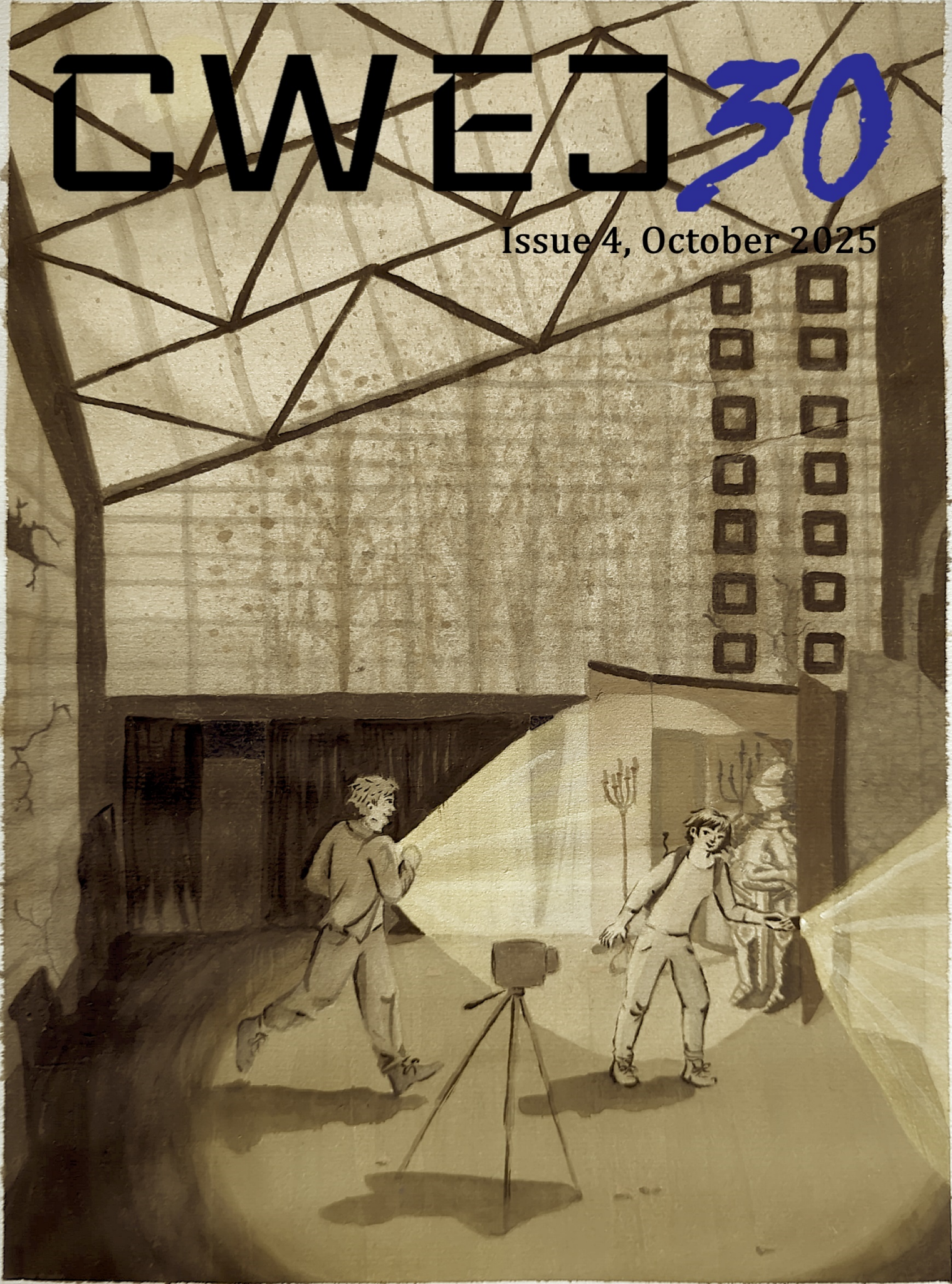


CWED 30

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CWEJ 30

Zine Issue 4

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From the Editor's Desk

Happy Halloween!

We're so happy to be back to celebrate Spooky Season with you. And we have some fun stories, fresh interviews, and new poems for you to enjoy.

I'm particularly excited for this issue's writers: Plum Pudding is an amazing talent who blew me away with their story *Little Green Men* so much I brought them back for another story down the line that's even better. I think you'll be seeing a lot more from them in the future. For now, you're in for a treat.

Molly Warton is a fantastic writer I had the pleasure of working with on *Academy 27* when we co-wrote "Sang Mi Investigates!" where our heroine tries to uncover whether or not one of her classmates was an Earther spy. I knew Molly was skilled at character work, and got the kind of delicate and heartfelt moments that Cwej and Sang Mi would experience on their trip. Plus, she'd already written for Sang Mi in her school adventures. So it was a natural fit, and I'm so glad her story is here. It's wonderful.

Finally, Michael B. Robertson is one of my favorite writers I've ever worked with. Talented, hard working, and funny as hell while still being about to break your heart, he's been with me on *10,000 Dawns*, *WARSONG*, *GoblinPunk* for Shotgun Angel Games, and co-ran *Lady Aesculapius* Series 1 with me. Lost Media is a special story, and there's a reason that it's the cover image. I can't wait for you to read it.

Oh, and that cover image? Its by the amazing Ari Michak. They worked hard researching what the interior of Lubin Studios in Betzwood PA really looked like in 1914, and it paid off in their art.

Plus—Bex Vee is back for two new interior illustrations!

I typed all of this with my cat rolling around on my lap, that's not important I just thought you should know.

This is a great issue, and I hope you can get into the spirit of today a little with it. Enjoy!

Also, for the record, I got attacked by a deer while working on this issue. Cwej30 is an interesting time that way.

—James Wylder

CWEEJ

ODYSSEY



Little Green Men

By Plum Pudding
Illustrated by Bex Vee

“They don’t look like that,” Chris Cwej noted, pointing at the neon green bumper sticker.

“Mm?” asked Sang Mi, half-listening. The road was long and she had zoned out, as she was liable to do in the downtime.

“Aliens. Martians. They don’t look like that.” Chris shrugged. It was just a plain fact.

“Yeah.” Sang Mi said, pointing at herself melodramatically. “I *know*.”

Chris chuckled, softly. He had forgotten she was from Mars—Gongen, that was—if only for a moment. She seemed like she fit here. Even if neither of them really did.

Chris felt now he had to continue to justify himself, so he continued to explain. “I mean, some aliens, well, they look similar. Maybe. At a push. But they don’t visit Earth. Even the lads that showed up at Roswell sure didn’t look like that.”

“Cool, yeah, uh, I don’t know what a Roswell is,” Sang Mi responded.

“It’s a thing nutjobs yell about on conspiracy forums,” Chris said, half paying attention and not really explaining because there were *so* many bumper stickers, decals, decorations on nearby houses. This was alien-central.

The amount of bumper stickers didn't really sit well with Chris. Bumper stickers were weird. Like they were something people believed in, an ideal. Chris knew about ideals and cultural fads. He didn't trust them.

The road was grey; the pavement and the buildings nearby were also very grey (or at least brown or white) and all excessively dull looking. There was generally a state of decomposition all around—Chris briefly wondered if this was a bad side of town, but then there were trees, nice trees, and every once and a while they'd see a beautiful old house, or in fact, a series of beautiful houses, and it would suddenly be clear that America was just *weird like this*. It came in waves.

For every disheveled hut labelled 'Jason's Wayback Whoppers, the best Burgers in Pennsylvania', there would be another place that was gated off and looked like it came from old money. There were no rules. Excepting, of course, that damn near every other car in this town happened to have those alien bumper stickers. Some were green, some were grey, but they were increasingly common.

This was a big deal around there, that they had all sorts of alien merch. This was pretty far from city civilization though, and yet the intensity of the town's fixation did indeed take him aback. Perhaps there was something in avoiding the highways now and then.

"There are a lot of those," Sang Mi at one point said, wrinkling her nose at the inevitable tacky American flag alien. It was funny, she had no idea the symbol existed before this whole thing, but she had tended to only see the flag showcased by nutjobs. She presumed there were ordinary people. She *hoped* there would be ordinary people.

It was bewildering to think that he lived here, Chris thought, *had* lived here, *will* live here, well, at least on this planet, nine-hundred and fifty years later or so, before all of this, although the memories of those days were now blurry and hazed. And he usually didn't think of it, except for the fact that this little place in Pennsylvania did *remind* him of Spaceport Five Undercity, even if they were nothing alike. This place was industrial, sure, but not a *city*. It was suburban, small town industry. He had been to earth hundreds of times without the thought of Spaceport Five popping in. But there it was. Perhaps he was getting too introspective. Seeing things that weren't there.

"There's gotta be a little green man," Sang Mi squeaked, a little more excitable than she usually was. "There's a really big one," Sang Mi said, pointing at a giant inflatable Little Green Man.

Chris instinctively pulled over.

* * *

The home of the giant inflatable little green man was 'Marko's Mechanical Contractors, Exceeding Your Expectations Everyday', next to a shop labelled 'suburban Tobacco', and a restaurant called 'Big Elk Grill'. It was decisively ordinary, the typical plaza you would see teenagers loitering at and not much else of note.

"There can't be a little green man," Chris said. "This specific design of a little green man isn't native to *anywhere*. It's not a thing."

Sang Mi nodded. "It's kinda got to be a thing though."

"It absolutely is not," Chris said firmly, not because he wanted to antagonize Sang Mi, far from it, but because he didn't want to get her hopes up.

"I mean, from a statistical sense," Sang Mi began, and Chris sensed that there was absolutely no stopping her at this stage, which was doubly impressive because she was nearly dead to the world but for a few minutes

ago, “A sizable percentage of the things we have witnessed on this trip have been in the impossible category. In short, *thing* territory.”

They still had quite a few miles to go today, a sizable amount of progress to be made, and if the whole day became a little green men production, they may not make it to the motel on time.

Which, Chris supposed, wouldn't *necessarily* be a bad thing. He decided to trust himself. He had to have pulled over for a reason.

They got out of the orange car (which looked an oddity in a parking lot of silver and navy vehicles) and proceeded into Marko's Mechanical Contractors. What awaited them inside they could not have possibly anticipated.

* * *

First off, there was a mascot.

It was clearly a man in a suit. Embarrassingly so. He was the same sort of green alien the outside inflatable decoration was, but the person inside the suit did not befit the outside alien's impossibly slender form.

Secondly, it was a hardware store. They should have known from the sign.

“Welcomeeee ee eee humaaaaannnnn mortals,” the unconvincing mascot proclaimed. His voice was agonized, that of an unprofessional voice actor who had been forced to poorly impersonate Goofy for shifts of seven hours at a time. Every vowel was stretched out for millennia, his remarkably nasal voice cracked frequently.

“Oh hell no.” Sang Mi muttered in apprehension.

“It is I, BlooxBop from the planet Gameepmorp! I'm here to save YOU up to 15% OFF any purchase of lugnuts, screws and bolts under seventy-five greep glops! Gwarsh, I'm sorry, that's my language for dooooooooooollaaars!! Haha!”

“You don't have to do that,” Chris began, feeling his patience already wearing thin. “I'm Chris Cwej —”

“Kweej? Golly, that's a Gameepmorp name if I'VE ever heard one, buddy,” the Mascot began. “Have you tried our new drywall package? *It's out of this world!*”

“And this is Sang Mi,” Chris said through gritted teeth. She waved awkwardly. The Mascot did an (overenthusiastic) little jig in return. Sang Mi regretted the wave.

Chris wondered for a moment about whether or not to ask anything further, if he should just walk out. This man was clearly not going to be helpful, but still, out of whatever it was, stubbornness or aimlessness, Chris remained there, standing in frustration.

“Can we just talk normally?” Chris asked, tersely.

“Caaaaaan do!” The Mascot squeaked.

“No, *really*.” Sang Mi butted in. “Please stop the weird voice. We're not here for hardware.”

Suddenly the Mascot stopped dancing and slouched. “Ah, man, why didn't you say sooner?” The Mascot said, talking in a normal, albeit low, voice. “What do you want then?”

“What’s the deal with the bumper stickers?”

It was bizarre how quickly the atmosphere changed, how solemn the moment seemed. The mascot removed his little green mask and sat down. His brown hair was tousled and stubble had grown all over his face. He looked depressed, nervous. Whatever he was, he was a hell of an actor.

“I, um, I don’t really know how to start. There have been disappearances. People... kids, mostly... They go missing in the forest. Sometimes they come back. Sometimes they... don’t...” the man said quietly. He looked over his shoulder, frightened of being overheard. “And the worst part is, it brings in the tourists, so nothing’s being done.”

“*Nothing?*” Sang Mi whispered incredulously.

“Nothing,” he said, haunted. “But it’s all this town has, the alien merch. And we’ve got to get paid.”

Sang Mi didn’t know how to respond. “That can’t be right...”

“Excuse me.” He placed the Mascot head back on and got back to work.

* * *

“I was right,” Sang Mi told Chris, clambering back into the car. “I told you the little green men were real.” She was a little too proud of herself.

“Ugh. I mean, probably,” Chris said, buckling his seat-belt. “I think I believe him, despite the initial cartoon voice. I mean, it’s grim enough.”

Sang Mi nodded. The proudness faded as she thought about that poor man in the Mascot costume. It was the first thing in a while to actually properly remind her of Gongen. Of home. And the reminder wasn’t because of the little green men suit, it was just the unfairness of it. Like that nasty old man challenging her to a sword fight in the gymnasium just to try to embarrass her. She deliberated over what to suggest. She didn’t have to suggest anything.

He turned the car key in the ignition and they set off. They were going to explore the woods, and figure out exactly what sort of thing was going on here. And he had a feeling it was the sort of thing that would be terribly, terribly wrong.

* * *

As they drove through the town to go to the woods, they saw a man standing still, completely and utterly still—just staring out at nothing by the side of the road at, well, nothing. There weren’t enough cars on the empty road to grab that much attention. Nor was there anything picturesque on the other side of the road. His face was forlorn and tired.

The strangeness of this man put a chill in Chris’ chest. He felt more dread seep in. He stopped the car and rolled down the window. “Hello?” he asked, carefully. It was a fairly ineffectual start, but he didn’t know what else to say.

The man had sorrow in his face and alcohol on his breath. He wore a flannel sweater, but it was completely unbuttoned, exposing his haggard hairy chest. There was a fleck of blood on his lip—he had been absent-mindedly chewing it. “Please leave me alone,” he whimpered.

“I’m sorry, I understand wanting to be left alone—but seriously, are you alright?” Chris asked.

“Course I’m not,” the man said. “My son’s gone. He just disappeared after soccer practice. It’s been weeks. *Weeks.*”

“Soccer? What’s that?” Sang Mi whispered in Korean.

“Football,” Chris softly whispered back. In English, he continued talking to the man: “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“Leave me alone!” the man cried, still a statue on the side-walk. Unmoving and static. “Leave me alone!”

Sang Mi wanted to say something but she felt useless in the face of the man’s grief. It was like a sponge: damp, absorbent. She felt herself getting sucked into it, and she wanted desperately to say something helpful, but nothing came to mind.

“It’s been weeks,” the man whispered.

They pulled the car over into a nearby parking lot and walked over to the man, trying to offer him some comfort, even if the attempt was feeble, but he was simply catatonic.

“Come on, Sang Mi,” Chris muttered after their attempts at kindness had morphed into a long silence. “Best thing we can do for him is give him some peace and quiet.”

Sang Mi wasn’t sure. Usually when she was that bereft—on those rare occasions she did get that down and miserable—her shouts to be left alone were pretty much the last thing that she, deep down, really wanted.

But still, after a few minutes with the man, they had to move on. The forest was ahead, and so, hopefully too, would be answers.

* * *

Chris remembered why the town reminded him of the Spaceport Five Undercity as they set off down the road to the woods, which were large and hitherto unnamed. It was the neglect. The authorities had never cared about the Undercity and no one cared about this place either. The woods overtook the buildings they passed, abandoned shells dotted the road. The centre of town had Marko’s and Big Elk, and even that was a little crumbly. But here? The roads weren’t maintained, because hardly anyone came out here but monster chasers, wanna-be interstellar abductees and minivan campers. It painted a dull picture.

“It’s pretty out here,” Sang Mi said quietly.

Chris wasn’t sure he really agreed. Though the trees were, in fact, marvelous. Mostly pine, really. It was funny. He had thought that pine trees were almost exclusively up-north, for Christmas decorations and Stephen King novels.

“I’m still thinking about that guy,” she said.

“I am too.”

The road stopped, and there was a muddy trench of a parking lot ahead of them. He carefully maneuvered the car into the lot, hoping that it would be easier than it looked to get it out. The sun was setting, and they were off course. Though Chris, despite his apprehension, felt certain that they were exactly where they were meant to be. Perhaps they should have brought camping gear. The alien-abduction in the forest experience felt incomplete without s’mores, tents, and a campfire. Though, he supposed, he could

probably at least craft a campfire himself. And they had the car. Which had served a relatively tent-like purpose on previous occasions.

The muddy parking lot had a few other cars in it. One of them in particular was gathering dust from abandonment. It had a broken window and what was probably raccoon scat on the front cushions. Most of the other cars were okay, but it did make Chris wonder what happened to that particular vehicle's owner. Part of him said there were dozens of mundane explanations, but another part couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't something more. The place was colder than usual for Pennsylvania, although that may have been the night air. Still, it was a gentle cool.

"I'm going to go get some spare wood," Chris said. "Start a fire."

Sang Mi was looking back at the little remnants of the town. She was having a nice little moment, taking in the sights of the tiny town over the hill. She hadn't had the chance to just be at peace lately, so Chris, for whatever reason, decided to leave her to it.

* * *

On the side of the parking lot, Sang Mi found a lost little bear. It was a stuffed animal, a teddy thing, though more gold than the typical brown. It looked well-loved. It didn't make her feel nice to see it abandoned, sitting there like that, festering. Sang Mi, not thinking, in a sort of automatic ritual, reached down and picked up the bear.

It was lost, like her, sort of. She wasn't lost, in most senses. But still, it was *like her*. She felt the story of the bear, its loneliness. Dropped in the forest by a child who, she knew for whatever reason, would not pick it back up again. The bear was essential. Sang Mi hugged the bear gently, and went back to place it in the car so as not to lose it. As she put it in the car, she shuddered a tiny bit. She never wanted to let it go.

* * *

Soon enough he was deep into the forest, which was suitably for a forest, wild and unkempt. He stepped through some masses of brambles, picking up sticks. Twilight made the forest navy blue in shadow. Chris did not feel as peaceful as the woods. He smelled something sour in the distance, which he changed his path to avoid.

It was the epitome of quiet and still. There was no bird song, no crunch of leaves underneath his feet. Everything felt muffled. Chris did not think anything of it. He had been to places that were like this before. Points of Stillness. He had never liked them, but they were always there.

His eyes began to adjust to the dark. Yes, it was dark, suddenly dark. He paid it no heed.

He kept thinking of Spaceport Five Undercity. He really needed to stop doing that. It wasn't relevant, not at all. He bit his lip. He was in the middle of the woods, not a Spaceport. There was no-one, positively no-one here. It was in fact, the opposite of a Spaceport.

He picked up another stick. It wouldn't do. It was soaked in some sort of sticky tree-sap. He cringed for a second, then remembered that it was just sap, and not some form of alien doom-acid.

To be blunt, much of the forest was damp and moist, if not with sap, then with dew. He would be picking ticks off his clothes for days, no doubt.

It was still very still. Chris resisted the temptation to hum to himself. In places like this, it was best not to be the only thing heard.

Then he saw the shadow move. It was not an animal, but it also was not an alien. It was a person, standing in the middle of the forest, with a hunting rifle.

“Don’t shoot!” Chris said, waving his hands. “I am not a deer!”

This potential falsehood seemed to allay the figure, who lowered the hunting rifle. He could now see the shadow more clearly. It was a slightly rotund woman, middle aged—she was standing just like—no, that would be absurd.

“Chris, dear, is that you?” She smiled. “Come give your mum a hug.”

* * *

Sang Mi rummaged in the back-seat of the car for the soda and the sour cream and onion chips. She was hungry, and she liked the food that they sold at these “Gas stations” very much. She wasn’t quite sure why Chris had left her alone out here, but for once, she didn’t particularly feel like following on after him, no matter how wonderful it had been to be with him lately. She just wanted some me-time. And she could sense that he wanted that too. Odd. She hoped she hadn’t done anything wrong.

The chips *were* very nice though. She was confused why Chris called them ‘crisps’ even though it said *Chips* on the bag and everything. Perhaps he didn’t know. What an odd thought.

The sun had completely fallen. Oh, and what a moon it was: a clear moon, a full moon! Though surely it had only just been a full moon a few nights ago, so this must be a nearly full moon. She squinted at the probably nearly full moon but came to the conclusion that, yes, it was a full one.

She kept thinking about Gongen, and how, when all of this would be done, she would have to go right back there and do everything all over again. Back to the school, to the stress, to Sang Eun and Saki and all of it. And probably, sooner or later, something much worse than school.

There was a ruffle in the bushes. Chris was likely back. They should talk about something, she thought. She wanted to know more from him—know more *about* him. They had talked! They did talking, they did all sorts of talking, they had to, but still, sometimes, she felt just a smidge guilty that she had sort of forced herself into this whole thing, and sometimes all that talking didn’t feel like talking. She bit her nails nervously.

But then the ruffle revealed itself, and it wasn’t Cwej. It was a young man who looked very similar to Sang Mi indeed. He could be her twin—in fact, he was.

“Sang Mi!” Sang Eun exclaimed. “It’s so good to see you! But come on, we’re in danger—and—”

Sang Mi immediately picked up the baseball bat that was hidden at the bottom of the car. There was absolutely no hesitation. She had seen a lot of ridiculous things lately and knew a trick when she saw one. Aliens were always shapeshifters in the movies and stuff—and this Sang Eun’s Korean was *terrible*.

“You aren’t my brother,” she said, fiercely. “You don’t know anything about my brother.”

“Of course I’m your brother,” Definitely Not My Brother said.

“How’d ya get here, big bro?” Sang Mi said, readying the baseball bat.

“I followed you here from town. Mom says that we need to get back to the house. She’s making up some nice Illinois Jambalaya,” the false brother desperately attempted.

Sang Mi swung the bat.

“CHRIS, THERE ARE ALIENS!” Sang Mi hollered.

* * *

Chris looked at Mummy Dearest discerningly. She continued to smile in a superficial way. He was immediately aware this was not his Mother. This was manufactured. And quite glaringly so: Not only was Lovely Old Mrs. Cwej in the wrong century, she was dressed completely wrong, wearing the fashion of this century, and equally fashion she would never deign to wear. Plus she was holding a shotgun, which was quite out of style, and she was a bit too young too. Worst of all, she looked just like she did in his memories—the ones he recently discovered his Superiors had heavily edited, which was incorrect on a multitude of levels. Just seeing this pilfered and incorrect attempt at a Mother did indeed make him feel rather sad and nostalgic, but he was acutely aware that was the intention.

“So,” Chris began. “I think we both know where this is going.”

Mrs. Cwej chirped out a sickly-sweet noise of endearment. “Oh, my boy, I’m so very glad to see you again.”

“And I would be too,” Chris said quietly. He looked at the woman and the shotgun. “Put down the gun, would you please?”

He was frustrated with how this whole thing still worked, despite the failure of the disguise. For whatever agenda or purpose, this thing was still dredging up old feelings. Why hadn’t he written his Mum a postcard? Even after he saw her last, in the deserted Undertown, barely able to say hello, let alone goodbye—and he hadn’t looked back for a second. That’s how he had always been.

“You’ve caught on, haven’t you, love,” Mrs. Cwej murmured, disappointed. She pursed her lips into a sour triangle. “I can see it in your face.”

“Yeah. So, you’ve been disguising yourself, taking people,” Chris declared. “I want to know why.”

“Taking people?” Mrs. Cwej laughed heartily. The familiar noise hurt something very deep down inside Chris, though he didn’t show it. “Aren’t you so funny! The little monkey thinks we’re doing something wrong. Isn’t that cute?”

Chris didn’t let the monkey insult get to him. He’d been called much worse by the Superiors—and plenty of others across several star systems. What really annoyed him was the callousness of whoever this was. And that he had no clue who they even were. It didn’t fit the pattern of any other shape-shifter thing he knew of. They usually had to lock someone up in a pattern suspender, wear a specific disguise, or, depending on the creature, could automatically change to whatever they had seen. Whoever this alien was, he doubted it had seen his mother.

He decided simplicity was the best move forward—he needed to keep things simple. “Who are you? What planet have you come from?”

The thing shaped like his Mother smiled again, a truly vicious looking smile. The smile opened vertically, revealing skin and arteries and eventually, a grey-green face. It re-asserted itself, and his mother was gone. The

classical face remained; the prototypical face for alien and other. The grey alien face with those bulbous eyes. It was real.

“We are from here,” it said, gleefully. “We have *always* been here.”

Chris was astonished at the thought. He looked at the strange creature. Even as it talked, nothing on its face moved. Its voice was the only thing that betrayed emotion.

“You haven’t *always* been here,” Chris said. “I would know. The Superiors would know. An additional sentient species native to Earth, that’s not the kind of thing that gets overlooked.”

“We have always been here,” the Grey repeated. “In fact, we have become *quite* popular.”

“I’ve noticed,” Chris said. He steadily reached into his back pocket, subtly, so the Grey wouldn’t notice. “You even have merchandise.”

“It is intentional. It is intended. It costs money to remain hidden, Mr. Cwej,” the Grey told him. The voice was still the voice of his mother. “Even for, as you call it, shapeshifters. Of course, we give glimpses to certain people now and then. To discredit the idea—to remain in the public consciousness, to have a degree of... celebrity.”

“Yes, your appearance,” Chris said. “The abductions. It’s all very cliché.”

“It’s a matter of branding. Public Relations,” said the Grey.

Chris hadn’t felt this angry at someone in ages. “Branding?! You’re kidnapping people and talking about *branding?!!*” He tried to sound strong, in charge. “Listen up, you tiny little thing. I’m going to stop you. I will stop every one of you that’s doing this. I will take this as far as it needs to go.”

Its face began to oscillate in color—it was green for a moment, quite green, although then it was grey again. Cwej scoffed at the sight. Everything was about appearances to this guy.

But then, the Grey laughed. “Take it far, Mr. Cwej. *No one will believe you.*”

A flying saucer was overhead. The Little Green Man made a mocking little “Live Long and Prosper” salute and then he was gone—*beamed up*. A little helicopter done up to look like a flying saucer was above him. It shuffled off. Cwej felt sick to his stomach. The callousness of whoever that was—it was incredible.

The world felt upside down. Strange. Like there was more to it than he had ever known, and yet somehow so much less. These Roswell Greys, Zeta Reticulans, whatever he’d end up calling them—they were so *small*. So vindictive. Cwej looked up at the faux saucer, still ahead of him. He finally finished reaching into his back pocket, no longer needing to be subtle, and fished out his old celluloid camera. He snapped a photo, but there was nothing in the lens. The flying saucer didn’t appear. David Bowie’s voice echoed in his ears. There *was* no Space Oddity. There *was* no Life on Mars.

* * *

Sang Mi came rushing towards the alien, baseball bat in hand. She knew enough Kendo to give these Grey bastards one thing coming.

It no longer was disguised as Sang Eun. Great. That made swinging a baseball bat at its skull way easier. But she swung the Bat, and she missed by the biggest mile conceivable. Several miles. Several trillions of miles. A miles to lightyear conversion ratio.

It was gone. Just like that. Her bat didn't connect with it, she didn't hit anything, it was just gone. She didn't even see a sci-fi thing. It just wasn't there anymore. What? Shit.

She tried to ignore the sting of failure, and collected herself. None of today had made any sense, but there was still a bit of hope she could solve this, and surely that must be enough. She turned and rushed into the clearing after Chris. She only tripped on a root in the underbrush once, and she picked herself up and ran further into the forest. If there was one thing she was especially good at, it was running.

* * *

Chris was there in the clearing, remarkably dejected as Sang Mi got to him. The clearing was dark without the light of the fake saucer, and Sang Mi swatted away some bugs that tried to land on her face. The clearing was dead, scorched, though not by fire. The woods had just pulled back from where the Alien—well, if it was an alien—had stood.

“They're gone,” he said, bitterly. “It doesn't make any sense.”

“I take it you also saw the little green men in question,” Sang Mi guessed.

Chris Cwej's failures were not usually this total in enormity. He shrugged. It was a feeble gesture, but he felt remarkably feeble. He didn't feel like he had learned anything that didn't bring up more questions, more problems. He could *theorize* how the Greys had obtained the face of his mother and also get so much wrong, but he couldn't be sure.

What did make sense to him is what they had done. They had lured people in with familiar faces, abducted them. It was probably, maybe, why he had been feeling so nostalgic, and... The flying saucer he had just seen—well, it... it was a mockery of everything about abductions, now he saw it up close. A sick joke, enough for atmospheric travel, a goddamn helicopter. If he could just track them down...

“Chris,” Sang Mi interrupted his thoughts. “Are you alright? You look a bit like that sad dude on the road.”

Chris made an untranscribable noise. “Yeah...” He sure felt miserable.

But maybe, if he had a mavimetric scanner that bypassed an active cloaking field with—ugh, if he *had* that, he *might* be able to track them—and he'd probably end up alerting the Superiors too. Who would outwardly dismiss whatever he claimed. How on Earth could they possibly remain undetected for this long? How on *Earth*?

“Hey! Sang Mi to Chris,” Sang Mi said, snapping her fingers in front of his face. That did it. “What's going on?”

“...I ...I don't want to talk about it,” Chris said, after a while.

Sang Mi thought about what she wished she said to that man on the road, begging for them to just leave. “Tough luck,” she said decisively. “We *need* to talk about it.”

Chris began to explain, “I couldn't catch them. They're shapeshifters. They said they're... native? They became my Mother for a bit—then they mocked me a lot and talked about capitalistic ventures, how they're everywhere—”

“Slow down,” she said.

“There’s something about this town,” Chris began, “That’s just *eating* at me. It’s sad, and it’s wrong, and it doesn’t make sense.”

“Then we get outta here.” Sang Mi tried to explain. “We aren’t here specifically to hunt maybe-aliens, we’re here to try and help people. And if we can’t help people—we tried! That’s part of what I like about you, not that we win or we lose or whatever—but that we *try*.”

Chris stood up. “You’re right. But when it’s something this big—you can’t just try once and then give up. Not when people’s families are on the line.”

“I wasn’t trying to say that.” She said quickly.

Chris sighed. “I know!” He said angrily. “It’s just, sometimes, I don’t know what to do.”

Sang Mi looked at him. She thought about how funny it was to hear him say that. Not haha-funny, or even funny-strange, but just... *funny* in the coincidental sort of way. How alike they were. And how small her problems seemed in a sort of comparison when looking at her teacher. Mr. Cwej from the high school where she was Sarah Jhe. She minded a lot of things, and it was a weird name, but she never minded being Sarah Jhe.

“Well, we do what we can, I guess.”

Chris, looking at her, thought how funny it was that she was the student and not the teacher. How she was already much better at all this than he was, and that when she grew up, she would probably be some sort of world peace superhuman, even if there were storm-clouds ahead. They were so alike. It would almost perturb him if somehow it didn’t make him feel better.

They *both* felt better for being on the road—for solving problems. And deep down, although they knew neither of them could solve this one, it made them all the more certain they could solve the next. Even if they were getting close to the end of the line, it still felt like a new start.

But before they went for good, they had to do what they always did. They had to try.

* * *

Jimmy put the ZeepZorp costume on the shelf. It was the end of his shift. He sighed. It had been a long day of pretending to be a happy goofball and he was exhausted. He could stop being the Mascot now, and he could be Jimmy again, if only for a few hours. He’d clock in again tomorrow. But for now...

He went outside for a cigarette. The town was empty and strange tonight. The light from the storefront was the only light there was. It was a *lonely* town. He almost convinced himself he could hear the relaxing country twang of guitar over the wind. Things would change around here soon. Less customers today. Maybe aliens weren’t as popular these days, what with the news. People have really had enough with always thinking the world’s ending, he thought. It’s not good for the mental health.

The cigarette wasn’t hitting like usual. Jimmy stamped it out on the pavement, not even thinking about littering. His mouth still moved automatically, even without the cigarette—he chewed his lip steadily.

The odd orange car from earlier rolled up to the storefront. It was funny they knew he was still here. The door opened, and there they were, the pair from earlier. He had sort of wondered who they were, what their real deal was, though somehow he knew he’d never really know. It was good they weren’t lost in the forest like so many others.

“We’re looking for an old man,” Cwej declared.

“There are plenty,” Jimmy said, gruffly. “This is a town of old men.”

Chris sighed. They had been all over town. It felt hopeless.

“Are you sure you don’t know him?” Sang Mi asked softly. “We have to get going. We have places to be.”

“If you had a name, I might be able to help,” Jimmy said, though he knew that they wouldn’t have a name somehow. This was a nameless town of nameless people—they had never bothered to ask *his* name earlier, now had they?

“Well, if you see him, if you see the guy, can you give him this?” Sang Mi asked. There was hope and pain in her eyes. She handed Jimmy—with great difficulty, he noticed—a small golden and thoroughly tousled teddy bear. Her grip around the bear was tight. He solemnly took the bear, recognizing its significance.

Sang Mi stepped away, awkwardly. “He, um, he needs it more than I do.”

Jimmy looked at the bear in his hands, subconsciously stopping to feel its soft fur. Sang Mi’s sacrifice was noted. “I’ll make sure it gets to him,” he said. As he held the bear, it became Jimmy’s mission too.

The two strangers got back into the car, and began their way out of town. It was night, but they were still going. Jimmy chuckled to himself, despite everything, despite being a thirty year old man holding a bear in an empty parking lot. Jimmy saw them drive, saw that they were going. He felt certain, although he hardly knew him, of one thing—that they would never stop.

* * *

The Man stood at the side of the road. It was night, and it was time to move. He would have to go home, sit down. Maybe his boy was waiting for him back home already, and he had been wasting his day on this pavement for no reason, stinking of cigarettes and beer. Wouldn’t it be so nice if all the problems could get solved? Mmph. But that wasn’t real life, now was it? Certain things just hung there like implacable flies.

Above his head, for just a second, he saw something in the sky twirl. A flying saucer! A *flying saucer*. Aliens were real! Aliens were real, goddamnit! Proper aliens! Not the big dumb aliens on the news, but honest to god Little Green Men in flying saucers! He laughed so hard. Those Little Green Men in flying saucers! They— Wait — They’re the kind of alien that abducts people! Maybe one of those Alien agencies would know! Know where his son is!

He walked over to the nearest payphone—which still work in small towns like this—and he feebly dialed the phone directory and got the number for the Federal Bureau of Alien stuff or whatever it was. It was surprisingly easy to get, too. He was certain this would be it. He would report the UFO, and find out about his son.

He phoned the number. “Hello!? I’ve got to call about the Little Green Men! I saw them! In the flying saucer!! It was a *sighting*, and you government people want to know about those, right!?”

“...The little green men?”

“Yes! The Greys! The Zeta Reticulans! They were here, in Pennsylvania !” His drunk voice probably wasn’t doing him any favors.

“Mister, this is an official government line for *real* extraterrestrial sightings. We do not take well to being prank-called. *There are no such things as little green men.*” The phone played that dull beep of a tone, and he was hung up on.

Another man might have sworn up and down, and redialed the number, and screamed to anyone who listened that the Aliens were in the Government! This man didn't bother. He placed the phone down and walked back to his house, past the dozens of green and grey bumper stickers and inflatable balloons. He trudged past the merchandise, his drunkenness making him stumble. That was it. The Beer. His eyes must have been playing tricks on him.

There are no such things as little green men.

This is a Story About _____

By James Wyllder

This is a story about a road trip.

But you know that. That's why you're reading this. Well, perhaps this is your very first time reading about the Adventures of Christopher Cwej and his young assistant Jhe Sang Mi as they travel through the American Midwest, and if so, welcome. It's unclear why you're starting here of all places, but we hope you have a good time.

Presumably however, you've seen their stories so far. You've seen them stop in towns, and help, or try to help. You've seen them meet ghosts, and creatures, and monsters.

The road has greeted them, and they have greeted it back. It has become comfortable, normal, their day to day. But no less filled with danger and adventure.

But no adventure is one story. This one starts somewhere else.

* * *

This is a story about Scooby Doo.

Or rather, this is a story about masks.

The flashlights lit up the monster that Christopher Cwej and Jhe Sang Mi were chasing in glancing glimpses, as they struggled to keep the lights fixed on the beast while running.

Its clawed feet and grizzled brown fur stood out in that light, even as its growls and roars of anger allowed the duo to stay on its long tail.

They turned the corner in the mansion, only to find the monster trying to turn a doorknob, rattling it and cursing under its breath.

"It's the end of the line," Chris said.

The monster turned to face them, panting, and as they put their hands on their knees to catch their breath, Sang Mi reached forward with both hands, grabbing the monster's head by the ears, and yanked.

The head popped off—too quickly, so that Sang Mi stumbled back and landed on her tailbone, holding the big hollow monster head as the human one in front of her looked up.

"Mr. Wilson. So it wasn't a real monster after all."

He scowled, spitting at the floor in front of Cwej's feet. "I would have gotten away with it too, if it weren't for you meddling travelers."

Getting up, and gesturing wildly with the fuzzy head with everything she said, Sang Mi was clearly upset. "But what about the monster attacks at the factory? People died!"

He laughed. "It was a convenient way to cover up all the accidents from our cost cutting."

"SERIOUSLY!?"

Chris sighed. "I really wouldn't have jumped to dressing up like monsters first."

"Well it worked."

Chris couldn't argue that bit. "You'll face justice."

Mr. Wilson's scowl turned into a grin. "Will I? I've bought the town prosecutor, the mayor, and the police chief. Go ahead, turn me in."

Sang Mi looked at Chris. "He bought people? Isn't that illegal?"

"Well, yes, but he doesn't mean it that way. He means bribes."

"Ohhhhh. Right. So that's pretty simple to solve, right?"

The man blinked. He clearly did not think it was simple. Chris also wrinkled his brow before his face lit up in understanding.

"Right, you see, my friend here is something of a computer expert. And she's found a lot of this era's electronic security to be..."

"Pitiful?"

"Well, I was going to be nice about it."

She raised a finger and pulled out her phone and started tapping away at the screen. Both Mr. Wilson and Cwej expected this to take a few moments, and for Sang Mi to slickly put her phone back into her pocket with a smirk and announce victory, but instead it took about twenty minutes, with Cwej having to threaten Mr. Wilson several times.

"Okay, done!" Sang Mi said, more relieved than triumphant. "The whole bribery situation has been taken care of. In fact, all your bribes are now being back charged to them. I don't suppose they'll be very happy with you about that. Oh, and also I transferred all your money and assets to a charity that does stuff with feeding children or something. I figured that was a safe bet."

Mr. Wilson stared. "You... that's impossible."

"No, that's why it took forever. That was really a slog. Okay now can we turn him in?"

Mr. Wilson found himself prosecuted to the full extent of the law. In fact, he was put through the wringer more than most criminals as the prosecutor fumed throughout the whole set of proceedings, and everything worked out.

Sang Mi couldn't help but feel a lingering sense of disappointment. "It was just a guy in a suit."

"That happens more than you'd think," Chris said.

"I know it's probably better when we don't run into real monsters. But..." she trailed off and looked out the window. Everything that had happened on their last stop was clearly still weighing on her.

"We were able to help here—really help. That means something."

She nodded. He knew it wasn't everything, and he said as much. She screwed her lips to the side, and then continued.

"At the end of this trip, when I go home and we're not travelling together, do you think I'll do good?"

"Of course I do," he said. But the thing that bothered him was that he wasn't sure. And it wasn't because she wasn't skilled. She'd made him proud on this trip.

But sometimes when he looked at her he saw himself. And he thought about himself, and the mistakes he had made.

And he wondered if it would be better if he'd never met her.

And he wondered if it would be better if they'd both died in that car wreck.

And he wondered if he was making his own monster in his own image.

And that made his stomach churn. It made his neck and palms sweat and his throat get parched. It made him miss a turn and have to awkwardly make a U-Turn at the next intersection.

He was proud of Sang Mi.

He wasn't sure that was a good thing.

* * *

This is a story about something you can't understand.

People tried to put words to it, they called it "Yssgaroth" and other names. But these names failed to truly convey its existence. It was a place. It was more than a place. It was where vampires came from. It was another world, another reality. It was an alternate path for existence, one where the laws of reality were fundamentally different. There was life, but what life there was was not the same. Whenever it touched our world, it was poison. Or worse, an infection. It changed things. It made things not as they should be.

Chris and Sang Mi had encountered the Yssgaroth in Chicago, but they had barely encountered it. They had encountered an edge, a glimpse. Like the proverbial blind men each feeling one part of an elephant, they assumed a greater understanding of the whole than they did.

Because they did not understand the Yssgaroth, and neither do you. You can look them up, and read about them, and read about it, and read about what it was and what it will be, and you will nod and think you have a handle on it.

But no matter how little you understand it, it will continue to be what it is.

* * *

This is a story about a kidnapping.

It wasn't a very big dock, it was just for motorboats and kayaks on the lake, but it was still a dock. And that was enough for a shady meeting at midnight.

"You Big Lips?" the man in the black trenchcoat asked the man in the blue trench coat, one hand stuffed in a pocket.

"I am, this is my associate," the man in the blue trenchcoat said, gesturing to the girl in the grey trenchcoat.

"I said meet alone." The gruff man in the black coat pulled a gun from the pocket, a Stivala N9B1 from the looks of it.

"Look I got tired of waiting at the hotel, I can't sit all the dangerous stuff out. I watched all of "Owl House" during the last secret meeting," the girl sighed.

Blue trenchcoat threw his hands up. "I'm really sorry, kids am I right?"

Narrowing his eyes, the man in the black coat nodded slowly. "Fine. You have the cash?"

"Half now, half when we see the girl."

Black coat gritted his teeth. Not ideal, but he could play ball. "Sure."

The man in blue held up a bag, and tossed it to the man in black. Without lowering the gun, he carefully unzipped it. It looked like the right amount of cash at a glance, and a few quick flips showed that the stacks of bills weren't just 100s with 1s in between them. "Alright, looks good." He whistled, and a car pulled up to the dock, from it a terrified young girl with duct tape on her mouth and zip ties on her hands was guided out by a man in a balaclava and a leather jacket.

"She matches the description," the girl in grey said.

"Well you saw her, too bad you're not leaving the dock alive."

He was about to pull the trigger when the girl sprang—and sprang fast. He could have sworn he pulled the trigger, and there was a pop-bang, but that was impossible because the girl was alive and drawing of all things some kind of sword on him—a sword that cut his gun's barrel off horizontally two thirds of the way down. If he wasn't sure it was impossible, he would have said that she'd cut the bullet he fired in half too.

But that wasn't possible either.

The sword spun up, and ended up at his throat. Dropping the remainder of his gun, he raised his hands in surrender.

The man in blue was cursing, and he could hear the sound of a fistfight going on behind him, intermixed with scolding.

“I told you I would handle it!” he said.

“I saw an opening! I'm not hurt!”

“You're not hurt because you're using a sword that breaks the laws of physics!”

“It doesn't break them on Gongen!”

“Your universe has different laws of physics, obviously—ugh—oof.” There was then the sound of several counter punches and a triumphant, “AND STAY DOWN!” Followed by panting and, “You can't show people that you have a sword that breaks the laws of the universe.”

“They wouldn't know if you hadn't said anything!”

The man in the black coat coughed. “Uh, so what exactly is going to happen to me?”

He heard the man in blue sigh. “You're going to continue this wild dream.”

And after that, there was only darkness till he woke up in a jail cell.

* * *

Sang Mi sheathed her sword. “I helped, there's no need to be angry. I fought the Vampires too, remember?”

Cwej gestured for her to tie the man up as he went to untie the little girl. “You're okay now, Stacy. This is going to sting a little—” He pulled off the duck tape, and the girl took in a deep breath.

“Is... is it over?”

He nodded. “It's over, you're safe.” She fell into his arms sobbing, and Chris mouthed, “We'll talk about this later” to her.

They delivered the child back to the family, who had never had enough money to pay the ransom, received many thanks, and then handed them the bag of money they'd stolen from the last group of criminals they'd undone because Chris was getting tired of carrying it around and it was probably more money than they'd ever had in their life. There was the usual “Oh no we couldn't!” before they accepted. Finally then Chris used a fake ID to pretend he was an FBI agent who couldn't break his cover by being the one to turn these kidnappers and the evidence he'd collected about them in, and the police detective he spoke to was kind and generous enough to take all the credit for the arrest, rescue, and investigation.

After all of that, they left town.

* * *

“I wish we’d see a monster, or an alien,” Sang Mi said, flipping absentmindedly through Oddities of the American Midwest.

“Haven’t we seen plenty already?” Chris ventured, but knew immediately it wasn’t what she wanted to hear.

“I mean, yeah, but...”

He knew what she was thinking. They’d made peace with having to leave the town with, well, for lack of a better term, Little Green Men. But it still lingered for them. She wanted to do something more, to feel like she’d accomplished something. “We saved that girl you know. Stacy Kimble never would have made it home without us.”

Sang Mi nodded. “I know. I’m not saying it wasn’t important. It was just... normal, I guess.”

“It was normal until you pulled out your magic sword.”

Sang Mi frowned. “It’s not magic. It’s got a mono-molecular edge. They’re one of Gongen’s greatest inventions.”

Chris sighed, and flipped his turn signal. “Sure. But not here. And you could have been shot. You could have died.”

“But I didn’t. I thought you were over this, being scared of putting me in danger.”

“That’s not the issue. I told you you’d need to follow my instructions, and you didn’t. I had a whole other way of handling that scenario planned. Things worked out, but... when they don’t work out, people die. You promised me you’d follow my instructions. You broke that promise.”

She slid down in her seat. “Sorry. Really, I am.”

“I know,” he said. They drove on in silence together. “And look, I want to see something unusual too. I’ve seen a lot of things but... you don’t go on these kinds of adventures if you don’t want to see new things.”

She nodded. “Let’s rest for the night. I know it’s early but...”

It wasn’t a bad idea, so he took it.

* * *

This is a story about a date.

Archie wasn’t usually one to ask someone out at work. And it had sort of happened by accident. He’d been working late with Tasha Williams, and as they charted the sightings of the monster across the city, he’d joked.

“They saw it at The Seventh Badger Pub? That was the last place I had a date. With how it went, might be worth checking into Brenda.”

“You dated a Brenda?”

“Not for very long.”

“And you let your last date be with a Brenda?”

“Do you have something against Brendas?”

“Do you?”

“Touche. But it’s not like I planned on not dating again—and how long has it been since you were on a date?”

“Well, a while.”

“Was it with a Brenda?”

“Maybe. And it’s not like I’ve not wanted to date again either! It’s just how things have gone!”

“Well maybe we should go on a date,” he joked.

“Maybe we should,” she said without thinking.

“Well then I’ll see you tomorrow at six,” he said just as quickly.

“I guess you will.”

There was a sudden pronounced silence.

“Uh, where at?” she asked, as everything caught up to her. “I mean, you don’t have to—”

At that point their co-worker Maxie walked in, and slammed a piece of paper straight from the printer between them. “I made a reservation for you two. Now shut up, let me get my work done already, and stop flirting!”

“We weren’t—” they said in unison.

Maxie scoffed and shook her head. Archie could have sworn she muttered about “Humans” as she walked away, but he was probably mishearing her.

“I guess it’s a date,” Tasha mumbled.

* * *

Archie adjusted his tie. He thought he dressed well most of the time, but he’d scrutinized his own appearance longer than he had in years tonight. He’d settled on pin-stripes; when he’d made the choice he’d thought he looked slick as hell in the mirror. But now the thought rang in his brain: pin stripes? Really? That’s what you chose?

“You look good.” He looked up to see Tasha.

“I should be saying that, damn.” And he meant it.

She was adjusting an earring and cursing under her breath about it. Tasha had chosen a classic black dress, and she was both stunning in it, and also looked slightly out of place.

“Psh,” she replied. “But thanks. I thought this place was going to be fancy but there’s a Blue Candle Coffee next door.”

“Honestly I’m glad Maxie didn’t try to bankrupt us.”

“Ha, when you put it that way I’m glad too. Funding is tough enough as it is.”

He put out an elbow, and she took it. It was a simple action, but one he hadn’t done in ages. Work had been his priority, and he didn’t mind that. The greeter took them to their seats, and their waiter told them the specials. They ended up both getting fish.

“I thought for sure you’d get steak.”

“I did too till you reminded me of our financial straits,” Archie said, then sighed. “You’d think with how much danger people are in they’d be willing to put more money our way. I mean, C.R.U.X is doing fine, the JDS are thriving and the US is even founding some new alien group that sounds like a music scene... EDEM, I think? Geneva is doing okay, there’s those other guys in Cardiff infringing on our mandate, and somehow that Zoltan guy is still doing things.”

“Wasn’t Zoltan in World War Two?”

Archie shrugged. “Should that surprise us?”

Tasha laughed. “I suppose not. But maybe we shouldn’t talk about work.”

“Right, of course.”

They ate their fish in silence for the next ten minutes.

Eventually, Archie paid their check after a bit of back and forth over splitting it, and they headed out into the cold night air.

“Well, that was...” Tasha trailed off.

“Yeah, sorry about—wait, look.” He pointed to the shadows, where they saw it: slimy and fish-like, mouth covered in fangs, it was crawling out from an alley, before it got up onto its hind legs, and roared. A roar that caused the few passers by in the area to scramble. There it was—the creature they’d been charting all this time! Tasha pulled a pistol out of her purse, and pointed it at the monster.

“Don’t move!” she called.

“Oh shit!” the monster said, raising its hands. “Whoa, hold up there, I give! It’s just a joke, just a joke!”

Archie and Tasha looked at each other.

“Well that was disappointing,” he said.

“The date or the monster?”

He sighed.

“Look, it’s nothing against you. I just don’t think either of us are ready for dating. Let’s deal with this bozo.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he agreed.

He would wonder later if he shouldn’t have agreed so quickly. If he should have pushed a little harder and said: “No, we clearly both care about our work. That’s not a bad thing. We really do have that in common.”

But he hadn’t said that.

And she was probably right anyway.

He wasn’t that kind of man.

* * *

This is a story about a hotel.

Bernice McCleary was bored. It was the fifth day at the hotel, and her dad insisting she come along on his business trip so he wouldn’t have to pay a sitter was proving to be something she regretted. Her now-ex-girlfriend back home had told her she wanted to see other people after day three, and she was too young to go into the single gay bar this podunk town did have cause they actually carded at the door—heresy.

So when she went downstairs to get another cup of free and incredibly thin coffee from the lobby and saw an Asian girl in running shorts shoes and leggings and a zip up hoodie, with a bob haircut that was starting to grow out a little longer than it was probably meant to be and a deer-shaped hair-clip. Her internal senses told her everything she needed to know: she might not know the right answers in English class, or social studies class, but she knew one thing: this girl was not straight. The girl was on her laptop, tapping keys and whipping her mouse back and forth, with her own Styrofoam cup of thin coffee.

She waved at the girl. She hesitantly raised a hand. “Mind if I join you? This place is jank.”

She gestured to the seat in front of her, and Bernice slid in.

“Hi, I’m Bernice.”

“Saaa...Sarah. I’m Sarah.”

“You sound unsure about that.”

“My name is Korean, so I go by Sarah around here on Earth.”

“...On Earth?”

“I mean Pennsylvania.”

Weird but whatever. “Sure. Hey, are you into UFOs?”

“...Like Little Green Men?”

“Yeah!”

“They’re not real. People from Mars look totally different.”

Bernice adjusted her skirt. This girl was exactly her type. “I think UFOs are real though—there’s all sorts of wild stuff in the night sky. And if you go online there are all sorts of videos you can’t explain.”

“In my experience when there is light in the sky you can’t explain it’s like... spy drone. Spy satellite. Another spy drone.”

Bernice nodded furiously. “Yes, the government is always watching.”

“They do that here too? Where I’m from it’s on the moon, well one of the moons, but they have this huge base there... Sorry this would be absolutely insane to listen to.”

Grabbing her hand that was on the mouse with both of her own, Bernice shook her head. “No, I believe you! I’d love to hear more.”

Sarah nodded. “Sure... I’m trying to beat this level in *Half Life 2*. Chris—he’s like, my mentor—told me I’d really like it.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good. Usually he leaves me at the hotel because he thinks it’s going to be too dangerous for me to go with him to uh... to work, but today I got too clever and now he’s got the room all evening.” She sighed.

Bernice raised an eyebrow. “...Oh?”

“Yeah, he was talking to the cashier at the grocery store, and I gave him a little nudge and this time he actually took the hints and said something normal and smooth. He’s dropped the ball so many times on this trip I was just like, please go on this date with this lady, I’ll be fine. I can find stuff to do. But turns out his date is going way too well, and I did not need more details, and I don’t have anything better to do than play *Half Life 2* in the hotel lobby.”

“Well, that’s not entirely true.”

“Oh? Did *Half Life 3* come out or something?”

Bernice leaned in. “You could do me.”

Sarah blinked, and her brain began doing calculations. “Oh. Oh I get it, yeah.”

“Nothing serious, my dad is out of our room all night, so we could fool around a bit.” She tried to give her best sexy eyes, but they didn’t really seem to be having an effect on Sarah.

"Let me finish this level, then... sure I guess, yeah. I mean, that's something you want, right?"

She pulled her hands back. "That's not exactly enthusiastic."

Sarah shrugged, returning to her game. "I'm rarely enthusiastic. That doesn't mean I'm not down for it. I just don't really feel attracted to anybody I haven't known for a long time and really trust. But like, I am really bored, and that's probably more fun than this, so really just let me wrap this up."

It was definitely unusual, and normally Bernice would have walked at that point, but she waited, and they went up to the room, and they did in fact have a really good time. And then did cleaning up in the shower too.

They cuddled in bed, both of them on their phones, showing each other memes, but Sarah seemed pensive.

"What's up, something is clearly bugging you. You're not regretting..."

"No, no, like I said, this was all really good. I was just thinking like... I don't normally do this kind of thing."

"You mean with girls?"

"No? That's a weird question. I just mean like... this is the kind of thing Chris would do. Meet someone on an adventure and have a passionate encounter. I've been learning a lot of good stuff from him. I think I'm a lot more confident these days. But I don't know, I'm not really attracted to people sexually or romantically very easily. Anyone. So like, I don't know if I would have done this before this trip, you know? That doesn't mean it's bad, or that I regret it. This is really nice. But I don't know. I guess I just didn't think this would be something I'd learn from him. I thought it would all be like... job related skills, I guess."

Bernice put an arm around her. "We're all bits and pieces of the people around us. I'm sure he's learned stuff from you too."

Sarah nodded. "That's probably true?"

Picking up her buzzing phone, Bernice's eyes widened. "Oh shit, it's my dad. He says he's not feeling well so he's coming home early—you've got to get dressed and get out of here."

Sarah frowned. "Not supposed to have people over?"

"That and he doesn't know I like girls—it would be a whole thing." She kissed her, hard and this time with longing. "If you're still here tomorrow, hit me up."

She wasn't there tomorrow.

She did leave a note for her though, slid under the door and labeled from your "FRIEND Sarah" with way too much emphasis on the "Friend part". There wasn't anything life changing in that note, but Bernice kept it with her in her purse. Years later her fiancé would ask her who "Sarah" was and she finally took it out and hid it in a drawer.

It was embarrassing to admit, but it was the only time someone had ever written her a note like that. She knew there hadn't really been emotion in it for Sarah, hell, the whole time Sarah was more concerned with making her feel good than worrying about herself. But sometimes she'd ask herself late at night when her wife was snoring next to her if she could have been something more to Sarah if they'd just had more time.

It was the kind of thought she wished she could push out of her mind.

But it was the first time she'd had a thought linger like that too.

* * *

This is a story about firsts.

Sang Mi and Kyon lay in bed together. They'd rolled over to face each other after he'd pulled off of her and he'd pulled the condom off.

They'd both asked each other if it was good, and reassured each other. "Sorry, I was a little nervous," he'd said.

She'd kissed him. "It was the best."

"It was the only."

She'd nuzzled into his chest. "Still, not everyone enjoys it the first time. It felt good. I thought I'd feel different now though."

"Yeah I think I get that. Like, I thought I'd feel like I was a man now, you know?"

He kissed her forehead.

"I... know what you mean, but in the other way," she ran her hand down his pecs. She liked that. He ran his hand down her back to her butt. "I really thought I'd finally feel... feminine. Connected to it all. You know, I thought I'd feel that way when I got my period. My mom prepared me for it. And then it happened and it just hurt. It didn't make me feel like a girl."

"Is this like... a gender confession?"

"No, not really. I guess. I don't know. I mean, I wanna do this again when you're ready. It's nice to just... feel like I'm here. Like my body is good. I don't usually feel that."

"I could probably go again, you know, whenever."

She laughed, and it was a real laugh. They were both sixteen. "You don't need to sound so eager, it's not like I'm going anywhere. You can just hold me for a little."

They kissed. And he did hold her. And they did go again.

And later he cheated on her and didn't tell her for three months. Because they were stupid teenagers. And she hated him for that later, but she did look back on her first time fondly.

Regardless of anything later, for that moment, she was safe, and warm, and happy, and felt good, and he was sweet and gentle and kind.

And somehow, everything bad later didn't ruin that memory.

* * *

He'd chosen this body-bepple just to impress him. He didn't even really like it, but Chris Cwej knew that Eli was always looking at people with this body-modification. He'd hoped this would be the end result. He knew it was ridiculous, going this far for a boy's attention. But anyone who had rolled their eyes could eat it—because it had worked. Eli had known what he was doing, and Chris had been content to let him do it.

"I thought I'd feel different," Chris said finally.

"What do you mean?" Eli replied.

"I mean, I thought I'd feel like a man. Grown up. Or like I liked my body, I guess."

"They have body bepples for that," Eli said obliviously.

"Yeah, I'll look into that," Chris deflected. "But don't you know what I mean? I thought sex would fix me."

"Not really, honestly. You saying it was bad?"

Panicking, Chris sat up and waved his hands. "No! No way, it was great, I'd love to do it again. I mean, when you, uh, yeah... Was it good?" he asked.

"Yeah. It was good. You uh, hadn't done this before had you?"

Chris laughed. "Found me out, huh?"

"It wasn't that hard."

"That's not true," Chris winked.

Eli blinked, and then it clicked and he shoved him playfully and kissed him. Their hands moved down, and touched each other once again. "That was a bad joke, it wasn't even funny." Eli said afterwards, but he was still smiling. Chris liked that he was smiling.

There was a part of Chris that felt a pang of regret that he knew this was all there was going to be—he'd looked a way that had caught Eli's eye and got him going, and he didn't have any interest in Chris beyond that. Chris wanted there to be more. He wanted to tell Eli that he knew what kind of movies he liked, or that he'd learned how to waltz because he'd planned to join the ballroom dance class Eli had quit later the same week.

He'd wanted all of this—and by the Goddess it had been good. He felt an aura of calm and satisfaction all down his body. Eli tolerated him cuddling, but the boy was already on his phone. They were both sixteen.

But there was another part of Chris that was relieved. He'd checked this box off, gotten this over with. And it had been good. He could make it matter the next time. He wouldn't hurt knowing that his partner would leave when he got up to use the bathroom, and then hurt again when his instincts were proven exactly right.

He liked to think that that pang in his heart taught him to be kinder to his partners afterwards, more attentive to their needs. It wasn't the end he'd wanted, but he didn't feel bad about how his first time had gone. He'd chosen it, and somehow everything bad later didn't ruin that memory.

* * *

This is a story about a prisoner.

He had been in prison for four years, and each of those years had been the same. It was hard to say anything interesting about his time. Every day was the same. Once a year, someone would come to visit him, which was the highlight of each year. He read a lot of books. He watched all of *The Owl House* and *Grey's Anatomy*. He only got in one fight, but after that no one tried to fight him again. He wished after that he'd held back—it would have at least given him something to do if someone tried to fight him again.

That all changed the day he had two visitors, neither of whom was his usual.

* * *

The first was a woman in all black, like a mourning Victorian widow complete with a ridiculous veil. She sat waiting for him with her hands folded one over the other, the blank front of her veil facing him as he was led towards her. Once the guard had left, she didn't waste time.

"How would you like to get out of here?"

He shrugged. "Not if it means I'm in debt to you. I have time."

"I'm aware. You aren't the only immortal in this world. You think I don't know who and what you are? Why else would I be here?"

He smirked. "Please. You're not the first person to come here and offer me clemency."

"Yes I am," she said.

He unsmirked.

"You're not cute, and you're not fooling me with your faux confidence. I can free you. From here, and from your... affliction."

"And if I don't want to be free?"

"Then die alone, Archie MacTavish."

"That won't be my end. We're done here. Come back if you have a real offer."

She got up soundlessly, fluidly, and walked from the room.

* * *

The second guest was much less subtle. He sat in a beige suit with a brown tie, flicking through a copy of *Crime and Punishment*. He wasn't reading it, he was just performing, the drama queen. Archie slid into the seat in front of him. Waiting for the man to stop pretending he didn't know he was there.

"Oh, I didn't see you there!" he lied, eyes shining and his smile pulling up his white beard.

"Are you with the widow?" Archie asked.

"Who? No, doesn't matter. I'm here for myself. And hopefully for you. Call me Agalon. One word, like Ulysses, though I'd never call myself him."

"You're offering to set me free? In exchange for what?"

"In exchange for you to do what you would already do. We have the same mandate, you and I. Unfortunately our friends have had several... bad goes at it. 1893 Chicago. 2020 London. 2023 Yorkshire. Among others. We've had a bad run. You know that yourself, you were there in 2020. But we only need to win once."

He examined the man closer. He could see it, upon further inspection. They shared a fate. "Okay, you also work for them."

"We want the same thing. And things are happening. Things that will benefit us. A darker world, one less kind, one that meets the needs of your benefactors. And one you will be most suited to."

He leaned back. "So how would you get me out, exactly?"

He gestured vaguely. "Oh, you know. We live in a silly world. I took the liberty of sending some very complimentary letters on your behalf to several very needy politicians. I can get you extradited to the USA, where you'll be pardoned immediately. What do you say?"

Archie leaned in. "What's the catch?"

He was nonchalant. "I really do just want you to do what you already would. Set the Yssgaroth free. I'll even give you a gift to help."

Archie gestured for this to be shown.

Agalon obliged, setting it down on the table with a smack.

"Well, I never said I wasn't above taking bribes."

* * *

This is a story about the Pentagon.

Archie had nice shoes now. They were the nicest shoes he'd ever owned, and cost more than his old salary had been in a month.

"You look sick," director Mark Ronaldson said.

“This is just how I look,” he replied.

Ronaldson shrugged. “Whatever. I hear that we got you busted out of jail in the UK to be here, what were you in for? A lot of the guys here at EDEM were in for weird stuff with minors.”

“Nothing like that.” Actually that thought disgusted him.

“Well, whatever it is, I hear you know a lot about this UFO-alien-Roswell stuff.”

“You could say that.”

He clapped him on the shoulder. “Well welcome aboard man! EDEM is cool, you know. We’re not like other organizations. We don’t really have like, oversight or regulations so we can do what we want! It’s really neat.”

“So it would seem,” he replied. Archie didn’t know a lot of things, but he was sure of this: this man was an idiot.

And he’d be glad when he was dead.

It was just a matter of time.

* * *

This is a story about a Squonk.

The squonk lived in the woods of Northern Pennsylvania, and had for a long time. It lived there alone. It knew there were other squonks out there somewhere, squonking and crying, but he couldn’t bear the thought of looking for them, for he was too hideous, and whenever he saw his face, he would sob and sob and sob, and his tears were never ending. Sometimes hunters would follow his tears and he would flee, crying even more. Thankfully he had never been caught yet.

He was scared, and sad, and very very alone.

* * *

But this isn’t just a story about a squonk.

This is a story about a girl. This girl had a name, and it was Julie. One night she was combing her hair, trying to get the strands to fall over the right side of her face so it was as hidden as it could be. She was getting it more covered, but it also made her look lopsided. But better to be teased for being lopsided than what she was. She only wore long sleeves these days, on her pants and her shirt, even when the summer heat was so bad that she felt parched after riding her bike just a little bit. But those long sleeves rubbed against her skin, and even with all the lotions and creams that hurt—hurt so much she would bite down on her rubber keychain to keep from crying out or grinding her teeth to dust. But that pain was still preferable to hearing people say things about her. Not that it stopped them totally, but it did make it all less. And less was at least better.

She was also trying to avoid her parents shouting at each other. This had become a very common occurrence since the accident. Her mother yelled that if her father hadn’t been drinking,

that she wouldn't be disfigured and ugly. Her father yelled back that he'd only had two beers, and it was her fault their daughter was horrible to look at for not bothering to hook up the child-seat properly.

Couldn't one of them just be glad she was alive?

Eventually the shouting settled down, and ended with two doors being slammed and two different TVs going to war with the volume on different shows, and Julie Paulson went to her window—it overlooked the mudroom of the house, and so she could slip out onto its sloping roof and then she could drop down onto the trash cans, and then onto the dew-covered grass of the lawn. She knew she shouldn't be out this late at night alone—her parents had a strict rule about getting home when the street lights turned on. She was well aware how scary the world could be.

But at this point, she didn't care.

Shoving her hands in the pockets of her hoodie, she marched across the grass towards the darkness of the trees. She'd brought her phone with her, so she had light if she needed it. Light felt in all too short supply for her. Soon her footsteps were crunching branches and leaves, and she was following the deer trail into the woods. It led to a tree she liked--she called it the special tree, which was a name she was proud of. If she had friends, she knew they'd laugh at it. But Eliza hadn't responded to any of her messages since she saw her at the hospital, and Leticia had blocked her.

She'd expected everyone to rally around her when she needed them. She'd thought that she'd mattered to them. She wanted to say that that pain hurt worse than her skin, but that was a lie.

Her skin hurt worse than anything she'd been able to imagine.

She clasped her hands together, intertwining her fingers, and trying to look as devout as she could.

Please God, just give me one friend. One friend who can understand me.

There are many times when people pray. Julie's family waffled between being very religious and not at all. They would get very into a new pastor opening a new church, and it would become her parents' personality for about a month and a half before they would lose steam and their attendance would go from weekly to bi-weekly to monthly to not at all. Julie prayed when she was supposed to, and didn't pray when it wasn't asked.

But not tonight.

Tonight as she said her "Amen", she heard something new.

Crying. It wasn't quiet, but it was that muffled crying from someone who was trying to keep their tears hidden but crying too hard to actually manage the task. She got up from the roots of the tree and followed the sound.

But it wasn't just the sound.

There were clues there—little tear drops forming a path to follow along, beading on the hard ground. She didn't know how she knew they were tears, she just did.

Pushing through the brush, she saw it.

It was on four legs, skin baggy and bunched up. Its head was something between a buffalo and a frog's, and it stood looking into its reflection in a puddle of its own tears, which only made it cry more. By any assessment, it was ugly.

"Are you okay, Mr. Creature?" she asked.

It turned, and its eyes grew wide. Its body started to... lose form, growing shaky like he was turning to gelatin.

Hastily, she pulled her hair aside. "It's okay, if you don't like how you look. I understand. I'm like you too."

He stared at her, and he started to grow solid again. One foot in front of the other, he walked over to her, and she sat down. He lay his head on her lap gently. She reached down to pet him—he wasn't soft. His fur was like brush bristles. But she didn't care.

For the first time since the accident, Julie didn't feel alone.

It was then, in her moment of peace, that she looked up and saw it: a light that beamed down on her and the Squonk, so bright it shut out the shadows. It came from something big, turning and strange. And she knew that she was not alone in another way, too.

* * *

"I want to find a monster."

Sang Mi said this so definitively that Chris at first could only nod and give her a thumbs up, accepting this statement wholesale. They drove on for another ten minutes before he thought to ask. "Wait, like, any monster or a specific one?"

"This one!" she said, holding a page of their book *Roadside Oddities of America* up to him.

"I'm uh, driving," he said, veering around a pothole. "Let me pull over..." Once he'd gotten onto the gravel on the shoulder, he took a look at what she was showing him. "A... Squonk?"

The picture was an illustration from 1910 of a quadruped critter with loose-fitting skin and a dour expression.

Sang Mi wagged the image in front of him. "Yes! It cries all the time, and it dissolves into a puddle of tears if you find it."

He nodded. Then he narrowed his eyes. Then he overly cautiously put a hand on her shoulder. "Sang Mi, is this a cry for help?"

She pushed his hand off. "No, I just think he's neat. Look at him! He's just a wacky lil guy!"

“Is he?”

The look she gave him said clearly that:

1. Yes, he is.
2. It would be best if he agreed.

“Yes, he is,” Chris agreed.

“He lives in Pennsylvania, if he exists. About where we’re passing through. Well, okay a small detour.”

“It’s not a small detour, is it?” Chris asked.

“Well. No.”

“Thought so,” he said, and put the location into the GPS anyway.

* * *

They pulled into town, had lunch, and came out of town with a commemorative Squonk plushie that had tears on its face, and both sipping from giant slushies in commemorative cups.

“I don’t know how today has gone like this,” Chris said.

“Oh please, you’re the one who kept insisting the plushie was super cute when I tried to leave,” Sang Mi said.

“You’re the one hugging and hogging it.”

She held it up to his face and moved it up and down as she gave it a high pitched voice. “You can hug me later Chris! I’m the Squonk and I could use all the cheering up. I’m so sad! Won’t you be my friend?”

“Of course I’ll be your fri—I’m not talking to the stuffed animal.”

She keeled over laughing, stumbling her way back over to the Odyssey. As she was about to open the door, she noticed a set of black SUVs a few blocks down. As the back door on one opened, a man in all black tactical gear with the green letters EDEM on the back and front breast hopped out, holding a machine gun.

E.D.E.M. An organization focused on getting rid of anything like aliens or cryptids, and who delighted in doing it brutally.

She sobered up quick. “You can’t be serious. I thought they got eaten?”

Chris looked where she was. “A lot of them did. They must have chosen a new director.” He grabbed the plushie from Sang Mi, and looked into its bead-eyes.

“... We’ll save you, lil guy.”

Sang Mi couldn’t even muster up the heart to tease him. “Yeah. We sure will.”

* * *

They hid behind some bushes, which didn't feel suspicious at all, as they waited for the EDEM agents to make their way into the forest. Then, they followed.

The agents were not subtle, stealthy, nor silent. Their thick boots crunched as they walked, their bulky gear caught on tree branches and thorns.

"This is weird," Sang Mi said. "I feel like I got better military training at my school."

Chris knew that that was true. He knew the implications of that. He also knew he didn't want to confront them. "Hey look, they're heading that way!" he deflected as they headed the same way they had been. With each step, they moved faster.

* * *

This is a story about running.

Julie was not strong, but she found the strength within her to pick up the Squonk and carry it. She had only just made her friend a few weeks ago, and she sure as heck wasn't going to let him get taken away by scary men.

Every day Julie would sneak out to see the Squonk. She brought him her favorite foods (scrambled eggs and pancakes), which he would eat with vigor. She'd tell him about her day, and they'd play with a frisbee she'd found in the basement her dad had gotten at a job fair five years ago. The Squonk was pretty bad at catching it, but it was still fun. Even when people were being nice they were pitying her. They'd either look away or stare too hard. She was tired of it. It was nice to feel like she could just exist.

Now the men in big boots with big guns wanted him. She ran hard. But there was something else wrong.

That light she had seen before, every night. It was back. Only this time, she wasn't the only one who could see it.

"Oh shit," one of the men said, and raised his gun. He fired, and a burst came from the ship and all of a sudden the man wasn't there and the air was filled with that burning smell you get when you leave a plastic plate on the burner when it's cold and forget it there when you turn it on again.

A man and a girl came bursting through the trees, and the man wrapped her in a hug, shielding her from the men with guns, and looking up at the flying saucer.

"It's okay, my name is Cwej, I've got you—"

And then they lifted up off the ground, rising in a beam of light into the air, as the Squonk squonked.

On the ground, Sang Mi looked up dumbfounded, and then looked back at the dozen soldiers pointing assault rifles at her. Slowly, she put her hands up.

* * *

This is a story about a sword.

When the EDEM agents took Sang Mi's sword, they didn't know that it was special. To them, taking a sword felt nowhere near as important as taking a gun. One of them joked about it, after all, why would someone seriously use a sword in 2025? They had Stivala Arms Assault Rifles; what use would a sword be?

They were, of course, complete morons.

Sang Mi's sword was special. It was a hwando, a type of Korean sword. She'd gotten it on her very first adventure with Chris, on the spaceship called *The Point of Know Return* which had been in orbit around her planet. It had been a gift—one of her planet's most carefully guarded secrets, and most potent weapons: blades with mono-molecular edges. These blades could cut through things. Too many things.

When Chris first encountered the sword, he had been incredulous. They'd used it to cut through the hull of a spaceship repeatedly.

Transplanting that sword here, into the wrong place, it was like an invasive species overtaking an environment. A glitch in a video game that breaks the balance. He'd almost told Sang Mi not to take it with her, but in Violethill it didn't seem like it would do too much harm, and then things progressed from there.

But she did take the sword with her.

And now there was a sword that didn't follow the laws of reality here.

Whoops?

* * *

This is a second story about a kidnapping.

The zip ties hurt, and whenever she tried to adjust her hands the man next to her in black tactical gear gave her a look that made her think actually remaining uncomfortable was just fine.

The man across from her though, he hadn't looked away yet. Sang Mi imagined saying a lot of sarcastic and witty one liners to the man that would really show 'em. But in reality she was terrified. In her head, she boldly kept her head held high and didn't let any of the tension of the event show. But in reality, after being zip tied and thrown violently into the back of an unmarked black van, she found herself crying and instead of a witty rejoinder said "Please let me go."

"No," the man across from her said.

She sniffled.

He pulled his face mask down, and removed his black sunglasses and helmet. Before her was a green eyed and black haired Caucasian man, with a slender face with high cheek bones. “You’re not from here,” he said in a British accent with a tinge of Scotland.

Sang Mi sucked her sniffles in and managed the closest thing to a witty rejoinder she could. “So are you.”

“That’s true. You’re from a bit farther though.”

The SUV rocked back and forth. The guard next to her pulled down his mask to take a drink from a nasty looking dark liquid in a plastic bottle. She looked back to the green eyed man.

“You seem more put together than the other EDEM guys we’ve met—ow!”

The man in tactical gear had whacked her.

The blue eyed man raised a hand and the other lowered his own.

“I should actually thank you, what happened with Director Ronaldson was tragic, but I’ve been suffering as Assistant Director to an incompetent nepotism hire for months now. He was weak, and EDEM cannot afford to be weak.”

“Picking on little guys isn’t being strong.”

“That’s what the little guys always say. As though we care.”

Sang Mi tried to center herself. What would Chris do, right now? He wouldn’t give up, that was for certain. She focused on the pain in her wrists. If they were going to hurt her, she could use that. The discomfort. The aches and pains. She let it overtake her anxiety, her fear. She just hurt. And that was unhappy. And when it was all she could think about, she could think about something else.

Okay.

Center yourself. Push past the pain now.

Where are you?

The back of an SUV.

Who is the man in front of you?

The head of EDEM. He’s British, maybe Scottish.

No, born in Scotland but lived in London most of his life.

Have you met him before?

No.

But why do you feel a sense of familiarity?

This last question was the hardest. She examined his face, blinking away her tears as much as she could. There was something about his face... She'd seen it before...

"You're a vampire!" she concluded suddenly.

He looked mildly impressed. "I read your file, you encountered the Yssgaroth in 1893 Chicago. I see you haven't forgotten."

"But we beat the Yssgaroth?"

"You won a battle in a war that will be going on long after you rot."

"Kinda rude..."

"Kinda true. You're in violation of US law. After all, you're not even from this reality, let alone this planet, let alone this country."

"Isn't that... massively hypocritical from the guy infected with evil reality rot from another universe who is also Scottish?"

He shrugged. "Consistency is for the weak. It doesn't matter that I don't fit the guidelines, that's strength."

What a prick. "Who are you anyway?"

He raised his chin. "Archie MacTavish. I used to be a member of a well-known but underfunded paranormal research organization. Now I'm the head of an organization with a budget in the billions."

She mustered the strength to roll her eyes.

"I was extradited from Belmarsh Prison in the UK for this job. My expertise was needed."

"Knowing EDEM you probably complimented someone online and they let you out."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Oh my God I was kidding. And stop acting like you're important. I have no idea who you are!"

"How I got released isn't important," he deflected. "As head of EDEM I am important, whether you like it or not."

Still riding the high of somehow getting under his skin while being his prisoner, without actually meaning to, Sang Mi pressed her luck.

"You haven't had a date in ages, have you?"

"I think we're done talking for now."

She got to be smug for only a little bit, before they came to a halt.

Sang Mi was shoved out the back of the SUV, which she had expected. But what she didn't expect was to see the UFO, landed in a clearing, surrounded by supply trucks and a large military style campsite. EDEM agents were going in and out of the craft from a big onboarding ramp.

She looked back at Archie.

She looked back at the UFO.

"Huh," she said.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"Did you build it?" She asked, as her personal guard shoved her forward.

"No, we just killed the aliens who came in it. They came in peace, ironically."

She let her open disgust show.

"Oh please. Your file says you had military training in school, and you're put off by putting that into practice? We don't need to be like those peacenik losers in our rival groups. If humanity is stronger than aliens, then we should show it."

"Bullshit," she mumbled.

He turned his eyes on her. His gaze was piercing. "What was that?"

"...Nothing."

She was led up the entry ramp—a massive sheet of smooth steel she found it difficult to walk on, and it led up into a hatch which popped open into a gigantic circular control room. Windows lined the room, which could be seen from between the two plate-like halves of the craft from the outside. The room had few natural barriers, and so the bits that EDEM had installed into it stood out like sore thumbs. One of those was a cage, awkwardly placed off-center in the room, in which she could see her friend Chris, the girl with the Squonk, and... two EDEM agents?

"SANG MI? ARE YOU OKAY?" Chris yelled.

"Mostly!" she called back. She looked back to Archie. "Why are your own people in there?"

"Oh, they weren't supposed to know what was going on. They'll be summarily executed later, but in a way that's helpful." He grinned. "Wanna know my evil plan?"

She sighed. "Go for it."

"EDEM has been struggling ever since our previous director and so many of our wealthy supporters were killed or injured in the Churubusco incident."

Sang Mi snorted a laugh. Archie frowned at her.

"Sorry, sorry! It's not funny!" She snorted a second laugh. "It's really sad and stuff."

“Regardless... the only thing that can really cause us to lose power is to lose the support of the people in power. And when you have a bloodbath like at Churubusco, people start asking questions about why you’re being given so many billions of dollars.”

“Must be real tragic for you.”

“It is,” he deadpanned. “So what we need is a very public victory. And unfortunately, when this town comes under attack, many civilians will meet a tragic end, and many EDEM agents are going to give their lives in the service of their country. But EDEM will heroically power through, and destroy this UFO.”

Sang Mi was silent. “That is an evil plan,” she concluded.

“Aren’t you going to ask why I bothered telling you?”

“Naw, I figured it out.”

He grinned again. “Of course you did. They said you were clever. But did you figure out why we need the Squonk?”

“...No, not really.”

“Then we’ll demonstrate soon enough.” He looked to one of the EDEM soldiers, who was relaxing while drinking some of the same dark liquid the guard in the car had been, “Time to lift off, Mr. Henning.”

“Yessir!” he called back.

What was interesting was that Mr. Henning didn’t touch anything. Instead he took a breath, stepped into a circle at the very center of the room, closed his eyes, and looked almost meditative. The ship lifted off the ground, and the ramp began to raise.

* * *

This is a story about an invasion.

Michael Paulson was putting the dishes away when it began. It was something to do.

Julie was gone from her bed when they’d woken up. She’d taken her bag, worn her best walking shoes, and gone downstairs to pack snacks and take a flash light. The police had concluded she’d likely run away and would be mounting a search. That was until he got the call that the search was being called off.

He screamed into the receiver, demanding they restart it.

“It’s not up to us. EDEM has full jurisdiction right now.”

He’d stormed over to the woods, planning to search them himself, but they were taped off and men with assault rifles stood watch.

When they threatened to shoot him, he went home.

And so he was doing dishes. The only thing he could do.

That was until the flying saucer rose into the sky. It spun, its top and bottom halves rotating in different directions, and a bright light beaming down from the bottom.

“PUNY EARTHLINGS! IT IS THE TIME TO MEET YOUR DOOM UNLESS YOU SURRENDER TO THE QUILLIPPI CONSORTIUM!”

A screeching wail came from the saucer, and at first he thought nothing had happened, but then he felt the despair. The deep despair. He dropped to his knees, and he knew he would never be happy again.

* * * *

Archie had ordered his men to take the Squonk from Julie. It cried, and she cried, and they hit her in the face which caused her nose to bleed and for her to let go. But before they did that they had to smash Cwej in the face first as he tried to fend them off.

They carried the Squonk to the circle, and set it there. It didn't seem like anything was happening, but Chris was looking horrified.

“I see that one of our guests has realized what's going on,” Archie said.

“You're projecting the Squonk's grief onto them. You're filling them with despair.”

Archie just smiled.

Chris looked around. He had to figure something out. Fast.

Then he saw it.

“Hey, you there. Nice sword.”

The man looked down at the sword which he'd set down on a crate. “It's just a sword.”

Chris laughed. “To you maybe. I bet you can't even swing it.”

“Of course I can swing it. It's not hard.”

Chris scoffed. “Okay, tough guy.”

The man marched over to the cage. “You realize you're the prisoner here, right?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah. But I'm not the one scared of a sword.”

The man grabbed the sword. “You listen here, I'm going to come in there and bash your face in if you keep talking like that.”

“Go on then, do it, Mr. Too-Scared-To-Swing-a-Sword.”

The man's friend tried to interject. “Hey Jeff, he's clearly taunting you—”

“NOT NOW CARL!” He drew the sword from the sheath. It reflected things in its blade in a way that looked wrong, too real to be real. “I’ll show you. You’ll be begging me for mercy when I’m done with you.” As if to demonstrate, he banged the sword against the bars of the cage.

This was actually a better result than Chris had anticipated. He’d had a whole elaborate plan, but this sped things up. Because the sword didn’t bang against the bars.

The monomolecular blade broke the rules of physics, and seamlessly cut through the cage.

The man lost his balance in the swing, and Chris took that opportunity to reach through the bars—one hand grabbed his wrist, the other pulled the sword from his grip.

Getting out of the cage after that was easy.

“Stay here,” he told Julie.

Sang Mi, seeing what was happening, threw her body weight at the guard next to her and, as he staggered with an “Oof”, ran for Cwej. With a simple slice, he cut her bonds, and handed her the sword. Archie scowled, and pulled a long black rod with a gem attached to the end out. They recognized that gem immediately—they’d seen others like it.

“A magic wand!” Sang Mi said.

“A control scepter,” Archie bit back.

The fight began.

* * *

This is a story about Julie.

She was not the kind of girl who saved the day. She could barely save herself. When the crash had happened, she had had to learn several terrible things at once. Her father had been drinking, and he and her mom were yelling at each other.

The first thing that happened was the deer walking in front of the car. The second was her father saying a bad word and turning the wheel of the car hard to the left. The third was the car slipping off the road, bouncing against a ditch, and then spinning as it fell down the hill below it. The roof hit the ground, and she remembered hearing herself scream, but it was like the voice belonged to someone else. Something cold was trickling through the car. It smelled horrible. Only later would she know this was gasoline. The car’s engine didn’t stop—it sounded like it was ripping itself apart trying to run.

She hung upside down, and her parents unbuckled themselves, and what happened next would always stick with her.

Her mother simply ran. It was hard to fathom for her, to reconcile. She watched her bolt, her feet on a ceiling of grass, stumbling and scrambling without looking back.

Her father unbuckled himself, and got out. He did not run. But he could have gone to her side of the car. She was closer, after all. But instead he rushed around the car, and opened the door to get her brother. He pulled him out to safety. It was then that she realized that no one was coming for her. She was no one's favorite child.

Everything was a priority before her.

And then the gasoline lit up.

If she hadn't been buckled in, she'd have been in the puddle below her, and she'd have died. But she still lit on fire on the side the liquid had dribbled down from the ceiling.

She was alone. And she was abandoned. And no one loved her enough to save her.

A voice in her head said that she should give up, and let herself burn. Another wanted to panic. But the voice that yelled the loudest said she was going to live, no matter what anyone else believed, she deserved to live. She reached for the door handle, blood still flooding to her head. She recoiled—it was hot. The air was filling with smoke. The inside of the car was so hot it was hard to think.

She reached again. She was going to live. Reaching burned her hand. Pulling the handle burned her worse.

She felt lightheaded from the pain. But she shoved the door open, and clicked her seatbelt—hurling herself out of the car.

She rolled down the hill—and that unintentionally helped a lot. When she reached the bottom she ripped off her smoldering clothes and collapsed onto the rough ground.

She passed out from the pain at that point.

But she lived.

Even if every person in the world said she didn't deserve to live, she decided she was going to. And there in the flying saucer, she knew she had one task: she had to rescue her friend.

She had to be brave. The man called Cwej and the teenage girl Sang Mi were fighting Mr. Archie, and the door to her prison was open. There was the Squonk, crying in the circle, surrounded by armed men.

She had to be brave.

She crawled out from the cage, and ducked behind consoles and boxes till she was close to the circle. The Squonk looked up at her. She had one shot at this.

She sprinted towards the circle.

“Hey—stop!”

She dropped to the ground—sliding like she'd seen baseball players do, and slipped under the armed man's gloved hands. She thought she'd done it—when she felt those same hands grab her

legs. She put in one great effort, and stretched her arms out as far as she could, grabbing the Squonk by the front feet.

The man pulled her back. And then said “Oh shit,” as he realized what he had done.

The Squonk and her slid out of the circle.

And the saucer’s beams powered down.

* * *

This is a story about surprise.

Archie had been dueling the pair, and he felt good about his chances. The girl had a sword that could cut through anything. Cwej was wielding a rifle like a club. And Archie had his scepter with the gem he’d been gifted. He knocked Cwej back, and the girl came in to try to stab him, but as he dodged her blow he focused on the scepter, and dark tendrils shot from it—knocking her to the ground and pulling the sword from her grip. She screamed, and he felt pretty good about how things were going.

Then the ship shook.

And he looked over to see that the Squonk was not in the circle. One of his idiotic guards had let one of the prisoners slip through. That shouldn’t have happened. He was about to win. In that moment, he let himself get caught up in his feelings. He didn’t like to think of himself as that kind of person. He thought he was a different kind of man.

But the sword had been picked up from the ground, and as he pulled his attention away from the Squonk, trying to keep his balance as the ship rocked, there was a sudden sharp pain in his chest.

He looked down to see the sword through his heart.

He was a vampire. He wasn’t supposed to die. It took a very special kind of thing to be stabbed through his heart to kill him. For a moment, he laughed. He started to reach for the sword to pull it out, but then felt his knees give out under him.

“Oh,” he said, as he realized that a sword from another universe that broke the laws of physics was probably exactly the kind of special thing that could kill him.

Chris didn’t bother to finish him off, he let him slide to the floor. It didn’t matter. Everyone knew what had happened.

* * *

This is a story about death.

Archie thought he knew death, but what he had become meant he experienced a strange sort of one. But it had had remarkably few consequences. He was in most ways still alive. He’d suffered a death that meant he still walked, and tasted, and felt, and saw. He moved, and was not still. What was happening now was very different. This was an ending.

A real ending.

In a little while, there would be no more Archie MacTavish, forever.

This thought was not a relief.

It was terrifying. He'd heard the cliché that life flashed before your eyes before death, but as his eyes began to lose their shine, he didn't find that to be the case for himself.

No, it was his future. All the possibilities. All the paths he could have taken from here. He was supposed to do so much. He'd been chosen, after all. He was *someone* now.

Agent of the Yssgaroth. Director of EDEM.

He should have led things into the future. He should have stood at the top of the hill. Instead here he was, feeling the life drain out of him.

It wasn't fair.

It wasn't *fair*.

At that moment, he felt someone take his hand. It was warm. Warmer than his already cold body by quite a lot.

He used some of his fading energy to turn his head. It was the girl, Sang Mi .

"It's you," he said.

"Yeah," she replied.

"I didn't think I'd end like this."

"Who would?"

"I barely even know who you are."

"I know you even less."

"I had a rival once. You know, a best friend. The kind of guy who thought a pony tail made him look unique. I always thought if I bit it he'd be right there. A fitting end. It would feel right. Satisfying."

"Death is never satisfying. It just sucks."

He coughed, and blood splattered from his lips.

"I certainly didn't think you'd be here, giving me kindness."

She laughed, which felt both rude and totally fitting. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad you'll be dead. But I'm trying to be a different kind of person."

He nodded. "It would have been good to die with someone who loved me, or cared about me. Or even knew me. But this will do. This will do... Where did the light go?"

“It’s still bright in here.”

He felt terror.

“Is all that awaits me darkness? Is... is this how it is forever?”

She squeezed his hand. “I don’t think so.”

He nodded, and his fingers fell loose, and his head tilted.

* * *

Chris came over, and put his hand on Sang Mi’s shoulder. “You did a good thing. Who was he?”

She shrugged. “Some asshole. Let’s go.”

* * *

The saucer was tilting to the side, and the EDEM soldiers inside were scrambling for footing. Chris ran to grab Julie and the Squonk—the soldiers who had been guarding it had pretty quickly left their posts when they realized the jig was up. Sang Mi, however, was running for two things that were right next to each other.

She pulled her sword out of Archie’s chest, which was gross, but easy. It slid out, his body flopping down the sloping floor like a ragdoll. And as it did, she grabbed his scepter.

“This thing is going to crash!” Chris called, holding Julie, who was holding the Squonk.

“Right—I’ll make an exit.”

Sang Mi lifted her sword in both hands, and shoved it down into the floor. If it was following any form or function, it should have merely scraped against the floor. Instead, it slid through the floor as if it was warm butter, and she made a nice nearly-circular hole that dropped out from the ship.

“We’ll still hit the ground, you know!” Chris called.

“Right,” she hadn’t thought of that. Probably should have.

“Wait, I’ve got it!”

She held out the scepter, it was basically a magic wand, right?

“Abracadabra!” she yelled, pointing it at the hole in the ship.

* * *

This is a story about magic.

First of all, magic isn’t real, so check that off your list.

Second off, magic is absolutely real, so check that off your list too.

Arthur C. Clarke said that any significantly advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. But what if the magic was just magic?

What if magic wasn't so much magic, but a glitch?

In this case, that might be the best explanation. Sang Mi's sword was a glitch, because it came from a different universe.

And the gem in the wand was a glitch for the same reason. And so when Sang Mi pointed the wand, and said a magic word, it wasn't that nothing happened. Something did happen. But it wasn't what she had planned. And it was only part of what Archie planned.

Here's what was unspoken: Archie knew Sang Mi had figured this out, and they didn't bother saying it, but all of this, all the tears and sadness and death, were part of a ritual. Sang Mi had seen rituals. Archie had done them before.

But there hadn't been enough sadness. Enough death. It had all been cut short. If it had worked, perhaps a giant gash would have appeared in the world and great things would have clambered out to feast and destroy.

But that didn't happen. Still, there was some sort of charge there in the wand, there were tears, and so something did open up.

A door.

And as the flying saucer began to crash into the forest, and the hull began to crumple and the fuel reserves began to burn, Chris knew there was really only one way out.

It wasn't a good idea, but they were going to do it anyway.

He carried Julie and shoved Sang Mi through that dark door.

And they were gone.

The saucer hit the ground. The hull tore apart—the two halves like two, well, saucers, broke away from each other, and explosions rocked the hull. Bodies fell from it, scattering through the forest. The top of the hull hit the ground and exploded. A shockwave followed: trees were torn from their roots, and EDEM agents and vehicles were blown through the air. The town beyond was rocked, and debris hit the sides of the buildings. But thankfully by that point everyone was already inside and taking cover. The other half of the saucer hit the ground on its edge, and rolled for a moment before falling over, hitting the ground with a quake, but without exploding. The shockwave threw cars around, and telephone poles were pulled over. It was all a mess. And in the distance, a man stirred.

* * *

This is a story about an EDEM agent.

Jason Vichy crawled out from the wreckage of the saucer. Everything had gone wrong, and gone wrong so quickly. Director MacTavish had promised glory, but gazing out at the forest, he didn't feel

glorious. The forest was littered with bodies. Bodies of his friends, his comrades. He'd had a good time in EDEM. He'd ignored the cries of the half-alien children they'd kidnapped. He'd ignored his mother cutting off contact with him. He ignored the weird feeling the all-natural homeopathic drink Director MacTavish gave them had given him. He had been doing the right thing: he was keeping people safe from aliens. But for the first time, he questioned if maybe he was in fact on the wrong side of things.

Pulling himself up, he could feel broken ribs. He wasn't hearing much out of his right ear, and his right eye seemed fuzzy. "Hello?" he called out, and stumbled, catching himself on a tree. "Anyone?"

"Help?" he heard a raspy voice call out, and he rushed over towards it to find a woman with a support beam from the saucer on her legs. He tried to lift it, but it was too heavy.

She reached a hand out to him, and he rushed over to take it. "I don't... I don't feel good?"

He held her hand. She probably didn't have long. At least she wouldn't die alone. "I know, just hold in there, we'll get help."

She shook her head, and he thought he knew what that meant till she spoke. "No... something else. I think... I think something was in our drinks."

The drinks had been weird but... the woman began to convulse, and black lines began to fill her veins. The black lines began to drain though, bubbling up to build up in her throat which bulged, until something began to crawl up her throat and out of her mouth. First came a long spindly leg—the tip of it was sharp as a razor, and the rest was twitchy and segmented. More legs followed, and it pushed and slashed its way up out of her head. The bloody thing that revealed itself was like if a spider had too many legs to count, and all of those legs ended in knives. Its body was a pulsing mass of gore and hair.

Jason fell back, landing on his rear, and began to scamper back. The thing had no eyes, but it seemed to look at him.

He had to escape.

He turned, trying to push himself up again, and there was a shining piece of chrome from the saucer's hull, a broken shard that curved and distorted his features like a funhouse mirror. Even so, it was enough for him to see that his veins were turning black.

He had enough time to be afraid before he began to feel it knifing its way up his throat.

* * *

It was too bad Archie was dead, because it turned out his plan was working out after all.

* * *

This is a story about nowhere.

Sang Mi found herself there, alone. It was dark, but the darkness seemed to be made of strands of muscles. It was wet, and smelled like fresh nutmeg and rotting meat.

She rose, and saw herself.

And she knew it was not her.

She raised a hand, and the other one did as well.

“You’re the Yssgaroth?” she asked. It was just a guess, but a pretty good one.

“You’re a stranger to this world,” she said in her own voice.

“So are you.”

“We are the same.”

“I mean... no... but... sure why not let’s go with that. We’re the same. So you’re nice now.”

“You’re not nice. You want bad things to happen to people you dislike. Then you feel bad when it happens. Guilty. Beat yourself up. As though that makes it better.”

The words stung. They really did hurt. But she knew this kind of bullying. She’d had it plenty of times before. It didn’t matter if this thing was Cthulhu, she knew the type. She took a deep breath—which wasn’t as relaxing as she’d hoped because of the wet air—and let it out. “You literally are trying to wipe out the world. Literally.”

“Not true. We deserve to exist.”

“I mean, I agree?”

“This place, it’s not yours. We should have it. There are people there. They are selfish. Living their lives on this ground. Living in flesh and hoarding their blood. We will free their blood from their bodies into the soil. We will make the land free. It is our right. We deserve this universe.”

Sang Mi took all of that in. “Back home some people say that about my planet. Gongen. They want to take it over. Because we said we deserved to be independent. They think they have a right to live in the houses we built. Does that seem right to you?”

“Yes.”

She looked at it. Really looked at it. She knew that this was just a form it was taking. It was something she couldn’t understand. Something bigger, darker, more powerful. It was incomprehensible. She was trying to have a conversation with the toenail of a giant, and to think she knew what was on top of its head was hubris.

But she was feeling pretty confident.

“You’re an invasive species. Just like me. You’re a glitch, you’re not supposed to be here.”

“Then you have no right to judge us.”

“Actually I do. Because I don’t plan on living here, and I don’t want to bulldoze their houses to build my own. Tell you what, let’s make a bet. You have Chris and the little girl and Squonk, right? The little hooved guy? You copied me, so copy the Squonk. Feel what it feels. Embrace it. Do that, and if you enjoy it, you can have the planet.”

The Yssgaroth stared blankly at her. “This is a trick.”

“Of course it’s a trick. But if you’re so powerful, it shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll just be wrong.”

It stared at her longer. And then the other Sang Mi’s eyes rolled back, and she dropped to the ground. Her flesh began to bubble, and pull, and shift, and the real Sang Mi looked away. When she could bear to look back, there was a Squonk.

And its eyes grew wide, and teary.

* * *

Michael Paulson was having the worst day of his life. His daughter had vanished. Armed thugs had threatened him. Aliens had threatened to invade. Their ship had crashed, and sent a shockwave through the town, and now a swarm of spider-like horrors was crawling towards the town. Their legs looked like knives.

He looked at his wife. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry about... everything. The drinking. What I said about our daughter. About...”

She pulled him into an embrace. “Me too... I... I’m so sorry.”

The wailing pulled them apart. They looked out the window to see the swarm of horrors was stumbling about as if they were the drunk ones now. It was like they were desperate to cry, but had no eyes. Then the swarm lifted their knife-like arms into the air, angled them towards their lumpy bodies, and slid them in.

And suddenly there was silence.

* * *

Chris didn’t really know how they got back in the forest, but he was with Julie, and the Squonk, and Sang Mi, who were all unconscious, and the forest was littered in horrifically mutilated bodies.

So he did the natural thing, and lifted all three of them. It was awkward, and not easy, but he’d had worse. Sang Mi was slung over his shoulder, Julie and the Squonk in his arms. The whole arrangement hurt, and he felt exhausted by the time they got out of the forest and he set them down on the ground, only to find a mess of meat and legs in the field leading up to the town.

He had a lot of questions.

But he didn’t actually care about them as much as he cared about getting some rest.

He caught his breath, picked them back up, and made his way into town.

* * *

This is a story about recovery.

The Jovian Diplomatic Service rolled into town as quickly as they could. Relief tents were set up, and Brittany Mordley found herself swamped with tasks. The town had had remarkably few casualties and no fatalities. All things considered, the damage wasn't terrible. A lot of folks needed new cars, new power lines had to be put up, and the buildings on the edge of town needed some real work, but she'd seen worse after an event like this.

More difficult to deal with was cataloguing the annihilation of the EDEM operations here. She hated EDEM, they opposed everything that the JDS stood for, but seeing the fates of what happened to the hundreds of agents who had been in the area chilled her to the bone. Somehow there had been no survivors, and it seemed they'd all been turned into monsters. They catalogued the bodies one by one, including EDEM Director MacTavish. She knew they'd just appoint another one, but rebuilding the personal loss here wouldn't be easy.

Nor would be explaining why there had been a flying saucer.

As she carried another crate of bottled water from a truck, she saw a family being reunited—a little girl and her pet... *something*, running to meet her parents and brother. How sweet.

She set the water down, and wiped her brow. What a day.

* * *

Chris and Sang Mi sat on the tailgate of the Odyssey, drinking some of the water the nice lady had handed them.

Sang Mi pulled the gem off the wand, and handed it to Chris.

"Found another one of these, I guess."

He took it, and without much fanfare, pocketed it.

"So... still glad you came with me? This was... well it has to have been a lot. I didn't want you to see stuff like this."

She looked into her bottle. "Archie, the EDEM guy, he used to help stop stuff like this."

That was news to Chris, but he just nodded so she'd keep talking.

"Honestly I don't think I've wanted to go home more than I have before. This was... horrible. A whole lot of people died." She wiped tears away. "And they were bad people, really bad people! But..."

"It's never easy." He scooted over and put an arm around her. "Should I take you home?"

She shook her head. "We saved people too. I heard no one died in the town. If we hadn't been here... We stopped the bad guys, right?"

“We did.”

“I thought stopping the bad guys would feel better.”

“Sometimes doing the right thing doesn’t have a reward. It hurts and it makes you want to smash your hand with a rock. But you do it anyway. Because of who we are, you and me.”

She thought about that. “Let’s stay and help. Not... for forever. But let’s help them clean up. Care for people. I don’t want to drive off into the sunset just yet. I don’t feel like we’re done.”

He smiled. “I was hoping you would say that.”

* * *

This is a story about a body.

Chris had felt it was appropriate to find someone to claim it. In the end, two women arrived, calling themselves freelancers who were ex-co-workers of his. One of them, a brown-haired woman, signed for it, while her black haired comrade who didn’t take her sunglasses off inside just stared at the body with her hands in her pockets.

“Friends?” Chris asked as she handed the clipboard back to the attendant.

“Used to be,” she said. “I’m Tasha, that’s Maxie.” Maxie raised a pale hand and shoved it back into her pocket. “He...” She looked at his corpse for a moment. “He was almost a whole person, you know? We almost... never mind. He tried to end the world twice. That’s really all there is to it in the end.”

Sang Mi nodded. “I guess so. I lit a candle for him at St. Matthew’s down the road. Maybe he’ll find his way out of the dark somehow.”

Tasha shrugged. “It’s all in the past now. I think it’s just time to let go, and move on.”

Chris put a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve given yourself some great advice.”

They watched as the attendant shoved the body into the furnace. They weren’t supposed to be there, but as Sang Mi explained, “I learned you can do basically anything by bribing people in America!” The thumbs up she gave everyone while smiling was a little too optimistic for them to explain their discomfort with what she’d said, so everyone just nodded and smiled politely.

The body of Archie MacTavish burned, first the skin, then the muscles and sinew and organs, and then the bones. By the end there were only ashes.

And as the four of them left the room, they never returned.

* * *

This is a story about a girl and her Squonk.

The Squonk no longer lived in the woods, but in a house, where he was fed Hershey's chocolate bars, and raisin bran cereal with milk, and tomato and cucumber salad, and whatever Julie thought sounded yummy. He wasn't picky.

The Squonk would curl up on her feet while she slept, and he would wake her up in the morning, frolicking around the room happy to see her.

Julie and her parents didn't immediately heal their relationship. There were a lot of things that might never fully mend. But they tried in a way they hadn't before. The man who called himself Cwej and the Sang Mi girl had insisted her parents go to marriage counseling, and it didn't solve everything, but it made most things better. The yelling and screaming lessened. And then one day it stopped.

Her mother took her shopping, just the two of them, and bought her new clothes.

Her dad looked into more surgery for her burns. She didn't mind how she looked the way she had before, but she did mind the way her skin felt, and the treatments helped.

And most of all, both of them told her they were sorry. She had never expected that. She didn't know what to say when they did; she just cried and they hugged her.

One night, she was sitting watching TV with her mom, dad, brother, and the Squonk. Everyone was laughing, and passing a bowl of cheap microwave popcorn around, and Julie realized that she finally didn't feel alone.

It disappointed a lot of people, but from that day on, the Squonk didn't cry anymore.

* * *

This is a story about a road trip.

It takes place in an orange Honda Element that they named the Odyssey. The back of the car can be used to sleep in, and they keep sleeping bags in there for just that. There are bags with all sorts of things: flashlights, or as Chris called them, torches, lots of snacks, a big bag of trash that they keep forgetting to throw out, a blue baseball bat custom engraved in Louisville, hospital discharge documents from Elkhart, a bobblehead of a Melonhead and two sets of baseball uniforms, several large gemstones, a projector in a box, a space-age gun, an equally space-age sword, and a book called *Roadside Oddities of America*.

This was a home. It might not look like a home, but it had become one. It became one when Chris and Sang Mi sang along to songs together on the radio, or argued about whether or not oat milk counted as dairy, or when they pulled over for the night and they stayed up too late as Sang Mi tried to teach Chris the steps to a dance from Gongen called "The Hongtu Shuffle." He was terrible at it, and they laughed so much that the sun came up.

And there were a lot of scary moments too. Both of them almost died, and they got drugged and brainwashed and had to play baseball to win their freedom, and they found so many lonely people on the road. People who had lost things. People who were lost.

And they technically had a destination, but they were lost too.

Or they were supposed to be.

But as they pulled out of the town that night, Sang Mi turned on the radio, and it was playing *Cupid* by Fifty Fifty. Sang Mi started singing along, doing a ridiculous dance in her seat that involved too much elbow movement to be taken seriously, and might be better suited for a chicken imitation competition.

Chris tried to keep a straight face as she leaned his way, still wagging her elbows, and finally he cracked. He laughed, and as his face lit up in a smile, sung along too. They harmonized as they drove towards the rose glow of the sunset.

Someday this too would end.

But for this moment?

This was a story about friends.

Remembrance

By Molly Warton

There was nothing but the wind in the night and the howling of the river to hide the soft unspoken whispering of the stars scattered across the horizon.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” beamed Chris Cwej, “The whole universe laid out like a dream in the night.”

“Mhm,” murmured Sang Mi, whose mind was bobbing up and down in her head.

He stretched, and through the stretch fell the world, into the palm of the short hard grass that adorned the rocky ground.

“I think we should get to bed,” Chris said.

“I’m not a child,” said Sang Mi, tracing dreamy fingers about a patch of dust, and yawned, “m used to staying up late.”

“Well *I’m* tired,” said Christopher Cwej, firmly, and went off over to the battered old orange car to get the sleeping things set up.

Sang Mi sat up, groaning, in the shadow of the mountain. She, stretch rolling through her body, wrapped her woolen scarf more tightly around her to fend off the bitter coldness of the night, and went over to the grassy ledge which sunk harshly down to the dancing limbs of the white white river below. Her heart ached, and she didn’t know why. She didn’t even notice it. She just stared into the gulf where the wind twisted about the pretty rocks and in it an owl cried, lonesome, for its mate.

She looked to her right, to the forest that sloped its way up into the night. It curved up desperately, grasping for the sky, but it could never reach the stars that gazed so softly upon it.

Her breath caught cold on her lips.

At the base of a tree was a smiling girl, who twisted her fingers shyly about the lower branches of the aging conifer. She bit her lip and looked at Sang Mi uncertainly.

Sang Mi stared at the girl. The girl stared at her.

“Chris...” began Sang Mi, turning slightly to him, but when she turned again the girl was gone. She ran to the tree.

Not a trace of the girl remained. When she listened she heard nothing but the weeping of the river and the gentle murmuring of the stars. The quiet smell of pine gave no hint of any others.

“Hello?” she said, in English, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to help.”

But there was nothing but the wind.

Her heart was doing funny things to itself and she wished that it wouldn’t, but she had to find the child, she *had* to.

“Do you know where Momma is?” asked the girl, gnawing at her dark hair.

The girl was right in front of her; she could feel her. She could see her.

Sang Mi jumped.

“Uh, sorry,” she said, crouching down, “I don’t. But I’ve got a friend, alright, and I—I’m sure he can find your Momma. What’s your name?”

“Lina,” said Lina, because it was.

Lina’s hand felt soft and cold in Sang Mi’s hand, and she could feel every tiny supple ridge that rolled along it. How beautiful it was, the little thing. She held it as if it were the most fragile thing in the world, and even then was scared of breaking it. She felt all at once as though she was holding Lina, keeping her from falling, and as though it were Lina holding her and keeping her from drifting away into the darkness.

They did not travel fast, but it was not far, and anyway time was of no consequence in the cradle of the stars.

Chris was sitting with his head entangled in a sleeping bag, and emerged a pile of disjointed limbs that flopped about good-naturedly before finally escaping the womb of the woven fabric.

“Hello,” he smiled, panting, “You ready for bed yet?”

“This is Lina,” said Sang Mi, looking rather anxious, but she was gone.

Chris looked at her curiously.

“Who?” he said, brow furrowed in confusion.

“She—she’s there!” said Sang Mi, and she was. But Chris could not see her.

“I don’t see anyone,” he said.

Lina looked very small and shrinking under the conversation, and her dirt-ridden hair went further into her mouth.

“Look!” cried Sang Mi.

Chris looked, and he could not see.

Through the frustration and utter bewilderment of his heart his soul was closed, and so still he could not see, though he tried. Again and again, he tried, and the present overwhelmed the reality so that he was blind in the ancient light of the stars.

Sang Mi stared at his sorrow, and all at once knew it, though her own emotions veiled it.

“Rest,” she breathed suddenly, and he did.

“She’s looking for her mum,” said Sang Mi to Chris.

Chris bit his lip, hard, and felt the pain of it even as he whirled through a hundred states, heart caught between waking and sleeping, the train and the platform, the knit and the purl, the soul and the *nafs*—even as it fell and rose with the tides and the moon; even as it beat twice, thrice, four times, five.

His eyelids were wrestling together, pressed deep-dark like the woods.

He opened his eyes.

He opened them again, and saw Lina.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello,” murmured Lina, shyly.

He saw.

“You’re dead,” he said to her.

“Oh,” she said, quietly.

Sang Mi looked at Chris. He looked at her.

“Sit down,” he smiled, but it was a sad smile.

The want for sleep seemed far more acute with the harsh softness of the shunted chair, and Sang Mi felt sleep seep into the edges of her eyes with the tears that she refused to notice. She lifted Lina up onto her lap, and the girl flickered on the edge of existence, cuddling into her chest. She was so warm and beautiful, even in her sadness. Sang Mi hugged her to her chest.

“Lina,” said Chris, his legs dangling aimlessly over the side of the vehicle, “Is a memory. She died many years ago—probably hundreds by the look of her clothes—but the land remembers her.”

“Why?” asked Sang Mi.

“The soldiers came,” murmured Lina into Sang Mi’s arm.

Chris and Sang Mi looked at each other.

“The soldiers came and Momma went to find work and she took me with her because she had to and they were fighting and then there was blood on me and it hurt like—like everything and... and...”

Lina’s voice died out. Sang Mi was holding her very very tightly.

“The land remembers strong emotions,” said Chris quietly, “It remembers her death.”

He shuffled himself off of the car and lay on the ground, propping himself up on his elbows. He shifted some browning pine needles from the ground, and felt the bare soil in his hands, patting it and turning it. He whispered to it, not with his mouth, but with his soul, and the heart of it opened up. It could not be seen, exactly, or felt, or perceived in any of the typical manners in which one perceives things, but the memory was known, then.

Sang Mi knew the unknowable: the subtle shape of a kind calloused hand wrapped around her own; the whispered assurances in an accent long lost to time; the fear of the noise that rang like the world in her ears; the reassurance of the smile of a soldier, with pretty brown hair that hung softly about his head; the look of the soldier as he knew that he was about to die, the blood that came so harshly and yet so soft; the turning of the stomach like a thousand wildebeest; lostness; pain; nothing.

Lina occasionally flickered out of existence, and what scared Sang Mi was that she didn't notice when she did so. She always came back though, slightly less real every time, and slightly more tired-looking and feeling every time, curled up into a ball in her lap.

She looked at Chris. He was crying.

"Can't we do something?" she asked, quietly.

"Memory fades," said Chris. "Existence is impermanent."

What he didn't say was that she *could* be saved, but the only way that it could be done would have brought his Superiors down on them like a black hole. And there were complications, always complications. Nothing was ever simple.

The only—it *couldn't* be the only way, thought Chris. There *must* have been some other way, there *must!*

If I were clever, he thought, I could see it. If I were somebody else, I could see it. But I'm not. I'm just me. Plain old Chris Cwej.

Sang Mi was looking at him, and he fell into her deep black eyes that held the stars in their rim, and nothing was right. The world was wrong, except that it wasn't. This was how things were supposed to be.

This was right.

"Crap," muttered Cwej, but under his breath, so that Sang Mi wouldn't hear.

Time sat sinking further into the night, taunting him as it danced about the treetops. He saw its mellow dance, and he laughed in his heart with all the warmth of a soldier going over the top. Ribbons of blue and red and gold, laughing in the softness of the night, even as he sat with a world of earth in his palms.

The universe laughed at him, because it always did, and he sat and listened, because that's what he was for.

He jumped up like a flower in the spring.

"I can *save* her!" he yelled, tears sparkling in the edges of his eyes, "I can save her."

But he couldn't.

"She's been dead for hundreds of years," said Sang Mi dully.

He knew he couldn't.

On his right shoulder sat an angel of death, and on his left sat an angel of destruction, and both would taunt him until Judgement Day, because that's what he was. And he wished he wasn't. He wished he were a little fish, swimming in a river. He wished he were a heron. Herons didn't have to worry about anything, he thought.

He wished he were a deer.

Sang Mi looked at him, and he looked at Sang Mi, and she was his world and he was hers, and he remembered, and knew that he *was* one after all, and his self was set at peace, and a strange calmness sat over him. He sat upon the carpet of needles and began to cry.

One last time Lina appeared, soft and warm in Sang Mi's arms. She smiled, and put her arms as far round Sang Mi as they would go, and the world fell into the hug, which was warm and painful and comforting.

"She's gone," said Sang Mi, and her voice was very very quiet.

She ran over to Chris and hugged him, and they cried softly and briefly into each other's shoulders.

Chris pulled away from the warmth first.

"Bed, I think," he said, smiling sadly, as the light of the stars danced across their bodies.

Sang Mi, bleary-eyed, assented.

Into the sleeping bags went their warm, aching bodies, into the comfort of the night.

And the last moment before sleep was a beautiful, terrible eternity.



Lost Media

*By Michael B. Robertson
& James Wylder
Illustrated by Bex Vee*

Jhe Family Apartment, Cheonsa Dome, Takumi, Gongen

2384

As the hours passed by, it became clear to Sang Mi that nobody was going to come. She'd sent out dozens of invites, but the only person here was her twin brother, and not only had they shared a womb, he lived here. The bowls of snacks she'd asked her mom to get ready for them sat nearly untouched, aside from the candy-covered chocolates she'd been depressively shoveling into her mouth, and the extra-spicy tteokbokki Sang Eun had been picking at.

"The flu is going around, I'm sure a lot of people are sick," her brother lied kindly.

"Yeah," she replied.

"And there's that big baseball game between the Hongtu Cannonballs and the Takumi Tengu?"

“Sure, I guess,” she said, defeated. She put on the next movie. It was one of the Lubin Studios Films she had the files for. She wanted to enjoy it, it was a movie she loved. To be swept away in it. But she just felt alone knowing no one but her twin wanted to share it with her.

As the action played on, both of their phones pinged. They picked them up in tandem, and checked.

“We’re in!” Sang Eun said. “Mom’s going to be so proud. And Min Jun can stop hounding us.”

She looked at the message. She’d been accepted to Academy 27, the second-best High School in Takumi.

“It’ll be different in High school,” she said finally. “I’ll be different.

* * *

The Pennsylvania Wilderness

May 2025

By the time they reached the tunnel, it was nearly midnight, and the world seemed to be on the edge of itself. Usually, they’d have stopped to sleep by now. Their journey could have been over already if they’d wanted it to be that way—sure they’d have gotten to the lodge in the Blue Ridge Mountains ahead of time, but they’d have been guaranteed warm beds and maybe could have investigated this whole strangeness.

Instead, they hadn’t encountered any hotels, well any that were operating, and there hadn’t been a place they’d felt comfortable or capable of pulling over to sleep at either. Chris and Sang Mi had pulled over to have a spirited debate about whether or not to drink an energy drink.

They’d eventually agreed to each down half of it, and now each had a strange feeling of being slightly too awake.

It was the kind of dark where all you could see was what the car’s headlights illuminated. The sky was overcast, and there were no lights on this stretch of woodland road. Sang Mi looked at her phone. “It says we’re out of service range?”

“That’s pretty normal, there’s not a lot out here.”

“What if we’re lost?”

“We’re not lost—”

“CAT!”

Sang Mi sprung forward, caught by her seatbelt as she pointed at the road, and Cwej hit the brakes hard—the car skidding to a halt. The headlights shone that they were about to enter into a tunnel carved into the side of a mountain. There were a lot of those out here, but there also wasn’t one shown on the map on their phones.

But that wasn’t the really interesting thing.

There was a cat there, illuminated against the shadows, its body flickering, pockmarked with flecks and lines like it was made of film. They'd seen a cat like this before, back on Gongen at Sang Mi's school, and it had led them to the dangerous film-projector in Violethill. Sang Mi swung her car door open, and Chris followed. They left the lights on the Odyssey on, the orange Honda Element sputtering in park as they approached the cat together slowly.

"It's a cat made of film!" Sang Mi said.

"Yeah," Chris replied.

"Like in—"

"YEAH," Chris replied more.

Reaching into his pocket, and crouching down, Chris pulled out a piece of jerky. The cat sniffed the air, and tail high crept towards him as he cooed at it.

Then a sound came from the tunnel, like gears turning, and the cat did a turning leap—bolting back towards the tunnel, disappearing into it and the darkness beyond.

"Should we follow—" Sang Mi began asking, but Chris was already going after it. Wasn't he the grown up here? She sighed, and tailed after him, pulling out her flashlight and turning it on as she ran.

The tunnel was dark. She could feel something though—feel something turning and spinning around her, like gears and cogs that made the clouds move were pulsing in her ears. Like the lack of anything she could see was spinning in a black vortex.

She stumbled out finally, into the light, and looked behind her to see that she'd come out the door of what looked like a small white shed with a shingle roof. Cwej shut the door behind her.

"But—" he put a finger over his mouth, and she could see in his eyes he was giddy to watch her see what he'd already seen.

She obliged, and turned around with him. And she knew very quickly he'd been right to be excited for her reaction.

Chris and Sang Mi looked out to the horizon, deep and dark and blue, and at the collection of buildings silhouetted against it. A row of large shapes, lit by moonlight and surrounded by trees. The distinctive shape of a water tower stood over them all.

Sang Mi knew where they were. She's seen enough photos - probably most of the photos of it that had ever existed - to know its shape even in the dark. "That's Betzwood. The Lubin movie studios."

"Yes it is."

"The real one? Are there any other ones, like theme park versions or something?"

Chris paused. "I don't think Betzwood is as iconic as you think it is."

She ignored him and took a step towards it. She moved her head, as though to check it was 3D and not just a flat image. “You can go to Betzwood. We, together, can go to Betzwood. The Lubin Manufacturing Company made so many silent movies. So many great shorts! They could've been as big as Hollywood, you know. They were a real competitor. Then a fire destroyed the Lubin film vault...”

Chris looked down at Sang Mi.

“We get to be here,” she said. “Moments and places...I guess they can last forever.”

When she'd sat with Sang Eun and watched movies together, so long ago and so far in the future, she used to think about what it was like for the actors being on set.

That way of thinking always confused her mom. “Doesn't that ruin the magic?” she used to say. Even though she was a grown up, her mom never liked to be reminded it wasn't real.

But Sang Mi loved it. Not only did movies let her escape into a story, they let her escape into the past. Each shot was a moment in time, captured on film. But even those captured moments were fragile. The fire in the Lubin film vault destroyed so many movies that will never be seen again.

Sang Mi turned to meet Chris' eyes. “Can we stop the fire from happening?”

He took in her expression. This meant something to her. Then he shook his head. “You can't. It's a hard thing to learn but you can't. Be content looking at history like a pretty picture in a gallery. You don't get to do your own finger painting over the top.”

Sang Mi paused. “I read a book about painting restoration once.”

“You can't change history,” Chris said flatly.

She screwed up her face. “Is that ‘you’ as in ‘we’ or ‘you’ as in ‘me?’”

“Nobody can change history - not on purpose anyway. Anyone can change history without meaning to. You could make an amazing discovery in your native time. Cure a disease, write a hit song, invent a com unit that never loses signal. But going back in time to change things on purpose doesn't work. If you knew a fire was going to break out so you went back in time to install a state of the art sprinkler system, the fire wouldn't happen, so you'll never have known about it, so why did you go back and install the sprinklers? Paradox loop. The timeline disintegrates.”

Sang Mi turned back to the view. “It's not fair.”

“I'm afraid it is fair,” said Chris. “It's the same for everyone. Nobody's...superior.”

She nodded, but it was a hollow gesture meant only to end the conversation. “Can we look around?”

“We have to,” said Chris. “It's where the cat went. Whatever's going on is going on in there. Come on.”

There was a chill in the air. A bird called out somewhere, hoping for a reply in the wind.

Sang Mi led the way. She drifted forward as though in a dream, finally walking through a place she'd known for years.

Chris moved more cautiously, looking down the dark paths between each building, imagining where the best vantage points to watch them from would be. At this point in his life, these checks were purely instinctual. He'd do exactly the same if he was heading out for a bite to eat after his shift on Spaceport 5.

The pair reached the biggest of the buildings and shared a silent look of acknowledgement that, yes, the biggest one was probably the place to start.

Sang Mi started towards the front entrance. Chris tapped her shoulder to stop her and gestured instead towards a side door.

It opened with a rusty sound louder than Chris would've liked. Accepting that they had now announced themselves, he stepped in, Sang Mi following behind.

The moonlight shining through the door was their only source of light.

Chris squinted to see. "Make sure the door doesn't-"

The door blew shut.

"Sorry," said Sang Mi.

A beam of light illuminated Chris Cwej's smile. "Have a torch." He passed her the other one from his belt and the pair set off.

Their torches cast sharp shadows across uneven walls, creating an aggressive expressionist world.

Sang Mi turned and her light fell on a fireplace. It wasn't lit, save for the light of her torch. Slowly, she raised her beam up across stone walls with old, unrefined brickwork.

She took a step closer, and closer, then she put her hand on the wall. The cold, dark stone looked cold to the touch, but it wasn't. It was warm. She pushed against it - it was slightly soft. Spongey bricks?

"Ah ha!" Chris' voice came from somewhere off in the darkness. "That's what we need."

A buzz, and one by one the lights sparked on overhead.

Sang Mi looked around at the medieval castle she was standing in.

At the end of the room was a long table, with a shining throne in the middle and several smaller, only slightly-less impressive chairs on either side. Banners hung on the walls above with stark black and white designs, and several empty suits of silver armor stood on guard by the entrance.

A man in a blue suit of armor walked through that entrance. "Not sure about the historical accuracy," said Chris. "Black and white banners, I suppose so the designs show up well on a black and white camera. Also..."

He pointed downward at the dirty studio floor that this old castle sat upon.

“It’s so detailed,” said Sang Mi. “I’ve never seen this film. What’s through there?”

She ran across the throne room with no regard at all for royal protocol and stepped across the threshold into a dressing room.

Two chairs sat in front of mirrors on either side of the room, and the most colorful array of suits and dresses were arranged on rails against one wall, feathers and sequins everywhere.

Sang Mi sat down and swiveled towards the nearest mirror to admire herself, but saw nothing. Instead of a reflection, she only saw a frame filled in with solid white.

Chris stood by her shoulder and looked. “Mmm. An early attempt to avoid the camera accidentally showing up on film?”

“You mean...” Sang Mi looked around. “This is a set too?”

“Looks like it.”

She examined one of the costumes. “It’s like something they used to wear on stage at musical revues. The Broadway Melody of 190-something.”

Chris opened the door of the dressing room and stepped outside into a wide open space, a dark studio filled with slices of different environments, like windows into different times and spaces, all frozen.

A shape moved through the frozen places.

“CAT!” Sang Mi ran off, Chris following close behind.

The shape disappeared into a rocky tunnel. As Sang Mi and Chris wandered through it, it became harder and harder to see without the light. At the end, Sang Mi pressed her hand against the cave wall and found it was soft again - even softer than the wall of the castle. Hesitantly, she pushed, and a giant hollow boulder rolled out of the way.

The pair stepped out of the tomb.

They turned and looked back at what they had just emerged from.

“This is...”

Chris nodded. “I think it is.”

They were standing on the set of a film Sang Mi knew very well. Chris had seen it too, briefly, but crucially neither of them had seen its ending.

The film was *Battle on the Easter Front*. This whole wild journey had started when a girl named Petra had moved Heaven and Earth to try to see that ending; it had been her mother’s favorite film. She’d gone so far as to kidnap her fellow students to try to recreate that ending. And crucially, they’d followed the trail of a flickering cat, and found a projector that made the movie... well, real.[\[a\]](#)

“This is the second time we’ve been inside this movie,” said Sang Mi.

“We’ve had the immersive 4D experience,” said Chris. “Now we’re seeing behind the scenes. Battle on the Easter Front was made here. But that means—”

A low grumble distracted him.

Sang Mi heard it too. They looked at each other and silently questioned whether the noise was something they should be worried about.

They heard it again. A heavy droning sound from somewhere nearby. It came and went, every six or seven seconds.

Whatever was making the noise was clearly big, probably dangerous, and the two of them couldn’t help but start moving towards it.

They listened as they walked. The low grumble got louder and louder as they got closer and closer.

They found the source more suddenly than they expected. Around a corner, sitting in the middle of the studio floor, was a giant something. At first it looked like a formless pile, but as they got closer they realized it very much had form - a deliberate, sculpted form. It was hard to tell what it was made of. Clay? It seemed to move, rising and falling slightly as the grumble came and went, but the movement was jagged and uneven.

The shape was also flickering. Just like the cat, it juddered as though the image was a projection.

Sang Mi reached out to touch it, but stopped when she saw Chris raise a hand to stop her. He shook his head and gestured to stay quiet.

He led the way as the two walked around the mound. His mind was reeling, trying to connect dots. It looked like a lump of sentient something. Is this what the flickering cat was made out of? Could he take a scoop of this stuff and shape it into whatever he wanted to bring it to some form of life?

He stopped when he saw a strange circle on the mass.

Sang Mi held her breath as Chris leaned in to examine it.

It opened. A reflection-less eye stared back at them.

“Back!” Chris pulled Sang Mi away as the mass started to rise. Part of it lifted off the ground, and as it did its form became clear. Two mighty hind legs, two small front arms, and one massive tail, all moving with not quite enough frames of animation.

They’d woken up a stop-motion dinosaur.

Chris grabbed Sang Mi and they ran. Despite how much she wanted to, Sang Mi didn’t look back at the impressive spectacle of the tyrannosaurus rex rearing back, roaring, then charging after them, knocking down sets and lights and rigging as it went. She could at least appreciate the foley that

emphasized its footsteps. It chased after them in a flickering rage, each step sounding like a deep drum being struck.

It chased the two of them back through the old dressing room set and the royal throne room. The table crashed over as the t-rex's mighty tail swung. Whatever that flickering material was, it was solid enough, Chris thought.

They ducked through the swinging doors of an old timey saloon - there's no way the dinosaur would fit through after them. Then they turned and saw the set only had two walls.

"Budget cuts," Chris growled, and they got back to running.

They ran out the side of the saloon and kept barreling forwards, away from the ever-approaching footsteps. They flew together through different times and places, always with danger hot on their trail.

"Over there!" Sang Mi pointed.

In front of them was a section of the studio that was boxed off from the rest. From this angle, they could see it had at least two walls.

They ran around those two walls, the t-rex not far behind them, until a third wall came into sight. Then, a wave of relief washed over Chris as he saw the vital, intact fourth wall.

He led Sang Mi through a door into the box, entering a pretty swanky-looking hotel room. It was bigger than any hotel Sang Mi had been in - with twin beds, a seating area with a sofa, a sideboard with drinks, the works.

They waited in silence.

Outside, the t-rex had stopped. It slowly crept around outside the four walls, looking for a way in.

They were so quiet, they could hear not only its footsteps, but a sound of whirring coming from the creature - the flickering of the film that made its greyscaled skin.

They heard the sound of something approaching, much closer than the dinosaur. The door to the hotel's restroom opened and a thin flickering man stepped out. "Say, what goes on here?"

Chris grabbed him and covered his mouth.

The sensation of directly touching the man's flickering face felt like static on Chris' hand. He fought the urge to let go.

Regardless, the man quickly fell silent of his own free will. The dinosaur's silhouette passed across the drawn curtains, its shape projected onto the screen.

All three were silent, watching, waiting.

The projected image faded.

They listened as the heavy drum footsteps got quieter and quieter until finally, they were alone.

Chris removed his hand from the man's mouth. "Sorry."

He was smartly-dressed, with a sharp suit and perfect hair. "Now do you mind telling me who you two are? And who was that man out there?"

"Man?" Sang Mi repeated. "It was a dinosaur! Didn't you see the shape?"

The man blinked. "Dinosaur? Now what does that mean?"

Chris circled him, taking in every detail of his flickering form. "A dinosaur. Do you know what a dinosaur is?"

"Can't say I do. Listen, I tell you what..." He turned towards the table and picked up a teapot. "How about a nice relaxing drink, huh?"

Sang Mi whispered to Chris, not wanting to be rude. "How does he not know what a dinosaur is?"

Chris paused. "Outside of his frame of reference. Maybe the movie he's from doesn't have any dinosaurs in it."

"Is that how this works?"

"Depends. Did I sound convincing?"

The man turned back to them holding two cups of tea. "I suppose I should make an attempt at a proper introduction. I'm Peter."

Sang Mi smiled and took the cup offered to her. "I'm Sang Mi, this is Chris."

Chris nodded to confirm that this intel was accurate and took his cup. "Where do you come from?"

"Oh, all over really." Peter turned and sat down as Chris and Sang Mi sipped their tea. "I've been staying here in New York a while, trying to get the big scoop on a new Broadway show."

Sang Mi tried to read the man's face. Was he acting? Did he wear the face of some actor from this era of film she just didn't recognize? Or was he a character personified? Pure unrestrained fiction. "We're not in New York," she said finally. "We're in Pennsylvania."

"Not to him," said Chris. "Cats and dinosaurs and even people from movies. What's bringing them to life? What's giving them mass? How does it work?" He paused as he muddled through it in his head. "There's one more important question though. The most pressing question of all." He turned to look Sang Mi in the eyes. "Why would a prop tea pot sitting in a film studio set at night have real hot tea in it?"

Slowly, the two of them looked down at their cups and saw that the liquid they'd been drinking was grey and flickering.

As Chris lost consciousness, he could feel the end of the reel.

* * *

Sang Mi's first thought was that Chris had just said something. Unfortunately, the thought came to her too late to actually listen.

She looked around at the rows and rows of shelves around her, all covered in film cans.

"Are you okay?" Chris repeated.

Sang Mi's first instinct was the turn to face Chris, then she realized she couldn't. The two of them were tied on chairs, back to back, in the middle of some sort of film collection.

"I'm fine," Sang Mi finally responded, although she realized after she said it that she hadn't actually checked if she was. She stopped trying to turn and focused her gaze forward, on the film can sitting on the shelf in front of her. "Outwitting Dad."

Chris tried to see behind himself. "Excuse me?"

"This film canister. It's called Outwitting Dad. It's a 1914 movie, I think the first movie Oliver Hardy was ever in. It doesn't exist any more - it's lost media. It burned...we're in Lubin's film vault."

"Well, you certainly know your stuff," said a new voice.

Sang Mi and Chris both turned their heads.

For a brief moment, Chris thought the voice belonged to the flickering cat, which wandered out from the shelves and passed by his feet. Then he watched it slink off towards a woman standing in the darkness. She wasn't flickering. She looked entirely real.

She reached down, and picked up the kitty as it started to rub against her skirts, stepping out of the shadows as it flickered in her arms and she stroked its shifting fur. She'd blended into the shadows because she was wearing all black, from her head to her toes. Her face was covered by a black veil. They knew her. They'd seen her before.

"How long has it been now, twenty-one years since the Chicago World's Fair? Though for you... days, weeks? Being a time traveller must be so convenient, while the rest of us slog through every day between two points, you just touch the highlights and disappear."

"Something like that," Chris answered. "I didn't expect to see you here, Salome Herodian."

She sighed. "Just Sal. I've been funding films here. I am hoping Battle on the Easter Front will allow me to fund other period pieces... including a better representation of my life."

They gave each other a glance, which hurt both of their necks in the attempt, and tried not to give too much of the future away.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're doing okay!" Sang Mi said optimistically.

Sal turned her blank veil to face her. “Yes, after you kicked me out of the top of the Ferris wheel and I broke my body in three dozen places and crawled away in agony, I did make a full recovery.”

Sang Mi tried to shimmy so she was more hidden behind Chris. It almost was a good attempt. Chris tried to straighten his back to assist, and calm Salome down. “We’re not here to pick a fight. We’re just...”

“Poking your nose where it doesn’t belong?”

“Investigating,” he said evenly. “That cat is unusual. And it’s not the only thing that is.”

Sal raised her veil just enough they could see her grinning. “Oh, you’re curious about them, are you?” She lifted the cat to look into its eyes. “Inside all of them is a projector. An omni-directional 3D projector. Using AI, it extrapolates a person or an animal or a thing from a movie and sort of... fills in the blanks. Completes them in a way. It imagines what the back of an actor’s head would look like during their close-ups, if you get my meaning.”

“Giving them physical form,” finished Chris.

Sal nodded and placed the cat down at her feet. “Ultimately, corporations turned against theme park mascots. They’d break character sometimes when park visitors misbehaved, and would demand things like ‘pay’ and ‘rights’. With these projectors, you can rip a character straight off of the screen. I’ve been experimenting with them for a while. The cat was simple. Relatively speaking,” she quickly added, for fear of offending the cat. “Then I started to think bigger.”

“Love the dinosaur,” said Chris. “A stop motion dinosaur made of clay. So these projectors can give life to even inanimate material.”

“Of course,” said Sal. “They don’t give life to the clay, they give life to the story. The fiction. The belief that the clay is alive. That’s what’s being animated.”

Sang Mi was starting to get a twinge in her neck from turning to face Sal while being tied to a chair. “Why did you move us here? And why are we tied up?”

“Well, I thought I might just leave you both here,” said Sal. “Locked up in the archive, left to gather dust. A pair of lost stories nobody will be able to reconstruct. Tell you what...while I’ve got you here, let’s see how well you know your film history.”

From one of the shelves she pulled out a projector screen and set it up against the wall.

“Tell me if you recognize this.” She pushed a button and on screen was a still image of a train station.

“*The Arrival of a Train*, from 1896,” said Sang Mi, almost instantly. “Thought to be one of the earliest films ever made. Just a simple shot of a train pulling into a station. You know,” she said over her shoulder to Chris. “There’s this legend that the first audience it was shown to thought the train was going to burst through the screen and hit them.”

That statement sat there for a heavy moment.

Chris raised an eyebrow at Sal.

Sal just stood there and beamed.

“You realize,” Chris started, slowly, “That this is a very small room. If a train came in here, you’d be crushed too.”

“Would I?” Sal took a step close to the tied-up pair, letting them get a good look at her.

She waved her hand in front of Chris’ face, which at first he found annoying and obnoxious, but it suddenly became very interesting when he noticed her hand moving just a little bit too quickly. Or too slowly? It was hard to put his finger on what was wrong with her fingers, except that sometimes, for a split frame, it looks like there were more of them than there were.

“Wow,” said Chris at last. “Well done. You really have been experimenting, haven’t you?”

Sang Mi tried again to turn. “What’s happening?”

“She’s not really here,” said Chris. “She’s just a recording, like the others. A 4k, high definition recording, running at a higher frame rate and in full dazzling color, but a recording nonetheless.”

“Well,” said Sal, lowering her veil. “The show’s nearly over.”

She pushed a button on the protector and the still image of ‘The Arrival of a Train’ started to move, a grain now playing across the screen.

“Goodbye!” Sal waved, then the image of her fizzled. For a brief moment, she was entirely blue, then the image retracted, and all that was left was a floating silver ball with several black lenses. The omni-directional 3D projector that had been sitting where her heart was fell gently to the ground and rolled.

Chris and Sang Mi struggled to free themselves as the train on the screen came into view.

“What do we do?” asked Sang Mi. The rope was so thick and rough, it dug into her wrists as she pulled against it.

Chris’ mind reeled. Were they really about to be killed by something so simple? A nefarious villain tying them in front of an oncoming train? “Don’t panic. Panic isn’t helpful. Just pull.”

The pair pulled against the rope as hard as they could, and all the while they couldn’t take their eyes off the screen.

The train got closer.

Chris and Sang Mi were on the edge of their seats.

Closer and closer.

And then.

It stopped.

The train settled into the station.

The film ended.

Chris and Sang Mi sat in the darkness for a moment.

Sang Mi spoke up first. "I suppose those people who thought they were going to get hit by the train were a bit silly, weren't they?"

Chris gave a nod she wasn't in a position to see. "Very silly, yes."

"I suppose it makes sense really," Sang Mi said, relaxing back in her chair. "If she was making movies here, she wouldn't do anything to destroy the archive."

They both took a moment to breathe deeply.

Then the breath was ripped from their lungs.

A deafening blast like a canon and the sound of something heavy shattering echoed through the room and shook their hearts. Cans fell from the shelves and the shelves fell from the walls.

"What now?" Chris shouted, a little too loudly while his ears still rang.

Sang Mi knew immediately. "An explosion in the Lubin film vault. The...um...the gases, I can't remember. From the celluloid. It heated up and caused an explosion. The fire's started. We have to stop it!"

"We have to get free - one thing at a time."

Chris and Sang Mi struggled against the ropes once more, and the pain in their wrists returned as if they hadn't had a break.

"There has to be something to cut it with," said Sang Mi.

They became aware of the air around them, somehow thicker, heavier, dragging against their throats as they drew breath.

A confused meow caught them off guard.

The flickering cat climbed over the fallen shelves and film cans. Sang Mi wondered whether an AI-fueled 3D extrapolation of a character from a movie could feel heat.

Then she noticed the particular film can that the cat had its paw on. It had a label on the side that said 'A Little Hero'.

Another explosion shook Sang Mi, but somehow she didn't notice it as much this time. Because something was very wrong, and it sent her brain into a frantic rush.

A Little Hero was a silent movie from 1913. Granted, they were currently in 1914 - the time checked out. What didn't check out was the fact that she'd seen it. Sang Mi had seen A Little Hero.

If it burned here, in Lubin's archive, how is that possible?

She'd watched it with Sang Eun. It was a charming little film, barely 5 minutes, about a bird, a dog, and...a cat.

The flickering cat turned to look at Sang Mi, and in that moment, she got it.

She'd seen that movie because it wasn't a Lubin movie. It was made by Keystone. Which means it being here was wrong - it must be a copy. It must have been brought here by Salome.

And finally, she recognized the cat.

"Is that the movie you're from?" Sang Mi asked.

The cat just stared at her. It tilted its head slightly, judging her reaction.

Chris looked over his shoulder at her. "Making any progress?"

The air was thick and dark now. The fire was getting closer.

In *A Little Hero*, a dog saves a bird from a cat. If that's the movie this cat is from...

Sang Mi started whistling the best bird song she could conjure.

The cat's ears perked up immediately. The film it came from may have been silent, but the projector in its heart brought the story of the movies to life - it could hear the bird song.

It jumped towards Sang Mi and started attacking the rope, clawing at it and meowing. In moments, it was slack enough for Sang Mi to pull herself free. She turned and untied Chris.

A third explosion rocked the building.

Without saying a word, Chris took Sang Mi's hand and they ran. They burst out of the archive and escaped.

* * *

Sang Mi and Chris sat on a bench in the middle of Philadelphia. The fire brigade had arrived, but Sang Mi already knew how much they were able to save and how much was lost.

"There were only around 20 injuries, and no confirmed deaths, which is lucky," said Sang Mi eventually. "A lot of people worked there, in Lubinville - that's what they called it. There was one boy called Ray who was badly hurt. An actor called Harry C. Myers saved him. I saw him in a movie once..."

Chris could feel Sang Mi trying to work through it, speaking more to herself than to him. "That's history. It's the way it always was. But, for a moment, we got to be there, didn't we?"

Sang Mi nodded. "Now that moment's gone."

They both sat and listened to the noise of the sirens. Then a noise under the bench made them both jump.

They looked down and saw the flickering cat, curled up asleep. A little hero.

“Come on,” said Chris. “Let’s go watch a movie.” □

Interview: James Hornby

When did you realize you wanted to be an author?

After leaving college to study history at university. In hindsight I would have switched course to study creative writing, but know I would have flunked hard given the quality of my writing back then.

Do you have any memories of Chris in the *Virgin New Adventures* novels, before you started writing for him?

Yeah! I had read three VNAs with Chris in them. The most memorable for me was *Just War*, but maybe that was just because of Lance Parkin. When I got the gig for Cwej, I read quite a few VNAs to get a feel for him, starting with *Original Sin*.

How did you get into Arcbeatle Press?

As a reader, I stumbled across *White Canvas* when it came out, and discovered a whole new little corner of the *Doctor Who* universe.

As a writer, it was later that year. *Cwej: Down the Middle* was originally going to be published by Andy Lane, but plans changed and it found a home at Arcbeatle Press.

Which story of yours is your favorite? Is there one you wish people would talk about more?

I'm really quite proud of *A Feast to Remember*, and it's also one I wish people would talk about more. I had fun building a childhood for Dionus and what that might look like. I suppose it's one I had the most fun writing.

What are your thoughts on Chris Cwej's adventures so far? Is there anything you're particularly excited for people to read?

I've enjoyed the story so far, and have a fair bit of knowledge for where it's headed! I'm excited for people to read the finale of *Odyssey*, James Wylder has been cooking up something really special. Beyond that, we have the secrets to be uncovered in *Lungharrow by Loomlight*, and some very exciting stories in *Cwej: Seasons* beyond that.

Is there something you've always wanted to write, but never got the chance to?

I have a Dionus novel I've had a strong idea for since 2021. I've kept dipping in and out of it, rewriting chapters, jotting down new ideas, but it's never properly got off the ground. Hopefully one day.

Where can we find you on social media?

You can find me on BlueSky: @avarna.bsky.social

Any final thoughts? The floor is yours.

I'm just excited for readers to experience what we do at Arcbeatle Press. We put a lot of love into what we write.

Thank you for joining us!

Interview: Hunter O'Connell

Tell us about yourself.

Hmm, let's see. I live in Iowa. I love animals. I have an interest in theology, but I'm not a strong believer. Obscure communities like the *Doctor Who* Extended Universe are my bread and butter. I have a younger brother. I'm a Democrat. My favorite musical genres are rock and electronic. I'm allergic to soybeans. I am on the autism spectrum, but it doesn't affect me too much. Any other questions about more specific areas of my life? I'd be happy to answer them!

What made you want to become an author?

Ever since I was 6 or 7, I loved telling stories. Whether it be campfire stories told to the kids in Cub Scouts, or writing picture books for 2nd grade assignments, it was exhilarating to craft fiction for others to explore. Writing was pretty difficult back then, mostly because of my (at the time) awful handwriting, but I persevered and it became my dream to write for a living. Nowadays, I seem to have really slowed down in my writing, but this is because I want to tell stories that couldn't have been told by anyone else. I want my stories to be unique to me. And that's difficult to do regularly. Inspiration needs to hit me and leave a serious mark.

Of all the *Doctor Who* characters you could have based a series around, why Chris Cwej?

There are a number of reasons, but here's the main one. Chris Cwej is a character I read about while going through the various VNAs I owned at age 15-18. He was kind, but that kindness often got him way in over his head. By *Dead Romance*, my personal favorite Cwej novel, he was broken down, deconstructed, and his blind optimism and naivety was stripped away to reveal an immature, utterly unwell young man with the fate of the world resting on his shoulders. This fascinated me deeply.

I read *Dead Romance* while in a mental institution, so this feeling of being burdened by responsibility came off the page and shaped my opinion of Chris as one of the most human *Doctor Who* companions ever. The Doctor undervalued Chris to the point he abandoned him on Gallifrey, to live his life as a regeneration-infantry soldier in an unwinnable War. Pulled in so many directions he had to literally be split into pieces for the Time Lords to get everything they possibly could out of him. I know what it's like to not be wanted by the people you care about, and I know what it's like to be yanked every which way by those who don't have your best interests at heart. Chris Cwej is me if I didn't read about Chris Cwej.

How did you become involved with Arcbeatle Press?

I suppose my first interaction with James "Jeanne" Wylder was me sending a novel I wrote, titled *The Plague is Spreading*, around 2017. It was a very bad novel. After shopping *Cwej: Down the Middle* to a number of publishers who all turned it down, I found Jeanne again and reached out. The rest is history.

What story are you most proud of having written?

The Crystal in the Crater. Chris goes to therapy, with one of his clones as the psychologist. Horrifying revelations ensue. It's the most personal story I've ever written, and it's also my best. Please read it.

What can you tell us about upcoming *Cwej* releases?

You're all going to love them. Chris ventures to the House of Lungbarrow, where countless secrets are buried. A freed, yet deathless man has some tricks hidden up his sleeve. Two time-sensitive investigators cross paths with Cwej, and a fortune teller has an axe to grind with them. Now, deep in the Luminiferous Lodge, something is growing. Remains corrupted, marked with a compulsion to unravel. Death is coming for Chris Cwej. But when has that ever stopped him?

Are there any hopes you have for future projects?

Good question. I've never really had to hope, I've just used my convictions to do. So if I have any future projects in the cards, you will see them.

What would you like to say to fans on this 30th Anniversary?

Thank you for everything. Your patience is that of a saint. I appreciate everything you've done to keep Cwej's legacy alive, by reading the books and writing reviews. You are a truly wonderful group of fans that, I can't express enough, I am grateful for.

Where can we find you on social media?

Discord is hunterjoc. Bluesky is @hunteroc.bsky.social. My Facebook is under my name.

Thank you for joining us!

Poetry

And Today, You — Hunter O'Connell

To memorize the man
To know him, that's a start
To see a bear or deer
To love with all your heart

The darkest days are always
The ones without you there
The best days of my life are
The ones I see you care

And yesterday I saw you
And today, you saw me too
And when we're watched, we smile
Until the day is through

Requiem — Hunter O'Connell

There once was a man named G. Glasst
Musician was his chosen class
With notes he had written
He realized he'd bitten
Off more than he could chew, alas

Chris Cwej, Tyron, Fionara
Learned the truth of this destructive era
A sequence of notes
Which G. Glasst had wrote
Would destroy many planets... and Terra!

Through INITEC ships and dead lands
The heroes caught up with the man
But he never knew
All the people he slew
And a final concert was still planned

Absorbing the musical slaughter
Glasst began to wither and totter
He fell over dead
Yet with bloodlust unfed
Fionara killed; Tyron had got her

Chris sat there, stewing in hate
But he didn't dare take Tyron's bait
The Vicinity called him
To deny it would be dim
Cwej's new adventures await!

In the Next Issue of
Cwej30

Cwej: Odyssey

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

Expect
new interviews,
new poems,
and new art.

And Watch Soon For

Cwej:

The Lost Fictionaut

A journey into fiction
like you've never seen before!

See You Soon!