Curioddments

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With the help of the gods, humanity finally achieved the glorious future dreamed up in centuries past. Death had been conquered. Wars had ceased. Interspace travel was possible and the universe stretched endlessly before them.

Now they could start anew.

They could abandon the planet they associated with hardship and suffering and find a better place to live.

So they did.

The ships that left Earth were sleek and flawless. Luminous celestial material, gifted generously by the gods, seamlessly concealed their clumsy clutch of machinery. People celebrated the ships which rose swiftly into the air and winked out one by one like stars at dawn.

Occasionally, ships would return to convince whoever was left to leave with them. Most did, thanks in no small part to the long-held knowledge that the world would one day end.

The universe was splitting at the seams and the only escape was through a dimensional rift to a new universe. Escape was necessary.

Despite the coming annihilation, not everyone left. Some stayed.

We stayed.

Through city-sinking floods, destructive earthquakes, engulfing tsunamis, flash freezes, and, most devastatingly, people leaving again and again, we have decided to stay.

Because who else will sit with the flowers? Who else will accompany the insects? Who else will watch the seas rise and the lands fall? Who else will listen to the birds as they sing their last songs to our tiny planet?

i.

Rain battered the coast of Eurasia, a once-powerful continent which now lay in disarray as thunder and lightning clawed the wet dirt. The prowling storm picked through the steel and glass bones of abandoned cities, dragging flashfloods through its streets. Spindrift-laced gales knocked debris loose that landed in great thundering splashes into the water that flooded the city before drifting dreamily to the bottom. Trapped under the floodwaters, sunken road signs gazed peacefully at the chaos above, now concerned only by the traffic of fish and friends. A shadow passed overhead like a cloud but it was only the husk of a floating car.

In the 22nd century, car manufacturers raced to equip vehicles with multi-terrain capabilities to cope with the increasingly unpredictable climate, so that in a pinch, people could escape to sea. On the other hand, architects failed to outstrip the rising tide and cities without divine protection were pushed and prodded by the spiteful elements until they crumbled like sandcastles.

This car was floating through one such half-drowned city. It clipped the side of a listing building and paused, as one might when they bump into a person on the street, before sheepishly moving on. Normally, these cars could be steered, but this one had been gutted, its seats and wheels ripped out and discarded so that it was only a shell pushed forth by the winds and waters.

Sitting in the footwell of the car was a large medicine chest with leather straps which allowed it to be carried on the back. The top of the chest glimmered with the image of a phoenix soaring over the mountains to land on a crooked pine. The chest was open, revealing little drawers filled with the usual fare of powders and tinctures, balls of dried herbs, bark and bones; and some more unusual ones like glass marbles, circuit boards, bent coins and metal filings.

Arand carefully selected his ingredients. He was half-listening to the usual broadcast of the Final Speech, mouthing the words as he worked, “Whatever we thought we could save, whatever we managed to preserve, it is our greatest regret that, in the end, all we managed to save was ourselves,” when movement outside the window gave him pause.

He grabbed his staff, a heavy thing made of wood and topped with a metal finial looped through with rings that clinked as he raised it. Scanning the waters for hazards, he saw only the dark, jagged shapes of once-stately buildings jutting out of the water. After a moment, the boy put down his staff again.

“Must be my imagination,” he said. The chest seemed to relax, its drawers slipping open, as though sighing in relief.

The boy turned back to the chest, gathering the ingredients he had chosen and adding them to a mortar. There was a scroll laid out in front of him. It was a beautiful golden scroll with blocky characters stamped in black at the very end.

“Glass to see clearly, metal shavings to encourage scattering, tea for serenity,” Arand opened and closed the drawers and his mutterings grew increasingly frantic. “Tea, tea, tea, oh no.”

The car crested a wave and materials leapt out of their drawers, scattering like billiards. Arand grabbed the heavy mortar before he was thrown back and it dug painfully into his

sternum. When the car settled, he surveyed the mess. The larger items had bounced off the sides of the car, but smaller items like the marbles and coins had slipped into narrow crannies, barely out of reach.

He put the mortar back down and began gathering the materials, scooping them carefully up. He noticed the chest was rattling like a pot on the boil and placed a hand on it, stroking the smooth mother-of-pearl inlay with his fingers. “It’ll pass.” But the chest only rattled harder, the little metal handles on its drawers clattering away against the wood.

He sighed. “I know the spell needs tea. I know I should have been more prudent during my last visit but what can you do? He’s a god, you’ve got to keep him happy. He’s a god!” Arand repeated with emphasis.

Tea notwithstanding, the visit to the Fortune God had been delightful. He’d prepared many delicious snacks, burned sweet incense and regaled Arand with gripping tales and exploits. But the Fortune God had kept Arand longer than expected, appealing to him to stay for “just another cup of tea”. Before he knew it, he had spent a week there and had to beg off in light of the storm which had blown down the doors.

“In any case, he’s the reason we’re still on track to Sevens. We have to be grateful for his blessing.” Arand dropped his voice to mutter, “Or storms will be the least of our worries.”

The chest gave a long squeak that sounded a lot like a whining child.

“Didn’t I tell you? I want to grant that wish before sundown or there’s no way we’ll meet the next deity in time.” He looked into the distance, furrowing his brow. “Make that two wishes.”

The chest shook again, sounding like the beating of surprised wings. Then it clapped a drawer shut. Then another and another, in quick succession, until all its drawers were pointedly shut. It would turn around if it could and it rattled as though it could.

“Don’t sulk. Meeting with old gods is especially draining and I wanted to get some work done on the way, or the monsoon won’t ever end. And there’s nothing wrong with this car, I’ve made it waterproof.” When the chest didn’t respond, he said, “How about this, I’ll ask MW to give us a lift to Sevens. Alright? Will that help? We’ll do some shopping, get some tea, maybe new wood varnish...” Finally, the chest swelled in agreement. “Great, I’ll just pack up and call— Skies above!” Arand exclaimed.

They struck something hard. There was a prolonged metallic screech and then the car began to tip forward. Arand snatched up the mortar, cradling it to his chest as he scrambled back until his shoulders met the car boot. He splayed his legs as far as possible to spread his weight. The heavy pestle struck the chest and would have tipped it over if it wasn’t wedged firmly in the footwell.

Arand stayed perfectly still as the car slowly steadied itself. The chest gave off a long squeaking whine.

“Do not worry,” said the radio serenely. “Because aboard the ships, life continues.”