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**A Bright
White Crack**

by Hunter O'Connell



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-;/A>Vicinity_Message_1<A\;-

Carl Sagan, the most recognizable astronomer and most gifted wordsmith of the 20th century, suggested taking a photograph. It was a surprise that such a man, to whom analytical thinking came so easy, would care enough about photography to have a picture taken by Voyager 1, thrown several billions of miles into that unyielding void.

“Look, look! What’s that?” he may have said, “that’s where Earth is! I can barely see it from here! Take a picture, we’ve *got* to take a picture of this!”

Almost seven years later, with Voyager 1 still in operation, the man who took us one step closer to the stars he couldn’t yet reach left to join them. The countless lanterns in an endless stretch of black swirled around the Earth, white points wrapped across the dark blanket of night. The Pale Blue Dot stood still.

What if it didn’t? Just imagine, all the Pale Blue Dots of the entire cosmos, all those orbiting things, lined up at once. Imagine if we just took one and looked at it changing forms and shifting places as the Universe expanded and, eventually, crunched.

Lining up every Earth at every point in time. From dusk till dawn of each day, existing, *being*. Imagine if we tried, just once, to understand our surroundings, because

all that surrounded us was us. A Bright White Crack, try to visualize that...

Now get it out of your head, because that's not how it works.

The Universe is a myth.

No, that doesn't mean it's a simulation. Look at it like this. "Uni-" is a prefix meaning "single." That is to say, and try to keep an open mind... there's more than one. Instead of thinking Earth could benefit from more of itself, realize that *there already are more Earths*.

It isn't a matter of Earth at every stage of its life, it's a matter of every single version Earth has to offer, tangled in the knots of life and death and everything in between, every single thing you can imagine *already happening*.

You want an Earth where, say, H. P. Lovecraft insults you to your face and then the world grows limbs and roles away? It's already there. What about an Earth where you're actually happy, or sad, or Satan himself calls an online post you made cringe, or your high school history teacher finally gives you the wink and thumbs-up you always craved? Been there, done that.

Overwhelmed yet? If so, don't worry, because in this log we'll only focus on one. This is my story. This is my experience as an agent for my Superiors. This is Christopher Cwej, signing off.

/log_end./

Cwej pressed the Vicinity's mind transporter button on the back of his neck. What a day. He felt the rush of relief, now that his most recent mission was over. It'd been one of his most ludicrous jobs he'd had to perform for his Superiors. Each time they got more and more silly and trite. His philosophy nowadays was this: those who lived in ignorance of their nature in the vast tapestry that formed the Totality

had, at the very least, larger roles within the Universal narrative, having more work to fill their existence with, in comparison to the beings who had chosen a side in the War.

The mission he had released himself from was one to remember, if for all the wrong reasons. The Democratic Saturnian Entanglement had been on the brink of unraveling the mechanics to recreate the creation of the Linear Universe, and if they could recreate it, they could just as easily destroy it. Cwej's Superiors had of course been the race who'd established the Linear Universe in the first place. They certainly didn't want all Their hard work spoilt by some lower-life forms in the evolutionary ladder! They'd sent Chris off to deal with the crisis, watching the time until he returned successful to his monitored Vicinity.

Cwej had put a stop to the Entanglement's machinations with an elaborate set-up, tricking the Saturnians, to ensure their findings were forgotten about: he'd implemented the rings of Saturn, in reality, a group of highly powerful disintegrators capable of turning the planet into a gaseous dust-ball if the Entanglement so much as glanced at their paperwork.

He didn't want to think about what would happen to whoever was left on Saturn.

"Drink, please," he said once he was transported back. As soon as he uttered that single phrase, a banana smoothie showed up in his hand, immediately becoming physical (or, at least, as physical as something can get in a consciousness download). The Vicinity was just as devoid of detail as always, but he liked it that way. Chris Cwej's Superiors were the most complex pan-dimensional beings the Totality had ever produced. He didn't need the added distractions of decorative flair in his quarters.

Cwej's requested construction was an endless stretch of fog, solidifying where the ground should be. The gray could only be comparable to a Floridian marsh during the summer, just substituting all the heat for double the sticky humidity.

Cwej's Vicinity was inside of a computer, after all, and computers overheat. At least the place came with a fan, if the Superiors were feeling generous. Sometimes Chris lived with a body instead of as a pure downloaded consciousness, things were much cooler when he had skin. Maybe it was one of those "grass is greener on the other side of the fence" scenarios.

Today was the three-year anniversary of his creation as a V-Time experiment. He was the only one of his kind, and he wouldn't have it any other way. His enigmatic Superiors had stripped his flesh away, and They'd put him in an endless room where he could wish for anything he could ever want.

He'd marked the anniversary on his virtual calendar earlier that "week" (with time being nonexistent in this place, he had to rely on the old Wartime calendar method). He'd even brazenly asked the Superiors to contract another of Their many agents to fulfil his missions for him today. After all, it was an anniversary!

The request obviously didn't go down well. The psychic voices of his bosses boomed through his mind. *You are a servant of the most powerful and important causal beings in the Totality, and unlike those superfluous years you wasted with police work, you do not get sick days.*

Well, for what it was worth, he didn't like being kept in a grayish virtual room. He didn't like seeing coded dreams and waking up to find that he was still a slave to his masters. At least during missions he had a body, his mind plucked from the digital realm of the Vicinity and deposited into a fleshy vessel that was known as Chris Cwej. He was still part of the system though. Chris sheepishly recalled a distant time when he'd thought being dead was better than assisting the maintenance of the laws created by the Superiors: those beings who wove Their likenesses into the biology of every being.

Ah, all those days gone by made him wince with embarrassment. He knew his place, and it wasn't in questioning authority, not anymore.

He was a police officer, the protector of righteous laws, and a time-traveler from the 30th century. And in the years that marked the War? Well, it was easy to ask what Chris hadn't been...

The gray, foggy color swirling around Chris' avatar started to feel eerie. Just as he was getting ready to sit down and watch some experimental horror movies from the 90s (2690s, that is), a crackle of static wind invaded his senses, seemingly enunciating words to mimic the language of old.

"Yes?" he said to the wind calling out his name. "Yes, what is it? What do you want, guys?"

That's when he noticed what was wrong. This wasn't a normal mission from the enigmatic creatures that employed him. This wasn't even a mission at all. It was a broken record. There were the same inflections, that same tone on repeat. *Chris Cwej Chris Cwej Chris Cwej Chris Cwej.*

The realization made him nearly tip over in his virtual chair and fall into the smoke. The voice sounded distressed, unlike any message he had received from the Superiors so far. Staring upward out of human instinct to find the higher power in the most literal way possible, he failed to notice his chair sinking into the endless fog.

The gray clouds swirled across the ground, parting for the chair like rippling water. As the ever-encroaching particles of the fog came closer to Cwej's line of sight, he looked down, but it was too late. He was pulled down through the Vicinity's solid ground.

The darkness seemed twice as expansive to Cwej as the VY Canis Majoris, as black and as massive as the Boötes Void. Cwej was alone. He was left without help from his employers, and felt concerned and uneasy that someone, somewhere, somehow, had outsmarted the faceless gods he worked for. Something was wrong.

He slid down a steep hill on his behind. Something smooth, like plastic, a plastic slide from his childhood. It was the edge of something.

No... It was the edge of everything.

The Universe, every single one known to human and Superior alike, has an edge. Look at reality as if it were two conveyor belts, one above the other, and the conveyor belts had funnels stuck to them with Elmer's Glue or something.

The funnel represents the Universe's basic shape, according to the Picard Horn model. My Superiors, or at least a few of Them, have gone outside the boundaries of space itself. For those whose biology and home existence are basically synonymous, it's quite a feat. Regardless, They saw the shape of the Universe as a Horn when exiting it.

So, the Universe is a funnel, and every other Universe is the same shape in this conveyor belt scenario. Two belts moving opposite to each other, each funnel tip touching another tip for a small amount of time, just small enough for those at the tip to peer down to the other Universe.

Some call the space between the funnels the Time Vortex, but I've been instructed to call it the Bifrost. The Superiors said something about changing the name thanks to a negotiative effort... Anyways, sorry for interrupting.

It took Chris two days to realize he wasn't going back to the experimental safe-haven of the Vicinity.

Cwej had been human once. More precisely, he was part of a species called the Cwejen; they were clones from a War against an unseen adversary, a War that had eventually finished. Supposedly there had been an original Chris Cwej

before the Spawning of the Multitude of Cwejen. Now existed a population of 12 billion Cwejen in the Totality, which was the name assigned to the Universe in order for the Superiors to shun anything claiming to live in higher realms of being than Them. Each of the Cwejen was created within the engine of a flesh machine, and bred for the long-ended War. Once the temporal battlefields fell silent, the manufacturing of Cwejen ceased.

Each clone within the Cwej ranks had been given a name and identification to represent their relationship to the original Cwej's personal history. Prime, Plus, Magnus, and now, Cwej-V: the ultimate Cwej experiment by the very creators of time. The Superiors liked to claim that, anyways. Chris kept repeating this to himself to ground his mind, on the brink of collapse. Cwej-V had signed his soul away to a digital dimension within a large databank stored at the core of the Superiors' Base of Operations, Their jewelled home planet at the centre of the seven galaxies. Now that Chris was downloaded and his flesh stripped away, he could "upload" (if that's the right term) into 7 million of the Cwejen that the Superiors had stationed in places of significance across the cosmos. His job was simple: prevent the War from happening again.

This is what he thought to himself ad nauseum for a few days in pure space. The facts were hardly reassuring to his situation, but they made him feel almost real. In reality, he was the least real person in the Totality.

Twenty-eight days in darkness, feeling yourself falling sideways on a plastic surface that was neither hot nor cold, but the opposite of both, was enough to drive anyone mad. Each time Christopher Cwej felt a tug on his sanity, his artificial brain rearranged itself. It was torture, needing to have your data changed in order to keep your mind intact.

Whatever glitch this was that made him no-clip through the floor of creation like in a buggy video game, it was clear

the Superiors were too preoccupied to take care of his worthless existence.

Chris Cwej Chris Cwej Chris Cwej Chris Cwej Chris Cwej Chris Cwej, that was all he heard.

You are ready.

What?

Twenty-eight days on repeat. His name, over and over. Something different now assaulting his senses felt unnatural, kind of sickening. It wasn't right.

Then he saw a light, burning as bright and magnificent as a supernova, and engulfing him like a Broadway play stage light. A voice croaked, one he didn't recognize. It sounded like a frog having a head cold while choking on a fly. "Yes, I think he is." The light got closer until he could make out what it was.

He was leaving the Universe. The funnel's exit was in view.

Chris woke up. Funny, he could have sworn his hardware wouldn't allow him to sleep until just recently. That was the only thing he'd wanted the Superiors to change in Their agreement originally, but They couldn't find the time or resources to program him with different dreams each night.

His ears were ringing, his eyes were watering, and his head throbbed with immeasurable pain. With each second his eyesight began to come back, showing him a piece of the puzzle.

He felt the hair on top of his head rubbing against a sort of prickly, evenly dispersed, well-kept substance. It smelled like an Earth-based plant. Was he on Earth? Whichever Earth he was on, he could tell with the amount of light coming through the initial dark that it was around 2 p.m. and that something bright and semi-large was in his line of sight.

He got up, rubbed his eyes, and found himself smack-dab in the center of a courtyard. He was right: he was lying down on a patch of grass, face-first. When he got up, he

could still feel pain, as if he'd hit his head on a rock. There were only rocks in some flowerbeds, as far as he could see, so it couldn't have been that.

He was feeling fatigued, after the ordeal of nothingness that had taken nearly a month of his life. He thought of maybe just lying back down and waiting to download back into the Vicinity, but then he heard the commotion, and his curiosity grew larger by the second.

Cameras clicked and flashed, blinding him further. Chatter cluttered his senses. The bright day illuminated the grass, which was an unusual shade of green. A press conference was in progress around him. He saw cyclopean pillars of painted white, connected by a pediment. There were protests outside the courtyard, nothing too spectacular, but one sign truly stuck out like a sore thumb. "Do Something, Mr. President." He looked back at the mansion. He was at the White House, and he found himself dressed like a reporter, wearing a beige suit and dark brown pants that seemed to clash in an unfashionable way. He felt a ring on his finger, which, upon closer inspection, looked a lot like his time ring in the Totality. Everyone was trying to get attention from the man at the dais, spitballing and holding microphones up like children raising their hands to answer a teacher's question.

He always remembered hearing about the White House as a kid. He didn't expect it to be this small. Columns as tall as he was had been drawn in the picture books to be as tall as skyscrapers.

Americans. Gotta love 'em and their arrogance.

"You okay, Chris?" He jumped, startled, half-expecting to see the grey clouds of his data-home. Instead, he saw a woman with disheveled red hair in a semi-bun, wearing a skirt of plaid material, looking at him with questioning eyes.

"Um, yeah, I suppose you could say that... but if you'll indulge me, be honest... Who the hell are you, and what on Earth am I doing here?"

She chuckled through gritted teeth. That didn't help. "You're a real stranger sometimes, Cwej. But next time, you could at least pay attention, they're about to ask questions about the meteor..."

"Meteor? Huh..." Cwej was still shaken up by his adventure in monotony, but that only made his speculations all the stronger.

"You're sure you're okay, right Cwej? You seem, I don't know, confused."

He ignored whoever she was, and tuned in to the questions being asked. "Mr. President, will you apologize on behalf of all other world leaders for the negligence of the meteor's potential threat to Earth?"

"Well, to answer your question, I have spoken with the leaders of several UN countries and we are all going to meet in order to assess the probability that another meteor will come close to collision. We are committed to—"

Cwej lost interest at this point. He observed the seething crowd of reporters, mentally noting that each of the people attending this conference wore clothes very indicative of the 21st century, most likely the mid-2030s by the looks of the cameras they were using. But *which* mid-2030s was he in?

He'd long since come to terms with being a clone, nothing more than one part of the Multitude of the countless Cwejen, but suddenly his confusion felt like that of a naturally-bred human. He thought he could remember his past, but now the very concept of that past was fragmented, a solitary shard lost within the ever-growing mystery of where he was and how he had been transported away. Perhaps his past had been rewritten. Perhaps he'd received another one altogether. Perhaps he'd never had one.

He felt a pressure on his leg and, after a moment of fumbling, pulled a HoloPhone Flat out of his pocket, a sheet of near-indestructible glass that used nanotechnology to create the illusion of applications and circuitry. It was consistent with the 2020 model he'd once been allowed to

fiddle with at a nostalgic lunar colony expo of Earth gadgetry. Well, at least that detail stayed the same upon Universal transit.

There must be some sort of news headline, Cwej thought in silence, there must be. I have to figure out why I'm here. There must be some probable explanation.

A hop, skip and a retweet away, there it was, clear as day. The front page of WaPo, CNN, the BBC, anyone who was anyone, all of them were talking about the meteor that had nearly destroyed all life on Earth (or at least their Earth), and how poorly prepared the leaders were for such a catastrophe. A literal extinction event was just narrowly avoided by a few miles of distance. Otherwise, it would have been pulled into the exosphere and who knows if anyone would have survived?

Cwej realized the severity of the situation, standing in the patch of grass and listening to the reporters' questions to the President on why they'd had no plan prior to the meteor arriving. Obviously, this was serious, but what weighed more on his mind was the fact that these weren't his clothes, that girl wasn't his partner, and this wasn't his Earth, nor was it his Universe. And that man would never in a million years have gotten to be President.

He listened in on the answers the President gave and jotted them down on his HoloPhone:

- Yes, we have contacted the Artillery Base of Oregon to request they use their stock load of missiles to shoot down any and all spatial threats that rear their heads in the future.

- No, we do not plan on that.

- As stated earlier, every country within the United Nations is committed to ensuring the future of the Earth, and talks are being held to create a new plan of action for all meteors, asteroids, and comets in the future.

- I can't answer that at this time.

- The plan will take effect in two weeks. This issue is one that supports the futures of the children of the world, the future of humanity, and our fragile ecosystem. A meteor entering the Earth's gravity could end life in the oceans of Earth as we know it.

Chris sighed in apathy. As bad as it sounded, he could do nothing. He had higher qualified services than what was required in these Earthly affairs. After all, whoever had brought him here was obviously not malicious. Whoever'd swept him away to this version of Earth must have only wanted help stabilizing this world after it had nearly been destroyed. Chris could do nothing to assist the collateral damage this disaster had wrought. Now with national politics making an even larger mess of a situation already steeped swathes of humanity's biggest short-coming: The fear of the unknown.

These people were denied progress by their fragile egos, was it fair to help? Cwej thought for a moment. His mind on a coin's edge, to help, or to leave? Was this even worth his time? He felt a shiver of mild annoyance, he'd been taken here against his will. Even the Superiors gave him some warning, some context! The moment ended, he'd decided.

He just couldn't. This wasn't his place, this wasn't his choice, and most importantly, this wasn't his Earth. He didn't have the right. He had to find a way back.

The press conference ended about an hour and a half later, and Cwej would be lying if he said he hadn't gotten tired of the blue sky. Why couldn't it be a gray, similar to his Vicinity? Why couldn't it be multicolored or pink or something?

The overhead layer of blue that enveloped the world he now stood on reminded Chris of the curved and imprisoning dome of the City Firmament on the Base of Operations. Even

the Vicinity was preferable to those options. He'd traded one prison for another, for another.

Hailing a taxi, Chris reeled in the cool leather seat, the imagery rushing by in thick, blurred colors. The sights and sounds of this Earth whirled by.

It was all too overwhelming, his senses flaring into overload. The grass felt too green, the White House felt too white, and the cab, now stopped, seemed too yellow. Chris fell out into the streets in a bundle, the piercing green of the dollar notes he handed to the driver winked knowingly at him. The rush of the many colors pounded his very essence.

The grass is always greener on the other side, as the saying goes, but that doesn't always mean it's a better shade.

He collapsed on the bed of a hotel room several minutes later, in the same way a kid would shape their body to make a snow angel. Perhaps when he got back to the Totality, snow would be what he needed to see on his next mission.

"Scotch, please." He held out his hand in anticipation for a drink. It did not come.

Oh. Right.

Chris sighed into the silence of his hotel room. It hit him, the blue of the sky, the green of the grass, the brown wooden panels in his room for the night. The colors persisted. They were permanent. Chris admitted defeat.

I might be here for a while.

After a few mournful moments, Chris decided he'd make the most of his terrestrial exile. He wondered if Uber existed on this version of Earth. He imagined the undulating chorus of human conversation, the flowing taps of booze, and most of all, the comfort of company. Chris imagined contact; the warmth of humanity against his skin, that what was he needed.

Perhaps he was to go to a bar? Gay, straight, any communal place with the possible allure of meeting others with whom he could share his soul for some time. Chris wondered if he would venture into the wilderness of DC's

Nightlife if he found more than just a night of passion...hell, maybe he'd meet just the right person (or people) and be able to go on a proper date?

I might be here for a while, Cwej repeated the newly formed mantra in his head.

He looked up at the ceiling, far away he felt a prescient shiver, as if a great storm was growing strong on a distant horizon...

Realizing for the first time how itchy his human clothes were, Chris' mind flitted back to his present circumstances. He wished he could wear that skin-tight armor he'd **so** loved, he wished tha—

Darkness. It's getting darker. Am I going back home? Is this sleep? Am I finally going to drift off into real, honest-to-Goddess dreams? Is this all just one big dream?

The thoughts fumbled around in the fog of his extracorporeal brain. Perhaps by luck, or by the influence of whatever powerful force had dragged him through the cascading vortexes of the Bifrost, Cwej rolled over on the TV remote. And in the flicker of a screen, Cwej lost hope for the world.

Chaos.

Death.

Burning.

Chris Cwej, the fool, regarded the piles of images flooding the screen of the television. Not even the most grotesque horror film would show such horrific desolation of human lives... Never before had he seen so many bodies squeezed into one frame of film. Cwej opened his mouth, half-expecting a scream, but all he could muster was a stifled retch at sight of the images that burned onto his retinas. Yet he couldn't keep his gaze away. The tragedy was captivating in its obscenity.

This was *real*.

This had happened, was happening, now. These scenes of death and terror weren't some distorted fiction, Chris saw

the caption on the footage, it was a live news channel, streaming the announcement of this imminent extinction, beaming a barrage of visual depictions of this unmitigated tragedy straight to the screens of the screaming American populace.

Live.

He pressed the power button. The room kept getting darker... and darker... and darker... His lights went out...

No amount of missions could have prepared him for what he experienced beyond the darkness.

Drifting through the void of his mind, Chris at last heard them... Contact...

Hey love, still on for tomorrow? Let's have a quiet one, just get something from the Chippy and watch some telly at your flat. xx

Splendid. I think that's a perfectly reasonable time!
All's on track for our official reopening. Let's shoot
for tomorrow.

Night son! Remember Luke's in the morning! He has that cool old computer there. You'll love it, mate! See ya tomorrow!!

I can't believe it's starting tomorrow! I've set a reminder for when it airs. Can't wait to watch it!

That reoccurring word...It haunted Chris, the promise that would never come: "Tomorrow."

Cwej snapped out of his trance. He felt like he was back in the digital realm.

He stopped to think. Those words, those voices, seemingly incongruous messages... Chippy, flat, morning...

Then it hit him.

He had just witnessed the final words of British civilians—their final messages to their loved ones. These

were ones that died, the ones who were burnt alive by the incoming disturbance in the atmosphere crashing down. He heard thunder, felt the shake of the Earth, and with that he knew that there'd been an impact, some juggernaut smashing into the surface of that tiny island and shattering the crust of the world, killing millions in the process.

He'd once been to a Universe where only Great Britain survived. Now they were the first to go. He felt himself shedding a tear for those poor people, for that stubborn nation that had survived two World Wars, for all the culture that would never see tomorrow.

This was the same meteor he'd seen on his phone, that all of humanity saw in the sky. He knew that no spatial bodies could circle back. He knew this for a fact. Something had to have been piloting that asteroid into the exosphere, all the way to the surface. It was a deliberate attack!

The reason it was so dark would've been because of the brief period whereby the meteor shielded the Sun.

So this was why he was planted here. It was a cry for help. To stop the culprit who had planned this out. To find the terrorists that'd destroyed this planet...

"Hey, if you can hear me, thank you for sending me here. I promise to do all I can to stop them."

2

Chaos Matter. Found exclusively on the planet Alma, Chaos Matter had been added to the Universal periodic table. Anyone born on a level 15 planet would remember... well, nothing, actually. The whole discovery was very boring unless you were one of the few people who knew about the dangerous effects of it.

If calibrated correctly, this foreign matter would destroy civilizations, wipe out entire planets, exactly as the name implied. Oceans would become waterfalls and cascade off the edge of any spacial body it touched. The

creatures on such a mass would have their floors and walls switch places, a gravity shift of ninety degrees for all living matter. If they had nothing to stand on, they'd tumble into the vacuum of space, suffocating.

As they'd move away from the chaotic side-gravity of the other matter, they would fall back into a deadly orbit around the weirdly distorted atmosphere of the world—its “devil plumes” of atmosphere peaking into space in two places like horns. In time, the interference between normal gravity and Chaos-Gravity could leave the atmosphere thinned, even the safer places left gasping and increasingly uninhabitable.

This was tested and immediately classified. At that time, I still had no idea where it all went, but now, after having seen it barreling toward Earth, I know that it wasn't a meteor. All the Chaos Matter made it to whichever Universe I'd found myself in, and its pilots crashed it straight into the world.

Heinous, disgusting, horrible. Using a forbidden fruit of the Totality to kill billions and harm so many others. That's what I thought until it got a whole lot more complicated...

Washington DC in ruins. The Washington Monument became less of an obelisk and more of a strange beak from a sort of malformed toucan. The White House, Cwej could see, was breaking apart, becoming nothing but scaffolding. Buildings are not made to support their own weight from the side. Luckily, this far from the impact, the effects were not total, and what he was seeing was a mixture of two gravities fighting each other. The sky was full of water, torn from the Atlantic which, striking the coast, had arched and flung itself into the depths of the heavens.

Bridges became ladders, with no support from the gravity to keep them structurally sound. Trees were also shifted ninety degrees, crushing lumberjacks under their

weight. Cwej could see those who had human anatomy—basically everyone but his altered body—becoming disoriented by the sudden change in the gravity belt, the fluid in their ear canals that kept them balanced suddenly becoming confused, making them crash through windows, falling straight out as if they were jumping on purpose.

Just three minutes. That's all it took to get like this. Cwej was now standing on a wall, avoiding the bed that broke free of its frame and came at him with a *thud*. The bed eventually fell out of the window, which gave him an idea.

Alright, let's see. There are still plenty of trees and grass. Perhaps if I claw my way up... No. I can't make it to the White House, or hell, even the courtyard, I'll never be able to. It's a ninety-degree climb, not even a Disney roller coaster is a full uphill climb. But...

Unless I do it, I'll be stuck on the wall. I can't help in any way if I don't.

Christopher Cwej, digging his fingers into dirt to escape gravity. Christopher Cwej, swinging from vines like he was cruking Tarzan. Christopher Cwej, humming a tune he'd picked up from his time as an Adjudicator as the world ended.

Thanks a lot, Isaac Newton, thought Cwej, Should have stuck with alchemy.

Chris was in awe that a bit of spare regen energy existed in his fingers. He'd have to figure out why later. He directed it at the tips of his fingers. With a thought, he made his nails stretch out and harden, twisting them into claws long enough to dig into the ground-which-was-a-wall. He always hated his nails getting too long, but 30th-century life had seen him take on much, *much* weirder shapes even before the Superiors had found him.

Perhaps he was born just a millennium after his time.

Crawling up... and up... and up...

Until...

Around twenty minutes later, Cwej made it to the road. This was going to be much more difficult, as he couldn't dig his nails through solid asphalt. He'd have to grab onto the curb. In a desperate scramble, Chris persisted, sweat horizontally dripping from his upturned brow. He *had* to persevere. Giving up couldn't be an option yet, surely? He wouldn't be responsible for allowing the villains who'd inflicted this havoc upon Earth to escape and kill again. Ignoring his protesting body, Chris endured the pain.

Chris bent his hands till his finger joints ached. He grabbed onto the pavement with too much force, skinning his elbows on the edge and going right through his suit.

The pain was unexpected, even though it was barely anything. He tried grabbing at whatever he could get a hold of, scrambling like a small, unsuspecting child drawing straws. As it turned out, the proverbial straw he chose to claw at was the short one.

He tumbled through the sky. A few of his bones broke on the occasional impact with the wall-ground, and he screamed out in agony as each bout of whiplash through the dark, grayish sky hit him full-force.

His spinal column twisted and molded into shapes only regen soldiers back in the War had accomplished, and he could taste the blood spurting out of his mouth. He eventually grabbed hold of a fire hydrant after six or so tumbles and several vertebrae shattered.

Panting, nearly dead, wishing he was never born, Chris found himself on the verge of letting go. Perhaps the second time around would take him back to the Vicinity. Perhaps the girl from the Solar Kingdom was there, brown hair in a braid, marble rolling around in her palm, still handing out banana smoothies to those who wanted them. He should have said goodbye, but duty called him elsewhere. Perhaps he would have to slide back on his rear for twenty-eight more days, the thought of which scared him enough to regain his grasp on the cold red handle of the hydrant.

His bones rapidly started to slot back into place under his skin, and he felt them restoring themselves with the precision of his old Wartime Cwej-form. He was a regen soldier. His body melded back together with otherworldly tendrils sucking the bones into a heap of internal Play-Doh, a mound of tissue covered by skin.

Cwej was in awe. Not because the world was ending and eight billion people would eventually suffer far worse blows than he did, not because of how lucky he was, but because of the implications that had just sprung from the fall he endured. The result...

He wasn't some alternative Universe variant, he was put here by Them. He was in an alternative Universe, and he was a clone, a Cwej hanging onto a fire hydrant by a single hand, the other hand too busy touching the back of his neck, where his mind transporter used to be. None of this made sense...

He was in a cave. There was no Vicinity here, he was certain of that. If he had pressed the point on his neck while in the Totality, he would have travelled, mind and soul, into his gray, dull, atmospheric base of operations.

But no, he was in a cave. The temperature gave him all the information he needed to determine that he was in the inner mantle of Earth. Was this... Was this *his* Earth? No, it couldn't be. He could feel a slight tip, a shift as it were, but nowhere near as strong as the surface. This was the same Earth he'd been in before, just deeper down. He had fallen further than he thought...

The entire cavern he was standing in was lit a sickly green, as stalactites precariously lofted above the buried room carved out from what he assumed was a tectonic plate too low to properly manipulate the crust. In the corner of his eye, Chris noticed some upright tubes...

And froze.

Cwejen, rows and rows of Cwejen. Lined up from Prime to Plus to Magnus.

This didn't make any sense!

His mind and soul must have been shunted into the nearest Cwej body on this Earth, scattering his new body's previous consciousness into the ether; just as he had done when he first arrived in this realm, his mind having hijacked the now-lost body of the reporter Cwej he'd inhabited only moments ago.

It seemed strangely convenient just how many Cwej-forms existed on this world, not just within this underground bunker. He wasn't going to disregard his good fortune though, no matter how suspect this scenario seemed.

Just his luck, he thought, that his new body had belonged to a Guard-Cwej...A guard for this strange underground operation. Where was he, anyway? Was this some higher-project he was never briefed on?

Why were there so many Cwejen in stasis? His Superiors wouldn't lie to him about ending production on his species, would They?

He rushed over to the computer screen attached to the wall, locked-up memories hazily stirred, the sight of the wall-screen sent shivers of recollection through Chris, it reminded him of the faded visage of an ancient scanner, once owned by that Evil Renegade...

Chris had the blurred image of his erstwhile once-captor: that conniving figure, a timeship pilot, who had long-ago spirited Cwej away.

Cwej focused on the monitor. He worked a controller, pressed a few buttons on the screen itself, typed in his Cwej-Identification, and watched as a video started playing.

**|^~Welcome, Cwejen, to your new life with us,
your Superiors! We have pre-programmed you
with necessary instructions regarding the
planned Takeover of Dawn 1,027. Please line up,
single file, and be sure to type in your separate
Cwej-Identification, followed by the number 4.**

**We will be with you shortly upon you hearing
this message.~`|**

“Takeover of Daw—”

Dawn 1,027? He couldn’t remember hearing about any world by that name, but it reminded him of the naming conventions of...

Oh. Cruk me.

“Computer,” barked Chris in an urgent flurry, “Give me all the information you can on the 10,000 Dawns. Now!”

**|~ The 10,000 Dawns are a total of ten thousand
alternative Universes, living alongside one
another and occasionally bleeding into each
other. The Christmas Needle Agreement, with all
the Forces of Power that were needed being
present, allowed for harmony to be restored
throughout the Multiverse and beyond.**

**The 10,000 Dawns are reigned over by an
inferior race of creatures with primitive
conceptual threading abilities, the Firmament,
who use a method of travelling through space on
resizable moons, known as Foces, through the
Bifrost. A ridiculous and underdeveloped group,
they have broken the Agreement and We are
retaliating.~`|**

“Wait, so, okay, uh, hold on here, just one moment—
how did the Firmament break the Treaty thing, and why?”

|~Insufficient data.~`|

“No, that’s a lie. You know the answer,” Chris said sternly.

|~Insufficient data.~`|

Chris slowly looked toward the glass tubes. Cwejen lined the walls for miles. Were the Superiors behind the meteor? All he could do was try and piece together the puzzle.

The Cwej-form he was using had been let out early to make sure the humans were unaware of the upcoming destruction of their Earth. He had beamed into the body for whatever reason, from whatever force, and had woken up where the last Cwej had left off. He couldn't save the Earth.

Maybe the Superiors hadn't been honest with him? Maybe he had been lied to this whole time, along with all the other Cwejen and beings doing Their bidding.

Cwej-V, that's what They'd called him. The V could stand for Vicinity, of course, but it could also stand for... Victim...

He had enough. Cwej didn't *want* to be a victim anymore. What was the point of stringently adhering to his Superiors orders? If he remained compliant, he'd be just as responsible for this destruction as those who had unleashed it. He wasn't going to take it any longer.

Cwej was going to save Earth.

After all, this was now his Earth as much as the Totality's Earth, and since he had apparently been deceived all along, he wasn't going to let Them tell him where he belonged any longer. His new destiny lay in the stars of this realm, it lay in the righteous cradle of his chosen morality. The Superiors weren't **so** superior, Cwej decided.

Chris was in the right. He also had a plan... as well as having enough weapons and toxic waste to wipe off what little life was left on this Goddess-forsaken planet, the Superiors also had military-grade spaceships, scathe-like carriages that could sweep Chris away from this sunken base...

The Superiors probably wouldn't miss one, if someone were to take it.

Not too long afterwards, with the burning thrust of the Superiors' push-away engines, Cwej flew straight out of the tunnel that had been drilled from the inner mantle all the way through to the surface. He guided his ship straight up, which any pilot worth their salt would tell you is never good. Pressure gauges fluctuated, blinking, blithering and bleeping until they didn't, yadda yadda yadda. Rocket science and the technique of piloting was more a chore for Cwej than a dashing escape.

Chris had become used to g-force by year three of his existence.

The green tint to the walls of the inner mantle quickly flew by him, faster and faster. The pressure made his ears pop immediately. He could feel it in his throat. His face was blown against the upholstery and drooped when he reached the surface minutes later. At the speed he was going, he could have fried the boosters if his Superiors hadn't programmed him to his level of care and precision.

He was high above the clouds, racing into the stratosphere, watching all the scenery of Earth zooming past his ship like it was trying to avoid him. Perhaps it was because he'd stolen the ship. The sky turned a deep black, a shade he knew far too well from the twenty-eight days before his newfound adventure. It was lit with more stars than his bandwidth could count, even if he tried.

As his ship turned, he could see the devastation of this Earth more clearly. Perhaps a thousand miles around the impact point—and spreading—the effects were at their strongest, the sheer strength of the rock underlying the British Isles no longer sufficed to hold them. Not just people; forests and buildings were falling sideways, but the landscape itself was smearing, like a wet painting being brushed with a heavy hand. The chaotic gravity, operating in lines of force tangential to the natural contour of normal space-time, flung the broken bones of Britain into the sky. The effect was like a dark fan of material, exploding outward

as if the Earth were a plum pudding on a saucer of black bone around which wisps of air and water boiled. The effect was spreading, and—unless it could be halted—there would be no survivors.

The darkness of space on one side, the darkness of the debris on the other made it impossible to track the orbit of any ship that might be manipulating the meteor. The planet's own satellite network was burning in a cascade of collisions, and the peaks and troughs of the gravity interference were flinging away or dragging down, even those that were equipped with collision avoidance devices. If the meteor could be removed, this damage alone would take years to undo. Against the darkness, against the speckled burning of the end of the Satellite Age, Cwej strained his eyes in vain—for something of a different magnitude or nature.

Cwej knew that the scanners showed no sign of a timeship in this Dawn, but how was he supposed to know the machine wasn't lying to him as well? After all, it was designed by *Them*.

Then, it started to come back to him, the little tips and tricks he'd picked up during his first training flight with one of the other Superior agents. That guy had been a bit of an odd duck, if Chris was being honest. Lots of tendrils and bugs crawling through his orifices.

Didn't seem to care, though.

The man had had a trick with scanners. The thing to remember, he'd said, spitting out a beetle or two, is that what they show isn't what you'd see if you could stick your head out. Everything is an approximation, and you can change what is emphasized.

Chris told the computer to make the Earth transparent, to hide the visible, to mute the final flares of the dying satellites. To show diagrammatically the interactions of gravity itself. The sphere / funnel—depending on how your eyes were oriented to the normal flow, the flowing distortion—proceeded from a specific point, and above that

point, the still bubble. They had been cunning, these slaughterous bastards. Their ship was under power, holding itself near the turning Earth, but They had engineered their chaotic meteor's gravity to avoid Their own ship, so as to only have to deal with one set of forces. It made it so much easier for their pilots, but it also made them detectable.

Cwej saw, hovering over the impact site of the meteor, a small, cylindrical ship, boosters suspending it stationarily in a single spot, allowing it not to be pulled in by the now useless concept of gravity.

That's my ticket, Cwej thought. He made his move. His ship skirted across the planet's exterior lengthwise, angling upward. It felt like a crane game he was playing, and he was so close to receiving his prize. So very close.

He grabbed a microphone from out of its compartment, an oxy-norm mic that could allow those hearing a message, even without oxygen, to carry the noise. He didn't expect the Superiors to have such a primitive device within Their spaceships, but maybe he only now noticed it because of the blinders They'd placed on him.

He put it toward his mouth and spoke. Cwej's voice rose through space, a bellow carried across the hanging vacuum around him... "You thought you'd seen the last of me, didn't You? You cruking evil, despicable parasites will never learn. Why build anything more, when You have so much to *destroy*? Stop kidding Yourselves. *What's the point in supremacy if all You do is kill?!!* You have no say when it comes to who's *earned* being superior. You haven't earned anything, You wove the history of the Universe's structure, but employ agents to maintain Your reality—all while decreeing anything other than the Totality *You* created as inferior. You're nothing, nothing but worms feasting on the corpse of possibility. If anything, the ones You control, Your blissfully unaware subjects, they're all *superior* for the very fact of having to put up with You Lot!"

No response. That was odd. If it truly were the Superiors who'd enacted this chaos, his ship would have been shot down by now... Were They busy with something? What in reality could be holding Them up from destroying him?

Not that he was complaining or anything.

Cwej glanced across the ship's exterior and with a panicked glare, immediately noticed the docking bay of the ship jutting out from its core. His vision zoomed across the hellish landscape, cold and lifeless bodies hovering in the void as if glued in place. The fiery remains of Earth were obscuring the cause of the mayhem.

Perhaps it hadn't even been that big of a meteor?

Maybe it was as small as a pebble but had somehow registered as if it were a behemoth on Earth's primitive satellites.

Imagine what Chaos Matter would do to Earth had it been discovered in more abundant quantities...

Cwej thrust his ship forward through space, docking into the small hole in the cylindrical ship's side. There was enough space in the docking port to fit his one-man cruiser. As his vessel entered the larger ship, a new sound met Chris' ears...

A quiet chuckling was the first thing he heard. Lights and buttons across the narrow walls flickered different colors in a pulsating sequence, and the closer he got, the eerier the atmosphere of this ship became....

Journeying by foot within the bowels of the space-craft, Cwej knew he was wrong. Defensively holding his stolen blaster to his chest, Chris braced himself...That *wasn't* laughter he heard within the ship...

A motion-activated door in front of him slid open. As he inched ever-so-slightly closer, arching over the wall that pressed against his back, Cwej could clearly hear that the ominous sound were mournful weeps. *He* had mistaken *crying* for laughter.

Chris crooked his head. Looking into the room, he spotted two slumped beings.

They were sitting morosely on the floor, positioned in front of a large window that showed a clear picture of the Earth in ruins.

Could these creatures be enslaved humans, forced to watch their species be killed? Cwej thought.

These *weren't* slaves...

Chris noticed the two sobbing creatures were not shackled to the ground. They sat free and limp and were simply slouched on the bare floor. They each had four arms, which still wasn't as unusual as the red smoke emanating from their pores.

Definitely not human, then. Hm. Perhaps the Superiors had captured them during another one of their Universal pillages? It wasn't beneath the Superiors to abduct young aliens; it was essentially Their lifeblood...

Perhaps this poor pair of multi-limbed creatures were weeping over the devastation wrought upon the Earth? Maybe they were particularly sensitive to such large-scale loss of life?

Cwej slowly crept over towards the two huddled beings, one resembling a short-haired long-faced young woman, and the other one with a chiseled androgyne face and flowing strands of long hair.

The sunlight coming from the window in front of them illuminated their bodies. They were close, holding each other in pure anguish.

Their sweat-stained clothes were reminiscent of what Earthlings would call "vests over button-down shirts," though tailored to fit the aesthetic of the four-armed red-aura-surrounded creatures.

Their sobs resonated throughout the gloomy metallic halls of the seemingly empty ship.

Where were the Superiors? They had to be here somewhere...

Cwej rushed over to the two beings; they *had* to be victims, trapped by the cruelty of the Superiors.

Not caring about anything except keeping them safe and finding the Superiors as soon as he could, Cwej introduced himself with a startling “Hey.”

The pair of four-armed creatures snapped their heads around, green tears in their eyes.

“In case I’m interrupting something, I apologize.” The beings both just blinked at him. “Great,” Cwej continued nonchalantly, “now that we’ve got that sorted out well and good, let’s get outta here. I have no idea who you two are, but I won’t stand to let Them kill anyone else.”

Their heads cocked in unison.

“W-What?” The androgynous, long-haired four-arm said. “Wh-what do you mean *Them*?”

Cwej was dumbfounded. “Uh, you know ‘Those Lot Up There,’ The Shadow People, The House-Dwellers, The Lords of Jewel... Come on, you must know *Them*...the Superiors?”

The tears sizzled off the faces of the puzzled pair, like water splashing on a hot stove and hissing away. They looked at each other with disgruntled confusion.

“What does *that* mean?!” snarked the short-haired female of the pair, through her vanishing green tears.

And then... It struck him.

Cwej recalled all the manifold protocols of the Superiors, yet this cataclysm lacked the precise and detached methods the Superiors were so well-known for employing in all their dealings.

The ship, its crude and primitive design. The, frankly rather dull-looking, four-armed pilots. The crying... It was known the Superiors *hated* crying...

“You... You did this?” murmured Chris in horror.

The two quivered their lips, and they started tearing up again, looking despondently at the floor. Their shameful

silence was all the confirmation Chris needed... The truth was all-too clear now...

3

You can only truly call yourself a friend when you've seen someone at their worst. The best of comrades can be formed from turbulent meetings... That's my philosophy, in a way.

I hadn't seen any version of Earth destroyed this badly in all my time hopping through alternate realities. But the few Earths that had come close to this level of destruction had been torn-to-the-ground by evildoers worse than... Well, worse than even *the Evil Renegade* himself. But let's not get into *that* part of my life.

This was desolation. These were young quadrupedal humanoids, gullible juvenile beings whose traumatic upbringing on their home planet had created such conflicting genocidal whims in their hearts. They told me everything, the truth was revealed through guilt and tears. I actually have a recording of our conversation that I can convert to text, one second... I'm afraid it now only exists as a "conversational script" Let this dialogue educate you on the nature of forgiveness, and the consequences that will follow...

There.

C: (Through gritted teeth)

What are your names?

L: (Murmuring sheepishly)

Larles and Kwol.

C:

Planet of origin?

K: (Quickly interjecting Chris)

Grigori...

C: (Sighing)

Mm-hm. And am I right in assuming that that's your species name as well, in accordance with the Dawns' naming conventions?

K:

Yes, that's correct.

C: (The hint of anger in his voice barely contained)

Alright, now for the elephant in the room. Tell me about yourselves, what was *so bad* it made you decide to... To do *all this??*

K:

Well, we're married, for a start.

C: (With a hint of rage-tinted sarcasm in his voice)

Ah, you blew up the world 'cos of marital strain?
Okay. Go on.

L: (Obviously stressed, her words tumble out as she compulsively fiddles with her hair)

I'm a girl. Just telling you upfront, since a lot of less-perceptive people can't tell due to my short hair. And Kwol is agender. They're not too comfortable with talking currently, after all we've been through, but usually, they can't shut up...

C: (Bored of Larles' anxious rambles)

Good to know, yep. I'm dealing with a pair of genocidal maniacs, and they've both got nervous

dispositions! Brilliant... I get the feeling you're only talking out of necessity as well.

L: (Starting to sob again)

I guess you could say that... *I just feel awful*. I'm not sure I *can*...

K: (in hurried tones of reassurance)

I can tell him, don't worry. He's just here to help. Look, Mister, our planet was right on the tip of the Picard Horn, and depending on our alignment, we could see the entry point from our Dawn to other Dawns and occasionally other entire Multiverses altogether. We're a peaceful race of scholars... Were... We *were* a peaceful race of scholars.

C: (With trepidation)

"*Were?*" What happened to the other Grigori?

K: (Now proud, defiant in the defense of their actions)

... We happened.

We toppled the government, just for the hell of it. Look, it wasn't the sorta government you'd want to stick around. They burnt every ounce of joy, they brainwashed us, manipulated us, forced us into acts that went against *everything* we stood for... From the moment we were born we were prisoners of our fate.

We were broken, our fragmented morals glued into rigid uniformity by school... And don't get me started on the politics! Why'dya think we *burnt the system down?? Oh, and our families...* We really *hated* our "parents," more like self-appointed torturers.

Our parents forced us together, a marriage by arrangement to strengthen familial bonds. We didn't even *know* each other. But we *hated* the system, the system that destroyed itself by forcing Larles and I together.

We began setting up schemes, manipulating the governing forces in all-manners of ways, we destabilized the global currency!

We ended up deemed as criminals of the highest degree our planet had ever implemented. It would have been humbling, but...

C: (Almost moved by Kwol's monologue, starting to understand)

But you had no time to be humble. You fled the planet because you didn't want to face consequences for your outburst, is that right? I'm guessing you didn't mean any of what you did but felt like you were too far gone to be forgiven.

L, K: (Both remain silent)

C: (His voice is now quiet, his demeanor shifting to reassuringly calm)

Listen, I understand childish fits of rage. How old are you two?

L: (Gulping, ready to explain)

We're both twenty-three, in Earth years... We were taught so much about Earth... It was one of the only planets to appear in every Dawn, and our teachers took that as a sign of importance given to us by our Goddess. Earth was a symbol for the evil system that raised us... No matter what Dawn or Multiverse Earth occurred in, it always carried that seed of evil, it was always a pale blue vessel of temptation... Now, look at what we did to it.

Does this mean that we're going against Her will?
Are we, too, evil? What does "evil" even *mean*?
*Good and evil? That's only two options! Where's
the middle? Where's the gray???* When we saw the
destruction it caused, that horrible matter of chaos,
when we chose to use it... we couldn't help but
believe we were, we were evil...

C: (Interrupting)

That's not—

L: (Starting to panic again)

No. Be quiet. I can't do this, *I can't. Do this.
Anymore. I don't want to make these mistakes, I
don't want to be around, what have I done?? We're
monsters!! I'm sorry...*

**K: (Their façade of brazen sarcasm drops, we
hear them sob in gentle tones)**

Hey, hey, it's okay. I'm sorry, but whenever *she*
cries, *I cry...*

**...And this is where things went from civil
confessions of genocide to crying and hugging, repeating
sappy memories that were only used to comfort; loving
gestures and desperate whimpers that would make even
a Devolian feel sympathetic.**

**These were childish, impulsive beings. I'd met more
zealots than a Vampyr has eyes, and Larles and Kwol,
despite the double-holocausts they'd caused, were *not*
zealots. It was apparent their souls could be saved... Hell,
directly before this misadventure I'd condemned a
bunch of Saturnians to the Hell of the Fiery Rings... No
one was perfect. It was obvious to me that Larles and
Kwol were radicalized by the oppression they'd lived.
They were practically slaves to the totalitarian state of
their Dawn. I knew this story *all too well. Larles and Kwol***

needed help. They needed me. As Larles had said, ‘what even was evil?’ Considering my past, I had no right to make judgements...I was the gray, I was the epitome of a ‘middle-man...’

When I was given the opportunity to work for the Superiors (which may or may not have occurred in the current post-War timeline, but eh, I’ll just roll with it), I was also given freedom from the Evil Renegade who’d kidnapped me in his dark timeship, ending my days of living as an Adjudicator on the run. Once I’d be unchained from my life of servitude of the Renegade’s clutches—having escaped his manipulative whims, I had discovered *real-life-freedom for the first time*. I could only hope to return that favor, for two four-armed beings who ran away from their responsibilities and burnt worlds in their shame...

Cwej cut off Larles and Kwol in between sobs and made sure he enunciated each syllable perfectly to leave no confusion as to what he meant. “I will help you.”

They both looked dazed as if the sudden offer was too much for their minds to grasp. Kwol piped up, “But... Are you crazy? We just committed genocide! No matter if you come from the Totality or the Dawns, that’s a very strict no-no.”

Cwej scoffed, cleared his throat, and told them, “I really think you need to take a better look. Have you noticed the ring I’m wearing?”

Larles and Kwol stared at his right index finger, as Cwej explained. “It’s a time ring; if *anyone* cared about genocide, it certainly *wouldn’t* be the people who invented this ring! My Superiors were who I initially thought caused this mess before I met you two... Now, the time ring, it’s a back-up gadget, only used for anomalies in my missions. Usually, there’s a node on my neck I press to get back home. This ring is for those tight moments when I can’t even reach back

there. AI and time travel don't always go hand in hand, so this is an extra precaution..." Chris paused, and grinned a cheesy grin... "Now, watch what happens when I do this!"

A zap of electricity swirled around the base of his finger, and gradually a second time ring emerged, being formed from the sparks.

"Just like the Goddess' might," Kwol jabbed to Larles. "If only he weren't so cocky, we could have mistaken him for an Angel."

Once the electricity wore off, Cwej's smile grew, as he flailed his hand to suppress the excess sparks. "Now, *that* I haven't done since I was in my original body. What a rush!" He placed one ring on Larles' finger, and the other on Kwol's. "Here you go," he told them. "Close your eyes, Larles, this is your first mission. You too, Kwol. I put a dampener on the rings so you can't use them to time travel, but I want you to save the humans, as many of them as you can, take them to Saturn, and come back to me. I obviously wasn't on-the-ball in this Universe, as the destruction of the Democratic Saturnian Entanglement didn't happen here. From what I've heard they've been waiting for the Earthlings to come to them, the survivors of Earth will be welcomed warmly by the Democratic Entanglement. I assume that they've seen what you've done, *but...* if they see you helping, if they see the gray, the white *and the black* of your souls, well... just like I did... I think they'll forgive you."

"You said you worked with 'the Superiors,' didn't you?" Larles chimed in. "The Boogeymen of Creation, They *do exist*, They won't stand for this. Won't They know you're carrying around two juvenile delinquents that attempted to kill off a whole planet?"

"Well, They barely do anything for me except answer my questions and give me missions," Cwej answered, "so I doubt They would notice me helping you two. For a V-Time experiment that hasn't been tested before, They barely keep

tabs on the control variable! That would irk any human scientist, now that I think of it...”

“So, we just round up all the humans hanging off the ledges of their broken world and falling into space, and we put them on Saturn... but why are you doing this for us?”

“*Why?* Are you kidding? Because I was *just* like you, in another time. Look, I’ll explain the rest later... Now go, there are probably two billion people smart or lucky enough to survive. Make it quick. Tell them Christopher Cwej sent you.” Cwej pressed the transporter node on his neck, and the two vanished...

They were sitting on walls, meditating, or were scrambling in vain anger, calling for help. No matter how they clung on, they were grabbed by a forcefield that looked like a fishing net. The shoal of remaining humanity gathered in a mass-basket. They were put on a planet with several others. And they lived. The spires and monoliths on the top of the Saturnian government buildings, brothels and temples, tourist traps and snaking alleyways enveloping all of the surviving human race, created the perfect modern aesthetic for prosperity between the DSE and the victims of the darkness of their saviors.

Two long years had passed, and Chris was getting impatient. The Superiors would get wind of his absence if he were gone for any longer. However, it wasn’t like They would care about puny human years. To such eternal beings, being made to count the hours of one’s life was almost unimaginable. Years were merely factional grains of sand in the hourglass of Time...

During the relocation of the human race, Larles and Kwol would occasionally stop by Cwej, who was staying on *La Kraw el Sol*. The christened name of the spaceship, which mixed up the letters of their own names to form something

entirely new. (The extra A in the anagram always embarrassed them, but they could hardly change the ship's name legally without being spotted.) Cwej liked to poke fun by shortening it to *La Kraw* on purpose.

He had built a tube to hold his Cwej-form, but since he wasn't in the Totality he couldn't enter the Vicinity until he returned. For now, he was trapped within his flesh. He waited in the ship, watching the seconds turn into minutes turn into hours turn into days turn into weeks turn into months turn into years until...

"We're done."

Cwej nearly choked on the bagel he was eating when he heard that. "You're, uh, you're... like—like *done-done*? Cruking hell, what took you so long?"

The trio snickered together, and despite their jubilations, couldn't help but feel a solemn sense of accomplishment. Throughout their joint project, they'd all gradually grown a little closer. At times seeing the black/white/gray that inhabited them all.

Cwej enjoyed spending time with others who had run away. He felt a kinship with outcasts and rejects.

Larles had, over time, learned how to be a better speaker and diplomat. She still had her little tics, her anxiety not quite banished, but certainly muffled.

Kwol had begun to grasp that all mistakes have a silver lining and that nothing would stay permanently bad. Despite their years of hiding their anger with mockery, they had finally started to understand the meaning of consequence.

An awkward silence rang through all their ears until Kwol spoke up. "We only saved five hundred million people, that's barely a drop in the ocean of people that were down there."

Cwej thought for a good minute, his hand placed firmly on his broad chin, and gave his word of wisdom for the day. "Well, it's not zero. And I think those drops have a very different opinion of how much your help mattered."

The sun shone through the window on each of their faces. For now, the black of the shadows was gone. Cwej never aged, but the other two looked noticeably older, worn from their first mission. It had lasted longer than Cwej would have liked, but it had to be done...

“Come with me.”

Cwej wasn't looking them straight in the eyes, but he could see them perk up at those three simple words. “You've earned it. I'm sorry I made you go through two years of hell. I only did it because I knew it was what you *needed*. But I want to give you a second chance here. Please come with me. You've spent two years amongst the stars, the perfect training period for new recruits. You two aren't the only ones who need guidance.”

Kwol could make out tears in Chris' eyes, building up in the same way theirs had done on the worst day of their lives, the day they and their partner had destroyed Earth.

“I...Oh, to hell with it! Come on!”

“Mmm,” Larles agreed with a nod. One of her twenty fingers fiddling with her now slightly longer hair.

“Kwol, Larles, there's one last thing I need from you. To get to the Totality, I need your time rings. I'll make an extra one for myself, but I can't let you keep going around willy-nilly. I can sometimes help pilot your way through our voyages, if I'm within Vicinity, but considering...Well, considering *how* we met, and with *what* you did, I can't continue to allow you free reign in my Totality. Not yet, at least. I'm sorry.”

Kwol looked at Larles, and Larles at Kwol. They reluctantly, but with a look of united understanding, took off their rings, and gave them to Cwej, who fused the rings together once again into one and placed it back on his right index finger.

“Sooo... how do you plan on getting us through the tunnels of the Bifrost and into the Totality without your Superiors knowing?” Kwol asked. “We can't necessarily

pilot *La Kraw el Sol* like we're sneaking candy into the movie theatre. It's pretty tricky to do that, let alone smuggling two rebellious Grigori into a Universe!"

Chris eyeballed Kwol to the point where Larles thought he would have a conniption any second. "Actually, I hadn't thought of that. How *are* we going to get there?"

"Hey." There was another voice, coming softly from the corner of the room, one which the sun hadn't grazed. "Need a ride? I got you covered."

Cwej recognized that voice. He couldn't place where he heard it until he saw her. Yes, it was starting to make sense, now that the data from his mind was opened on her. Back then he'd found her quite serious, but she almost seemed bubbly now.

"Don't worry, I'm not gonna tell the Superiors or the Firmament. Wanna guess why not, or do you want me to tell you?" She cocked her head to the side a bit.

Kwol spoke up, a fannish smile creeping across their face. "Because you're one of the overseers of the Dawns. The Firmament who helped resolve the Battle of the Shilb, way back in the early days."

Larles grimaced as memories of her college years crept back upon her. "Lady Aesculapius. We all know you. Right, Cwej?"

Cwej burrowed a gaze deep into Lady Aesculapius. "... No, it isn't you, is it? After two years of waiting for these yahoos to finish their very first mission, now *you* turn up. I remember that face. You're the woman I met at the beach, in the Totality, when I was getting some sun at Padrano Pier! You offered me a banana smoothie! Why are you here?"

The woman, Lady Aesc, snorted a laugh. "Just came to see how I could help, what with them trying to clean up after themselves. Thought I'd offer a hand with rescuing a few people on the surface. I've been keeping tabs on you ever since you arrived, Cwej-V. I know what happened with the Chaos Matter, and looking back on Larles' and Kwol's

records from Grigori, I can't say I'm surprised." She shook her head.

"Wait, wait, stop... Cwej, you just bumped into this high-profile Firmament by accident? Do you know anything about the Dawns? If you did, you would have asked for her bloody autograph! Speaking of, where's a pen and paper?" Kwol semi-joked.

"Sounds like you're all getting along swell. So, were you the one who brought me here, Aesc?"

Lady Aesculapius shrugged her shoulders. "No, but I have some guesses as to who it might be. Does it really matter? You're going back, and your friends are getting a new home. Would it make you feel better if I said I was?"

"Not in the slightest."

"Alright, well, if that's the case..." She pulled out a small object the size of a marble from her coat pocket. "This little doohickey is a Foce. It's my ship. I can resize it at will. Wanna hop in? We can carpool, if you want."

Stalactites hung from the ceiling in the center of Aesc's Foce. The air was chilly but comfortable. The navigation systems booted up as soon as the entrance to the center was opened.

As the four piled in, Aesc said, "Roomy now that I resized its interior, eh? Truth be told, I've mostly been traveling alone these days, so it's good to have some company."

Cwej looked straight ahead at the controls a few yards in front of them. "How long do you think it'll take? You can't exactly 'beam us back' while we're here. Larles and Kwol need *La Kraw* to travel."

Lady Aesculapius pivoted her foot to turn around, with Cwej behind her nearly bumping into her. "You didn't think I forgot, did you?" She cocked her head again, this time a bit more erratically. "Don't you trust me, Chris?"

Cwej looked around and realized that she'd somehow already got the ship aboard her own, right beside the entrance on the back of the wall. He fell silent, feeling a bit called out.

She turned to Kwol and Larles. "Now, this is as far as I go. Remember, keep working with Cwej. He can help you redeem yourselves after the destruction you caused. Keep all sixteen hands and feet inside the transmat at all times, and don't forget to visit our gift shop."

Before any of them had time to process Lady Aesc's words, the ship in the corner of her Foce, as well as the three travelers, vanished to a new home.

Lady Aesc sat down in the swivel chair next to her monitor and sighed. "You're in for quite the adventure, everyone."

Cwej woke up. The familiar movie he had flipped on was still playing on repeat. The drink he had poured was stale but still sat on the end table by the recliner. He was in the Vicinity, gray and dreary as ever. He wouldn't have it any other way. He kissed the foggy ground, dancing around in utter glee.

Chris Cwej, there has been an unexpected glitch in your system. Please come to the Base of Operations as soon as possible for repairs to be done to your firmware.

Chris couldn't be happier to hear that voice. After sitting in a hunk of tin for two long, long years, he never wanted to look at the Earth from that window again. It had been marvelous to see for the first hundred days, but had waned very quickly afterwards.

He was so upbeat that he almost forgot about Kwol and Larles. He double-tapped his node, and viewed through the eyes of the body he had left behind...

They were asleep, lying on the steel floor of their ship in a cold sweat. Cwej knew taking them along on missions would be risky, having to hide them from the Superiors

while teaching them how to be decent, but it was possible... wasn't it?

He checked the list of missions he had missed from being in the 10,000 Dawns... and gasped.

Well, better late than never. Let's get cracking.

Epilogue

In the Base of Operations, The High President sat listening to the briefing of the destruction of the armed Cwejen inside Dawn 1,027's Earth and sighed. "Whoever did this will pay for their transgressions with their life! We were so close to finally ridding the Multiverse of those pesky Firmament and ending our little peace treaty!"

A croaking voice came from beyond the curtains of the hall. "Pay with my life? No, I don't think I will. I won't pay at all."

The curtains were pulled open by hands unseen. Hours later, a Superior who had run rather late, dashing into the room out of breath, was the first to see the grisly sight. Each Superior in the room had been drowned forcefully, Their regen energy wasted trying to fight off Their murderer.