm human?"

You didn't know why you said that. Inclined to confuse the Cat, possibly, or to see if he could be confused — you are human. Probably. Maybe. You can't quite remember — how long have you been here, again? Trivial matters like what species you are get quickly forgotten, amongst books.

"Maybe you said it to be interesting. Or to meet a minimum word count."

Silence. Somewhere, a cricket chirped, and tumbleweeds rolled across the frozen tundra.

"Anyway," the Cat continued, "I think I know what you need. Follow me." And with that, he rose, stretching slightly as he walked you to the door.

"I'm not ready!" you cried — was the feline really evicting you? There was so much more to read!

"Oh, do calm down, human. I know another place that you'll enjoy just as much. Go out this door and turn left at the gnarled tree stump — you'll see a building to your right a little ways down that path. There are many more stories."

Hesitantly, you followed the Cat's instructions, certain that this path wasn't there when you first arrived in this little House of the Cheshire Cat. You soon found yourself inside a great building, a library, which seemed infinite inside. An impossible amount of space inside an otherwise ordinary building — but then again, stories always bend reality. They made space for themselves.

Wandering through the aisles, you were soon utterly and completely lost — which is, of course, never a bad thing in a library. Nevertheless, your old companion soon appeared to guide you, a terribly familiar grin appearing in a book spine, growing wider and wider until it had become an entire furry face. You felt, despite your discomfort at the strange feline,

a little relief — it would be strange, being alone after all this time in his company.

“Take this. A little tale of what this time of year is all about — family. A non-human story to remind you of your humanity.”

The book the Cat had emerged from was a black, leatherbound thing, with the outline of a gold-leaf beetle stamped on the front. You weren’t quite sure how you knew this, and yet you were certain that it was an Arc Beetle.

You looked up. “Is this story real?”

The Cat continued grinning. “Aren’t all stories?”

* * *

Ederwhile chips and rosemary greeted Nardeth as they stood in the snow, taking in the landscape. They always knew Mrellin was nearby when they smelled ederwhile chips; roasted wood, a little like pine, a little tangy, a little soporific. They settled back on their heels and raised a hand, pointing out towards a building a little ways in the distance.

“Look. It’s the factory.”

“But there are so many people going in and out — they look, I don’t know, happy.”

“I think they turned it into a community centre, or something like. This was such an isolated area, and now... people.”

Mrellin nodded. “People.”

“And snow.”

Mrellin nodded again.

“And snow.”

Nardeth moved a little closer to her; reality bent where people were, carving out a little space that they could *feel* without needing to actually *see*, able to follow the universe’s divots and dives to find people. Or, indeed, avoid them. When they focused, at least, or when the person was someone they

—

“It’s amazing, isn’t it. All this snow... it could never have fallen, if we hadn’t come here, and decided to help. We did a

thing, and it had an impact on the world around us. A good impact. The first good thing we did after so much bad. You know, I always thought somewhere like this wouldn't be a bad place to end up. Settle down, cozy up by a warm fire on cold nights like this."

Nardeth jumped a little, moving away from her again.

"I didn't think you thought like that. Settling down. It sounds impossible."

If they stopped moving, they'd be too easy to find. Nardeth wouldn't take that risk.

Mrellin, oblivious to Nardeth's impending panic, waved her hand. "I'm just thinking out loud. One day, sure, I'd like to stay still for a bit, you know? I know it wouldn't be like home, but, with the right people, maybe anywhere can be home."

That's beautiful. "Yeah. Maybe." They were frowning.

Mrellin nudged them. "Come on. You are not dressed for this weather — let's go inside. Captain's orders!"

They followed her back into *Zadellin*, soon settling down by a hearth that had appeared in a bare sitting room a few days before. They'd known it was a sitting room, instinctively, just as they'd known that the *Zadellin* would be the right Ship for them, despite her rather run-down appearance and out-of-date circuitry. That stuff didn't matter. It was what was inside that counted — the *heart* of something. The soul. And this bare empty space had the soul of a sitting room, so Zerlan had been scrounging up scraps of fabric from across the little of the Ship that the three had explored to decorate it, and Nardeth had picked out a beaten-up old sofa from a market in New Dubai.

The fireplace had appeared as soon as they'd set the sofa down. Interestingly enough, they had soon discovered that it would disappear just as quickly if they tried to *move* the sofa; it seemed that *Zadellin* had very particular opinions on furniture placement. Well, it *was* her inner dimensions they were living in — wouldn't do any good to anger the Ship.

Zerlan came in, and immediately adjusted the red floor rug. Just as quickly, it moved back to its previous position; ze rolled

zir eyes and gave up, walking over to begin setting up a game of Paradox.

To avoid detection by anyone who might be watching for just this sort of infraction, the players didn't actually try to create paradoxes, though of course that would be the aim in a real game — instead, they simply moved their pieces until the other player would have no further move but to create a paradox, such as a piece being in two places at once. This usually resulted in frustration for all involved, but it was one of Zerlan's favourites — just the right mix of strategy and stupid risk-taking. Nardeth opted to sit back and wait for Mrellin who, as the only vaguely responsible or competent one of the lot, was needed to defuse any thorny situations that might arise mid-gameplay.

She was also the only one of them who could even kind of cook, so she'd gone to put some pies in the oven. It only properly worked while the Ship was in motion — the capacitors never stored enough temporal energy to heat even a piece of toast. Must be a leak... it was one of those things on 'the List'. That list of things to fix that Zerlan promised he would get to, and, in all probability never would — the Captain's kettle, his own mental health, the lights in corridor B... it seemed to be a never-ending List. It would take a lifetime, maybe a few, to work through it all.

Would ze want to stay with them that long?

"Did you know, this time of year, there isn't a planet out there that doesn't do something to commemorate midwinter. Some set out for forgiveness, some celebrate their family and friends with presents, some enter a ceremony of prayer, but they all do *something*. Isn't that amazing?"

Nardeth thought Zerlan had just said something to break the silence — ze didn't seem able to just let a quiet moment sit. They never really knew what to say to zir; ze was so bubbly and excited about the world. Nardeth always worried that if they let too much of themselves show, said the wrong thing, they'd break that fragile optimism. Hope was such a delicate thing.

“How can you really count a ‘time of year’ when you spend all your time in a time machine?”

Zerlan pouted. “You can *always* measure time. That’s practically all we do. Well, if we were back home, it would be winter by now. Families would be gathering for Eldritch Night and whatnot. Did you ever do anything fun, back home? I mean, this time of year, not, you know, ever.”

Nardeth was quiet for a few seconds. “Not really. Do you miss them, your family?”

Zerlan looked down. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.” Nardeth looked at him. He hadn’t had to leave, not like they did... if Zerlan had stayed, ze’d be back with zir family now, celebrating however they usually did. Maybe they’d have a fire of their own. Zir thirst for adventure must be truly overpowering, if ze’d chosen to leave a safe, happy family on a whim like that.

Nardeth didn’t really know anything about Zerlan’s family. Ze had a brother, they thought, but otherwise... well, they didn’t really know anything about Zerlan. Made it hard to talk to him, to get along... they sighed. Too difficult, they thought, to build a relationship now. Too awkward to ask the getting-to-know-you questions when you’ve been around each other for so long already.

After a predictably tense game, diffused by a predictably pragmatic Mrellin, Nardeth wandered back to their room. They were still holding a pie, flakes tumbling to the floor with every bite — it wasn’t exactly *good*, but it was edible, which was more than could be said for anything Nardeth could make, and Zerlan, well, ze could set things on fire, and that was about all. Their room was always set back so it was just around a corner, meaning they’d always be a bit surprised when they reached it, but other than that, it was never in the same place.

It seemed to move to match their mood — further from the others if they were feeling a bit lonely, closer to the main doors if they were feeling antsy. They weren’t quite sure if *Zadellin* was doing it to try and communicate with Nardeth by showing them that she understood how they felt, or just to

mess with them, but it made them feel closer to the Ship nonetheless.

No matter where the room was located on the Ship, the one thing Nardeth could count on was everything *inside* remaining exactly as they'd left it. Same grubby old tunic tossed carelessly on the bed, same plate left on the chair, same precariously balanced piece of paper about to fall off the nightstand. So, they were really quite unsettled to see something waiting for them by the door. No, not *by* the door; exactly one pace in front of it, as though the thing had been a person, walking into the room and then shrinking itself down to the size and shape of a single white envelope.

Bending down to inspect it, Nardeth noted that it was slightly smaller than what humans called A5, much like a card you'd receive to commemorate a holiday or personal milestone. The envelope hadn't been sealed, so they removed the contents with ease, finding just such a card, except...

Huh.

It was blank.

Blank on the front, blank on the back, and not a word on the inside.

It can be anything I make of it, Nardeth might have thought, if they were the kind of person to think positively about what things *could* be. Instead, they were simply mildly confused, and set it aside.

The next day, Mrellin made a hot drink with some bark in it, some spices, and skin from a creature that tasted like cinnamon.

The drink did *not* taste like cinnamon.

But the people, their crew, they were sweet spiced luxuries that were too good, too much, and Nardeth couldn't stand it. They quickly made excuses to leave, not wanting to pretend to like the drink — or what it represented — through another round of Paradox, or discussions of where they could go next.

They were tired of thinking about the future. They didn't *want* a future; they just wanted to curl up in their room and never leave. But, when they arrived in their room, that space

that was comforting because it was always the same, they found something different: yet another envelope, with yet another card. Again, a blank, off-white surface, with no indication of who might have left them, or what they might be for.

All Nardeth knew is that someone was entering their private sanctuary, and they were changing it. Adding something, imposing an unknown element into what should be known.

Nardeth frowned. They didn't like the cards. When they were young, the guardian they'd been assigned by their Family would force them to write cards like those to any who had aided the family over the last year; whether it be a kind word to the right council member or a tutor for one of the children of the house, Nardeth would be the one who'd have to write the thank-you note.

They put the second card on top of the nightstand with the first, and left the room, wandering around the Ship for a while before returning to Mrellin and Zerlan.

“There's no need to do anything out of the ordinary.”

“You don't think this is some kind of warning shot, then?” Zerlan bit his lip. Nardeth tucked themselves more securely around the corner, closing their eyes. They didn't want to see the worry on Mrellin's face; it was all becoming too *real* again. When they were out in space, they were floating — couldn't feel their body, their mind, or anything else that hurt.

But the Watch was solid ground. The Watch is where they felt things — the Watch made them feel pain.

Mrellin's concern was palpable, radiating off her in waves that Nardeth could smell stronger than any juniper berry. Juniper berries took away the hurt, too, in the same way as ginger, or gin — it's that special chemical reaction that makes problems go away. Well, until it doesn't.

Mrellin's ederwhile and rosemary scent was intoxicating — for a moment, Nardeth could ignore her worry, and immerse themselves in her. But she was worried, and they couldn't hide in her forever — they'd received something. Something from the Watch.

A small present, wrapped in purple tissue, had appeared on the captain's chair by the central controls. Attached to the thin green ribbon around the irregular shape was a little tag, with a dash, followed by the letter 'J'.

Jill.

Jillian, their office's old secretary, who had now taken over the whole department.

Mrellin was talking to Zerlan again — something about not wanting to jump to conclusions — but Nardeth was already turning back and making their way to the controls.

They skidded into the room, filled with the memory of artificial light, trapped in the present; snapshots of light from another time. The controls were at the other side of the room from the door, like a classic star ship's bridge, in front of a wall-wide viewing screen that showed whatever was outside the Ship (or, occasionally, some family movie that Zerlan insisted on watching for 'crew bonding time'). Running up the three marble steps to the centre of the room, they stopped just before the high-back chair, staring at the gift. It was undisturbed, as if Mrellin had been too scared to touch it — she never let herself appear that scared in front of her crew. Was she scared?

Maybe everyone is scared, all the time. But... if everyone is always too scared to do anything, then nothing would ever get done, and things do get done, so...

Maybe I'm no worse than everyone else. Maybe everyone else just does it scared.

Slowly, as if approaching a skittish animal, they reached forward, and pulled the ribbon.

Nothing happened. There was no explosion. No one died, no one got hurt... it was just a present.

Nardeth smiled in relief.

It was only a present.

To be precise, it was a glowing globe, the bottom half flattened as it met a wooden base. The object was about the size of a bowler hat, and could easily sit at the end of the control panel. In fact, Nardeth was pretty sure it was meant to

— there was a gap around the right size, and it very well could be a standard inter-Ship communications device.

The right hands — hands with the right intent — could activate the device and talk to the Watch station. Could send a message back home.

Jill was reaching out her hand and telling them she'd be there if they needed.

It had a good soul.

Nardeth found themselves walking away from the gift, back to their room. They didn't open their eyes once; *Zadellin* guided them, or maybe they guided themselves, or maybe the cards called out to them... whatever it was, they found themselves back in an unfamiliar space, their bed and nightstand entirely buried under dozens of cards.

They picked up the nearest one and began to write a thank-you note, because that was what the card was, at its heart; it was always supposed to be a thank-you note, the same way Jill's present was supposed to be an olive branch. A quiet, tentative olive branch, for sure (wouldn't do to let people think that a Watch leader was sending presents to their enemies), but an olive branch nonetheless.

They took their card and they put it in the envelope, and then they went back to the others and took Mrellin's hand and led her to the globe.

"Maybe I was being overly cautious. Sometimes, people just do nice things," Mrellin said, and Nardeth put the card on the globe and together they placed their hands on its surface. The envelope glowed, and then disappeared.

"Yeah... maybe," Nardeth agreed; they were smiling. "Hey, would you maybe want to play a game, watch a movie? With Zerlan. All three of us."

Zadellin protested, a lever moving to flick Nardeth in the back.

"Four of us," they corrected, and Mrellin put her arm around their shoulders.

Before long, they were settled in the new sitting room, *It's A Wonderful Life* playing in the background as Zerlan set up

another game of Paradox. It was hard to trust that people meant well, sometimes, but on a day like this, with a good soul, Nardeth thought that trust could be worth the risk.

* * *

You closed the book, carefully avoiding the Cat's gaze. Did he choose the book to show that he understands that you're still a little scared? Home would be a Known. Home would be understandable and easy and... boring. Too dull to stand. Surely, that's why you left, why you're making a new home in a nest of paper and cushions and quiet exploration. But the Cat doesn't seem the type to stick around long enough to become family... though, if you've really been here for months... who knows why cats do what they do. You choose your next words carefully, wondering if the Cat will care enough to unpick their meaning.

"So, does Nardeth understand Zerlan now?"

"Possibly, but if they do, that'll be a whole other book."

You squint at the Cat, trying to work out if this was coded in the same way as your words were, but then realisation sets in, and you gasped — did time move here, too? "There's a Zadellin book coming out? Do new things come into the library?"

The Cat flicked his tail. "All stories are called books 'round here. Just be glad we're Here, and not There — did you know, there are some archives where anything that happens inside four walls is considered a story? Imagine!"

You frowned, realising the Cat didn't answer your second question — still so much he wasn't telling you — before looking around, confused. "Are we inside four walls?"

The Cat shrugged, as much as Cats can, and disappeared to let you move on to your next story.

8:
Christmas on Gendar
Auteur
by Aristide Twain

A year ago, Gendar's North Pole had been a barren tundra. It was certainly freezing cold, even on a planet whose surface was in large part a sun-baked desert, but there had been no water there to freeze, any more than there was anywhere else on the planet. Anywhere, that was, except in those regions which had been touched, so long ago, by three great, alien gods, and blessed with life.

The gods were long-gone, of course; everyone knew *that*, if they knew the Legend of the Three Gods at all. And though there was no hiding a mile-high statue of the Goddess of Gendar, or the many temples and carvings which dotted the City, the holy secrets of the Gods' deeds were guarded jealously. But thankfully, although Gendarkind *was* regarded by the peoples of the Universe as an evolutionary mystery wrapped in an archaeological enigma, they were also, first and foremost, regarded as jolly nice types to get to know.

Oh, to be sure, the riddle of their impossible existence brought hundreds to the spaceport every day. But *then*, they fell in love with the place, and the sights, and the people, with their cuisine and their stories and their street musicians; and pretty soon, they forgot their questions, sensing, perhaps, that those lovable, lovable locals would rather they didn't probe too deeply.

And if anyone got too close to the truth — well — there were countermeasures. Civil, but *firm*, and discreet.

So there were things that no one knew; things that no one mentioned to the tourists, except, perhaps, for children. But who would believe *them*?

Thus it was that no one had noticed the wonderful change which had descended upon the North Pole of the Planet Gendar just a year ago. Gone was the sandy wasteland, replaced with what the man responsible would have called “*the works*”: ice banks, snowy mountaintops, even polar bears and penguins. There wasn’t much ocean around it, but there was enough to maintain the postcard illusion, and to keep the animals well-fed. At the centre of it all stood a magnificent palace of gleaming ice that never melted.

At the top of the tallest spire in the Palace of Ice, there was an office; and in that office sat Father Christmas. Dark-skinned, red-coated, with a long white beard which almost got in his way as he worked, bent over his desk. Had he been a little fatter, and had the parchment on which he scribbled been a list of good and naughty children, he would have been picture-perfect; as it was, he was still a pretty good likeness.

He looked up from his weary work when he felt the patter of little feet rushing into his office without so much as knocking. For a moment he hoped the blue-skinned was bringing him another nice cup of black coffee, but the way it ran in, urgent as anything, quickly put paid to that.

“Santa Claus!” the creature squealed. “*Santa! Sir!*”

“I *told* you Goblins not to call me that,” the Father admonished, rising from his chair. “I’ve nothing at all to do with any Turkish bishops. How would *your* lot like it if I called you *Elves*? We’re doing Christmas, yes, but *our* Christmas, *merci bien*. We do it our own way, *à la Gendar*. And if the tourists want *Earth*-Christmas, they can bloody well go there.”

“I’m sorry, Father Christmas,” the Goblin replied, ears drooping downwards.

At his underling’s contrition, the old man frowned. It was centuries ago that he’d brought the holiday to his children, but that had been a drunken jape; he’d been as surprised as anyone by the importance Christmas had taken for the Gendar. Only

now had the ancient god returned to the planet, in remarkable circumstances, and agreed to embody the archetype for the long haul. All of which was to say that he was pretty new to this Kris Kringle business. He still had instincts that better befitted... well, it wouldn't do to even *think* that name. The instincts of the man he'd been out there, in the Cosmos, when he *wasn't* tending to the world he'd created with Gideon and Virtuoso. Snappish, lordly, even cruel.

The people expected better of a Father Christmas.

So he sighed, and took it upon himself to rise to the challenge. He'd been given a new lease of life, and he wouldn't waste it. Not this time.

"No, Snakebite," he told the Goblin in a weary voice. "No, the fault is entirely mine. I shouldn't have snapped; I can see you're all trying your best. Now — what was it you had to tell me?"

The little creature's ears pricked up again in sudden alarm, his round eyes widening. He actually *hopped* as he spoke.

"Oh! Oh! Yes, sir — sir, we have a problem, a very big problem, with the — ahem — the equipment without which your scheduled delivery cannot hope to proceed."

"The toys? The sled?" The Father's eyes snapped to the ice-clock. "*Cornebidouille*. What dreadful timing. Christmas is *tonight!* We've only got, what, half an hour before I'm due to set off — is it the Time-Sled? I thought we'd repaired it!"

"Well it is, in a manner of speaking, the Sled," Snakebite gulped.

The Father stared at him.

"B-but, from another point of view," the Goblin continued, fidgeting with the dangling tip of his pointed hat, "you *might*, equally, say that the problem lies with the shipment of toys... Ahem..."

The Father stared some more, willing himself, very intently, not to become angry.

"I think," Snakebite finished desperately, "you'd better come and see."

“You’re being ridiculous!”

“*You’re* being childish!”

The Goblin Helpers of Father Christmas watched from a safe distance, huddled together as if for warmth. There was, it turned out, one thing more mystifyingly compelling than two gods having a row: two of the *same* god having a row.

Not that you would have known it just to look at them. No physical resemblance existed, within three-dimensional space, between the white-bearded man with his dark brown skin, and the tall, white redhead; even their clothing could hardly be more different. One was dressed in a practical trench coat whose dark red hue was the only concession to the season; the other was a classical model, with golden sandals, a flowing white tunic and even — *noblesse oblige* — a maroon laticlave on her toga.

But what were bodies to Celestials? And what was death? From Time, from memory — and weren’t they the same? — two of Auteur’s visage had been pulled back to Gendar, unbound from their established timestream, reborn to watch more closely over their people than they’d ever intended. The man had the icy wastes and the task to bring joy once a year; the woman had the run of the City.

And that was only fair. After all, *she* was the one who’d created Gendar; he, her successor, was the man who had almost abandoned it. Now that he owed his rebirth to his children’s continued faith in him, however unwarranted — well, he’d deserved some kind of penance. He’d admitted it.

But if this was to be his redemption, he felt he was entitled to actually carry it out. Wasn’t he?

“That is *my* Sled.”

“It’s *our* Sled, *frérot*,” said the Goddess, with a grin that bared perfect white teeth. “I know we can’t say our name, but we *are* the same person.”

She’d already claimed the driver’s seat, and was reclining, one leg crossed over the other, in that terribly unladylike

American fashion. The deceptively simple-looking leather reins — psychic conduits, of course, allowing for very fine steering indeed — were clutched tightly in her gloved right hand.

The Father stalked around the wooden vehicle like a big cat sizing up a rhino as he growled his reply.

“*We were* the same person. Everything changes!”

“Oh, I agree! When gods return to mortal earth, nothing’s set in stone.” She flashed him another shameless grin and uncrossed her legs, tensing up as if about to drive off. “For example, nowadays, Santa Claus can be a woman.”

“*Not* Santa Claus!” he snapped. “*The Father of Christmas!*”

At this reminder, Snakebite nodded very seriously, quickly followed by the other Goblins in the audience.

“Father indeed! Quite the Patriarch.”

“Oh, for powers’ sake — I *made* all these toys! Directed the Goblins for some, and wrote the rest into existence. They are *my toys*, you had no part in the process!”

“Exactly!” she retorted, half-turning to pat the extra-dimensional sack which the Goblins had loaded at the back of the Time-Sled, and secured with sturdy coils of rope. “You’ve been hogging all the fun. You can at *least* let me drive the sled —”

“Driving the sled is the *fun* bit!”

“*Exactly!*”

“Unbelievable! You are *unbelievable!*”

Either of them might have said that to the other, and for a moment, each thought the other *had* —

— but then they realised that the rich, almost musical voice matched neither of theirs. They turned as one to find that the Goblin crowd had split in twain, parted like a Blue Sea by a handsome man with dark mauve skin and curly purple hair. The Auteurs shared a look, less than pleased with themselves for completely missing the appearance of Virtuoso’s Face, and Virtuoso himself.

Gendar’s secret third god, the one who’d never gone away, was dressed, as was his habit, in *local* fashion, with flowing,

colourful fabric and the all-important goggles. His darker skin was perhaps unusual in the City, but any Gendar would have taken him to be one of their own. And then made sure to ask for the autograph of the beloved, veteran head of the Historic Preservation Society.

He'd have smiled at such a request, and fulfilled it at once. But he wasn't smiling now.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves!" he snapped, now he had their attention.

Oh, he'd never have spoken to Auteur like this in the old days. But things had changed, just as the Goddess had said. *He* had a few centuries on *her*, now, and even on the older one with the beard.

"I mean, do I have to break out the human carols?" he continued. "This is supposed to be a time of peace and goodwill! If you can't get along with yourself, how can *either* of you hope to embody the holiday for millions?"

"Er..."

"Well... Uhm... *C'est-à-dire...*"

"Goddess," he addressed the woman, "*move.*"

Cowed in some childlike way by his uncharacteristic forcefulness, she had almost risen from her hard-won seat when Virtuoso spoke again, a little more softly, but still with the unyielding confidence of a schoolteacher issuing commands.

"No, don't get up completely, just move to the side. Yes — yes, to the left, that's good." Virtuoso turned to the bearded man in the red coat. "Now, tell me, Father Christmas, what do *you* notice now?"

The old man thought for a moment, actually rubbing his beard as he did so. Then he spotted it, and groaned.

Obvious, he thought with a slighted Archon's rancour. *Childish*. That a genius like him, a god and an artist, should be forced to abide...

...Oh, but it was, perhaps, exactly the kind of heartwarming moral lesson expected of — well — a Christmas vignette. He sighed inwardly. There was no point in trying to

escape the narrative logic to which he'd bound himself willingly. The Christmas magic was at least a gentler master than what he'd run from.

"...Ah," he said, already ambling towards the Sled; the smile of the good loser softened his features, matched muscle for muscle by the Goddess. "I *see*. There's room enough for *two*."

"Not quite," said Virtuoso.

The other two stared at him — then at each other — then looked back at the purple-haired man. Slowly, his frosty authority thawed, and they saw a grin that was at once friendly and mischievous appear on his distractingly youthful features. At last, hardly containing his excitement, he spoke:

"There's room for *three*."

9:
All Wrapped Up
The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids
by Aristide Twain

The first thing the child observed was that Santa Claus was much thinner than storybooks and fizzy-drink commercials made him look. Could it be that the managers of New Flaversham's shining new mall had hired an *impostor*? Polly Sanders was young, too young to consciously articulate the suspicion. But even if she *had* possessed some inkling of mall Santas as an institution, she would still have been put out at the slightness of the figure in the red coat, and the boniness of the knees onto which she'd been deposited by her father. Not to mention the shoddiness of the synthetic beard, which was far too clean and white and looked, all told, like wads of cotton haphazardly glued to a chin. One expected better, even of an imitation, if it was being provided by Altern.

Altern. Even to a four-year-old girl, the name promised the wonders of the modern age. A certain spirit of unbounded progress which in other dimensions, might have withered with the dawning of the 1980s at the latest, and revived by only the most hopelessly deluded of über-wealthy narcissists — that dream, in *this* world, had been kept alive and well. And this was because it had been resuscitated in its waning years, and doted upon, and souped up in all kinds of exciting illegal ways, and sent back into the field with blaring trumpets — all by the almost solitary efforts of the Altern Corporation.

Of course, Altern itself was largely reducible to its founder, the intrepid Laura Drake. Like many, many little girls, especially the ones who lived in Doctor Drake's own home city, Polly wanted to be just like her when she grew up. The trailblazing engineer's inventions were in every home, her sponsored documentaries and biopics were broadcast on every self-respecting TV channel; and, case in point, the ads for the Automated Santa Grotto at the Altern Shopping Centre had been impossible to miss, building and building in the young girl's mind until Mr and Mrs Sanders had had no choice but to cough up the entrance fee.

The mother and father pair weren't truly surprised at how quickly they found themselves regretting their purchase; but for *Polly* to be so immediately disappointed — and oh, they could tell — now, that *was* a blow.

Still, there was a line, and a script to perform. There was only one way into the Grotto and one way out of it. A quick getaway was spatially out of the question, whether it be for a compromised industrial spy or a terminally bored grown-up.

“Ho, ho, ho,” said a monotone voice which was also distressingly high-pitched. “What have we here.”

“Er... Hi, Santa,” said the girl. “I'm Polly.”

“That's great,” the impostor replied, still without emotion. “That's great.”

Instead of speaking further, Santa ran a slender hand down her right temple, and, noticing a lock of brown hair had gone astray, quickly stuffed it back under the hem of the jolly red hat.

Polly stared, at a loss about how to proceed; Santa Claus's brown eyes, ringed for lack of sleep, were not *unkind*, as such, but she met her gaze without blinking and without betraying the faintest hint that she grasped there was a problem. In desperation, the girl turned back to her parents, pleading with silent, wide eyes for them to save her from the awkward silence before the whole world crumbled.

“P-Polly here's been a very good girl this year, Santa,” Mrs Sanders attempted, with her best attempt at an engaging smile.

In this, she did succeed at coaxing a response from the red-coated figure, but unfortunately, not the one they'd been expecting: the woman — and it was clearly a woman, at least by the anatomical evidence; the red coat, dyed leather instead of wool, did little to hide her figure — the woman simply rolled her weary eyes.

“Hah,” she aughed hollowly. “If only they were all like you.”

* * *

“Well, well, well. Someone's been a bad girl.”

The woman with short, dark hair was not wearing a scarf, or goggles. She was here, as it were, *incognito*; unofficially. A conjugal visit, that was all, which was not to be construed by anyone involved as a return to her status of Protector of New Flaversham. There was someone else on the job now, and doing a very fine job of it.

“Mmmh,” said Laura Drake. “Mmh mmh mh mmh.”

It was, perhaps, the intruder would have had to admit, not the wittiest quote to have passed the lips of the self-proclaimed Smartest Woman in the World since she'd come to public prominence. But perhaps that was forgivable of a visionary genius who just so happened to have been tied down to her own office chair with gift-wrapping ribbon, and gagged with the same, for the last half-hour.

As to how she had come to be in that predicament, any number of conclusions *could* have been drawn, in a vacuum. But despite her easygoing air, the visitor was far from unobservant; she had solved her fair share of mysteries, in this and other lives; one of her best *friends* was a detective. (He was also a robot, but that wasn't important.)

She looked around the room and noticed a few things. For one, the office was locked from the inside. *Her* sort of person notwithstanding, no one could have gotten in or out. Laura Drake could hardly have tied herself down like this and then locked the door, nor vice versa. Which left one obvious culprit.

The culprit, thankfully inactive, was tall, rotund and chrome-plated. Even without his trademark hat, there was no mistaking the cutting-edge, ‘extra-lifelike’ SantaBot automaton whose likeness had been emblazoned on a hundred commercial billboards for the past two months. The visitor might not have lived in town anymore, but she did drop in regularly — largely to visit this very person — and even that had sufficed to burn its falsely jolly smile in her mind.

“A-ha,” said the larger woman, pointing at the android with a finger, and flashing a knowing grin at Doctor Drake. “I see what it’s all about.”

“Mmh mh *mmmb*,” Laura replied sharply.

The woman could almost hear the clipped ‘No you *don’t*’. She smiled.

“Aw, come on, I haven’t even said yet!” she protested, spinning to face the securely-seated scientist. “You’ve gotta give me three guesses. It’s Christmas!”

* * *

“It’s Christmas.”

That was a fairly unsurprising thing to hear from a person dressed, however unconvincingly, as Santa Claus, in justification of their own behaviour. Somehow, Mr and Mrs Sanders couldn’t seem to accept it this time; and that puzzled Polly.

The conversation had dragged on, even gotten heated, but eventually the Sanderses had succeeded in reminding the person currently pretending to be an automaton pretending to be Santa Claus of how this was all supposed to go. Then Polly, overjoye, had emptied out her heart of every toy and gift she wished for, unburdening herself of a mess of burning desires she’d been trying her hardest not to let slip her mind before she’d said her piece, a remarkable feat of intellectual discipline for a girl her age. At seven items in total, the list wasn’t outrageous, but it had been clear from the Sanders parents’

steadily wilting faces that their simultaneous acquisition was a little beyond their means.

Wilting, that was, until Santa Claus had gone ho-ho-ho again, and snapped her fingers; and suddenly seven large parcels wrapped in bright red paper had appeared at the feet of the prop armchair on which she was seated.

Hence rather a lot of questions, to the tune of “How did you...?” and “Will we have to pay for...?” and “Are you *sure*...?”.

And hence “It’s Christmas”.

After a while it got to the point that the woman with the fake white beard had had to raise her tone.

“Listen, there’s a *line* here. A lot of kids are waiting, and. I don’t have all night, you know.”

* * *

A few blocks due East and a dozen floors *up*, the visitor’s deduction continued, still punctuated with the muffled complaints of Doctor Drake.

“...but if you’d meant to give me *that* kind of a present, you’d at least have taken your shoes off, and probably more,” she finished her musings. “Not to mention there’d be a note on your desk, instead of a lot of gibberish about sales figures.”

The woman picked up the stack of paperwork which had been lying half-done on the desk, and tossed the whole thing into the air, where the white sheets danced like snowflakes. Laura Drake made a strangled noise as a good number of them escaped through a half-opened window.

Already her visitor had moved on, pirouetting across the office to grab the hem of the coat of the SantaBot. Even now, the construct did not stir, its moulded smile remaining impassive.

“And it’s not *this* guy either. I think maybe someone tried to frame him, but nah. It’s not that your robots *aren’t* liable to turn against you and leave you tied up; hazards of being a mad scientist supervillain, that, you’ve got to admit.”

“Mmmh.”

“But it wouldn’t just switch itself off all nice and peaceful. That’s ridiculous. No, you know what *I* think, Lor? I think someone took *both* of you out of commission and brought you up here together.”

The amateur detective’s grin widened at a subtle shift in the bound woman’s face, a kind of reluctant slackening which she knew to be confession.

“You were *up* to something, weren’t you?” the free woman spelled out, still grinning as she leaned very close to the captive, until their faces nearly touched. “One of your dreadful amoral get-rich-quick schemes.”

“It’s called running a *business*,” Laura Drake replied haughtily. “Darling, either bring down capitalism or don’t, but as long as it’s the way the world works, you can’t blame *me* for taking advantage of an emerging technology of my *own* design in order to maximise —”

— Laura paused mid-sentence and *blinked* as she realised her gag had *vanished* from her mouth, leaving behind a few rainbow sparks that fizzed on her tongue like a carbonated drink.

“...Oh,” she said, and attempted a smile. “Er, thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” said the other woman, and closed the distance between them, planting a little peck on her newly-freed lips.

* * *

Penny Anderson — she who called herself Jenny Anywhere — watched as the last of the elated, still-half-disbelieving families filed out of the plastic Grotto. Four hours and half she’d spent here, by her watch.

Perhaps it hadn’t been the *best* use of her time, in an absolute, objective sense. Christmas or no Christmas, there were always starving people to be fed, cats to be bought down from trees, orphans to be rescued and villains to be stopped. To snap her fingers and rearrange the patterns of the

Multiverse until the needy's needs were fulfilled was such a frightening, a *daunting* gift. How certain other people could live and breathe it every moment, and remain carefree, lackadaisical souls, she would never understand.

But the power to fix such injustices was one thing; the ability to *find* them with certainty was another. Solving the crises she spotted, as she saw them, was the best she could do, and the best this city would get.

Besides, some things had to be stopped. Some schemes were too outrageous, even if the harm was minor. Some things should be pure — *sacred*. She felt that very deeply. A pretend Santa Claus in a mall as a marketing gimmick? Tacky, but nothing more. A robotic one who would record each and every conversation? Already Penny had her doubts, whatever the achievement.

One with cutting-edge hypno-sound implants, however — one that would murmur to the child exactly what they *should* ask for, according to some optimal pattern of sales worked out by a computer —

— *no*. Just... no. Penny had travelled, when she'd first gotten her shifting powers. She'd been around. She knew very well that this was a cruder form of a kind of corruption which, in worlds without mad scientists, should not have bloomed for decades yet, and which would have done so without even the picturesque veneer of robot Santas.

Well, Penny wouldn't have it. Not in her city. Not in her universe. Not now, not ever.

And if that *other* Shifter wanted to spend Christmas with the kind of person who came up with this kind of scheme, well... that was just another thing she'd never understand.

But she wasn't here to judge. She knew the patterns of the other dimensional jumper's comings and going; she felt them in the fabric of the Infinite, like little storms on the wind. Might as well kill a couple of birds with one stone. Or brighten up the birds' Christmas holidays as the case may be.

* * *

“Mmh... I hadn’t thought of it like that,” Laura said in response to the last thing the other woman had said before kissing her more deeply. “But I think you must be right.”

She was flustered and out of breath, but that had never held her back from intellectual pursuits. Besides, it was ever so exhilarating to be free of the ribbons at last. She could even forgive her visitor for scattering her hard-won finance reports; she couldn’t deny it had been prescient of her to clear the desktop.

“She just looked so *serious* when she left me here,” Laura added as the other leaned buried her face in the crook of Laura’s neck, and, pulling her shirt collar open, began to plant small kisses along her half-exposed collarbone. “Ooh. But then, I suppose Penny *always* looks serious.”

“Yeah,” the woman agreed. “But she really does mean well — and it’s not like she called the cops on you. She’s not such a spoilsport as all that. Heck, she didn’t do anything *I* wouldn’t have done, she just frowned more while she did it. I’d say the city’s in good hands.”

“Well... I like *your* hands better,” Laura whispered playfully in the woman’s ear.

“Ah, but I guess she knows that too, ol’Penny,” came the verbal reply, as pudgy, but nimble fingers began to prove Laura’s faith in them was warranted, undoing a series of buttons at remarkable speed. “She *knew* I’d come and see you soon; we shifters, we can sense these things, sometimes. That’s why she used ribbons and not, say, rope. You were my *present!*”

“And you are mine!” Laura giggled. “Now go on, keep unwrapping.”

That drew a laugh from the Shifter. “Hah! Oh, Laura, I love you.”

“Love you too, my darling life... And merry Christmas!”

10:
The Vanishing of Jhe Sang Mi
Academy 27
by James Wylder

2387

**The Warsong;
The Planet Gongen;
The City of Takumi;
An Apartment Complex;
A Bedroom.**

It was the weekend after my best friend had been in a TV show. That dated things pretty concisely, 'cause it's not like I know a lot of people who had been in a TV show. My sister had woken me up—yeah, I have a sister. I know, it's never really come up before. But honestly, I don't really see much of her.

“Wake up, you dummy!” she said as she whacked me in the face with a floppy pillow.

I moaned as I rolled over. “Five more minutes.”

“Your girlfriend is here.”

I squinted. “I don't have a girlfriend. I mean, I would *like* a girlfriend—wait a second, is it Li Xiu?”

“No, it's the other one. The annoying one.”

I squinted harder.

“Your *other* girlfriend, you pig.”

“I don't *have*—nevermind. Who?”

“Sang Mi!”

Oh right. Sang Mi. I sat up, I wasn't really sure how to deal with that. I'd just gotten back from the Cao family wedding, and in the moment? Everything had felt clear. I felt like I'd really settled things. But then I went back to school and things were just... off. And things got more off from there.

Sang Mi looked shell-shocked when I came into Mrs Ichinose's classroom, she was the first one in there. She was never the first one in there. She always slipped in right before the bell, looking annoyingly smug that she'd done so. But there she was, staring at her desk. She didn't move her head when I said her name, just her eyes. I slipped in next to her.

"Hey uh, you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine."

No one who says 'yeah I'm fine' is actually fine.

Normally, I would have just gone along with what she said. I was always trying so hard to please her, she was always leading me around on adventures and getting me into situations that I never would have gotten into on my own. And until recently, I thought she was the girl I was destined to marry. She filled my dreams, and filled my waking thoughts, and filled my search history to be honest. Not that I'd been looking at pictures of her on her social media profiles in a weird way, or anything. Maybe I'm talking too much.

"Did something happen?" I asked. (And that was pretty bold for me.)

She turned her head slightly, and if I was better at reading body language I'm sure I could have picked up something deep from that. Unfortunately I have as much skill at it as an unpeeled potato.

"Can you be honest with me? Like, actually honest with me?"

I shrugged. It was a question that made me nervous—I was pretty sure whatever she was going to say was something that had more wrong answers than right ones.

"Yeah, sure."

She took a deep breath before she started, and that should have been my next clue I was in trouble.

“Am I a bad person? I think I might be. Like there’s something inside me that just was ill-formed. Like it would be better if people stayed away from me.”

She looked at me, and I could tell she really did want an answer. And, worse, that she was going to take me seriously.

“I mean...”

She threw her hands up, a sudden jerk of movement that caused me to spring back, wobbling my desk. “That’s not a good start, Jae Hyun!”

She didn’t talk to me for the rest of the day, and didn’t walk home with me. But then the next day was all smiles, and acted like nothing happened. I knew she was faking it, but I wasn’t brave enough to push the issue.

Then the weird storm happened, the big one they cancelled school over. And when I woke up the next morning, I had even more questions. Everyone was messaging me about a new show that had streamed last night, a remake of that old *Professor X* series that Sang Mi loved. I know they’d stopped streaming the new episodes on Gongen due to the rising tensions, and Sang Mi had been getting frustrated at how hard it was to pirate large files from another planet.

And then there she was. My best friend—the person I spent the most time with, the person I had pined for endlessly, suddenly in a sci-fi television drama. I know some people said it wasn’t very good, but look, I might be biased—I *am* biased—but it’s actually pretty good. The scripts are hit or miss, but Sang Mi was fantastic in it.

It made me wonder why she wasn’t an actress? She’d done rakugo comedy on stage and nailed it over spring break. When they needed someone to fill in as the voice of Shocho for the teacher’s night play she’d nailed that too. But she insisted on running Track & Field instead, a sport at which she was not bad, but not great either.

PROFESSOR X:
(*eyes full of wonder*)

Grant, look at this! Have you ever seen anything like this before?

GRANT, played by a tall, broad-shouldered man with blond hair, looks at her with noticeable exhaustion.

GRANT:
Yes, that's a cat.

The camera pans to a normal-looking cat.

PROFESSOR X:
Yes, well, I'm still impressed.

So when I opened the door to see her there, sucking on a lollipop, I couldn't help but think of her all dressed up in costume running around having adventures. Not many people would think of her that way, though.

"Hey, let's go, Li Xiu is doing something silly again."

"That makes sense."

She led me to the train station, and from there we went to Twinkle Park where Li Xiu had gathered a few people from the theater department, and they were putting on a performance. A bad performance. Jorani, the stagehand, was somberly jogging around the outdoor performance space—trying to keep things organized, and being undermined by Li Xiu shouting orders as the actors tried to follow her previous contradictory orders.

"Oh!" Li Xiu waved. "Look, Sang Mi, remember your TV show?"

"Yes," she said without passion.

"I'm going to do it better than you did on stage!"

"Okay," she said, exhausted.

"And I'll have someone play Grant more suited to being a nerdy assistant than that muscley hunk guy..." She paused, struggling to pronounce the name. "...Cwej?" She was nowhere close to right.

Jorani looked between them, and picked up another heavy box while shaking her head.

Sang Mi stared back at Li Xiu blankly. “I thought you weren’t jealous of my show.”

“Pshhhh, I’m not jealous. I’m *so* not jealous. No one has been less jealous, ever.”

Sang Mi looked at me. “The free show isn’t the one she thinks.”

I didn’t want to laugh, but I did. The performance never happened, in the end Ihor threw his hands up and walked off and Li Xiu moped as we both tried to console her while Jorani cleaned things up before the park rangers came by to complain we’d littered.

And I really thought that would be the most eventful thing that happened that day.

* * *

It was the weekend after my best friend had been in a TV show. That dated things pretty concisely, ‘cause it’s not like I know a lot of people who had been in a TV show. My sister had woken me up—yeah, I have a sister. I know, it’s never really come up before. But honestly, I don’t really see much of her.

“Wake up, sleepyhead!” she said as she chucked a pillow at my head, again.

I moaned as I rolled over. “What is it?”

“Your girlfriend is here.”

I squinted. “I don’t *have* a girlfriend. I mean, I would like a girlfriend. That is to say, there are girls that I like that I would like to—”

“Okay well she’s waiting outside. The annoying one you’re always hanging out with.”

Ah, well, that explained it. “Tell Sang Mi I’ll be a second—I’m not dressed.”

She scrunched her face up, and crossed her arms. “Not *that* one, the *other* one!”

“*Oh!*” I scrambled out of bed, threw on some clothes, then spent a little too long changing my shirt so it looked like I’d just thrown something on, and then went to the door, swinging it open.

“Hey Li Xiu—” I shut my mouth.

“Hey... Jae Hyun,” that one girl said. You know, the one that hangs out with Sang Mi. With the running. That one. Does the school announcements.

“Heyyyy.” I leaned on the door frame. “So uh, what’s up? How come you know where I live?”

She squinted. “Is this some kind of gag?”

I stood there awkwardly. Sang Mi might say that’s how I normally stand, but in this case, it was pretty pronounced.

“...Okay whatever,” she rolled her eyes. “I see you completely forgot.”

I tried to play everything off as charmingly funny. “Oh, haha, I guess I did!”

Hee Jin was not remotely amused. “Yeah, okay — look, the project isn’t going to do itself. Let’s get to the cafe already. You should be grateful I agreed to make sure everyone came.”

“Well, it’s a good job for the school announcements girl!”

She looked even less amused. “I really don’t know what you’re getting at, but grab your stuff and let’s go.”

I got out the door, and spent an awkwardly quiet train ride with Hee Jin where I began to doubt the obvious truth that Hee Jin had done the school announcements every single day this year, except the two times she was sick, in which Li Xiu and Sang Mi were alternately tasked with filling in.

When we reached the café, the other members involved in what was apparently our group project were already gathered, though no one had taken the initiative to actually start working.

I knew one thing deep in my heart: that person wasn’t going to be me either.

I was surprised neither Li Xiu or Sang Mi was there. Usually I was in a group with one of them, a really wild coincidence that only really occurred to me just then. Instead, here was (of course) Ahn Hee Jin, Park Eun Ji who I had barely

talked to this year, and Jorani Ruoy the stagehand. I went to the counter and ordered something—the fee was excused because this was a scheduled school assignment meeting—and slid in.

“I really don't want to do another play with Hanzo in the lead,” Eun Ji mumbled.

“Well he wasn't the lead in *The Great Journey*.”

Eun Ji squinted. “When did we put on *The Great Journey*?”

“For parents' night?”

“...No we didn't?” Eun Ji looked at Jorani. “I mean, you'd know better than any of us.”

Jorani was quiet for a moment, and then shrugged.

“Yeah, see, we didn't put that on.”

I looked around waiting for everyone to tell me they were joking. No one did. “But you *did*, I was there. I mean, Sang Mi did the voice of Shocho. Hard to forget that.”

They all glanced at each other. “Who did?”

“Sang Mi? You know, Jhe Sang Mi? Or Kalingkata, as she calls herself? Track & Field? Hangs out with me a lot?” I paused, unsure if I should add the next bit, but the blank stares were getting to me. “...My best friend?”

They clearly didn't know.

“Does she go to a different school?” Hee Jin asked.

I was getting frustrated at the joke. “She's your friend on the track team! You're always running together!”

“Are you *okay*, Jae Hyun? Or is this some kind of joke? I don't know *anyone* named Sang Mi.”

“I have a third-cousin named Sang Mi,” Eun Ji added.

“I don't know her,” Jorani said.

“You *have* to know her!” I pulled my phone out and started looking through my conversations. But hers weren't there.

And hers wasn't the only one not there. The roleplaying group chat wasn't there. Li Xiu wasn't there. None of my friends were. I tried to find pictures of us—pictures from the wedding I'd been to with Li Xiu, pictures of Sang Mi and I at the junkyard she liked going to for some reason, pictures of all

of us at New Year's, even pictures of me and JackBox competing at that dance game out of spite together.

None of them were there.

I sat there, staring at my empty life.

We did our group project. They moved on from me being weird, and I began to question if I was still sane.

I didn't contribute much. I'm pretty sure I lost a lot of points on that.

So, I decided to go see Li Xiu.

* * *

Getting to the compound was difficult today; the people trying to give me religious tracts and tell me about their faith were thick as pudding. But eventually, and after a lot of 'no thank you's' filled with polite frustration, I was able to make it to the door, where Beom-Seok was standing, arms crossed. I'd seen him a few times coming here, he was one of the family's bodyguards. You need those if your parents run a counter-establishment religious organization. Or as Sang Mi calls it, a cult.

"Hey there, Beom-Seok. How's it going?"

He looked at me sternly. I laughed nervously.

"Hey there! It's me again, from Li Xiu's class at school? I was hoping to ask her about something."

He grunted, and spoke into an earpiece. There was an uncomfortably long silence where he blinked way too few times and I began to feel sweat forming on my brow. I was just about to say "Okay sorry to bother you, haha!" and turn tail when he said:

"You can go on in."

And so I did.

I'd expected more welcoming faces, but as I was led down a few hallways to a room where Li Xiu was sitting—

— no, wait, stop. Let me start over, that description doesn't even get close to adequately communicating the vibe I

walked into. She was in a *movie theater*, a private movie theater, watching an old movie I didn't recognize. Really old. Like, not just pre-holovid, but also pre-color, and more than that pre-sound. On the screen a man and a woman were racing round the deck of a ship, always managing to stay out of view of the other, each rotation getting faster and faster.

"I didn't know you liked silent film."

"I didn't know you knew what silent film was."

"Sang Mi loves it, so she forced me to watch a few of them."

Li Xiu turned her head a moment. "Who's that?"

I sighed. "I guess that's why I'm here." Shoving my hands in my pockets I slumped down a few seats away from her in the same row.

"I was wondering why you came here, it's not like I talk to you at school."

I couldn't help but look hurt at that, and I could tell she didn't understand why I looked that way. "Let's say hypothetically we went to a wedding together."

"If you're hitting on me, leave."

"I'm not! I... look just... Doesn't something feel wrong to you?"

She took a sip from a bottle of boba tea before replying. "Yes, something does. You really think you have a right to talk to me?"

I had been doing my best to keep it together, but I lost it there, spinning to face her, but then my rage turned to despair just as quickly and I curled up. "It's like we haven't even met."

"We haven't."

"*Professor X*. There's a new season of *Professor X*."

"...I bet there is, what's your point?"

"Put it on."

"I'm watching *The Navigator*, it's a classic comedy with Buster Keaton where—"

"Put it on. If you don't understand what's wrong, I'll leave and you can make fun of me at school all you want about this."

“I can make fun of you at school regardless, this isn’t special.”

“Ha. Ha. Just... put it on.”

“What episode?”

“Any episode.”

She held a look, and when I didn’t flinch or laugh or chicken out, she pulled her phone out, and pulled up the program on the projector.

After the familiar ‘PROFESSOR X’ theme music—you know how it goes, all those wacky noises they thought sounded futuristic back in the 1900s—we get right into the action. The episode starts with a young Korean lady with a black bob haircut, running towards the camera; she’s carrying a large slug with a pink bow around its head. Behind her are a group of hippo-headed aliens.

PROFESSOR X:

The Hippo Detective Agency is reasonable, they say! You can negotiate with them, they say!

SLUG:

Mweeehhh.

PROFESSOR X:

My thoughts exactly!

The PROFESSOR keeps running and the camera pans to reveal she is about to reach a cliff! She doesn’t stop, leaping off, and causing the Hippo People to skid to a halt in shock. But she doesn’t fall! Instead she lands on thin air. She rises, and then as she stands her whole body rises—and a spaceship ripples into reality behind her.)

PROFESSOR X:

Ta ta! And I thought Hippos were supposed to be cute. A door opens behind PROFESSOR X, and a muscular blond man comes into view from inside the ship. GRANT is wearing glasses, but you can kind of tell the actor doesn’t need them.

GRANT:

Sometimes cute things can be dangerous, Professor.
We get a close up shot of PROFESSOR X, and she grins. It's charming as Hell.

PROFESSOR X:

So just like me?

Li Xiu paused the episode, and as she turned to look at me, I could see the confusion. The little twitches as her face tried to find an emotion she didn't understand.

"Who was that?"

"Like the credits said, starring Jhe Sang Mi as *Professor X*."

She shook her head. "I don't mean..." she gritted her teeth. "Why do I feel like I *know* her?"

I scooted a seat closer. "That's what I've been trying to tell you. Something is wrong here. I remember all of us being her friend—you, me, Tsetseg—"

"The loner?"

"Bashrat."

"The weirdo?"

"Sang Eun."

"The Maverick-lover?"

"Yes. All of us. We'd meet up on the weekends after school and play roleplaying games."

"Well of *course* we'd play roleplaying games. That's sort of what my family does."

"Not like that. Just for fun."

She stood up. "This is crazy. I'm not entertaining this anymore."

I hadn't wanted to say it, I really hadn't.

She'd trusted me with that, trusted me in that quiet way where I could tell how much it hurt just to speak it out loud even once, and even if the person I was about to tell it to was the same girl who'd told it to me in the first place with a quivering lip, it still felt weird. I didn't understand exactly what

was going on but I wasn't so dense as to think she was pretending to not know what was going on.

So I took a deep breath, closed my eyes to avoid eye contact, and started speaking.

“When you were eleven years old, the Tenryu Party mounted an investigation into your family, raided your property, and confiscated your assets. Until then, you had been the most popular girl in school. Everyone wanted to be your friend, and you thought everyone loved you. But when that happened, none of them stayed by your side. Not a single person. You realized how hollow all your friendships were, that they had only come to you through your family's money and power.

“And you felt cold and empty inside. You didn't understand what the point was to try to keep building ties to new people. Then a few Tenryu Party higher-ups suddenly decided that they needed to apologize and make reparations to your family, allegedly because they had been blackmailed with documents about certain activities they were involved in, and everyone went from shunning you to pretending that they'd been your friend that whole time. And you put an empty smile back on, but you didn't let them back into your heart.”

I opened my eyes. Her eyes were wet.

“...How did you know that?” Her voice was soft and raspy, like she was struggling to push the question past a whisper.

“The same way I know who the girl in that TV show is. There's something wrong. Sang Mi is gone. Without her, things are... messed up.”

“Why would *she* be so important to me? She seems insufferable.”

I nodded. “Yeah, you two couldn't stand each other for a long time. She hated you, you hated her. You bullied her a lot, honestly. But... when you two made up, you knew she really wanted to be your friend. Even though she was annoying at times. But you knew she was honest.”

She sat back down. "You're right. I've known something is wrong. I don't even like silent movies. They're stupid, just put some damn sound on these things. I don't want to read title cards. But I felt like..."

"Sang Mi loves silent movies. She thinks they're better than holofilms, because she's an insufferable, pretentious girl. And it's annoying but we kind of love her for it."

"*You* love her for it."

"There's plenty to love about you too."

"Shut up. Look... what do we do? You came looking for me, you have to have some idea?"

"I do. But I need your help."

She raised an eyebrow, and the edge of her lip raised too. "Okay then Mr *Professor X* Fan, what's your plan?"

I coughed into my fist. "Well, I think we should put on a show."

* * *

Jorani sighed. "You really didn't have to get me out of class for this."

Li Xiu slapped her on the back. "Of course I did! *Everyone* is getting out of class for this, it's a mandatory volunteer project!"

"That's not what... Forget it." Jorani went back to getting the stage set up as the school's smaller theater filled up with every person I could imagine might have had something to do with Sang Mi disappearing. Did I know what was going on? No. But I figured that you can't see a snow globe snow unless you shake it. So shake it we would.

"Hello everyone! How are we all doing today?"

There was a brief silence, then some coughing, then Ihor yelled "Fine!" from the back.

"Right, so we're putting on a new play. It's actually based on a TV show. Some of you might have heard of it, but if you'd all turn to the front..."

The projector turned on, putting a holographic projection of a screen in front of the group. On the screen, Professor X ran from a group of Hippo Detectives while holding a slug.

I scanned the crowd, watching them, trying to read their expressions. Trying to gauge if any of them were acting unusual. I turned to Jorani.

“Hey, could you—”

But my request to slightly brighten the lights so I could make out the audience’s faces died halfway off my tongue.

The blood had left Jorani’s face, and she looked like a terrified animal frozen in front of a hoverbike. She was staring at the screen, shaking her head and backing away.

I stomped towards her.

“Hey. Okay. So. The jig is *up*.”

I didn’t know what the jig was, so this was all the closest thing to bravado that’s in me, but thankfully that girl did not have a poker face. Even I, with the body-language reading skill of a potato, could see immediately that she knew she’d been caught.

She looked me in the eyes.

And then she bolted. Just flat-out broke into a sprint.

Now, neither of us were runners, but I’d been hanging out with a runner most days; not to mention, she’d forced me into a lot of situations where I’d had to move fast. And that gave me an unfair advantage here that I didn’t even know I had. She gave a good go of sprinting, but I outlasted her, and by the time she’d hunched over, heaving in breaths as she braced herself against the wall, I was merely heaving in breaks and staggering a bit. I grabbed her by the arm before she could get any further.

“Okay.” Deep breath. “That’s enough.” Heaving breath. “What the *Hell* is going on!?”

She panted, and held up a finger in a gesture of ‘one minute please’ which only a sucker would oblige under the circumstances. Naturally I gave her the minute. Even so, I didn’t let go as she caught her breath.

“I... I’m sorry,” she finally managed. “I didn’t... I didn’t think it would really...”

“What would really?”

She straightened, still breathing heavily but more in control of herself. “...We need to go back, I have to make sure the audio system switches back when Li Xiu goes to speak again.”

I nodded, but didn’t let go of her arm as I walked her back.

When we returned, we slipped in just in time for Li Xiu to call for a pause and go off on a ramble about the cinematography of the episode as she completely forgot why we were here in the first place.

I stayed glued to Jorani’s side.

Jorani leaned against the curtains, clutching them like a child clutching a toy. “You don’t know what it’s like, Jae Hyun. You’re popular.”

I scoffed. “I’m not popular.”

“Yes you *are*. You have friends. You’re in the plays, and if you stopped doing them people would still talk to you. If I stopped helping out at the theater, I’d disappear as quickly as the ripples on a pond.”

“That’s not true.”

“*Yes it is*,” she answered so quickly it was hard to reply. “I only matter when we put on shows. If there isn’t a play, no one invites me out. No one includes me. No one even *thinks* of me. But even then, no one gives me an ounce of credit. I even directed the parent’s day show, but all the credit went to Amelia for the sets, or Sang Mi for filling in last minute, or even the stars for making out on stage. I can work as hard as I want, and it doesn’t *matter*.”

“I don’t understand though, I get that you feel like you vanished in front of all of us, I get it, but Sang Mi is gone. Just... gone.”

She stared out at the stage, watching as Li Xiu waved her hands around wildly pointing out something about the way Sang Mi’s face was framed on screen.

“When I saw her there, acting in *Professor X* when she hadn’t even done her time here in the theater... She always

acted like she was above it. She just... flitted in and out. I couldn't take it. So one night I went outside, and I looked up at the sky, and it was like..."

"Like what?"

"It was like the storm, like a little version of the big one that they cancelled school for. And I just... made a wish. I wished she was gone. I was sure if she was gone I could be someone. People would notice me. But instead, everyone is just... unhappy."

I processed that. "Wishes aren't real."

"I thought so too."

I put my hand on her shoulder—or if I'm being less generous to myself, grabbed it. "If they are, then wish her back. Make it your dream. Because I can't do this anymore."

She looked back at me. "Why do you still remember her?"

I wanted to say something sappy, but I knew the real answer. "I've sort of been watching the *Professor X* show on repeat," I said as I found my gaze drifting from Jorani to the suddenly very interesting curtains, "and, uhm, I kinda... fell asleep to it on the night you were talking about."

Jorani looked at me with well-deserved judgement. "Get it *together*, dude."

"Yeah, sorry."

She hit play as Li Xiu finished her speech. "Don't worry. Everything will go back to normal. As normal as it can. I'm sure I just have to dream it."

* * *

It was the weekend after my best friend had been in a TV show. That dated things pretty concisely, 'cause it's not like I know a lot of people who had been in a TV show. My sister had woken me up—yeah, I have a sister. I know, it's never really come up before. But honestly, I don't really see much of her.

"Wakey wakey, you stupid-face!" she said as she whacked me in the face with a floppy pillow.

I moaned as I rolled over. “There’s no school, let me sleep.”

“Your girlfriend is here.”

I squinted. “I don’t *have* a girlfriend. I mean, I would *like* a girlfriend—wait a second, is it Li Xiu?”

“No, it’s the other one. The annoying one.”

I squinted harder.

“Your *other* girlfriend. Ugh. You know, you are an enemy of all girls.”

“I *don’t* have—never mind. Who?”

“*Sang Mi!*”

I shot up out of bed. “SANG MI?”

She stumbled back nodding. “Uh, yep! It’s her, she’s —”

I didn’t bother getting dressed—I just ran to the door in my pajamas, throwing it open. Sang Mi was there. She was really *there*. I put a hand over my mouth.

“Are... you about to cry?” She was sucking on a lollipop and looking up from her phone, the memes she’d been scrolling through seeming to look up at me too.

“You’re really here!”

“Sure am?”

I hugged her, and she seemed to consider pushing me away until she realized I was crying; then, she politely patted me on the back.

“Okay, well uh, there there? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is *definitely* okay.”

Her back patting got slower. “You know, you should probably get dressed; the neighbors will say something.”

“Sure, sorry.” I pulled back. “What are you here for?”

She shrugged. “Just getting people together to hang out. I was thinking I could try to get Li Xiu to watch *The Navigator*—she *bates* it when I show her silent movies. It would be so funny.”

I smiled. “It might go better than you think.”

“Really? Rats. Well, go get dressed regardless.”

I nodded and was about to invite her into the living room while I got dressed when it hit me.

“Let’s invite Jorani.”

She tilted her head. “The stagehand?”

“I mean, I’m sure she has interests outside of just the theater.”

Sang Mi weighed this. “Sure, why not. I’ll message her.”

I looked up at the sky. “It’s snowing. Like somebody shook the snow globe.”

She looked up too. “It’s freaking spring. The weather has been *so* messed up since that storm inside the domes.” She shook her head, “Sheesh. Someone wished real hard.”

I laughed. “You know, that’s more likely than you’d think.”

11:
To Absent Friends
SIGNET
by James Hornby

The Valhalla was a bar unlike any other in York. Large axes hung from the walls, and large, round shields lay fixed to the bar, all to fit its viking theme. Jae-Sun sat on a large wooden stool, across from a man who made Thor look like Princess Peach. In his hand he held a large stein, frothing with mead.

The inclement weather meant that Jae-Sun would not be sending Sung Tan Jul with family in Korea as he had hoped. Instead he had decided to pass the lonely hours in his favourite bar, in the company of complete strangers.

Catching the snooping eyes of the man next to him, Jae-Sun slipped the sheet of paper marked 'Cortez Project' into his jacket pocket and returned to his drink. Aside from him, the others in the bar nursed their drinks with dour expressions. He did not know why they found themselves here on a wintry Christmas Eve, but could imagine that not all reasons for spending the season alone were as circumstantial as his. His heart went out to them.

The clock struck twelve. Christmas was here, and across the world, his family in Korea would just be waking up.

Those inside the bar exchanged awkward glances, unsure how to acknowledge their loneliness. Rising from his seat, Jae-Sun turned to them, stein raised.

"To absent friends."

* * *

In memory of David A. McIntee.

About the Editor

If you'd like to help assist with James Wylder and their loved ones' ongoing medical costs, you can find out more and donate at: <http://wyldercommissions.weebly.com>

Coming Soon From Arcbeatle Press:

WARSONG: Steel Changelings

The adventures continue as things begin to heat up, and the path towards war in the Solar System begins to be harder to turn back from...

CWEJ: Seasons

The adventures of Cwej continue with new amazing journeys like you've never seen before.