

CW E J 10,000 DAWNS WARSUNG

PRESENT:

AND TODAY, YOU



JAMES WYLDER

Arcbeatle Press and...

CWEE

10,000 DAWNS

TALES FROM THE WARS™ UNIVERSE

WARSONG

Are Proud to Present:

And Today, You

James Wylder



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**For Chris and Kathleen Mau.
Never forgotten, and always with us.**

Foreword

Ten years. When I first started Arcbeatle Press, I had no idea that I'd still be running it ten years later, and I couldn't have guessed where we'd have gone. There've been huge ups, and huge downs, but through it all the support and care from so many other people who shared in and believed in the vision of Arcbeatle Press.

To everyone who has supported us, been there for us, read our works, written for us, or cared about our work: thank you.

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PROLOGUE: *The Patient*

Outside the window, the Patient can see a deer. It isn't a real deer, just a bronze statue. But she likes seeing it. The day before, a rabbit was hopping around in front of it. She watched the rabbit for hours. There wasn't a lot else for her to do after all. They'd removed all of her electronics, or anything sharp, or anything which could be conceived of as sharp.

But the deer reminds her of a short story she'd read a long time ago, where a girl had said something about a rabbit and a deer to a man who had shown up. One of them was a time traveler—was it the girl? She supposes it doesn't matter. That story isn't on the shelf.

The shelf of paperbacks by her bed is her only non-window entertainment. Physical books are a rarity these days, so most of what has been donated to the hospital are either religious texts, or things that could only dubiously be called religious texts because after skimming them, the Patient was pretty sure they were from a cult. There is a third kind of book on the shelf however: reprints of old books from people who were huge fans of them, and ended up with too many copies of something a little too bespoke.

She doesn't reach for anything, however.

The Patient lies in her bed, and can hear footsteps. She knows she should probably sit up, but she doesn't feel like it. What's the point?

"—We don't think she's a danger to herself, but we do want to monitor her overnight again to make sure before we release her," a man says.

A sniffing woman answers, "Is... is this really all because of that incident? It was just a bit of blood, I didn't think it would affect her so much."

"Trauma hits all of us differently," the man replies.

"Is she going to be able to live a normal life? I mean, if a zombie movie sets her off—"

"I feel very confident that with therapy she'll be able to, as you say, live a normal life."

The Patient shrinks in on herself, curling the blankets around her.

After her mother leaves, she sits up, staring down at her lap. She looks over at the shelf.

Why not?

She reaches for a book.

Past the shelf, and out the window, she sees a man standing by the deer statue. He raises a hand. Awkwardly, she raises one in return. He goes back to his business.

She takes the book, and opens it.

The pages are filled with dreams.

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ACT 1: Gongen Dreams

CHAPTER 1: *Beautiful Dire Things*

The world was beautiful, not that Sang Mi particularly cared. As she woke up to get ready for school, she looked out the window at the city she called her home. The lights of the buildings shone like tiny stars in the morning darkness, and the larger main dome of the city blurred its lights through the towering glass, so it resembled a freshly-shaken snow globe. Between the buildings, small dots zipped back and forth; jetpack couriers like her mother. Trains snaked along far below, or rose like roller coasters on upraised tracks, carrying men like her father to the factories for their morning shifts. Some of those pinpricks of light might be the homes of people she loved, tiny reminders of her friends. The sun began to peek over the horizon, and the edges of the dome glowed a gentle orange, as through wrapping her home in a warm embrace.

It was beautiful, and she knew it was beautiful, and she wondered: what was the point?

The whirring sound of her mother landing on the balcony after a delivery greeted her as she dressed: a school uniform of dark gray sweater over a red blouse and black tie, and black stockings and skirt. The letters A27 were embroidered on the breast of her sweater—it was a good school, hard to get into. She ran a comb through her black hair—it was a bob-cut so easy enough—and then began to pack a bag with street clothes. She began to frown, and tossed around several messy piles of clothes around her room, getting more and more frustrated.

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"Mom," Sang Mi said, storming out of her room and up to her mother, her face as stern as stone. "Have you seen my socks?"

Her mom looked up from her tablet, she was still wearing her flight-armor, her jetpack leaned against the wall like a wet umbrella. "You have a lot of socks."

"The ones with the bunnies on them."

"You know you can't wear those to school," she sighed.

"I have plans after school!"

"With Saki again? You two are spending an awful lot of time with each other."

"Saki isn't my friend," Sang Mi said coldly. "And no, not with Saki, with my actual friends. And my brother who probably didn't mention it either."

Her mother's face showed this was true. "You know if you cleaned your room you wouldn't have this problem."

Sang Mi moved on from the topic to avoid this. "Is Sang Eun up? I haven't seen him yet."

"He's up, playing some game till it's time for you two to go to the train station." She seemed to turn over a thought in her mind a few times before speaking it: "If you want to skip today I'm fine with it, they're having a propaganda assembly."

Sang Mi's demeanor shifted. "Again?"

Her mother nodded. "Every time some Earther blow-hard spills his coffee at a meeting with the Atarashi Hajimari they're treating it as an escalation. They gave the parents a warning since they're doing a weapons demonstration, along with telling you how wonderful it is if you get drafted when..." She trailed off, her voice cracking.

They stood there together in a silence that was difficult to break. "...I'll still go, I'll just tune it out. I don't want it to be weird with my friends."

Her mother smiled, and Sang Mi could tell she was trying to figure out how to word what she wanted to say. "I'm... glad you have friends again, Sang Mi."

Sang Mi forced a smile onto her face, and went back to getting ready for school. Though when she looked out the

window again, she gazed up. There were more lights in the sky: Earther and Gongen patrol ships, eyeing each other, and flitting around the faint glow of the moon of Phobos which Earth had occupied just to show them who their masters really were. She looked down, but if she'd looked up just a little longer she would have seen two lights in the sky unlike the others that flittered down gently like falling leaves onto the city.

Those lights were beautiful too, but in a far different way.

* * *

Sang Mi and her twin brother Sang Eun arrived at school to find that most of the teachers had given up on doing much with their morning lessons since the assembly was going to cut off class partway through, as the Self-Defense Force was very thoughtful and considerate about their education.

The students all filed out, filtering through the crowded halls up to the gymnasium.

"I hate these," her brother murmured.

"I hate them more," she replied.

Sliding up to them, their friend Tsetseg cut in. "Do you know who is speaking?"

Kalingka shook her head in the negative, a gesture that was cut off by someone grabbing her arm in the crowd. Her head swung around to see Saki Suzuki, who was dragging her to the bathroom with the same gentleness as a dog shaking the stuffing out of their toy as she ran into people trying to get past her to a chorus of "ughs" and "hey watch it!"s.

"Ow, what are you—"

Saki let go of her, then changed her mind and dragged her further into the farthest bathroom stall, before shutting the door. They stood there staring at each other, Sang Mi rubbing her arm. "You never cease to weird me out."

"I needed to talk to you in private. Everyone is going to the assembly, so we have a moment."

Sang Mi sighed. "Okay, what is it?"

"You know exactly what it is. I need to do another trial run tonight."

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She frowned, and examined the other girl's face. "We just did one last week. You said the schedule you gave me wasn't going to change."

"Well, things changed."

"I'm glad to see I can trust you," she snarked.

"When did I give you that impression?"

"You got me there."

Saki pulled out a keyfob for a hotel room, and grabbing one of Sang Mi's hands shoved it into her palm. "Room 221, just like last time."

She slapped her hands away but kept the fob. "Could you stop manhandling me? I'll be there, okay. But why did things change? That doesn't make any sense."

Saki leaned against the tile wall, crossing her arms. "Is your curiosity piqued?"

"If I wasn't curious about it, I wouldn't be doing all this," she grumbled.

"Even if you weren't, I have enough blackmail on you from your participation that I'm confident you wouldn't quit anyway." The serene smile on Saki's face could have belonged to a pageant queen. Or a rattlesnake.

Sang Mi blinked. "Was that a threat?"

"A threat? No no, nothing so base and vile. I'm just stating facts."

"You are the scariest teenager on Gongen," Sang Mi said unironically.

"Thank you."

"I had plans tonight."

"Pity," she replied without pity. "What we're doing will be more interesting. Besides, I came a long way to conduct this experiment, and you're the only one suitable to assist me.."

"You could be nicer to me."

"Am I not being nice?"

"You're certainly a comedian."

"The correct term is 'comedienne'."

"So really though, why do we need to do this tonight?"

"What are the two of you doing in the same stall?" came their teacher Mrs. Ichinose's voice. "And why aren't you going to the assembly?"

Saki opened the door with a smile and gave an incredibly detailed explanation of how Sang Mi was helping her with a personal problem that caused Mrs. Ichinose to cut her off and send a hall pass to their phones.

They quickly hustled out, and then walked casually through the now empty hallways to the gymnasium, where the student body was assembled on the bleachers. There was a large podium set up in the center with a big banner, and the teachers and administration were seated there. Sang Mi and Saki both stopped at the edge of the bleachers. The administration wanted them to come even if they were late, but they also didn't want them to *show* they were late by walking through the other students to find a seat—they should stand and think about why they were late, and let that be a lesson to them, or something.

Saki was looking at her, probably because she was squinting, trying to figure out who the guests were. "How much did we miss?" Saki asked.

"Sadly, not a lot. Just Mr. Mori's introductory speech."

"Who are the—"

But Mr. Mori cut them off. "I'd like to present our special guest speaker, the legendary Kano Tamja!" he said proudly.

They all rose to applaud him as he took the podium, his daughter Kano standing behind him. He waved to the crowd, his military cut gray hair standing out. He had lost a little of his youthful trim; he no longer had the perfect body of an Olympic athlete—he'd gained a bit of weight, but he clearly still worked out. His jaw was so square you could use his chin as a level.

"Who is that supposed to be?", Saki asked.

"The legendary Kano Tamja. Gold medalist. Defeated the pirate king Serren. Ended the Lybid kidnapping standoff. Caught the Hongtu Ripper—" she sighed "—helped put down the reform movement back in 2356."

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Saki continued to look at her but Sang Mi very pointedly didn't look back.

Kano Tamja got to the podium and raised his chin with expert precision to get a better angle for the filming drone. "Thank you, Chairman Mori. Honored Teachers, valued community members, and budding minds. It is truly an honor to speak here before you today. When I first joined the Self-Defense Force..."

He rambled on about some adventures that they'd all heard about a million times. Sang Mi had seen both of the holodramas they'd made about taking down Pirate King Serren (the 2379 one was the better one) and was also aware that the version being told here mimicked the movies more than the reality; Serren and Tamja had started an epic duel, and then Serren had slipped on some leaked fuel and hit his head on a metal railing, killing him instantly. So, listening to the old man describe the choreography from the movie was a bit awkward.

"But that's not why I'm here today. I'm here about you, the next generation of Gongen heroes. There is no greater duty, or honor, than to serve your people, and no greater pride you can feel than to defend your home. If, someday, you are called on to fight for Gongen, be proud to take up arms! Don't be afraid to give your life for this blessed soil, for if you bleed into it, your blood is as red as it is. And no one, even the powers of somewhere like Earth, can match the Gongen spirit, the Gongen might, and the sheer Gongen tenacity. So, make sure your draft information is updated properly, and keep up your training—not just of the body, but of the mind too. Be strong, be clever, and..." He drew his sword for emphasis, holding the shining blade up so it glinted like a beacon. "...Be brave. Do that, and your comrades will stand with you. In the Self-Defense Force, you will find purpose, glory, and dignity. Gongen forever!"

"Gongen forever!" the student body said back, with a combination of passion and perfunctory tones.

"GONGEN FOREVER!" he cried louder, not satisfied, and everyone repeated it again, this time louder and stronger.

Everyone save Saki, who Sang Mi noticed merely mouthed the words with feigned, silent gusto. He smiled, and sheathed his sword. Everyone applauded, and Mr. Mori shook his hand as photos were taken.

"They're going to send you all to the meat grinder." Saki said softly, barely audible over the cacophony.

Sang Mi tried to keep her face impassive. "The diplomats might still pull through. And you'd be there too."

"No. No I won't be" The next thing she said was the most concern she'd probably heard from her. "You should stay out of it too."

"We both know I don't have your money or connections, so don't pretend I can."

Saki didn't reply. They all watched as the Kendo team ran through some drills, and they all applauded, and then some of the best members did some mock duels against each other, which seemed to please both the elder and younger Kano.

"Now then, how about I see what the youth here is made of?" Kano Tamja said as he stood up, in a moment that was supposed to seem off the cuff but was clearly scripted because the filming drone had flown over by him before he said it.

Surprisingly, they put away the wooden training swords, and got out real ones. Sang Mi assumed they were dull as a toy butter knife, but still, they'd hurt to be hit with. First, Tamja dueled the captain of the Kendo team, both of them following the rules to a T, and Tamja losing by one point and shaking the kid's hand to much applause. His daughter went next, and won easily, and then as Mr. Mori went to shake their hands again and wrap up, something actually unscripted happened.

"I've seen the best of what you have here, but what about the worst?" Tamja said. The look in Mr. Mori's eyes could have melted all of the swords in the room.

"I think perhaps it's best if we get the students back to class," Mori replied. Sang Mi hated Mr. Mori, but apparently even he had limits.

"Nonsense." Tamja scanned the crowd, and then looked over at where Sang Mi and Saki were standing— but Saki had

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vanished, leaving only Sang Mi standing in the "late arrivals" area. He pointed at her.

She felt her pulse race and her mood sour. She did not want to do this.

"How about her over there, that girl who walked in late. Let's see if she's ready for the battlefield."

The room was filled with an awkward murmur, and Sang Mi's hopes that she'd be sided with were squashed by an assistant principal, gesturing for her to come forward. Reluctantly, and with her stomach turning over, she did.

She did not want to do this. She did not want to be here. Everyone was watching her. Why did everyone have to be watching her? She hated this. She hated herself. She just wanted to die or go home or both. She put on a big smile and waved to everyone like it was all a big joke.

As she got up to the dueling area, Kano Masako returned the big smile and gave her a pat on the shoulder. "Sorry about my old man—he gets an idea in his head, he does it. Have you done sword training?"

Sang Mi nodded. "Yes, Miss. I, uh, we've had regular classes."

"Good, don't worry then, we just need to put on a good show. No need to worry."

It was in fact somewhat reassuring, though she was annoyed she couldn't change and had to do this whole thing in a skirt. They gave her a protective mask, and an aide rolled out a pile of swords just as dull as she'd predicted. Nearly all were katanas, but one stuck out to her. "Is that a Hwando?"

Masako looked over. "...I'm not sure, do you know the difference?"

Sang Mi picked it up. "The handle is shorter, with a hole in the center for the tassel. Oval pommel guard. Straighter blade, usually thicker and without a channel carved into it." She tested it out, it was definitely a cheap sword that someone didn't mind dulling and chucking in a pile for things like this, but it also felt pretty sturdy.

Masako smiled brighter. "Well spotted, this should be fun then."

"Actually, I'll duel the girl," Tamja said, and his daughter bowed and went back to her seat. He approached her, and smiled, but her relief and joy sank deep down when she saw that it was not a kind smile at all. He turned off his mic.

"You're a Jhe, right? I thought so. I can see the family resemblance."

She tensed. "Jhe Sang Mi, Hei-Ran and Kwang Sun's daughter."

"And yet you have the audacity to show up late to a patriotic assembly. I see you still have your grandmother's idiocy."

Don't react. Don't give him the joy of your reaction. "If I am anything like my grandmother, then I thank you for the compliment."

He scoffed. "You should feel lucky your family wasn't sent off into the wastes to die of exposure. You get to breathe our air, and go to our schools. I'm disgusted to see that you haven't learned a damn thing."

She could feel her pulse racing. She forced her mouth to stay shut, even though she knew her face was reddening.

"Your grandmother passed away recently, didn't she?"

Sang Mi looked down, and he leaned in.

"I take some comfort in knowing she got to see how far her bloodline has fallen."

She wanted to strike him. Wanted to take the sword and split his skull open. But she just stood there quietly. Because she knew she had been a bad granddaughter. She knew she hadn't been good enough. But the last thing she wanted to do was admit anything to him. She forced herself past him, and onto the dueling mat, holding the sword out in front of her in a proper stance, feet positioned. Her chest heaved up and down. She wasn't calm. She wasn't relaxed. She wasn't even poised.

And for once, that ended up being a good thing.

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Tamja rushed at her, and there was some surprise that he wasn't following the actual Kendo rules, but Sang Mi was ready, bringing her sword up in a parry as he pressed his down. It was hard to resist the blow—he was old, no longer in his prime, but he was still monstrously strong.

She couldn't hold this, so she took a step back and slipped out of it. But he kept swinging.

The crowd began to look at each other with some confusion. This didn't look like a Kendo match, it looked like they were fighting?

He swung hard, and she dodged and weaved out of the blows, his sword making a surprisingly loud noise as it cut through the air so fast. She couldn't get a blow in, but she did do track and field. She could move pretty quick, and that was all she had going for her. She blocked, and then broke the exchange as quickly as she could. She backed up.

She didn't have a plan, she was just on the defensive, reacting. Furious. Trying to find a way to whack him at least once.

Then he came down again, and she moved to block, only to realize it had been a feint and the arc of the blade wasn't what she'd imagined. It hit her in the ribs, and it hurt like hell. She was knocked down, rolling, and ending up face down on the mat.

There were cheers, cheers and laughter. It was funny, how badly she was doing. That was fair. She'd just lay here. It was all over. All she'd done today was show the whole student body she was worthless.

She'd failed. She'd failed her grandmother, her memory. Her friends.. Herself..

"YOU GET HIM, SANG MI!" It was her twin brother's voice.

It broke her out of her trance.

She saw things clearly. Things slowed. This old man, still holding decades-old grudges and taking them out on a teenager. The heavy blows. The difference in their swords. The difference in their sword's construction.

She couldn't match him in combat. She pushed herself up on her hands and knees, and then got to her feet, retrieving her sword. This got a nice reaction from the crowd, but her ribs still hurt a lot. She took in deep breaths, and he came at her again. She blocked his sword, but with one hand, and let him press down hard like he did before. Which was perfect, because when she pulled her forearm up on the other side of the blade and pushed it from the other direction, it caused the katana to snap like a twig.

The shining blade flew up into the air, and people scrambled out of the way of the unexpected deadly projectile as it turned over a few times, and then embedded itself into the second row of bleachers.

Sang Mi and Tamja both stared at it in shock.

They turned and looked at each other.

Then Sang Mi bowed—indicating that the duel was over—handed the sword and mask to someone who looked vaguely associated with the proceedings, and walked away as quickly as she possibly could.

* * *

"Oh my god, did you hear Mr. Mori chewing him out? He didn't even hide it, Kano's daughter was holding his head down and making him bow lower with the apology for it all, just incredible!" Li Xiu laughed, and put her arm around Sang Mi. "Our incredible duelist!"

"Never again, really," she moaned. "The nurse applied the medpack, but my ribs still feel weird."

"You'll sleep it off," Jae Hyun said comfortingly. "...You *will* sleep it off, right?"

"Yeah yeah, miracles of modern medicine and whatnot."

Sang Eun did not look as amused. "What did he say that pissed you off so much?"

She didn't meet his gaze. "He insulted Grandma."

Sang Eun's face soured, and he nodded. "I wish I'd stabbed him myself."

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Sang Mi gave him a forced smile, and hopped off the ledge she'd been sitting on. "I should head out. I have to meet Saki for something."

Li Xiu frowned. "Again? JackBox isn't even here yet."

She shrugged. "It is what it is. You guys have fun without me."

They waved her goodbye, and Sang Mi couldn't help but feel somewhat hurt that as she looked behind her, they were doing just that, as though she hadn't been there at all.

CHAPTER 2: *Yesterday I Saw a Deer*

"Did you ever think about being replaced?" Sang Mi asked Saki. This question came as a surprise, because not only were the pair of girls in no way friends, calling them enemies was giving their relationship far too much intimacy as well.

"Of course. Anyone can be replaced if they get complacent."

Sang Mi nodded, staring up at the ceiling of the hotel room. They'd been meeting up here after school, not because of anything romantic, but because they were taking drugs together. And not the kind of drugs you'd take to have a good time or even a bad time. A weird inscrutable set of pills Saki had acquired from somewhere or another. The room didn't even give off the vibes that the pair were going to enjoy themselves; Sang Mi had hoped that Saki would at least put on some music. But no. The whole thing had the air of a low-budget clinical drug trial.

"Alright, down the hatch," Saki said as an alarm on her phone pinged. Sang Mi sat up, and unwrapped the sealed pill, which she downed with a hearty gulp of water and lay back down. She felt Saki flop down next to her.

"The Time-Space phenomenon should begin in a few moments," Saki said.

They laid there together. Sang Mi closed her eyes. She tried to ready herself for it to hit. She never felt ready.

She took a deep breath, then let it out.

After lying there in near silence for several minutes it awkwardly became clear that Saki's grandiose proclamation

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was not actually timed correctly. They both stared at the ceiling and tried not to make eye contact with each other.

It took a little time for Sang Mi to crack the silence. "I think about being replaced. I feel like all my friends are just... moving on. They're seeing the end of school in sight, and they're seeing the future of their lives and where they're going and I'm just standing still watching them slip away from me—"

Saki's voice was cold, but not cruel. "Maybe you should focus less on your schoolmates – who were always going to be a temporary part of your life – and more on lowering your heart rate. You're tachycardic." Saki said. Sang Mi was thankfully saved from having to come up with a reply to that, as the drugs kicked in, and the wave hit them. The room seemed to fall away around her as the pair drifted off into dreams. The walls and the floor dropped away first, leaving her and Saki seeming to hover in a void with the two beds. Then even the beds disappeared, then Saki, and finally herself as she drifted off, and away.

And oh what dreams did come.

Her dreams usually started somewhere familiar, and this one was no different. She was in a black mourning dress, greeting the various people giving her sympathy at her Grandmother's funeral. Her friends had come. JackBox had even worn something that wasn't gaudy. She knew many of the mourners from the community; everyone had known her grandma, but that also meant that she didn't know a huge swath of them. Shaking hand after hand, the faces blurred together, till there was no face at all. Just masks of skin under mops of hair. This wasn't the kind of dream the Delirium Pills were supposed to give her, it was just a normal nightmare of that funeral.

Funeral.

The word seemed to sink in, and the world blurred further. She was somewhere else. There were booms, and thuds, and screeches soiling the air. She was in some sort of kitchen-like-room, only it was wrong. The appliances were all wrong, their

uses indiscernible. She was here in a tangible way she wasn't before, everything was still hazy, but she could smell the acrid burning around her, feel the floor shake with the booms. She staggered around the corner, and immediately dropped to the floor as sizzling plasma bolts shot over her head, leaving smoldering holes in the wall that crumbled out trickles of ash.

“What the hell are you doing here kid?” a man yelled over the blasts. He was blonde—really blonde, and *strong*, with chiseled features and a broad chest. He was sitting under the window the shots were coming through, fiddling with a gun.

“I don't know! I fell asleep!” Kalingkata yelled back.

The man nodded, clearly not grasping that explanation but not arguing it. His tone softened to a caring and even cadence, though he still spoke loud enough she could hear him. “Crawl this way, get right by me.”

She followed his instructions, trembling all the way. This wasn't real, this was a dream after all, so she couldn't really get hurt... probably? In truth, given the fact that she seemed to be feeling everything *else*, she wasn't particularly confident in her self-reassurance. Sang Mi got up beside him, and put her back up against the wall, knees against her chest. She could feel the house shake against her back. “What exactly is going on here?”

“Oh, you know how it is, the Selachians catch you in the wrong place on Hytheriax VII, things just go funny. Name is Chris, Chris Cwej. You stick with me, you'll be safe here.” He gave a wink, which even she could tell was forced, meant to try and ease her tension.

She nodded, and went rapidly back and forth between talking with her hands and covering her ears from the explosions as she spoke. “Jhe Sang Mi, Jhe is the family name. My friends call me Kalingkata though—not that you need to know that.”

He smirked. “Good to meet you. As you can see, we're pinned down by enemy fire here.”

“Is there a reason you're sitting under the window?”

* * *

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Cwej turned his head so his ear was facing up, hearing the blasts impact the remains of the house. He had to wait for an opening. Everything about this mission was going wrong, and he couldn't seem to get back to his ship, *La Kraw el Sol*. At the very least, he wasn't going to be surprised by anything else today.

The door swung open, the locks and barricade in front of it somehow proving inconsequential. Plasma and lasers poured through the doorway, ripping up the far wall. There stood a figure in a long billowing coat, framed in smoke and shadow, who was pointing a whisk at him with an accusatorial fervor.

"Hey! Chris Cwej! You rapping scallion, you missed my funeral!"

From behind the first woman, a second woman clad in black combat armor, with long white hair in a braid, blasted covering fire while trying to push the other woman inside. "It's rapscallion, not... whatever you said!"

The black armored woman shoved the door closed again, and Cwej finally recognized the first one.

He sighed. "Lady Aesculapius of the Firmament, funny seeing you again."

"Well of course you're seeing me again. You think you can get away with skipping my funeral without getting an earful?"

The house shook, bits of loose plaster dropping from the ceiling, probably hit by some heavier ordinance.

"You were dead, I didn't think you'd be filing a complaint."

The white haired woman sighed. "Really sorry about this, I tried to tell her this was a bad idea..."

"Have we met?" he yelled over a blast.

Aesc grabbed the other woman by the shoulders and presented her proudly. "This is Blanche Combine. She's my girlfriend!"

"...Congrats."

"Thank you!"

"And uh, I see you have a new face?" he said. Lady Aesc had indeed had a whole different body the last time he saw her. Her people put their minds into blank clones upon death; it

was a whole thing. One he could relate to, in a way, but that was beside the point.

"Thanks for noticing, you like it?"

She spun around in a circle, only to be pushed out of the way by Blanche to avoid the ceiling fan dropping down on her.

"...Could we finish this chat later?"

"I want an apology!"

"Fine! I'm sorry I didn't attend your funeral for your last body! Are you happy?"

Aesc smiled from where she was being pulled up from the rubble by Blanche. "Apology accepted, now was that so hard?"

"Now could you help me?"

"What do we say when we're being polite?"

He sighed. "Please?"

"Wait really, that's what we say? I think I've been doing this wrong, Blanche."

Blanche ignored her yammering as she shoved Aesc back out the door. "Just shut up and go negotiate with the attack group."

Which she did very well, if he was being honest. Turned out the whole thing had been a misunderstanding, but he couldn't say he enjoyed the whole meeting. Cwej turned to say something to the girl who had appeared, but she was gone. If her footprints hadn't been left in the plaster dust, he'd have sworn he imagined it.

* * *

In the dream, if you could call it a dream, Sang Mi found herself standing on the deck of some sort of ship, an older spaceship with features that seemed retro and out of date — unlike the modern amenities of the present year, 2387. It wasn't the first time she'd changed locations in a dream while taking Delirium, but the experience was always disorienting. She'd seen strange versions of her school where the colors were swapped, and had an extended dream about being in Victorian London once. But something about this felt different. The gravity felt odd, artificial, like she was really on a spaceship. She stumbled along the metal grating of the walkway, trying not to

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focus on the weird view outside the vessel of grass and a never-ending spiral of stars. People moved about in the distance and the muted noise of machinery seemed to echo from underneath her with every step. The stars were beautiful though, and she was drawn to them. By the glass stood a man, leaning against the railing, staring into it. Rectangular glasses on a clean shaven face.

"It's almost time, I didn't expect to see a new face." She had expected more surprise in his tone, but it was like he'd been waiting there for her. That felt odd.

Sang Mi did finger guns. "That's a really weird first thing to say to someone. Like, why not, 'Hey random teenage girl here's a not creepy thing like *hello*,' or the like?"

He gave a huff of a laugh, and pulled his glasses off to wipe them on his shirt like a nervous tic. "Sorry, even with how much time hasn't passed here I can still be pretty awkward."

She looked around. "Are we on, like, the Space Hindenburg or something?"

The man laughed again, but more genuinely. "Something like that. It's certainly a dead end. Or it was supposed to be. But it won't be for long."

"You're talking kind of ominous my dude, making my dream pretty weird?"

"Your dream?" He furrowed his brow, and then his eyes took on a spark of understanding. "Ah, I guess I'll be seeing you soon."

Sang Mi shot up in bed, she was breathing hard, her skin covered in goosebumps. Saki was rubbing her eyes as she looked over. "Any good dreams?"

"You know Saki, I think I can give you a firm no on that one."

* * *

Three Days Later, the Planet Gongen

On a planet that was once called Mars, the world went on, and it was normal. People went to work, went to school, and

went to sleep. This morning started normal, with Kalkingkata moaning at her alarm and stumbling up to eat breakfast while looking like she'd rather be shoved off a cliff than be awake. Her twin brother Sang Eun matched her enthusiasm as the two ate banchan with white rice that their father had made. Their older brother Min Jun frowned. "Apparently there was another scuffle between our defense fleet and the Earther patrols, both claiming jurisdiction over an area of... well, nothing."

The twins looked at each other. "Min Jun, it is way too early to be contemplating the prospect of interstellar war. I haven't actually finished my rice."

He shrugged. "You not caring won't stop things from happening."

The twins glared at him, and scarfed the rest of their food down with some annoyance. But that was normal. It was what happened next that would change the course of things.

Sang Mi was brushing her teeth when her phone pinged with an unsilenceable notification. Spitting the toothpaste out she scrunched her face up.

"Move out of the way, I need the sink next," her twin brother Sang Eun said, nudging her.

"The trains are out?" she said. "Why are the trains out?"

He frowned. "The trains are never out. Not in the mornings, anyway."

"Think they'll cancel school?"

Their phones both dinged, and as they looked they let out a mutual sigh.

"You jinxed it."

* * *

RPG Muppets Chat

Talinata: I'm saying we should auto-carpool. They're giving us the vouchers, let's go together.

Bashrat: It's a two-hour delay, we can just walk.

Kalkingkata: Don't be like that, it'll be fun. Free car ride! Ice cream! Fun for the whole family!

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Tsetseg: You just made up the ice cream part.

Kalkingkata: You won't get ice cream with that attitude,
Tsetseg.

Talinata: Are you in, Li Xiu?

PinkPrinces2424: No.

A moving image of Li Xiu in the all-leather backseat of her family's car wearing sunglasses and dancing

Tsetseg: School is being delayed for two hours?

PinkPrincess2424: I'm going to that new cafe everyone is raving about, no point in staying home.

Bashrat: I heard that cafe is run by a strange woman with no past who talks like an alien.

Kalkingkata: Don't be ridiculous, Bashrat.

Kalkingkata: JK I want to meet her immediately Imfao.

Tsetseg: What if we meet you at the cafe, Li Xiu?

PinkPrincess2424: Whatever? Like I care what you do?

JaeHyun: Hey sorry just seeing all this. So what's happening? We going to the cafe???

PinkPrincess2424: Changed my mind meet me there immediately.

* * *

"We're not seriously walking all the way to school," Sang Eun said.

"Of course we're not. But think about it, if they're still doing school they must have contingencies out, like putting the autocars and cabs out to pick people up."

He frowned. "But the app for that is down too."

She brushed it off. "Pshh, look, I bet you a cupcake we can get a cab."

"Absolutely not."

"Why not?"

He put his shoes on and adjusted his school bag. "You only make bets you know you're going to win. Let's go already."

They were barely two blocks from their apartment, when the cab pulled up as Sang Mi jumped up and down to call it over. She pointed repeatedly at it.

"I didn't accept the bet."

"But I won in spirit."

"I'm calling an exorcist."

When the car rolled up, the window rolled down, and the twins were struck with surprise. This wasn't an autocar. This car had an actual driver, like the cars of the well-to-do of Takumi. They stared at him awkwardly. He was tall and broad shouldered with blond short-cropped hair. He looked like a GravBall player.

"Did you steal our car?" Sang Mi asked.

"What? No?" the driver said. "I'm a cab driver. I'm driving the cab."

She squinted. "This is Cheonsa Dome, not the Main Dome. We just have school vouchers, not important parents."

He sighed. "That's... why I'm here." He held up his phone, and the twins each held up their own. A ding confirmed that this driver had been vetted by the school system and wasn't a creeper. Giving each other a look, they both shrugged and got into the back seat. The driver started off, and began a fairly normal route to Academy 27.

"...So how long have you been driving cars?" Sang Eun asked.

"And why are you driving cars!" Sang Mi asked more impudently.

"I've done it a few times. But with the networks on the fritz today they asked some of us to help out in case the autocar network went down along with the trains."

Sang Eun frowned. "The networks are down?"

The driver nodded, and pointed out the window to the swirling dark sky beyond the dome. "The storms are causing things to go haywire."

She'd been so focused on getting to school, the stuff with her friends, and the weirdness of having a cab driver, that Sang Mi hadn't even looked beyond the dome at the sky. After all, the thick protective dome kept any inclement weather out, so what was going on outside it often faded from her thoughts. But these storms were unusual. They'd been having lots of

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weird storms lately, and she and Saki had been doing their sleep experiments in time with them but... these were something else. The storms were swirling, the clouds almost looking like a giant funnel in the sky, arcing out lightning. But they were also very limited: they formed a loose circle, around which the sun was still shining bright.

"...Shouldn't the dome be protecting us from that?"

The driver shrugged. "Apparently not. I don't think it's... an ordinary storm," he concluded with an air of leaving off the intended end of his sentence.

Sang Mi was thinking hard about what the driver had said when she looked down at her phone, and let out a string of extremely family-friendly curse words that, while we don't need to censor, are doing so to avoid embarrassing her.

"...Something wrong?" the driver asked.

She held the phone up. There was an alert on it: school was canceled for the day.

* * *

Chris Cwej, temporary cab driver, stared at the phone alert Sang Mi was showing him.

"Isn't that good?" Wait. Maybe she was one of those kids who just loved going to school.

"Of course it's not good," her brother said seriously. "If they'd just decided that ten minutes ago, we could have lounged around all day."

Sang Mi moaned. "Our friends are going to want to be social!"

"Again, uh, that doesn't sound like a problem—"

Sang Eun patted her on the shoulder. "We'll get through this together."

"We could be playing Sellis Strike 2! We could have gotten the grognak achievement — finally!"

"It's not fair, God isn't fair."

He coughed. "You kids okay back there?"

"NO!" they shouted in unison, then burst into laughter.

"Oh my god we had you going there," Sang Eun said.

"...I am upset we're not playing video games though."

He shook his head. Teenagers.

"Could you pull over? We need to figure out where we're going now?" Sang Mi said with some unneeded passive aggression.

Well, it wasn't any less chaotic than his usual orders. Pulling over was easy: with much of the public transit shut down, it was like the city itself had decided to call it a day. The early morning streets were largely empty, aside from an occasional worker popping into a convenience store or cafe for something to eat. It seemed that even most of the businesses had shut down, and the warm sunrise gave the city of Takumi a peaceful vibe despite the swirl of dark clouds casting an odd blot over it all.

Chris Cwej stepped out of the cab and looked down the old street. The smudged dome glinted off the morning sunlight, and made him raise a hand to block the glare as he sat down on the hood. Behind him, the twins were each furiously texting people to try to organize something to do on their day off. He sighed, and scratched the back of his neck. His Superiors had sent him here on a wild goose chase far out outside his jurisdiction, and he was wondering more and more if They had been either trying to get him out of the way for malicious purposes, or were doing an attempt at a prank more embarrassing for Them than for him. Either way, he might as well make the best of it. He'd been to Mars before, but this wasn't his Mars. In fact, it was decidedly different than any Mars he'd been to before. There'd been some sort of horrific nuclear disaster on the Earth of this universe, one that had caused a mass migration here, so the population was booming. Then they'd decided to give an AI control of the operation of the whole planet, which felt like a second disaster waiting to happen, but things had been going all right with that for over three centuries now, so who was he to judge?

"Hey, mister driver man!" Sang Mi said, waving her arm in broad strokes unnecessarily so that she resembled a window wiper. "We want you to take us to a café, the new one on 142nd street!"

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“Virginia’s Cosmic Bakes,” her brother added.

“Yeah!”

Cwej rubbed his nose. “Sure, why not, I could use some coffee anyway.”

* * *

The twins burst through the door, dramatically posing in a way that Cwej assumed only two teenagers could think was cool. This assumption was promptly proved wrong however, as several other teenagers were in the café already, sitting in a big booth in the corner, and had immediately found this display amusing. One even actually laughed. Cwej, who was already having too much of this (and it wasn’t even noon) went over to order. He gazed at the rows of cupcakes, sweetbreads, and other delectables. Clattering ceramic plates were being carried back to the washer by a freckled girl with brown hair, which, Chris felt, made the place a fair amount more homey. He looked at the coffee menu. And then finally, fatefully, he turned his head to catch the eye of the barista and order.

She smiled back at him.

His jaw dropped.

She posed dramatically, despite being a grown woman.

“What are you doing here?”

She flipped her hair, and then adjusted it ‘cause a lot of it ended up on her face. “The same thing as you, presumably.”

He knew her well. They didn’t have the same job, but it was similar enough they’d helped each other out a few times. This was Lady Aesculapius, Aesc for short as she would remind him from time to time though she didn’t need to, and - even more than him - she shouldn’t have been here.

Cwej and Aesc stared off with each other for a moment, both sets of brows furrowing, before Cwej nodded his acceptance of the situation. “If your people and my Superiors both think something is happening here, there must be.”

“I’ve been monitoring things from this café I opened, and there’s a lot of strange waves here coming from some phenomenon. They seem to be affecting some people’s dreams, but it’s not the actual issue here.”

Cwej raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“Well, there’s something, say... riding the waves right now. It’s what’s causing the disturbances.”

The door to the kitchen swung open, and a very tired-looking woman Cwej recognized as Aesc’s longtime girlfriend Blanche Combine strode through carrying a tray of cupcakes. “I still think this isn’t our problem,” she said to both of them. “This is someone else’s world, and someone else’s problems. Not for us to get in the middle of it. If it’s *serious* business, the Council of Frogs will take care of it.”

Cwej looked her in the eyes, and she held his gaze firmly. “If it is caused by something from one of our universes, it’s our business.”

“Wasn’t one of ours,” Blanche said.

“I’m here representing one, you two are here representing what, ten-thousand of them? The odds are weighted on you.”

In lieu of replying, Blanche handed him a cupcake.

“On the house!” Aesc said.

“She keeps doing that. If this place wasn’t a front we’d be bankrupt,” Blanche droned.

“Isn’t this planet... communist or something?”

Aesc shrugged. “Honestly I’m not sure it’s entirely consistent, but we’ll deal with that another time.”

* * *

Sang Mi and Sang Eun slipped into the booth and tried to slip into the deep throes of their friends’ conversation. JackBox was there, looking out of place as usual—she wasn’t from Gongen, and didn’t go to school despite being their age. Instead she lived at the nearby Maverick colony. Like all Mavericks, she had had some of her body replaced with visible cybernetics, and a chrome arm and leg peeked out of her black skull-patterned sun-dress. She had a panel open on her metal forearm, and was fussing with it with a screwdriver which buzzed as it used soundwaves to move a screw. Li Xiu was watching the whole thing with a mix of curiosity and discomfort.

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"Isn't it like... rude to take apart your body at the table?" Li Xiu asked.

"Huh? Why's that? I mean, you cut your nails at the table, right?" JackBox replied.

"No! No we don't!"

Jae Hyun smiled awkwardly at the twins as they sat down, lingering on Sang Mi for a moment. She pretended to miss while she looked over at the counter and the two people standing there, as though trying to place where she'd seen both of them before.

"Sang Mi, try this coffee, it's so good," he said, holding the cup out in a clear bid for her attention.

She sipped as requested. It was decidedly okay. "Yeah it's really good," she replied, and handed the cup back to Jae Hyun who she could tell was suddenly realizing that her lips had touched his cup. He then spent the next minute having a fierce internal debate, playing out on his face in real time, as to whether he should drink from the same side of the cup as Sang Mi or not.

JackBox tested her mechanical finger motion, and she got back to work as the ring finger stuck in place. "I just wish things weren't all messed up today, I had a lot of errands to run, not that I don't like hanging out here," she said.

Li Xiu's eyes lit up, and she leaned in conspiratorially. "Listen, I heard from my dad that there's some sort of disturbance at the big comm and broadcast hub, and it disrupted the automated train lines signals."

"How," Sang Eun deadpanned, "would your dad know that?"

Sang Mi looked at her brother in a way that said, *Maybe you shouldn't provoke the girl whose parents' fancy house we use every weekend for Roleplaying Game sessions?* and Sang Eun looked back at her in a way that led to them having a staring contest.

"We have connections," Li Xiu replied simply.

Tsetseg and Bashrat watched this whole exchange awkwardly, as the twins continued their face off.

What Jae Hyun said next got Sang Mi's attention back though. "...We were talking about going to the Zombie Escape Room that opened up."

Both twins turned to him and grinned.

"We're in," Sang Mi said.

"I'm in," Sang Eun said.

"What?" Sang Mi replied, confused. "What do you mean I'm in? We're both going, right?"

Sang Eun went between several facial expressions in quick succession before deciding on one that definitely didn't get what he was going for in the first place. "...I mean uh, do you really think that's a good idea? For you to, you know, go?"

She felt color rise in her cheeks as she realized what he meant. "Of course I do! That was one time."

"What was one time?" Saki said, strolling up, and plopping down in a chair, not looking up from her phone.

"Oh, hi, Saki," Kalingkata replied. "My brother was just talking about something that didn't matter."

Li Xiu looked between them. "If there *is* something wrong, then we'd like to know. I mean, we all have to sign waivers before you go in."

Saki leaned in. "Yes, everyone has been really looking forward to this, you know. It'd be a pity if it was ruined by some sort of problem."

Sang Mi clenched a fist tightly. Of course they'd say that. Of course this was how today would go. "Whatever, I was already thinking of going home and taking a nap, you do whatever."

Jae Hyun looked disappointed, but Li Xiu latched on quickly. "Then we should go, you wouldn't want to hold us back from enjoying our day, right? We'll call you when we get done with the escape room and we can meet up afterwards."

JackBox shut the panel on her arm, and looked over at her. "Are you sure?"

"You want to go, don't you?"

"How will you get home?" her brother asked

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Sang Mi did her best to keep the sour tone from her voice as she gestured to the cab driver. “It’s his job, isn’t it?”

Saki grinned. “Well then I’d say we’re in for a fun day out.”

They left in bunches rather than all at once. Jae Hyun lingered a little before being dragged off by Li Xiu. But in the end they were gone, and Sang Mi was left by herself at the booth with only the smell of coffee and the memory of her hopes for the day to keep her company.

* * *

“I am curious if this is localized, I mean, it could have something to do with —” Aesc gestured broadly.

Cwej stared blankly. “Just moving your hands around doesn’t actually convey words to me.”

“You know, the whole... brewing conflict thing? There was a standoff between Earther and Gongen ships the other day, after all.”

He shook his head. “They don’t have that level of technology. I mean, I know it’s all subjective, everything looks a bit primitive compared to my Superiors’ toys but even then — I’m from the 30th Century. These people — trust me, they don’t have the ability to cause these kinds of disturbances on their own.”

Aesc frowned but nodded. “I suppose you have a point. Seems a little rude to just say it though.”

He sighed.

Sensing she’d killed the vibe, she put a chipper tone in her voice. “Why don’t we work this job together? We’re going to just waste a bunch of time figuring out whose responsibility it actually is, so let’s just pool our resources and get it done quick.”

Cwej weighed the options. The odds were more likely it was Aesc’s problem, but honestly leaving her in a lurch didn’t sit right with him either. “Fine, sure. Let’s do it.”

She threw her hands up in the air. “Hooray! Or whatever they say here!”

They both looked down, both pulled up devices, and both frowned. "...There's a signal coming from it?" Chris said.

"Wait, let me look where it's centered..." She held a phone up to him. "The Takumi Broadcasting Center, outside the domes. It's directly over it."

"They're trying to send a message?"

"I'd say that makes it even more important we intercept it before the locals."

They each nodded, and Aesc threw off her apron and vaulted over the counter. Behind her, Blanche sighed. "...I'll tell Virginia and Jason to man our shifts. Again."

"Thanks love! Now let's—"

They found themselves confronted by Sang Mi, standing with her arms crossed, a confident look on her face, in front of the exit.

"Well well well, so you think you're just going to leave here that easily? No way. You're taking me with you, or I'm blowing your cover."

Cwej and Aesc exchanged looks. Damnit, the girl had been onto them.

He leaned back. "So then, if you're right, isn't it awful bold of you to approach?"

She laughed, in a forced way that she probably thought looked more confident than it did. "Oh, well I'm certainly not frightened. And... come on, like I would be one to pass this opportunity up?"

Both Aesc and Cwej had looked at the file of important people in this universe, and this teenage girl was not on the list. But Chris... felt like he'd seen her before somewhere. But he couldn't place it. "Alright, so say we take you with us. Are you sure you're up for it? How do we know you won't be a hindrance?"

The girl moved her crossed arms to her hips. "I mean, I've seen worse."

Chris gave half a laugh. "Maybe."

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Aesc stroked her chin. “You know, isn’t it a tradition to take random strangers who are volunteering on things like this? Your old friend used to do that right?”

“...Old boss.” He sighed, and looked up. “Former boss. The one you’re ripping off.”

“I am not ripping them off, I’m my own person, and I still think I’m right.”

Well, Chris had to admit, she was. “Alright, you can come. But do what we say, yeah?”

After they got in the car and set off, Cwej and Aesc in the front, Sang Mi and Blanche in the back, Aesc began scrunching her face up and bouncing her knee. Chris raised an eyebrow, and she asked the question that was eating her up. “Miss Jhe, how exactly did you figure out who we were?”

She scoffed. “Well it’s not like it’s that often we get documentary filmmakers in the area. And if you’re going to the Broadcasting Center maybe I can get an in there—after all, I wasn’t kidding, I have seen worse. You should see our theater department, hoo boy.”

Aesc gave Cwej a look that said she was screaming internally. He just accelerated the car.

It was Blanche who broke the awkward silence next. “But how did you know we were here about the storm? There are a lot of storms.”

Sang Mi got awkward and quiet this time. “Lucky guess.”

CHAPTER 3: *Blinking in the Eye of the Storm*

The Takumi Broadcasting Center was on the outskirts of the city, a sprawling complex that existed on both sides of the city's Main Dome. A tunnel connected the two parts, and the outer segment had a high tower that could receive and send transmissions from beyond the planet itself. Above it, the sky seemed to swirl. The planet Gongen had been undergoing centuries of terraforming, but its atmosphere was still thin. So many people looked out their windows that day at the storm that seemed to be forming outside. Sang Mi herself seemed transfixed on it, as Aesc and Cwej glanced back at her own awe.

"...Those aren't normal clouds, your intuition is on the money," Cwej said.

"...I've seen clouds like that before. But they *are* unusual."

Cwej wasn't exactly sure how much she knew, but it was clear the girl knew more than she was admitting. It was a big ol' car full of liars.

They pulled in, and waltzing in, Chris flashed an elaborate set of credentials at the front desk, which got the three of them through the door into a conference room where Sang Mi promptly tucked herself into a chair in the corner, presumably with the hope that all the important people would pretend she didn't exist.

Cwej had done enough research to know that the man at the head of the table was Director Jojan, essentially the man in charge of the entire city. Other chairs held Deputy Director Naita, prominent community member Kano Masako, and most awkwardly for Sang Mi, her friend Cao Li Xiu's mother, who Sang Mi had made a point to whisper the identity of as

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they entered. She stood out in particular as she was a woman who held no official government position, but quite a lot of power as a leader of a local religious sect. Cwej had seen them handing out pamphlets earlier. As he and Aesc slid into their seats, all eyes turned to them.

"...I don't believe we were expecting anyone else," Director Jojan said evenly.

Aesc smiled, and gestured to Cwej as though they were colleagues used to this sort of thing, and he smiled the same way, and passed his identification over. Director Jojan looked at it, and then plugged it into his tablet to confirm it was real, and then looked back up.

"I see. We will of course cooperate with anything you need. However, we're very worried about the potential damage from the storm. The communications outage is already worrisome."

Sang Mi's head raised at that, but the pair continued unperturbed.

"And you'll have nothing to worry about," Lady Aesc said warmly. "Shocho has planned for this eventuality, and all is under control."

Everyone nodded, and Cwej didn't let his relief show that no one seemed to want to check that part.

"Could you take us to the control center?"

Jojan nodded, and gestured for the Deputy Director to lead them there. It was a short trip, and its ending was only elongated by Narita's confusion as to why they had a student in an Academy 27 school uniform standing around with them.

"Work study program!" Aesc exclaimed. Cwej gave her a look that said it was better to not explain it.

"Computer science department. Our school still has the old SpR systems running alongside the ShoSys ones, just like over here, so I've been advising on SpR mainframes," Kalingkata said.

The Deputy Director blinked, nodded, and finally left.

"...A good lie," Cwej said.

"It's not even a lie: they upgraded the city's servers but they had to keep some of the old ones running because of legacy programs, not that that matters."

Aesc slammed her fist down on a console, which lit up. "Well, it's like you thought, Cwej."

Cwej put his broad shoulders between Sang Mi and the screen. There was a repeated signal coming through the storm, something from elsewhere, outside of normal reality. It had probably been meant to come to his own world, the Totality, but... well, there seemed to be something odd going on in this universe, labeled 'The Warsong' in the dossier, that perhaps made it susceptible to this trickling-through.

The screen ran a transcript of the message:

"My name is Grant Markham. I'm trapped outside of your memory. If anyone can hear me, I need to get out."

They all stared at the screen.

"Grant Markham," Aesc said.

"I never thought I'd see that name again," Cwej said, with genuine surprise.

Sang Mi was silent, but stared at it intently as her eyebrows lowered.

"Well, I have no idea who it is!" Aesc replied.

"...Can we shut off the broadcast?" Cwej asked.

Sang Mi jolted to. "Just shut it off? Isn't this some sort of... distress call?"

"She has a point," Aesc agreed. "Especially since you seem to know them."

Cwej shook his head. "There's some sort of... phenomenon going on here, it's just coming through here on accident because of it. It's riding a wave, and the wave is getting stronger because of it. We should shut it down before it becomes a danger to the people here—Mr. Markham probably doesn't mean to, but he's causing this storm to get worse and worse."

Sang Mi furrowed her brow. "You're saying that... he's communicating using the phenomenon?"

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They both turned to her. “You say that like you’re aware there is a phenomenon.”

“I mean, I’m not saying there isn’t not a phenomenon.”

Aesc counted the negatives on her fingers, before moving on. “Let’s just say there is a phenomenon, and you don’t want to talk about it.”

“Just like you’re clearly not filmmakers.”

“We never said we were,” Chris said.

“And we never said we’re not!” Aesc added too cheerfully.

Chris squatted so he was at eye level with the young woman. “And if you think you can help here, and there’s something we don’t know, then you don’t need to explain it, but you should tell us you can do it.”

She bit her lip, mulling this over. “He’s in danger then?”

“It would seem so?”

“And we can save him?”

“Potentially.”

“Don’t give me that. If I can learn more, is there a possibility we can save him?”

Chris Cwej closed his eyes for a moment. “Yes. Yes there is. But I can tell this is asking a lot of you.”

She shook her head, “No, it’s fine. I’ll help. I just need to message Saki so she can bring the drugs.”

Both Cwej and Aesc stared a little open-mouthed.

“...That came out wrong.”

* * *

In the lobby of the broadcast center, Aesc paced back and forth as Sang Mi twiddled her thumbs.

The Deputy director stopped mid-walk and looked at them.

“Can we assist you?”

Aesc waved both hands dismissively. “Oh no, we’re just waiting for her drug dealer.”

The man blinked.

“I mean, not like a normal drug dealer, nothing to worry about, like a cool drug dealer.”

“She means someone is bringing my prescriptions over,” Sang Mi said, exasperated.

The Deputy Director nodded slowly, and moved in very close to Aesc so he could whisper. “You do know who that girl is, right?”

Aesc nodded, and replied with a tone filled with concern, “Yes, we explained all that, did you lose your memory in the last hour?”

He coughed into his fist. “I mean... she’s from the Jhe family. They were well known dissidents in the 50’s.”

“In the 1950’s? The Buddy Holly era? That was over four-hundred years—oh, oh obviously you mean the 2350’s. Well... that was still over thirty years ago?”

“You might say only thirty years. Well, I’m sure you know what you’re doing,” he said in a tone that said he didn’t believe she knew what she was doing for an instant, and sauntered off.

Sang Mi and Lady Aesc held a very long awkward look until the doors swung open and Saki Suzuki blazed in, not taking her sunglasses off indoors. She was in street clothes, an outfit not unlike the one Sang Mi herself was wearing, but they somehow seemed out of place – like a costume – on her. “I really hope this is important.” she said in a tone that suggested she very much doubted it was.

“Did you bring the Delirium?” Kalingkata asked quietly.

She tilted her head, fixing her gaze on Aesc. “Who is this?” She studied her for a long beat, lips thinning in annoyance, before shifting her attention back to Sang Mi. “Been telling tales in the schoolyard have we?”

Aesc coughed into her fist, and then held up her hand dramatically. “Oh, I’m already aware. You mean Delirium, a drug developed by the Earther Corporation XeLabs that failed several clinical drug trials, initially set to be used as a sleep aid it later found use as... well you don’t want me saying that bit out loud, do you?” Aesc’s eyes were positively sparkling. Elsewhere, Blanche Combine was sweating as she whispered facts into Aesc’s earpiece that she’d learned by delving into top

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secret documents from this world she wasn't supposed to have access to.

Saki's features remained impassive. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Wouldn't expect you to! I mean, not yet anyway. Most people do, in time."

Saki studied Sang Mi. Her gaze was palpable, sharp and predatory, even behind the sunglasses. Whatever she was thinking did not make it to her face. At long last, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a blister pack of two pills. "One dose. For whatever you're doing."

Sang Mi took the pills, and slipped them into the pocket of her hoodie. "Thanks, I appreciate it. Savor that I'm saying that for once."

"I do." A smile curled over her features like a snake coiling around prey. "I'm always happy to do a friend a favor, so long as they remember to repay that favor in due time."

"...We're not friends," Sang Mi mumbled, looking intently at a very bland potted plant on the other side of the room.

Saki just held her serpentine smile. "That's not what everyone else says." Saki spun on her heels and started to the door. As she passed through the doorway, she glanced over her petite shoulder. "And Sang Mi? Do try not to die."

"I won't die?" Sang Mi said, then turned to Aesc more nervously. "I won't die right?"

Aesc scoffed. Then scoffed a second time to emphasize her point, which actually only made her sound like she didn't believe her own argument. "Of course not!"

Well, Sang Mi thought, I guess I've got myself into this mess.

* * *

They'd commandeered a room for employees at the complex to take naps between shifts, and let Sang Mi get cozy. She downed the pills with half a bottle of water and some rice crackers, and lay down.

"How long till it sets in?" Aesc asked.

"Usually about a half hour, then I have to hope there is a wave from the phenomenon."

“That shouldn’t be a problem at least!” Aesc replied.

“I guess not, yeah.”

It took nearly the full half hour for her to actually get to sleep, and then Aesc and Cwej watched her cautiously.

“You think it’s a coincidence we ran into a girl doing illegal experiments about the phenomenon we came here to look at?” Aesc asked.

He shook his head. “No, but I think these things just happen in our line of work. I don’t really know why, but if you get yourself in the right location and start poking around, it’s something like... the universe is just desperate to show you what’s under the surface.”

Aesc thought about this. “I mean, I’m pretty sure it’s just that coincidences aren’t as uncommon as people think. You show up in one place where things are happening, the chances you find people who are there for the same thing is just higher right off.”

Chris shrugged. She had a point, but it wasn’t a very appealing one. “What do you think she’s dreaming about?”

“Hopefully something useful.” Aesc paused, frowned, focused, and then jolted up as she realized something. Chris, watching her, was about to ask, when he suddenly realized the same thing.

“The girl from Hytheriax VII?” they each said loudly but not entirely together.

* * *

She was walking in darkness. Purple wisps seemed to swirl around her, but she kept her focus: Grant Markham. She walked toward the thought of that name, and soon she found herself in a white room. There was a bed, and a vase of flowers on a table. There was a window, and the man on the bed was gazing out through it.

“You’re back,” he said.

“Back? Have we met before?”

He turned to face her, and it... started to come back to her. “... Wait, no, I did see you before. In a dream.”

“Is this another dream for you?”

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She nodded. “Probably. Where are we?”

“Well, apparently inside your head, but we’re also at the *Point of Know Return*.”

“The point of no return?”

“It’s a place where people are sent to be forgotten. Sometimes out of malice. Sometimes out of pity. Sometimes because it’s easier.”

“Which are you?”

“I wish I knew. But you know me, don’t you?”

A memory came to her. There was a deer outside her window. The day before, she’d seen a rabbit. She pulled open a book.

“...I don’t think so,” she denied.

He gazed at her for a long moment. “Well, no matter. I suppose even the people looking for me have forgotten.”

“I’m here to help you, we want to get you out of here—I’m here with someone named Chris Cwej, and Lady Aesc. Aesc said Chris had a mutual friend you’d both traveled with..?”

Grant laughed. “So, one of my replacements. Did you forget about him too?”

She looked askance. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You forgot me. People don’t just fade to the sidelines when you leave. They keep living, even if it’s inconvenient for you.”

“How can we get you out? I said I’m here to help, I mean it, how can we help?”

He looked back out the window. There was no rabbit and no deer. “I don’t honestly know. I think I did, once, but it’s slipping away from me. Maybe I even agreed to be here, wanted it. I just know that, right now, I don’t. I’m tired of being alone.”

She could feel a hand on her shoulder — not here, but where she really was, and it nearly broke her out of her dream. “...What do you mean you might have agreed? Agreed to be forgotten?”

“You think that it’s fine, you know? If you just disappear for a while they’ll all forget you and you can have some peace. And at first, you get that peace. It feels as good as you wished it would. No one to worry you, no one to drag you into their schemes and problems. You start to think to yourself, ‘I could be alone forever, and I’d be happy.’ But that’s not how it works, is it? The days turn to weeks and suddenly that ache of regret starts filling up the gap in your heart. Even when it wasn’t a pleasant parting, you start thinking: ‘If only I’d made up with them, if only I’d run after them. If only I’d called, or written, or done anything? If if if.’”

“If is a big word.”

“It is. And then you start to think: ‘They’ll miss me, they’ll come back for me.’ But they don’t. You just wait, and as the days go by you realize that you never really mattered enough for someone to look for you.” His face soured. “That you deserved to be forgotten.”

“No one deserves to be forgotten.”

He shook his head. “If you’d met the—the mutual friend your friend Chris and I have—you’d know that sometimes the memories are all you get. You’ll be forgotten, left behind, no matter what you do.”

“That doesn’t sound like much of a friend.”

He spoke with a wistful smile. “Oh, but they were. Kind. Brave, the sort of friend you’d do anything for. The sort of friend you could always trust. I assumed that meant they’d always come back for me, but that was just me being naïve, I guess. It doesn’t mean they aren’t... look, they were someone who — who could fix any problem with seemingly just a screwdriver sometimes—how wild is that? They defied the powerful, brought justice to the oppressed, and I got to go along with them. And here I am now, nowhere.”

Sang Mi was quiet for a moment. The wind—if you could call refiltered air wind—made the curtains sway as she pondered his words. “There’s no magical hero with a screwdriver where I come from. There’s just assholes and people like me straining under the weight of our apathy. To

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me, that all sounds like a far-off fantasy. So what, you're alone now. You pushed everyone who loved you away. Everyone has forgotten you. It's easy to be ignored and forgotten. It's harder to reach out your hand to the people in front of you who care, because they're not going to be the ones you want them to be."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Then believe it," she said, and vanished before she could finish her sentence.

* * *

When she awoke, Cwej and Aesc were looking at her. Aesc was rubbing her shoulders. "You alright? You looked like you were having a bad dream."

"Not bad, just..." She trailed off, then explained the dream in as much detail as she could. Her companions listened intently, thanked her profusely, and then immediately ran out to talk in another room.

"Cool, very normal reaction," she called after them.

* * *

In the other room, Aesc shut the door and locked it. "Okay, so this is definitely not a normal situation."

Cwej nodded. "I think I know what's going on."

"Is it normal?"

"No. Though I do think you're right that my people might be involved. I'll... need to check in with them."

She crossed her arms and leaned back against the door. "And if we can't help?"

"Well it wouldn't be the worst lie I've told."

She gave him a disappointed look. "What is going on?"

"My Superiors have a tendency to... play with memory."

"Go on."

"They adjusted my own memories for a while."

"And are they still adjusted?"

He shook his head, and then shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Sometimes, you need a lot of people to forget something all at once, and the easiest way to do that is to just... remove it entirely."

“You mean like... from time and space and causality?”

He nodded. “But my Superiors are also a bit lazy. They like using outside agents. For a while now I’ve suspected that someone has been... subcontracted out to do just that.”

“To make people forgotten? A whole group who just does that?”

“It’d be lucrative, if you could pull it off.”

“And would you know who they are and where to find them?”

“Well, no. Because they make people forget things for a living.”

“Okay, fair point, you got me there.”

Cwej thought hard for a moment. And it wasn’t just a normal sort of thinking — it was the kind of thinking that gets a person into wild scenarios. Deeply introspective, and yet extremely overarching. Maybe it wasn’t actually the best idea, but it certainly felt like it was one. And in the end, isn’t that all that matters? Especially when you’re about to make some rather large and wide-ranging decisions that would affect everyone around you in massive ways. “Wait—wait— hold on just a moment. If they’re making people be forgotten, isn’t the easiest way to negate that to just... make people remember?”

“Go on,” Aesc said curiously.

He paced back and forth. “Okay... okay. What if we did something that reminded everyone that Grant Markham existed. Something big. Something memorable. Something that uses the facilities that we have at our disposal right here.”

“Hold on, you aren’t suggesting...”

“We film a TV series!”

“About Grant Markham?”

Chris nodded, and threw his arms out, one of which smacked the wall with a hollow thud. “About Grant, and his adventures with the...acquaintance we both traveled with. We’re in a broadcasting center with soundstages, we’re outside our jurisdiction, sure, but no one is going to throw a fit if we slow time down for a few days so we can get things filmed. If

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people see Grant's life, see what he went through, maybe we can weaken whatever is making him forgotten."

Aesc gave him a look that said, "This is an absolutely ludicrous idea and there are a lot of problems with it."

"You can direct it," he added.

"This is an amazing idea and we need to do it immediately," she pivoted. "But there's still something missing. We can't just rely on... the idea that something could happen. Plus, no offense, but I don't think either of us is exactly a scriptwriter. Not to mention the fact that, for all your confidence, your Superiors could still very well shut this all down on a whim."

Cwej's eyes lit up. "I... do think I know someone who could do it. Someone who could get around a lot of the normal rules. Someone who could... ensure that our little production would have the intended effect. And... I think I can make a pitch to get my Superiors to approve all of this, to boot."

"So what's the next step?"

"We go talk to an expert on doing things that don't make sense."

Aesc frowned. "...You don't mean..."

He nodded. "I do. We need to see Auteur."

Aesc blinked. "Oh, okay, that isn't what I thought you were going to say, I thought we were going to go kidnap Alfred Hitchcock." She paused. "Isn't Auteur dead?"

"They are now, but they'll be back, sooner or later. And he's been known to wander outside our Totality — or he will be, anyway. Someone like you could... pick him up. Discreetly."

Aesc sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Ugh. Okay. Follow-up question. Isn't Auteur, like, clinically insane?"

Chris didn't answer, but Aesc didn't argue.

CHAPTER 4: *Pre-Production*

Aesc told Sang Mi that she should consider taking a nap on the way to and from her next location, and while Sang Mi had told her that she'd literally just napped and wasn't tired at all, she must have been very wrong, because she'd fallen asleep so quickly that she couldn't exactly remember how they *did* get to and from the place.

At first, as she came to, she thought she'd arrived at a library. But, rubbing her eyes, she realized pretty quickly that it wasn't a place filled with books, but rather, manuscripts. The spines each had handwritten labels, and piles of papers with black-ink scrawl covered the room. At a desk that was overflowing with papers sat a man who... clearly needed medical attention? He was wearing black robes, but appeared to have no skin? Next to him was a girl a little older than herself wearing a black skirt, suit jacket, and tie with a white blouse underneath. She had black hair in a ponytail, and glasses; she was leaning over and arguing with Cwej and Aesc while the man without skin continued writing while talking to himself. In the back, what looked like a cyborg Maverick wearing a brown trench coat with an oval mask for a face was leaning back in a chair while reading a copy of *Greater Good* by Nathan P. Butler.

“—Look, my Superiors are demanding this.”, Cwej was saying. “We can't get out of this.”

“You defy your Superiors all the time, don't talk to me like I'm stupid,” Glasses said.

“Graelyn,” Aesc said, “I understand this is difficult—”

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“This is my parent we’re talking about here!” she yelled back.

Sang Mi raised her hand, and called out, “Um, hello yes, Kalingkata here. Um. Shouldn’t we, uh, get that man to a hospital?”

They all stared at her.

“...Oh, he’s fine,” Graelyn said.

“Is... is he?” she replied.

The cyborg in the back shut their book. “...Why don’t we compromise? If you want Auteur to write your scripts, we have to be there to look after him.”

“...Are you his doctor?” Sang Mi asked.

Graelyn and the cyborg looked at each other. “...Yes,” they answered. “I’m Archimedes Von Ahnerabe, this is Graelyn Scythes and her third parent Auteur. I hear you’re the star?”

Auteur looked up, his unblinking eyes making his grinning skull of a face even more uncomfortable to look at. “Well well well. *Je vois double*. Another Kalingkata! My daughter here met you when you were a boy!”

“I... have never been a boy?”

“Not in this life! Hahaha! *À vrai dire*, come to think of it... maybe he’ll have some discoveries to make about himself... oh-ho. That could be a laugh heh, heh. Yes, yes, I think I smell a plot cooking.”

Graelyn smiled politely. “He’s a little eccentric.”

Auteur mused on his new idea for a moment more, then suddenly *slapped* himself. “Wait! Deadline! Out, vile plot bunny, *je suis occupé*.” He shook himself and held a pile of paper up: “Right! Done! A pilot script for the Mysterious Professor XI! It’ll introduce Grant Markham for a whole new generation.”

“...Could we have a different title?” Aesc asked.

“Keep it or I walk.”

“...To a hospital,” Sang Mi whispered.

* * *

Dossiers:

Name: Sang Mi

Species: Human (The Warsong)

Height: 5'6"

Blood Type: O+

Favorite Food: Lemon Chicken

Name: Christopher Cwej

Species: Human (Totality)

Height: Depends on Cwejform

Blood Type: Tasty, according to a defected Yssgaroth

Favorite Food: (Redacted For Security Purposes)

Name: Lady Aesc

Species: Firmament (The 10,000 Dawns)

Height: 5'8"

Blood Type: Whatever but today AB

Favorite Food: Chocolate cupcakes with salted caramel frosting and sprinkles but she pretends it's things she finds less embarrassing.

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* * *

They convinced Sang Mi they were going to need to talk to an executive producer before casting could continue, and then convinced her that the mysterious black door that had appeared had always been there. Well, *convinced* is a strong word, but she had at least stopped arguing. They'd tidied their appearances up, and straightened their backs, and then Cwej opened the door. Crossing the threshold was the hard part; after all, it was a portal between two different realities being sustained by a complex architecture of living time machines. Sang Mi looked a little sick as she got to the other side, but otherwise it was without incident.

"...You brought an interloper," the man at the end of the office scolded. His back was far straighter than any of their own, his high-collared dark robes making a stark contrast to the blinding white of the rest of the room. Pedestals held strange and singular objects, leading the path to a simple desk which had a painting of a domed city behind it.

"Which city is that?" Sang Mi asked.

"Hongtu," the man said without a beat. "...You really shouldn't have brought her here, it makes the conversation somewhat awkward."

Sang Mi didn't remember Hongtu looking like that, but she supposed the holofilms set there probably just shot in a different city to save money. "I promise I'll be on my best behavior!" she said as she leaned on a pedestal and quickly scrambled to grab the golden gauntlet on it as she knocked it over, and replaced it all very quickly.

"...You can call me Sergeant-Instructor Littlejohn."

"I thought you were the executive producer?"

"You never really leave the army."

She nodded, frowning.

Littlejohn continued on as though he'd settled all possible questions about himself. "I'm surprised at your interest in Mr. Markham, I didn't believe you'd met?"

“We haven’t,” Chris said plainly. “I read about him though. I thought it was prudent to find out about the other people who travelled with my... former boss, in case I ran into them, so I requested some dossiers.”

Littlejohn furrowed his brow. “I’m familiar with your former friend. A wise precaution.”

“Not my friend.”

“Rightly said.” He steepled his fingers and looked all three over. “I’ve been in contact with your other Superiors, Chris. Your little scheme has been approved, you can go ahead and start recruiting your cast. There has been one demand, however.”

“...And that is?”

“They want you to look into one of Our contractors. Freelance. Just let Us know how they’ve been running things later, keep it under wraps till then.” He passed them a tablet.

Aesc and Cwej looked at the list while Sang Mi hopped up and down trying to look at it over their shoulder.

“...Can we work with this?” Aesc asked.

“It’s this or nothing.”

“Wonderful list, happy to help,” Cwej said.

CHAPTER 5: *Auteur Theory*

Salma “I feel like there’s a lot you haven’t told me about all this.”

“What’s to explain? We’re making a TV show!” Aesc said cheerily.

Sang Mi shook her head, looking around as the crew moved in equipment to the soundstage. “And this is supposed to help us help Grant?”

An aide brought over a series of forms to sign, and Aesc began signing them as she replied. “Think of it this way: did you meet Grant in a normal way?”

“Well, no.”

“So the solution isn’t going to be normal either. I have every confidence in Mr. Auteur’s skills here.”

Sang Mi got in closer. “Um, Miss Aesc...”

“Lady Aesc. Miss just sounds weird.”

“...Aesc,” she settled. “I really don’t think we should be trusting him? I felt like I had walked into a red flag store when we were at his place.”

Aesc put a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Cwej and I will make sure you’re safe, this is our responsibility after all.”

“Did I hear my name?” Cwej said, wandering over with a crate of microphones.

Sang Mi raised a hand in greeting. “Just trying to figure out why we’re doing this plan that doesn’t make sense.”

“If you don’t want to help, you can leave,” Cwej ventured.

“No, I’m in,” Sang Mi said. She’d already hastily pushed her friends away for the day. It’s not like she had anything

better to do at this point, and if this worked, then well, all the better.

“Good.” He gave her what he hoped was a warm smile. She gave him an awkward thumbs up in return that said he’d missed the target.

“I do have questions though? Like, we’re making a TV series based on Professor X... which is a fictional series. Like, it’s make-believe.”

Cwej smirked. “Actually, it’s all true.”

Sang Mi pursed her lips for a moment like a doubtful chipmunk. “You... you two do realize that I am old enough to be drafted into the military, right? Like, time travel is impossible. And that show has a *lot* of time travel. They fly around in the TASID and have adventures, with aliens, who also don’t exist—well, I mean, they exist, but they’re so distant from us in some far away galaxy we’ll likely never meet them.”

Chris and Aesc were forced to, annoyingly, concede that this was in fact an extremely fair assessment. This universe had no one like Cwej’s Superiors, or Aesc’s people. No Gods or Lords or Auditors, no Grey Men keeping reality under lock and key. Around here, it seemed, the Laws of Physics took care of themselves. There was no Professor X, or even a look-a-like. As far as Sang Mi’s worldview was concerned, she was right on all counts. They exchanged a glance, and each knew they wanted to give the same speech:

“There are wondrous things out there, Sang Mi, worlds you couldn’t dream of where the seas are red-wine, and the clouds are cotton candy. Other beings to meet, in shapes and forms of all kinds. Adventure just a footstep away, if only you take my hand and follow us there—”

But such things were out of the question. There was no way that Cwej’s Superiors would tolerate taking her anywhere outside the confines of this mission, and teasing her with things she could never experience just felt... cruel?

“...Some creative liberties were taken with the truth,” Cwej said, with a pained diplomacy.

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Sang Mi examined his face for a long moment, and decided it was best to move on. “So, uh, what do we know about this Grant Markham character?”

Aesc pulled up a file on a tablet, and handed it over so Cwej and Sang Mi could read it: it was a dossier on everything they knew about the man.

"Oh, he's from New-Tokyo," Cwej said.

"You mean Tokyoplex? ...The place that doesn't exist anymore?" Kalingkata said.

"Or Space Tokyo?" Aesc said.

"Nevermind," Cwej sighed.

"No, really, where the hell is New Tokyo? Also doesn't Tokyo mean "Eastern Capital?" So isn't that like... New Eastern Capital of what?"

"Don't tell her about New Neo Neuvo East West Tokyo 2," Aesc whispered.

"I heard that," Sang Mi sighed.

Cwej turned to the young lady. "Look, all that matters is that Grant Markham traveled with an acquaintance of mine—the one the *Professor X* series was—" He trailed off as he scrambled for a description that wouldn't raise too many questions even if it wasn't entirely accurate. "—Loosely based on, for a while, one who had the same job that Aesc here has."

She squinted. "Film Director?"

"Er, no, look this may come as a surprise to you but—"

"No I get it, you're in some sort of secret Government Agency or something. I read the Dark Web, you don't need to keep lying about it." She gave an exaggerated wink. "You're in the film industry." She winked twice again, rubbing it in too hard.

Aesc looked at Cwej. "Chris, did we uh, get ourselves a conspiracy theorist as a companion here?"

Chris stared at her in silence, and then looked back at Kalingkata. "...What have you been researching lately?"

"How there was a secret drug trial at XeLabs producing a super-drug that could allow people to interact with the shockwaves of some sort of unexplained event."

Okay, that was weird, but it was technically true.

“Also trying to figure out how one of my classmates is a secret agent from Earth infiltrating our school to spy on the student body—”

Cwej held a hand up. “How about we stop talking for a while so I can pretend it’s good you’re here?”

She gave him finger guns and then didn’t stop talking, “Okay, but if we are making a rip off of the TV show *Professor X*—”

"Homage! Pastiche!" Lady Aesc interrupted.

“I mean actually we have the license,” Cwej muttered.

"Yeah whatever—we need to figure out who is going to play the lead."

Lady Aesc nodded. "Well it’s obvious, isn't it?"

Cwej nodded in return. "Of course, there really isn't any question about it."

"It’s Cwej," Aesc said.

"It’s Aesc," Cwej said at exactly the same time.

"Ah," they continued in unison.

"I mean, you actually knew them! You hung out with them! You went doo-wee-oooo, eeee-ooo!"

"...What is that thing you were trying to sing?" Cwej asked.

"The theme song!"

"We didn't have a theme song."

"I do—mine has lyrics!" Aesc said proudly. "Well, not officially. But I sing them to myself."

"That doesn't matter—you actually *are* them though, you're literally the same person."

"I am not! I just have the same job! I'm not the same person at all. It’s like if you tried to say everyone who is a cashier is the same person!"

Kalangkata stood between the two adults, with the awkward vibes of a kid realizing they were going to be the adult in a situation. "...Okay, maybe the solution here is neither of you? It doesn't sound like either of you want to play the role—"

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"We don't," they answered together, then glared at each other. "Stop saying what I'm saying!" they said. "This isn't funny!" they said comically.

Sang Mi coughed into her fist. "Sooo, we should do something new? Cast someone else? I mean, maybe even someone with more acting experience."

Lady Aesc and Cwej stared off, before their eyes lit up (once again in unison) and they turned to look back at her.

"What... what are you thinking?"

They smiled as they stared at her.

"No, no, I am not doing that!"

* * *

Sang Mi stood, sighing as loudly as she could as they fit her for her costume. "So... I'm playing the 60th version of the character?"

"The 6th, actually," Cwej said.

"...I haven't seen that far back."

"Oh come on, you have to check out the classics right. Like you've seen the 7th one, right?"

Sang Mi shook her head. "Do you know how many seasons of that show there are? It's the year 2387. Later this year is going to be the 424th anniversary. You cannot expect me to watch all of that. Sang Eun already says I've watched too much of it, I mean I got through 'The Year of the Professor', and not all of those 365 episodes were worth my time."

Aesc held a scarf up. "We have to use this."

"...Do we?" Cwej said. "We might as well just have her hold a bag of jelly babies and wear red Converse."

"...I am already wearing red Converse," Sang Mi said.

Aesc threw the red scarf around her neck. "I actually mean because if we give her a red scarf we'll probably have an easier time getting past the censors here."

"...How very Station B9 of you."

"I do not know what that means, like at all," Sang Mi said, and Cwej ignored her as Aesc pulled Sang Mi's arms through a black frock coat with a thin red tartan pattern on it.

“Oh!” Sang Mi spun around in the coat. “I actually look pretty good? Eat your heart out, Li Xiu.”

“I feel like he was wearing a worse coat?” Cwej said.

Sang Mi looked between them. “Like, how worse?”

“Like, the worst coat you can imagine.”

Aesc's eyes narrowed. “Like, leopard print?”

“That's the first thing that comes to mind when you say the worst coat ever, really?” Cwej said.

Aesc approached Cwej, her eyes fire and fury. A bottled storm. “Have you ever seen a person who actually looked good wearing leopard print? I mean *actually* looked good. Some people wear leopard print because they know it looks like shit, and they know they're cool enough to show everyone else they can look good despite the leopard print. But the whole effect is from how awful the pattern is. Name one being that has ever truly looked good in leopard print.”

“Leopards,” Kalingkata said.

Aesc held a finger out, trying to come up with a reply, before stomping off.

* * *

At this point, the film crew was setting up, which left Sang Mi with three questions. “Okay, first off: where are the scripts, where is the cast, and why do I have to hold a random powertool?”

“It's a futuristic multitool!” Cwej said. “It uses sound waves.”

“We have those. This is literally just a soundwave multitool I got from a closet here.”

Cwej looked mildly disappointed at this. “Soundwave multitool just doesn't have the same ring to it. But you make a good point.” He looked up at Aesc. “We really do need to find a cast.”

“Should we raid the local casting pool?” Aesc asked.

“Maybe, but...” he pulled Aesc aside. “I'm already feeling a little weird about involving a local this much. Especially after

all those questions. Maybe we should bring in some outside help?”

“...We’ll need permission for that,” Aesc said. “The Firmament probably won’t care, but your own Superiors are pretty nitpicky about that kind of thing.”

Cwej bit his lip. “...I’ll try to set something up.”

CHAPTER 6: *Filming*

She'd fallen asleep again, but remembered some sort of strange dream where she'd been in a room made of crystal, Cwej and Aesc bickering with each other. Sang Mi stretched in the armchair, and looked around. There was indeed a cast assembled, and they were certainly... colorful. Some of them were clearly already in costume. She hopped up and went over to a group of them, since she was apparently the lead she might as well act the part too... Though she hadn't assumed that, like, the production would be this professional, or have this many other actors.

"Hello! I'm Kalingkata, or Jhe Sang Mi, I'm playing Professor X." She gave a quick bow. "I'll be in your care!"

One of them, a young man who appeared to be dressed up as some sort of... cactus person, awkwardly shuffled a cup between his hands, "Hi, uh, I'm Coloth. I hear you learn to fight in school here, I did that too. I mean, kind of."

She nodded. "So... not from Gongen?"

Coloth pulled his sleeve down and looked at something scribbled on his wrist. "No, I'm from... Hongtu?"

"Really? Gosh, a lot of visitors from Hongtu today."

Coloth laughed awkwardly.

"I'm Dionus," said a Caucasian man in a fine vest, pants, tie, and dress shirt. "Also from Hongtu."

"Ax Rossum, also Hongtu," a woman who looked kind of sickly with how many veins Kalingkata could see beneath her skin, and blue hair (including the eyebrows and lashes!)

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“Larles. Apparently also Hongtu, I guess,” said another woman, who seemed to take an unusual amount of time to decide which hand to offer for her to shake. She also seemed to completely avoid eye contact even when Sang Mi made an effort.

“A pleasure! Is there like... an acting school in Hongtu or something?” Sang Mi asked.

There was a rather uncomfortable silence, before someone slipped in behind Sang Mi. “Of course there is, haven’t you heard of it, Hongtu Arts Academy?” It was Graelyn, the woman who was apparently Auteur’s daughter.

“Oh, well I guess I don’t know a lot about Hongtu schools,” Sang Mi admitted.

Graelyn nodded. “Of course. My parent over there is a professor of drama there. He has many produced works.”

Sang Mi looked over at where Auteur and Aesc were sitting together nearby. “Are they any good?”

Graelyn blinked. “...He has many produced works!”

* * *

Aesc was reading Auteur's script, her face growing less content with every minute. "...Okay, there are one or twenty-seven problems I have with this."

Auteur grinned—or maybe he didn't and that was just his normal face? "Yesss?" he leaned in, somewhat giddy.

"This is barely anything like the original story? It feels like you took more from my adventures on the Dyson Sphere in the 10,000 Dawns than you did the original story."

"Oh, piffle! Creative liberties! Things have to be changed in adaptation, *c'est élémentaire!*"

She sighed. "I guess it would take too much time to fix it now." She glanced over to where Sang Mi was staring at her. "...Is there something on my face? Other than my face, that's usually there."

Sang Mi shook her head. "I'm playing you, right? So I should get in character."

"No, no! You're playing the person Chris Cwej and Grant Markham traveled with!"

"Professor X?"

"No, you know, *them*."

"...Can't we just say their name?"

"No."

"Why?"

"How about we get quiet on set now?"

Sang Mi grumbled, but got up and went over to her mark.

"Okay, let's do this."

The camera crew assembled, the lighting was ready, the microphones were in place, and the other members of the filming crew watched nervously as they waited for the cue. Aesc approached the set, and looked over at their camera woman, who was some fellow time traveler named Zoey Hartnell, dressed in clothes from Colonial America. The woman looked back.

"...And... Action!"

* * *

Professor X Series 1 **Episode 1 (pilot): "Grant"**

It was yet another day where Grant Markham was puzzled over a line of code. He squinted at it, and as he did everyone on set realized that Chris Cwej was actually terrible casting for the role.

"Oh no," Lady Aesc said.

"Oh no," Coloth said.

"It's too late now..." Graelyn mumbled behind them.

In the world of the film, Grant ignored the people talking on set who would have to be edited out in post. "...This code can't be right?"

His co-worker leaned over and also squinted. "What would that even mean, it doesn't look like it's trying to execute any program we're working on. Is it a virus? Should we alert Shocho?" She was of course being played by Kano Masako, a prominent member of the community in Takumi who had been at the Broadcasting Center for a morning message on the

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news about community safety and who Cwej and Aesc had given a role with gritted teeth. Turned out she was pretty good.

"It can't possibly be..." The code, which the camera had focused in on, executed, and then the door behind the two of them opened up. The person there was clearly some sort of superhero, or rather specifically Dynamite Thor, not that that meant anything to Cwej or Kano.

"In the name of justice, super justice, both of you are under arrest?"

Grant looked at his co-worker. "Is this... a joke?"

The co-worker shrank. "...I don't think this is a joke."

"If you don't resist this will be painless, as we liberate this city with the help of... mecha-Nephilim!" Dynamite Thor cried out dramatically.

"Just Nephilim. Actually, they don't even need to know that, just say giant robot!" Aesc called on set.

"...with the help of our giant robot!"

"Cut!"

* * *

Grant and his co-worker were tied up, and taken to the giant-robot, where a woman with blue hair and eyes was complaining about the filming crew.

"We can't get the lighting properly!" Aesc said.

"I know you can't, you should have just built a set, not borrowed an entire Nephilim Mecha. I'm not even sure why this film got approved by the propaganda bureau," Starcatcher Ax Rossum said, who was having her own issues with being taken to another universe without being aware of it. "Why did you even need the whole thing? I was told you're not even filming the exterior of it?"

"No, that would be too difficult with its size."

"And it was too difficult to make a nondescript piloting tube with a chair in it?"

Aesc paused. "Ah, well, look, it's authentic-looking."

On 'set', filming started.

Grant's co-worker looked at him nervously. "You're sweating something hard there, Grant."

"Being inside a robot like this... it... I don't like it. I don't know why though. I mean, I've always hated robots."

She clutched her hair. "We're not going to get out of this!"

"Well, not with that attitude. Okay no, you actually are getting out of it with that attitude since I'm here, so keep it up I guess!" a voice said. Framed at the end of the tube in silhouette was a young woman in a long black frock coat of red tartan. Her hair had a pin in the shape of an exclamation mark, matching the badge which also adorned one lapel of the coat. Around her neck was a red scarf with the symbol of the Gongen people knitted in on either end; in her hand was a soundwave multitool, which had had some lights added to it to make it look fancy. "The name is Professor X, but you can call me X—everyone does, it's a whole thing. Now raise your hands if you'd like to get off of this giant robot!"

The pair looked at each other. "We're tied up?"

"Oh right, well I can fix that!"

She pointed the multitool at the ropes, and they fell to the floor.

"That isn't a normal multitool, is it?"

Professor X winked.

* * *

A distance shot of the three leaping from the robot was inserted, which was then changed again when it was pointed out that on Gongen they'd jetpack out of a high place like that.

* * *

As the three land, they look up at the giant robot, played now by a Diplomacy Bot that Aesc had gotten into an argument with in the lobby. It stomped around a hastily assembled model mockup of a city.

"It's going to wreck the city?" the co-worker cried.

Grant sank down, hands in his hair. "This... this isn't real. This can't be real..."

Professor X nodded. "You're right, it can't be. A giant robot, a superhero, it doesn't make sense, does it? So what can we infer from that?"

"We're hallucinating?" Grant suggested.

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Professor X smiled. "Close, but if only. No, someone is making fiction into reality."

Grant and his co-worker looked at each other. "That's impossible!?" they said in a unison that took five takes to get right.

"And I know just who it is," she said darkly. "I could use your help, if you'd give it?"

The co-worker shook her head. "I just want to get away from all this. I'm sorry."

Grant rose up, shaking but determined. "...I'll do it. I'll come with you, whoever you are, if you can really do something about all this."

She reached a hand out to him, and he took it.

He'd expected they'd get whisked off somewhere, but instead Professor X held his hand, and the pair faced his coworker.

"We don't have to go far to find the culprit... Do we, Professor Meistras?"

The co-worker smirked, and then began laughing, tilting their head back into a full throated maniacal laughter. "Ah, my old student, I see you're still on your toes. Did you like the giant robot? I thought that was a fun touch." She reached to the back of her head, and ripped off her face in an elaborate special effect that Aesc was so proud of as a director that she showed the tear off from five different camera angles in a row, which would later be described by one reviewer as "self-indulgent".

The effect ended to reveal the face of Cwej's long-term friend Larles, who was noticeably worse at acting than Kano had been.

"...Yes it is I. Professor Meistras. Ha ha ha. Now you will... line?"

"You will suffer from being turned into stories yourselves," Archimedes read out to them.

She nodded. "Yeah, that."

"You have to say the line," Archimedes clarified.

She did so, reluctantly.

"Not so fast there, Meistras! You failed to account for one thing."

"Oh. And what. Is that?" she said flatly, looking over at the catering table where a woman in black and gold was setting out cupcakes.

"You let me onto your giant robot!" Professor X held up the soundwave multitool, and it cut to an effects shot of the robot picking up Meistras as they halfheartedly screamed.

"...Is it really over?" Grant said, blinking.

Professor X reached up, trying to pat him on the shoulder despite Cwej being so much taller than Sang Mi. "It's over if you want it to be. But... how'd you like to tag along for a while?"

He looked out at the city. "I've been staring into a computer screen writing code for so long, maybe I haven't really lived."

"Then come on then, Grant Markham, let's live."

Everyone applauded as filming on Episode 1 wrapped, and Cwej stormed over to Auteur. "You made way too many changes. What are you up to?"

"Artistic license! *La muse changeante*! I'm just capturing the emotions of the characters in a different medium!"

He sighed, and didn't reply, but did give a backward glance as he stormed back off.

* * *

"What a first episode. I can't believe we're rolling right into the next one. It feels like it couldn't all be done in one day," Sang Mi said, munching on the cupcake she'd been handed.

"Oh yeah," Lady Aesc assured her. "We'll be doing all of this in one day."

"It's so weird, because while I've taken a few ten-minute naps, It feels like I slept a full eight hours, and I've eaten full meals?"

"Sure would seem that way! Weird, huh!? Just goes to show how much an efficient production can do!" Aesc said while trying to hide the sweat forming on her brow from lying.

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Thankfully Sang Mi turned to the baker. "These are delicious. How did you make them?"

She smiled. "I can give you the recipe. Virginia's Cosmic Cupcakes are for the people, after all!"

Sang Mi nodded, and looked her up and down, centering in on the nametag on her black apron. "What kind of a name is Virginia Stens-6, anyway?"

"Oh it's common in the Great Assimil——"

Aesc stared at her with moon-sized eyes.

"Th...the Great... Gongen City of..."

Aesc mouthed to her.

"Hongtu?"

Sang Mi furrowed her brow. "...Everyone is from Hongtu today. Weird."

Episode 2: "Return of Iconic Villain (Remember to Insert Final Title Before Airing)"

The second episode had them facing a bunch of hastily assembled cyborg robot thingies that Sang Mi thought looked very silly, but which Aesc swore would look great on camera. Eventually Grant and Aesc made their way in the story to meet the creator of the cyborgs, who was for some reason played by Coloth in his cactus make up. Sang Mi asked about taking his makeup off to make him more comfortable since it didn't seem necessary, and Aesc just hurried her onto set.

"W-well t-then Professor X, and uh, Grant, you made it this far. Now it's in your power to um... choose whether or not to destroy all of my creations or not!" Coloth said, sweating.

X was there on the floor holding two wires. "If I touch these wires together, I kill off an entire species."

"...They'll go on to kill millions of people if you don't, Professor X!" Grant said.

"Wait, really?" Coloth said. "That's the kind of person I'm playing?"

They tried to ignore him, but the outburst threw Sang Mi off of her script. "It's uh... well they would um... people would make alliances and uh..." For the first time she looked for a line

cue, but it didn't come, so she kept going. "Um... well, why would I kill off an entire species? They can't all be evil right?"

"Well," Cwej said. "I mean, they are all evil."

"Really though? Like, isn't that sort of a dangerous thing to believe? I can't really believe that an entire ethnic group is evil. That's kind of messed up."

"But they're like... genetically evil, that's part of their thing."

"That just sounds like an excuse. It sounds to me like the real problem is that they're continually radicalized by people like their creator, and we should deal with that."

Cwej nodded. "...That is a novel approach but I don't think it's going to fly since they're pretty popular bad guys."

Director Aesc sighed off set. "Let's do the take over again. Someone get Sang Mi a script."

Episode 3: Tales from the Green Glow

Grant and Professor X applauded as Dionus finished reading the story. "We have to be careful, this show Hamish Forester hosts here at the café, Green Glow Stories, could be Meistras' next target," Aesc said.

"And you'd be right!" Meistras said, in Larles' best attempt at acting, which still wasn't great.

"Aha!" Professor X rose up. "I thought it was you, but you'll never control the Green Glow—it's the power of stories itself"

"Of course I can!" Meistras said, and off camera Cwej motioned for them to move toward their mark, which they did somewhat stiltedly. Meistras reached out for the Green Glow as Dionus begged them to stop, but the light overtook them, as the Professor let out a horrific scream (of course, that was all added in post, so Larles had just walked up to a lamp and pretended to shake around before falling down onto the floor).

They stopped the camera, held it in place, and then a new actress laid down in the exact position Larles had been in as she expressed endless relief she'd finally been written out. The new actress sat up, and examined her hands. "Well well well, I

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might have failed, but it looks like not all was lost, I've acquired a new body!"

Everyone let out a sigh of relief that it was a good line reading.

After they'd finished, Sang Mi went over to her. "You did great, I'm Kalingkata, will you be with us for the rest of the shoot?"

She nodded. "Yeah, Chris asked me for a favor. The name is Kirstine Cwej."

Sang Mi blinked. "No way. Are you like... his sister?"

She laughed. "Yes, yes let's go with that."

"Weird answer but pleasure to meet you!"

Chris and Kirstine exchanged looks, and she stuck her tongue out at him. He just sighed.

Episode 4: Kidnapped to the Space Spa in Space

Grant wiped his brow. "I can't even remember my name. Or how I got here, onto this spa in space..." It was a massive place where people from all over the universe went to recuperate, and Grant was stuck cleaning up the towels. Though he didn't even know he was Grant. Aliens of all sorts wandered by: Gendar, Diashna, Halshai, Caradans, and more. Even one played by Ambassador Galaxy Violet of the Quoth, dime sized and glowing, flew by. "Can't we make that bigger?" Sang Mi whispered to Aesc.

"Uh, I'll think about it. Anyway, that's your cue."

Sang Mi stepped up to the microphone. "Grant, it's me. That's your name, Grant, you need to remember who you are."

He looked around confused.

Sang Mi looked over at Aesc. "...This reminds me of a movie I saw once but I can't put my finger on it."

"Don't worry about it," Aesc said quickly. "Now please get the hot space dragon boyfriend prop in place."

Episode 8: Cryptological

The Professor and Grant walked through the woods, lit only by flashlights.

“Do you really think it’s a monster taking the kids from this town?”

Professor X bit her lip. “Maybe. Maybe not. But I do know that their going missing is *very* real.”

From the shadows, a cloaked figure with metal hands rises up from a pile of leaves. “It’s real!” Grant cries out. “The Wolf of Heaven, it’s just like the townsfolk said!”

X narrowed her eyes, and pointed her multitool at the creature. “I don’t think so. I think there’s something else going on here. Why don’t you reveal yourself?”

The monster paused, and then slowly pulled its hood down as it stepped out of the shadows.

Grant gasped. “Bigfoot! It’s Bigfoot!”

The Professor smirked. “Of course it is, it all makes sense.”

* * *

Aesc looked over at Auteur. “It does not make sense.”

“No no, it will all make sense! *Faites-moi confiance!* Pliny the Elder and Dianne Fossey will show up—”

Aesc cut him off. “Whatever. We already shot half of the thing, so I guess we’re finishing it. Is this some sort of allegory about tax dodging?”

Auteur looked over at Graelyn, who shrugged. “Now that’s just ludicrous. I don’t know where you come up with that nonsense.”

Episode 13: The Fate of Grant Markham

Aesc opened the script for the final episode. She didn’t exactly like doing all of this on the fly, but even with slowing time down that didn’t mean she had infinite energy or attention. But what she liked even less was the actual contents of the script:

Scene 1: Mystery Opening!

Good luck!

Scene 2—

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She threw the script down, for not the first time today, and stormed over to Auteur, also not for the first time today. “What the hell does this mean? How am I supposed to film this?”

Auteur looked up at her, his grinning skull practically giddy. “It means we’re about to have a whole lot of fun. Get real drama, a certain *je ne sais quoi?*”

No, something was wrong. Auteur said a lot of nonsense but there was something else going on here. Aesc’s eyes widened, and she spun around. No, no way.

“Auteur, what did you do? Where did Sang Mi go?”

He just smiled wider.

* * *

Sang Mi stumbled in the dark. The room smelled of blood and shit—what kind of a filming location had they found for this scene anyway? Had she fallen asleep again? The smell was too strong for this to be a set, the air was too thick—Gongen air was light and thin, which made Earthers uncomfortable. This felt like the breathing equivalent of trying to drink thick custard. Over her shoulder the filming drone provided a faint light. Were they still filming? She tried to get her footing. They hadn't even given her script pages. Her eyes adjusted to the dark, and she saw what looked like rows of rickety metal bunks.

The camera drone stopped in front of one of the bunks, where a small boy lay. The bunk could only barely be called a bed, and the thin block that passed for a pillow under his head was stained with fresh tears along with long dried blood. They'd certainly spared no expense on the set decoration. Was this boy supposed to be Grant? They'd done a terrible job picking a child actor who resembled Cwej, but she supposed it was more important the kid could act. Had they given him a script? Either way she'd have to improvise—she wasn't even sure what the goal of this scene was.

The boy noticed her presence, and jolted, pressing himself up against the rough wall like a spooked cat.

James Wylder

"Hey, it's alright. I'm not here to hurt you."

He did not look like he believed her. "...Are you here to take me away?"

Oh. Oh of course. This was some sort of flashback scene. Was she supposed to have time traveled here? "No no, of course not. Though I wish I could, to somewhere better."

He sat up a little. "Somewhere better?"

"Not everywhere is bad. It doesn't change how bad things are right now but... I can't lie to you, and tell you things are going to be easy. Or that you'll escape here tomorrow and there will only be bright days ahead. No one gets happy endings, but life isn't like that. I can't tell you that I think people are inherently good or kind, I'm not that optimistic. But I can tell you that you will get away from here, and there will be hope, and that when you do, the kind of person you will be will matter. Because even if every day is horrible, it's worth it when you get that one good day where you remember why you're alive."

"Is it worth it if there's no one to share it with?"

She smiled. "Even if you lose some friends, even if you're forgotten, you can always start over. Losing the people we love is hard, but it's never the ending it feels like. Because we're still here, and every day you stay alive you can live off of the spite of your abandonment until you can make new friends."

He seemed to think on this for a long time. "...Who are you?"

"A friend you haven't made yet. You'll know me when you see me again."

"Please don't go, don't go. I don't want to be forgotten."

"Oh please Grant, I'll never forget you."

The whole crew stood in baffled silence, only broken by Coloth chewing ice cubes nervously by the concessions table.

After a few minutes, Sang Mi stumbled out of the door, holding a hand up to the light. A light trail of blood and shit footprints followed her, and the stench carried on her clothes. The camera drone zipped by her to go transfer its data.

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Chris rushed forward, grabbing her by the shoulders, "Are you okay? What happened?"

"I filmed the scene with child Grant? I mean, it wasn't in the script, so I hope I improvised it okay—"

She sniffed, and lifted her sleeve up to her nose. "Ugh. You didn't have to make the set smell like that. It's not like its smell-o-vision."

"I think it adds to the performance! Method acting!" Aesc lied convincingly.

"I'd rather not."

"Noted for the future. Now uh, Graelyn, could you help Sang Mi back to costuming and get her cleaned up while I check the dailies?"

They all smiled politely as Sang Mi walked back, and then Aesc calmly went over to the drone and projected its footage. She didn't change her expression, and when it was finished she approached Auteur. The two smiled at each other politely.

Then Aesc slammed him hard into the wall. "What the hell just happened!?"

He just giggled. "You asked for a ritual that would bring Grant Markham back, didn't you? I'm delivering! *Retour aux sources*, start to finish."

"You disheveled Proust wannabe—Sang Mi is still a teenager. You can't send her into danger."

Auteur's permanent skull grin seemed to widen, though that was impossible. "Oh please. Please please please, Lady Aesc. You and Chris are so cute, pretending you really care about what happens to her. That's half the fun of traveling around, isn't it? You run into disposable people, you can hop back in your fancy ship and next week never worry about them again, dead or alive! None of these kids are going to have a good time, *après tout*."

Chris furrowed his brow. "What's he talking about?"

Aesc didn't let go of his robes, her face souring. "This is the planet Gongen, 2387. Things are spiraling out of control politically. Next year things will reach a head. There's a lot of ways history can go here, it's always in motion."

"And there's a 'but' at the end of that sentence you left off."

She let go of Auteur, and shoved him to the side. "Yeah. There is. But most of the possible timelines here lead to a war. And like all wars, the young people will do the fighting."

Chris stared Aesc down, but they were interrupted by Sang Mi walking out of makeup.

"I'm all ready to go! Though I'd really appreciate it if we don't do any more improvisation."

Aesc spun around, all smiles. "Of course, yes, that was my mistake. Christopher, why don't you go get to your place as well?"

He held the gaze a moment longer, before relenting with a sigh. "Sure, might as well."

* * *

"So," Aesc said with some apprehension. "How are we doing the end here?"

Auteur, grinning as always, passed her the script. "We should broadcast the first episode while we film."

"You really think we can edit the episode together that fast?"

"You have a time machine."

She ignored that he was right and moved on. "Alright. So we broadcast while we film. What will that do?"

"The *grand rituel* will be complete, and we will be able to rescue Grant Markham just as you wish."

She wagged a finger at him. "You'd better be right."

He wiggled several fingers at her in return, making it unclear if he knew why people waggled them in the first place — then he traced several X signs over various areas of his chest. There were rather more than two. "Cross my hearts and hope to die! Again! Maybe I'll do it properly this time!"

"Shut up." She stormed back over to the set, and then Aesc and Chris walked off into a meeting room with the footage, and walked out seconds later with a completed episode which they'd already dropped off elsewhere for distribution.

"Could someone get this uploaded for streaming, or whatever they do here?" Aesc yelled. Kano Masako

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volunteered, which both made sense and ended up being fairly convenient, as she was the only other native to this universe remaining on set aside from Kalingkata. She rushed off, and the actors took their places.

* * *

Across the planet Gongen, and countless worlds in the homes of Lady Aesc and Christopher Cwej, an episode began to play. A young woman in a tartan frock coat and red scarf named Professor X ran in, and saved a young man named Grant Markham from a terrible fate.

On Gongen, JackBox leaned into the screen of her phone, muttering, "No way?" when she saw who was in the program. Li Xiu stared incredulously at the large screen in her parent's compound as Jae Hyun pointed excitedly. Tsetseg did not actually watch it until later.

On a different Mars in the 10,000 Dawns, a young man who also used the screen name Kalingkata observed with some confusion that someone named Jhe Sang Mi was in a new show, when he was Jhe Sang Ki. She looked strangely similar to him, and it all gave him a feeling he couldn't quite place. He decided there was nothing to unpack there.

On a different Earth, in the village of Cheldon Boniface where Chris had once been to a wedding, a family sat down to watch something for the evening. "Another reboot," the father muttered with a sigh. They still watched it.

And here on set, Professor X stood, scarf blowing in the breeze.

"Grant," she said. "This has been too much. Time is tearing apart at the seams."

He shook his head. "Professor, there has to be another way. I... why would it be this way?"

"You have no endings. You're a beginning that trails off like the end of a sentence, an eternal nail being hammered into the fabric of the universe. Things are being nipped and ripped away around you. Things are after you, but we can never know when."

He took a step forward, cautiously, scared. "But I can just... there can be an ending."

Professor X held up their powertool. "I'm sorry Grant. But there's no other way, it's the end of the line."

Now he took a step back.

And the alarms went off.

Only, that wasn't in the script.

As the crew ran around the set, above them the sky swirled with lightning and clouds.

Sang Mi lowered the powertool. "Is something wrong?"

Aesc and Chris both looked at Auteur. "No no no, everything is going perfectly!"

"Are we sure we should trust Mr. Should-Be-Hospitalized?" Sang Mi asked. Everyone ignored that this was a good point.

"Is this it? Is it opening a pathway?"

Auteur laughed, a big hearty laugh he put his grotesque hands on his belly to emphasize like some sort of edgelord Santa Claus. "Open a pathway? No no no, *quelle idée*! I said this would show you where he is and allow you to rescue him, *voilà tout*."

Chris immediately sprung to alert. They should not have trusted Mr. Should-Be-Hospitalized.

Dionus and Coloth had run over to a monitor. "There's something coming through the storm!"

Tumbling down through the swirling clouds, a pill shaped object dropped. It didn't show up on the Gongen scanners, but it showed up on Cwej and Aesc's equipment. There was a thud, and the building shook, dust tumbling from the ceiling as the sounds of something large and mechanical shifting above them settled in.

Sang Mi looked up nervously. "...Aesc, Cwej, what is happening?"

Cwej looked at Aesc, and for the first time since she'd met him, she saw he was scared. "Aesc, get Sang Mi out of—"

Holes burst from the ceiling, and a swarm of metal beings with glowing ovals for faces, and four bending limbs like tubes

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that moved like tentacles, with hands at the end with seven-pronged claws, poured through the holes. People ran, but the beings dropped on them, grappling them, running across all surfaces like springing spiders. Chris took one down, and saw Aesc deactivate one before another tackled her to the ground. He turned and saw Sang Mi trying to dodge them, terror in her eyes, before another pinned her. He opened his mouth, but whatever he was going to say was cut off by a metal hand covering his face.

Well, he thought as he passed out, technically the plan worked?

James Wylder

And Today, You

ACT 2: The Point of Know Return

CHAPTER 7: *The Day Before I Saw a Rabbit*

The Patient woke up. She looked out the window, and saw a deer. A butterfly landed on its nose, its wings slowly fanning up and down until it came to a standstill.

"Hello, finally awake?"

She looked up at the nurse who'd come to attend to her.

"Do you remember how you got here?" the nurse asked.

Of course she did, how wouldn't she? But as she opened her mouth to explain, the patient realized that... no, actually she didn't. She shook her head.

"Of course, that's totally normal." The nurse tapped on her tablet, and a badge on the breast of her hospital gown glowed and then displayed, "Patient 331". The Patient fiddled with it a moment, before looking back up at the nurse.

"You're on the *Point of Know Return*, a vessel dedicated to helping people like you get better."

"What am I getting better from?"

The nurse smiled and did not answer. "There are some clothes set out for you on the chair by the window. If you could please put them on while I step outside."

She clothed herself, and then looked back out the window. The deer had moved on.

* * *

As she was led down the hallway by the nurse, she passed other patients and staff. All of the staff had the same oval-shaped screens for faces and limbs like bending tubes. Any part of their body visible aside from the face shone like chrome. Most of the patients seemed to have some sort of task to

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perform; she supposed she'd probably be getting assigned one too. A man mopped the floor, a woman stood on a ladder changing a light. The halls were obnoxiously white, and a faint, but pleasant music wafted through overhead speakers. Eventually, they exited into some sort of intake lobby, equally white, with a host sitting at a plain desk. Finally, they reached a pair of double doors, which opened up into a giant concourse. It was a breath of relief after the sterility of the hospital area: at the far end was a huge floor to ceiling window that covered one whole wall, and beyond it could be seen a great glass dome housing green grass and trees, and beyond that the endlessness of space. The concourse itself had huge staircases on either side that led up to what looked like hotel rooms on one side, and some sort of spa on the other. The floor of the concourse was littered with couches and tables. A bar, coffee shop, clothing boutique, and restaurant were set up in each corner. Guests moseied about, or lounged. It was like a resort!

"Is this for us?" she asked.

The smile on the face of the nurse seemed more patronizing. "No, this is part of your treatment plan. By helping others, you will learn to help yourself, Patient 331."

"But who am I?"

"You are Patient 331."

That didn't seem satisfactory, but it would have to do. The nurse led her over to the spa side, and opened a door to where a somewhat older woman was picking up towels, wearing the same outfit she was currently wearing, which 331 realized was somewhat maid-like.

"Blanche Combine, meet our new Patient, 331. We'll be assigning her to you so you can show her the ropes."

The Patient raised her hand in greeting, and Blanche rolled her eyes. "Sure, whatever, like I needed something else on my plate."

"Work builds character, and daily activity can relieve your conditions."

"What... are our conditions?" the Patient asked again.

The Nurse ignored her. "Good luck!" She walked out and shut the door. Blanche examined her. "So, you're new here. I'm guessing you have a lot of questions."

"Yes, and yet somehow I feel like I don't know what I really should be asking?"

"Don't we all. Come on then, follow me."

Patient 331 scampered to follow her, as she led her into the spa. There were rooms filled with people getting massages, saunas, rooms for baths smelling of different salts and soaps, and a large pool. A group of guests bustled by them, knocking them in the shoulders rudely as they passed.

"Hey—"

Blanche cut her off. "Nope, don't talk back to the guests. Come on then. You see these rooms? We're mostly doing clean up. We go through, pick up towels and trash, wipe things down, freshen the air. That sort of thing."

"How is this part of our treatment?"

"You really think they're treating us for anything? Just keep your nose down, you don't want to get assigned to a worse job. Now come on, I'll show you how to do it."

Cleaning the rooms was boring, and strenuous, but the Patient had more muscle and endurance than she'd expected, so it wasn't too bad. Whenever a guest left, they'd slip in, throw the towels in a hamper, clean up any sweat or spilled products, and spray air freshener, then take the towels to a big pit they dropped them in, and rinse and repeat. Things seemed to be going in a pattern, until something happened the Patient didn't expect.

She recognized someone.

In the room was a man, sighing as he tapped onto a tablet that was plugged into a panel he'd opened in the wall. Something sparked, and he cursed, and tried again. He had glasses, and angular facial features accented by his light skin with dark hair. She recognized him immediately.

"Grant Markham!? Oh boy, am I glad to see you!" She ran up to him. "I've been looking everywhere for you, for..." The

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Patient squinted. "Actually I'm not sure why I was looking for you, but I sure was!"

He squinted at her. "Wait a second. I have seen you before."

"How the hell do you know Grant?" Blanche asked. "He lives in the damn machine workshop!?"

She looked down, that indeed was the name on his badge.

"It's alright Blanche, she's a friend."

"Oh! That's wonderful, probably!" the Patient replied.

He held a look on her, as if trying to ascertain something from her expression. "Find me after your shift. I work four decks down in the repair shop."

A staff member opened the door, tubular arm curving around the edge of the door like a snake. "Is the room ready? We have a guest waiting."

"I just finished the repairs," Grant said.

"We haven't been able to clean the room yet," Blanche said.

A gruff voice came from behind the staff member. "I don't care, I'm just here for the treatment. They can do whatever they need to."

The staff member rotated its head 180 degrees to face the guest. "Our comfort standards—"

"I'm not here for comfort, just give me the damn treatment."

"Of course, we're here to meet your needs!"

Grant left after closing up the panel, but Blanche and Patient 331 had to finish cleaning up, so they were there as the man walked in and lay down on the table in the center of the room. The staff member extended one of their arms, and pulled a device from the wall, which unreeled on a spool as they pulled it in. The device had clicked into the circular hand of the staff, and they attached it to the man's forehead.

"Now, I'll begin the treatment."

He just grunted in affirmation.

The device whirred and... it was difficult to describe what changed. It wasn't so much a physical change, but a change in the feel or vibe the man gave off. He seemed less like an

annoying customer, and more like someone who had everything going for him.

"Your treatment is complete. If you'd like a complimentary—"

"I'm fine thanks," he said with a new confidence and pep, and walked out without another word.

"What are we giving them as treatments?"

The staff member turned to look at the Patient. "That's confidential. You should resume your own treatment regime!"

They both sighed, and finished getting the towels together.

They pushed the cart of towels out the service door, into the back rooms where the other patients were going about their business with much less discretion. Members of the staff were there too, and appeared to be less inclined to act in a way that comforted the bipedal clientele they serviced. Arms and legs extended in arcs so they could climb spider-like up the walls, going up into pipes further into the ship or staring down at the patients below. The centerpiece, though, was the pit— which was more orderly than the Patient had imagined. A sort of railroad track fed down into it, a big basket-like cart rolling down the tracks every so often. The pair pushed their own cart up, and tilted it up on its side so the towels tumbled down into one of the baskets. Patient 331 watched them roll down and out of view. "Where does it all go?"

"Who cares?" Blanche said.

The clicking and turning of machinery echoed up, and the Patient decided she really did care.

"Well, we should get back to cleaning."

And they did. Room after room. Sweat covered table after sweat covered table. Dirty towel after dirty towel. The Patient had more stamina than Blanche had expected, but she still found her back getting sore pretty quickly. Thankfully, the day ended, and as the spa guests made their way to the hotel area or the amenities in the lobby, the patients made their way back to their rooms.

"I usually eat with some of the other ladies, you wanna come?" Blanche asked.

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The Patient shook her head. "I gotta go see Grant. I'll try to catch up with you though."

Blanche shrugged. "Your loss hanging out with the techies. They're boring as hell. Well, see ya."

She waved goodbye, and watched Blanche wander off, before she took a breath, squared her shoulders, and started on her own way.

The Patient made her way down the stairs, the machinery that worked inside the ship noisily lurching away as she got down into the real depths of the ship's belly. She passed through a narrow hallway, which made her feel like if she moved a little too much to the left or right she'd be clipped by one of the moving machine parts, and once or twice she had to awkwardly squeeze by another person coming the other direction, but when she came out the other side, she was greeted by a circular room with an equally circular desk at the center where a peculiar staff member who had more arms than the rest was trying to grab a small white rabbit that was hopping around the desk yipping and squeaking. The Patient blinked for a moment, watching the extendable arms shooting out in arcs, knocking bits of junk off of the table as the rabbit kept yipping.

"You stupid rat, get back here!" the staff member yelled.

"Uh, hello?" the Patient said, and the staff member looked up at her. Seeing its chance, the rabbit hopped off the desk and scurried over to the Patient, who knelt down as it came up to her, and before she knew it, it had hopped up, jumping up her arm and perching on her shoulder with a happy squeak.

"That menace your pet?"

"I've never seen her before in my life."

"Squeak!"

The staff member sighed. "Well as long as it's not messing up my things I can deal with it. But if you're taking responsibility you'd better keep it out of trouble."

"Oh I didn't... uh..." she looked over at the rabbit, which was looking back with incredibly pleading eyes. "Okay fine, I'll look after the li'l guy. You have a name?"

"Squeak!"

"I guess that was a silly question. How about Uisa?"

The bunny spun around in a circle happily, seemingly signaling yes. "Hello, I'm Patient 331."

The staff grunted. "I'm Finagler. I take it you're here to get something fixed?"

"No—well, yes."

"Terrible answer."

"Is Grant Markham here?"

The staff member sighed a second time. "GRANT! SOME GIRL WITH A BUNNY IS HERE FOR YOU."

A door swung open, and Grant, now with goggles over his glasses, swung out with it catching himself on the doorframe.

"Oh, you actually came. Come on in. Where'd you get the rabbit?"

"Just sort of came into it. Her name is Uisa."

Uisa squeaked and nodded.

"Smart bunny. Alright, come on into my workshop."

She stumbled over some junk, and made her way in. The room was filled with half-completed projects, some abandoned, some in progress, all being worked on in fits and bursts. Somehow, she recognized a lot of it. "That's a grav-stabilizer? But where's the particle shaft?"

He leaned over. "...Oh, you're right." Ignoring anything else, he ran over to a box, and shuffled through the parts in it before pulling out a tube with a regulator capsule in the middle, and hustling back over, affixed it into the machine. "Fantastic, I was so focused on the regulator not turning on I didn't even look at—" he stopped mid-sentence. "Sorry, I got excited. I realize that's not why you're here."

She shrugged. "I mean, I'm not sure why I'm here to be honest?"

He frowned. "So it's not just an act. The rescue attempt really has failed, huh?"

"Rescue attempt?"

He sat down on a crate and pulled the goggles off his glasses. He pointed at a large machine that took up an entire

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wall of the room. In fact, until he pointed at it the Patient had just assumed it was a wall. "I spent the last few months constructing that. To get a message out. It... well I was hoping that someone would hear it and come get me."

Usa's ears drooped and she let out a sad squeak.

"...Did I come here to get you?"

He nodded. "I think so. Probably. You're not the kind of person they usually bring here, and even then... well they don't seriously adjust the memories of just anyone. It's a lot of extra effort after all."

She walked over to the machine, inspecting it, and dwelling on his words. "So... they adjusted my memories?"

"I saw you before, you talked to me about the rescue. I'm not sure how you did it, it was like you were here but... well, not at the same time."

"What's my name? It can't be Patient 331."

He shook his head. "You didn't mention it, I'm afraid. I wish you had. But... well, we're trapped here together now."

"Trapped? Isn't this a hospital?"

He laughed. "You haven't figured it out yet? This is a prison. A place for us to be forgotten. But the staff—the Letharchy as they call themselves—they're not content to just be paid off to make people disappear. They wanted a little off the top so they made their prison ship a goddamn wellness spa, and we're the prison labor."

It was the Patient's turn to sit down. "Then we have to get out of here? Right? We have to figure out a way to escape?"

He laughed again, and it was a dark and empty one. "What do you think I've been doing? This was my best shot."

She shook her head. "No, we can't give up!"

"You don't even have your memories, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know, but I'm not going to get locked up here by Mavericks like this and used to clean up dirty towels!"

He blinked, and then smirked. "Mavericks, huh? Well, maybe a few memories are sticking in there. Adjusting them is

a hard thing, you get too much then people can't function. You get too few, they can revolt."

"Well, then I'm revolting!"

There was an awkward silence.

"As in... like, that I am going to—"

"Yes, I know, it's funny though."

"A bit."

She looked over at the machine he'd transmitted with. "How do we know each other anyway? Are we friends?"

"Not really. This is our first time meeting face to face. I mean, I was physically present the last time I saw you, but you weren't."

She furrowed her brow. "What the heck does that mean?"

"It means you should try to get your own memories back so you can tell me."

The words washed over her, and eventually as she sat there long enough, they soaked into her. "Alright. What do we do next then?"

"You try to return your own memories—or at the very least, if you came here with other people, get theirs back so they can help you."

"Did I come here with other people?"

"I think so, but who knows? Regardless, it'll be hard to get in there, though probably easier for you than other people."

She tilted her head to the side. "And why is that?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, but the more important the person, the more security on the memories. All of us have some secured there, you just have more than most. Whilom—that's the Letharch in charge here—likes to brown nose with the elites."

"Then that means I have to be important?"

He shook his head. "Nope. It means they're concerned you could help someone they think is important escape. I hear they've been extra cautious since a few groups started investigating them: SIGNET, OOPS, a bunch of other acronyms. A few people even came poking around about some other missing folks like Mother Camilla and Amelia Earheart,

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but this place had nothing to do with them. Still, there's enough important people here that it can be a problem now. The important people become part of their racket — 'did you hear I got a picture with Grant Markham? He traveled with that one hero, you know the one!'" He put on a funny voice as he said it.

The Patient slumped. "I guess I should have figured." She looked at her arms. "I sort of knew that already. It might even be better if I don't get back. I... I think everyone would be happier without me?"

Grant looked at her for a long moment, and his eyes seemed to wane like the moon as it passed. "...So that's what I sound like to everyone." He turned around and pulled the goggles back over his glasses. "Tomorrow I'll have Finagler send for you; you'll have permission to head into the area with the memory storage to install a new power regulator. From what you said when you came in, I assume you can do that much?"

She nodded, which confused her, as she didn't know why she was so certain about that. Grant nodded; she couldn't see his face but he seemed pleased. "I've been putting off repairing one for a while just in case of this exact scenario. I'll run a refresh of the system when you install it, which should give you a window to go through the door into the memory storage area."

"How will I know what door it is?"

"It'll say Memory Storage Area on the door."

"Ah."

"Then you'll just have to get through the security."

"Like... cameras? Security bots?"

"Nightmares," he said. He didn't elaborate, even when the Patient pressed him for more, so eventually she walked out.

Finagler watched her as she exited, and Uisa stuck her tongue out at him, which caused him to shake a metal fist at her. Shifts were ending, and as she got upstairs Blanche was waiting for her, waving for her to follow. They made their way through back hallways into the hospital rooms they'd woken

up in. She changed into her pajamas, and settled in. Uisa hopped up on the windowsill and looked out at the statue of a deer. The Patient rolled over and closed her eyes. Something about all this felt familiar. Too familiar. It nipped on the tip of her tongue and the edge of her memory, but she fell asleep before she could conjure it.

CHAPTER 8: *Memory Storage*

Blanche and the Patient were picking up the towels and wiping down the treatment table after someone's session when the intercom in the room pinged.

"Could Patient 331 please come down to the Repair Shop? They'd like her to help with an errand."

Blanche looked over at her and shook her head. "That's why you never get friendly with anyone around here, you'll just get drafted into more jobs."

She smiled back. "It's alright, I like fixing things."

"Okay, Anakin Skywalker. See you later, try not to take too long, I don't want to do too many of these rooms by myself."

She gave a mock salute, and hustled off, stopping over at a pile of crates and boxes, where she slyly moved by and clicked her tongue a few times. Uisa's twitching nose was the first thing to pop out, followed by her ears and head, and then she hopped out, jumping around in a circle happy to see her again.

"I'm glad to see you too, you want to come with me on my errand?" Uisa nodded, and she lowered her arm so she could climb up onto her shoulder again. Together, they continued into the backrooms, past the other patients and staff, down the stairs with the churning machinery, and back to where Finagler was. He looked up and gave a long distorted sigh. "You're back again? I was hoping you'd ignore Grant's job posting."

"Oh no I'm reliable, what a worst case scenario," she deadpanned. "Just gimme the part."

Uisa squeaked in agreement, and Finagler grumbled as one of his arms dug under the desk and dropped the power

regulator on the counter. "Go ahead. But don't think I don't know what you're up to."

She picked it up, it took both arms to carry. "Haven't the foggiest idea what you mean."

The word "Doubt!" appeared on his face, and he turned away. Walking on, she made her way further into the ship, down and down. Eventually she took a moving walkway, and looked at Uisa as they sped past. "Do you hear that? It sounds like a giant washing machine. Do you think the towels all go this far into the ship?"

"Squeak!" she replied.

"You're probably right."

The walkway slowed, and she saw a sign indicating this was her stop. Her exit was a circular room, mostly a bland white, with a few open panels on the wall that had slowly stopped being shut when it became clear no one was coming down here aside from the people fixing it—and one door with stark blue lettering: Memory Storage Area.

"This is Grant, can you hear me? Are you there, Patient 331?" his voice came from the intercom.

"It's me! There's no staff here."

"They're too lazy to be down there. Install the regulator, and then get through the door as fast as you can, I'll handle the rest. There isn't an intercom inside Memory Storage, but I should be able to make a noise loud enough you can hear it faintly inside for when you need to get out. Clear enough?"

She carried the regulator over to the appropriate open panel. "Ready when you are."

"Then let's rock and roll."

"Okay, Paul McCartney." She turned the valves and disconnected the power sources to allow her to safely remove the old part, and used a soundwave multitool to remove the screws and bolts. Then she pulled it out (actually the hardest part) and shoved the new one in its place, then re-secured and powered it. "All done. I was trying to think of a Beatles pun, but I couldn't."

"Can't wait to Get Back?"

And Today, You

"Eh? I don't know, just Let it Be for now. Ready to run it?"

"Yep, here we go. Three... Two... One... Go!"

The power cycled. The cameras turned off. And she bolted through the door, Uisa clinging to her shoulder.

Behind the door was darkness and cold.

* * *

She walked through nothing. It didn't feel like her feet were touching the floor, and she wobbled, eventually falling as she couldn't tell where the floor was until she hit her face against it. Looking up, she saw Uisa had hopped off as she'd fallen—she was glowing? Where she hopped, little blue footprints appeared, and the Patient rose to follow them. Having some sense of her surroundings was all she needed, and she kept on forward, till she walked into her grandmother's kitchen.

"Oh, hello there—" A name was there, but it was garbled static. "I'm making Bulgogi. I thought everyone could use a treat tonight."

She leaned over as the succulent smell of the seasoned beef wafted up from the stove. She hugged her grandmother. "...It smells wonderful. I missed you, Halmoni."

Her grandmother looked down at her, and her face darkened. The cheeks sank in. "I haven't missed you, you selfish little girl."

She backed away, shaking her head. "No, you wouldn't say that—"

"But I always wanted to, you know that deep down. I'm making something special to reward everyone for putting up with you. Your parents, your brothers, they can't wait till the day they don't have to deal with you anymore."

She covered her ears. "This is fake. This is... some sort of trick."

Her grandmother put a hand under her chin. She had the hollow plasticine look she'd had in her coffin, her eyes were empty. "Then why does it bother you?"

She bolted. She ran. She ran as hard as she could in the first direction she could. There were footsteps behind her, shambling ones, and she ran faster.

"Help," the woman behind her said. It wasn't her grandmother. Her face was bruised, a trickle of blood down her face. "Someone help me. I... call my caseworker... I..."

She ran. She ran. She RAN.

Eventually she keeled over, panting, covering her face.

Then someone said a name. It was once again fuzz and static, but it was her name. If only she could focus in on it. But the voice. She knew the voice. She pulled her hands from her tear stained face, and saw her friends.

"Sang Eun?" she said.

"That's right. It's good to see you again. You don't need to worry anymore."

She looked around, her other friends were there: JackBox, Li Xiu, Tsetseg, Bashrat, Jae Hyun, Midi, Ryan, even Saki and calling her a friend was questionable at best.

Sang Eun took JackBox's hand. "You don't need to worry any longer: you won't be weighing all of us down anymore."

Li Xiu smiled. "We've all realized the problem was you, it was you all along."

The Patient cried harder. "I know. I know it's been me. I know it is. I'm sorry. But don't leave me."

Tsetseg frowned. "I thought you'd finally moved on from your selfishness. We're moving on, and leaving you alone because it's what you deserve. We can all be happy now."

Jae Hyun nodded. "Don't be sad, this is what needs to happen. Can't you just be happy that *we'll* be happy finally? Don't you care about all of us?"

She curled up in a ball, trying to make all of it go away.

"Help, help! Could someone please call my caseworker—" the woman in the distance moaned.

"Please, please stop. Please stop."

"Just admit you're worthless, and this can all stop. Just go back. Let us forget about you," Sang Eun said.

"That's what we need," JackBox agreed.

"Let us forget you," Jae Hyun said.

"Stop wasting our time," Li Xiu said.

"You're better off forgotten," Bashrat added.

And Today, You

Maybe they were right. This wasn't so bad, being on this weird Maverick ship. She was needed here. She just had to do what they said, and she had something to do everyday. Nothing to worry about. No one would be weighed down by her. She could finally disappear.

"No one deserves to be forgotten," a voice said. Was it... was it her own voice? No, no it was her own words but... "Listen to me—" her blurred name was said again "—you're almost out of time. You need to let me free."

"What the hell does it even matter! I don't care, I don't care anymore! I'm tired of all of this. I just want it to stop. I just want to stop. Can't you just let me do this?"

"Giving up is easy."

"That's why I want to do it! I keep having to do the hard thing, and it's never good enough. I'm never enough."

There was a silence, and she was about to continue when the voice broke in. "That's not true. I asked you to help me. Because I could tell you're a good person."

"Bullshit I am," she sobbed.

"You're capable, you're good at what you do."

"I couldn't even win this stupid security challenge or whatever it is! I lost, I wasted all the time, and I'm still wasting it! That's all I can do, waste shit! No one should have trusted me with this."

"I'm still trusting you with it."

"Stop saying that."

"I used to have an acquaintance—"

"Oh, your bullshit friend everyone keeps talking about. They're so great—well, where the hell are they? Why aren't they here right now, huh?"

"They weren't my friend...no that's not the point. Why? Because no one is coming for us. You're right about that. But you're wrong about something else."

"Oh yeah?"

"People will always forget about us. They'll forget about me, you, anyone. But we can always find people who will

remember us. And I remember you. So even if you think you're worthless, I don't, and if you think you deserve to be punished, whatever, we'll deal with that later. But don't punish me for that."

She bit her lip and pushed herself up. Uisa squeaked from where she'd sat down on something in the darkness, putting her at the height of a table. "Fine," she stood up and staggered to the rabbit. "I... I can't see anything."

"That doesn't matter. Right above where the rabbit is, right behind it, just hit it."

Uisa looked up, and the Patient pulled her fist back, sniffing.

The punch she threw impacted something. There was a spark, and she reeled her hand back in pain as Uisa squealed and leapt toward the door. The darkness broke, and she was in some sort of room filled with computers and glass boxes. She'd punched one of the boxes, and it had shattered—electricity arced out of it, and a loud noise came from behind her. Uisa squeaked at the closed door, and the Patient bolted for it. She opened it, the pair slipped through, she slammed it shut, and such a bolt of pain ran up her arm that she nearly threw up. Looking down, she realized that the electricity had burned her.

She hustled back over the panel, and the room came back online. "Are you there, Patient 331? How did things go?"

She panted, her tear stained face reflecting back distorted from polished steel pipes.

"...Well, I think I did it."

* * *

She curled up on the moving walkway on the way back, Uisa nuzzling her and trying to comfort her, but she didn't feel better. When she got back to the workshop, Finagler stopped their sorting to look over at her. His face turned a sympathetic teal.

"What are you looking at?" she sniffed, wiping some snot off on her sleeve.

And Today, You

"I didn't think you'd make it."

"I didn't. Someone had to bail me out."

"Someone always tries to bail you out at the end, it's usually not enough."

He scrounged around under the table. "You know, I tried to go back there once. I... I can't remember why now."

She looked down at Uisa, and back at him. "What do you mean?"

He laughed. "Where do you think the Staff here come from? When the Patients get used up, get so much drained from them they're husks, they get converted. I... I think I used to be..." his face read an error message, and he shook it clear. "No, it doesn't matter. Whoever I was, it's all long past now."

"Is... that true?"

"It's a secret, I'm not supposed to tell you, but it's not like there's much to my life these days."

Would she really become one of these Mavericks if she stayed here? They'd chop her up and put her remains inside a metal shell and she'd crawl around the ship a ghost of her own regrets? She already felt faint, and this was enough that she had to go brace herself against a wall.

Surprisingly, she found that Finagler had reached out two arms to catch her from tumbling over. "I know you and Grant are trying to get out of here. I'm not going to stop you. Hell, I want you to."

He pulled something out from under the counter, and another arm extended across the room to hold it out to her. It... was familiar?

"Is this mine?"

He shook his head. "No, but it was... from someone like you. A long time ago. Go ahead, take it."

With both hands, she grasped it, and weighed it in her palms. It was... a sword? No, not just a sword, the word came to her moments later: a Hwando.

"Be careful with the blade, it's monomolecular."

"I... I've trained with those. We had to, at school."

The face turned a more somber shade of blue. "I bet they did. I feel like you should have it. Maybe it'll help you on your way out of here. Grant thinks like... well, where he's from. He wouldn't think of carrying something like that."

She nodded, and as she looked down she realized tears were falling on it. "Thank you. Thank you so much. I don't deserve this, but thank you."

He shook his head. "If you didn't deserve it, I wouldn't have given it to you. I'm not that nice."

She laughed through the tears. "Yeah, you're a real stick in the mud."

"Now you and the bunny get out of here, this isn't a pet shop."

She smiled, and waved goodbye as she ran back up the stairs. The Patient affixed the sword to her back, and found Blanche.

"Where the hell did you get that? Is that regulation? Wait, have you been crying?"

She winked a puffy eye. "Don't worry about it. I got it from a friend."

CHAPTER 9: *A Very Important Guest*

The Patient was worried that the next day would be filled with suspicious staff, inspections, and worried glances. But actually it appeared no one had noticed anything, or at least no one had cared. Some of the other patients gave her odd looks about the sword, but as she continued to carry it around like she was supposed to have it, pretty quickly everyone assumed she was supposed to have it too, and things settled down. She ate dinner with Blanche and a bunch of other patients, who all complained together about their banal tasks. Everything went fairly smoothly, in the end. Too smoothly. Enough didn't happen that by the time she went to sleep she began to wonder if nothing had happened at all.

The next day started just as calm, but only started that way. Her and Blanche were picking up more towels after another guest, when finally things began to change.

A ringing rang out, and the faces of the staff all began to flash blue. "What's going on?" the Patient asked.

"It's a problem guest, something is going on."

Blanche ran out to the lobby, and they saw a group of staff and patients were trying to usher the guest through the airlock they had docked in.

But this was difficult, as the guest was a lot.

And by a lot, that meant that the Patient didn't exactly know what she was looking at.

It was a person, or... probably a person? They were scratched out, like video distortion was covering them over. Sometimes she thought she could make out a body, but the face was still blurry lines, pixelation, and scribbles. Every step they made distorted the world behind them, leaving a trail of shining blue and silver scanlines on the floor. A staff member tried to block their path, but their own screen face started to scramble as they got too close and their fellows immediately pulled them back.

A staff member who was instantly distinct from the rest with his gold plating dropped down on all fours and scrambled over like a running crab to them. "Blanche, Patient 331, you try getting close to them!" It was Whilom, the one in charge of all the staff she'd heard about.

Blanche shook her head. "No way, absolutely no way, I don't even know what the hell that is, and I've seen some stuff."

They both looked at the Patient and, each grabbing an arm, shoved her forward. The thing slowed down, what was probably its head tiling as vibrant flowers of flashing chrome grew around it on the tiles.

The Patient looked back at those who had so generously volunteered her, and gave them a rude hand gesture.

Unfortunately for her intent, neither of them seemed to understand what it meant. She pushed her chin up and tried to be confident.

"Uh, um, welcome to the... the *Point of Know Return*. We would kindly like to ask you to leave, please."

She glanced back. Blanche, Whilom and much of the staff were giving her a thumbs up. She looked ahead again.

The thing looked unhappy. It grew, its color turning from blue and chrome to red and chrome, the distortion around it increased, lights flickered and popped, and the Patient waved her arms hastily. "O-Or, uh, do you want treatment? You're here for the treatment?"

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It seemed to calm, and seemed to either bow or nod. The colors dimmed to a purple. She put on her best customer service voice, and gestured towards the Spa side. "If you could um, follow me please?"

The thing followed her, and she looked over to Whilom, desperate for instructions on where to go. "Take it to the amphitheater, we use it for problem cases!" The staff's faces turned into green arrows to follow, or red X's if she was about to go the wrong way, and thankfully their instructions were simple enough she was able to lead the thing through the labyrinth of the spa into a circular white room that was angled slightly so all sides led into a drain at the center.

Not knowing what else to say, she bowed and said, "Please make yourself comfortable, our um... Maverick staff will help care for you soon?"

It looked at her oddly for a moment, and though there were no eyes, she could *FEEL* that it was looking, and it trudged forward. A strange sense of déjà vu overcame her, and she felt like she was familiar with this, as though she'd seen it all before. But where and how eluded her.

Tubular arms shot out of the wall, but they each flinched away from the flickering storm of distortion around the thing. The room did seem to be containing the thing's distortion within it though, so that was something. The Patient would have been a lot more enthusiastic about it if she wasn't the only person trapped in there with it. As her eyes adjusted to the strange sight, she began to see things in it: faces, shapes, places. She looked up at the gallery above the amphitheater, much of the staff was crawling along the ceiling, faces glowing white and shining down like spotlights. The other patients were bunched up, eyes agog. A burst flickered out, and it stung her arm leaving a silvery blue line.

"Hey! Keep control of yourself, I'm trying to help you here!"

It sort of worked. But it was clearly struggling to make the request happen. She scanned the crowd, and saw Grant. She

took in a deep breath, and bellowed as loud as she could: "Hey! Grant! Can you make the room play music?"

He looked around before realizing that yes, he was in fact the Grant he was referring to, not any of the other no people named Grant in the room, and nodded.

"WHAT SHOULD I PLAY?" he yelled back.

"Something Nostalgic!"

"I can't think of anything."

The thing began to spark, and the strangeness of its form began to reach higher on the wall.

"Just sing... whatever! Whatever comes to your mind!" Grant yelled

This was difficult, because she didn't exactly have memories.

"I can't remember anything!"

"Ah," Whilom said. "Oh no. I just realized a major flaw."

"OH YOU THINK?" another staff member said, their face flashing a red frowny face.

"What flaw?" the Patient yelled.

"DON'T WORRY ABOUT THAT!"

Blanche spun on him. "You have to give her something back."

Whilom's face displayed a rainstorm of nervous sweat drops, which disappeared when a stray jolt from the thing hit a staff member, causing their screen to turn into an error message as they shook and seized. "...Fine." His face displayed a loading circle, and all of a sudden the badge on the Patient's breast flashed green.

It wasn't much. But she felt different. And she turned to face the guest, she stared down its sparks.

And then, as they touched her, how bizarre.

She was standing in front of the class; smaller than now, elementary school. She was holding the skirts of her dress down with both hands, not looking up.

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"Now, Miss Jhe has her own idea for our class video to promote the school fair. Please give her your attention."

She took a deep breath.

"M—my s—suggestion is that we sing a song. I um, I took an old song and sort of uh..."

"Sort of what?" someone called from the back.

"I uh..."

Her brother nodded to her from his seat. "I rewrote the words to match our school and our city. So it goes to the tune of *'Meet Me In St. Louis'* and it goes like..."

She stammered through the first few bars, awkwardly doing the choreography she'd practiced endlessly. She'd done it flawlessly in the mirror, but now here she forgot half of it, and the half of it she did remember was mistimed and awkward. What she really remembered was the laughter. The way that Li Xiu had started laughing, and then the other girls had, and then the boys, and even the teacher was holding his lips shut, trying not to smile.

It wasn't a very good memory, but it was a memory.

Miss Jhe.

That was her, wasn't it?

Why that memory? Did it have a connection to this guest somehow? She didn't know, but it was all she had.

She felt sick when she came to, the world flashing into place, some of the tiles in the chamber were beginning to crack. But she stood up as straight as she could, and began to sing.

*"When Kumi came home to the flat
he hung up his coat and his hat
he gazed all around, but no wifey he found
he said, "Where can Flossie be at?"*

The Staff looked at each other in confusion, but the guest was looking right at her, as she tried to improv some movement to go along with the song, pretending she was dancing with... whatever it was.

James Wylder

*"A note on the table he spied
He read it just once, then he cried
It ran, "Kumi dear, its too slow for me here,
so I think I will go for a riiiiiiiide."*

She gave a spin of her skirt to signal the refrain. She hoped somebody here knew it.

*"Meet me in Takumi, Kumi, meet me at the fair
Don't tell me the lights are shining
any place but there.*

*We will dance the hoochie-coochie,
I will be your tootsie-wootsie
if you will meet me in Takumi, Kumi
Meet me at the fair"*

They either didn't know it or needed reminders, so she raised her arms up, and yelled, "EVERYBODY!"

It took a moment, but soon a chorus of biological and electronic voices were singing together, a loud harmony of "Meet me in Takumi, Kumi, meet me at the fair," bellowed out and their bodies began swaying together as they repeated the refrain yet again. And as they sang, the sparks began to lessen. The guest began to solidify, to take shape, and soon it was a clear outline of a man, though still the color of distortion.

It reached out fingers dripping chrome, and she reached out to take the hand as though it was the only possible thing to do in such a situation.

* * *

They were sitting on a grassy spot looking out at an air hanger, a group of men in three-piece suits and hats running hurriedly around a dirigible.

"Why are we watching this?" Larles asked, with some exhaustion.

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Chris Cwej pointed. "You'll see."

The dirigible took off, to much applause, and then headed toward the fence. It got very quiet, the audience who had gathered around to watch it take off tensing with anticipation.

For a moment, it looked like it was going to keep rising.

But then it evened out.

And it hit the fence.

A great moan erupted from the crowd.

"There's a contest to try to make several circuits of the area in an airship, but nobody is going to make it."

Larles frowned. "Nobody?"

"They're all going to hit the fence they erected to protect the aircraft from the wind."

"And... this is fun?"

"I mean, we're supposed to make sure that nobody actually makes it over. I did most of the work already so now we just sit back and relax." He held out a bag that smelled of sugar and cinnamon, with the faint stains of oil.

Larles sniffed it hesitantly. "What is it?"

"Donuts. One of the joys of the St. Louis World's Fair."

She picked one up, and slowly took a bite. Her eyes lit up.

"Told you." Chris watched Larles eat, and as they gathered up the wreckage of the last aircraft, the pilot stomping his foot and cursing on the ground, a calliope began playing in the distance. He turned his head. "I know this song. An old associate of mine played it for me. Sang it badly."

"That associate, the one everyone talks about?"

Chris didn't answer, he just began to sing along softly. "Meet me in St. Louis, Louis, meet me at the fair..."

"How's that nostalgia treating you?"

"Fine, thanks."

"Did you remember?"

"Remember wha—" He turned back to Larles, but it wasn't Larles. It was a Korean girl wearing some sort of maid outfit, with for some reason a sword on her back.

"Remember who you are?"

* * *

Chris blinked, and he was standing over a drain, being watched by an entire crowd of the staff, patients, and guests of the ship.

"...Chris?" the Patient asked.

"Sang Mi?" the Guest asked.

"That's me, I think. It's... coming back to me."

He looked around, the staff were crawling closer, moving from the gallery down the wall like a flood of spiders. He quickly got back to back with Sang Mi.

"Alright, just stay where you are and—" Whilom was cut off by Cwej pulling a device from his belt, and dropping it. A burst of energy surged around them, causing the crawling staff to tumble down the wall, their faces a scramble of data. Cwej bolted, grabbing Sang Mi's arm and dragging her behind him. Alarms went off. The staff's faces glowed red.

"Where are we going—"

"Escaping," he said, bull rushing a staff member out of the way, knocking them to the floor.

"We're on a spaceship!"

"I have that covered."

He shoved a door open—and they found themselves in the main concourse.

Which was filled with members of the staff, all staring at the door. They covered the walls, the ceiling, the floors. He shut the door.

"You do not have that covered."

"No."

She bit her lip, and then it hit her. "Follow me!" He ran after her, she was faster than he expected, and they went through a door into the back area. Staff were coming out of the doors, but they weren't right on top of them yet at least. Sang Mi ran to a hole in the floor where laundry carts were going down a set of tracks. "In here!"

Well, it was better than nothing. She leapt into a cart, and he followed. Giant gears and pistons turned to either side of them, the light from the hole they'd dropped down getting

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smaller. And then the other lights came: Red ovals, climbing down the carts ahead of them, leaping from cart to cart.

Chris cursed. Sang Mi drew her sword, and put her feet into a stance.

"...Do you know how to use that?"

"Of course I do, they teach basic weapon use at school, you know?"

"How did you even get a sword?"

"I'll explain later!" The first staff member leapt at them, and Sang Mi made a flawless slash in the darkness, the metal legs of the staff member clattering and bumping under the next cart, the rest of them tumbling somewhere far below. She hadn't been kidding. Cwej just started ripping up the lining of the cart, looking for if there were any sort of controls on this thing.

"How does that thing cut through them?"

"Monomolecular edge, Gongen craftsmanship!"

"That's not how a monomolecular edge works!"

"Take that up with Robert Boyle!"

Behind him, Sang Mi had a deadly focus. She swung the sword carefully, always waiting for the right timing, and to Cwej's relief seemed to be trying to be as non-lethal as possible. Sure, she couldn't help that they were going to drop down to God knows where, but cybernetic limbs could be replaced. So she went for legs and arms. Even so, she hadn't been kidding about the training. A cluster jumped at them, arms extending, red faces raging, and she swirled her blade in a swerving arc that tore through arms and legs with a searing screech of ripping steel and splatters of oil and hydraulic fluid. One got through, arms gripping the end of the cart, dragging its own legs against the tracks, its feet trying to grip down around them, to slow them down—a loud and terrible sound that caused the young woman to flinch. It tried to dig its hands in deeper, but she put a foot to its face, and shoved hard. Its motors were stronger than muscles, but it was also fighting against the motion of the cart, and the kick dislodged it, causing the staff

member to roll back and get crushed under the cart behind them.

"They keep coming!"

Cwej tore more of the lining up and grinned. He ripped a panel open, and very quickly pulled a few wires out and rearranged them.

Sang Mi didn't have to ask what he was doing. She knew. She sheathed the sword, and ducked back down, trying to grab hold—as the cart shot forward, its engine going into overdrive. The innards of the ship rushed past them, gears and service stations, gravity generators and fuel lines, till they screeched to a halt, rolling off the cart into a pile of dirty towels. Though a pile wasn't quite giving it enough credit—it was a giant basin of laundry, like a cloth lake with circular metal walls keeping it all in.

Sang Mi tried to stand up, but immediately began sinking.

"Spread your weight out, crawl toward the wall," Cwej yelled.

She did as directed, and it mostly worked. The towels shifted constantly under her, and a terror began to creep into her that she would slip beneath them and be churned into them if she remained still even a moment. Her heart beat hard; she'd never imagined she could die from being dropped in a silo of towels. Cwej had struggled a bit more than she had, and as she touched the wall with the satisfaction of an Olympic swimmer, she saw she'd actually overtaken his lead. She scrambled around—there weren't actually any obvious hand holds against the wall. And as her momentum stopped, she started sinking again. She wanted to thrash about, but she instead centered herself.

If she panicked, she'd sink.

She needed a way for her and Cwej to get out of this.

Then it struck her, what would have been obvious if she hadn't been so stressed—she drew her sword, the act sinking herself down, and dug it into the wall. The monomolecular edge cut through the metal with about the same resistance as a regular knife through a block of cheddar cheese. Sinking made

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it a little awkward, but it didn't really matter—as long as she could make a rough circle, she'd get out even if she was submerged in towels. She curved the blade, tugging hard, to the side, then up, then back towards her and... she felt herself falling. The fall wasn't that bad though—she tumbled along with a flood of towels into a hallway, and they broke her fall pretty decently. Her sword had tumbled a bit away, and had come to a stop embedding itself in the floor like Excalibur. Cwej came not long after, dropping in a little less ceremoniously behind her.

"You all right?" she asked.

He nodded as he pulled a dirty washcloth off his shoulder. "Well, I didn't experience death by laundry, so I'll take that as a win for the day."

They could still hear the alarms blaring, though as Sang Mi looked down the hallway she couldn't see any of the staff. "Do you think they think we're dead?"

"Probably. Those towels are going to get boiled and compacted, so as long as we stay off their radar we should be good. Speaking of..." He pulled the chunk of wall she'd cut out from under the towels, and shoved it loosely back into place. Then pulled a device from his pocket, and sealed the edges of it."

"That is a handy device."

He put a finger to his lips. "Our little secret. Now let's get out of here."

She walked over to the sword, and pulled it from the floor. "...Aren't we on a spaceship?"

He winked, and walked over to a door marked with strange symbols, which he opened using the same device he'd sealed things with. Behind it was a ladder.

"I'm guessing it isn't a short climb."

"No no, it's pretty manageable!"

Quite a lot of time passed, when a hatch popped open in a grassy field, a glass sky above it, the curve of the ship visible along the field. First Sang Mi popped out, crawling out and

throwing herself onto the grass panting. Then Cwej followed, sitting down a bit more ceremoniously.

“Okay,” Sang Mi said, still huffing, “Could you explain to me what the HELL just happened?”

CHAPTER 10: *What the Hell Just Happened.*

Chris Cwej was nowhere. This wasn't particularly new for him; he'd been in a lot of weird places over the ages. This one was just... boring white space. They could have at least given him a park bench or something.

A being appeared before him out of nowhere, resembling the ones that had crawled out of the ceiling at the Takumi Broadcast Center—though its exterior was gold instead of chrome.

"Hello there, Christopher Rodanté Cwej, yes? We're honored to have you here."

He nodded. "I have literally no idea who you are, so maybe start there?"

The being bowed. "I am Whilom, of the Letharchy. We're a group who has been contracted by your Superiors for the... removal of certain unsavory elements from Their time-space continuum."

He looked around at the nothing. "...So is that including me?"

"Oh! Of course not, but we wanted to have our conversation with you without distraction. Please understand we're all on the same team here."

He sighed. "Could we talk somewhere a little nicer then?"

In the blink of an eye, the nothing had turned into a cozy study, a fire burned in the hearth, and Whilom sat down in a comfy chair that faced one sized just right for Cwej, which he sat down in.

"You raided a facility in a universe outside your jurisdiction; that's certainly grounds for investigation."

"I think you'll find that this universe won't be giving us many consequences. Our home has The Superiors watching over it, the 10,000 Dawns have the Firmament. What do they have? There is certainly a powerful force here, but they're unaware of the existence of the wider Multiverse, and as such until they reach their full potential, they don't even know they can complain, let alone retaliate. There won't be any consequences for us."

Cwej chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "You're talking about these people like they're a backwater? Like their whole existence is less than ours?"

Whilom put a gentle smile on his face. "It *is* less than ours. Even if we accidentally wiped out that whole planet—not that we would mind you—no one would care. This universe has largely been forgotten. You know, we were rather baffled that Mr. Markham's escape attempt arrived here of all places. I'd never even heard of it before. This solar system is getting close to tearing itself apart anyway."

"I reject the idea that just because this isn't where we were born that these people's lives are less than ours."

"And yet, they'll be forgotten regardless of your bleeding-heart sympathy. And your Superiors don't care either."

Cwej felt his mood growing dour, until suddenly and with the clarity of wiping a muddy window clean, he suddenly saw the obvious point.

"... But... if my Superiors didn't want me here then 'They wouldn't have sent me in the first place, would they?'" He thought hard. There was something blocking a thought. Something trying to keep it out of his head.

They could mess with memory. But his memory was anything but ordinary. He focused. Hard. It was familiar—the technology here was based on the technology of his Superiors, he realized—and he just had to push through.

"Ah, could you uh... stop that?" Whilom asked.

He didn't, and it felt like the room itself cracked.

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"...I was asked to look into a set of independent contractors while I was here. Those contractors are you. They did hire you, but you've exceeded your mandate, there's something wrong going on with your operation, which fits with you abducting me."

"Pity," Whilom said. "I was hoping we wouldn't have to take drastic measures. We're well aware that as an Agent of The Superiors you have a special relation to memory. And you would normally be able to go back to the Vicinity System that keeps your memories intact wherever you go. Unfortunately for you, that's your weakness here."

He tried to focus harder. Something was wrong.

"...Wait a moment you..."

"Yes, you're trapped here, unfortunately. We'll have to come up with some sort of lie to tell your Superiors but... well, that won't be too hard in the grand scheme of things. You'll be forgotten too, in time. Don't worry, it's not as bad as you think. Honestly it might be a relief."

And then, he was once again in nothing.

* * *

Lady Aesculapius was in a classroom. The teacher at the head of the room stroked his goatee as the robed students studied the glowing dodecahedrons that had been placed in front of them. She looked around at her fellow students before examining the object.

"And what is the probability of the reality we've been projecting proving viable?" her teacher said.

She looked up, and frowned. "No, I'm afraid this won't do."

Her teacher raised an eyebrow. "And what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that this is just obviously some sort of visiony-thingy you're using to try to keep me distracted from actually moving on with my objectives."

He furrowed his brow. "What sort of nonsense—"

"Just stop embarrassing yourself, this isn't my first rodeo, and frankly I've seen a lot better in terms of production quality. Now chop chop."

Her teacher sighed. "I see the gig is up. Well, I suppose we should talk about things."

Her eyes opened, and this time she was in a place much more like what she'd expected.

The thing was vaguely person shaped. A loose blue poncho-like garment hung over a humanoid torso, but the arms and legs seemed to be lacking joints, instead they moved like tendrils with hands and feet at the ends. Unlike the ones she'd seen at the Takumi Broadcast Center, this one was gold-colored. The head had a shield-shaped face which was actually a screen—a simple smiling expression made of two curved arches for the eyes, and one upside down for the mouth below it, gave it the air of at least trying to seem friendly.

"Hello," said Lady Aesc. "I'm sorry, I don't seem to know where precisely I am."

The thing's smile grew bolder. "Why hello there, I didn't think we were expecting any visitors. Welcome, to the *Point of Know Return*."

"You can cut the nicey-nice act too. I remember you folks grabbing all of us with metal limbs too."

The being's face expressed an awkward face emoji. "Well, I suppose there's no point in getting around that. But I think you'll find we're having a massive misunderstanding right now. Would you walk with me?"

She frowned, but slid off the bed, and followed the being. "You have a name? You already know mine."

"Ah yes, I'm Whilom, the commander of this whole operation. We're actually a legitimate company, believe it or not—we have contracts with several groups, including your friend Cwej's Superiors."

"Do you have one with my people?" she asked.

"Ah, no. Wherein lies the awkwardness. While we understand the Firmament are the foremost power of the

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10,000 Dawns, we haven't actually had the pleasure of encountering one of you before."

She did jazz hands. "Well, here I am!"

"Yes, so we see, so I'd like to explain our purpose and perhaps smooth over this... misunderstanding."

She nodded. "Fair enough, I'll hear you out. Though I'm not going to lie, I am naturally skeptical."

He gestured diplomatically as they walked along the bland hospital-like hallway. "Of course, of course, I'd expect nothing less!" He gestured again into the rooms they passed—there were patients in them, or people dressed like patients. Though... some appeared to be changing into work clothes. "The method is simple, we remove people from having mattered. They become forgotten, less than memories. They can exist here with purpose and all their needs met, even community with the other patients, and in return we get access to their memories in order to make sure that they hold no impact on the future."

Aesc peered at some of the patients as they passed. They were oddly quiet. "Why do you call them patients?"

"Because in a way we are treating them—and treating the gash in reality that comes with cutting someone out from it."

Aesc didn't react to the reply. "This is quite the elaborate operation. You had to have been working on this for some time." It wasn't a question.

"Oh, plenty of time," Whilom agreed. "This isn't our first attempt at this. We originally operated a vehicle that transported the candidates on an unending journey. But we ran out of space, and we had grander goals."

Another one of the operators passed by, nearly identical with the screen for a face, and the bendable limbs, but with a different color of garment. "...And who are we?"

"Ah, forgive me," he bowed, legs extending and curving as his three-toed feet splayed out to keep balance. "The Letharchy, at your service. Providing removal from history at a reasonable price."

"You seem rather unconcerned with us shutting you down."

A smile of dots and a curve appeared on his face. "I don't think we have anything to worry about. If you'll follow me..."

She followed, this time two steps behind him. The whole thing was curious. Aesc was led through a concourse, filled with what looked like the patients, running around in white work clothes with black aprons over them, carrying supplies, or cleaning. Letharchs were leading people dressed normally this way and that way, between rooms on one side and the other. "...Are you using the Patients as unpaid labor?"

Whilom's head spun around independent of his torso, the same smile there, but it looked pandering to her. "Work builds character, and provides purpose! And these people need purpose."

She stopped, and crossed her arms. "You can't just use these people as slaves. If this is really a reputable business, why does it seem like you're trying to milk every aspect of it dry?"

"Because it is a business—you can't fault us for trying to make a little extra money, can you?"

"Yeah, I can? I can do that a lot and very easily?"

"Pity, I was hoping we'd be able to convince you."

"I think that's pretty well off the table. Wait—is that Coloth?"

Coloth looked up from where he was wiping a table and waved at her, with some confusion, like he was trying to work out where he'd seen her last.

"I couldn't possibly say."

She rushed up to him, grabbing him by the front of his poncho. "You just took everyone who was at the Broadcast Center? My friends? Where is Blanche? Cwej?—where's Sang Mi? Where's everyone?"

"Oh dear, no need to get violent! I was just hoping we could have a reasonable discussion about this."

"Reasonable? This is heinous!? Immoral! It was bad enough you were stealing people's memories, but you're

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literally using them for slave labor after you do that? Did you really think I would let that slide?"

The electronic face grew into a terrible grin. "We did our research on your people. When you die, your consciousness just goes into a new cloned body, right?"

She frowned and took a few steps back. "That sounds very not-good and ominous."

"Well, if we kill you, you'll just come back and cause problems. Thankfully we have a pretty good understanding of consciousness and memory."

She was already running, trying to make it to one of the hatches, but a swarm of Letharchs were already crawling over at high speeds to block her exit.

"We think we found a good solution. How do you feel about bunny rabbits?"

She spun around. "I have a feeling you won't be taking my opinion into account anyway, but I'd prefer a fennec fox."

"You're right! We are ignoring your opinion. Grab her."

They did, and when she next came too, she was sitting in a cage, and as she looked down, saw her feet were paws.

"Squeak!" she said. *Oh dear*, she thought.

For all the carefulness of their plan, the Letharchy actually hadn't invested in a very good lock on the cage. Well, a normal rabbit wouldn't have been able to get it open. But she wasn't a normal rabbit.

She hopped out and made her way into the facility. Eventually she found where Grant was.

And then she met a familiar face, who called her Uisa.

* * *

Chris had been waiting in nothing, but he could sense... something. He could reach his mind and thoughts out somewhat, but it was all limited. Even so, he knew he was doing more than he should have been able to. He'd read a lot of the Letharchy's files, including what had happened to Aesc and Sang Mi. He hadn't expected they'd put one of them in a bunny rabbit certainly. Their mutual familiarity with this

technology was double-edged, but apparently not enough in his favor.

That was when he realized something.

There was another mind here. No—two.

Approaching. Closer.

And then one of the minds began to give up.

He told most of this to Sang Mi, but he left out the bit about Aesc becoming a bunny. That was probably a stretch too far.

CHAPTER 11: *Remember the Good Times*

Cwej and Kalingkata had set up on a hill in the grassy field in the ship's surface dome. Above them, they could see the planet Gongen dominating their view. "...So yeah, that's about what happened," Chris said.

Uisa yipped in agreement, and hopped around in the grass.

Sang Mi sat quietly for several minutes. "So they kidnapped us, used devices to mess with our memory, and took us into space on a big Maverick ship?"

"That's the long and short of it."

She nodded, then frowned. "There's something you're not telling me about all of this. And not just how weird this is. We weren't just filming that series so Grant Markham can get his story told and have people remember him. There's something more to it."

Cwej stared Sang Mi down, "I don't know what you're talking about, we're—"

"I'm not stupid, Chris."

They stared off for a moment, before Chris sat down on the grass. The longer they sat there, the more pronounced the gentle hum of the machinery beneath them became, simply because it became harder to ignore. At least for Chris.

Sang Mi looked more at ease, he thought. According to the file, her home city of Takumi was mostly underground: vast factories that churned out machinery for the rest of the planet. The murmur of it, the subtle vibrations, must make her feel more at ease than real nature. She was human, but at that moment, that subtle difference in their relationship to the

ground itself made her feel alien to him. Which wasn't fair to think, really; he was pretty different than 'normal' people himself. He'd gotten her embroiled in so much, and he barely knew or understood her. What was beneath her own skin was as much a mystery to him as the unseen layers of city below the visible surface of Gongen. And indeed, she wasn't stupid.

"...Grant Markham is like me," he eventually replied. "He traveled with the same associate, the one you were sort of playing through extension. The one Professor X is probably based on. But that journey ended, and... well, Grant was left behind. And well... I managed to find something new. New friends. A new purpose. I'm not sure there was anything there for him. His life just... stopped."

"That's not all there is to it," she said, and there was no hint of doubt in her voice.

Cwej nodded. "No, and that's the part I wasn't saying. He wasn't just forgotten, he was abandoned. It wasn't just that he got left behind, but that all the ties that held him onto the world were severed one by one until he was all alone."

"That sounds miserable."

"I'm sure it is. But I'm sure there was a good reason for it."

Sang Mi sat down next to him, and pulled her knees up to her chest. "Maybe. Maybe it was just an excuse to avoid doing the hard thing."

"I'm just saying, maybe messing with all this was the wrong idea."

"You roped me into filming a whole TV series, got me kidnapped by Mavericks and taken to a spaceship, had my memory stolen from me, and nearly got me killed by a giant washing machine. You're acting like I can just... give up and forget all this."

"You could just be dreaming."

Sang Mi curled up into herself even more. "Yeah, that's what everyone says."

Chris examined her face now, and the unspoken words beneath it. "Like I said. It was the wrong idea."

"Do you... really believe that?"

And Today, You

He shrugged, a heavy shrug that could have lifted up the hill. “Maybe. I’ve been around the block a lot. I’ve lost people. Given up. Got going again. Lost it all. Found it. Lost it. I’ve even forgotten about the people most important to me, myself, for a while. Things kept going. I kept thinking it would be the end, but anytime I was alone, someone left, there I was.”

“That sounds like you’re just justifying not doing anything.”

He shook his head, “No, not that. But isn’t it easier if this is a dream, if you just wake up tomorrow and rub your eyes and can say ‘what an odd time I had’ until the details fade from your mind?”

“You can’t just let go of things. Even if no one else saw them.”

“This isn’t your world, the gravity is wrong, the sky is wrong, the air is wrong, grass exists. You’re right, I shouldn’t have roped you into this. So what if I never did?”

Sang Mi rubbed her head. “Don’t talk like that, I don’t like it.”

“It’s just hypothetical.”

“Still.”

“It’s okay to have had enough. To give up. We can just walk away and leave things forgotten.”

She pulled her sleeve up, and pressed on the skin of her forearm till he could see the faint impression of an under-skin implant. “I have this, it pumps chemicals into my body in a steady trickle that keeps me from utter despair and anxiety. When I was a kid I managed it all okay, but when I was in middle school that all changed. I was walking home one day and I saw this woman just shambling down the street, blood trickling down dark and shiny from cuts in her head, her eyes half-glazed. She kept calling out over and over begging someone to call her caseworker. I ran to help her, and stayed on the call line with emergency services till they could come. They kept telling me I needed to make sure she didn’t lose consciousness, and to put pressure on the wound on her head. So I did that, used my hat to try to blot the blood as I pressed

and kept talking to her even though she wasn't making sense. She kept bleeding, and started foaming at the mouth, her eyes rolling back, and I just... I had to keep going. The help arrived, and told me my help had likely saved her, handed me my bloody hat, and just drove away. Nobody stopped to see if I was okay, or if I needed help after a literal child had dealt with all that. And I just... couldn't handle it. I broke down. My brother had to talk me down from hurting myself and worse, and... for a while I couldn't really tell what was real or not." She looked up at the sky.

Chris was quiet for a moment, then said, "Thank you for trusting me with all that. You were really heroic to do that, you know."

She shrugged. "Maybe. I'm only telling you this because you're not the kind of person who sticks around. You're not going to be here next week to pity me, or drift off because you think I'm crazy and too much work. Nobody says that outright, but you can see it in their eyes. The way people who knew me then just... will never treat me the same. Like I'm a full person. I can tell they're just waiting for me to crack again. I have new friends now, but... I'm sure they'll leave me too someday."

"People leave, that's just how life works," Chris said. "It's the people who stick around that really matter though."

"If that's true, why is this friend of yours still so important?"

He gave a humorless laugh. "They're not my friend. But you have me to rights. "

"You can't even say their name. That says a lot."

Cwej picked at the grass before responding. "Yeah. There's a lot of reasons for that. Some of them practical, some of them boring, but... well, if I'm being honest, even if those reasons didn't exist, I still couldn't manage it. Because it would be too hard. Too painful. Like poking an open wound. It's easier to just... keep them at a distance."

"Being forgotten isn't pleasant."

"I never said they forgot me."

And Today, You

She held a look at him till he relented and looked back at the grass. He could still feel his gaze on her as she began to speak again. “When I had my breakdown, everyone was really supportive at first. People wished me well; I got cards and cakes. But when I didn’t get better as fast as they liked they just... trickled away. The more I stayed in my room at the hospital or my home, the more they just forgot I was there when they couldn’t look me in the eye. And I realized that it was better to be annoying than forgotten, better to be obnoxious than ignored.” She plucked at the grass, throwing a handful of it into the air. “Every day I looked out the window, and tried to tame my boredom with anything out there. There was... a statue of a deer. I memorized what it looked like, at least the one side of it I could see. Sometimes a rabbit would hop around it. Once there was a man there, who waved at me. I held onto that brief moment of human contact there. Like I’d been acknowledged as a person.”

“It’s funny you ran into a rabbit here, then.”

“I saw a deer outside my window here too. First I saw a deer, then a rabbit, and today, you. It’s enough to make me think maybe I *am* dreaming, or worse?”

“What’s ‘worse’ mean?”

“It means it’s not all a coincidence.”

He nodded. The thought had occurred to him. He hadn’t wanted to ask, but now he had to. He couldn’t put it off any further. “Sang Mi—Kalingkata—you knew who Grant was when we said his name the first time, didn’t you? And not just because you had a weird dream with him.”

Her face flushed, and she looked down, having clearly been called out. “Yeah. I did. I just... didn’t want to admit it. It would make things weird if things were about me. I’m nobody.”

“No one is nobody.”

“If that was true, there wouldn’t be a spaceship populated with people who don’t matter anymore.”

“Now who is sounding dire? Do you really think Grant doesn’t matter? Or Blanche? Or me?”

She nuzzled her head into her knees, and shook her head. “I’m stupid, I’m just contradicting myself now.”

“You’re not. But I’d like it if you told me what you’ve been keeping from me.”

She sighed, and looked up, her home ochre and swirling beyond the glass. “When I was in the hospital they wouldn’t let me read anything on a tablet in case I hurt myself with it, so they gave me a bunch of paper books. Some of them had Grant in them. When I was at my lowest, there he was.”

He smiled. “Then he does matter. Maybe his signal came to where you were specifically because you cared. A strong memory of him, one that wasn’t going to fade.”

“It’s just further proof I’m crazy though. He’s a fictional character. I can’t square that away.”

Chris opened his mouth and shut. He was going to rebut her before he second guessed the impulse, and another hit him. “But you know he’s real. You’ve seen him.”

“You’re the one who was trying to convince me we should just leave.”

He looked away. Everything was confused. This whole messy situation. “Maybe I’ve changed my mind.”

“You don’t need to tell me what’s going on. I don’t even need to believe this isn’t a dream induced by Saki’s pills, but I do need you to believe that I’m not going to give up here. Because that friend of yours isn’t coming back.”

“You don’t know—”

“They aren’t. We both know it. They’re not coming back for Grant, and they’re not coming back for you. But I’m here right now, and so are you.”

Cwej took a long moment, standing up again, and taking a deep breath of the air. “...The air is surprisingly clean up here.”

“It’s thick and soupy; air should be thin.”

“Dome dweller.”

“Oversized Teddy Bear.”

He laughed again, this time for real. “I think I’ve had enough of being snarked by a teenager.”

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“Well all I can do is be snarky, there isn’t anything else we can do right now.”

Cwej grinned, and it was an honest grin. The kind that gave Sang Mi a surprising confidence in what he said next. “Of course there is. We’re only beaten when we stop trying, and between you and me, Sang Mi, this isn’t over yet. Not by a long shot.” He held a hand out to her, and she took it. He pulled her up, and they stared down at the far away windows and walls of the concourse below, watching as the field of grass which spanned the distance rippled gently to the left in the idle breeze. “Being forgotten is temporary, after all.”

CHAPTER 12: *And Today, You*

The first sign that something was about to go wrong was that some of the laundry went missing. Laundry was important to the *Point of Know Return*, after all: the guests at the spa used the towels, the Patients had their uniforms and outfits, and then there were the storage lockers where their original clothes and possessions were stored. All of these needed to be washed, even if it was just to store them. When the ship had been built, this had been taken into account, and a large system for washing things had been put into the center of it. At its heart, the ship wiped things clean, and then used them again.

The designer, a woman named Yanna on a planet called Gendar, hadn't known what it was for. "If it's a spa ship, what's with all this intense memory storage hardware?"

"Shut up, your job is to design, not talk," her boss had said.

And so she had done so, but this in the end had made the ship somewhat awkward. There was a huge grassy space under a dome, one which the Letharchy who'd commissioned it really had no use for. Some of the guests enjoyed it, but mostly it sat unused, a place they themselves forgot about. Yanna's designs had pictured this area as a warm space, where concerts and picnics would be held. But the most use it had gotten in ages was two humans and a bunny sitting on one of its hills speaking their hearts and planning their actions. Its grassy plains and rich soil would stain pants and dirty shoes, and cause even more laundry to need to be done. And the crew were nothing if not lazy.

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So when a member of the Letharchy, Memento, was called over to the clothing storage area, and several outfits were missing from it, it felt like it was a portent. As she opened the lockers and looked into the unfilled space within, the world was thrown out of balance. The heart of the ship turned, and it lurched.

* * *

Whilom was getting frustrated with Memento's blathering. "But sir, the outfits were missing. Someone took them."

"Yes, and we very much know who it was. What does it matter anyway? They didn't take anything useful, it's not like they grabbed weapons or bombs. We'll find them in time."

"But they did take one of the filming drones from the Broadcasting—"

"Enough."

"But *SIR*--"

"Memento, shut up before I wipe your memory again."

She slinked back, and he marched on. They had valuable guests to entertain; this was a backwater universe, certainly, but the view of the planet Gongen was proving unexpectedly popular. Though Whilom was 90% certain this was only because the wealthy guests hadn't actually realized that Gongen was just Mars with extra pizzazz. Even so, they wouldn't be hopping back home just yet. As he walked into the concourse, gold body sparkling, he greeted and checked on some of the VIPs:

"Yes, very good, I'm so glad you're feeling refreshed, High Councillor Vaquar. Lovely to see you again."

"Oh, and Countess, I hear your daughter just sprouted her second head? How lovely."

"The daiquiris have juice in them? No need to throw your glass, do you know what a daiquiri is—I mean uh, we'll get a new one for you right away without the offending substance! Our sincerest apologies!"

A fine day. Even if he was a little on edge because of the earlier disturbances. He just needed to put that all behind him and—

"HELLOOOO *POINT OF KNOW RETURN!* Did you know the ship's name is a pun? Who knew we'd all be trapped on a Dad joke made tangible?"

Eyes turned up. A young woman in a black and red tartan coat was floating down from the rafters, holding onto a camera drone with one hand, while the other held a microphone. She gently landed on top of a sculpture of a legendary explorer, wobbling a moment before she got her footing, and let go of the drone as it began flying around getting the best shots it could. "Remember me? You might not, I'm the hit character from TV and books, Professor X, but surprise I'm real after all. Reports of my fictionality have been greatly exaggerated!"

There was applause, and Whilom saw that many of the rich guests were apparently fans of the property. One even shouted. "I KNEW IT! I KNEW SHE WAS REAL!" while shaking their very unenthused companion by the shoulders. This caused him to do something that he would promptly regret: he hesitated.

"As you may know, I flitter about righting wrongs, and being a general nuisance. But I'm a rather kind lady, so I'm going to give all the patients and guests of this establishment a warning: Get back to your rooms. Now."

There was silence.

"No, I'm serious. If you don't want to die, move NOW."

There was a vast scampering, and the staff tried desperately to get the guests to stop running towards their rooms, but it was fruitless. Chairs and tables were knocked over, drinks spilled along the floor, expensive dinners splattered, and Whilom desperately called out for everyone to ignore this imposter and stay calm.

"She's just a girl from this—ow—univer—ow!"

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By the time people had finished barging past him and knocking him in the shoulders, the room was nearly empty. Only the staff, and a few obstinate guests remained.

"What are you waiting for, grab her already. I don't care if you break her this time."

Letharchs began to crawl towards her. They covered the walls and floor like a flood of spiders, which caused the few holdout guests to finally flee.

The girl probably had hoped to look more confident at this point, but she persevered nonetheless. "Uh, well... ahem. Letharchy Mavericks! This is your last chance. Back down and surrender and I won't have to defeat you!"

They ignored her. Their faces were amused. They chattered with staticky laughter.

She held her multitool up in the air, seemingly confused as to why she had been told to hold up the tool in the air at this part of her performance. "Then so be it! I think it's only fitting then that monsters such as you get defeated by..." She pressed on the tool. It buzzed, not actually activating anything because it was just a normal powertool, but it looked like it did and her comrades did the rest.

A rumbling began. The Letharchs slowed, and looked toward the wall that led to the spa.

"...Your own dirty laundry!"

The wall exploded outward, as "Professor X" grabbed onto the filming drone again, flying out of the way of the debris—first the wall collapsed down, then it was followed by a wave of laundry. Towels. Clothes.

And beneath the pile, the great run of carts that ran through the ship rose up from the depths, pulling up everything from its belly. Tons and tons of wet cloth, rising up and dumping out.

Whilom scrambled out from under a piece of rubble. One of his legs had been partially crushed, and he struggled to stand up, trying to dig his way up through the mountain of dirty towels above him.

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" he cried out.

"I just reversed the laundry carts and increased their speed. It literally was just changing the settings on a panel. You should really treat your repair shop staff better."

He stretched his arms up, grasping onto something, and pulled hard. Whilom rose up through the towels, and finally made his way up to the top. Sang Mi, no, Professor X, looked down at him.

"This isn't over, you just—"

"It's over. While you were busy digging through towels, we solved another problem."

* * *

Unfortunately, it was too far away for them to hear the sound of Chris Cwej smashing the memory containment room, but it was certainly happening. Across the ships, patients' eyes lit up, they remembered who they were. After all this time, all the things about themselves that had been held back flooded back in. Sometimes they didn't want to remember those things, but they were still a part of them. And as Cwej swung Sang Mi's sword, it unleashed a torrent.

Coloth remembered a coming of age ceremony, far away.

Graelyn remembered carrying coffee at her first real job in a city under the ocean.

Ax Rossum remembered a fierce battle in space, screaming out as her mech lunged forward.

Dionus remembered the sunrise over Gulliver's Rest, and conveniently forgot an encounter with a knock-off amnesiac botanist.

Blanche remembered the day she'd fallen in love with her girlfriend, and how warm her cheeks had felt.

Auteur remembered... well, it's not clear if what Auteur remembered had ever really happened but he sure did remember it.

And Aesc suddenly sat up, gasping for breath, back in her own body, as a bunny ended a very confusing last few days in that same body, happy to hop again.

* * *

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Letharchs climbed up from under the mess slowly, and as they did, they saw the faces of the Patients. They'd come out from the rooms when the collapse had quieted and their memories had returned, and the Letharch's faces soon displayed a new panic.

"Like I said, it's over. So if you could make this easy, I would really appreciate it. I am really not sure how I'm going to explain my absence to my family and the school, but the sooner I can get back from this misadventure the better."

He glowered, he fumed. "It's not over! It's not!"

"It... kinda is?"

"No, you're nobody. You're no one. I should at least be beaten by Chris Cwej, or even Lady Aesc! Someone memorable!"

She sighed. "Are you going to scream, 'I'm important, I'm daddy's special boy!' next or something?!"

"...No," he said unconvincingly.

"I don't even know who you are!" she yelled back.

"I'm..."

He... who *was* he anyway? He'd started this whole endeavor... or had he? He was in charge of it but...

He tried to think back. Why was he here? Why had he started this? Or... who had given him command? He didn't know. His confusion grew, and so did his rage. "NO," he yelled, straining the limits of his speakers. "I'll make sure they remember me—"

She shook her head. "Look, buddy. You want to blow up the ship or something? Or alert the Gongen and Earther forces in the area we're a threat? Take the whole thing down with you? God, it really is so easy to do the wrong thing. If you die here, no one will remember you. No one will think you're the one who killed us, you're just as forgotten as me. You've even forgotten why you made the ship the way it is."

He was silent. He couldn't remember.

"It's really obvious when you think about it. The spa. The memory wipes. The friendly multi-armed mechanic..." she

sighed. "This whole ship is just a cheap rip off of *Spirited Away*. The old Hayao Miyazaki movie."

There was a long silence, as everyone around processed this.

"...Oh shit, she's right," Memento said.

"I haven't seen that movie?" Coloth said.

"I mean, even if it is, it's... more like an homage than a rip-off right?"

She shrugged. "Who cares? You could have made this place fun, you could have even done your evil memory stuff and been sort of kind about it. Instead you used people as slaves. Maybe long ago you were a kid, a kid who clung onto something they needed."

—*A boy replayed the movie again. It shut out the noise from the other room where they were yelling.*—

He clutched his head. "No... no, I don't want to remember that."

"Of course you don't. It would be so easy if we could just forget. Our bad memories don't make us better people, but the fact that we keep them does make us who we are. And if you'd remembered who you are, maybe you wouldn't have turned out to be an evil slaver."

He slumped down, and Sang Mi sighed. "It's obvious what happened here. There never was someone in charge of this ship on board. You were all meant to be forgotten, and eventually you forgot even that. The inmates not only ran the asylum, they forgot they hadn't always been the staff."

Whilom looked down at his hands, clenching and unclenching them. He couldn't say why, but he knew she was right.

Sang Mi hesitated, and then gently placed a hand on the top of his metal head. "For the record, *Spirited Away* is a great movie." She looked up at the crowd, and raised up the powertool.

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A great cheer rose up, and she saw Chris and Aesc awkwardly making their way towards her across the rubble and towels. She waved at them, and they waved back.

"Well, you did it, Professor," Cwej said.

"Oh shut up," she laughed.

"No but seriously, fantastic work. Don't worry about the clean up here, I'll make sure everyone gets home," Aesc said.

"How will you... you know, nevermind."

The three hugged.

"Oh, have you seen Uisa?"

The bunny popped its head out of one of Aesc's pockets. "I'll get her home too."

Sang Mi reached down and petted her. "Well... where is Grant at?"

"He ran the machine backwards just like we told him to, I don't know where he went after that honestly," Aesc answered.

Sang Mi nodded, and looked around. A lone man sat on a grassy hill. "...I'll be right back."

She stumbled over towards the hill, the strain of the last few days finally catching up with her. "Hey, Grant, you're finally free."

He nodded, looking up at the planet beyond. "I suppose so."

She sat down next to him. "Did you hear my speech? It went over really well, all those Mavericks were just bowled over."

He nodded. "You did really well. A pretty decent impersonation of the real thing."

She frowned. "You're still hung up on that old friend of yours? There's... a lot more to life. Sometimes people just... move on. We have to."

He shook his head. "You wouldn't get it."

"I think I do."

He just shook his head again. "It was good meeting you. I'm very grateful to you, don't get me wrong. This melancholy is my own business."

She nodded slowly. She tried to think of more to say. But all that came to her was. "Thanks, Grant. You helped me through some hard times too."

He furrowed his brow, not understanding, but nodded in thanks nonetheless as she dusted herself off and walked back to the concourse.

Sang Mi saw that things were already well underway when she got back—the towels and rubble had somehow been mostly cleaned up, which she had questions about but didn't question, and there were other people here now, putting binders on the Letharchs, and talking to the Patients.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked up to see Chris. "How'd the help get here so fast?"

"They were just waiting for the right time," he replied.

She supposed that made sense. "It's been a heckuva adventure. No one will believe me about this. Well, maybe Saki and Bashrat but that's sort of their own problem."

He smiled. "Well, it was a nice dream after all."

She looked up, about to say, "What?" but she had already passed out before the words broke her lips.

* * *

Aesc frowned as Cwej carried the limp Sang Mi over to a stretcher. "Is this really what's best for her?"

He nodded. "I think we did a good job of keeping most things from her. She excused any aliens she met as Mavericks, they do a lot of body modifications so it slotted nicely into her worldview. But... still, she shouldn't think this was real."

"You're supposed to wipe her memory, you mean."

He shrugged. "If she thinks it was a dream, then I can fudge the paperwork."

She sighed. "Honestly it's kind of cruel. The poor girl already doubts herself enough. It feels awful to add to that."

"It's the rules."

"Screw the rules."

Another voice came from behind them. "Certainly we should not be doing that to the rules." It was Sergeant-

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Instructor Littlejohn. Aesc awkwardly tried to compose herself. "You two should be proud, this mission was a complete success. Grant Markham was rescued, our contractors who were abusing our technology have been apprehended with copious proof of the wrongdoings, and there were no fatalities." He looked Aesc in the eyes. "Don't overcomplicate your win. We're grateful for your people's assistance in this matter. Keep it that way."

Aesc sighed. "Fine. I'm going to complain about it though."

"Do that." He walked away without another look or word.

"I'll make sure Sang Mi gets back home, and make sure she doesn't get in trouble for vanishing for a bit," Cwej said.

"Good," Aesc replied. "What about Grant?"

"What about him?"

"Sang Mi left her mic on, I heard her conversation with him. I don't think we really solved his problem."

Cwej frowned. "I think I know what you want to do, and... well, if it is, it's probably for the best."

"Yeah," she replied. "What's one last bad idea for the road?"

* * *

Grant had fallen asleep on the hill, until a noise and a light awoke him. He opened his eyes, his face, still gritty with dirt, was pressed to the ground. He tried to pull himself forward, but only managed a few centimeters before he collapsed back down. Why bother? He'd just lay here. That'd be fine. Then his eyes caught the edge of the light, and his head turned.

"Come on then Grant, are you having fun on the ground, should I join you there?"

The person lay down in front of him, miming his pose. "No, this isn't fun at all. Well, if it's not fun for me, it's not fun for you, up we go!" The person in front of him wore a long coat, hair flippy and short. It wasn't the face he was familiar with but... the hand was warm, and he found himself being pulled up and led by the hand as though he was a child again.

There was no doubt, as he came towards the light from the opening doors on the box.

“It’s you, isn’t it?”

He winked back. The doors shut behind them. Inside it was different but familiar in a strange way that pulled on his nostalgia—a whole room of blue crystal focused on a set of crystal controls along the back wall. He edged closer, his heart beating faster and faster.

“...I thought you’d never come back for me. I thought you’d forgotten me. I thought... I thought... after everything that happened...”

They spun and pressed a finger to his mouth. “That’s enough of that, Grant Markham. I never forget my friends, and I certainly would never forget you. We encountered all sorts of things together, didn’t we? Who can forget those bronze knights after all?” They pulled a lever on the console, and the machine made a noise—it wasn’t the sound he remembered, but this was a new face after all, “Come on then Grant, where do you want to go? Paris 1921—Hemingway is a bit of a cad but he’ll always show you his drafts. Oh, Space Wyoming? Everyone loves Space Wyoming. No wait, I’ve got it—” they spoke far too quickly for him to get a word in edgewise. But he didn’t mind some reason, just followed as they rushed past him and opened the doors again.

They were looking out at a desert with a sky the gaudy color of an orange creamsicle. A mighty statue of a woman with her arm raised to the sky stood tall and proud like a mountain around sprawling cities and ruins of temples. Little dots of far away people bustled around. “Gendar, the seventh most interesting place in this universe. Well, actually made it to number one last year but a bunch of the universe had stopped existing so that sort of—”

Grant awkwardly pointed at a sign that read, “Welcome to GENDAR: Most Interesting Planet in the Universe for a Brief Period While a Bunch of the Universe Stopped Existing! Please Exit Through the Gift Shop!”

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“...Ah right, I see that got that covered. Come on then, planet of eternal peace always finding a way to stay out of every war, and the ultimate tourist trap. There’s fun to be had—and probably a lot of money to get scammed off of us, but that’s half the fun. Plus the people here have purple hair and eyes which is pretty cool. Let’s go then!” They looked at something scrawled on their hand. “...Something in French, let’s go!”

They had adventures. They had fun. They spent a lot of money on things they knew they were getting ripped off for, and somehow that only made the experience more memorable.

Grant stopped, and turned his head back one last time with a smile and a tear. “I’ll never forget you either, old friend.”

The door shut.

Lady Aesc’s smile turned somber, and she gazed back into the face of her disguise in the mirror on the wall.

“You got the sound when it takes off wrong, it’s more of a really loud sort of... groany-wheezy churn,” Cwej said, stepping out of a crystal doorway on the wall.

Aesc shrugged, and as her shoulders moved her face contorted back to its original form, her hair falling back down over her shoulders. She leaned over the fake console of useless levers and buttons. “I didn’t exactly have much reference material. I figure I chose a face that worked well.”

“Honestly you look like a bad pound store imitation but... I guess I shouldn’t complain. It worked,” Cwej said, dropping into a chair.

“We could have tried to get the real thing you know, they’d have come for their friend if we could find them.”

Cwej shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that and you know it. The knock-off is the best we can get—” She threw a shoe at him, not her own shoe, it was unclear where it exactly came from. He caught it millimeters from his face. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

A moment passed before Aesc responded. “Do you think we did the right thing?”

“Of course,” Cwej replied quickly.

“I can’t imagine he’d thank us if he knew we were fooling him. You’re kidding, but I’m well aware people think of me as a dollar store—sorry, pound store knock-off. And from how easy I fooled him, maybe I am. But I feel like my own person. I’m genuine on the inside.” She reached under the console and pulled out a can of Dr Paprika soda pop, which she cracked open and drank down.

“The real one won’t blow the story if it comes up, I doubt they’d remember either way and just go with the flow. And Grant needed that, it’s a little white lie. I checked ahead on his timeline, things go better for him from here on.”

She threw him a can of the knock-off soda pop. He drank a sip and raised his eyebrow at the slightly-off taste. “Times change. And who can say if he’ll be happier. Wouldn’t it be happier for him to really be remembered, rather than just... think he is?”

“We remember him, we’re important.”

“You just called me a knock-off.”

“I remember you too.”

She gave a snort of a laugh. “I think all this is hogwash anyway. Sang Mi was right, it’s not about how many people remember you, it’s not about if you get written about or chronicled. Trying to exist just so you’re around other popular people is no way to live. And I should know, I’ve done it myself. It’s fun for a while. You feel important. But it’s nothing like a real friendship. It’s nothing like doing something, or making something, that really matters even to just one person. Maybe we robbed him of that.”

“I think doing something that matters is just what you did, Aesc. He has the chance to make new connections now, a new chance. It’s his to do what he wants with. Just because it can be hollow, doesn’t mean it is. And all things considered, it’s nice if you’re remembered.”

Aesc shrugged. “If.”

CHAPTER 13: *The Dandelion Boy*

Sang Mi woke up to the sight of her room's ceiling. She blinked, and rubbed her eyes. She'd been... in space, on a weird Maverick spaceship that was a spa? And reminded her of Studio Ghibli? She sat up. It was a weird dream certainly.

But as she stumbled out to eat breakfast... she began to wonder. It had felt so real. But... so had so many of the dreams she'd had with Saki. Was it all... from the Delirium pills? She made herself eggs and toast, and sat down, munching it nonchalantly as her twin brother slid in next to her. "Well well well, if it isn't little miss celebrity."

"Mmm?"

"You seriously can't be that tired can you?"

"...I'm pretty tired. I had a weird dream. I was on a spaceship, and... it was in space?"

"They often are," he agreed. "I haven't seen you in a week, you got excused from school and everything?"

"Oh... right," she said, trying to remember. "Wait, was the filming stuff real?"

He pulled an episode up on her phone, and slid it over to her. Her acting was... decent, certainly. "I can't believe they shot the whole season in a week. I mean, no offense but you can kinda tell the production was rushed. Even so, Li Xiu is going to be so jealous."

She watched herself run around, it was sort of surreal seeing it. "Did everyone watch it?"

He shrugged. "Kinda? I mean mom and dad watched the first episode."

"...Ah."

"They did put the thank you letter from Director Jojan up on the fridge though."

She squinted. "Thank you letter?"

"Yeah, apparently there was some last minute contract thing the Broadcasting Center had to fulfill with producing the show, and if they didn't the city would have lost funding for feeding orphans or something."

She squinted harder. "What?"

"I know, it sounds ridiculous, but it was good of you to step up."

She walked over to the fridge and read the letter. "What kind of agreement about feeding orphans requires a student at Academy 27 of exactly my age and height to star in a film production?"

He shrugged. "Bureaucracy is weird sometimes."

She squinted even harder, if that was possible. "...What!?"

* * *

Out in public, nothing really changed. The show wasn't super popular. She got recognized at the grocery store once and took a photo, but that was the end of things. She did wonder how it would go at school. She had memories that were hard to square away. Was she just remembering the filming, and putting it all together in the mess of her brain? She stayed up at night, looking at the ceiling, and scrolling on her phone. She didn't know. Before she knew it, the weekend was over, and she was back at school. The trains were running, and the cafe they'd visited when they had been down had closed shop. She could see the empty storefront down below through the window as the train picked up speed.

* * *

Sang Mi slid into her desk, and stared at the whiteboard. Had the week really happened? Had the day off from school really happened? She was tired, very tired, but she was often tired. As she stared, the view of the whiteboard was cut off by

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her friend Li Xiu sliding into the seat in front of her, leaning over the back of the chair.

"So, Sang Mi. You were keeping a secret from us. Naughty, naughty. I should be angry."

Her brain churned. "Oh, I was?"

"Don't play coy, I'm not actually mad. Honestly I understand why you didn't tell us. I mean, if I were you I sure wouldn't have"

She nodded nervously. "...O-oh?"

Li Xiu gave her a sympathetic look. "I was really thinking that you didn't tell me out of shame because you knew I wanted to work with film and you got such an amazing opportunity. But, well I wouldn't have told me too if I was in something that bad."

"Oh," Sang Mi said, drained of all emotion.

She patted her on the shoulder. "I appreciate you realized I was above that."

Sang Mi pursed her lips and nodded slowly.

"Everyone get in your seats, please." Mrs. Ichinose called from the front of the room, and Li Xiu slipped out and went back to where she was supposed to be. But class was difficult for Sang Mi even without Li Xiu distracting her. And not just because of the dig at her acting ability and the production.

Because the production was real. People really had watched it. She pulled an episode up on her phone, shielding the screen under her desk: there it was. There was Chris, and Kano, and Larles, and Coloth; did the rest of it happen too? It was hard to fathom, to put it all together in her head. She felt her head throb.

"Sang Mi. Sang Mi!" she jolted up, straining to read the board to grasp what she'd been missing.

"The uh... the Great Journey was written by Higen Shijen?"

The class laughed. "That's true, but you have a visitor for you down at the office."

She nodded, and slipped out of the classroom. Her headache was getting worse. Maybe she'd just go home sick?

She opened the door to the office, and stopped dead still as she saw who was there. He was tall, blond, and broad shouldered.

"...Chris?"

He smiled, and gestured to a meeting room. As she closed the door behind them, he finally spoke. "I'm not actually supposed to be here."

"...Yeah, it's school hours?"

He shook his head. "No I... I wasn't supposed to come see you again. But I couldn't leave things... as I did."

She looked up at him. "What do you mean? I... are you really here?"

He gave her a sympathetic look. "I was thinking back to... my own friends. People I've known. And... well, myself. I've had some rough times. But I always valued it when people came back for me. I didn't want you to think you were forgotten."

She nodded. "I'm glad..."

He took a deep breath. "But that's... no that's not what I really needed to say. I just... I just felt like no one else was going to say it." He put a hand on her shoulder. "Sang Mi... you're not crazy."

She looked up at him, and her eyes began to water, then the tears began to flow. She tried to form words, but the tears turned to sobs. He gave her a hug, and she cried into his chest.

"You good?"

She nodded, and pulled back, wiping her face on her sleeves.

"You know, it's funny. I've kept thinking of this story."

He didn't know where it was going, but he let her talk.

"It's by Robert F. Young, this man keeps meeting this girl who claims to be a time traveler. And she keeps telling him how she saw a deer, and a rabbit, and then him. I read that story a lot growing up. *The Dandelion Girl*."

"That's a pretty wild co-incidence, considering..."

She laughed, still puffy-faced from crying. "Yeah, yeah I know... well. Do you know why she says that?"

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He nodded. "Well yeah, at the end of the story—"

She shakes her head. "I don't mean that. Why does she say it so many times?"

"I don't know, tell me."

"Because sometimes we can remember people who don't remember us. And I've been lying this whole time. I know it was you."

He paused. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Outside my window at the hospital, when I was at my lowest point. That was you by the deer statue. I knew this whole time."

He gave her a soft smile. "I guess it will be, yeah."

She didn't understand what he meant, but she smiled back. "So we'll be friends, even if we don't see each other again. Because you already came back for me twice now. That's more than most people. And I promise I won't forget you either. A deer, a rabbit."

"And today, you."

"And today, you."

About the Author

James Wylder is a writer living in Elkhart, Indiana who is known for creating *10,000 Dawns*, and writing for the *WARSONG* series as well as the Doctor Who spin offs *P.R.O.B.E.*, *Cyberon*, and *Cwej*. James also was the host and writer of the “*Tales by the Blue Light*” live show in Elgin, Illinois for two years.

A big fan of cooking, dogs, RPG’s and gaming in general, James hopes you’ve enjoyed spending time in the worlds he’s made as much as he enjoyed creating them.

You can find out more about them at jameswylder.com.

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