

FROM THE WORLDS OF ARCBATTLE PRESS

THE NOODLE INCIDENT

EDITED BY ARISTIDE TWAIN



THE NOODLE INCIDENT

An April Fools' Day Serial from the Worlds of Arcbeatle Press

Being the First and Final Entry in the Original Series "The
Noodle Man"

Edited by Aristide Twain

Featuring L. Alves, Ismaeel Clarke, Ostara Gale, James
Hornby, Lena Mactíre, Theta Mandel, Callum Phillpott, Plum
Pudding, Shergar Sahcahgar, Aristide Twain, and James Wylder



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NOODLE PRELUDE:

“THE NOODLE INCIDENT”: BRAND-NEW “THE NOODLE MAN” SERIES LAUNCHES WITH EXCLUSIVE ARCBATTLE PRESS CROSSOVER SERIAL ON APRIL 1ST

By Aristide Twain

In recent years, Arcbeatle Press has continued to blaze a trail for independent science-fiction and fantasy publishing, launching multiple new projects spanning a variety of universes. In line with our commitment to quality over quantity, we have naturally decided that the optimal thing to do at this time is to launch yet another one.

As soon as we decided to add even more prose to our editors’ workload, it became obvious that there could only be one focus character worthy of the endeavour: we speak, of course, of the Noodle Man, created by Plum Pudding and memorably used in such notorious successes as “that time they joked about him with friends once”.

Some might believe that anchoring a long-running book series on an untested, unpublished character whose premise begins and ends with “he’s a man made of noodles who hums to himself a lot” is, to name a few, “insane”, “a really bad idea”, or “an April Fools’ joke... gotta be... right? right?!”. If you recognise yourself or a family member in one or more of these statements, we can only recommend therapy, meditation, and of course a healthy diet of noodles and chocolate eggs.

The rest of you can look forward to “The Noodle Incident”, an exclusive crossover serial featuring such Arcbeatle hallmarks as *10,000 Dawns*, *Auteur*, *Dionus*, *SIGNET*, *Starlight Endeavours*, *Coloth*, and many more. The Noodle Man deserved an introduction in style, and we could think of nothing better than a clipshow-style compilation of disparate vignettes held together with the barest excuse for a connective thread.

“You might think that we’re using these established series with crass, cynical commercialism,” says *The Noodle Incident* editor Aristide Twain, “that we’re exploiting their existing fanbases to forcibly establish the largely unknown Noodle Man as a central character within the worlds of Arcbeatle Press overnight. It’s certainly always a risk, with big corporate-driven crossover events, that you lose sight of the artistic integrity of each individual project, in favour of the entire cosmos bending around the new guy with something to sell. That’s certainly been known to happen, so I understand why people would be concerned that it might occur with *The Noodle Incident*. It’s a very sensible fear to have. But, on the other hand, I seem to have forgotten what I was going to say after the ‘but’.”

“The Noodle Incident” will be released today, April 1st, 2024, on the present website as an exclusive ebook. In addition, the first book of “The Noodle Man: Arc 1: The Book of the Noodle Man”, provisionally entitled “Book 1: A Really Incredible Character’s Kaleidoscopically Reimagined, Out-there Lasagna Life”, is [now available for preorder](#).

Inquiries may be sent to arcbeatlepress@gmail.com

NOODLE THE FIRST:

HOW TO APPEAR NOODLES IN SEVERAL UNEASY LESSONS

By Plum Pudding

A “Coloth” vignette

The halls of the Plume Coteries were quiet, too quiet — bordering on the clichéd end of quiet, actually — as Callum and Maritsa explored the shelves of the great Library.

They were enjoying the spell of quiet that hung over them. It was peaceful in the dark, but not at all foreboding, Library halls — and despite recent events, it was always rather hard to feel entirely in danger around *books*. Neither Callum or Maritsa really took themselves for the nerdy type, but they were wiser than children their age usually were, and they rather enjoyed books. Books were important.

They had just been involved in a rather calamitous book too. They had been trapped in one of the Library's rooms, reading a fascinating series of books which **AVAILABLE NOW COLOTH BOOK OF THE SNOWSTORM AVAILABLE NOW FOR 2.99 PLUS SHIPPING AND HANDLING OH WAIT NO THE PDF IS 2.99 THE BOOK IS MORE BUY THE BOOK NOW AVAILABLE NOW** had proven quite overwhelming. Luckily, however, these trials were now firmly in the past. Now they had peace, if only for the moment. Some other dangerous crisis was sure to come up at some point — what was life without adventure? But then, what was adventure, without those little pauses between them?

Their good friend Coloth, a cactus — go with it —, was a bit behind them, strolling lackadaisically over to their side with their other good friend Rich, a giant bird. He seemed happier, somehow. He carried a book in his quilly hands, and was paging through it voraciously. It was a book that wasn't out yet on the Earth you might inhabit, a book that might never come out, altogether; but in the infinite range of the Plume Coteries' Library, a library holding every book written and unwritten, it was most certainly available; in the dozens, even.

“What are you reading, Coloth?” Maritsa inquired, turning smartly.

“Oh, it's something by Robert Shearman, I think,” he murmured. “One of his dreams.”

Maritsa wasn't one to interrupt, so she turned her attention back to Callum, who was further ahead on the long curving path of the bookshelves that now lay ahead. As junior Bookkeepers, they had taken oaths to oversee the running of the great Library, but today, it almost seemed to be overseeing itself. Aisle 3,884,299,910,322,029,344,571 was clean. Not one of the sentient computer terminals had attempted to enact martial law, a recurring problem with their kind. No shelves had been defaced by vandals, there was no sign of the Deadline or their cronies, and no Dewey Decimal Tributaries bent on aligning the Library into a singular view were in evidence. Nor was anything on fire. All in all, a remarkably peaceful sight.

Maritsa was beginning to wonder what this particular story was about — as it were — when she saw Callum disappear behind a corner. She urged the others forward.

Around the corner, after a brief bit of running to get around said corner, they found themselves in front of a great and disorganised *pile*. Not a pile of books — not, in fact, a pile of anything. It was a pile of nothing, a sight uniquely difficult to describe but altogether quite noticeable when there is a lot of it. Usually Nothing is only found in small amounts, unless, of course, you're travelling in space, which is practically defined by the overabundance of nothingness; but in the Library, an area of infinite generation, it was remarkably striking. Crawling out of the Nothing was a figure, dark and slant. It did not have human joints, appearing rather lumpy. Its jacket resembled that of a salesman, and it radiated a rainbow glow, constrained by swirling shadows and ink.

“VALID, INVALID VALID INVALID VALID INVALID,” it said.

“What?” Coloth mumbled, looking up from his Shearman.

Rich the Birdhemoth tried to explain, but realised he didn't know how.

“HEYA KIDS,” the shadowy rainbow of energy said, continuing to emerge from the rift. It spoke with a clipped transatlantic accent, g-g-glitching. “WE KNOW WHAT YOU WANT HERE AT ARCBATTLE PRESS WE KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR OH BOY OH BOY OH BOY —”

“What did you do with Callum?!” Maritsa growled.

Her growling didn't exactly sound intimidating, given she was a slip of a teenage girl, but she did her best. The cactus and a Birdhemoth backing her up did, in all fairness, add a hint of genuine force to the threat display. However, the pulsating rainbow silhouette covered in shadow and ink blots didn't seem to notice. It danced around flamboyantly, gyrating like Nicki Minaj having a seizure. If Maritsa, Coloth or Rich had had any cultural reference point for the peculiar sequence of motion, they may have been able to deduce that it was the live choreography to *Ram Ranch* — *Grant MacDonald*, assuming such a thing existed.

“HI YES I'M your NeW cuLTURAL rePREsentATIVE he t REPRESENTATIVE OF every spinoff,,[[sh*tting on the floor]] and also am [[the most canon man]] ,, I'M HAPPY TO FINALLY ANNOUNCE WHAT YOU'VE ALL BEEN WAITING FOR!!”

“A spinoff that isn't niche?” Rich guessed, based off of the fact that the whole thing had been about spinoffs thus far.

“NO,” [[the most canon man]] said. “I'M SO VALID I'M SO VALID I'M SO —”

“Get to the point!” Maritsa yelled, and Coloth nodded furiously.

He felt the scent of *Cho* close at hand. Whatever was happening, it was exceedingly and vehemently dangerous.

“— **CANON!**” [[the most canon man]] barked out, as if he'd been holding the word in.

“Actually,” said Maritsa, “the proper adjectival form is ‘canonical’. The point, please?”

There was a strange, jerking nod from the intruder.

“**Introducing** noOdle,” [[the most canon man]] said, and promptly vanished.

Nothing seemed to change. Things looked normal again. Even the Nothing was gone.

“...Who was that guy? Some sort of spokesperson?” Coloth supposed. “A writer?”

The others looked uneasy. They had dealt with enough apocalyptically chaotic authors over the years. Well, maybe just the one, but he was enough for anyone.

“I’ll tell you who that was,” Rich declared. “Someone who needs to be taught that randomness isn’t inherently funny, that’s who.”

Then Coloth saw it. “Maritsa, look!” he shouted.

The shelf of books was completely transformed. The *titles* on the spine of every volume had changed; a terrifying, claustrophobic cohesiveness had replaced the glorious anarchy which usually governed the Library’s collections.

* * *

Adventures of Noodle Man by Plum Pudding

Noodle Man on the Orient Express by Plum Pudding

Simmer Gently Till Pasta is Soft - A Noodle Man Novel by Plum Pudding

Noodle Man Fucking Kills Cwej by Plum Pudding

The Noodle Man That Came In From the Cold by Plum Pudding

God versus Noodle by Plum Pudding

The Noodle Man Ascendency - Volume 22 by Plum Pudding

* * *

“Who the heck’s this Plum Pudding person?” asked Maritsa.

“I don’t know,” said Coloth. “Look, there’s a whole shelf of her, or him. Or whatever pronouns a Pudding has. But — but I’m not sure it’s the right question.”

A shiver ran down his cactus spine; his friends gulped at the sight, for as a holographic projection, Coloth had no natural bodily reactions. If he had made the quills along his spinal cord literally shudder, it must mean that he could find no better way to convey the dread he was feeling. He pointed, wordlessly, with one of his cactus hands, and his friends’ eyes widened.

It wasn’t just that shelf.

* * *

The Noodle Man Cometh by Aristide Twain
Noodle Man - Realms of Noodle by Aristide Twain
Noodle Man: Book of the Noodle by Aristide Twain
Genesis of the Noodles by Aristide Twain
Resurrection of the Noodles by Aristide Twain
Antidisestablishmentarianism of the Noodles by Aristide Twain
Noodion Noodledox the Noodle Noodle Noodle by Aristide Twain
Noodle Man Book One: Down The Griddle by Aristide Twain, various
Noodle Man Book Two: Out of the Batter by Aristide Twain, various
Noodle Man Book Three: We Had To Split This One For Length by Aristide Twain, various
Noodle Man Book Four: mmm noodle mmm
10,000 Noodles by Aristide Twain

* * *

Or that one.

* * *

Green Eggs and Noodles by Dr. Seuss
Charlie and the Noodle Factory by Roald Dahl
Noodlehouse Five, Or The Children's Crusade by Kurt Vonnegut
The Magic School Bus Goes To Noodle by Joanna Cole
American Noodles by Neil Gaiman
50 Shades of Noodle by E.L. James
To Kill a Noodle by Harper Lee
War and Noodles by Leo Tolstoy
Noodles! Noodles! by Terry Pratchett
The Bible by Noodle Man
Hamlet but it's About Noodles Now by William Shakespeare

* * *

No, it wasn't any of them individually.

It was the entire damn Library.

"Kids," said Rich, "I think we might have a problem."

NOODLE THE SECOND:
UH OH, SPAGHETTI WOES

By L. Alves

An “OOPS” vignette from the worlds of “10,000 Dawns”

This was a dying Dawn — a rising sun which, having reached its zenith, was now well along the slow and sombre path towards the opposite horizon. Where once the night sky had shone with the trails of comets and the shimmer of galactic whorls, it now flickered only with the continual death of a thousand stars — the final glimmers of the lights of endless worlds finally completing their path towards the arid rock over which five brave souls now slowly tread.

Cresting a crumbling clifftop, Minerva Caputo stared down over the pits and valleys that marred the once-beautiful landscape below. She stood for a moment, biting at her lip — then shook away the inevitable thoughts of destruction and decay which the sight had stirred. That kind of pondering wasn't going to do anyone any good, and if there was one thing Minerva had learned in her many long years trekking the 10,000 Dawns and the worlds without, it was this: you couldn't save everyone, but you sure as hell couldn't let that stop you from saving *anyone*.

So she took a breath, swept back the strands of loose hair which had escaped the tightly-bound bun into which she had tied it before setting foot on this sweltering world, and faced her team — scanning their faces, though she didn't let it show. Jesslyn had tears in her eyes, as did Theo — and Fizz, although he wasn't programmed for that kind of thing, wasn't looking his cheeriest, either. As for the Noodle Man — well. He was looking as cool as ever, in his fedora and classy coat. He had even spiced up the outfit, today, with an absolutely rocking pair of shades.

INTRO STING

THE ODD OTHER-DIMENSIONAL PICK-UP SQUAD! When scared people are lost in unfamiliar worlds — when monsters threaten innocent villages and insensitive villagers threaten innocent monsters — when all you really want is to see your home again — OOPS is there!

MINERVA CAPUTO! No-nonsense, no mistakes.

FIZZ! Wrangler — wrestler — wordsmith.

THEO! Sharp tongue, sharp mind... fluffy tail.

JESSLYN! Keeper of the archives... and the peace.

AND INTRODUCING: THE NOODLE MAN! We're going to sell so many copies of THE NOODLE MAN'S BOOK!

TOGETHER, THEY ARE:

OOPS & The Noodle Man

The Odd Other-Dimensional Pickup Squad

SWIRL BACK INTO THE ACTION

Ah, the Noodle Man — the recent fifth addition to the OOPS team. It had only been a few short months since he'd joined their number, but Minerva could hardly imagine an OOPS without him. Shortly before they'd met, he'd been cast down out of his home universe by his arch-nemesis, Eldoon, after a climactic and emotionally-charged scenario during which his dear friend and long-time sidekick, Butter Boy, had been melted down to nothing, sending Noodle Man on a high-stakes quest of revenge against his wicked foe (*A Watched Pot Boils in Secret* in *Noodle Man Book 1: On the Griddle*, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press). Although landing in the 10,000 Dawns had been a shock for this most noodley of men, it hadn't been all bad — his brief turn as an actor (*And Today, You - The Lost Chapters*, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press) had reinvigorated his desire to see his home again, and although his attempt to contact OOPS for this very purpose had failed when they'd proved unable to locate the far-off world from which he originally hailed (*In the Meadow We Can Build a Noodleman* in *The Book of the Snowstorm*, cut for length), it had led to the agreement which was currently in place: a partnership between these two compelling concepts which would last for several adventures and slot seamlessly into *both* of their ongoing life stories at once.

“Alright, team,” Minerva said, with a sharp nod. “I know this is heavy stuff. But - ”

“It's just — hard to take in,” Jesslyn replied. “I mean, this — this was a garden world! The most beautiful planet for a dozen Dawns! And now it's just... gone. All that beauty, all that history, all that culture, just...”

“Dust.” Fizz put in. “Just dust sticking to our boots.”

“I know,” Minerva said, heaving a sigh, “I get it. But like my nonna used to say, there's a time for mourning what's lost, and it isn't when you're still picking up the pieces.”

She cast a heavy glance at the Noodle Man, then continued.

“There's someone stranded out there, someone who called *us* for help. That's what's important right now. Got that?”

The others nodded. Fizz forced a smile, then pounded one fist into the other.

“What're we waiting for? Let's get out there and show 'em what OOPS does best!”

“I couldn't agree more!” piped Theo from his shoulder, adjusting his spectacles with one squirrely paw. “Shall we?”

“Oh yeah baby I'm the Noodle Man.” said the Noodle Man, shifting wetly. *He*, Minerva knew, was used to this kind of thing. His original planet had been laid to waste in the Great Spaghetti War, causing him to wander the universe as a lonely traveller for some time (*Baker and the Noodle*

Man in Particularly Petrifying Poems, Goblin Studios, October 2023), until he'd finally met Butter Boy and dedicated his life to protecting the innocent and downtrodden (*Just Add Water*, Arcbeatle Press website exclusive).

With the team's morale settled, Minerva faced the wastes ahead. It would be a gruelling journey, there was no getting around that — but OOPS was no stranger to them. The important thing was to head out now, before the sun set. As hot as the day here was, at least it was survivable. If night rolled in, and the cold along with it, there was no telling whether anyone would make it off the planet alive.

“Any ideas?” Minerva asked. “Rappelling down a cliff this sheer doesn't sound fun, but I'm not seeing any paths — unless...”

“Oh yes wow yes don't worry,” said the Noodle Man. “Haha mmmmwow guys Noodle Man has it under control.”

With a sound like worms fighting in a paper bag, the Noodle Man began to lengthen. Minerva couldn't keep a grin off of her usually-severe face as he stretched off towards the distant horizon, his noodley legs remaining anchored to the rock beside her. This was just the kind of person Noodle Man was — one who played by his own rules, but always came around to the side of good in the end, as aptly demonstrated when he'd helped Coloth and Rich find their way to the 925 Universe by reshaping his constituent noodles into a thirty-dimensional map just after Callum and Maritsa had happened to read a book exactly mirroring Noodle Man's first meeting with OOPS (*The Book of the Snowstorm framing sequence in The Book of the Snowstorm* from Arcbeatle Press, cut for length).

“Slide right across pals,” came the voice of the Noodle Man. “Ha ha yes wow nothing to it.”

The OOPS team began to cross the ever-helpful Noodle Man as if he were a very slimy rope bridge. Life was good.

* * *

“Not long now.” Minerva said, as the team trekked the last few metres towards the place which the distress call had indicated — a cave somewhere in the desert ahead.

“Good,” Jesslyn called back, “Because I'm getting thirsty. The sooner we can get back to headquarters, the better.”

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves.” Minerva replied. “This could be a complicated process. We don't know who, or what —”

“Don't worry about it chums ol chums,” came the voice of the Noodle Man.

Reaching up towards the sky, he wrapped his noodley fingers around the handle of what Minerva took to be this Dawn's closest equivalent to the Big Dipper of her own home's skies, then swiped it across the last remaining shimmer of stars above, scooping them up into the cosmic ladle. Drawing his arm back in, he offered his prize to Jesslyn.

“That’s why they call it the Milky Way,” he pronounced. “Yum yum tasty for all of our friends.”

Minerva shook her head, chuckling as ever at the Noodle Man’s usual antics. He’d done much the same when he’d stretched across several universes just to give Chris Cwej a high-five and hand him an advertisement for something called *Noodle Man Book 1: On the Griddle* (*Chris Cwej and the Promethean Noodle* in *Cwej: Hidden Truths*, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press).

As Jesslyn sipped from the ladle, they reached the cave. Taking a breath, Minerva nodded, then walked inside.

She let her eyes adjust to the darkness — then took a step back. She had expected to see a monster, or an injured survivor, or one and the same — but not *this*. Standing before her were the unmistakable ensemble that made up HURRAY — the Habitually Usual Rescue and Retrieval unit for Alternate Yuniverses.

Suppressing the usual surge of anger at the thought of the horrible construction of their acronym, Minerva cleared her throat.

“Hello,” she said, “Minerva Caputo, with OOPS. We received a relocation request from this area?”

“Sorry,” said the HURRAY unit leader, shaking her head. “So did we. Um — maybe we should let *them* explain.”

Minerva followed her gaze to a much more expected sight — a ragged-looking person, part-cyborg, their skin rough and their hair long. A survivor of the vast civilisation that had once spanned this world, having finally found the means to call for help after ages of wandering the deserts of a dying planet in a dying universe. Pity flooded her mind as Minerva looked upon them. It wouldn’t have been an easy life, and certainly not a comfortable one. It was moments like these that reminded her what OOPS was for. A monster wasn’t a set thing, and neither was a home. All that really mattered was taking whoever or whatever it was that you were dealing with someplace where they’d be happier.

Noodle Man, she suspected, could understand that well enough. He’d taken Butter Boy on a journey to find *his* home once, but Butter Boy had eventually decided that his real home was with Noodle Man — and Noodle Man had privately come to the conclusion that *his* home, too, was with Butter Boy (*Softly-Melting Hearts* in *Noodle Man Book 1: On the Griddle*, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press).

“Wait, wait,” said Jesslyn, looking at the stranded survivor. “Did — did you call us *and* HURRAY? That’s... unusual. We tend to have pretty different clientele... I mean...”

The survivor shook their head, torrents of dust falling from their hair.

“After I finally managed to radio you my coordinates,” they began in a voice that had long gone unused, “I received your confirmation message — telling me that you were on the way. I

tried to radio back and cancel, but you had already left the office. I had no choice but to call for HURRAY — and pray that they got here before you did.”

Minerva blinked — genuinely surprised, which didn’t happen often.

“May I ask why?”

The survivor nodded gravely — then levelled a mechanical finger at Noodle Man.

“Because,” they replied, “when I got your outgoing call, I realised that you were still saddled... with *him!*”

“Noodle Man?” Fizz asked, sounding shocked. “What’s wrong with Noodle Man?”

“*Everybody* loves Noodle Man!” said Theo, sounding angrier than Min had ever seen him.

The survivor shook their head.

“He’s just so... annoying,” they replied, hanging their head somberly.

“Such an unnecessary addition to the cast,” the HURRAY leader put in. “What a stupid contrivance. We’ve all been saying so.”

“He ruins every scene he appears in,” the survivor went on, “there’s literally no reason for him to exist.”

“We hate him,” said the HURRAY leader, nodding her head solemnly. “We hate the Noodle Man.”

“Plus, he’s only here to shill his book. He’s such a cash-grab. He’s shoehorned in at every opportunity.”

“He doesn’t even fit the tone. He doesn’t fit any tone. His mere presence ruins every dramatic moment.”

“There’re no stakes anymore. And his dynamic with the rest of you is non-existent at best, and actively degrading to your own established characterisations at worst.”

“He sucks. The Noodle Man sucks.”

“I’d rather stay in this cave than go with the Noodle Man. That’s my statement.”

Minerva stared, fury building. For all that she tried to hide it, she cared very deeply about her teammates. The idea that one of them — that the *Noodle Man*, no less — was being dragged through the mud right in front of her was too much. OOPS was a family — united for a common cause, the cause of doing their absolute damndest to help some of the people in the Dawns who were hurting the most. And that meant helping each other, too.

The Noodle Man had experience with that. He’d had to stand up for Butter Boy against Eldoon plenty of times, before Eldoon’s encounter with the fabled Hand of Tergusa had sent him down a dark path and turned him from an arrogant bully to a dark sorcerer capable of melting

even those with the purest of hearts (*A Hand Forever Grasping* in *Noodle Man Book 1: On the Griddle*, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press)

“Do you see what we mean?” said the survivor. “How am I supposed to deal with that?”

The HURRAY leader nodded in agreement.

“Come on, team,” said Minerva, fury bubbling beneath her words. “We’re not going to stand around and take this. Let’s head back.”

There was no point trying to fight — angry as she was, she knew that. Sometimes things didn’t go as planned. This time, Min thought — this time, it was OOPS who had found themselves out of place. And it was time they headed somewhere that would make them happier.

The Noodle Man could relate. He had come to much the same realisation when he’d realised that OOPS wasn’t helping him move many copies of *Noodle Man Book 1: On the Griddle* and decided to leave for a more lucrative franchise among Arcbeatle’s many worlds (*Uh Oh, Spaghetti Woes* in *The Noodle Incident*, Arcbeatle Press, April 2024).

INTRO STING

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FIZZ! Wrangler — wrestler — wordsmith.

THEO! Sharp tongue, sharp mind... fluffy tail.

JESSLYN! Keeper of the archives... and the peace.

AND NO ONE ELSE! DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT!

SWIRL BACK INTO THE ACTION

Minerva blinked, then looked around at her companions.

“What the *hell* was that?”

Everyone shrugged awkwardly. Minerva rubbed at her eyes.

“Oh, we have *got* to invest in some better perception-alteration wards. Alright, let’s take stock of the damage.”

“Over lunch?” Theo suggested. “I’ve got such a craving for spaghetti.”

NOODLE THE THIRD:

FREAKY FOOLSDAY

By Lena Mactire

Something had gone terribly, terribly wrong on the UHS *Endeavour*.

Amalia Wildstorm, the executive officer and primary liaison to Chancellor Catarrah, was the first to notice it. She woke up at 0700, an hour before her duty shift, and threw off the covers of her bed.

Standing, she dimly noticed that her paws felt strange... like they were flatter than usual. Why would that be?

Confused, she tried taking a step... and immediately fell over, because she no longer had a tail to help balance herself.

Grateful for the carpet that covered the floor of her quarters, Amalia got to her feet... somehow... and staggered to the lavatory. Looking into the mirror, she saw not her own, lupine face...

But a human face. A face with pale skin, reddish-brown hair done up in a bun, and piercing green eyes.

Her captain's face.

"...What. The. Fuck."

* * *

When Gemini Shadow woke up, she looked down to find herself covered in thick white fur, rather than the silk dressing gown she usually wore... to say nothing of the decidedly lupine muzzle taking up most of the lower third of her vision.

She got to her feet, just barely managing to stop herself from toppling over, because she now had paws... which weren't generally things humans were meant to have, except in werewolf movies. And last she checked, Gem was not a werewolf.

Catching her reflection in the viewport, she saw not her own face, but that of Amalia.

"Well. This isn't good."

* * *

Once Gem and Amalia were back in their "proper" rooms, much confusion followed as the two officers attempted, with various degrees of success, to get ready for their duty shifts. Amalia found that the leather and metallic outfit she wore, the traditional uniform for a member of the Fenririan military, did not fit Gem's slimmer, taller frame at all. She clanked around in ill-fitting armour, feeling as though she was drowning in her own clothes.

Elsewhere, Gem was having the opposite problem: her uniform was far too tight! Given that Amalia was built more like a warrior, the blue Star Corps tunic and trousers she wore now fit about as well as — well — space clothes that were two sizes too small.

And then her communicator chirped:

“Kayzee to Shadow!”

Fetching it from her bedside table, she jabbed the small touchscreen with the pad of one finger.

“Shadow here,” she said, only realising after the words had left her mouth that she now had Amalia’s Scottish accent, rather than her familiar Received Pronunciation.

“...Colonel Wildstar? I thought I was hailing the Captain,” Kayzee said, sounding puzzled.

Gem suppressed the lupine snarl she wanted to make in the communicator’s general direction, and instead said:

“This *is* the Captain, Lieutenant. Just... make your report, please.”

“A strange being has appeared on the bridge, ma’am,” Kayzee said. “I can’t really describe it... I think you should see this for yourself.”

“On my way,” Gem growled, cutting the link. A bit steadier on her paws now, she made her way to the nearest turbolator.

* * *

On the bridge, there was a man wearing a trenchcoat and fedora — or at least, Kyla was pretty sure he was a man. He was also, apparently, made entirely of spaghetti.

“Mm. I’m the Noodle Man!” he announced, for approximately the twelfth time since he’d arrived. “Hi everyone, I’m the Noodle Man! The star of a brand new book series! If I’m lucky, they might even make a movie!” A pause. “Mmmm. If they do, I want Chef Boiardi to play me.”

“This isn’t happening, is it?” Violet O’Hara asked Kyla, who had command of the bridge as second officer.

“If it is, it’ll be a long time before I so much as glance at a plate of spaghetti and meatballs again,” Kyla said, as the Noodle Man continued announcing himself.

A door on the aft starboard side of the room swished open, and a curious pair stepped onto the bridge. It was definitely Captain Shadow and Lieutenant Colonel Wildstar, but they’d swapped outfits for some reason.

“REPORT!” barked Colonel Wildstar, sitting down in the command chair. Captain Shadow sat beside her, making quite a racket thanks to the clanking of the uniform.

The Noodle Man bounded over and declared, “Hiya, doggie! I’m the Noodle Man!”

“Are you now,” said the Fenririan, staring the Noodle Man down. “And what, pray tell, is so important that you materialised aboard my ship, *on my bridge*, whilst I am already having a frustrating day as it is?!”

In an undertone, Kyla whispered to Violet: “...Yeah, that’s the Captain.”

The Noodle Man hummed, then held up his book in one delicious appendage. “Buy my book?” he asked.

There was a very long silence. Then, finally, Gem (or rather, Amalia in Gem's body) produced some grated cheese from somewhere. "Captain... permission to take an early lunch?"

"Denied," the Fenririan said sharply. "I'll buy your book, sir!" She reached into her jacket pocket and produced several Martian dollar coins. "Will this be enough?"

"Yeah! Thanks muchly, doggie! Mmm, I'm the Noodle Man! Kids, absolutely do try this at home. Try it in abundance! Mm!"

Somehow, the Noodle Man grabbed the coins from the wolf's paw, and disappeared as quickly as he had come.

Kyla spoke into the silence. "Captain... what just happened?"

"I have the sneaking suspicion, Lieutenant," said the wolf, glancing briefly toward the fourth wall, "that someone is playing a colossal joke on us."

Then, from the other side of the bridge, they heard: "I'M THE NOODLE MAN!"

The Captain facepawed.

NOODLE THE FOURTH:

TEA TIME!! NOODLES!!

By Ostara Gale

A “The Castaways of Ishiok” vignette

The first thing Abraytha did after awakening from his slumber into a new, vampiric body, Abraytha —

— well, the *very* first thing he had done was the fulfilment of a somewhat inappropriate bodily function; but enough said about that. The first significant action he took was to sit down, and ponder. He had a strange feeling, an inkling that the world itself had changed along with his own body — not for the better, and for rather different reasons.

* * *

Across cosmoi untold, the terrible and fearsome Noodle Man ravaged, and he raved, and he ran the rendezvous; he ate noodles.

But he is coming...

...is coming for you...

* * *

Abraytha sat down cross-legged, thinking.

Oh for fuck’s sake, Janus, go to Wonderland already, his hodgepodge of a sentient house shouted across their psychic bond..

The horned man was not pleased, but he set off on his way, flipping the final fobbly-switch which set the good ship *Katioka* on a course for the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party.

The Ship began crashing, but because the Noodle Man — who sees and knows all — decided Ostara had done that plot point one too many times, the Noodle Man flung it back on-course, and there they landed.

Being entirely too busy with teatime to bother with any kind of scene-setting or physical description, the Mad Hatter stepped up to greet the winged traveller in all of time and space known only as Abraytha Janus Colefia, Son of Yophese Janus Colefia, Daughter of Janus Ab-Yoph Colefia, Child of Colefia, Fia of Cole.

“Why, hello, dear sir! What an unexpected pleasure! Merry unbirthday to you, I do say, and furthermore —” the Hatter said, and then his tone turned strangely plaintive, almost imploring as he produced a book from under his top hat and waved it in the Unbound Scavenger’s face. “— please buy this amazing, fabulous book.”

“What?”

The Hatter shoved the book even closer to the tip of Abraytha's nose.

"It's called *The Book of the Noodles and the Men*," the Mad Hatter continued, sounding quite mad, but quite unlike himself, "and it's available to buy!!! It's so good!!! Very interesting!! Technically it's the seventeenth instalment in the series, and it features a swath of decade-old and overly-niche characters, but it's friendly to a first-timer! Trust me, a person who's kept up with every instalment since Alice left!"

"But was she the right Alice?" questioned the Dormouse.

"Shush, that's a reference to a version of *Alice in Wonderland* we don't have the rights to, the Interdimensional Copyright Office will be all up our backsides."

"Metafictional freaks," opined Ostara, looking up from behind one of the largest teapots cluttering the Mad Hatter's table.

The March Hare's eyes bugged out of their sockets, and he slammed his teacup down onto its saucer so hard that he cracked it in half. The Hare had not been concealed behind any items of unusual size; the unfortunate lack of exposition had simply failed to establish his presence at the time of Abraytha's arrival.

"I *say!*" said the Hare, whiskers twitching. "Who in the name of the flying rumtilstintskins let the author into the narrative? Metafictional freaks *indeed!* Kettle, pot, black, I say!"

Abraytha turned away from the pair and looked back at the Mad Hatter, who was still staring expectantly at him..

"Uhhh... I don't want to buy any 'books of noodles' —"

"*The Book of the Noodles and the Men!*"

"Yes, yes, whatever. I was just... I just came here to join the tea party... you see, I got an invitation from one respectable Ms. Aesculapius, and she said that you..."

"Oh, but of course," bellowed the Hatter, "certainly, by all means! Join us for dinner! We even have the man and the mystery himself — Man, Noodle."

With that, the Mad Hatter gave a little bow and a most hideous of creatures came forth. If he had been in a more generous frame of mind, Abraytha might have thought that the man made of living pasta looked pleasantly whimsical; he might even have admitted that the being did not look entirely out of place in Wonderland.

But this was simply not how any of this was supposed to go.

"Mmm," the Noodle Man huffed, his voice surprisingly mild. "Hello. I'm the Noodle Man. Nice to meet you, old sport!"

"No it *isn't*," said Abraytha, resolutely ignoring the wet, warm, flaxen appendage that the being had held out for him to shake. He straightened, wings spread out, and rumbled: "You know what?"

I refuse! None of this is happening! You, sir, are no part of any aspect of my life, and *certainly* not this one!”

The Noodle Man looked genuinely crestfallen as Abraytha turned on his heel and headed back towards *Katioka*.

“N-no, wait!” the Noodle Man called out. “Don’t go! Mmm, we, we could work so well together! *I’m the Noodle Man!*”

“Good-bye!” Abraytha said without turning around, just about to cross the doorframe.

“No!” the Noodle Man called out again, chasing after him on limp noodle legs. “If you go, mm, I’ll, mm, I’ll — turn this entire world into noodles!”

“I! Don’t! Care!” said Abraytha. “*None of this is canonical!*”

He slammed the door. The Noodle Man did his best to bang against it, but his noodle-hands and noodle-arms could only produce a feeble, floppy sound which even he realised could not possibly be heard from within. Moments later, *Katioka* dematerialised.

The Noodle Man stood in place for a moment, then sighed.

He spared the Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse a glance — shared a heavy look with Ostara — then turned the world into Noodles.

But nobody cared.

NOODLE THE FIFTH:

I'M SO NORMAL I'M SO NORMAL I'M SO

By Plum Pudding

A "SIGNET" vignette

It had been a nervous day in York.

To be fair, the operations of SIGNET were usually quite strained, being one of many organisations dedicated to investigating the unexplained and also alien stuff, be they ancient vampires, Hervoken or gay bars that aren't real because of some time erasing thing. It wasn't a calm life. However, relatively speaking, today was more anxiety inducing than usual. SIGNET had found a thermonuclear missile.

"Shouldn't this be someone else's purview?" Jae-Sun had asked, trying to carefully move the thermonuclear missile into the back of Aoife Fitzgerald's people carrier. Aoife was wincing, as they slowly lifted the doomsday weapon. "For instance, perhaps someone more equipped or experienced?"

"No," Charles Zoltan said, in his usual imperious tone. "Other government organisations seem to be rather held up as of late. There's been an infestation of memory parasites in Whitehall."

Aoife sighed. Something was *always* happening in Whitehall. And memory parasites were the worst. Like that one guy, Aaron or Alex or something, who would show up and make you think that he was always part of the team and then try to have sex with people. Creep. She tried to adjust the carrier, moving her bags around the boot so there would be some cushioning — for all the bloody good it'd do if this went off. Her mind kept going to Norah and Harvey. She focused back on the work. "More memory parasites?" She asked, trying to remain calm and focused on anything but the thing in the boot that could kill literally everyone.

Zoltan nodded, but the attempt to engage in conversation seemed to have failed. Olivia approached with more blankets and stuffing, which they proceeded to shove in the boot nervously. Xana was trying to hold open the car doors.

Aoife did think there was something odd about them having to deal with a thermonuclear missile and not one of, you know, the bigger acronymic organisations, like those people with the imperious nearly avengers tower in the middle of London. Or you know, maybe just a normal government agency properly equipped to deal with missiles that didn't seem to be odd and or unexplained. Aoife wasn't always sure how much she trusted the government — it was a general sort of trust, but she was certain that it was better trusting entire *divisions* with the care of thermonuclear missiles rather than six randos who worked in an entirely different field.

But six *was* better than five. And a new addition would absolutely be helpful. So she was glad to have

The Noodle Man

YES THE NOODLE MAN!! HE'S HERE TO HELP SIGNET AND SAVE THE DAY

Squelch squelch squelch went the Noodle Man as he Noodled all over the place.

“Hi mmm yeah I’m the noodle man,” he said.

“Noodle Man!” cheered Charles Zoltan. “Our Newest member is HERE to HELP,” he proclaimed, and Aoife wondered when she had last heard him so pleased.

But she too was pleased. The Noodle Man was *exactly* the kind of person you wanted at a time like this. Especially considering how he was skilled in defusing thermonuclear explosives. (See *The Adventures of Noodle Man Volume 17: Kim Jong Un Gets Noodled* and *The Adventures of Noodle Man Volume 18: More of Beating Up Kim Jon Un with Noodles*, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press.)

“Woah I’m noodle man mm”

Noodle Man gyrated wetly toward the thermonuclear missile, his individual strands of noodle squirming inside his trenchcoat and fedora. “m’lady,” he grunted to Olivia, who blushed — what a handsome fellow!

A bit of his noodles almost fell off, a bit like two kids trying to balance on each other’s shoulders, before he corrected himself. He approached the nuclear bomb.

“Only Noodle Man can save us now,” Charles Zoltan said, and lo, but he was right, for behold. On this sacred day of days, the Noodle Man, he rose, and he approached the bomb, the destroyer. His Noodly filaments trembled, but he moved on. The light shone upon his fedora as he began to investigate the bomb.

Light from another source! A woman shone, floating over them, vicious and deceitful anger glowing in her eyes.

“It’s too late,” said Nrai, the evil Archon with a love for rearranging letters. “My missile is armed, Noodle Man. You have but 81 seconds before all of York is decimated. You shall *never* defeat me and get Noodle Wife back.”

“That’s what *you* think,,” Noodle Man said, flamboyantly, filled with derision for his nemesis. (See *Adventures of Noodle Man 11: Me and Someone Else’s Ghost*.) “But I haven’t begun to use 3% of my power.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Nrai screamed camply.

“Mmm yeah I’m nooodle man m m,” he said.

The world began to reshape into a glory of fire and light. Noodle Man raised his Noodle filaments in anger, and shook furiously, individual strands of noodle trailing in the wind. He began to charge his Kamamamaheaha or however you spell it.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Asked Zoltan, suddenly out of whatever religious fervour had taken hold of him. “Who is that?”

Olivia held her head in pain. “What’s happening??” There was a clot of dark blood on her light purple skin, and she winced. Pulling at the wound, she discovered that it was not blood leaking out of her skin, but rather a thick and pasty tomato sauce. Her limbs began to bifurcate, as if her bones were now naught but a squirmy, misshapen, delicious pasta.

“AAAAHHHHH OH MY GOD, I’M STILL CONSCIOUS, I’M IN UNIMAGINABLE PAIN,” she said.

Xana gripped onto her gun, running forward, but it was useless! She clipped into the floor.

The thermonuclear missile beeped ominously in tune with *Gimme Gimme Gimme A Noodle After Midnight*, which was now playing on the radio. Jae-Sun’s head began rotating 360 degrees.

“LICENSED FICTION, LICENSED FICTION,” the gods intoned.

Charles Zoltan gripped his head in pain. “Of course, how could I not realise it sooner!” He moaned. “That isn’t the real Jae-Sun! It’s a memory parasite!”

Jae-Sun’s face split open like facets of a diamond, revealing a giant meatball baby, who spewed Olive Garden breadsticks towards Zoltan and Aoife. The Thermonuclear missile continued to beep.

“You can never save Noodle Wife!!” yelled Nrai, punching Noodle Man with the power of twenty quadrillion suns.

“Im bixsesual,” announced Noodle Man.

Zoltan’s phone began to ring. He answered it. “Hello?” He answered, petrified and meek, as Jae-Sun began to shit living room furniture for no discernible reason.

“Hi yes Mr Zoltan it is me King Charles,” said King Charles, over the phone. “I was wondering if you would care to let me knight your newest member of your team,, I really have a deep admiration for choppy the Gonzales.”

“Who?” Zoltan asked.

Choppy the Gonzales waved hi to Zoltan, before Zoltan shot it in the head with his pistol, as typical of a lifelong pacifist who shunned all weapons.

“Another memory parasite, damn it!” he declared.

Richard Nixon appeared. Unlike many other US Presidents, he was categorically not a memory parasite.

“Zoltan!” he shouted. “I’ve time travelled from the past to tell you that the choices you make now, put the past in danger! It is a matter of continuity that York is not destroyed by a nuclear explosion! Come with me, I’ll explain on the way!!”

Charles Zoltan nodded, stern. The Thermonuclear Missile beeped.

INTRODUCING TIME TRAVELLING RICHARD NIXON AND CHARLES ZOLTAN’S ADVENTURES COMING SOON FROM ARCBATTLE PRESS !! FEATURING THE STORY NIXON VS RAMEN *and* AUTEUR IS *ALSO IN IT*

“Wait,” Aoife exclaimed. “That didn’t happen! There wasn’t a thing about that!!”

Richard Nixon nodded. “No, it didn’t!! I’m trying to stop the memetic noodle! Time is a spoon and chopsticks. Nothing makes sense anymore. The Continuity all the way back to the anchoring is noodles and also I am a fish.”

Time Travelling Richard Nixon was now Time Travelling Fish Richard Nixon. “You have to fix it Aoife, You’ve got to get back!! Back to the past!! Samurai Jack!!”

The thermonuclear missile exploded. The last thought that Aoife had before she disintegrated into eternal death was that this would take quite some doing to retcon.

NOODLE THE SIXTH:

THE CASE OF THE NOODLE MAN

By Shergar Sahcahgar

A “The Cosmology of Sherlock Holmes” vignette from the worlds of “10,000 Damns”

Of the many adventures that myself and Holmes have experienced — even, though I hesitate to use such a light word to describe events which have so frequently been built on tragedy, enjoyed — there is one that I shall never forget; and that is the case of the Noodle Incident. It began, as I recall, on the 1st of April 1890, at about nine o’clock in the morning (we had breakfasted, my journal records, on kippers, expertly prepared for us by the redoubtable Mrs Hudson). I was touching my napkin to my mouth, about to congratulate the aforementioned landlady on her sterling work when there came, at the door, a queer squelching noise, not unlike the noise made, if my recollection can be trusted, by a thing that makes queer squelching noises.

“Hello?” came a voice from behind the door.

The voice, too, was reminiscent of a thing that makes queer squelchy noises. My mind was sent back to an encounter with the Queer Squelchy Noise Beast native to the Visakhapatnam region. The next squelchy words, though, reminded me of something very different and altogether more unnerving — semi-amateur writers of half-licensed quasi-fanfiction.

“Are you planning,,,,, mMmmmm,,,,,, to leave a review of Noodleman 1– the Legend Begins after you buy your digital copy from Amazon? I’m the noodle man,,,,”

Holmes — languishing, I remember, as was his wont, I recall, in an opium haze— opened his mouth and made a noise which, I recollect, eventually resolved itself into a sentence.

“Come in, Mr Noodle. And I fear I shall not.”

Mr Noodle entered the room at last, carrying a case.

“Why not? I’m,,, the noodle man. And Mr. Holmes, though I have heard word of your talents, do you mind my asking you how you ascertained my identity,,, before even seeing my noodley face?”

“Simplicity itself, old boy. I have a CCTV system set up in the landing. I could see you on my tablet screen. And before you inquire, I have a CCTV system because one was thrown back in time, and a few universes to the left, through a space-time rift caused by the nuclear destruction of York, some thirteen decades hence. Thus it was easy to ascertain your noodliness; and, given that — minor Welsh nobility aside — the infamous Mr Noodle is the only being in Britain so clearly made of eggs, flour and water and covered in tomato sauce, it was easy to connect such a quality to your good self. Especially given that you stated your identity, you thick haggis.”

“Dash it, Mr. Holmes — mmmm, do excuse my language, Dr Watson — people say your powers of deduction, your ability to come to correct and specific conclusions ,, Mm m m. , with

no information to go on, is impressive, but it really doesn't hit a chap until he sees it himself. Mmmm,,,,,.....,,,l, I'm the noodle man."

"I know," said Holmes, "I'm really bloody smart, aren't I? And as to why I won't be reviewing your book — it's because I won't buy it. And I won't buy it because it's nonsense. A hack's joke! Unlike wot i am; a well-constructed, satirical piece of eruditia. So yah boo sucks to you."

"Oh," said Mr. Noodle, "Mmmm,,, you're not so good a detective as Buzznut Steelman, PI,,,,,mmmm fair enough. I'm the Noodle Man."

Then Mr. Noodle left, looking rather dejected.

"What a satisfying conclusion that was, Holmes." I said, as I remember.

"Yeah, I thought so too."

"By the way, my darling Holmes, in American terms, what was the last level of formal education you completed?"

"University, you bastard Watson."

NOODLE THE SEVENTH:

SCALPEL'S EDGE

By Theta Mandel

A "Dionus" vignette

"Are you ready?"

The lights were bright against the reflective walls. Dull, wasn't it? Hospitals always had white walls.

"Mmm," she mumbled through the tube.

"Ah, yes. Well, let us begin. Count down from ten."

Ten.

Dionus glanced at the brainwave monitor, standing proudly at its left. Machines can't let you down because they don't make mistakes.

Nine.

He leant to his side and picked up a freshly-cleaned scalpel off the blue cloth, nimble fingers sliding over the metal. For a moment — just a moment — he thought it had dropped to the floor.

Eight.

The patient was at the verge of an endless abyss, eyes closing as she tumbled headfirst over the edge. Dionus felt his heartbeat skip a few bars; *focus*.

Seve-

Gone. She was gone, and her brain was quiet, and her mind was still. The doctor sighed, leaning in, bringing the scalpel closer towards her bare, vulnerable skin.

* * *

A shard of silver flashes before his eyes and he cries out but does not weep, for all the tears are gone, but the man in his arms is hurt, dying, dead, and there's nothing he can do.

* * *

And the lights go out.

Looking down, his hands are simple blobs of flat colour, and everything is easy.

Looking up, his patient is a mess of yellow lines, somehow distinct despite the fact that he's *almost entirely sure* that they're the same colour.

* * *

“Wait, no, I was...”

“Mm, I know what you were doing! I’m the Noodle Man.”

“You’re — you should be unconscious.”

Even in this strange state of existence into which he seemed to have slipped, Dionus was firm on this point. *I don’t operate on people who are awake.*

“No no, I can do what I like! I’m the noodle man! Weee!”

“That... that doesn’t matter! You should be *asleep!*”

For a man who had been having a flashback only moments before, he was certainly resolute, determined not to let his standard of care slip. Even if that standard was being extended to a bundle of noodles in a trenchcoat.

“Right. Take that coat off, let’s get you back into your patient gown, then more anaesthesia. No arguments.”

His face was stony despite the ludicrous situation. The mass of noodles considered him.

“Mmm,,” he said, “mmmm indeed. Hey,,,,, did you know I have a book coming out later today?”

“That’s wonderful, Mr, er, Noodle Man, but — here, put that coat over there, and then tie this around you.”

He tossed a blue hospital gown at the noodle man unceremoniously.

“B-but I’m the noodle man!”

“That’s nice, dear, but this is a hospital”.

The doctor stared at the noodles. The noodles stared at the doctor, or at least, tried. Not having eyes, this was highly ineffectual, and so he decided to play along.

He wobbled out of his trench coat and wiggled into the classic blue gown.

“Classic,, mmm!” he said.

“Okay, come on, back to the table.”

Perhaps the change of medium is down to this strange noodle man... Or perhaps I inhaled some of the anaesthetic.

“Won’t you take a bite?” the Noodle Man asked, offering up his arm.

“No. No I will *not!* Look, this is preposterous! I — I’m going insane! I can’t perform surgery in this state! I was on the verge of a panic attack only a few minutes ago, I can’t — I can’t deal with sentient noodles in trenchcoats, or casual changes in medium! This is serious! Just. Just let me be serious. I think it’s necessary.”

Dionus breathed heavily, scalpel in his left hand, anaesthesia mask in the other. Not that the Noodle Man had a mouth and nose for gas to travel into, but hey, he spoke, right? Air had to be coming and going from *somewhere*.

Right?

The Noodle Man laughed.

“Look, angst-man, it’s, well,, my book is coming out today! You know what that means! It’s April Fools!”

“What?” Poor Dionus was too confused and out of breath to manage more than a single word.

“It’s. April. FOOLLLSSSS!!”

“Okay. Sure is, buddy” Dionus was exhausted, and reached forward, anaesthesia face mask towards the mass of noodles.

“NOOOO!!!!” the Noodle Man screamed. “I’m,, I’m,, I’m in a book! I’m the noodle man!!! You can’t do this to me!!!”

Dionus sighed, then stood up tall, taking a deep breath.

“I. AM. YOUR. DOCTOR. Now, count back from ten”.

“That’s not how this ends,, not how it ends, not at all!”

“I don’t know if you heard, noodle man, but there’s a new writer in town, and he has a medical degree.” Dionus caught sight of his hands as he moved them towards his patient; they were trembling. “Now, come on! Back. From. Ten.”

The Noodle Man moved to stand up from the table. Dionus moved his left hand to stop him; oh no.

The scalpel squelched uneasily into the noodle man’s wet strands. Dionus and the noodle man both stared at the wound, yellow oil drops escaping and pooling on the blade.

“By Urizen’s teeth... Are you alright?” The doctor’s mouth dropped open, though he closed it just as quickly as more oil spurted out of the wound and directly into his open gob. “Ack!” he spat. “I — I’m so sorry—”

“Mmmmm it’s fine. No harm done,,,” the Noodle Man reassured him, but he was already taking his chance, slamming the mask firmly onto the noodle-entity’s head-ish-area.

The Noodle Man began to stumble over his words even more than usual. “No — I — Ten. Nine. Eight. Seve —”

And the Noodle Man fell away. And the room fell away.

* * *

Dionus looked down. The lights were still bright against the reflective walls, but the patient was a woman, and one most decidedly *not* made of thin dough strips. He sighed, removing the mask from her face.

The scalpel was not, as he had feared, embedded in her shoulder, but sitting quite tamely in his palm. He moved his hand forward to begin the operation.

A closer look at his hands revealed that they were still trembling.

He put down his scalpel and sat to the side, trying to think of another doctor whom he might trust to perform the surgery while he took a much-needed night off.

And, if he couldn't think of anyone, he would sit by the patient's bedside and wait for her to wake up, then refer her on — or perhaps reschedule to another date, when his head was not filled with images of war upon the sight of a scalpel's blade and the cold flash of silver.

NOODLE THE EIGHTH:

THE ADVENTURES OF TALBOT, INTERDIMENSIONAL DOGTECTIVE - PART 1

By Callum Phillpott

A “Jenny Over-There: The Nine-Two-Five Universe” vignette

The name’s Talbot Molossus. I’m a Dane. A Great one. I mainly run the Scottish branch of the MFS these days, but so little happens there that you have to forgive me when I get a bit distracted.

You see, sometime in June, I received a message from one of my college friends up in Hybor-E1. One of the few wizards I like talking to.

“Talbot,” his email read, “first off, how’s it been? I’ve certainly been better. You see, after college, I —”

“Save the pleasantries for later,” I replied, imagining that I cut my old college friend off at that precise moment. “What’s the deal? I told you to only email me if you knew of anything potentially world-ending. I’m a Prince — 17th in line to the Royal Canis Throne, I don’t have time for your trivial matters!”

“Hey, boss,” said one of my employees — one Tetra-None Hepta-Oct, or ‘Tetra’.

“What?” I asked.

“My phone’s not ringing quite right, can you fix it?”

I nodded. “Of course.”

“Thanks!”

Meanwhile, my old college friend replied to me:

“I told you what was going on in the second half of the first email. You really need to start reading these in full rather than treating these as identical to dialogue because you’re missing out on a lot of nuances —”

“That’s enough from you,” I replied before scrolling back to read the rest of the first email. Well, skim it.

I felt my fur stand up as I realised what the situation was.

Apparently, according to his magic crystal ball, the Noodle Man had broken free from the OMSCF (Our Majesty’s Spiffing Containment Facility). Terrible news indeed. He was a Blihter-Class entity, a classification reserved for only the most annoying of anomalous beings. The Noodle Man had more than earned it, on account of his voice, behaviour, and general antics. Even centuries after successful containment, we could still feel the scars he’d left — you know those

weird things you sometimes see floating in your eye? That's the Noodle Man. He put them in there just to annoy you. At least, that's what mummy told me.

"My God," I said, "the Noodle Man has escaped!" I made sure to also repeat this in the email so that my college buddy could know about it.

"Indeed," he replied, "so deal with it, please. Lots of love, Albrecht D. Whipple."

"No. Kisses, Talbot Molossus."

"Look, I'd do it, but Charles is taking me out for our anniversary, and you know I don't like going out in public, but it was just so sweet of him, how could I not? I can send you pictures if you want."

"Please do." I had no sodding clue who Charles was, but there wasn't much time.

Quickly, I ran over to the most knowledgeable man in this entire office: Doctor Know. He was arranging his beanie baby collection when I got to him.

"What is it?" he asked with a snarl. "Don't bother me unless it's of the gravest importance."

"Oh, but it is!" I grabbed his chair and spun it around to face me. As I spoke, I made sure to stare right into his eyes to convey the urgency of everything that was at stake here. "Tetra says the phone's not ringing quite right. Can you fix it?"

He sighed. "Xe probably just has tinnitus, but sure. I can fix both. I *am* a Doctor, after all."

Now that it was out of the way, I got back to the Noodle Man issue. From my desk, I pulled out my gear — a pair of chopsticks and, in case things get really out of hand, a fork. I did consider bringing my loveable companion character around with me, but I sensed that someone somewhere would have to deal with less paperwork if I didn't bring him along.

I ran through the office, making my way to the teleportation machine my boss from Wales gave to me. One capable of travelling through many worlds. I stepped in, determined to help protect dogkind and other, inferior creatures from this multidimensional noodle menace. There was only one question in my mind as I set the coordinates:

Why hadn't my college friend also said 'Lots of love' in the last email he sent me?

I then also realised I didn't know what coordinates to put in. Shrugging, I just tapped the autopilot button and set it so it naturally sought out places where climactic events happened. Even if that wasn't where the Noodle Man was now, it was likely where he'd end up.

NOODLE THE NINTH:

AUTEUR LICENSE

By Plum Pudding

An "Auteur" vignette

1960.

A slow burning sensation spread over Marilyn Monroe's chest as she steadily got up from her seat. The barbiturates were quite strong indeed, she realised, coughing. Yes. Very strong. Slow. Get up. Now don't hurt your back.

She moved slowly, like a sloth, or perhaps, more akin to her public image, like a cat that has just begun to stretch. But this was when she saw it at the foot of her bed — and thinking it was just the strength of the concoction, she muttered "oh, shoo!" and blinked a few times, but the figure, a skull — no, a *skeleton*, wrapped in a robe with an almost Transylvanian collar — was still there at the foot of the bed.

"*Bonjour,*" he said, and she knew this was no dream.

Marilyn was not one to scream hysterically unless the part required it. She had seen worse over the years. She was more concerned that a man she hadn't invited had turned up in her room at all — and this spoke to some sort of flaw in terms of security, surely — than she was by the fact that he was a skeleton. On the whole, having little in the way of flesh made strange men intruding into women's personal quarters *less* foreboding, as far as it went.

"What are you *doing* here?" she asked, pursing her lips.

She did not like the look of this figure, but at least, based upon his clothbone, ragged nature, she did not anticipate that he could overpower her. She considered calling for the guards with the button near her pillow. She was Marilyn Monroe. *Of course* there had been intruders before.

"*Non, non, non!* Do not worry, *mademoiselle.*" The skeleton purred. "I am not here."

"You have a funny way of showing it," she said, reaching for a cigarette by her table.

But as she looked at him, she determined that he was indeed correct. He really *wasn't* here, not physically — the figure at the foot of her bed was ever so slightly translucent. Many an actress might have panicked, but Marilyn simply remembered one of the many ex-husbands she couldn't legally name, the one with the adorably hopeless taste in neckwear and the remarkable taste in wives. In this town, surprise extra wives tended to be grounds for divorce, and a distressingly common kind at that; but in *his* case, the wife had been one of the few things that had made her consider extending the marriage of circumstance. She'd gotten a few adventures into the bargain — and, oddly enough, a flying licence.

But frankly, those adventures had been the least of it. This was *Hollywood*. She had seen strange things before.

So she decided to play along.

“Je m'appelle Auteur,” he said. Foreign, pretentious, or both; that wasn't unusual either, around these parts. “This film you are making, you should stop now,” he said. “It does not exist.”

“Like you,” Marilyn noted.

“Nothing is like me,” Auteur said gravely.

Then, suddenly, he was gone, to whatever extent he had been there in the first place; and so Marilyn got up and proceeded down to the studio.

* * *

On set, Marilyn felt completely blissed out. She fell asleep on a couch at one point — and she awoke to a woman doing her makeup. “You're on in seven,” the woman said, meekly.

“Thank you, Seven,” Marilyn answered — the theatre industry way of saying ‘Yes, yes, I heard you!’.

She wondered why exactly she was in such a tired and ragged state, but she didn't think about it too hard — or she might have come to a conclusion that she didn't particularly like. That it was the drugs, or the — no, it wasn't the drugs. She knew how to handle herself. She was on top of her game. She was *good* at these roles — oh, sure, most of 'em were dumb blondes, but she was still good at them. *I've got this*. She lit another cigarette. She had time.

She'd been working on this film of late, deplorable thing. *Let's Make Love*, it was called, of all things, although she could hardly think of an experience less conducive to a romantic effect. The script was especially atrocious. She was wracking her brain day and night on how to say the lines — but there really wasn't anything to be done with them. It could be a career-killer.

She took a deep huff of the cigar, and hoped it would help with the nerves.

The set was cold. It tended to be — all of the men were buttoned up in their three-piece suits, and she had to wear her dresses, with her shoulders exposed and everything; wasn't that the way?

She got up, and moved onto the stage, but it wasn't the set she remembered.

Something's wrong.

Oh, of course. Nothing about this film's production was ever simple! She'd have to go talk to Arthur about working on the script or something — mind you, it'd be like filling a pothole with cotton balls, but perhaps —

“Crewman!” she called, waving to one of the stagehands, a run-crew member. “Is this the right set for *Let's Make Love*?”

The crewman was about to say something about the title of the film, but she flashed him her wedding ring, as a reminder.

“Is this the right stage?” she repeated, louder. She realised, after the fact, that she was yelling.

The run crewman's face went pale. He'd heard Monroe had a bad reputation, but even so! "*Pasta in Paris*," he answered.

Marilyn bit her lip. Now, she knew that she'd signed up for a lot over the years, but surely she'd remember a title *that* outrageous. No, no, this wouldn't do at all.

"I came here to work on that stupid lovey film."

"I'm sorry, Missus Monroe, but you're signed for *Pasta in Paris*," the crewman repeated himself, a bit nervous now.

"I'd like to speak to the director," she stated, not sure what else to do. The set was eerily silent. Something was wrong. The lights came on, and began to shine in her face. It was blinding. "And won't somebody please turn those *off!*!" she cried.

The director's chair lowered, seemingly from nowhere.

"Mmm mh hello m'lady ," the Noodle Man said. "I'm,, , , very excited for ,, noodle film."

Marilyn was shocked by the *appearance* of the fellow. People had said things about *her* of late, certainly, but she never looked half as horrific as that! She couldn't think of a visage more inhuman — he was certainly more nightmarish than that skull fellow who had appeared in her bedroom. His entire face was strands of spaghetti and ramen, shaped into something that hung awkwardly in a blobby mess. He wore a trench coat, a fedora and sunglasses (despite no facial features) but he was shirtless and she could see his bare chest was just more of the wet wriggling tendrils.

"M mm noodle advertisement . for noodle product ." the Noodle Man said.

"Now see here!!" Marilyn declared. "This just isn't right! I'm here to do more work on a film."

"Commercial." the Noodle Man replied. "Let me show you mmm noodle product."

"Noodles, I assume." Marilyn pursed her lips. She always said to dear Arthur that she didn't have an ego, but she couldn't help but feel that this was a fair bit beneath her.

"No!" the Noodle Man smiled, presenting to her a can, like a can of soup or beans. On the can was an image of a skull and the caption *Chicken Auteur Soup*. Marilyn raised an eyebrow, sceptical.

The Noodle Man struggled to explain. "Hello I'm the noodle man um yeah so you know how they sell noodles at the store I was thinking mmm ,, that that's a little last week you know,,? ? I'm just not like a fan of it mmm I guess"

"So this is the replacement?" she asked. It seemed so familiar...

And the can in her hand was *yelling*.

"Look, kid," Auteur cackled, "I get it. We all wanna be the big shot. But why don't you let poor sweet lil Auteur go, *s'il vous plait?* Huh? What have I ever done to you? What do *you* get out of this?!?!"

“Capitalism,” the Noodle Man answered in an oddly clear, American voice, handing another screaming can of Auteur to Marilyn.

“Pardon, but why does it scream?” she asked, nervously.

“Mmm, it’s for immersion,” the Noodle Man answered, noncommittal. “I’m the noodle man.”

Marilyn hesitated once more, but had to ask. “Is this a person?”

“No, no, no, mmm, it’s many liquidised *parts* of a person,” the Noodle Man said. “Plus chicken broth. Here, have some. Haha i’m the noodle man”

The Noodle Man continued rattling one of the cans. Marilyn was almost fascinated by how many sentient cans and boxes of Auteur soup he had made out of him. Thinking back to that skeleton fellow she had seen, there had hardly been any liquid involved in his physiology. Maybe bone fluid or something. And yet, the Noodle Man had somehow managed to mass produce a product. Auteur was being *sold*.

And so Marilyn couldn’t bear to be fascinated. It was a little *obscene*. Her head felt strangely... noodly... but that much was still clear to her as she processed what she had seen and been told. Thanks to that vision she had seen, she now *knew* in her heart of hearts that this was once a person! That this was wrong!

Auteur shrieked his irritating death-rattle. The Noodle Man handed a can to a stagehand, and gestured furiously with his noodle appendages for another stagehand to open it and eat.

“What’s in it?” the stagehand asked.

“Mm, as a filmmaker you could say I have an auteur licence, ba dum tsss,,,”

The stagehand looked sceptical, holding the now shaking and screaming can.

“Special effects,” the Noodle Man assured him.

The stagehand reached out, and put a bit of the broth, chicken and auteur from the can on his finger. He moved it to his lips, and began to chew before screaming in pain. “WHAT THE HELL!?!?” he yelled. “IT’S ALL BONE!!”

“calcium!!”

The stagehand’s teeth all fell out onto the floor, and he began screaming in pain and gyrating. The carotid artery near his neck burst, spraying a hyperbolic amount of blood onto Marilyn and the Noodle Man.

“ARRAGGRHAHAHAHAHAHFHGHGHRHRHGGH AAA A AH HH H H H H H “ the man yelled.

“haha i’m the noodle man,” the Noodle Man said, eating another stagehand whole.

Marilyn felt fearful, and this had been an overwhelming day, beyond any she had ever known. She ran through her thoughts, trying to figure out the logical next step. She didn't know what to do, so she did the only thing she *could*.

It was the prerogative of a diva to storm off the set.

NOODLE THE EIGHTH, AGAIN

THE ADVENTURES OF TALBOT, INTERDIMENSIONAL DOGTECTIVE - PART 8

By Callum Phillpott

A "Jenny Over-There: The Nine-Two-Five Universe" vignette, continued

The name's Talbot Molossus. I'm a Dane — a Great one. Once I left the burning wreckage of the Kooba Cola Corporation, I stepped into the teleportation pod and blasted off, prepared to do it all over again. Any climax, any time, anywhere, so long as I eventually find the Noodle Man and put an end to his Blighter-class antics.

Stepping out from the teleportation pod, I was greeted by a series of cold corridors emblazoned with a triangular logo. At once, I recognised the sigil as an earlier variant of Solace Operations, a spacefleet from Earth mainly focused on the colonisation of other worlds.

"I'M GONNA KILL YOU!" screamed a voice from across the hall.

Emerging from the corner was a nervous figure wearing oily yellow robes and a pinkish mask. Emerging from sleeves, I could see thin grey limbs. For a moment, I thought that this was the Noodle Man... but no. The Noodle Man would never wear anything with that much colour.

The robed figure noticed me. "You!" they screeched. "You've got to get me out of here! There's this man on the base chasing me with an axe!"

"Now hold on, buster," I said, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it. I didn't like smoking, but I'd been practising the skill in the hopes that someday I'd get addicted. "Why *should* I help you?"

"Because someone's chasing me with an axe!"

"I suppose that's good enough." I moved out of the way so they could join me inside the pod.

Immediately they wrapped their arms around me, and I could tell for certain that this wasn't the Noodle Man I was after.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!"

"No worries." I threw the cigarette down and stomped it out with my royal boots. "Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm..." they paused before pulling out a tablet from their robes — "Tonpaxoparamorph. Apparently."

"You needed to check?"

"Don't you?"

They had me there.

“Let’s get back to business,” I said, pushing more buttons. “I’m currently on the trail of an entity known as the... Noodle Man?”

“The NOODLE MAN!?!?”

“The Noodle Man.”

“You want to find the Noodle Man.”

I nodded.

“Why!?!?”

“You know him?”

“Know him? He’s one of the many reasons I left for the Dawns!”

“The Dawns?”

Tonpaxoparamorph gestured around, “This place, it’s in the Dawns, this sort of isolated collective of various universes.”

“So you came here for protection?”

Tonpaxoparamorph nodded, “That, and it meant I had fewer universes to deal with. Infinite possibilities can be very overwhelming, you know.”

This confused me further, “Why would you have to put up with more than one?”

“I...” They reached into their robes again, pulling out their tablet and reading over it. “Okay, so an experiment or something happened, and now I’m in a multiversal hive-mind with, like, myself. A version of myself in every universe. Honestly being here has been very confusing since there’s this other version of me in a universe with a nearly identical Solace base to this, and apparently, they’re just staying in a room all day with some chap named Haydren. Like, Hayden, but with an r for some reason —”

“Wait,” I said, speaking as though I was responding to an email. “Did you say there’s a version of you in every universe?”

They nodded. “Well, at least that’s the case in the Dawns, now. I’m not quite sure what happened to the outsiders — hopefully, they died.”

That’s when I came up with my genius idea. I grabbed their shoulder and looked at what I assumed was their eyes.

“Listen to me, pal. I need you to think over to another universe —”

“Well, I’ll do my best, but —”

“— and I need you to tell me where to find either a new telephone, or a good treatment for tinnitus. You see, I have a friend/co-worker named Tetra, and xe...”

I trailed off, noticing the strange look in Tonpaxoparamorph's eyes.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing," they said, "it's only that I thought you were going to have me find the Noodle Man."

I paused. "Actually, that might be better to do first. Tell me where the Noodle Man is."

They smiled. "Ah, thought so."

"Well?"

"Well what?" they asked.

"Well, where *is* the Noodle Man?" I asked, perhaps a little forcefully.

"Oh, I have no idea. Not anywhere in my range, not anymore. He must have found something more iconic to hijack, I expect. Which is just as well; I didn't escape all the way to the 10,000 Dawns just to have him on my back again!"

"Ah," I said. "Alright." I paused. "...Well?"

"Well?" they repeated once more.

I admit my voice got a little forceful as I elaborated:

"Tell me about the phones and the tinnitus!"

NOODLE THE TENTH:
THE NOODLE MAGIC ISLAND

By Ismaeel Clarke

A "The Magic Island" vignette

"Another Arcbeatle Press vignette?" cried Mrs Furball, nearly dropping her handbag in surprise.

"Yes, indeed," I replied, producing the letter I had received from a certain author fellow. "It says here that to promote Arcbeatle Press's exciting new upcoming series *The Noodle Man*; we will be in a vignette in this new anthology, *The Noodle Incident*, where we will have our narratives usurped by —" I paused in slight confusion, and read a bit further down the letter.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear," said Aquanafrahudy worriedly, for he was a worried sort of fellow when he was worried. "Having our narratives usurped? That doesn't sound very good."

"Did somebody say 'usurping narratives?'" said the theatrical and suspiciously French voice of a dark, skeletal figure wearing a monochrome cloak.

"Oh, go away, Auteur!" said Mrs Furball, "You've already gotten your own vignette!"

Mrs Furball and I hoisted up Auteur by the arms, and threw him all the way to the end of the book.

"What? No!" he cried, sailing through the air ungracefully, "You cannot do this to me, *imbéciles impudents!* I am *l'Auteur!* Put me down at once! At once, I say! At oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo..."

"Well, that's him sorted out," I said, and sank down into Mrs Furball's chair.

"Excuse me, that's my chair," said Mrs Furball indignantly.

"Are you sure?" I said, not particularly wanting to let go of it.

"Yes, quite sure," said Mrs Furball, "It was given to me by the Zognob of Bargonia after we defeated those jam-eating pineapples, remember?"

"I'm sure the Mighty Zognob gave them to me," I said.

"Well, I'm quite sure he didn't," said Mrs Furball.

"It appears we are at an impasse," I said, "And I was here first."

"I was there before that," said Mrs Furball.

"It was unoccupied before I sat down," I said.

"But I'd occupied it before that," said Mrs Furball.

“Yes, I suppose you had,” I said begrudgingly, and got up.

Mrs Furball slumped down into her chair, then got up again because she needed to get her knitting, which was next-door. She was just about to open the door and go through, when she found a large group of noodles in a trenchcoat standing before her. This, we thought, must be the dreaded Noodle Man who was coming to usurp our narratives.

Nobody said anything.

“No, I didn’t,” said Nobody, “I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh yes you did,” I said, and pushed Nobody out of the shop.

Just then, there was a knock at the door. It was Nobody.

“Oi!” they said, “You can’t just go pushing people out of shops like that!”

“Oh yes, I can!” I said, and pushed Nobody right out of Mrs Furball’s shop again, and all the way down the street.

“Shouldn’t the Noodle Man have said something by now?” asked Aquanafrahudy, “From what I’ve heard of it, it’s quite talkative.”

“Shush,” said Mrs Furball.

Just then, there was another knock at the door. It was Monsieur Wel.

“Ah, *bonjour, mon amies!*” he cried, “I don’t suppose you ‘ave seen, by any chance, a bunch of noodles in a trenchcoat? Only it’s for a new sort of cheese zat I am making, you see, and I think I may ‘ave left it somewhere around here.”

“Oh, yes, here you are,” said Mrs Furball, and handed Monsieur Wel the group of noodles in a trenchcoat.

“*Merci, merci!*” cried Monsieur Wel, being an entirely more pleasant sort of Frenchman than Auteur; and he kissed me most exuberantly on the cheeks.

“Ahem —” I began, but just then, there was *another* knock at the door. It was Nobody.

“Oi!” they said, “you can’t just go pushing people out of shops and all the way down streets like that!”

“Oh yes, I can!” I said, and pushed Nobody right out of Mrs Furball’s shop, all the way down the long, windy street, round a corner, into the docks, and onto a ferry heading towards Barneel on the other side of the world.

“There we are, then,” said Mrs Furball, “Sorted.”

Just then, there was *another* knock at the door. It was the Noodle Man!

“No!” we all cried. “Not the Noodle Man!”

“No, I didn’t,” said Wee All.

“Shush,” I said, and pushed Wee All down the large, convenient hole left over from when the Evil Narrators had fiercely fought us, using fierce fish with all the fierceness of mice, but surprisingly effective excavation skills.

“Well,” said Mrs Furball, “What shall we do now?”

“Mmm! Mmm! Noodle noodle!” cried the Noodle Man, “Go buy the Noodle Man book, mm mm noodle noodle!”

“Oh, okay,” we said, and started leafing through the bookshelves.

“Hang on,” began Mrs Furball, but got no further, as just then there was *another* knock at the door. It was Nobody.

“Oi!” they said, “You can’t just go about pushing people out of shops, all the way down long, windy streets, round corners, into docks, and onto ferries heading towards Barneel on the other side of the world like that!”

“Oh yes, I can!” I said, and pushed Nobody right out of Mrs Furball’s shop, all the way down the long, windy street, round a corner, into the docks, onto a ferry heading towards Barneel on the other side of the world, onto a large, bumpy sort of a truck, and into a rocket ship headed for the very heart of the Xargonian Empire, ten thousand million billion trillion light years away.

“Right,” said Mrs Furball, “What are we going to do about this Noodle Man? We can’t just let people come in here and usurp our narratives, that’s absolutely absurd!”

“Well,” I said, “he doesn’t seem to have done much usurping so far.”

“Noodle noodle noodle! Go buy the book!” cried the Noodle Man desperately.

“Book?” I asked.

“Book! Mmm!” cried the Noodle Man.

“Why did you say that?” groaned Mrs Furball groanily, as she was feeling groany.

“I was surprised about the book,” I said.

“Book?!” cried Mrs Furball, jumping, “What book?!”

“No idea,” I said. “Let’s ask the Noodle Man.”

“Okay,” said Mrs Furball.

“Shall we ask him, then?” I asked.

“Okay,” said Mrs Furball.

“Noodle Man,” I said.

“Mm! Mmmmm! Noodle noodle!”

“Noodle Man, what book?”

“Noodle,, buy the noodle book!” cried the Noodle Man emphatically, then added, “Mmm! Mmm!” for good measure.

Just then, there was *another* knock at the door. It was Wee All.

“Oi!” cried Wee All. “Ye cannae just go about pushing people down large, convenient hools left oover from when the Evil Narrators fiercely fought ye with fierce fish wi’ all the fierceness of mice, ye ken?”

Just then, there was *another* knock at the door. It was Nobody.

“Oi!” cried Nobody. “That’s my line!”

“Noodle noodle,” said the Noodle Man, deciding that all this was much too silly even for him, and that our narrative weight was much too strong anyhow, so he’d better get out before he was completely dragged in. The Noodle Man picked up his hat, and left the Magic Island.

“Hang on!” cried Mrs Furball, “Come back here! The Vignette isn’t finished ye —!”

NOODLE THE ELEVENTH:

STATUES AND SPAGHETTI

By Aristide Twain

A "Small Miracles" vignette

Two young boys were playing in a field.

It didn't matter where the field was. Some asteroid, probably — some uninhabited planetoid. It was a safe distance away from the eyes of any grown-ups, but not so far that a healthy Miracle child like Martin Edenkind would have any difficulty taking them home once the day was done.

The game was simple, and was the brainchild of the other boy, Maurice Griss-Ventner. It was called 'Statues', if it had to be called something, and was played like this: one of the boys would stand as still as he could, ideally in a pose befitting a statue. The other would run or fly around him, singing, pulling faces, telling jokes, and generally doing his level best to distract him until he broke character — at which point, after considerable laughter, the roles would be reversed. No physical contact was permitted — no tickling, no throwing things, and (they had determined after an early round) not even blowing in the other's face from a few inches away.

They had been playing for four turns each, and were poised to complete many more before they tired of the entertainment and devised something else. The appeal of the game was bolstered by the fact that preparing for each round was an activity unto itself; whenever it was his turn to be the statue, Martin, the posthuman child, used his Transformation Token to cover his skin with a fine layer of bronze, granite, marble, or whatever other material suitable for a classic statue, also altering his hair and accessories to match. Meanwhile, when it had fallen upon him to try and break Maurice's concentration, he had displayed a variety of carnival outfits, clown wigs and Halloween costumes, limited only by his considerable imagination — and a desire to not let himself gain *too* much of an edge over what his baseline friend could achieve in his place, though of course, neither of them was truly trying to *win* so much as share in the excitement of the game.

At the moment, Maurice was the statue. Martin had magicked him up a little marble column to stand on, just high enough to make him feel important as the Miracle child flew in rings around him; but the metallic sheen of his skin was his work alone. This was not the first time they had played the game, and, in expectation of today's rematch, he had brought a big pot of silver-coloured body paint to the play-date. Inevitably, each of his turns as a distractor marred the illusion with the natural creases and scuffs of a body in motion; and each time, he studiously reapplied the make-up.

(Martin had been thoughtful enough to put little invisible force-fields in front of his eyes and nostrils, so he wouldn't get any paint in when he slathered his face in the stuff; having a Miracle friend was nice that way.)

So here Maurice stood, one arm behind his back, the other raised in a Roman salute — his expression screwed up in an approximation of stern dignity. He had been standing like this for at least thirty seconds, which was *ages* when you had an itch behind your left ear — and when you

only had your heartbeat and breathing to listen to as you waited for your friend to pop up, shrouded in a daft disguise. It didn't usually take this long for Martin to come back into his field of vision, or otherwise give signs of his existence; but then, this was the opener of his turn, so it didn't surprise Maurice overmuch that his friend might put special care into his first gambit.

Even so, little would have prepared him for the appearance of the gigantic, preposterous figure who suddenly materialised in front of him.

It took everything Maurice had not to break position right there and then. This new guise was *huge*, tall as the grownest of grown-ups, and loomed slightly higher still thanks to the addition of a nifty fedora. But neither of the fedora nor the trench coat held a candle to the body they adorned. Martin had really outdone himself this time: the figure seemed to be made entirely of noodles.

Real noodles, too. They *smelled* real, and the steaming mass was close enough that Maurice could feel its wet heat on his skin. He found himself wondering if matter produced by the Transformation Token was actually edible — but pushed the thought away. That was a post-turn kind of a question, a question which could only be answered after he'd lost. And he wasn't going to lose that easily, no sir. He frowned just a little harder just to emphasise the point — minute changes of that sort didn't count, they'd decided by unspoken agreement, even if Martin *could* have told him by exactly how many microns he'd let his molecules shift.

"Mmmmm, haha, hello, there," said the swaying pasta-scarecrow in a wonderfully silly voice. "Mmm. I'm the Noodle Man. Mmmm!"

Maurice didn't laugh.

"Mm, mm, mm," said the Noodle Man, stepping closer with quick, wobbling steps. His head, a ball of yarn made of noodles, swivelled comically as he bent down to consider the silver-skinned boy on his pedestal. "Game,,, funny charming whimsical," he reflected, "childhood innocence happiness fun fun fun haha wow. Mmm!"

He reached out with a single finger-tendrill, just three entwined noodles — but seemed to spot the beginnings of a disapproving glare on Maurice's face as the tip of his finger neared the boy's painted cheek, and he sharply withdrew the offending appendage, clasping his noodle-hands together.

"Mmmmm!" he said, seemingly more to himself than to Maurice. "Of course of course rules of play,,, must be followed, very important yes, Wonderful One would approve yes yes, rules of the game are the rules of the story, mmm, I'm the Noodle Man!!!"

Maurice hadn't quite caught all of that, but he'd ask Martin about it *later*, thank you. If his friend thought cryptic allusions would succeed where sheer surreal humour had failed, he had another thing coming. Or, to put it another way, he wanted to see what *else* the Edenkind boy could come up with.

"*Growing* boys!" the Noodle Man suddenly erupted. "Growing minds! Educational family-friendly entertainment,,, very important,,!! Mm, yes,,, mmm, I'm the Noodle Man! My books my books must read must-read five stars on Goodreads yes,,,"

As if to make his patter ever so slightly less obscure, the Noodle Man reached into one of his coat pockets and withdrew a glossy, hardcover book, which he began to wave in front of Maurice's face; the jitters were slightly too fast to comfortably read the title, but the image was undoubtedly an artistic rendition of the same spindly figure now standing in front of him.

"My book,,,,," he repeated for emphasis, as if it was the most important thing in the world — "my book!! must read my book!!!! Very popular very fun!! Mmmm haha wow I'm the Noodle Man!!!!"

Well, *that* did it.

Maurice Griss-Ventner lowered his saluting hand and hopped off the marble column, crossing his arms in forbiddance; his silver-painted feet kicked up small clouds of low-gravity dust as he touched the ground again.

"Time-out," he said, allowing himself to laugh even as he chided his friend, "time-out. Hah. That was terrific, Martin, I mean it actually was, but — oh look, you can't create physical objects other than the costume. That *can't* be in the rules. You could do all kinds of nonsense and, and I couldn't do it back! C'mon."

The Noodle Man stood in front of him for a moment; somehow, Maurice got the sense that he would have blinked, had he possessed actual lidded eyes as opposed to vague looping coils of noodles where his eyes ought to have been.

Then he winked out of existence.

Several long seconds passed before Martin reappeared as himself, warm brown skin and golden eyes and all — several feet to the left of where the Noodle Man had been standing, and looking fairly petrified.

"W... what was that?" he asked in a strangely shaken voice.

Maurice's laughing confidence abated. "Er, I just said, I didn't think, you know, in future turns, you should do things like pulling that made-up book out of your pocket. I mean it was funny. You won this round, fair and square. But — going forward, you know?"

Martin gulped, hands opening and closing nervously as if about to break out into some big, illustrative gesture. "But — no, Maurice, that wasn't m — that wasn't — I mean I was just going to stay invisible until you —"

The Edenkind body paused as he felt his human friend's hand on his shoulder.

"Hey," Maurice said earnestly. "It's okay. It's cool. You can create objects if you want, I won't mind." That didn't seem to reassure him, so he added: "O-or we can play something else! It's up to you."

Martin remained still for a moment — then nodded affirmatively and dashed for the small forcefield under which they'd stashed their day clothes (such as they were) and the pot of silver paint.

“Yeah, let’s, uh, let’s go play something else, very, very far away from here.”

“Okay, Noodle Man,” Maurice said light-heartedly, following him. “Whatever you say.”

“Maurice, *don’t call me that.*”

“What?”

“Just... just don’t.”

NOODLE THE TWELFTH:

NOODLES ON A COPPER PLATTER

By L. Alves

A "The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids" vignette

The *Fish'n'Ship* was sailing at a clip through the vast nothingness of the Void Between Worlds, its crew already reminiscing fondly upon the day which now lay behind them and beginning to plot ahead for April Fools' Day next.

"Well, now," said Captain Scherzo of the Faction of the Fooling Fish, looking out over the prow, "this April-the-First didn't turn out so bad after *all!*"

"You said it!" exclaimed Boatswain Claptrap, a smile on her face. "Put 'er there, captain ol' buddy ol' pal."

The two shook hands with the customary exchange of electrical shocks, then turned towards the railing ahead, each leaning over and taking in a hearty gulp of the nonexistent scent of that fresh and exhilarating lack of Void air.

After a moment, Claptrap squinted — then pulled out a telescope and angled it at something floating far below.

"Hey, captain!" she said, frowning, "Look, down there. Isn't that...?"

The Captain leaned further, straining to see. There was a shape hovering casually amidst the darkness of the Void — a distinctly *noodley* shape, with plenty of tendrils and the definite outline of a hat.

"Well would ya looky there." he exclaimed, a note of suspicion in his voice. "If it ain't Lord Thymon again! What's that overgrown jellyfish think he's doin' followin' us around?"

As the two Fish stared, the distant and noodly shape raised a tendril, wiggling it slightly.

"I think he's beckoning us, cap!" said Claptrap. "Maybe we should see what he wants."

"Aw, nothin' doin'." huffed the Captain. "I've had enough o' that mug today. No fair thinkin' he can order us around when we haven't even kidnapped any more o' his kids."

"Aw, but captain!" said Claptrap, "he *did* lend us a hand recharging our Time Scrambler! Maybe it's time to return the favour!"

The Captain grunted, crossing his arms.

"Remember the code..." Claptrap prodded.

"Aw, I know, I know. We do what we do t' spread joy and whatnot. Fine, fine! Never let it be said that Captain Scherzo doesn't have a soft side. Why, I'm practically all heart. One good deed a day, I says."

Scherzo turned, then whistled to the Fish currently manning the sails.

“Ahoy, there, pals! Bring ‘er down! We’ve got ourselves an ocktypus t’ haul aboard.”

* * *

“Don’t ya think that was strange, bos’n?” asked the Captain, as the *Fish’n’Ship*, having rendered assistance to its unlikely passenger, resumed its course towards the Prime Universe.

“Nah,” Claptrap replied, busy painting nine eggs black for use in a final prank on the Ennead of the Eigengrau Easter Eggs back home.

“I don’t know...” the Captain continued. “Somethin’ about it just didn’t feel right. Are you sure Lord Thymon looked like that up close, before? And why was he goin’ on about macaroni? And why in th’ name o’ Scherzo did he need *us* to use the Time Scrambler an’ drop him off back in two-thousand-and-nineteen, huh? He’s th’ god o’ time, f’r his own sake!”

“The *former* god of time,” said Claptrap. “And he used his *own* power to recharge our Scrambler this morning! He was probably worn out.”

“But why’d he need t’ —?”

“Relax, cap!” exclaimed Claptrap. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

The Captain nodded.

“Yeah. I suppose you’re right, bos’n.”

* * *

~~“Lord Thymon~~ **THE NOODLE MAN** and the Department of Problem-Solving”
(released March 30, 2019)

Pythagoras-858, head of the Department of Problem-Solving, trudged through the Cupid Homeworld, hands deep in his pockets and a great deal weighing on his positronic mind. There was the Tasmanian tiger case, of course, which had occupied most of his waking hours the past week — but even *that* paled in comparison to the new problem with which he had just been presented. This was a problem of multidimensional proportions — one which involved Lord Thymon, a name which he had often heard whispered, but to which he had not, till now, dedicated very much thought. But now — *now*, Pythe was expected to find some way to negotiate with, or bypass, the great demon of the Void — and in truth, he hadn’t the first clue how he was going to go about —

Pythe paused, catching a flicker of *something* out of the corner of his eye. Turning on his heel, he faced the unexpected interrupter of his quiet walk, and fixed it with a severe gaze — one which quickly gave way to a confused frown. The entity which stood before him was... noodles. A mass of noodles, stuffed into a trenchcoat a good deal shabbier than Pythe’s own, and wearing a fedora which, he privately thought, was hardly a patch on the one *he* liked to wear.

Ridiculous as it may have looked, though, it was still a non-Cupid standing in the Cupid Homeworld — and that was a sight so rare that Pythe could count the number of times he'd seen the like on one, four-fingered hand.

Recovering quickly, Pythe cleared his throat, then held up a warning palm to the strange entity.

“Alright, then,” he began. “I don’t know what you are, or how you got here — but - ”

“Mmmyes I’m the Noodle Man,” burred the bizarre entity. “Crossover. Brand synergy ha ha.”

Pythe’s frown deepened. This wasn’t the kind of entity one wanted roaming the Homeworld, he could tell that much.

“Hm,” he replied, rubbing at his forehead out of habit. “Now, look. I don’t mind telling you that I’m *very* busy, and I really don’t think there’s anything that’s going to interest something like you in a dimension full of copper robots. I’d be happy to give you a ride back to... *wherever* it is you come from, if we can just agree to — ”

“Yep nope,” said the Noodle Man, waving his many tendrils. “Sticking around ha ha yes oh wow the Noodle Man’s joining the recurring cast.”

Pythe sighed. He hadn’t dared to hope that this would be resolved easily — still, it would certainly have been *nice* if it had been.

“Alright,” he said. “Now, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Drawing his hand suddenly from out of his pocket, Pythe pulled out his forbidium manacles, and clapped them around the writhing tentacles of the Noodle Man.

“Oh wow ya got me haha.” said the Noodle Man. “What a shame. What a shame”

* * *

*“The ~~Fall~~ **NOODLE MAN** of **IN** the Consistency Palatium” (released November 18, 2020)*

“Don’t you understand?!” screamed Mandragora the Alchemist, “There’s nothing you can do to stop this! Soon — soon, I will know all! I will *be all!*”

Marksmanship, Tracker, and Bibliophile cowered against the walls, shying from the crumbling stone which had started to rain from the ceiling above as the Palatium dimension began to tear at the seams.

“What are we going to do?” Tracker asked.

“I don’t know,” Marksmanship replied, panicked, “but whatever it is, we’d better do it soon. I don’t think this place is going to last much longer.”

“I think our only chance now,” said Bibliophile, “is to hope for a miracle.”

Mandragora's cackling rose to a fever pitch as stones fell and shattered around him. The moment was coming — the alchemist's apotheosis was at hand. Above, they could hear the sounds of rifts rending the fabric of reality. The end was nigh.

As Marksmanship, Tracker, and Bibliophile shut their eyes against the oncoming destruction — they suddenly heard a new noise. The distinctive sound of a Fog Ship materialising. Daring to hope, Bibliophile raised his head.

“Mandragora!” came the voice of Pythagoras-858 as he stepped out of his Fog Ship. “This is insane! Do you realise that?”

Mandragora whipped around, fire dancing in his eyes.

“Pythagoras, you fool! Do you really think you can stand against the collapse of all realities? A battered old clockwork man, playing detective, facing down the ultimate fracturing of everything that there has ever been? It's a powerful image, I'll grant you that. But we are well past the time for even that kind of magic. Now — *now*, Pythe, there is only one path remaining. *My* path.”

“Don't be so sure, Mandragora.” Pythe replied, fixing the mad alchemist with a grim stare. “Oh, I don't deny that you've whipped up quite a mess this time. In truth, I wouldn't like my odds, were the circumstances any different.”

“What are you talking about?” Mandragora spat. “Whatever trick you may think you're about to pull from your sleeve, I assure you, it isn't going to stop me. Not now.”

He gritted his teeth, awash with crazed determination.

“Do you know, Pythagoras, the way I'm feeling, I rather think I'd keep walking if you put a bullet through my heart.”

Pythe shook his head.

“Oh, nothing so crude, as you well know,” he replied. “No, it's just that I've brought a friend with me. One who's not so keen to see reality fall apart like a moth-eaten sweater.”

There was a squelch, and something stepped forth from the passenger side of Pythe's Fog Ship.

“The Noodle Man!” Marksmanship exclaimed.

“Oh, brilliant thinking, Pythe!” Bibliophile said excitedly. “If there's anyone who can stop this — ”

“Old Noodley's as good a candidate as anyone I can think of!” Tracker finished.

“Just so.” Pythe replied, taking a step closer to Mandragora. “*Just* so. Noodle Man and I had quite a time finding a way out of the Homeworld — but your own scheme gave us the answer, eventually. A rift, formed from the structural instability in the infinite Noodle Caves he'd constructed beneath the house we've built him.”

“Oh, so *what?*” Mandragora snarled. “Befriend enough gods and you’ll be able to depose anyone you please, is that the idea?”

His face screwed up in anger.

“Well, *it isn’t going to work*, Pythagoras! Do you understand me? I’m an *alchemist*, you idiot.”

He took a step forward, his eyes blazing like twin suns.

“I know gods too.”

Turning around, Mandragora spread his arms wide, facing the rifts which were gathering above his chamber.

“Come to me, my patrons!” he called. **“The great work is almost complete!”**

“We’d better hurry this along,” said Pythe, rushing to the Noodle Man’s side. “Noodley, old boy, are you certain you can handle this?”

“Oh yeah mmmno problem,” said the Noodle Man. “No one in this series is more powerful than the Noodle Man haha wow.”

Jumping into the nearest rift, the Noodle Man poked his top half through the next nearest, then stretched into the next. Soon, he was connecting them all — and began to pull himself tighter, dragging the rifts closed like a sutured wound.

“And you wanted to get the Toymaker.” Tracker laughed, elbowing Bibliophile, as Mandragora, finally seeing the Noodle Man in action, had no choice but to fall to his knees and weep.

* * *

~~Lord Thymon~~ **THE NOODLE MAN** and the ~~Impossible Guests~~ **OTHER LESS IMPORTANT CHARACTERS** (released March 30, 2021)

“Can you believe it’s been a whole two years since the Noodle Man came to live with us?” said Juliet-178.

“I sure can’t.” said the other one, Pythagongle or something. “Feels like it’s been much longer.”

“Ohhhyes the Noodle Man’s been here all along,” said the Noodle Man, putting noodley tendrils around his two faithful Cupid sidekicks. “The Noodle Man’ll always be here yesindeed.”

“Any plans this week, Noodley?” asked one of the ones.

“Buying *The Noodle Man Book 2: Fresh and Troubling Foods* from Arcbeatle Press of course!” said the Noodle Man.

* * *

“NOODLEY ACTIVITIES” (released *Noodle 31*, 2022)

“Come on the Noodle Man!” shouted the Noodle Woman, as the two faced down the evil Eldoon, with no Clockwork Cherubs in sight. “Let’s mmm show this guy what’s up haha.”

“Mmmyes that is good,” said the Noodle Man. “We must do battle.”

A battle ensued. The Noodles won.

“You cannot defeat me so easily!” shouted Eldoon. And he leapt backwards into a portal!

“Oh wow oh no we must follow him.” said the Noodle Woman. The Noodles jumped forwards into the portal!

Find out what happens next in The Noodle Man Book 3: Realms of Sink, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press!

“Wow!” said Butter Boy. “I’m sure glad you’ve invited me to be a recurring character in this series!”

“Mmmthink nothing of it my dear friend.” said the Noodle Man.

“Ha ha yes it wasn’t as if anybody with copper wings was taking up the spot,” said the Noodle Woman.

“We must rebuild this world,” said the Noodle Man. “We must remake this world. We are gods, new gods, old gods. We must shape this fertile world. We must remake this world. We must rebuild this world. We are gods, old gods, new gods. Ha ha yes.”

Find out what happens next in The Noodle Man Book 4: Night of the Seasoned Broth, coming soon from Arcbeatle Press!

* * *

“NOODLE” (released *NOODLE*, 2023)

Ha ha wow. said the Noodle Man, and the cry was taken up and echoed. Ha ha wow. came the voices of the new and untested. Ha ha wow. came the voices of the old and discarded. Ha ha wow. said the favourites, the despised, and the damned. Ha ha wow. said the gods and the ghosts. Ha ha wow. said the fiends and the foes. Ha ha wow. said the noodles. Ha ha wow. said the noodles. Ha ha wow. said the noodles, and it echoed and echoed and echoed.

* * *

“NOODLES NOODLES NOODLES” (2024)

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Noodles.

Noodles?

Blue noodles. Time noodles. Eye noodles. Hat noodles. Scary noodles. Bad noodles. Wrong
noodles. No noodles. No. No. No. No. NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO

* * *

“Everything alright?” Jenny asked sleepily, as Thymon slithered into the bed they shared on occasions when cuddling seemed appealing — even though Thymon much preferred his old perch for the purposes of actually *sleeping*.

“**Oh, YeS, mY dEaR,**” he said cheerfully, snuggling in beside her. “**ThErE wAs A... wEIL. i SuPpOsE yOu WoUID tHiNk Of It As A rAt In ThE wAlls.**”

“Of *this* house?” Jenny joked. “Must be *some* rat.”

“**yEs, I sUpPoSe It WaS,**” Thymon mused. “**BuT oNIY a SeAsOnAl InFeStAtIoN, aLl ThE sAmE. No WoRsE tHAn tHe ShArE-aLiKe OuTbReAk ThAt YoU pIcKeD uP oN tHaT tRiP hOmE lAsT yEaR, oR tHaT dELAY ThAt GoT iN oN cHrIsTmAs...**”

Thymon frowned.

“WeLi, I'M sTiLl TrAcKiNg ThAt OnE dOwN... bUt...”

He shook his tendrils, putting it out of his mind.

“ToMoRrOw... ReMiNd Me To PaTcH uP tHaT hOIE cOrNeLiUs LeFt In ThE dIeGeSiS. tHaT sHoUID pUt A sToP tO tHeM.”

Jenny nodded — then smiled.

“And tonight?”

“ToNiGhT...” said Thymon, nestling close, **“ToNiGhT, i DoN'T wAnT tO tHiNk AbOuT aNyThInG bUt YoU.”**

He furrowed his single, great eye.

“EsPeCiAlLy NoT nOoDIes.”

NOODLE THE THIRTEENTH:

INFERNAL ESCAPE

By James Hornby

A "Dionus" vignette

Thremix twitched anxiously. *So this was what they'd been working on all this time...* The room looked like an inventor's workshop had exploded. Trip hazards galore: thick power cables zigzagged across the floor, plugging into pieces of tech mashed together in the sloppiest of ways imaginable. One accidental knock and the whole place could come crashing down like a house of cards. Thremix was no engineer, but she knew a deathtrap when she saw one...

"Is this what I *think* it's for?" she asked the two occupants of the room.

Dionus was the only one to look up, if briefly. "Yup."

Thremix gasped. "You can't seriously be thinking about escaping V-Time?"

"We're not thinking about it, we're *doing* it." Dionus joined Sushruta at a sparking control panel, flipping switches until the orange spray subsided. "What's the worst that could happen? Cwej managed to rip the Totality in half during the Uprising and that turned out alright." He winced. "I think..."

A cable dislodged from an overhead monitor, hissing like a savage cat until Sushruta caught it in one hand and forced it back into position.

"It's just —" She sighed. "I dunno. Maybe it's that I still don't understand why we need to do it."

Dionus' attention broke completely this time. His face flushed with anger. Thremix instinctively took a step back. She had rarely seen this side of his temper: the caged beast buried beneath the mild-mannered medic.

"Because I'm sick of *Them*," he began, mouth foaming with fury. "Their insistent rule over this damn epoch. I want out." Seeing her back away, he faltered, taking a deep breath to regain some composure. "After They erased you over your part in Their creation, I thought you, of all people, would understand that."

Thremix grumbled. He indeed had a point. Urizen had been a bit of a bastard, and his flock of sheep had swiftly followed suit. She just wished their way out would look a little... safer.

"It'll only be a little tear," said Dionus, as if reading her thoughts, "just enough for Gulliver's Rest to hop outside to what comes *after*." He paused in contemplation. "Or maybe what comes after that. I suppose in the end we'll find out when we get there."

Thremix sighed. Ah well — at least, if they did survive, it might help Dionus to chill out a bit. She knew he'd been a soldier and all, but man he could get tetchy sometimes.

“Mmm. If you ask me, the grass is always greener,” said the Noodle Man.

“Thanks for sticking up for me, Noody,” said Dionus.

“Anytime, big D,” said the Noodle Man. “Gotta say, you're looking much buffer these days. Glad you dropped the dodgy entrepreneur look. Mmmm. I'm the Noodle Man, and that version of you, he did a number on me with a scalpel once... Hmm!” He strode around the room like a curious cheestring, tripping several times over the power cables. Dusting himself off, he said: “Ah well, at least there's no sharp objects around this time” He looked at Thremix. “Gotta watch him around those, y'know?”

Behind the Noodle Man, Nrai, the evil Archon duplicate with a love for rearranging letters, waved seductively at Dionus and winked.

Dionus eyed her with a hint of recognition. “Do I know you?” he asked.

The memory hit him like a truck, right in the nads. Dionus dry heaved.

The Noodle Man wobbled on over to the central terminal, his noodly eyes out on stalks after spotting the big red button at its centre.

“Don't touch that!” snapped Dionus. “We're not ready!”

Too late! A noodly forefinger-tendrill-thing had already pressed it.

Thremix winced.

Flesh and noodles went everywhere.

NOODLE THE FOURTEENTH:

WHY JACKBOX SAW PROFESSOR SONG

By James Wylder

An “Academy 27” vignette

Domed City of Takumi, Planet Gongen, Spring 2387

Geraldine “JackBox” McGraw was seeing how many credit chips she could balance like a house of cards (it was, so far, enough to buy a real house) when an unexpected guest made his way through the bouncers of the Cogworks Import Lounge. The Gongen man was wiping sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, and stammering at the bouncers as they checked him for weapons, bugs, or anything else weird. She recognized the man’s face — not that she’d met him before. But she had studied the records of all the local officials. He was a low-level man in the City Director’s office. Gesturing for him to sit down, she then signalled for Oil-shins to get the guy a drink.

“Oh, no I can’t accept gifts. As someone in the Director’s office —”

“Stop pretending this is a place you’re supposed to be — we both know it isn’t, and whatever you’re here to say will go a lot smoother if we both accept that.”

He paused, then nodded, and downed the drink. It was clearly burning his throat, but he was also clearly having the sort of day where that was a good thing. “They said you were just a kid, you look like one but you don’t talk like one.”

She leaned back, and shrugged. “Growing up on Titan Station does things to a girl.”

He nodded again, staring down into the empty glass that Oil-shins refilled.

“So then, why are you here Mr. Civil-Servant?”

He downed the second drink. “Have you... noticed that a lot of odd things have been happening lately?”

She crossed her arms, and let one of her eyebrows raise like it had been wanting to since he’d stepped in the door. “Like you being here?”

“Like... conspiracies being real? I work in records, I get a lot of stuff. A lot of weird stuff comes through. Eventually you start to notice patterns.”

“Like?”

“Like... kids getting caught in an incident at their school *just* like a legendary fake TV episode. Or a fake arcade machine being found at that theme park the Cao family reopened. Or that time travel show getting a revival out of nowhere, starring one of those same kids who were involved

in the school incident. Or...” He cringed and pulled a padd out, flicking it on and pulling up an image that he scooted towards JackBox. She picked it up, and examined it with all the seriousness of a parent praising a child’s drawing of a giraffe that looked like something it really shouldn’t.

“What... exactly am I looking at?”

He grimaced. “I was hoping you could tell me.”

“Explain.”

“Well, I thought he might be a Maverick? You folks like body modification — I mean, I’m sure some of you don’t —”

“We do, it's fine,” she said, and examined the picture again. “He looks... wrong. Like he’s made of tentacles or pasta or something.”

The man nodded furiously. “So... so he’s not one of yours?”

Geraldine shook her head, and handed the padd back, which caused the civil servant to deflate.

“He’s been appearing, then disappearing. Appearing on single frames of security footage... A lot of the folks, including the Self-Defense Force, just think it’s a prank but...”

“You have a feeling,” she finished for him.

He looked up, and nodded slowly.

“Enough of a feeling you had to try to find an explanation.”

He nodded again. “If you see anything... please contact me.” He tapped on his padd, and sent her his contact information.

“I’m sure I will,” she said, biting her thumb as the man stumbled back out.

* * *

Zhuge Liang University, Takumi

“Professor Song?”

The woman looked up from her desk; she was surrounded with holograms, some displaying a variety of strange phenomena right out of a conspiracy theory, some displaying real historical records of ancient rock carvings or fragile papyrus documents. She adjusted her glasses to better get a look at her guest — JackBox was used to that. Mavericks weren’t exactly common here on Gongen. And even fewer had the right to freely walk the streets of the city of Takumi. The shining metal of her cybernetic right arm and leg gave away all doubt of her culture, and she could tell the Professor was a bit taken aback.

“I — I don’t have any money on me!” she said, throwing her hands up, and JackBox hissed a long exhalation from her teeth before forcing a smile on her face despite the disgust she felt in her gut.

“You really think all Mavericks are pirates? I’m here about an academic question.”

She approached, and pulled up her licence to enter Takumi on her phone — holding it out as Professor Song leaned in again, and inspected it closely.

“S-sorry. That was i-incredibly rude of me.”

“It’s alright,” JackBox lied.

“My brother was killed in a pirate raid, he ran on an ore hauler from the asteroid belt...”

JackBox nodded. “Do I look like a pirate? I’m wearing a poodle skirt.”

The Professor looked down: she was indeed wearing a poodle skirt, in black and green tartan with a patch of a dog with a pair of cybernetic legs leaping towards a star on it. She had on a matching green t-shirt from a David Bowie tribute band named *Post-Modern Love*; she’d seen them with the Jhe Twins the other week — with a leather jacket over it. Her black hair was done something like an archetypal 1950s housewife’s, aside from the hairband with a skull pattern on it.

“I uh... suppose not.”

“Geraldine McGraw,” she said politely, extending a hand to shake — and leaving out that almost everyone on the planet who knew her called her JackBox.

Shaking the hand, the professor tried to straighten up, set on attempting to act like she was forgetting her own rude behaviour. “Professor Song Ga Ram. What brings you here?”

JackBox pulled out a padd, and set it down on the desk. “What’s going on in these pictures?”

She got intently focused, so focused that JackBox began to think she’d forgotten she was here. Eventually though, after JackBox had shuffled her feet a bunch, she did look up. “I’ve been following this — carefully mind you. I hadn’t gotten to see clear enough pictures. But well,” she looked around the room as though someone was listening in. “I’m on some rather secretive groups online about this stuff. This one pair of users, Kalingkata and Talinata, were posting about this just the other day.”

JackBox did not stop her eye from twitching. Those were the screen names of her good friends and, when she was being honest with herself, double-crushes, the Jhe Twins. “Oh really? And what did they say about them?”

“Well, they were making fun of the whole thing. Saying it was ridiculous we were buying some weird pictures of a Cthulhu-esque man with tentacles for a face. They swore it looked like noodles. Kalingkata posted a whole image analysis on how she thought it was noodles...” The professor sighed. “And I’m afraid they might be right... but...”

JackBox pulled a chair up, and sat down in front of her desk. “But?”

Professor Song moved a bunch of stuff on her desk so the touchscreen surface was visible, and began to draw on it with her fingertip. “Imagine this is our universe. Everything we’ve ever know. Gongen... where are you from?”

“Titan Station. But I very much live here on Gongen now.”

Her face blushed in embarrassment. “...I’m really sorry about earlier. That’s not what I meant. I was just trying to show...” The Solar System appeared, with Gongen and Titan Station highlighted. “The world we live in is big, but what if there were other worlds?”

JackBox squinted. “There *are* other worlds. Mercury definitely exists.”

“No! I mean like, other universes.”

“That’s far-fetched.”

“Just... just listen. What if something was trying to break through into our universe from somewhere else? What if everything we have thought of as lingering in the shadows or the corners of our eyes were really visitors from another universe? Fairies, ghosts, cryptids, all sorts of things!”

She looked down at the man who either had Cthulhu-esque tentacles or pasta for a face. “Or this guy?”

Professor Song nodded enthusiastically. “If that’s the case... I have a sort of theory about why he’s blinking in and out?”

JackBox gave a look which rather effectively conveyed the words “You don’t need me to answer your question with a please go on, this is literally why I’m here.”

“Right, um... I think that *our* Universe has certain laws to it, about what can exist here. Like, think about it like it was a David Bowie album —” She said pointing at her shirt. “If you were listening to *Let’s Dance*, which absolutely masterful album —”

“No question there, utterly legendary.”

“— yes, yes, and then you were listening to it and an off-key child singing *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* came on instead of *Modern Love*, you’d know something was wrong, wouldn’t you? It would *feel* wrong. I think that there’s something we don’t understand about how things work, some sort of... protection that makes it hard for things to cross over.”

JackBox furrowed her brows. “So this... tentacle-pasta man is trying to cross over into our world, but can’t?”

Professor Song shrugged. “That’s just a theory. A cryptid theory. But a theory nonetheless. There’s steps and steps of things I haven’t proven to even get to it. But... well, that was your question.”

Picking up the padd, JackBox looked at her mechanical right hand. She'd had one limb removed as a tiny tot, another blown off during the revolution on Titan Station. She hadn't had a say in either. Life had been a long series of cold-hard choices for her, only interrupted by cold-hard things she had no choice about. Looking at the picture, something strange stirred in her. "This would probably be a much more fun place to live, if things like this guy existed here."

The Professor smiled. "I think so too. Maybe someday they will."

"Maybe," JackBox replied, standing up. "Thanks for your time, Professor."

"Feel free to stop by again!" she called as JackBox exited the room.

* * *

The rest of her workday passed by in a blur. She went back to the Cogworks Import Lounge. She arranged two shipments of illegal alcohol. She had a guy pull a gun on her and get tackled by security. Pretty average day.

When she finally got off, she messaged the Jhe Twins about meeting up, and they all did at an Italian restaurant that had opened up near the train station into Cheonsa Dome. She came in, and, at once, spotted the *maitre d'* giving her a dirty look — but as her friends waved at her and vouched for her, there wasn't any further trouble as she sat down. They'd brought the whole gang with them, or close enough: Jae Hyun trying desperately to flirt with Kalingkata while she was fixated on her phone, Tsetseg listening to Li Xiu drone on about her next film project, Ryan and Talinata playing rock-paper-scissors — but not Bashrat, who was not there, because he would rather stay home. Fair play.

Still, it was comforting to see (almost) everyone together. For a moment, the picture that had been dominating her thoughts all day left her mind, and she began to enjoy herself. Tsetseg was awkwardly telling a none-the-less funny joke, when their food came.

JackBox looked down onto her plate. Onto the plate of spaghetti noodles, with two meatballs placed on the top half of it like eyes.

She blinked.

"Oh my god," she said louder than she'd meant to.

"Huh?" Talinata asked.

"It was pasta, it wasn't a Cthulhu thing, the guy literally just had pasta on his face! It was just a guy walking around who put pasta on his goddamn face!"

The rest of them stared at her, while Talinata and Kalingkata started cracking up.

"So, you don't believe in the 'noodleman' either?" Kalingkata said while absolutely losing it.

JackBox started to laugh herself. “I... I guess not.” Then she smirked. “I guess you could say he pasta’d me by!”

This caused her and Kalingkata to laugh even harder, while everyone else stared in confusion — except for Talinata, who instead directed a stare which conveyed his deep feelings of how “It’s not a funny joke”.

JackBox wiped a tear from her eye. Things were good. She didn’t need a mystery in the world. She didn’t... from the corner of her eye, in the corner of the room, for just a moment she thought there was a man there. But when she turned her head to look, he was gone.

“Maybe a mystery is okay,” she mumbled to herself, and dug into the pasta.

NOODLE THE LAST:

TASTE THE NOODLES OF DRACULA

By James Wylder & Aristide Twain

A “10,000 Dawns” vignette

There is a castle on a dark hill below a clouded sky where a single lightning bolt is striking, it is exactly as you would imagine this kind of castle. Perhaps a little too much like how you would imagine it, there is the faintest hint of colour but the castle strains against it, daring the world to be black and white. We get closer to this castle — we're free to be wherever we like, after all — and we see there is a car nearing it, aiming to go past it. But suddenly the engine begins to make noises — of course it does, you know where this is going. The car stalls, a woman gets out, and as the rain starts she runs to the only shelter she can see — that dark castle.

She runs to the door, and her greyscale hand knocks on it. There is silence, and she knocks again. Finally, she hears footsteps, the water dripping down from her hat in front of her eyes as the door creaks open to reveal... an empty entry room.

* * *

She pushed the door all the way open against the wall as another lightning strike hit.

“Hello?” she said to the empty room.

“Hi,” a muffled voice replied, and she spun around. There was no one in the room. Her heart beat faster. Then the door pushed away from the wall, she took a step back, and a young woman was revealed from behind it.

“You shoved the door on me,” the young woman said. “I mean, good muscles, but it's a bit rude.”

She took off her sopping hat and extended her other hand. “I'm so sorry, Alice McLeod, investigative journalist.”

The young woman approached, and shook the offered hand. She was wearing a dark blue skirt and matching blazer; what Alice thought of as black basketball shoes, and we might call Converse; a white blouse and black tie; and glasses. Her black hair was in a ponytail, and her dark outfit contrasted with her white skin. From the length of the description, one might presume she was a major player here, and one would be correct. Alice, however, looked perplexed.

“Graelyn Scythes,” the young woman replied. “Scientist, adventurer, tired.”

“Your appearance...” Alice said, “why do you look like that?”

Graelyn looked down. “Well, once you get an outfit people are familiar with...” She trailed off. “Oh, you mean that I'm in colour, right?”

“Is *that* what you call it?”

Graelyn nodded, and picked up a candelabra off a table. “There's a lot to explain, Alice, but — you have to be soaking wet. I'll see you to a room, and then if you haven't eaten you can eat dinner with my friend Archimedes and I.”

Following Graelyn up the main staircase, Alice looked around the decor: paintings of long-dead men and women. Paintings of... grisly scenes from myth. Animal heads mounted on plaques. The place gave her the creeps.

“So you're not alone here?”

“Nope, Archimedes have been camped out here for a while now.”

“So it's not your castle...?”

Graelyn just pursed her lips hard, and gestured into an empty room. Alice looked in. There was nothing in there.

“...Alright.”

“That's most of the castle, is my point,” Graelyn said, and kept walking. “That's not your room.”

Before long, they reached a bedroom, complete with a large canopied bed.

“Join us in the dining room when you're all cleaned up. There should be some dry clothes in the wardrobe — ugh, they might not fit... Well, I'd offer you some of mine, but we're clearly different sizes.”

That was pointedly obvious; the young woman wasn't by any means malnourished, but had a naturally narrow frame that made her look skinnier than she probably was. Or maybe she *was* that skinny. That was the problem: who knew? She could have been made of noodles under there for all Alice could tell, and old castles weren't known for their handy stocks of measuring tape.

“Oh, I do have some long sweaters if you want one of those.”

Alice thought for a moment. “Sure, it *is* draughty in here.”

She closed the door, and shuttering the vanity on the desk, proceeded to undress, and pull out a few outfits from the wardrobe. The one that fit the best was a sort of Victorian-looking dress, so Alice settled for that, and after finding everything else she needed in the drawer and cabinets, dressed and descended the stairs.

“Thank you.”

* * *

Archimedes slept.

He slept — but sleep for a cyborg is never quite like sleep for someone without computers in their brain.

He dreamt of a woman walking through — no, she wasn't walking, she was in a gown, and she slid along the floor as though on wheels. The floor was shifting numbers, and her hands touched the walls, rippling the code along them. And at the end of the hallway was a mass of zeroes in the shape of a man, and it smiled with fangs.

And then his danger sense activated.

His electric eye turned on. Hovering over him was Alice. Her eyes held no sheen, and she was reaching under his chin. He grabbed at her hand but he was too slow, she'd pulled open a piece of armour and had ripped out a cord. He tried to call out, but he knew instantly she'd just prevented that. So he took the other route, and swung his fist out towards her, the blade built into his arm sliding out as Alice leapt back — the edge of his sword catching the front of her shirt, and slicing a thin line across her skin, but no deeper.

But his arm had swept forward, and she took advantage, the knife in her other hand coming down before Arch could grab her arm, sliding between two of the armour plates around his armpit, and causing a massive jolt of pain he turned off.

His free hand grabbed her arm; for a moment, it was like a bizarre arm wrestling match as the two fought for control of the moment — and then Arch pumped more power into his servos and pulled her right off the grip of the knife, and into the air and against the wall. She didn't crash there, but caught herself like a spider, mouth wide in a grin of fangs.

* * *

Dracula bowed, and Graelyn curtsied.

The hand extended, and she took that too.

"I don't know how to do this sort of dancing," Graelyn said.

"Follow," Dracula advised.

"Never been a talent."

He gave a thin smile, and put his hand on her waist. They began to move across the dance floor; she could feel his long nails against her skin.

"I see you are a woman of many faces. Which one am I dancing with, Miss Graelyn?"

Their feet moved to the beat, following the waltz across the floor, he curled her out, so their arms were outstretched, and reeled her back in, arms around her.

"Maybe we don't need masks, if we'll both be honest with each other."

His facial expression did not change. "Who says I have not been honest?"

Their arms came around, and they continued their circle around the floor.

"I do. You are Count Dracula, the most notorious vampire in history. I read your book."

“Did you? I think you might have read a work of fiction...”

“Then you won’t oppose me pressing a cross to your lips?”

Now he grinned. “Ah, Miss Graelyn, you are bold.”

“Now I’ll be honest. I come from another world, another time, another place. I’m a traveller, and I came here to kill you.”

“You’ve done a terrible job,” he said pleasantly. “Or do you believe dancing to be among my weaknesses?” His expression hardened a fraction. “Where is your friend?”

“A good question, but aren’t you worried about the killing part?”

His dance-steps slowed, and he loomed closer to her, face aggrieved.

“I’m sure you have entirely the wrong impression,” he said —

— then he leaned further in, and bit into her neck. The blood surged out, and he drank.

And he screamed.

She watched impassively as he dropped down to the floor, clutching his face and clawing at the bulging veins.

“You really didn’t think I prepared for this? I had my blood cycled out of my body, and blessed by a priest, and then cycled back in. It took hours, but every drop of my blood is consecrated. Now how’s that for bold?”

He didn’t answer. He simply continued to flail, and then burn, and wither, and scream.

Soon there was only a layer of bones and ash there.

Graelyn wiped her neck off. “My third parent would be proud.”

“I’m sure they would,” said a familiar voice. “But we have a problem.”

Graelyn turned round, one hand still held to her neck to stymie the trickle of blood from the small puncture wounds, though they were already healing.

Archimedes Von Ahnerabe stood in the doorway of the great, gothic ballroom. His metal skin was mottled with unidentified splatters; in this black-and-white world, it took a moment for Graelyn to realise that unlike those now staining her own dress, they weren’t blood at all.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” Her brows knit with concern. “Oh god. This was too easy, wasn’t it? Too fast. We’d barely just got here, the Count turns up, asks us to stay the night, I do the job — too easy. Don’t tell me, was it that black-and-white Alice? Has she turned?”

“No, no,” he quickly reassured her, crossing the distance between them. His single eye focused on the ashes on the floor for just a moment, then turned away to refocus on his friend. “No — well, she did attack me. But she was just in Dracula’s thrall, she isn’t actually a vampire.”

“She ambushed you? She didn’t hurt you, did she?”

“No,” he said, “she wasn’t anywhere near strong enough for that. Nimble, yes, but not *strong*. Nor,” he added quickly, “did I hurt *her*. I know how to be careful.”

“Of course,” Graelyn nodded quickly, eager to reassure Arch that the thought hadn’t crossed her mind. “I know you do. But then, what’s... What’s all the...”

Arch shrugged, his body language less than legible even to such a close friend as Graelyn, and he gestured for her to see for herself. Intrigued as much as aggrieved, Graelyn reached for Arch’s shoulder, rubbing two fingers into one of the stains and picking up the substance to give it a sceptical sniff. It was thicker on her skin than blood — grainier — and *warm*.

She blinked.

“That’s bolognese sauce,” she observed.

“Yes it is.”

“You didn’t nip down to have a midnight snack, did you?”

“Nope.”

“Were you fighting Alice in the kitchen?” Graelyn guessed. “Does this castle *have* a kitchen?”

Arch thought for a moment. “You know, I never checked. It must do, right? But no, this was all happening in my bedroom.”

Graelyn frowned — not in anger at Arch, but simply in frustrated concentration. She paced for a moment, still holding out the hand whose fingers had been stained with the greyscale sauce. Her eyes landed on Dracula’s velvet cape, still lying on the floor, covered in the arch-vampire’s ashes. After just a second’s hesitation, she half-picked up the garment and wiped her hand on it.

“Alright, enough of the guessing game,” she groaned playfully. “What’s happening, exactly? Where’s Alice?”

“I don’t know,” said Arch, the emotion now clearer in that familiar, subtly metallic voice. “You’d... better come and see.”

* * *

“That’s noodles,” said Graelyn Scythes.

“Yeah.”

“I was expecting a crime scene,” she repeated, “and you’re showing me *noodles*.”

“I’m as confused as anyone.”

The sight would have been disturbing, if the innards spread around the remnants of Arch’s bedroom had been human. Even now, in black and white, it was hard to ignore the loose humanoid

silhouette of the wet material lying on the floor in a battered trench coat, with a large hole in the middle of its chest area, bleeding ichorous, greyscale tomato sauce. The floppy arms were spread out, crucifixion-style, while the noodle legs lay so close together that it was hard to see where one pasta-calf ended and the other began. A discarded fedora, lying a foot or two from the unmoving head, completed the tableau.

“I don’t know, Graelyn, I really don’t,” said Arch, slowly pacing around the body to look at it from other angles. “He just — appeared. One moment I was fighting Possessed-Alice, the next, she blinks out of existence and it’s *this* guy I’m sparring with.”

“Woah!” said Graelyn, looking back at the hole in the fallen person’s chest. “I thought you said you were holding your punches.”

“I was!” Arch defended himself. “For fighting a *human*. Normal people are soft compared to me, but *this* fellow was something *else*. Not that he went down with the first punch, not quite. And before that, he said...”

“This thing could *talk*?!”

“Well, it didn’t talk very *well*,” Arch tempered. “But he started saying — I don’t know. I couldn’t make sense of it, his grammar and syntax were *really* screwy. But he said he was our ‘greatest enemy ever’ and that this was a ‘sensational confrontation’ that was going to, uh, ‘shift a lot of copies’. Yeah.”

Bemused, Graelyn sat down on the nearest available surface; with Arch’s bed having been reduced to so much firewood by the fight, it had to be the windowsill.

“Okay, so he’s a metafictional thing?” she said. “That’s okay. We’ve done metafictional stuff before. Heck, I’ve got metafictional stuff in my family tree.”

“Hah! *That’s my giiiiirl!*” shouted a shrill French voice.

Graelyn turned to look out the window just in time to see a skeleton in a tattered black robe streaking through the Transylvanian sky like a shooting star before disappearing in the distance.

She blinked, and looked back at Arch. Scrutinising his metal face, she could find no evidence that he hadn’t seen it too, and no evidence that he had. Taking a deep breath, she elected to ignore it. One meta mystery at a time.

“Funny thing is, I didn’t think this Dawn was *that* metafictional. Genre-based, yes, the black-and-white alone would tell us that, and we definitely skipped some plot beats to get to the climax, there — but I don’t think Dracs *knew* he was a character. I mean, if he did, he’d have seen my trick coming a mile away, right? And besides, what’s Universal Horror-y about a noodle-guy wearing a trench-coat? Come on!”

She sighed again, cupping her chin with one hand and lifting one leg fully onto the windowsill so she could rest that arm’s elbow on her knee.

“Well,” she continued, “I *guess* this could be an attempt at some kind of Lovecraftian guy, if you figured on a cheap costume, you know, trying to use Italian food for tentacles the way some people used sink plungers for evil ray-guns — but *gothic*?”

“Absolutely,” said Arch. “And — well — there’s something else. I don’t *think* he’s from this Dawn at all, or if he is, he’s certainly multiversally aware. In his babbling, he mentioned... things. Things he shouldn’t know about.”

“Like what?”

“The Arc Beetle,” he said first, and let that sink in.

The Arc Beetle was one of the great mysteries of their realms. It was a name they’d heard Kinan Jans mention a couple of times, even Lady Aesc — but neither of them had been willing to explain.

“And not just that. It was things from other Dawns. Big players. Centro, Dusk, the Great Assimilation — that sort of stuff. He said he was our ‘greatest nemesis ever’ *because* he’d been behind, I don’t know, everything bad that’s ever happened to us. ‘The author, mm, of all your pain, mmmm,’ he said.”

“Now *that* sounds like Auteur,” Graelyn observed. “Minus the humming.”

“Oh, the humming was *integral*,” Arch assured her, as if this point was the clue upon which everything else rested. “This guy hummed *so much*. He hummed like you couldn’t imagine.”

Graelyn groaned, extending her folded leg and throwing her head back.

“Blargh! None of this makes any sense! The Great Assimilation *can’t* secretly be controlled by a — by a *noodle man*. It just can’t.”

And then it happened.

A voice, a horrid, squelching voice that seemed to be coming in a wet whisper from every noodle at once, rose from the noodle-body on the floor.

“Mmmm, not *a* noodle man,,,,,” the voice said. “*Theee*,,, Noodle Man. Capisce??? Heehee.”

The mass of pasta was *rising*, the noodles in his chest area growing like hyper-evolved plants as the hole knitted itself back together. The Noodle Man did not so much get up as *grow* up, the mound of noodles rearranging themselves in a sitting, then standing position, with no regard for which individual noodles had previously been the head, the arms, or the legs.

“Okay,” Graelyn squeaked as the figure stood to its full height, arms out-stretched, “that’s — that’s a *little* gothic. I’ll give you that.”

“MmmmmmmMMmmm,” the Noodle Man hummed, his voice an obscene parody of a slide whistle. “Graelyn Scythes,, haha wow!!! Original protagonist beloved character,,,, mmmm, agent of Dawn adventurer main character showdown climactic fight dramatic event mMmmm! I’m the Noodle Man!!!”

As he spoke, he stomped a little closer to her windowsill in a manner reminiscent not so much of Boris Karloff's portrayal of Frankenstein's Monster, as it was of Bela Lugosi's at its worst. Graelyn looked over the edge of the open window, and became acutely aware of how high up this floor was — of how sharp the rocks at the bottom looked. Her heartbeat quickened. This was bringing back some memories.

Some very, very bad memories.

She gathered herself, both legs on the windowsill, and stood up, unable to move in either direction — caught between a noodle man and a hard place.

“H-hey now,” she said with a forced smile. “I’m — I’m flattered you’ve heard of me, *really*, but if you want a sparring match or something, could we, maybe, um, reschedule? It was for a good cause but I did just lose, like, a *lot* of blood.”

“Step away from her,” Arch said in a clipped, warning tone.

But the Noodle Man wasn't listening.

“Mmm,” he babbled, “big shock big twist surprise doomsday villain kill off the hero big event heeheeheheeeeee steal from the best, hope for the worst mmmmm,,,,, I’m the Noodle Man press coverage shocked audiences write-in campaigns, fridging mm big outrage!!!”

“No!” Arch shouted.

He lunged for Graelyn. Seeing a fist made of noodles speeding towards her to push her over the edge, she did the only thing that came to mind —

— and, opening her mouth as wide as she could, she bit into it.

The Noodle Man withdrew his arm sharply and took a step back — then stood, frozen in shock.

Graelyn swallowed.

“...Huh,” she commented at last. “Those actually are some pretty good noodles.”

The truce lasted for just a moment.

“Graelyn,” Arch called out, “get out of the way!”

Reacting as quickly as her Dawn training had taught her to do, Graelyn dove down from the windowsill and back inside the room, taking advantage of the gap the Noodle Man's momentary retreat had made between them; landing on the floor in a crouch, she rolled out of the way. The Noodle Man was still standing dumbly, looking at the stump of his left hand, when a considerable amount of protective biomechanoid mass collided with him like a cannonball —

— and knocked him out the window.

“I’M,,,,,THE,,,,,NOODLE,,,,,,MAAAAAAAAAAAAAANnNNNNnNnnNNnnnnN—” he screamed all the way down before he finally went ‘splat’ on the convenient sharp rocks which an

impish world-designer had, no doubt, placed there for arch-vampires to impale themselves onto at dramatically appropriate times. Close enough.

Graelyn looked over the edge just long enough to make sure that he wasn't going to immediately bounce back up or something. Satisfied that the scattered noodles and tattered longcoat seemed to be lying still, she faced away from the window and shared a long look with her adventuring partner.

"If he regenerated once..." Arch began.

"...he'll probably regenerate again," Graelyn agreed. "Arch, this feels bigger than we're equipped to handle right now. We need backup."

"I agree," he said with a nod. "We should go back to Spiral. Maybe they know something about this thing." He stilled for just a moment. "I've saved the exact time-space coordinates we're in right now," the cyborg explained, "so hopefully, Dawn should be able to send people back here before the Noodle Man regenerates."

"Good thinking!" Graelyn complimented, giving him a literal thumb's-up. A little positive reinforcement among friends never hurt. "Okay," she said, fishing around her pockets for the requisite powder. "Spiral, here we come."

"No point," a familiar voice interrupted. "It's noodles."

As one, they swivelled by 45 degrees to look at the door frame of Arch's bedroom.

Facing them was a woman with tan skin and a pleasant, open face, her long brown hair in disarray. Her flower-patterned shirt was stained with tomato sauce, pesto sauce, and various other condiments; her blue, chequered trousers had been torn in several places, and she was missing a boot. Most obviously, her beloved tweed coat was nowhere in sight — and if *that* didn't tell her old friends that Lady Aesculapius had just been through some *serious* shenanigans, then nothing would.

"...Say, what?" asked Graelyn.

"No time to explain. Get in."

With practised ease, the Firmament woman hurled a small crystal marble into the centre of the bedroom, just where the Noodle Man's body had been; in a matter of instants, it grew back into the giant, hovering sphere that was the rogue Firmament's Factory of Crystal.

"I said, get in!" she repeated as she ran into the doorway before it had even fully opened.

Graelyn and Arch didn't have to be told thrice.

* * *

"Okay," said Graelyn as the Factory of Crystal left the Gothic Dawn behind, "*now* can you tell us what's going on?"

Lady Aesculapius, as Graelyn well knew, was the kind of space-time traveller who *simply* couldn't function unless she was wearing, at the very least, a passable approximation of her Chosen Adventuring Look. Never having found her consciousness transplanted in a series of wildly different bodies, Graelyn couldn't judge the means the Firmament had of keeping their identities grounded, but she did hope that bugging the alien woman on the way down to the Factory's wardrobe level might result in some answers even *before* Aesc found herself a replacement boot and coat.

"Who's the Noodle Man?" she said, almost out of breath as she struggled to keep up. "What do you *mean*, Spiral 'is' noodles?! What's — *woah!*"

Graelyn physically recoiled as she turned a corner in the cathedral-like, crystalline interior of the Foce, only to find herself face to face with a brown-haired, round-faced woman who looked a little older than herself. Even with noticeable eye bags from lack of sleep, her irises were still the kind to lose yourself in for hours, and still sparkling with the same defiant intelligence.

Even here, even like this — older, tired and unexpected, dressed in what looked to be a pair of baggy alien pyjamas, with an unused, extra pair of sleeves hanging pointlessly from the hips — Graelyn instantly recognised her old roommate and former girlfriend.

"*Ashlyn?* What are *you* doing here?!"

"Or 'hello', as people used to say," Ashlyn Oswin replied with one of her trademark smirks.

"Uh, right, yes. Hello, Ash," said Graelyn, adjusting her glasses.

Ashlyn acknowledged the greeting with a little nod, then tilted her head, still smiling thinly.

"You look well," she observed. "Younger."

"Well, funny story, technically I think I'm older than you now. By, like, two decades, relative time? But also younger," she added before Ashlyn could react to *that* little bombshell. "I got deaged into a baby and grew up all over again before I got my memories back, so, yeah."

"...Woah."

"Yeah, it was a whole thing," said Graelyn, forcing a chuckle. "Great for your health, but overall, Do Not Recommend. It was in this weird metafictional situation, Auteur set it up — you've met Auteur, right?"

"*Oh* yeah," Ashlyn replied at once, "we've had run-ins. The tosser keeps trying to steal the Tourist's Pyramid."

"Mm. Right, well, they're kind of my parent now," Graelyn confessed. "They were surprisingly non-terrible at it! I mean, they were still gaslighting me the whole time as part of an evil scheme to take over the world, haha, but, y'know. I'm grading on a curve." She gulped. "So. What have *you* been up to?"

"Oh, you know, the usual," Ashlyn said airily, leaning against the nearest crystal pillar. It was probably because she was literally too tired to stand, but somehow she still made it look attractively

nonchalant. “Robots, chases, waterfalls. Been travelling with the gals, living my best life. Causing trouble one day, saving civilisations the next, driving the Resident loopy — it’s a hoot.”

“Sounds like it,” Graelyn said with an amicable chortle. “I’ve been hearing about you. Mmm. You’ve caused a fair bit of hassle for Dawn in your time, Kinan’s always kvetching about you.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear it.”

“Say, I never asked — ‘you and the gals’ — I mean, is this a polycule situation, or...?”

Ashlyn tilted her head again, raising an eyebrow. “Why, are you applying to join?”

There ensued the longest five seconds of Graelyn’s life. She hadn’t thought Dracula had left her with enough blood to blush like *this*.

“Hah!” Ashlyn broke into a laugh. “Your *face*. Look, we don’t put a label on it. Me and the Tourist, that’s *definitely* a thing, out and proud. The rest of us, well, we live together, we’re all various kinds of sapphic — but the rest is our business. Y’know? Even to you, if that’s alright.”

Ashlyn bit her lip, as if unused to the slight emotional vulnerability she had just displayed — and raised herself up again as she added with renewed theatricality:

“Actually, I tell a lie, we *do* put one label on it. And *that* label,” she proclaimed, “is ‘the Forgotten Heroines of 10,000 Dawns’. Nothing more, and definitely nothing less.”

Graelyn blinked.

“Why not ‘the’ 10,000 Dawns?” she asked after a moment.

“Eh, meta reasons,” said Ashlyn. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Mmm,” said Graelyn.

* * *

“Do you *really* rollerblade *everywhere*?” asked Arch. “Even indoors?”

“Yup,” said the purple-haired girl with the jean jacket, circling him to emphasise the point. She smirked. “You got a problem with that?”

“No, no! I’m actually quite impressed,” he stated — then shook his head. “But we don’t have time to discuss it, I’m afraid. I assume our good pilot is filling Graelyn in while she’s replacing her previous wardrobe items — but I’m afraid I found myself outpaced. Would you Heroines mind...?”

“No problem!” said Shona Daniels. “Right, girls?”

She took one last slurp of her drink through the brightly-coloured straw, then set it aside on the nearest crystal surface; it was probably a very important computer bank, *not* an actual piece of furniture, but then, the same could probably be said for all of their chairs. Aesculapius really needed to start labelling things.

“So basically,” Shona began, voice mild, “someone stole our gimmick. You know how we rampaged through the 10,000 Dawns to make a name for ourselves and all that, when the Tourist first busted out of the 10,000 Drafts? That’s what the Noodle Man’s doing, only with the metafiction levels turned, like, *way* up.”

Archimedes tensed, pivoting to look at Miranda and Pathway. “So he’s like you two? A runaway draft-character?”

“No,” said Pathway, the thin, athletic woman with the blue, short-cropped hair. Archimedes couldn’t help but think that her blue-striped outfit looked faintly comical, but there was a resolute seriousness in her sky-blue eyes. “At least, Aesculapius does not think so. If he is, he is more powerful than any Draft character yet encountered. But there is no record of him in the ancient schematics. He is not of the Firmament’s design.”

“I see,” said Arch, concern increasing. “Could Auteur be involved? We saw one of their incarnations in Transylvania, but he seemed —” He paused, unsure how to phrase it. “— in a hurry.”

“Yeah, we know,” said Miranda. “No connection.”

Zig-zagging across the crystal chamber, she leaned to take a sniff of Shona’s forsaken drink, but the strawberry blonde closed her hand around the cup again before her friend could snatch it. Miranda made a face and continued.

“He did run into the Noodle Man, but what you saw — look, the best way we can put it is that he’s just been punted across the layers of reality by some... distant powers. Folks even the Firmament don’t tangle with. He’ll probably crash somewhere eventually, probably somewhere very metafictional. Either way, he’s not part of the problem, just another victim.”

“And the Monochrome One was lucky,” Pathway continued, still staring intensely. “As were you and your friend, Graelyn. The Noodle Man is powerful. The manifestations people have been witnessing in individual Dawns, and even as far as the Totality and the Cupid Homeworld — they are but fractions of his being. The mushroom caps, not the underlying mycelium.”

“Ooh,” Miranda admired. “Fancy simile. You really *are* good at exposition.”

“Yes, I must say, you *are*,” Arch agreed.

“It is what I was created for,” Pathway said with a hint more personal edge in her voice, allowing a brief, wistful smile to alight upon her features before it vanished. “I’m glad I can be more than that, now, but it never hurts to flex old muscles.”

* * *

“Aesc,” Graelyn said, “you *have* to get better at exposition. I, uhmm, I still don’t understand any of this.”

“Nice outfit though,” Ashlyn interjected. “Suits you.”

“Well, yes, it *is* a frightfully good coat, isn’t it?” Lady Aesculapius agreed, doing a little twirl to make its lapels flap. It was the spitting image of the one she’d lost, except that its hue might have been ever so slightly lighter. “But — Graelyn — what *don’t* you understand?”

“Mm. Well, for a start, you still haven’t explained, about Spiral ‘being noodles.’”

“Oh,” said the Firmament. “Right.” She blinked. “Were your hues always this... warm? No, never mind. Must be the contrast with the new coat. Graelyn, I said Spiral was noodles because Spiral is noodles. That’s the level of being we’re dealing with here. It’s not just that he *is* noodles, he can turn anything *into* noodles. Even entire worlds, if the whim strikes him. Not to mention his sheer presence — it derails things. Changes the biodata of whatever’s around him, introduces glitches, absurdities. Makes everything sillier and sillier until it falls apart... sometimes literally. It’s not his primary objective — he wants to become famous via the 10,000 Dawns, not *destroy* the 10,000 Dawns, but if you cross him, well...”

“He turned our *ship* into noodles!” Ashlyn complained. “While we were *inside* it!”

“Haha,” Graelyn laughed nervously, cringing. “...Wow.”

“*Yeah*,” the brunette replied. “*Wow*. Why do you think I’m wearing *this* thing?”

“...Why *are* you wearing this thing?”

“Because at the time, the Tourist and I were... oh, shut up,” Ashlyn said with a roll of her eyes — then glared at Aesc. “And I mean, you’d *think* there’d be everything a girl could *want* in this Foce’s wardrobe, but in practice it’s 90% adventurer coats, and half of the remainder is alien jammies.”

“As it should be,” Aesc stated, not at all sorry.

* * *

“Alright,” said Archimedes, “so the Noodle Man is a metafictional cuckoo — wildly dangerous in practice, even if his actual agenda is simply silly. Spiral and the Firmament have fallen, but are likely to be restored once he’s banished, so we shouldn’t freak out too much about that, and get on with defeating him. You girls are onboard because you had a narrow escape during which the Noodle Man claimed your ship. Have I got everything so far?”

“Yes,” Pathway confirmed, “that is correct.”

“See?” said Miranda, leaning in to plant a kiss on her cheek. “You’re great at this, pal.”

“Two questions, then,” said the cyborg. “First: where are we going, exactly?”

“A higher tier of reality,” Pathway readily replied.

“Boo-yah!” said Miranda, raising herself on just one roller-skate as she assumed a mock fighting stance, ready to kick thin air. “We’re taking the fight to that meta-noodle-thing’s home turf!”

“It’ll probably be one of those universes entangled with ours, where everything we know and live is fiction,” Shona explained; having finished her drink, she was now munching on a sandwich which Arch didn’t remember her fetching from anywhere. “We’re going to meet our creator. That’ll be nice, I expect. I wonder if I’m named after anybody.”

“Probably not,” said Miranda. “Actually, most authors *don’t* put their name in the story, it’s just confusing. I bet we can guess some of their names if we think of common names we don’t ever seem to run into. Do we know a Jim? James?”

“I don’t believe I’ve ever encountered a Jeanne,” Pathway said thoughtfully. “Or an Aristide... or a Plum.”

“Hey, I said *common* names.”

“Apologies, Miranda. My knowledge of what passes for normality still has certain — lacunae.”

“You know, I met *my* creator in another universe, once,” Arch mused.

“Huh,” Shona replied. “Was it nice?”

“Ech. *He* was nice, but my creator... It’s complicated.”

“It always is,” Pathway said, her gaze distant. “What was your other question?”

He paused.

“...Oh, right. Yes. My second question is: if we’re in here, and Aesc is getting changed, *who’s flying the Foce?!*”

* * *

“Oh, *there* you three are,” said the Tourist as she stomped into Aesc’s enormous wardrobe closet.

The Renegade Elder known only as the Tourist had made quite the first impression on Graelyn. Unlike Ashlyn, it seemed she had been wearing *something* when her combination vehicle and abode had rudely turned into pasta around her — but it wasn’t something that you could wear on most streets without turning a few heads. Except, she supposed, in some cyberpunk-type worlds. Black leather certainly suited the tall, cranky-looking woman, and something told Graelyn that the boots, at least, might actually be part of her day-to-day outfit.

Somehow, she was also thoroughly unsurprised that the woman was wearing a pair of sunglasses indoors. She seemed the type.

“Ah. Tourist,” said Aesc; there seemed to be little more than a workmanlike mutual tolerance between the pair. “Shouldn’t you be at the controls?”

“I *was*,” the Elder replied tersely. “Obviously. But we’re there.” She looked Aesculapius up and down, lips curling with distaste. “I see you’ve replaced your rags with other, better rags. Excellent. Let’s go.”

Before the Tourist could stomp back out of the room, Aesculapius stepped nimbly between her and the door.

“What... umm... what’s going —” Graelyn began.

“*We’re* going,” Aesculapius said, and grabbed Graelyn by the hand, pulling her closer without turning out. “*You’re* not.”

“I beg your pardon!? That thing *noodled* my *ship*!”

“And it would noodle you just as easily,” Aesc explained. “You and your Forgotten Heroines, you’re — well. The title says it all, doesn’t it? You aren’t exactly household names.”

“I did my best to change that,” the Tourist argued. “That was the whole point!”

“And you failed,” Aesc replied just as smoothly. “Granted, you failed in an entertaining way which has secured you and your girls something of a niche, a bit of a following, in and outside the Dawns — but it’s not enough to really interest the Noodle Man. Become a threat, he’ll swat you away like a gorilla squashing a mosquito.”

“And you’re *different*, are you?” the Tourist thundered, drawing herself up to her full height and stepping closer to Aesc, as if defying her to physically stop the Elder from walking out of the room.

“Not just me. Me, *and* Graelyn, *and* Arch. Like it or not, we have a certain... metaphysical relevance. Believe me, it’s a blessing and a curse. Never go on walks, you might just become a cosmic keystone! But it does mean the Noodle Man will be — reluctant to just zap us away. We’re iconic. We’re... *main characters*.”

“Haha,” said Graelyn. “Wow.”

“Well, it’s true,” Aesc said with a sheepish head-tilt, before locking her eyes back onto the Tourist.

The Elder chewed on her words for a moment — then stepped even closer to the woman in the tweed coat, until their bodies were nearly pressed together.

“Aesculapius,” the Tourist hissed into Aesc’s ear through clenched teeth, “I *despise* you.”

Then she *shoved* her aside with some kind of bastardised move from one alien martial art or another — but stomped off in the *opposite* direction to the outer doors of the ship.

“You know, Aesc,” Ashlyn commented as her footsteps receded, “I think that was her *flirting*.”

* * *

Graelyn’s hand was warm and clammy in Lady Aesculapius’s as they stepped out over the threshold of the Factory of Crystal.

“It’s going to be alright, Graelyn. You’ve beaten worse things before. Come on, you killed *Dracula* half an hour ago!”

“Mmm,” she simply replied. “If you say so.”

Archimedes Von Ahnerabe would ordinarily have offered additional words of reassurance, but was too busy looking around the landscape in the middle of which Lady Aesculapius’s Foce had materialised.

“Er... Aesc? Are you *sure* this is that meta-world with the spunky indie publisher from Indiana?”

“*Has* to be,” Aesc replied, still looking at Graelyn. “Unless...”

She looked up, and her jaw slackened.

They stood upon a hazy plateau, some kind of huge, alien mesa dotted with smaller rock formations and distant woods with strange hues. The sky above them glittered with unspeakable colours — and above all, the landscape was dominated with the huge, awe-inspiring shapes of majestic, titanic creatures. No two were alike — there were cats and dogs, liquid beings of rippling ink, insects of various kinds, all huge as mountains. Most were curled up, at rest, though a few were on the prowl, and they even saw, near the horizon, that a few seemed to be actively fighting with one another.

“...Unless what?” asked Archimedes.

“Oh. Oooh,” Aesc grumbled to herself, stomping back and forth in a little half-circle, “I am going to put pink glitter in the Tourist’s shampoo bottle, just you watch me. She couldn’t *tell* us, could she? The *ego* on that woman. It’s okay, a Factory of Crystal and an Elder Pyramid are basically the same thing, right? *Right?*!”

Arch placed a metal-plated hand on the woman’s forearm.

“Aesc...”

“I’m fine,” she said, tone levelling out. “I’m fine. Just blooming well ticked off, that’s all. Kids, what’s happened here is that we bounced right off of that meta realm we wanted, because it turns out *someone* didn’t actually know how to calculate a fourth-wall-piercing vector without screwing up the Sweldenvlog divisionals.”

“Mm,” said Graelyn, blinking in the strange, shifting light of the sierra. “Meaning we’ve ended up... where?”

“Somewhere you never want to be,” said Aesc. “A secret dimension, right on the edge between the Dawns and the Drafts. Full of ideas that are only as real as the Firmament need’em to be — antibodies on standby. This particular region of it seems to be some kind of... allegorical plane full of animalistic embodiments of...”

She glanced at the huge, huge golden-furred wolf in the distance, who seemed to be padding carefully after the even more titanic silhouette of a gigantic mouse who periodically tossed it dog-treats the size of Olympus Mons.

“Well,” she finished, “I *could* tell you, but you’d only have more questions.”

“I *already* have more questions,” said Arch.

The colours of his reflective panels were shifting, in sync with, but not direct reflection of, the many-hued skies. Graelyn and Aesc doubted he could have stopped it if he’d wanted to; he seemed awed, his voice distant.

But not so distant that he was losing sight of the practicalities.

“Such as, why did we land here, in particular?”

“Oh, because it’s the next best thing, I expect,” Aesc replied.

With a snap, she belatedly reduced the exterior of her Foce to a marble, and, peering at it, she gave it a good shake. She knew the Tourist couldn’t actually feel it in there; it just felt cathartic.

“Somewhere in here is a reflection, an allegorical embodiment, of the... powers... which govern the destinies of the Dawns on certain layers of reality. If I know my stuff — and Meistras made sure that I did — then a crisis like the Noodle Man must be visible on this level of existence. Not quite the real root, but beating it here should be enough to break his hold on the worlds.”

“Huh,” said Arch, putting his hands on his hips. “So it’s just a matter of finding that great big Guardian of ours? Sounds easy enough. Do we know what it looks like?”

“Er...”

Arch misread Aesc’s hesitation for an implicit negative, and sighed with good-natured weariness.

“Figures. Well, I’m sure we can —”

“Ehmm, no, Arch,” Graelyn’s voice said behind him; he felt her comparatively weak, base-human arms tugging at his coat. “You, mm, you should probably look around.”

The one-eyed cyborg complied, and found that a gigantic black beetle was hovering a dozen feet in the air, facing them. Its wings were folded under its shell, not buzzing; the gleaming being simply hung in mid-air, as though suspended by invisible chains. Its bulging brown eyes somehow scanned to him with immediate clarity as panicked and imploring, despite the stillness and the inhumanity of their possessor.

“At last, you’ve come!” said the being. “I wasn’t sure you would. Thank you.”

Its voice, though huge and chitter-like, sounded strangely soothing; even now, crying out for urgently-needed rescue, there was a noticeable hint of John Lennon in its peasant cadence.

Lady Aesculapius hesitated for a moment — then *knelt*, not as a supplicant before a shrine, but as a knight before their liege-lord.

“Greetings, Arc Beetle,” she addressed it from that kneeling position. “I am Aesculapius, of the First and Final Firmament. I have come to request —”

“Yes, I know who you are,” the Arc Beetle said, its voice indulgent despite the ongoing, apparent worry. “And you, too — Graelyn, Archimedes. It’s an honour to finally meet you like this, truly. Now please —”

“What?” Graelyn and Arch asked in unison.

“*Please*,” the Arc Beetle said, and its huge mass began to *move* up there, pivoting in place then beginning to fly off in a very specific direction. “There isn’t much time. It’s my babies. *You have to save my babies.*”

* * *

The Arc Beetle’s nest was a surprisingly delicate structure. Graelyn and Arch could see why the Beetle had waited for human visitors to intervene in its stead; even a single one of the great insect’s legs would have crushed it. How the Beetle had even laid those dozens of eggs, the humanoids daren’t begin to imagine; allegorical beings didn’t have to make sense, they cautiously supposed. Certainly, it didn’t sound like the eggs contained within the bubble-like mound of earth — about the size of a small cabin — were ever going to hatch into other giant Beetles.

In fact, it didn’t *look* like it, either.

On the surface, the eggs arranged in alcoves within the nest all looked alike — wet, translucent, and shaped more or less like rugby balls. They looked so fragile that Archimedes and Graelyn were reluctant to touch them, but Aesc had no such compunctions, picking up the one nearest to the entrance in her bare hands; her movements were quick, but precise and measured.

Stepping back out of the nest to rejoin Arch and Graelyn, she held the egg up to the sunlight, giving it a little shake. Galaxies and nebulae glittered within.

“Careful, now,” said the voice of the Arc Beetle, still hovering nearby.

“Yeah, yeah,” said Aesc. “I know what I’m doing, big guy.”

“Are these... universes?”

“Sort of,” Aesc answered, carefully replacing the egg in its slot within the earthen hut. “They’re —”

“— narratives,” the Arc Beetle finished in her stead. “Stories, some waiting to be born, others already quickened, but incubating under my care. But look again, and *help.*”

They had barely stepped in and out the first time, with Lady Aesc ahead and the other two following. This time, the three shared a look; each of them grabbed one of Aesculapius’s hands,

and they walked together into the darkness of the warm, earthen nest. It took a few moments for their eyes to get used to the lack of light.

And they saw the problem.

There were noodles everywhere.

There were warm yellow noodles, and there were cold, greyscale noodles — there were spaghetti and ramen — every kind of noodle known to man was here, growing on every available surface, like ivy, like a fungus. Noodles squelched under every footstep; clumps of noodles encircled the eggs, as though trying to choke them out.

“...Ah. Mm. Wow.”

Without exchanging a word, save for Graelyn’s simple reaction, they walked deeper into the nest. It was bigger, now, than they’d realised on the outside, this Arc Beetle’s nest; it had seemed like quite a small, homespun thing at first, but now that they were in, every chamber seemed to lead to yet another alcove or niche, yet another little cupboard, all brimming with eggs at various stages of maturity.

And every single one of those spaces was overtaken by the noodles. There was no end to them, no rhyme or reason; they didn’t even move, content to exist there like parasitic vegetation. Still, the visitors did not speak. Perhaps the noodles were not inanimate, but simply dormant; it wouldn’t do to rouse them. Communicating through rudimentary signs and Arch’s displays, they agreed to return to the outside world, where Arch and Aesc stepped forward and craned their heads up to address the Arc Beetle once again.

“...Okay, well, that seems... straightforward?” Archimedes hazarded. “Take the eggs out, hack the noodles away, put the eggs back in? Is it really that simple?”

“Yeah, no offence,” Aesc told the Beetle, “but I *was* expecting more of a climactic showdown sort of thing. Compared to what happened in Spiral before I picked these two up, this looks pretty tame... The Noodle Man’s not even here! I get that you don’t have hands, but —”

Then something occurred which paused both their heartbeats, however briefly — and probably the Beetle’s as well.

“MmmMmm not here???” said a voice.

That voice chilled them to their bones — or innermost boneless viscera, in the case of the invertebrate Beetle. It was doubly familiar.

Firstly, and most obviously, that irritating slide-whistle tone was not an easy one to forget. Before they even turned around, the Firmament and the cyborg knew that the Noodle Man had arrived, fashionably late to the culmination of his little hostile takeover.

Secondly, however, there was the voice itself, and that, too, was horribly recognisable; higher-pitched than the Noodle Man’s natural squelchings, and distinctly more human.

“Mmmmm haha I’m the Noodle Man!!!” said Graelyn Scythes. “Big twist surprise last minute reversal I’m the Noodle Man,,, wanted climactic confrontation well you got it,, wow.”

Except she wasn’t Graelyn Scythes. Not anymore. With twin, surreal pangs to their guts, Archimedes and Aesculapius realised their friend had been changing ever since Transylvania — skin growing a little warmer, a little wetter, a little yellower. Features blurring. Somehow, they hadn’t *seen* it until just now.

“*You!*” Archimedes thundered, assuming a fighting stance.

“I’ve got a whisk,” Aesculapius warned, “and I’m not afraid to use it.”

To bear out her claim, she produced the implement from the pocket of her tweed coat, and held it forward in a threatening fashion. Briefly, Archimedes remembered that this particular coat was a recent replacement for her old one, and wondered if each of the ‘adventurer coats’ in the wardrobe came equipped with its own Quantum Whisk. He wouldn’t have put it past Aesc.

But there were more urgent matters at hand. “Let her *gol!*” he demanded.

“Or what,,, haha dilemma gotcha April Fools aren’t I a stinker,,,” the being cackled. All traces of Graelyn’s physiology were gone, now, leaving only the familiar Noodle Man in his trenchcoat and fedora. A moment ago the figure had still been wearing Graelyn’s glasses and tennis shoes, but the noodles had swollen and swallowed them away. “Ha ha wow I’m the Noodle Man,, but I’m Graelyn Scythes but I’m the Noodle Man, can’t hurt me can’t hurt her hee hee haa haa Main Character Plot Armour,,,!!! Success!!”

The built-in weapons in Arch’s right forearm had been locked onto the crowing, babbling Noodle Man, but now he lowered it, uncertain.

He shared a pained glance with Aesculapius, who was, for her part, being forced by the Noodle Man’s utter lack of response to admit that her bluff about the common kitchen whisk having any unusual abilities whatsoever was entirely failing to work on him.

(It rarely did, in the grand scheme of things, but three times out of ten was still worth the hassle of keeping the thing on her person, she found — besides which she rather fancied having objects to dramatically point with.)

“What...” she began, and shook her head. “How did you — you didn’t *replace* her the way you did other people, you —”

“It was the sauce,” Arch cut her off with a sullen groan. “Should have seen it coming. Dracula world, Dracula rules — eating the monster’s blood is a very, very bad idea. Ugh! So stupid! I should have told her!”

The Noodle Man jittered in place, flailing his noodly limbs about in some kind of demented victory dance.

“Chekhov’s gun,, mmmm,,, yes!! I’m the Noodle Man and I’m Graelyn *and* I’m the Noodle Man!!!”

“Hey! Big guy!” Arch called up to the Arc Beetle. His tinny voice had taken on a hoarse, ragged desperation. “A little help?! A *deus ex machina* would be pretty nice right about now!”

The Beetle bobbed down for a moment, and tilted its head-section downwards a fraction.

“I’m the Keeper of the Story Arc,” it explained mournfully. “The painter cannot be in the painting, as they say in one of my children. I cannot interfere.”

The Noodle Man *hopped* in place, his noodle-legs squelching ridiculously as he landed, and let out a hoot of laughter.

“HooohooOoooo! MmmMmMM! narrative importance, won fair and square,, main character status,,, popular buy my books mmm — *blrp*.”

The Noodle Man’s victorious monologue cut off as he stumbled back a few paces, colliding with the earthen wall of the nest hard enough to knock his fedora loose. Confident in his priorities, the pasta person caught it again in one noodley hand, and only then looked around for the projectile which had collided with his face.

It turned out that whisks, even if they weren’t quantum, made for pretty nifty throwing ammunitions.

“Your books!” Lady Aesc spat, now that she had his attention. “Your books! Always your *books*! Don’t you *get* it!?”

“...MmMmM?” it hummed in confusion.

She stomped over to him and *grabbed* him by the lapels of his absurd, dollar-store private-eye trench coat. Still keenly aware that it was Graelyn Scythes under there, Arch made to stop her, but halted as he saw that the Firmament had no further violence in mind — just a well-deserved talking-to.

“You aren’t going to *get* any!” she berated the noodley being, who, insofar as its expression could be determined, continued to stare quizzically, limbs flopping, making no attempt to free himself from the average-sized woman’s grip. “Not ever! *None* of us are, if you carry on like this. Graelyn’s story isn’t powerful because she’s The Original Main Character Of *10,000 Dawns*, you — you noodle-brains. You can’t just... become popular by replacing her, if you keep none of what made her the wonderful person she was!”

“Aesc,” Arch asked in a light voice, “why are we critiquing the interdimensional madman’s evil plan?”

“Shush. Trust me.”

“But —”

“It’s because he’s not evil, *okay*?!” she said with a roll of her eyes, then refocused on the Noodle Man as she spat the next bit. “If he were evil, maybe he’d be, ever so slightly, *interesting*. But you’re not, are you? There’s nothing more to you than meets the eye.”

“MmmMm! I’m the Noodle Man!” the Noodle Man agreed, nodding vigorously. At last, he had reached a topic on which he could offer an expert opinion. “I’m the Noooooo- Noodle,,Noooooodle Maaaaan,, I’m the Noodle Man!!!” he insisted.

“A man,” Aesc repeated. “Made of noodles. Yes. That is what you are. That is *all* you are. No past, no future, no life, not even a name worth a damn. You’re just an idea, and a pretty silly one at that.”

“Hey!!” the Noodle Man argued.

He was regaining a bit of poise, though still not enough to actually put up a fight as Aesc tightened her grip on his coat collar, more as a warning than a practical preventative measure.

“Comedy!! Haha! rule of funny!!! gotta mak’em laugh hha hahaha woww,, less is more,, memorable gimmick,,!!!”

“Oh, you’re worth a chuckle, sure,” she granted. “But a book series? Not the ones you’ve been summoning into existence, the mockups, the meta-shadows. The real things. The things in the worlds up there that even you can’t alter directly. You think they’ll *care* about you? That they’ll want to read about you for more than, what, 30,000 words, tops? And that’s pushing it! Tell me, Archimedes. Expert testimony.”

He straightened, bemused.

“Uh, sure? What is it?”

“What,” Aesc asked with tight-lipped smugness, “are some of the qualities of Graelyn Scythes? The ones which have made her suitable to engage in a variety of adventures? The ones which made you want to keep hanging out with her all this time?”

The cyborg thought for a moment.

“Well... she’s kind... She learns from her mistakes. She’s a loyal — a *good* friend. M-my best friend. But not just mine — she sticks by the people who stick by her. And she’s determined. She can play it smooth or she can play it hard — but either way, she’ll do the right thing. Ugh, but I’m making her sound like some sort of saint, some sort of hero...” He trailed off. His voice sounded unsteady, on the verge of sob. “She’s got her flaws. She’s human — she’s *so* human. She’s had rough patches, unhealthy spirals — she’s had fights with people where it wasn’t the other guy’s fault. Who hasn’t? But like I said, she learns from it, makes amends. She’s complicated and silly and — and wonderful. I dunno. That’s... That’s who Graelyn is.”

He didn’t know who he was talking to. Lady Aesc? But *she* knew all that already — perhaps not in so many words, but she *did* know Graelyn, better than most in fact, even if it had been a while since they’d adventured together on the regular. The Arc Beetle perhaps, but it seemed like the sort of creature to already know everything you were going to say before you said it. So who?

Maybe it was himself.

Maybe it was Graelyn, if she was still in there somewhere.

Or maybe some part of him hoped the Noodle Man would take the hint. That seemed to be Aesc's gambit... apparently.

"So," said the woman in the tweed coat, staring directly into those hollow pasta-eyes. "You heard the man. Think you can be as interesting as that? Think you can be even a tenth as interesting? Mh? Are you going to do the smart thing just for once?"

The Noodle Man gathered up his last bits of nerves, and began to try to pull himself free of Aesc's determined hands.

"I,,,, am,,,,, the NNoddlNoodleManmaaaaa—"

"Excuse me," she cut him off, shoving him back against the packed-dirt wall, "I wasn't done *talking*. My question is this. Are you going to go back to whatever bizarre slice of reality you crawled out of? Or are we going to have to wait for you to drive this publisher into the ground?!"

"Publisher?"

"Arch, shush. Are you going to drive this publisher into the ground," she repeated at the Noodle Man, "and all the stories with them? Because they're all like Graelyn, you know," she added, nodding her head in the direction of the entrance of the nest, and the iridescent beetle-eggs within. "The big ones and the small ones. It's not just marketing, and it's not just that it's oo-all-connected-all-canon-gotta-follow-the-spreadsheet. Screw that. I pick my friends *better* than that. And you, Noodle Man — face it, you just can't hold a candle to any of them. Not *one*."

"But I,,,,I,,, hmmm, I'm the Noodle Man! Please,,,, please!!! I'm... I'm the... I'm....."

The Noodle Man flailed and squelched, his distorted, wet voice growling and gurgling without managing to form any coherent words worthy of being put forward as a retort to Aesculapius's ultimatum.

Then, after a moment, he stiffened — and, immediately thereafter, slackened completely.

Whatever power had been holding the noodles together in the shape of the man faded; they fell out in clumps from within the trench coat, piling up on the dusty sierra ground in tangled little mounds. Within seconds, Aesc found that she was holding nothing but an empty coat; then it vanished with a flash, and she was thrown back — she would have hit the ground on her back, had Arch not swooped in to catch her and break her fall.

But the white light was not abating; far from it. An identical glow was rising from the ground, the hut, the eggs, even the Arc Beetle overhead and the other beasts in the distance. A sound that was not a sound, but the inrushing of absolute silence, began to fill the air — a deafening sensation.

"*What's going on?!*" Archimedes shouted over the un-noise.

Even his sophisticated vision processors could no longer make out Aesculapius's form amidst the blinding white, but he could still feel her shape in his arms — though even that was growing oddly fluid.

“The *Noodle Man!*” Aesc shouted back, voice straining to be heard over the eldritch din. “He’s *gone!* That means the crisis is over — and *that* means — *the allegorical plane doesn’t need to exist anymore! It’s returning to a state of —*”

Archimedes didn’t hear the next bit. The sound was unbearable. The binding whiteness reached such an intensity that it became indistinguishable from pitch darkness — and then he knew no more.

* * *

Archimedes slept.

He slept — and when he woke, he found himself battling a temporarily hypnotised Alice MacLeod. Nobody else.

All across the 10,000 Dawns, and beyond, people woke up as if from a daze, and remembered what they were meant to be doing. To some, the day’s adventures were only a distant dream, a quickly-dispelled sense of *deja vu*, perhaps an inexplicable craving for pasta.

Of course, there were others who remembered. Auteur, Lord Thymon, the Bookkeepers — Marilyn remembered too, for the short time she had left; perhaps a few too many years in showbiz had dulled her ability to safely put away this sort of thing. Or perhaps it was just luck of the draw.

Across time and space, even in the distant city of myth and legend known only as York, events which had become caked in doughy filaments repaired themselves as best they could. There were side-effects, traces, lingering tremors — but weren’t there always? In most places the Noodle Incident had reached, the fabric of reality had been knitted and unpicked so many times of late — even unravelled, if certain rumours were true. One more aborted reboot scarcely made a difference

Somewhere nameless — somewhere simple, and indescribable — a man made of noodles sat atop a pile of unspeakable non-matter, pulled his trench coat closed, and rested his noodle-head in his noodle-hands.

That, he told himself, *could have gone better.*

But, he argued, *it could have gone a lot worse.*

And he really hadn’t had very long to prepare. Who knew what he might achieve, with just a little more forewarning, a little more planning and lead-time? Perhaps some assistance — for all the times he’d encountered the word, he still wasn’t entirely sure what “friends” were, but having lots of them, and being loyal to them, seemed to be quite important.

He sighed and drew himself back onto his feet. He’d figure this out. Eventually.

After all... hmmm.

He *was* the Noodle Man.

NOODLE - LEGACY:

EPILOGUE TO THE NOODLE INCIDENT

By Ismaeel Clarke

An "Auteur" vignette

Auteur landed on the last page in a manner much like a pillow, only bonier.

"Urgh!" he cried, "The insult! The outrage! They cannot treat *moi* like this! I am Auteur! *L'Auteur lui-même*! Author of history, Last of the Mappers, Goddess of Gendar! Well, not so much that last one any more, but still! This is *inconceivable*! To banish me! Me! Banished from my own — well, it wasn't my own, but banished from someone else's narrative! It is an outrage! I shall write to the Daily Mail, yes, I shall, and I shall have my revenge! And my revenge, it will be the greatest revenge of them all! And yea, it shall be a deadly vengeance. It shall be the deadly vengeance of deadly — no, hang on, that's taken. But nonetheless I will have my revenge on those meddling cats! No, hang on, there was only one cat, and all the rest were humans... But I will wreak my vengeance on them. It shall be a deadly revenge. The deadly revenge of — no, hang on, sorry, this monologue really isn't very original, I need to up my game. Anyhoo, as I was saying, I *will* wreak my revenge upon Furball and Narrator and all, and that Noodle Man, too! Just they wait! They will not know what has hit them! For I am *l'Auteur*, Last of the Mappers, Father of Christmas, Goddess of Gendar, Son of the Fallen House of the Morning Star, and I will not be in — hang on, only one page until the end of the book? Only one single, paltry page? This is an outrage! A complete outrage! I will not stand for it, do you hear! No! Stop! I am Auteur! You cannot do this to m

THE PERPETRATORS

L. Alves, also known as Lupan Evezan, is a writer and occasional editor. L. co-created *The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids*, and has also contributed to the noodles noodles noodles noodles noodles. You can find L. on Tumblr at drleevezan.tumblr.com, and on Twitter at [drleevezan](https://twitter.com/drleevezan).

Ismaeel Clarke is definitely not currently being held in a basement by a certain noodley fellow in a trenchcoat and fedora and his publishing friends. Certainly not. And they aren't being held at gunpoint either, oh no no no, please don't shoot me oh god please don't shoot me well this is rather dark isn't it, ahahahaha, well, let's talk about something nicer, like, umm, oh god, noodles! Noodles are very nice, yes! Noodles! (Anyhow, in case you were wondering, I'm an author or something, probably, sometimes.)

Ostara Gale is emerging from her pool of writing & fanaticism, still not yet having recovered from an obsession of all things *Who* and Paradox. She spends her day running around the Cheshire House and is proud of getting published by Arcbeatle Press (in *The Book of the Snowstorm*) (and human things).

James Hornby lives in Yorkshire with his mountain of noodles and outlandish dreams. He has previously written short stories for Pencil Tip Publishing, Altrix Books, and the UNIT series at Candy Jar Books. His most recent work is *Night of the Noodles*, the opening entry of the SIGNET series at Arcbeatle Press. To fund his noodle addiction he also has a real job.

Lena Mactíre is a lupine trans girl from St. Louis, MO. Loup has written the *Back to the Eleventh Hour* series of Doctor Who criticism books, and is the co-creator of the *Starlight Endeavours* science fiction series. Stories from that series have also appeared in the *Horrors of Arcbeatle* and *Book of the Snowstorm* anthologies. She now lives in Ithaca, NY with her wondrous fiancée.

Theta Mandel is an eldritch creature who can occasionally be seen hiding behind eir blinds or terrorising the village people. Eir last known appearance was in *The Book of the Snowstorm*, and, less officially, on AO3 under the name *Z_in_a_blue_box*. Ze wanted to write something cool and smart but then... mmm noodle man haha... taste...

The Noodle Man is the best one of them all so amazing ha ha wow. The other authors do not know how he got here but they can't make him leave. BUY HIS BOOK coming January 32nd from Arcbeatle Press.

Callum Phillpott is a Sci-Fi/Comedy writer, mainly seen contributing to Arcbeatle Press or his own series, The Nine-Two-Five Universe. One time, somebody told him that his work was 'postmodern'; whether that's true or not, it's been going to his head ever since.

Plum Pudding is a nuisance who is the proud creator of the Noodle Man, the most important character in fiction, and prouder writer of *Noodle Man: Out of the Batter Volume 12*, as well as other projects that *actually exist*. Maybe. Plum can be found on the Doctor Who Discord server. Any resemblances to [[most canon]] figures are purely incidental.

After graduating with a first in classics from Merton, **Shergar Sahcahgar** was investigated for academic fraud and bribery. She is currently working as one of the little people inside your telly

who make the pictures move. After being made an offer she couldn't refuse (a reduced Iceland curry) by a company she'd had zero prior contact with (EVER) she wrote some rubbish in an afternoon for... some noodle thing? Honestly she doesn't remember. Sounded crap.

Aristide Twain (*The Crew of the Copper-Colored Cupids*, *Faction Paradox*, *Anteur*) edited *The Book of the Snowstorm* in a month and *The Noodle Incident* in three days. Experts forecast that his next seasonal anthology for Arcbeatle Press will fracture the light-speed barrier and create an all-devouring singularity poised to engulf the entire space-time continuum into its merciless maw. Aristide hopes that the interior of the black hole will be warm and snug; maybe, then, he can get some rest.

James Wylder is the co-founder of Arcbeatle Press, a writer, and a resident of beautiful Elkhart Indiana, where they ate their first noodle. They are best-known for their work on *10,000 Damns*. They love animals, and their cat Zazzy is snoozing next to them as they write this.

Special thanks to **Hunter O'Connell** for kindly allowing us to fucking kill Cwej and to **Henry Walker** for kindly reviewing *Statues and Spaghetti*.