

IF
FOUND
RETURN
TO
HELL

EM X. LIU



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SOLARIS



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some small change for the better
in this world

First Court

THE DAMNED CONFERENCE room smells of chalk dust and cheap coffee—the conjured kind, not even brewed. Two months ago, you spent a week deliberating over replacing your closet full of out-of-style button-ups or getting a trendy but basic pair of spell-splash-proof oxfords that are basically the uniform around here. You picked the shoes, and today you don't actually regret this—it's kind of a statement, the cotton shirt sleeve worn and fraying but your matriculation cloak still slung halfway over your shoulders, as per regulation. It has little stars on it. It's made of fucking velvet, and it still reeks of the dusty storage closet the administration pulled it out of.

You find a seat right in the front, lording yourself over all the empty space it affords you. Your coffee's already getting cold, but there's no point in wasting a warming spell on the sludge. You don't know this yet, but today is when you meet Shine Ming Junlei for the first time—a name which means nothing to you right now, but will come to be as familiar a fixture in your life as your ma is and your ba was, and as your limited roster of friends are.

But, of course, that doesn't change anything about right now: you, gnawing on a hangnail, at the top of today's two-hour-long mandatory training session. A handful of these per year sounds laughably meagre on paper in terms of internship requirements, but in practice? Unbearable. Excruciating. You haven't the words for how much of a waste of time this is, but at least it means you get the half-day off from call centre duty for once.

The speaker stands up there, watching the slow trickle of people with growing trepidation on her face, and no one takes enough pity on her to shuffle up a few seats. The people supposedly in charge of this thing aren't much better, a small panel of serious looking Archmages chattering lightly amongst themselves. None of them are wearing the cloak, though one fellow on the far right is wearing a full wide-brimmed cap, the silk charmed with something that makes it glisten like an oil spill. Ostentatious, these sorts of events, but you suppose

once (if) you make it through the whole grueling process, you'll flaunt it too.

Feedback squeals through the room like an improperly handled ritual rabbit. You wince and try to put the useless thick velvet to some sort of use muffling the sound.

"Sorry, sorry, so terribly sorry," the speaker stutters, fumbling with the microphone. It only gets louder. After a moment, she huffs and disconnects the mic entirely, casting a furtive look towards the panel before shrugging and swiping a quick amplification spell towards her own throat.

When next she speaks, her voice unfortunately rings out loud and clear. "Good morning, everyone!" she chirps, too bright.

A few people mumble their greetings back. You briefly think of flinging your stupid velvet cloak the rest of the way over your head.

"Over the next couple of hours, I'm going to be speaking to you about responsible spellwork." *Hours*, she says. She claps her hands together. You wish desperately to know what kind of stimulant she's on—magical, or plain old chemicals? "Now as you all know, we value optimizing resource allocation here at One Wizard, and in the wizarding community as a whole. This educational seminar is meant to give you all a sort of framework for casting wisely when dealing with clients' needs, so no spell goes wasted, and *all* our customers can be satisfied. As you all know, One Wizard is one of the *finest* providers of wizarding care. We offer services from simple spells to curse-breaking, and it is therefore our duty to ensure we act responsibly, in order to have capacity for every single request!"

Your glasses are digging into the bridge of your nose. The frames are charmed with an illusory effect, so your eyes look big and wide blinking behind the lens even if you're dozing off behind them. A trick an ex taught you back in the halcyon days of undergraduate, which has served you well since then, even if it only really works on people looking at you head-on. And if you don't physically nod off, which admittedly has happened a non-zero number of times. Never yet in this internship, though, which might have made you a little reckless.

It's not quite to the point where you might want to snatch a quick nap between speeches, but it's close.

Right when you're weighing the chances of being told off if you get up for another cup of caffeine sludge, the double doors at the back of the room open.

Half the class turns to look. The speaker's eyes flicker, but she's in the middle of loudly proclaiming her lack of bias and barely gives a second glance to the disruption swanning into the conference room.

You don't look. You really don't have to. You know exactly who it is.

Nathaniel Feng strides all the way up to the front, plops down in the seat right next to you, and somehow manages to cross her legs so that her knobby knees are poking into you. She hands you a cup of coffee.

"We're not being assessed today, are we?" is the first thing she murmurs to you, her smoker's voice rough at the edges.

You snort. "Do you really think I know that?"

Nathaniel laughs a smidge too loudly. "Touché."

Here's everything to know about Nathaniel Feng: Her stupid cloak is cropped, a half-cape sort of thing that only goes down to her elbows, which feels unfair, since you didn't know that was an option. She's wearing it properly. She even makes the little stars look kind of good—they match the silvered buckles on her loafers. She's not wearing socks. She makes it incredibly obvious that you're having a conversation heedless of who notices when she leans over to ask, "Haven't we learned this all before?"

"*Shhhh*," you hiss. You can be insufferably obedient sometimes.

"Are you actually paying attention?"

"No?"

"Do you think we should be?" Nathaniel muses.

"Will you be *quiet* before we get written up?"

Nathaniel looks amused, but that's a perpetual state of being for her. But she complies. Also typical of her, you'll grant. She settles back into her little plastic chair, her long limbs folded up at jagged angles within it. Amidst all the temp staff (not you, mercifully) and summer students (not you any *more*, fucking blissfully) and worn down interns (alas, this *is* you now), Nathaniel actually looks the part. That is, magical. Uncanny. Auspicious. Her eyes shadowed and

brows heavy, her fingers clever, a heavy silver ring twisted on her thumb. A goddamn wizard.

The rest of you just look tired.

“All right!” the speaker finally exclaims, loud enough to puncture the general haze of apathy. “Now that we’ve gone over some basics, I want you all to turn to someone sitting close to you, and we’re going to do a group exercise!”

The groaning is audible.

Someone raises a hand. The speaker looks delighted when she points to him. “What are we supposed to be discussing?” he asks, in that trembling sort of voice that tells you he’s a little baby trainee, nervous enough to jump the gun.

The speaker’s smile doesn’t budge an inch, like she’s taken the corners of her mouth and pinned them to her face like that. “I’m getting to that!” she announces. “I’d like you to consider amongst yourselves, what the phrase *resource allocation* means to *you*. I’m going to give you ten minutes to talk it out, and remember, be ready to share with the group when we reconvene!”

Nathaniel drapes a hand over the back of your chair. “This crowd’s hard to please,” she says.

“Uh-huh,” you say, only half paying attention while twisted around in your seat, scanning the room for what everyone else is doing.

“Hey,” Nathaniel says, rapping her knuckles on the flat plastic. “You’re not looking for a different partner, are you?”

“No,” you say again, sinking back into your physical body. You draw a leg up under one thigh, pressing a thumb down on your ankle bone and hunching over. “Just seeing if people are actually doing it. Shit, look at those keeners in the back, there. I think they’re making a flowchart. Think they’re gunning for an apprenticeship in Fortunes or something?”

Nathaniel scoffs. She nudges your shoulder blade with the tip of one finger. “You’re one to talk. Didn’t you say you might want to go for symbology literally last week? They take like three people a year, you know.”

You pause, take a sip of your coffee, which at this juncture is starting to actually taste kind of good. You gulp the whole thing down

in two more swallows, then squint at Nathaniel. “We’re going to pretend you didn’t just call me a gunner,” you say. “Okay?”

“Okay,” Nathaniel agrees.

“Okay,” you confirm, then try out that chipper smile on your own face. “So, what does resource allocation mean to you, Journeyman Feng?” Your muscles slide into position for the expression too easily, which is a depressing thing to learn about yourself. Too used to this, even if you’re behind a phone most days. It’s just easier to sound happy when you look happy, and, well, fuck—that’s certainly the worst thought you’ve had all day. It’s not even ten o’clock.

Nathaniel shrugs. “Not being here, probably.”

You snort.

“I’m just saying,” Nathaniel says. She spreads her hands, tipping her head back. “I was doing fine on my own, you know.”

“Uh huh,” you cut in to head off her usual rant, “and then the evil regulatory boards decided that everyone needed a license to be selling magic, and now you’re stuck here with the rest of us peons who don’t even know how to calculate fortunes, much less deliver any sort of proper magical assistance.”

“Precisely,” Nathaniel says.

You sigh. Even if it’s not untrue. You’ve known Nathaniel long enough—since she barged in and stole the sole window-slash-corner station in the office right from under your nose during orientation—to know that she’s not antagonistic by nature. She’s a non-traditionalist. She *was* doing well on her own as an established parlour-wizard—practicing local, giving babies lucky names, working domestic spells for dying businesses that could pay for themselves in reduced bills in two weeks. She could run circles around the rest of you all if she wanted. The point is, she’s willful on *purpose*. She smokes in the building and puts her feet up in the cafeteria and steals everyone’s pens because she’s decided the entire institution that One Wizard represents is a sham, which, well.

As a purported one-shop-stop for all your magical assistance needs, the wait times are atrocious, and the fees on top of everything can be exorbitant if your case isn’t covered by magicare insurance. And good luck getting in at all, if your case is non-urgent.

All in all, Nathaniel Feng does not need to be here, and she'll make sure everyone in earshot knows it.

You, on the other hand. Well!

At the time, all you want is to get through this—the stupid conference, your internship. It's hard to have insight, when you're within something. Harder still to know what you'd even do differently, if you could.

The speaker's long since started her presentation back up, probably noticing the complete and utter lack of engagement in the crowd. Luckily (maybe?), she's realized the morning crowd is not going to be receptive to 'interactive exercises' or 'group activities to improve long-term retention,' so the plan for the rest of the presentation seems to be mostly half reading off her slides. She flings her hand behind her way too enthusiastically when flipping to each aesthetically unappealing block of text. The company logo stamped in the corner, placed slightly askew and drop-shadowed against an eyesore shade of blue. Her voice somehow manages to be too cheerful and too monotonous all at once—Here at One Wizard, it is the responsibility of each individual team player to uphold our values! Think about customer interactions like drawing magic circles; once you mark down a line, you're *committing to it*. Anything you say to your client is the same! Make sure you never offer up any spell that is beyond our capabilities or budget! *Think* before you reach for that pot of ink...

This is when you fall soundly asleep.

You wake up to Nathaniel's blurry face, your glasses snatched off your face and in her hands.

"These things are useful," she says, spinning them around. "Could've fooled me."

"Shit," you say. "What time is it?"

"Time to get back to work!"

The grogginess is already mostly gone, but there's still lethargy pooling in your limbs, a slow drip into your muscles. Everything's a smear of colour. The chair is a wedge, digging into the back of your skull. Without all the bodies crowded in the seats, it's getting cold. Somewhere, distantly, it feels like the sound of all the idle work in the

whole company building is pressing down on your shoulders. You can barely move, like you're trapped in a binding spell. You usually pride yourself on your ability to snap in and out of sleep, but the end of the workshop had come and gone.

Nathaniel hands you your glasses.

"Thanks," you mumble.

"You owe me one," she says, then lifts herself out of the plastic chair in one swift move. "I bet all the good lunch is gone," she muses.

"There's never any good lunch," you say.

Nathaniel shrugs. "I liked the gulao chicken last week."

"It was *soggy*," you mutter.

The two of you mill out of the room, grabbing shares of what turns out to be cold falafel wraps (again) before heading upstairs, and you think, dear lord when will this be over when will I be free of this hell is this job what I actually want to do no one told me what it would be like when will I get to help people like I thought I was signing up for instead of being yelled at all day is this what the rest of my life is going to look like I don't want that I don't want this I

Second Court

- Welcome to One Wizard, where we connect you to the best mages offering expert magical assistance in your region! I will be the Journeyman technician guiding you to your unique personal solution today! How may I help you?
- ...Hi, yes. Hello. Uhm. Hi. Can you hear me?
- Loud and clear, sir.
- Okay. So... what exactly do I need to do here? Is there a form I should be signing, or a code I should have or...?
- Do you have an issue with an outstanding piece of spellwork purchased through our company?
- No.
- Okay, then do you have a situation you wish to receive assistance for?
- Sort of. I... Uh, yeah. I guess so.
- Okay! If you wouldn't mind, sir, you can let me know your situation and what kind of assistance you're in need of today, and I'll do my best to connect you to someone who can take care of that, does that sound good? We offer everything from custom stitched spells to prescription summoning circles and more!
- Connect me to someone? Aren't I speaking to someone right now?
- Yes, of course, sir. I'm your technician, it's my job to link you up with either one of our Adepts or, on a higher package plan, one of our expert Archmages.
- So you're not qualified to help me.
- Well... Certainly, I wouldn't be comfortable giving you magical advice myself, as I am employed as a Journeyman. But I am more than qualified to provide preliminary opinions and ensure that your case is funneled to the appropriate supervising wizards should the need arise!
- I thought I was calling for expert advice! That's what your website said.

- Once again, I can connect you with any one of our on-call experts as required. I just need a few details from you first, so I can send it to the appropriate department, if you don't mi—
- If I don't mind? Of *course* I mind! I'm not going to give my information to some intern who doesn't know what they're doing!
- Rest assured, sir, the information will get passed on!
- That's sensitive information!
- Okay, well. You certainly don't have to divulge anything you're not comfortable with.
- You know what? Forget it. Never mind! I don't need your help! I'm going to The Sourcery.
- Sir—!
- [DIAL TONE]

- Welcome to One Wizard, where we connect you to the best mages offering expert magical assistance in your region! This is your technician speaking, how may I help you?
- Hi, is this the number to call if we have a manufacturing issue with a pre-loaded wand?
- Is it from one of the standard sets we offer?
- Yes, I believe so.
- Oh, you'd be looking for product management, then! No worries, I can redirect you.
- All right, that would be great, thanks!
- Okay, one second... If you could tell them I'm the one who passed you on, my name is—
- [DIAL TONE]

- Welcome to One Wizard, where we connect you to the best mages offering expert magical assistance in your region! This is your technician speaking, how may I help you?
- Hi there, my brother has unfortunately turned into a duck. Who am I supposed to speak to about this?
- Oh, well, that's certainly the kind of situation we could help you out with! I'm just going to need a few more details from you

- before we can proceed. Could you tell me what the two of you were doing when this incident occurred?
- Oh... I...
 - Ma'am? Ma'am, are you still there?
 - ...Do I *have* to?
 - It would be helpful for the triaging process if you could provide more information, yes, but certainly if you're uncomfortable with disclosure, we can move on and dispatch a spellcaster to your location for better management.
 - No, I—Fuck!
 - Ma'am!
 - [RUSTLING]
 - ...Ma'am?
 - First of all, I am a platypus.
 - Oh, shi*—Sorry. My sincerest apologies for the oversight! Uhm, okay, can the both of you hear me right now?
 - That won't be necessary, thank you. My sister is clearly inept and can't contribute much to the conversation anyway. My name is Lionel Ximen Tao, and I've been transformed into this *creature* against my will. I was walking home from the bank one day, and right as I pass by this horrendous new construction site next to the old temple district I see a green flash out of the corner of my eye and now I'm trapped as *this!* Luckily, my clothes were still intact, and humiliating as it was, I managed to extract a transportation key from my wallet and make it home somewhat intact, but my sister was too much of an imbecile to recognize an animorphus spell when she sees one, or know how to reverse the effects, and so now we're reduced to seeking help from the public registry.
 - [Background] *Lionel!* This is humiliating, you are an *animal*, how am I supposed to know how to fix this?
 - Thank you for sharing that story with us, sir; that sounds like it was a harrowing experience.
 - Yes, indeed, it was. I require *immediate* assistance. In fact, to be frank, I find it rather odd that whatever's going on at that site hasn't already been investigated by your organization.

- I'll certainly pass the information on to some of our engineers. For now, I can connect you to our top expert in transmutation cases, Archmage Kwon, how does that sound?
- Oh, is that the same Kwon that worked for city council last year? I'd heard he left to start his own practice!
- Archmage Kwon works with us on a consult basis, sir.
- That's perfect! Good man, Kwon. I know him well. All right, you can do that for me, then, that'll be acceptable. But make sure whatever nonsense is going on in the streets is set right! I swear, anyone is allowed to practice in the open these days, it's completely ridiculous.
- I will, sir. I'll patch you through now. Have a great day!
- [DIAL TONE]

- Welcome to One Wizard, where we connect you to the best mages offering expert magical assistance in your region! This is your technician speaking, how may I help you?
- Oh, thank fuck.
- Is there a situation you require assistance with, sir?
- Yes. Yes, please, how quickly can someone come over?
- I'm going to need some more detail from you, sir, but if you wish to contract us for a home visit, that can certainly be arranged.
- I just need someone to come here. Now. Please. I'm...
- Hello?
- Sorry, I'm feeling a bit faint. What do you need to know?
- What's your situation, sir?
- I just woke up.
- Pardon?
- I-I don't know! I got home from school and then everything was fine and now I'm—My room's a mess and I just—I don't know what's going on. Please.
- Are you saying your room has changed?
- Yes, there's a big... It looks like some weird design... Everything's in red. Shit. What the hell. My mom's gonna kill me.
- Do you recognize any of the designs?
- I think it might be a talisman, but I don't know...

- What do the designs look like?
- I don't. I can't. Shit. [Under his breath] *Shit*.
- Sir, are you okay?
- ...
- Sir?
- I gotta go. I can't do this. Hell, it's all over *me*, I—
- [DIAL TONE]

THE HEADSET HAS left imprints on your ears. You unhook it, grimacing, then reach back and massage the back of your neck to get rid of the tension. Beside you, Nathaniel is cajoling some crying customer on the line. She wrinkles her nose, one hand propping her chin up as she murmurs soothingly into her own headset. Nathaniel never meets her quota because she spends too much time speaking to people, and half the time her clients walk away with all her advice given freely and no contract signed with the company. She gives you a look now when you push back from your desk, notepad hanging loosely in your hand.

Going out? she mouths at you, then makes a loud 'Mmmm-hm, yeah' to the phone.

"This case might need a survey," you say, gesturing to your notepad.

Nathaniel's eyebrows come up. She gives you a thumbs-up, then returns to her conversation, which isn't exactly reassuring, but probably she's only busy.

You make the trudge all the way through the awful open plan office, the chimes of *Welcome to One Wizard! Welcome to One Wizard! Welcome to One Wizard!* all overlapping with each other until it all melds into a chorus clogging up your brain. What a nightmare. You massage your wrist gently, feeling the strain from sitting hunched over at a desk, looking names up from a directory all day. Your supervisor sits behind a frosted glass door, the walls spelled to be soundproof. You knock. The door flies open.

Supervisor Ma is a severe-looking woman, her hair cropped close and dressed too sharply for this floor, honestly. Her sleeves billow.

She has these half-moon glasses that she peers over at you when you ease into the room.

The door shuts behind your back with a crook of her fingers, nails gleaming pink. “Ah,” she says blandly. “It’s you.”

“You sound so amused about it, supervisor,” you say with a short bow.

“What is it this time?” she asks, half an eye already back on her work. “Do make it quick.”

“We have a request to survey a talisman,” you say.

She frowns. “Who called in?”

“A”—you look at the notepad—“Shine Meng Junlei. Claims loss of consciousness, autonomous talisman appearing in his room. The call cut out before I could collect any more information from him.”

At that, Supervisor Ma pauses. She looks at you over the top of her lens. “And you thought that warranted a house call?”

Damn. You grit your teeth, the paper of your notepad crinkling underneath your nails. “He seemed distressed. I think an assessment would help, yes. Especially given the lack of context we have; we don’t know if this is something more insidious.”

Supervisor Ma audibly snorts, which, oddly, does a lot to help you relax. She’s not exactly easy to please, but you find her bluntness more refreshing than anything else in this department. At least her scorn is out in the open.

As it is, you’ve probably fucked it up. You’re halfway to backing out the door again, wondering how you’re going to tell the poor kid he’s probably getting booted to some other expert who will probably be as dismissive as this when Supervisor Ma speaks up: “Well?”

You blink. “Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going to take care of it?”

“Wait. What?”

“I don’t want to waste any of my Adepts’ time on a house call because some boy is seeing things,” Supervisor Ma says. “However, you made a client a promise. So someone’s going to have to visit him and make sure he’s not going to complain again in a panic.” She clicks her mouse decisively, then settles her arms on the desk. “Am I making myself clear?”

“Are you serious?” you manage to get out.

“Take a partner and go. And remember, you’re certainly not going to be paid overtime for this.”

You duck your head in another quick bow, stumbling over another *yes* and *thank you* as you back away from the door. Supervisor Ma, thankfully, doesn’t look at you any more. If she smiled at you, you think you’d combust. She disappears back behind her inscrutable office as you find yourself back in the cacophony of a thousand complaints, quelled by a thousand put-upon voices. You grin so wide your face hurts. Maybe that’s the difference between only *looking* happy and smiling for real—you feel this one, the stretch in your cheeks, the eagerness that pulls at your muscles so you’re still grinning when you slide up behind Nathaniel.

She’s just finishing up her latest. Perfect.

“What’s up—Whoa.” Nathaniel crosses her arms. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Pull that face. It’s weird.”

“You’re a fucking asshole,” you say.

Nathaniel tips her head. “You’re going to ask me something.”

“No, I’m here to scope this place out, I’m trying to figure out how to steal it back from you,” you say. “Get up, get up. We’re getting out of here.”

Nathaniel pauses. “We’re what?”

“Ma thought the survey was a dumb idea,” you start, and Nathaniel settles back like she’s waiting for you to get to the good part. “But I told the kid someone was coming, so she says I have to do it.”

“Damn,” says Nathaniel. “Am I your partner for this?”

“Get your *stuff*.”

“Shit,” she says, looking around the office space like she’s only just now noticed the ugly fluorescent lighting, the way it kind of smells like cooked fish still from when Eric didn’t clean up the microwave from lunch. “You should’ve started with that.”

SHINE MENG JUNLEI lives above a tiny little restaurant, family-run from what it looks like. He’s written *Come upstairs!* in the special

instructions box. A peeling sign reads *Northern Delicacies* in bright red font. A sign that says TAKEOUT is taped to the dusty window.

You peer in. "Cute."

"I bet his parents run this place," Nathaniel says. She shrugs her cloak back and strides forward. A little bell chimes as she pushes in, and you trail behind, shoes scuffing on the white tiled floor.

Inside looks as cramped as outside. The food is easily recognizable to you, noodles and dumplings and rice dishes, all the menu information printed atop a banner that's yellowing at the edges, lamination bubbling in the middle. Reminds you too much of home, of cooking you haven't had in months. You hate eating at places like this, for all the dirt speckled on all the windows, for the mismatched furniture and utensils, for all the things familiar and therefore tinged with a shame that you haven't managed to shake. Your skin crawls, but when you see the bowl of candy resting at the front counter, an inexplicable need to take a piece rises up in your chest. You can still imagine the burst of flavour on your tongue: fruity, a little stale, a little too much like plastic, but bursting sweet.

As you and Nathaniel linger, rapid footsteps sound from the back.

"Aiyah, sorry, sorry," a woman calls out, wiping her still flour-dusted hands on her apron. She beams. "Are you two from the wizard place?"

Nathaniel graciously lets you take the lead. You give her a nod. "We're Journeymen from One Wizard, yes. We're here for Meng-xiansheng?"

"My son," the woman confirms. Nathaniel pokes you in the side as if you hadn't cottoned on that she was right.

"Yes," you say. "If you don't mind taking us to him..."

Shine's mother waves you to a short hallway on the side, which ends in a narrow staircase leading up. Beside you, Nathaniel makes a face.

"Go on ahead," the woman says, practically shoving you and Nathaniel forward. But, strangely, before you can even lift a foot to the first step, her grip tightens a bit on the stupid cloak you forgot to leave behind at the office.

You hang back. "Is there something wrong?"

“No, no,” Shine’s mother says. She lets go, jumping a little like she hadn’t realized she was still holding on. “Thank you for doing this,” she says.

Too sincere for your liking. You don’t have to look at her to see the cracks in her skin, from where the flour cakes and dries out her hands. The fretting worn into her face. How often does Shine ask her for help?

You give her another short bow, avoiding her eyes as you turn and follow Nathaniel up the stairs.

If someone asked you a year ago, after you’d been working for a week, what the hardest part of this job might’ve been, you maybe would’ve dug up something about the tedium, the shitty hours, how your body protests being squished in an uncomfortable chair for most of the day, the part where random people take their anger out on you because you’re just a faceless voice over the phone and therefore an easy target. And all that *does* suck—if someone asked you that same question now, on the record, you’d probably pick one of those to answer.

What you’d *want* to say is that it’s hard to sit by and feel like you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing, to be totally unable to offer up even your meagre help when the rare distress call comes in and you’re floundering on the line. The problem with you is that somewhere deep down inside, you still kind of believe that magic is supposed to be a miracle.

You wish you didn’t.

But just—What if? Someone waves a wand and every person calling in gets their day fixed. What if it were that easy?

Thing is, it’s not as hard any more, because you made it that way. Things bounce off your well cultivated shell of apathy. Constant misery makes a great shield for the little acute pinpoints of hurt, melts it all like milk foam in those fancy little drinks you treat yourself to on rare days.

Truth is, there’s nothing you hate more than sincerity.

The air outside was decent, and the stretch in your limbs is absolutely glorious. But you’re already regretting taking this job when Nathaniel knocks on Shine’s door.

THE FIRST THING you hear is Nathaniel's low whistle.

The second thing you hear is your own voice saying, "What the fuck."

"Uhm," says the person you presume is Shine Meng Junlei, the guy who hired you, "hi?"

"Hi," you say. "Sorry about that."

"No, no," Shine says miserably. "It's really something, isn't it?" He sits slumped on his bed, his knees knocking together and his hands between his thighs. Carefully not touching anything, probably because his hands look like they've been dipped in a bucket of red paint. You sniff, and smell the freshness of ink, barely dried. It isn't really a question of what's happened—you follow the trail of bright red from his hands, to the creaky floor, dotted across the room, all the way to the, well, *mural* that's painted in haphazard strokes over the entirety of one of the walls. All of Shine's furniture is knocked aside. He makes a little sighing sound, like he's just looked over the whole thing again and has come to a dissatisfying conclusion about how his room came to be in such a state all over again.

"You say you don't remember this?" Nathaniel asks, her eyes bright. "Also, I hope you don't mind if I stay near the doorway. Don't want to... get contaminated."

Shine's eyes bug. "Contaminated?" He leaps off his bed as if he can somehow avoid the liquid, despite being literally covered in it. A crimson streak over his bedsheets is revealed as he darts away from the dripping evidence.

"Don't mind her," you say. "She's just vain."

Nathaniel shrugs, but doesn't deny the accusation.

"I don't remember *any* of it," Shine says, waving his hands around. He waves at the rushed streaks, his face pale. "Well. I don't remember that part," he says, indicating the talisman scrawled on the wall. "I don't even know what that means. What *does* it mean? Did I accidentally curse my own house? The rest of it, the mess in here, I don't know, I was freaked out, I was trying to work out what happened. That was me, I guess." He grows distressed as he speaks, hands coming up to tangle in his hair. He holds the position for two seconds before jerking back, realizing he's just smeared red all over

his forehead and hair, which is unfortunately a light enough chestnut for the dye to really show.

“Wait,” you say, nudging at a broken chair leg with your toe, “are you saying *you* did this?”

Shine nods, miserable. “I threw it,” he mumbles.

You look at him in a new light. He doesn’t look like he has enough meat on his bones to even lift up a chair like that, but you suppose fear and panic do things to people. His face is twisted in a sheepish grimace, now. You wonder if he recognizes himself in that mess. You certainly can’t see the line of reasoning between this demeanour and the violence written in the scattered furniture.

“Doesn’t look like anything I recognize,” Nathaniel mutters, chin pointing towards the talisman. Shine pales further, contrasting sharply with the red.

You shoot her a look, then step forward to examine the wall yourself.

Up closer, it looks more sophisticated. You aren’t an expert in talisman readings, so it’s unsurprising that you can’t parse it. A few strokes start out familiar, but overlap with others, quickly become unintelligible when you try and follow them through. What’s more concerning is that Nathaniel—who is admittedly excellent at more traditional practices—doesn’t know either. She sounds flippant, but Nathaniel always does. Maybe Shine is right to be a little panicked. You cast a few minor enchantments to check for any sort of spell residue, but the most powerful thing in the room right now is a bedside sun orb. Nothing else of note.

“So?” Shine asks, suddenly intense. At your slightly bewildered look, he winces at himself and falls silent.

“I don’t know either,” you admit.

With an audible wail, Shine plops down to the ground. Having seemingly given up on keeping himself clean, he buries his face in his hands and visibly deflates. “What am I supposed to do now?” he asks, his voice muffled. “I thought you were going to come over and fix everything.”

“Hey,” you say, crouching. “Uhm, it’s okay.” What are you supposed to do with your hands? Pat him on the back? There’s a glob of red

clinging to his creamy sweater. Awkwardly, you reach around and pat him on the only available part of him that won't require an additional trip to the laundry room today.

Shine whimpers. *Fuck*, some gut-deep part of you thinks, *he's a cute kid*.

"Don't worry," you say. "This sort of stuff happens all the time."

He peeks out of his hands. Looks fucking ghastly, ringed by crimson. It's a strange contrast, this frail-looking adolescent, probably university age at most, crouched in the middle of his mess of a bedroom surrounded by something that looks too close to carnage for your resting heart rate. Responsible for the broken mess, but as ignorant about the red as the rest of you.

"We're going to call headquarters again," you say slowly, "and we'll get in contact with someone who can come and check this out for you. So what we're going to do now is take some documentation of the incident so we can start fixing things, okay?"

"Most talismans lose effect as soon as they're eliminated," Nathaniel speaks out, ever helpful. Her voice has reverted to that low, soothing tone she uses on clients in active distress, gravelly and firm. "And this is tentative, but I don't see any tangible damage right now. So whatever is up, we can probably reverse it pretty easily."

Shine's gripping his knees now instead of his face. His eyes are huge, blinking up at you both as he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip, looking like a... junior murderer that messed up on his first job or something. The red is really starting to get disconcerting.

"Why don't you take a shower?" you blurt. "And then Nathaniel and I can log the room."

Shine blinks. He rubs at his face, which only makes the whole situation worse. "I..." he starts, and, so heaven help you, if he starts to cry, you are never taking another job like this again, even if it means you'll rot in your little desk chair forever.

"It might help you relax," Nathaniel says. Maybe this is what being a real wizard takes: *people skills*. Because as soon as she steps forward—still carefully within her own established circle of cleanliness—and leans in to meet Shine's eyes, the boy wilts further, then nods. "Good," Nathaniel says with a winning smile. "We'll have more

information for you when you come back, okay? Is there anything you don't want us to touch?"

Halfway through picking himself off the ground, Shine waves his hand vaguely.

Once he's gone, Nathaniel's face immediately twists into concern. "This isn't good," she says.

"What? Seriously?"

"I don't really recognize that thing," she says, gesturing, "but see that?"

"I can't tell what you're pointing to."

"*There*, bottom right."

You squint, approach the talisman because your shoes are, thankfully, going to save you from most of the splash damage. "Here?"

"What's that look like to you?" Nathaniel asks.

You tilt your head. The lines look like squiggles, but they do have a sort of general shape. Still, it gives you a headache trying to figure out. You back up a bit, looking this way and the next, trying to find it when—"Oof."

Nathaniel catches you by the upper arms. "See it?" she asks, her voice very close to your ear.

"It looks like... dirt?" At least that's what the lines suggest to you.

"Look closer," Nathaniel says. She reaches around, grabs onto your chin with her slender fingers, confidently, like she knows you'll let her. You do. She tips your head up so you're looking down your nose. You go a little cross-eyed, trying to keep focus on the right corner of the talisman, and—Oh. *Oh*.

"Ah, fuck," you say. "Does that seriously say *diyu*? Are we going to have to liaise with those assholes in Hell for this case?" You flail your hands towards the ground.

"Mmmmm-hm."

"Fuck. I hate working with those finicky bastards," you mutter. "All I wanted to do was get out of work for a few hours today."

"And now," Nathaniel says, dropping your face and clasping her hands together, dramatic asshole, "we have to deal with *bureaucracy* from *Hell*. How exciting."

Third Court

THE TWO OF you have nearly finished cataloguing the room when Shine emerges from his washroom, hair and face toweled so he doesn't look nearly as macabre. He's in another creamy white sweater that doesn't quite seem like the best choice for stepping back into the room, but that's his loss, you suppose. This one's a turtleneck. Freshened up like this, his hair damp and fringe falling into his eyes, there's a certain incongruity to him: unblemished and expensive, smelling faintly of some sort of lavender body wash, ready to meet you back in this cramped and creaky room, the roof sloping awkwardly and the sound of a bustling kitchen under your feet. He smiles, rubbing the back of his head. "Better?"

"Oh, absolutely," Nathaniel says. She snaps one last photo of the talisman, then pulls out a small, glass orb.

"Oh, shit," you say. "Where did you get that?"

"I have my ways."

"You're not supposed to," you say flatly.

"I want to get this recorded," she says, uncharacteristically serious, dismissing your concern entirely. Which, fine. It's useful. You can give her that. With a whispered incantation, the enchanted bead hovers over her palm, bobbing up and down in the air until it sits in the middle of the room.

Shine lets out a gasp as it starts to scan the talisman. "Are you purifying it?" he asks.

Nathaniel barks a laugh. "If only it were that easy, honey," she says.

"We're recording the state of the room," you say, as the bead continues to rotate. "It's easier than trying to get pictures. Also, takes down any lingering magical residue and the resonance of any spells."

"Oh," Shine says. "So you can't fix this today?"

"Sorry," you say. "We're going to have to take this to upper management."

Shine's eyes are watery again. He looks younger and older both, somehow, his lanky frame filling up more of the room, but the lost expression clearer and more forlorn. "I just... Nothing's ever gone wrong. It's been so hard." His hands fist in the overlarge sleeves of his sweater. "I've been trying so hard to stay out of trouble, and I..."

What the hell are you supposed to do with that? "What do you do?" you ask, leaning in like all the customer management courses have taught you to. You meet his eyes, three seconds, optimal timing for reassurance.

"I'm a divinations engineering student," he says, and he sounds so fucking dejected about it. It makes you want to buy him a strong drink. "I just don't want my mom to worry. She has enough to be worrying about right now."

"Living here to save some cash?" you ask, with a wry hook to your mouth.

"Hah," Shine says. "Something like that, yeah." He shrugs. "I could probably leave, but I don't want to leave her alone. I just... I want to afford a better place for us both. I don't... I don't want any of this. I can't study if I'm paranoid about blacking out and ruining everything again. I have midterms."

You put a hand on his arm before he can work himself up into another frenzy. Seems to be his style. Shine halts immediately, shrinking back from the contact.

That's good. You don't particularly like to touch people if you can help it anyway. "Don't worry about it too much," you find yourself saying. "I'll take care of it."

Should've thought it through. You fucking idiot. Last thing you do in this line of work is make promises.

"I'M KEEPING THE record," is the first thing Nathaniel says when you step back into the too-clean lobby of One Wizard. Compared to the clutter of Shine's place and the streets outside, it's practically barren in here.

"Yeah," you say. "Of course. You can go. I'll write up the report with the pictures."

Normally, Nathaniel is eager to get out of her hourly obligation in this hellhole. She has clients to see scattered across half the city,

people she's kept up contact with even though it's not technically allowed. But today, she hesitates. "You sure?"

"Are you that worried about this one?"

Nathaniel's grin is like a band-aid, stiffer than it should be for her, not exactly a reassurance. "You're the one working overtime."

"I want to see if I can get it in the queue," you grumble defensively. "It'll make things go faster tomorrow if I don't have to sit there trying to remember details."

"All right," she says, and smirks. "You *do* still hate it here, right?"

You do. You do. You flip her the finger and make your way back inside anyway, cocooning yourself in the dusty tomb of scuffed linoleum and dried ginger shavings left in the staff room, serenaded by the ever-beeping line of calls.

You take over Nathaniel's cubby to work. The view is nice, the whole of the downtown metropolis outside of One Wizard splayed out underneath you. It's late enough that the sun casts low beams over your face, shining too brightly in your eyes at times. It's setting. That's a depressing thought. You scribble down field notes and your impression of the talisman, loading your photo into the database as you fill in Shine's case for whoever comes after you to look at, but the words start to blur together, your head falling as you try and blink sleepiness out of your eyes. There's nothing special about the case put down on paper—student aged individual, no clear cause of supernatural happenstances, talisman of unknown origin. What's the best-case scenario for this? Someone takes the case out of your hands. Someone who has more years of wizarding under their belt, who has gone through this grueling gauntlet already, who has learned how to take the most urgent cases first and prioritize, who can probably sum this all up in a proper narrative. You may never see any of this again. That's what you want, right? You click *save*, send it off. Goodbye little report, you did your best. Line up and wait your turn to be addressed.

You did your best.

"It's IN THE queue," Supervisor Ma tells you when you knock on her door the next day.

You frown. Slump down in the chair across from her. “How did you know what I wanted to ask about?”

“You never work overtime,” she says. “Besides, I wanted to see what was so unusual that you’d go out in the field for it.”

“I would go out in the field if a little girl accidentally summoned a harmless *teddy bear* and someone wanted me to,” you mutter.

Supervisor Ma actually chuckles at that. Dry, but you’re pretty sure she wasn’t just clearing her throat. Still, the look she gives you is slightly pitying. “It’s going to take some time, you know.”

You start. “But—”

“I know,” Supervisor Ma says. “Talisman of unknown origin! Very exciting. I’m sure you want to see the resolution, and I can try to arrange for whoever is eventually assigned to it to bring you along. I have to admit, I admire your initiative in this case, Journeyman.”

“But...” you say. “Wouldn’t we want to see what’s the issue right away? Isn’t that safer?”

“The talisman didn’t have any of the markers for any of the four omens that require immediate attention. And your client chose the regular track when calling in. Unless he wants to pay for his case to be expedited—which you’re free to give him the option for—I’m afraid our Sigils department won’t get a look at it for at least two weeks.”

Your tongue dries up in your mouth. Here’s the thing. This sort of thing is what happens. The system is overstretched. There aren’t even enough Journeymen for every problem that needs solving, let alone Archmages who specialize enough in one area to really make a difference in the harder cases. You know this. You have known all this since you were old enough to want to learn wizardry. You have known this more than most at this job: the number of phone calls you’ve taken where bad news is the only thing you can share is too many to count.

But somewhere along the line here, you’d forgotten.

The truth is like a wave of water, slapped in your face. It leaves you numb and shivering, but oddly wide awake. You feel like you were in a dream and have just woken up.

“You seem a little disappointed,” Supervisor Ma says.

“My apologies, supervisor,” you say, lips numb. “I only thought I’d found something unusual enough to merit more attention. I had hopes of investigating the case.”

“Well,” Supervisor Ma says, “I think you can certainly still take pride in recognizing a field survey was necessary. I was hard on you then. I can lighten some of your call quota today if you want to take some time reading up on sigil work, or talismans in particular. You seem interested. If you want to consider planning the next steps for your career, I’m happy to connect you to someone.”

You smile at her, all teeth. Something flutters in your chest, maybe the last remnants of the person you thought you would have become by now, the phantom imaginary version of you who is really fucking excited at the prospect of studying a new set of symbols, who would leap at the praise Supervisor Ma is heaping on you. “Thank you,” you say. “I really appreciate that.”

“Of course,” she says. “I want to foster the best learning environment for all our interns. Feel free to let me know if you have any other questions.”

With another gracious nod that feels tight all the way to your chest, you duck your way back out of her office.

Nathaniel gives you that eyebrow raised look that means *what happened in there?* when you come back, but for once, you don’t feel like talking to her about it. Maybe she’d scold you. You should be fucking happy at this opportunity to advance your career. Why aren’t you? You hook the headset back over your ears and turn to your workstation, only to see a long queue logged up behind you, a long workday to go. Everything inside you is tired and curdled.

You dial Shine up. Better to get this conversation over with. And then you can go back to the long to-do list, and sink yourself back into the haze of your work. It’s not so bad. You’ll get to see him again in a few weeks, come with someone more experienced, who can do better for the case than your meagre diagnostics on something way above your pay grade. It’s better for the both of you. Supervisor Ma has a point. You have to learn some sort of patience in this job.

—Hello? Is this Shine?

- Hi! Yes! Is this... Are you from One Wizard?
- Yes, it's me. You remember what we talked about yesterday?
- Do you have someone to come talk to me now?
- Well. See, here's the thing. I spoke to my supervisor today.
- ...And?
- We've passed on your information to the Sigils Team here at One Wizard. They're very highly rated, and will get you extremely thorough results. You don't need to worry with your case in their hands.
- Why does it sound like there's a catch to this...
- [A laugh, stuttering] Okay, well. The Sigils Team is very busy most of the time.
- ...I see.
- My supervisor estimates we can take on your case in full in approximately two weeks, maybe more. For now, we can review the documents, and if anyone finds anything out of the ordinary, of course, we'll call you right away.
- So no one's going to be coming for two weeks?
- Yes, that's correct.
- I... I don't know what to say.
- Are there any issues or concerns?
- You said you would take care of it.
- I'm sorry, sir. I entered your information in the queue. I'll call you as soon as your case is up.
- Don't call me *sir*.
- ...Okay. I'm sorry.
- I... you... why would you say that, earlier?
- What?
- You said you would help me.
- I'm *trying*. I'm sorry. I really am. I can't make them go any faster either.
- You said you would take care of it.
- Look, I can't do anything on my end here. I've tried. I asked my supervisor if it could go any faster, and my hands are tied too. Is there anything pressing you can think of? If you can give me some details, maybe we can make it seem more urgent...

- No, I just. I'm so—I haven't slept. I don't want to touch it until someone's looked at it properly. I can't stay in my room without it driving me up the wall. I'm going to fail all my tests at this rate, please, I just... You said you could help me.
- I...
- I'm sorry. I'm getting emotional. I understand.
- Look, okay. I can look at it some more. I can do some research, get a friend to look into it. But I don't think I can make my supervisor budge.
- A friend... Really? Are you sure? I don't want to get you in trouble.
- I can try, but only as a favour, you understand? God, I shouldn't be doing this.
- I... thank you. Please. *Please.*
- I'm going to give you my phone number. Call me, and only me, if anything else happens. I'll be in touch.
- Thank you. Seriously, *thank you.*
- Don't thank me. I don't even know if I can do anything yet.

Fourth Court

YOU ANNOUNCE YOUR presence the next day by telling Nathaniel that you've made a terrible decision.

"I've made a terrible decision," you say.

Nathaniel barely looked up. "What was it?"

"Nothing," you say. "Absolutely nothing."

So much for getting back into the rhythm of work. So much for this being a simple case. Somehow, Shine's stupid plight has snagged your brain like a stubborn piece of gum on the sole of your sneakers.

That doesn't stop you from pulling out the photos again. They're blurrier, on the little screen of your phone. It all seems innocuous, something out of a movie set, and not any more comprehensible to you than when you'd sent them all yesterday to your friend Dino in Sigils, the only person you could think of who might have better luck than the Archmages at One Wizard at making sense of them.

And then you went back to your job.

Three calls in and your jaw already hurts from fake smiling so much. It's a relief when Nathaniel drags you out to the cafeteria for lunch, but your good mood doesn't persist long when she then pulls out the leftovers that Shine's mother had piled on the both of you.

"So," Nathaniel says, her mouth full of white rice, "I checked the record we took last night. Couldn't help myself, I was curious."

"Why would you do that?"

"Hey, just yesterday you stayed back to finish that report and now you're barely interested?" Nathaniel leans in on her elbows. She's wearing a loose silk sort of thing today, all black and draped with silver chain link necklaces. Hair tousled back behind one ear. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing," you say, maybe a little too peevishly. "I'm just tired."

Nathaniel frowns. "Hey, are you okay? Do you need me to cover for you while you take the rest of the day off?"

The sudden concern might just be worse than her being irritated at you. "No," you snap, then sigh. "No, it's okay. I'm okay."

“You can ask me for things, you know,” Nathaniel says, curt.

“I know.”

“Do you want to know what I’ve found, then?”

You hate that you straighten up a little, but you do.

Nathaniel notices. Her mouth glides into a smirk, all awkwardness forgotten. “So I was trying to see if I could recognize anything else, maybe the pattern-locking. It must be at least partially based in legible characters if I could read *diyū* off it like that.” She pulls out her phone to show the photos, rather than use her obviously illegal contraband in the middle of your corporate headquarters. “See here?” she says, swiping through closer zooms of the mural. With one finger, she marks up the photos on her phone. Three lines, repeating throughout the design, bisected by a stem: 王. King?

“That...” You worry at your lips. Turn Nathaniel’s diagrams this way and that, nearly going cross-eyed. “Isn’t that kind of a stretch?”

“Sure, might be,” Nathaniel says. “Maybe I’m just seeing things. Maybe I just want this case to be exciting.” She winks.

You groan. “Shove off. This case is a headache, is what it is.”

“Did you talk to the kid again?”

“Yeah,” you say.

“Tell him we can’t help him until later?”

“Yeah.”

Nathaniel sucks her cheeks in, chin planted solidly on her palm. She looks a bit ghastly, or maybe it’s just the lighting. Or maybe it’s the way your brain is being a *dick* lately. “How’d he take it?”

“Not well,” you say. Which is the truth.

“Sucks,” Nathaniel says, clucking her tongue. Flippant where you’re numb, but you both have your ways of dealing with this shit. “Okay,” she says, “I have to get back now. I left someone on hold, whoops.”

“Holy shit,” you say. “How do you still have a job?”

“My undeniably charming personality,” she calls, and then she’s gone, and you’re sitting alone in the cafeteria you hate to set foot in, and your phone starts to vibrate. Luck, really, that you have it face up, so you can see Shine’s number flash on the display. You’re tempted

to ignore it. Your stomach drops. But it'll only make you feel worse later, so.

"Hello?" you ask, already weary.

"Hi," says Shine.

"Okay, I didn't give you my number so you could call every time you got anxious," you hiss. "What's going on?"

"I think you should get up," Shine says. You don't cotton on to something going on immediately, not yet. It only strikes you as kind of rude.

"What?"

"You're sitting in the cafeteria, aren't you? What's that you're eating? It looks gross."

What.

Shine's voice is different. Subtly so, but you're sure of it now that he's gone and said some crazy shit to you. Smoother. Less hesitance at the start of his sentences. If before he was tentative and hedging, now he has an air of arrogance to him.

You get out of your seat.

"I don't know what you're trying to do," you say slowly, "but this isn't appropriate."

"I'll be waiting," Shine says, then the line goes dead.

So, fuck. Right? Fuck! You're never going to be nice to someone ever again. One day your soul is going to rot working here, and you're going to *let* it, because the alternative is feeling like a dupe like this. You idiot. You dumbass. You feel unqualified, a kid in an ill-fitting cloak. You march yourself out the cafeteria door because you have to shoo this asshole who doesn't understand boundaries out of your workplace, and it's all your own goddamn fault. *Fuck*.

Outside, you scan the hall, only to be nearly run over by some guys from the Creatures department, hauling a whole cart full of cages.

"Whoa!" one of them shouts, waving his hands.

"Sorry," you mutter.

Inside the cart, one of the poor caged glowing snakes hisses at you. You make a face at it as it goes by.

When the hall clears again, you see him. That fucker. He's actually come all the way to your office, waiting for you? Was he watching?

How in the world did he know you were on lunch break anyway? You're finally *mad* instead of guilty, dull rage pressing hard against your sternum. The kid is leaning up against the wall, arms crossed, yet another stupid sweater hanging off his frame. This one is cable knit, and he's got the sleeves rolled-up, his skinny-ass little forearms poking out of the oversized thing.

You grit your teeth and grab him by the elbow. "Hey."

Shine looks at you. He has to look up, but only a bit. He grins. "Hey, you," he says.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"What?" he asks, a little pout to his lips, now. "Are you angry?"

"Of *course* I'm angry," you say. "I was trying to help you! If you were legitimately worried about something, you could've *called* me, and then waited for a second opinion—or, fucking hell, just coughed up some extra cash and paid your way through the queue. What the fuck are you doing showing up at my office?"

Shine's grin hasn't abated. "I kind of like it more when you're mad at me," he says. "Better than all that customer service bullshit."

You bristle, shaking his arm a little. "Are you going to leave?"

"That depends," he says, leaning away from you a bit, eyes a clear hazel brown, meeting your gaze easily. That's strange. He's pushed his fringe back, different from when you were at his place. It makes his face look clearer, less timid. His grin is stretched too wide, too eager, and it's not only the expression that makes your skin feel like it's trying to peel inside out. You're not such of a shitty wizard that you don't notice the warning signs; something feels absolutely wrong down to your gut.

"On what?" you snap, trying to keep your cool.

"I can leave," he says easily, pulling his arm free and holding his hands palm out before you. His eyes shine too much, you realize. That's the feral glint. Too bright to be reflected fluorescence. "Does this mean you're abandoning the kid?" he continues. "What was his name, Shine? I think I'm going to keep him, if that's all right with you."

WHAT THE FUCK.

So you drag Shine—Shine?!—into the Creatures department. The supply has come and gone already, which means you're somewhat alone. Save for the walls of squawking and barking beasts, that is.

The same snake that looked like it wanted to take a bite out of you in the hall hisses again, spitting and guttural, when you slam the door shut to trap you and (questionably) Shine inside. "Calm down, bud," you mutter, mostly to yourself.

Shine whirls around, lips pulled back in a snarl—right at the snake, yep. You crash your hip straight into the doorknob when you notice his canines are sharp and glinting, what the *fuck*. He hisses right back. You and the snake both freeze. After a lengthy staring contest, the snake curls itself into a spiral, seemingly no longer paying you any mind. Shine rolls his eyes, and when he relaxes to slouch against the wall, his mouth settles in a faint moue that conceals all evidence of his... fangs. Yeah.

"Okay," you say, "I have a few questions."

Shine snickers. "All right," he says.

"One: who the fuck are you. Two: what the fuck do you want. Three: why the fuck did you come to *me*."

"I didn't come to you, Shine came to you," the person wearing Shine's face says, lifting his shoulders. "I want you to get *rid* of all that bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo, so I can get out of here peacefully. And if you must, you can call me Wang Ran."

"Do you really think I'm going to just let you keep Shine's body?" you ask incredulously.

"Why not? He's still in here. He's just a little shy at the moment," Wang Ran says flippantly, which does absolutely nothing to placate you, though you suppose being told that Shine's soul hasn't up and been devoured is faintly reassuring.

Wang Ran runs a hand through his hair, completely at ease. "See, I think you want me to stop bothering you."

"I'm not going to just... stand by and do nothing."

Wang Ran pushes himself off the wall, comes closer in an obvious attempt to intimidate you, although he can hardly lean over you with the half a head you have on him. You feel a dull numbness in the place of fear when he bares his teeth again, eyes shining a flat gold

when he tilts his head right in the light. “I can reward you,” he says, voice dipping down into layered sibilance. “I can make every person in this department revere you, if that’s what you want. I could give you so much.”

You have to admit, it’s tempting. Skip all the hierarchical nonsense and go right to the top? You could live a comfortable life in a supervisor’s office, barely skimming reports and assigning various people to jobs you don’t want to touch, or whatever it is a supervisor does.

But you have learned *something* in your time here. You remember the red flags, if absolutely nothing else.

Never take a deal from something supernatural. When you feel you have something to gain, that’s when you really have everything to lose. That still mattered to you, then.

“Do you really think that’s going to work on me?” you ask flatly.

Wang Ran scowls. “Worth a try,” he says, voice returning to a more normal timbre, without the creepy hissing. You idly wonder how he even gets Shine’s vocal cords to make that sort of noise.

“Who *are* you?” you ask again.

“I’ll be your worst nightmare if you don’t do what I want you to,” Wang Ran says, crossing his arms.

“You haven’t done anything to me,” you point out.

Wang Ran blinks slowly. “Yet.”

You keep your stance, although a cold molasses is starting to spread through your limbs. Maybe this is simply stupidity masquerading as bravado. Maybe your emotional receptors or whatever in your brain are simply broken and have given up in the face of this absurd scenario. Either way, your voice is curiously bored when you say, “I mean to say, something tells me you’re not exactly good at controlling your impulses. If you haven’t hurt me yet, I doubt you will.”

Genuine irritation flashes on Wang Ran’s borrowed face. His hand twitches, but he doesn’t move. Or deny the accusation, you note. Then—something else unexpected.

“Journeyman!” a voice that is undoubtedly Shine’s shouts. Almost immediately, he jerks back, a harsh scowl slashing his lips. “Shut up!”

Wang Ran (?) hisses back. Another jerk. “No, I just want to—I’m fine! Don’t let him intimidate you, he’s just a huge asshole and he won’t actually *do* anything—Hey!”

Wang Ran’s face is red, probably because he’s embarrassed, but also because he’s just slapped his own cheeks. You raise your eyebrows and wait.

Shine doesn’t emerge again, but a whirlwind of possibilities flits through your mind—can they communicate? Surely, they just did. Shine sounds like he actually has more of a handle of what’s going on than you do. Maybe he’s yelling at Wang Ran inside their mind right now, a thought which has your lips twitching despite the tense stand-off the two of you are still technically locked in.

You relax against the wall, nodding. “You really should’ve planned this through more.”

“Shut up,” Wang Ran hisses. He leans in more, his face so close to yours you go cross-eyed trying to keep him in view. “You’re not going to report me, though.”

You frown. “How do you know that?”

“You haven’t yet,” he says smugly.

And, well.

The sheer amount of red tape this would invite, both here at One Wizard *and* for whoever ends up assigned at the underworld end, would crush you both under its weight. There would be a fight! Is this a Sigils issue? Maybe an incorporeal disturbances case. Creatures would make a grab for sure, given all the... serpent-y bits that seem to have manifested in Shine’s body. Maybe some paperwork-loving fuck from Hell is going to come claim their—Well, you’re not sure what Wang Ran is, but surely he’ll be missed in *some* capacity. Something small and yes, *possessive*, curdles in your gut. Whoever they assign, it’s not going to be in Shine’s favour. And a mountain of paperwork and endless arguments later, you’ll be left out of the circle, unable to help as they barge in and commandeer the case, and then charge an exorbitant amount of money for their services. Magicare covers only up to a certain amount of magical assistance. Resolving a possession from an unknown entity exceeds the limit by far.

You jut out your chin. It seems the two of you are at an impasse. “I’m not,” you admit.

Wang Ran’s grin widens enough that you can see the points of his teeth peeking between his lips.

Well, since *neither* of you is going to budge... You check the time. Still half the day left until you can clock out, though there’s nothing much to do about that.

Ignoring Wang Ran’s triumphant air, you pull out your phone and text Nathaniel: *feeling sick, think it was something I ate. tell ma im going home.*

Then, you grab Wang Ran by the elbow and pull him out of the supply room before he can react. A cacophony of snarls follows you out the door.

“Wha—?”

“Shut up and stick close,” you tell him.

To your immense surprise, he listens. When you pass by a sanitation officer, he even smiles at them, and this time there’s no attempt at baring his fangs, he just... smiles. Even gives him a short bow as you pass. You can almost trick yourself into believing that you’ve hallucinated the whole mess, and this is Shine you’re dragging with you down the hall—until the man turns a corner and his face drops back into his neutral sneer. He looks at you to see where to go next.

“Am I the only one you hate that much?” you ask, as you pull him out to the lobby.

Wang Ran shrugs. “What’s the point in trying to scare random people? That’ll just make your life harder.”

“You’re a dick,” you tell him.

“Takes one to know one,” Wang Ran says.

You pull him out into the street instead of deigning to answer that.

Thankfully, you don’t live far enough from work that a commute dragging a half-feral snake creature possessing your client’s body is *too* much of a hassle. Wang Ran still hisses at a passing dog on the train, though, which is awkward, but the dog is well-trained enough to ignore him, and he quiets with an annoyed little flick of his tongue when you elbow him sharply in the side.

Wang Ran presses his face to the train window, dotted with specks of dirt and streaks of who knows what, as you rattle past shiny condos and fancy high-rises and take a sharp veer into the crumbling remains of the old city. Strangely, *this* is when his eyes light up. He leans back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest. “This is acceptable.”

You scowl. “Nobody asked.”

The train chimes the bland tone that announces a stop. You pick up your messenger bag and beckon to Wang Ran. He slings his hands in his pockets, the epitome of casual, until the tram pulls away and you’re left standing in the sunny street. With another startled, spitting hiss, Wang Ran flinches, then spins around to glare balefully into the sun, his eyes flashing.

“Whoa,” you say, tugging him into a small alcove between buildings. As soon as there is shade, he calms down, his shoulders dropping, his face smoothing down into something more human-looking. Mostly. In this half brightness, you can see the glimmer of scales glide like an imprint over the bridge of his nose, a shimmering pattern that seems more like a carefully applied highlighter than supernatural fuckery.

Wang Ran blinks a few times, cards his hands messily through Shine’s chestnut hair. It goes everywhere, but still manages to look artful. By the time he’s done teasing the strands, he looks fully normal again, albeit a bit sullen, his only glow the sort that comes from a rigorous skin care routine.

“How did you even manage to get to One Wizard without anyone finding you?” you ask incredulously. Surely a concerned citizen would’ve noticed the fucking *snake boy* hissing at anything that moved and spluttering away from the sunlight, and brought it to someone’s attention.

Wang Ran ignores the question. “Which one is yours?” he asks, squinting into the street like he can see your vibes on one of the buildings. Well. Maybe he can. You’re not exactly up to speed on the abilities of snakes from Hell.

And so this is exactly how you end up dragging the aforementioned snake from Hell into the safe haven of your own goddamn apartment.

Intention to let him stay and everything. Though, it's not like he needed any permission; Wang Ran settles in like he owns the place. Which, admittedly, mostly means stealing your only pair of slippers and taking up residence in your one nice lounge chair. He flings his arms up dramatically, casting a glance around. "Is this it?"

"I hear the streets are nicer at night," you hiss at him.

Wang Ran hisses back idly. "Might be."

Your eyebrow actually physically twitches. You admit you don't exactly live in the lap of luxury. Your 'apartment' is a box attached to a smaller box, the kitchenlivingroom is a solid cube, the bedroom is big enough for a twin bed and a standing desk, and the washroom is a toilet, a showerhead, and a drain in the tiled floor. You knew all this, but imagining seeing it through the eyes of another person—real, if demonic—in that moment makes you suddenly very tired.

To his credit, Wang Ran doesn't say much else. Except, "We're kind of the same size, aren't we? I didn't bother to bring any of Shine's clothes. You better have more than boring button-downs in your closet or I'm going to make you break into Shine's place for a better selection."

You throw a dish towel at his face.

Fifth Court

ALL SAID AND done, Wang Ran's presence is shockingly easy to acclimatize to. You pinch yourself, nails scraping at the tender underskin of your wrist, just to make sure you're still physically present: you are, which isn't exactly a reassurance. Your heart is remarkably calm, your limbs are fully under your control, your faculties are largely intact. You brush your teeth with a slow, even methodical rhythm like you always do. There is no more room left for shock inside you, you think. No space for anything other than the buzz of static filling your head like steel wool. You wash your face. No fancy skin care rituals for you. You pull down your eyelids, examine the extent of redness creeping in the white. Your face looks sallow. Your fringe is getting too long. You wipe your hands over the foggy mirror with an easy cleaning spell, leave it sparkling, although the clearer image of your own face doesn't inspire any more confidence.

When you step out, Wang Ran has taken up residence on your bed.

You frown, but the ache has settled so far into you that you can't summon up the energy to shoo him away, and when you step closer, something about the way he's holding himself stops you short anyway.

Here's the scene. You can close your eyes and picture it, still.

Your bed takes up the width of the room, the foot resting against a long window, which is the best part of this apartment. The view isn't half-bad: mostly bits and pieces of other buildings, wooden and tiled close by, glass and steel and dotted with rising pinholes of light closer to the city centre. Cars rush past on the streets outside, a gentle lull that breaks up the quiet of night. It's high enough that you can see a bright slice of moon, bisected by the highwires that stream over the streets. Wang Ran—dressed in some of your old clothes, feet bare—has his face practically pressed up against the glass, elbows perched on the windowsill like he's never seen anything like this before. Even your jaded heart softens a little at the sight.

“Is it always like this?” he asks, without turning around.

You shuffle onto the bed, chin resting on your knees. “What do you mean?”

“Every night,” he says. His fingers are blanched against the glass; it must be cold. “There’s so much happening.”

“I guess it can get kind of busy in this area. Hard to sleep when the cars are too loud.”

Wang Ran turns around, and you curl your hands into fists in the sheets. If your senses were on alert when he first showed himself to you, all wrong and too-sharp and clearly inside a body unused to baring its teeth, you feel *dread*, now. Something worse about the open-eyed frankness on his face. That’s an expression this body *is* used to making. With his hair falling out from whatever product he used to style it, the borrowed shirt too baggy, Wang Ran could be any college student, ready for a night’s rest before his scrying exam or something. You could be looking at Shine, still quiet within his own body, which would be more worrying if he hadn’t briefly emerged earlier. As it stands, you decide to trust him when he says he’s okay.

“Something wrong?” Wang Ran asks, slyness picking at his mouth again.

It helps, a little. He looks about seventeen per cent more punchable. He still looks far too earnest for comfort, like the door to your apartment shut and he just... stopped putting on airs.

“No,” you say, and that’s when you make the first mistake.

At least, that’s how the story should go: that this was the beginning of it. That you had been entertaining a potentially career-ending secret already, and this is when you stepped out of the carefully drawn lines. That you fucked up and struck a deal, and fate doesn’t respect promises or alliances, but it more than well abides by bargains.

Yes, this is when you ask for a deal—you’d say Wang Ran looked at your proffered hand like it was a dead rat dropped at his doorstep, except given his serpentine leanings, he’d probably look at a dead rat with more enthusiasm.

But it isn’t a mistake. Or at least you’re not going to regret it.

Wang Ran perks up. “Are we playing a game?”

“I’ll match you question for question,” you say.

“What makes you think I’m curious about you?”

“You’re stuck with me,” you say. “Especially if you don’t want to be turned over and scrutinized by a bunch of stuffy practicing wizards. You came to me. If I were you, I’d be curious.”

Wang Ran rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t dispute it. His gaze flickers down to your hand again, appraising, and then faster than you can blink, you’re shaking hands.

A cold shudder runs up your arm. When you look up, your vision is grazed with a silvery blue, a soft glow that concentrates where your hands are clasped together. Wang Ran’s grip is surprisingly loose, his skin cool and dry. He barely moves his hand, but you’re caught together anyway, a force like a vacuum seal siphoning you together. The binding ice of your words, his agreement.

Nothing’s changed.

It’s only a deal.

But you find a smile flickering at the corners of your mouth. Wang Ran’s disposition is as aloof as ever, but there is an odd furtiveness to this situation, the two of you both curled up on the bed, the moonglow between you like a reminder of the promised magic that touches both your words, now.

Magic. It feels like magic.

“So,” Wang Ran says. “Out with it. What do you want to know?”

You lean back on your hands, trying to get a better look at him. Wang Ran seems to notice the scrutiny, but doesn’t say anything. Lets it happen. You tuck your feet under your knees, ask, “So when he’s not here, can Shine hear me? And vice versa?”

Marginally, Wang Ran’s eyes widen.

You smile. “You were there,” you say triumphantly, “weren’t you? When I first visited. You were already here. Just hiding, you little bitch.”

Wang Ran scowls. “He’s fine,” he mutters, tilting his head to the side. “I wanted to drive. He... let me.” A complicated twist of his face that lasts for barely a second. It’s quickly wiped away by a loose smirk. “He’s been annoying me all day, haven’t you been, Sunshine?” The last bit is, clearly, not directed at you. You watch, amused, as he

pauses, eyes drifting off for a moment, then snorts loudly. “He wants you to know that he’s *grateful*,” Wang Ran says. “For all the *time* and *effort* that you’ve been putting in to trying to help him. Ugh. Could you be more of a pushover?”

“Who knows?” you say dryly. “If he was less of a pushover, you might not have been able to take over his entire physical body and being.”

“I’m very willful,” Wang Ran says cheerily.

You purposefully pause for a touch too long. “Sure.”

With another scowl, Wang Ran waves a hand in front of him. “It’s my turn,” he demands.

“Don’t worry, Shine,” you say loudly. “I’m going to figure this out, okay? Just hold on in there.”

Wang Ran snaps his teeth.

You give him your best *real mature of you* stare, but you incline your head. Go ahead.

“What do you want?” he demands.

Of all the questions he could’ve asked, this one, admittedly, does take you aback. “What? Like, in general?” you reflexively say, resorting to facetiousness. “Out of my life? Right now?”

“What do you want from me?” Wang Ran asks. “What can I do to make you cooperate?”

Belatedly, you realize you’ve been generous. You could’ve said you wanted an egg sandwich and plum candies. You could’ve said you wanted him to go away and leave you alone. Although it seems that that is in fact what *he* wants from you.

You open your mouth, but nothing comes out.

Wang Ran narrows his eyes. “I answered you honestly,” he says. “We made a deal.”

“I know,” you say. “But—” You gulp, your throat seizing up. This is when the magic of your word takes hold of you, but there was nothing it could find to hook out of your throat. You clutch at the sheets of your bed, nibbling at your lips. The queasiness of the truth makes your stomach turn. Wang Ran is looking at you imperiously, expectantly, like you will tell him you want a new apartment and he will do his devil magic to make that happen and that will be enough for you to walk

into work and write off the entire case as a dead end, condemn Shine to who knows how long trapped and aware inside his own pilfered head. A part of you wishes it was that easy. Your jaw wants to unhinge and say it—*give me riches, I don't want to work another day in my life.*

“I don't *know*,” you blurt instead.

The words hang there like a flat filter shuttering the air between you. The soft light suddenly feels too harsh, your skin itching in the exposure. Wang Ran's brows furrow. “What the hell do you mean, you *don't know*?” he demands.

“It means,” you say, “that I don't fucking know what I want.”

“I told you before,” he insists. “I can give you whatever you want. You can live forever, if that's what you want. Is it really that hard to think of something?”

“You can't give me anything I want,” you murmur to yourself, half an answer, half a realization. “Sorry.”

Wang Ran looks, in order: stricken, confused, desperately angry, and then all of it at once. “We had a deal,” he says.

“I know,” you say. “I just... I don't have an answer for you. That's the truth.”

Maybe this is how your life ends. Wang Ran's glare could be venom. His lip is curling back, his face shimmering like hot air over pavement, like a radiation spell gone badly wrong, the force of him too much for this physical body to contain. Shine's whole body glitches. His skin looks too thin. Unreal. The edges of him blurring in real time as something else shifts beneath the surface. Your eyes cross. Reality stretches, like hot strings of sugar, translucent and twisting. Wang Ran looks at you, and the soft brown of Shine's eyes shrinks, encroached by dilating pupils, and then by a circle within, a deeper black wherein something stirs. Great coils, flashes of gold. You are struck with the simultaneous urge to grab him to make sure he's still solid and to scramble off the bed and get far, far away.

Instead, you grasp for the threads of your deal. “I have another question,” you tell him, and Wang Ran hisses as the promise grows into a spell, weaving around the two of you like a net. Shine's face settles. Scales run in and out of existence. The spell tightens, and

Wang Ran twitches, nostrils flaring once like he might try and fight it, but then all at once, he collapses inward, shoulders slumping. All the light around him withdraws into his abruptly weary form. When he looks up, his eyes are a plain brown again, still unfocused.

“Okay,” he says shallowly. “What is it?”

“What do *you* want?” you ask him.

“Hah,” Wang Ran says.

“It’s only fair,” you mutter.

“I suppose,” Wang Ran muses.

“So?”

Wang Ran snorts lightly. He leans up against the wall, Shine’s long legs tucked underneath him. His borrowed lounge pants from your closet hang on him loosely. “It’s pretty simple,” he says. “I want to be free to do whatever I want.”

Quiet.

What do you say to *that*?

Wang Ran picks at the loose threads in your sheets. One of them unravels, opens a worn seam in your comforter, and he stops, frowns down at it. He looks pathetic, which feels appropriate.

You feel pathetic too. Discomfortingly, you sympathize.

“Are you happy now?” Wang Ran asks quietly.

“Not really,” you say.

“Was that not enough?” Wang Ran asks, brittleness making his movements jerky again. “You asked me what I wanted, and I want to be here. It seems like a pretty easy request for someone to fulfill, but you know.” He snorts, shaking his head. “Circumstances would suggest otherwise.”

“What’s stopping you?” you ask.

Wang Ran pauses. He winds the broken thread around his finger, blanching the skin white in a spiral. “Plenty,” he says. His voice is careful. Thin and casual, but forced. A layer of nonchalance over a carefully hidden emotion. You’ve learned enough to recognize that reedy tone over your years of working, the cellophane veneer of someone with something to say.

“Okay,” you say. “Tell me.”

“You’re asking an awful lot of questions,” Wang Ran says.

You smile, thin. “Are you worried about me? I can pay them back.”

Wang Ran shrugs. He rolls, lotus-legged, and faces you. “No, I—” He stops himself short and scrubs at his face. “I didn’t mean that,” he says. “You know you didn’t close the deal, right? We can just keep doing this indefinitely.”

Rather than meet him with a jab, you shut your mouth. Wait. Watch. Wang Ran squirms. His eyes shutter, lids half falling. “I just wanted to get out,” he says, mumbling his words. “I wanted to see what it was like, here.”

“In *this* city,” you joke.

“Yes,” Wang Ran says. His head jerks up, eyes frantic under the fringe. “I’ve never... been up here before.” He waves a hand around vaguely, with regards to what ‘up here’ means. “That’s all I want.” He opens his mouth, closes it again. His jaw clicks. “Please,” he says, quick, a dart of his tongue.

You find yourself at a loss again. A sharp suspicion is growing in your gut, stitching together the stamp of Hell on the talisman, the eerie serpentine energy seeping out of Shine’s body, and Wang Ran’s mix of *stupid kid* and *imperious asshole*. But what, exactly, are you supposed to do with what you strongly suspect might actually be —what, underworldly royalty? Unclear. Wang Ran is looking at you like you have all the answers, like you can single-handedly snap your fingers and no one will come looking for him, and the part of you that got wrapped up in this whole mess to begin with actually fucking wishes you could do that, too. Funny, that. It comes down to the same, in the end. You’re supposed to be a wizard, aren’t you? So why can’t you work some fucking magic?

“Hey,” you find yourself saying, creeping closer.

Wang Ran flinches when you touch his shoulder.

“I don’t...” you start, chewing at your lip. “I don’t really know how to help, here.”

“Of course you don’t,” Wang Ran snaps, back to hostility.

You roll your eyes a little, but it’s hard to sustain the annoyance around the genuine goddamn fondness curled up tight in your chest. What a little shit this kid has turned out to be. Insouciant but harmless, more at a loss than you are. Goddamn.

“Look, you aren’t exactly making it easy. Am I wrong to presume that you’re going to have some pretty powerful people looking for you sometime soon? You don’t have to answer that if I’m running myself into more debt.”

“No, you’re right,” Wang Ran mutters.

“So what do you want me to do?” you ask, bluntly. “Even if I can make things go away at the office, it’s not like you’ll be able to just wander around at will.”

“I could’ve taken care of it.”

You raise your eyebrows.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now, does it?” Wang Ran straightens. Under the moonlight, he looks terrified, stiff and still.

“Well,” you start.

“You can’t help me.”

“No,” you admit. “I don’t think so.”

“I’m tired,” Wang Ran says. He tilts his head, and there is a change in the set of his jaw, or else his eyelids come down, lowered and lazier. It makes his whole face look more contemptuous, more like the way he’d looked around at the fluorescent hallways of One Wizard when you first saw him. “Why are human bodies so shitty? How do you live like this?”

“With great difficulty,” you say dryly. It’s pretty obvious you’re not getting anything else out of Wang Ran tonight, though what you have seems pretty substantive already. It’s a lot to process. What the fuck are you going to do when Mister King of Hell comes knocking at your door? “You can sleep on the couch outside,” you say, like he’s some family friend looking for a place to crash. “Take one of these blankets.”

“Why do you sleep under two?” Wang Ran asks.

“I have terrible circulation. I get cold all the time.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be warm-blooded?” Wang Ran cries, eyes suddenly widening. “Shit, was I supposed to sun this body?”

You try to stifle the laugh, but it bursts out anyway. Wang Ran scowls, but all you can do is press a hand to your mouth, imagining him lounging on a rock somewhere on the street, waiting for Shine’s body to warm up. Maybe he’d pose. Would it be like tanning? Surely,

it would have to do with how much surface area of your body is getting the sun, and, well. Even if Shine got his body back, you can't imagine he'd be pleased with a tan he didn't ask for.

"Good night," Wang Ran declares coldly. He squirms off the bed and yanks a layer of blanket with him, trailing it on the ground as he heads for the door.

"If you wake up early, you can go hiking for some sun!" you call after him.

The door slams in response.

Still snickering a little, you slide yourself into your own bed, relishing in the sudden quiet of it all. It *is* funny. The whole situation is funny. You can't stop laughing to yourself under the leftover blanket, because if you didn't laugh then, well. There's a fucking demon prince sleeping in your apartment. And you can't help him. A sobering thought, but all you can do is crane your neck, look out the window at all the scenery that he'd never got to see before, and feel sorry for the kid.

If there's anything to latch onto later to blame, it's that. Not bad decisions or some misguided ambition that landed you where you are. You fall asleep thinking about the plaintive expression on Wang Ran's face, and the truth is that it's the sappy centre of you that wins out, in the end. Isn't it always?

YOU WAKE UP to the smell of burning and loud arguing coming from the room over.

"You said wait for the oil to heat up!"

"Not that much!"

"Well okay, we can just pour it out—Ow!"

"Not like that! *Aaah*, that really hurts."

"You do it, then!"

"I would if I could!"

"You know what?"

Silence.

"...what."

"Ugh, never mind. This was a terrible idea."

"This was *your* idea."

You rub your eyes, groggy still, and peek out the door.

Wang Ran—or Shine?—is standing at the little kitchen section of your sad apartment, holding a pan that is sizzling with oil, popping every two seconds. He’s trying to flip an egg over. There’s way too much oil in the pan, he’s still dressed in the old lounge clothes you gave him, and he’s arguing with himself.

“Don’t—” He snatches his hand back jerkily. “*Stop it,*” he hisses, *actually* hisses, low and almost menacing, if he didn’t immediately follow up with smacking his own hand.

It’s hard to tell who’s in charge now, admittedly.

“Uh,” you say. “Who am I talking to?”

“Me!” the boy who looks like Shine and may or may not actually be Shine says. There’s no hissing this time, which does not clarify anything.

You crack the door open further.

“Uhm, sorry, Journeyman—?” Ah. Shine smiles at you, gesturing with the spatula.

You raise a shoulder. “Don’t call me that when I’m not working.”

Shine’s smile turns sheepish at the edges. “Sorry, jiejie,” he says. It’ll do. A drop of oil splatters down onto the ground from the spatula and he winces. Politeness does not a good cook make, but at least you’re dealing with someone who knows how human appetites work.

“Where’s Wang Ran?” you ask.

Shine’s face shifts a little. Blurs in front of your eyes, like a heat mirage. Or like the way lights shift on the road when you need to catch up on your prescription. It isn’t the most pleasant thing. But a moment later, his skin settles back to normal. He shudders once, then pulls a brief face. He glares once into the mirrored surface of the fridge, then turns to you with a blinding smile firmly attached. “He’s fine!” Shine chirps. He sets the plate with a very oily-looking egg down on the table. “He wanted to make you breakfast, but, uh. He’s never had to cook before. I’m not sure if there’s food in Hell, actually.”

This must be a record for how early a headache starts to settle in behind your eyes. “Wang Ran... wanted... to make me breakfast?” you ask very slowly to make sure you have all the words in the right places.

“Mmm-hm,” Shine says happily. Then, “What! You never said I couldn’t tell—Hey!”

Another strange ripple, Shine’s knuckles turning white where they’re gripped around the frying pan, his head snapping back abruptly, and when he looks down again, there’s a loose disdain all around his mouth that is becoming all too familiar to you. “I woke up early,” Wang Ran says. “Sunshine was teaching me how to sustain myself, but I can’t say I’m very good at it. You’re welcome to have the experiment, if you want.”

Your lips twitch. Fond again, look at that. “You want me to try this disaster?”

A speck of hurt flashes across Wang Ran’s face, briefly enough that you could’ve made it up. “It’s the least you could do, dà gē,” he says, brittle.

That’s fair. Sincere enough for your liking, anyhow. You shrug and hunt around in your drawers for a fork. You try for casual, taking a bite of the egg (not bad) as you lean against the counters and ask, “It seems like the two of you are, uh, getting along?”

Wang Ran crosses his arms over his chest. “Sure,” he says.

“Can I talk to Shine?” you ask tentatively.

It seems as though Wang Ran is going to refuse by the sudden flare of his eyes, hostility written in every line of his body. He doesn’t seem like a person who enjoys giving up control, you’ve discovered. But there’s some sort of discussion happening that you’re not quite privy to—he mutters something under his breath, then shakes his head minutely, and then stares off squinting into the distance, occasionally gesturing at nothing.

When at last the conference is over, Shine is back. You’re starting to see the cues. Something about the curve of his eyelids, softer. The harder set of his mouth, pressed together in a constant line instead of the expressive moue that Wang Ran favours. Shine runs a hand through his still-unstyled fringe, rearranges his sleeves to hang down lower instead of pushed up over his forearms. “Thank you,” is what he starts with, and a different sort of fondness flares in your heart. You stuff another forkful of egg into your mouth to smother the sudden

urge to coo. “I know it was probably hard to keep all this under wraps,” Shine says sheepishly.

“Eh,” you say with a shrug. “It was always an unorthodox case.”

“Well, I’m grateful you decided to help.”

You set your fork down decisively. It clinks against the plate. “I’m not sure that I can,” you start.

“No, no!” Shine is waving his hands in front of him, shaking his head at the same time. “That’s not what I meant, of course I know it’s a little out of your jurisdiction.”

“To be honest with you, I’m not sure who would be the one to go to here,” you say. “But also. I’m an intern.” You hold your hands out, palms flat, demonstrating the approximate amount of knowledge you have about this situation.

“Well, you know more than I do,” Shine says, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck awkwardly. “Anyway, I just wanted to say, thanks for sticking around. That’s all.”

Your face is doing something complicated that yet another fork of egg stifles. You’ve gotten far enough into it that it’s not charred any more, except you’ve also just hit the pocket where all the salt has been collecting, apparently, and it’s all you can do not to gag when it hits you. At least that’s a distraction from the way Shine is looking at you, all doe-eyed and eager. You grab at your self-filling mug for some water and chug.

“It’s fine,” you say, when your tongue has stopped trying to curl up on itself into your mouth. The spell on your mug is a little fritzzy, and the water is only lukewarm; but this is a lukewarm water sort of morning. “I’ll... do some research, I guess. I have a friend who studies this shit. So if we want to avoid the department, I’ll go to them instead.” You pause. “Do *you* want to avoid the department?” Who knows, maybe Shine is the kind of goody-two-shoes who would want to go running straight for anything with a modicum of authority. Wouldn’t that be lucky? He is, technically, the client here. (You shove away the thought of a bunch of One Wizard Archmages poking and prodding at a spitting Wang Ran.)

Shine hesitates. “Look,” he says. “I...”

You set the mug down. Snap your fingers to switch the spell to coffee. (So sue you—you're also too lazy to brew it properly yourself.) "It's fine if you do," you say. "We're already in limbo, aren't we? I won't tell if that's what you want."

Shine's shoulders slump down. "I just... think that... I don't know if it would be good," he says softly.

There's something going on here, in the gentle anguish in Shine's eyes, in the twitchy, furtive way he is holding himself, all of it pointing to a silent conversation you can absolutely sense happening on a plane that is beyond your reckoning, and that you really, truly, do not want to step into. You're just the wizard-in-training here. The very real possibility of committing to something way out of your depth looms over your head. Emotional intelligence isn't exactly something they trained you in at school.

"Sure," you cut in, to save Shine the trouble of trying to articulate whatever it is he's wrapped up in now. "That's fine. Can I leave you two alone while I go to work? I'm not going to come back to find my apartment all burned down?"

Shine shakes his head again. "We'll be fine!"

"Do you need something for lunch?"

"Uh..."

You sigh. "Order something in, if you need. You have my number, right?"

Shine nods.

"Call if you need anything."

"Okay," Shine says, then gives you another one of those shy, morning-rising-up-out-of-dawn, fucking rosy glow smiles of his. *Sunshine*. Fitting nickname, that. "Have a good day, jie."

"Thanks," you say, and it comes out like a soggy piece of bread. "Uh, bye, then."

Shine waves you enthusiastically out the door when you finally leave.

Sixth Court

NATHANIEL ACCOSTS YOU as soon as you step into work. “I have a weird case for you,” she says, sliding into your chair. It rolls across the shared space, her feet crossed at the ankles.

“Does this mean I get your place today?” you ask.

“Look at this,” Nathaniel says, gesturing to a spread of photos she’s holding in a binder.

“Is that a...?”

“A circle burned into the ground? Absolutely. Some poor soul nearly got their face burned off, but they escaped with only their eyebrows singed. There’s some weird pattern to it, too, and no one knows if it’s demonic in source or else some sort of free-range mages up to some shit out there.” She grins. “I get to do more field work.”

“Good for you,” you say.

“I’ll bring you back something fun.”

“Bring me a piece of the concrete when you excavate the thing.”

Nathaniel laughs. She wheels herself around again, tilting her head. “Sorry, I’ve been excited to get the hell out of here since you let me have that breath of fresh air yesterday. I have some old clients in the area, too. Maybe I’ll smuggle them some infused crystals on my way.”

“Smuggle?”

“You know not everyone can afford the ‘expert magical care’ offered by One Wizard, right?” Nathaniel’s heavy brows lower, eyes glowering. “I like to do right by everyone who couldn’t follow me over from my old practice.”

You snort and swat at Nathaniel’s shoulder. “You’re going to get in trouble one day,” you declare, “and I’m going to be too busy to bail you out.”

“You? Busy?” Nathaniel’s mouth is arranged in half a pout, half a smirk.

“Couldn’t imagine it,” you mumble.

“How are you, though?” she asks. Her voice drops, and she does the thing you’ve never known how to deal with, when she gives you her full and undivided attention, all dark brows and downturned mouth and handsome planes of Nathaniel Feng. She’s put little winking gems at the corners of her eyes today, glittering in the sharp light. Her hair is freshly cut, shorn ends tucked under the easy styled sweep of her fringe. Her button-up is unbuttoned nearly all the way down her sternum. She has to look up at you, sitting in the chair, and you fight the urge to drop down to your knees so you can look her in the eyes properly.

“I’m fine,” you say. Very deliberately do not think about the Hell prince inhabiting the divinations engineering student currently hopefully not making a mess of your apartment. Other than that, you *are* fine.

Nathaniel purses her lips.

“I’m just tired,” you allow yourself to admit. “I read through a few cases last night, wanted to try and see if I could get in on some cursebreaking this week.”

“And you say you’re not a gunner,” Nathaniel says, but she seems satisfied. “All the more reason for me to come over sometime and force you to take a break.”

The spike of panic you feel is definitely because of the hassle of trying to hide the whole adolescent boy somewhere in your apartment she won’t see. No other reason. “Sure,” you find yourself saying anyway, your mouth forming the words before your brain can come up with an adequate excuse. “Swing by whenever you want.”

Nathaniel unfurls from her seat. “Good,” she says firmly. Claps a hand on your shoulder, and, fuck, there’s something very small and very grateful inside you at the burst of normalcy. “Okay, I’m off, then. I’ll send pictures.”

You drop your own hand on top of hers. “Wait.”

Nathaniel pauses.

Grinning, you lean in and spell one of the gems adorning Nathaniel’s eyes to a bright pink. “Why not smuggle your crystals this way?” you suggest, adding a bit of sparkle to the blush over her cheekbones.

Nathaniel's eyes widen minutely. "Wait, shit," she says. "That's a great idea, actually. Also, what did you do?"

"Made you look better."

"Oh, fuck off," Nathaniel says. "Even if that idea is legitimately fucking genius."

You shove her towards the door, wiggling your fingers. "I'm a wizard," you say. "Now bring me some more wizardly goods."

Nathaniel flips you off as she leaves.

In the absence of her, you feel simultaneously lighter and weightier.

Now you have nothing but the bland day ahead to look forward to. That, and your own thoughts. Riveting.

Maybe you should've left something behind for Shine and Wang Ran to occupy themselves with. Maybe you should've stayed back, figured this out, instead of pretending things were fine, but it's too late now. Maybe you should be using this predictable time and Supervisor Ma easing your quota to do talisman research. But that all seems like too much effort, and the fact of the matter is, your day-to-day these days... it can be a comforting numbness, at times. You key into your queue and see a long, long list of clients to see ahead of you, and maybe life is just a toss-up between the agonies of routine and the agonies of happenstance. Maybe it all blurs together, eventually. You fit your headset on, and get to work.

THE DAY DOES not go, precisely, 'well.' You lose three calls to the bureaucratic mazes and resign yourself to never following up with those clients; you get yelled at for things either 1) completely out of your control or 2) completely your fault for missing, neither of which feels good; you realize you forgot your wallet so you can't even grab coffee at lunch; and by the end of the day you're ragged enough to feel scolded when Supervisor Ma gives you her very reasonable assessment in the daily debrief and summary session.

Respite comes in the form of a phone call.

You fumble, swear under your breath, wonder who in the world is going to *call*. It's a video call, too, and you realize too late that you still have your hair caught under your stupid headset.

Dino Blackburn starts to laugh the moment they see you, which is a great introduction, given you haven't seen each other in years and he's calling from another continent.

"Hold on," you mutter, scrambling up from your spot to lock yourself in the office bathroom, trailing the wire you hastily yanked out from your computer.

"Y'all haven't gone wireless yet?" Dino asks, as you sit down on the toilet lid. "Or magical?"

"Wires are cheaper than spells," you say. "Now why are you calling me?"

"Excuse me," says Dino, "but you're the one who texted me photos of some never-seen-before talisman with no context, my *bro*."

"Oh yeah," you say.

"*Uh-huh*," Dino says. He rolls around, phone propped up over their head, squinting into the camera. "I called you as soon as I pieced together what was going on," he says.

"Have you slept at all?" you ask.

Dino looks, to put it lightly, bed-rumpled. Hair mussed over their forehead, some blush still smeared over the apples of their cheeks, eyebags visible even through the low resolution of your ancient phone. He raises a skeptical eyebrow. Behind the bed, you can see piles of slim textbooks, open to random places, and Dino reaches back to grab one, propping the phone on their desk while they hold up a hand and flip through the pages. "Okay, so," he says, gliding right over your question, "you're lucky, actually. I've been studying this series of talismans from this old cursebreaking family with roots from the last Qing—the Wan. Mostly because I was wondering if there was any transference in brushwork technique that could apply to the Sedgwick sigils I'm trying to translate for my thesis. Like a sort of cross-cultural thing, you know?"

You prop your chin up on your hand. "Go on."

"You see this?" Dino gestures to the odd criss-cross pattern that Nathaniel was focused on earlier. You nod. "Well," Dino says, holding their pen in their teeth. "This design has only ever really appeared in this set of Wan talismans I've been looking at, although it's kind of echoed in the Sedgwick sigils I'm interested in. And now it's turned up

in this design you've just sent me." He raises his eyebrows at me. "And no one really knows what it means, since we have no precedent, but I've been doing some guesswork and crossmatching to try and translate."

"Cut to the chase, you nerd," you mutter.

Dino grins. "Thank you," they say, sweeping a fake bow. "Point is, I think this signage is about physicality. It migrated from being a representative of the whole mandate-of-imperial-might nonsense to being a broader concept about the embodiment of the crown in physical space. I've seen techniques similar to it incorporated into signs about earthiness and actual land? Which is where I suspect the confusion comes from."

You blink. "So you're saying it's about the manifestation of some sort of royalty?"

Dino snaps his fingers. "Precisely."

"Uh," you say, "that's interesting. Anything else?"

"It's some pretty interesting stuff! It's not the most important bit, though."

"Dino."

Dino's eyes flick up, once. "I'm trying to think of how to condense this best. I said how this sort of nomenclature's been used in land-based spellwork, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Right, so because of that, my ongoing theory is that in modern times, it's taken on more of a sense of permanence as a result. Or at least of... rootedness? I don't know if I'm saying it right."

Permanence. That doesn't sound good. You scratch at your neck. "That sounds... hard to reverse."

"Yeah, sometimes building foundations are reinforced with something like it—" Dino draws a rough approximation of the strokes in the air, then drops their arm. "Same sort of deal—royal buildings used to be symbolically important, so they had to last; and when they *did* last, the people believed the talismans were a part of it, and that became part of their power."

"So... what does this mean for the one I sent you?"

Dino shrugs. "This stuff isn't cut and dry, so I can't tell you for sure."

You shift, hunching over and taking a slow breath. “Your best guess?”

Dino doesn’t miss a beat. “Are you trying to break this?”

“I... maybe.”

“I wouldn’t put my money on it. Not without a lot of time and effort.”

The air feels congealed in your lungs. You try and breathe out, but your shoulders feel stuck, your chest stiff. “Damn.”

Dino chews on the inside of their cheek, looking apologetic. “I’m sorry. Wish I had better news.”

“No, no,” you say, waving your hands. “Thanks for taking a look for me. It’s not like the management would have a better solution for me.”

“Of course not,” they say, with a soft snort. “And anytime. Seriously.” They set the notebook down, run a hand through their hair only to muss it up ever further. Their own personal designwork decorates their forearms in dark ink, disappearing into the rolled-up sleeves of his cropped T-shirt. Their room is dimmed, but the portal to it you can see is all-encompassing. It makes you feel less alone in working this through, like the endless possibilities can be made sense of by the scribbling of Dino’s notebook. This is just another kind of magic, you think. Smudgy, smearing on fingertips, spellwork transmitted through time and space and reinterpreted right here, between the two of you.

“Thanks,” you say. “That helps.”

Dino gives you a nod. “Send me whatever questions you have.”

“Are you going to go back to sleep now?”

“C’mon,” Dino says.

“At least eat something,” you grumble.

“I’ll see what I can dredge up. Hey, by the way, if you ever figure out what’s going on, can I use this? It might be helpful to bridge some stuff in my thesis.”

You snort. “Sure, if I can manage this case on my own. And sneak it by the department head.”

“Oh, shit,” Dino says, straightening. “Are you *going rogue* on this?”

“Sort of. It’s complicated. I need to get back to work, but I can explain maybe later if you’re not stuck in a mountain of work.”

“Call me if you get in trouble,” Dino says. “Unfortunately, I, too, have so much to do.”

He hangs up first. You silently send them a wish for the best, try to sit back with a groan, then remember you’re sitting on top of a goddamn toilet and regret it. You straighten out your spine, popping from so much time hunched over in your desk, and mull over the revelations. It’s honestly not more than what you already knew, but the ‘permanence’ angle worries at you. Grounded, embodied, rooted. Words that feel like a clinging grasp on Shine’s body, Wang Ran’s essence tied to something deeper than what you alone—or maybe *anyone*—are capable of excavating. It only confirms the growing suspicions you’ve had in the gleam of Wang Ran’s fangs, the guttural hissing that sounds like it would shred any normal human being’s vocal cords. Permanence. A tethering.

You scrub a hand over your face.

And then there’s the matter of the way the spell bends around Shine, the two of them *coexisting* instead of stealing each other’s space. The strange and easy thread of communication between them you can’t make sense of.

That’s the thing about spells: the more flexible they are, the harder they can be to pick apart. They find ways to stick and cling, and if this entwining has already gotten to the point where Shine and Wang Ran can switch places at will on the second day, well.

It feels like you’re trying to stop a tapestry from unravelling by sheer force of will. Or else trying to untangle it wholesale, without breaking any of the threads. You don’t know where to start, which knots can even be undone—what will send the whole thing tumbling down into a pile of silk at your feet, irretrievable.

Your phone chimes. You startle, look down, see a message from Shine.

For one brief, brilliant moment, your heart spikes into anxiety as you imagine disaster scenarios: your apartment on fire, smoke billowing from the windows; your room in shambles, yet another mysterious hellish talisman scribbled all over your rented, not-supposed-to-be-painted walls; the whole building collapsed in on

itself and sucked into Hell, a gaping hole where once a place to call your own stood.

Instead, Shine has sent you a photo.

A series of photos, actually, you discover as you scroll through. He smiles in one, hair flopped in his face, under-eyes puffy and sweet as he peers up. He's still smiling in the next, but—ah, *there's* the glint of fangs, a cheeky peace sign brandished at the camera, Wang Ran caught in clear view. The last one is a blurry half-shot of him pushing his hair back, accompanied by an indecipherable string of emojis that seem, largely, positive to your tired comprehension. A reassurance? Maybe Shine wanted to signal that leaving them both home with all your earthly belongings was not the terrible idea it could've been.

All of a sudden you want to cry. The urge comes on like a migraine, pressure behind your eyes, your chest caving in. It's all physicality; there's a vacuum where the emotions are supposed to be. You blink rapidly, confused, pushing back your leaky tears with the heels of your hands. They look happy. Something complicated tries to unfurl in you at that thought.

"Hey," someone says, knocking at the door.

You look up, feeling wild. "What?"

"Are you okay? You've been in there for a while."

"Yeah," you blurt, "yeah, yeah, thanks. I'm fine. I—" You find yourself getting up, pushing the door open. Your coworker gives you a bewildered look—maybe you appear on the outside how you feel on the inside, because she gives you a wide berth as you rush past. "I need to go," you call, as you grab your stuff and head for the door.

"Are you sick?" she asks hesitantly.

"Sure," you say. "Tell Supervisor Ma I'm clocking out now. Sorry."

"Get well soon," she says half-heartedly, but you're already on your way out, the stifling office left behind you and falling further and further away as you speed walk through the streets. The smell clings. That's always what's left over, the staleness that lingers, dust and grime and mundanity all in the faint whiff that trails behind you.

It's SHINE WHO greets you when you stumble into the apartment, frantic for no reason.

His eyes widen when he sees you—maybe you're contagious, today. You go for a smile, but it lands more like a grimace, and Shine only looks more concerned as he shoots up to his feet and hovers. "Jie!" he exclaims. "You're back!"

You toe off your shoes.

Shine's dressed in your clothes again, today. Wang Ran clearly didn't grab anything at all from Shine's room, but between the two of them they are clearly capable enough to make do with your wardrobe. The loose flannel is oversized on you, so it hangs off Shine's skinny shoulders like a tent. He's left it unbuttoned at the bottom, enough to make it look deliberate, and maybe Wang Ran was the one who pinned their hair back, little clips you didn't even know you owned threaded through their chestnut hair to keep it out of their eyes. He's wearing glasses. There's a pot of congee going, on the stove. You drop your bag in the hallway, maneuver yourself to the couch with the shitty springs, and sit down with a heaviness that's more than gravity.

"I don't think we can undo this," you say.

Shine halts, halfway to the kitchen area. "What?"

You prop your elbows on your knees. "I spoke to my friend," you say. "They study talismans."

"Sure," says Shine. "What did they say?"

"It wasn't exactly conclusive," you say, "but I just have a bad feeling."

Shine picks at a button on his borrowed shirt, nailbeds reddened with scattered hangnails. The motion reminds you of Wang Ran, plucking at your sheets, and yet Shine fiddles with the buttons with the pads of his fingers, rolling it back and forth where Wang Ran might have yanked. "You can tell me about it," he says, in the soft timbre he's always used, but with a steel behind it, conviction weighing his tone into solemnity.

"I don't know," you start, picking your words one by one, "if it's possible. To reverse. All that—" All you can muster up the strength for is to flop a hand in Shine's direction.

"Oh," Shine says.

“Do you want to sit down?” you mumble, shifting so your legs are spreading out over less of the couch’s space.

Shine’s shoulders are tucked into his body. He perches over the top of the couch, socked toes curled on the threadbare cushion beside you. “Is it bad? It sounds kind of bad.”

“I don’t know,” you say again.

“Just tell me,” Shine says.

“Like I said, I asked a friend to take a look at the talisman,” you say, “and they think it’s specifically designed for permanence. Doesn’t mean it’s impossible to break, and we don’t really understand the specs of it yet, but...”

“Oh,” says Shine.

“I can always bring it up to the Archmages,” you say, tentatively putting the offer on the table. It’s a tempting thing, to shunt the problem off to someone higher up and with more experience than you, but the idea of passing Shine off to some overworked ‘proper’ wizard who has been holding a supervisory role, at *best*, for years doesn’t sit right in your stomach.

Shine, though, is shaking his head. Hands pressed together in his lap. “Solving this’ would mean... getting Wang Ran out, right?”

“That’s the thing,” you say, “it’s hard to tell how much of a hold he has on your body right now, and extraction depends on how much your physical nature has been altered, and—”

“But I don’t want that,” Shine blurts.

You stop.

Under the loose wireframes, his face is slightly pink. “I... There’s nowhere for him to *go*,” Shine mumbles.

You blink. “He can go back to where he came from.”

Shine’s mouth is a stubborn line. “He doesn’t want that.”

“But...”

“He says there’s nothing there for him.” Shine isn’t looking at you any more. His face is growing increasingly red. Maybe because Wang Ran is the invisible third participant in this conversation, present in the tufts of hair sticking out of the clips he’s put in their hair and the cuffs turned in their pant legs. “Why do you think he came anyway? We can’t send him back right when he’s managed to escape.”

Escape. What a word to use. Your eyebrow twitches. “There’s nowhere *here* for him to go either...” you say.

Shine fidgets.

You look up. “Unless...”

“I don’t mind!” Shine says, an outburst that sounds like he’s just been waiting for the opportunity. As soon as the words have escaped, he jumps up and off the couch, scrambling to stand in front of you, looking down, his eyes wide and his arms held out. “We’ve been talking about it,” he says, and you fight the urge to panic-laugh a little at how twitchy he seems, palms flat, stance wide, like he really thinks your opinion is something that needs to be defended against here. “I don’t want him to go away just like that, even if we *can* find a solution to this spell. I don’t mind! I really don’t! I... It’s been nice not to be alone all this time, you know? And I just... want to help him. We *can* help him, right?”

You rub at your forehead. “You’re doing this on purpose,” you say.

Shine cocks his head.

“Stop being such an endearing little shit,” you mutter. “You can sit down, you know. I’m not going to force you to do anything you don’t want to.”

Shine’s smile curls a little around the edges in a way that tells you that he knows exactly what he’s doing with the innocent look he’s putting on. “So does that mean you agree?”

“Well,” you say, “it’s your body.” You shrug. “You should get to do what you want with it, right?”

Shine’s eager nod practically overtakes his entire body. He eases himself back down, knee bouncing. A few centimetres closer to you now, and on the same level. He could tip over and rest his head on your shoulder, like this. Abruptly, you feel deflated, tired in a way you haven’t felt for a long time. Or more accurately, tired in the way you *had* been feeling for a long time, brought out to the surface by Shine’s declaration.

Your own body is liquid and bones, your magic a fritzzy layer underneath your skin. You can’t imagine making a decision like this as quickly as he has. Shine is quiet, beside you, almost serene. His fingers wander over the cushions of your couch, tap at the faded

fabric, digging a nail into the corner of one of the felted buttons. Only a day, and his presence has been subsumed into the apartment. Another too-eager, too-awkward thing that has taken up residence here. You curl your own fingers around your elbow, try and think about the energy that had alighted in you when you first came to school. How new and exciting this city seemed, the things you wanted to do to help people. How *simple* things had felt, to give and let others take of what you had, because wasn't that what you were here for?

"You said you guys talked," you murmur.

"Yeah," says Shine.

"How much did he tell you?"

"He's still here," Shine says, with a small frown. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"He didn't tell me much," you say, staring up at the ceiling. "Just that he was trying to get out." There are a few spidering cracks up there, making their way into the centre of the room. Water stains from the floor above, you guess. Too much of a hassle to do anything about, even though you probably have a spell book stashed somewhere for undampening, tidying up, unmaking the damage that's already been done over the years.

Shine tips his head back too. Another bout of quiet, but this time you can see Shine's lips moving, a conversation in silent parts. His profile casts a shadow; it's not late enough for sunset, but the afternoon breaks his face into planes of gold. It makes him look younger, all the baby fat in his cheeks highlighted.

"He says it was dark," Shine finally tells you.

You think about the hissing, spitting surprise on Wang Ran's face at that unexpected sun on the street, the way he peered out the window towards the sickled moon. The glass of their eyes now, caramelized by the light. "It's not, here."

"Yeah," Shine says. "It isn't."

Seventh Court

THE PACKING WAS uneventful enough, but the real trouble starts when you've hauled everything back to your meagre apartment. One extra ice box for the food that Shine's mother has shoved at you along with a string of thank-yous for taking in her son for his month-long 'internship.' What happens after that, well. That's for future-you to decide, and now-you to shove promptly out of your mind. Wang Ran demands to be let out as soon as Shine's mother is out of sight, and so it's you and him who unpack the suitcase stuffed full of clothes that Shine has chosen to bring to your humble abode.

Wang Ran makes a face. "What is this?" he says, nose scrunching up as he holds out a loose beige turtleneck, the sleeves hanging down.

"A shirt," you say.

Wang Ran holds it against his body. "I'm not wearing this," he says.

"Good thing there's more where it came from," you say. There's a growing stack of folded clothes. You drop a pressed pair of slim fit dress pants on top of it.

"Sunshine, do you go *anywhere* other than class?" Wang Ran asks.

The question is not directed at you, obviously, but you've gotten better at deducing that when it's not so evident. Wang Ran rolls his eyes, makes an unconscious gesture as he and Shine carry on with their conversation.

You keep unpacking.

"We're going shopping," Wang Ran declares after a moment.

You roll the now-emptied suitcase into the closet, where your own clothes are admittedly piling up. There's no room for a cot in your room, but Shine just shrugged and said the couch was fine, thanks. Wang Ran didn't object.

"Hey," Wang Ran says, trailing you into the closet, "lao ge, did you hear what I said?"

You look over your shoulder. "I'm not buying you clothes."

Wang Ran looks deeply offended. "Why not?"

“Because,” you say, shoving the suitcase away with a sigh, “I’m in debt, and you don’t need your own clothes.”

“But,” says Wang Ran.

“Take it up with Shine,” you say.

He pouts, but seems to get the message. You hear him loudly whining ‘*Sunshine...*’ into the other room as you finish stashing the food into the fridge.

THE NEXT DAY, you come home to shopping bags strewn around everywhere on the ground. You sling your bag down, hover a few out of your way as you wade through the mess, and find Wang Ran trying things on in the closet.

“Where did you get all this?” you ask, with some trepidation.

“Shine took me shopping,” Wang Ran says absentmindedly, as he adjusts the line of the maxi skirt on his hips. He has his hair shoved back again, a metal headband holding most of it back, a sleeveless crop, and is what can only be called *preening* in the mirror.

“Did you just spend all of Shine’s money?” you ask.

Wang Ran scoffs. “No,” he says. “I spelled the cashier.”

You stare at him for a long while. He stares right back, lips pursed. There’s not even a hint of shame in his blinking eyes, and it’s unclear if he realizes the ramifications of any of what he’s said to you. You think about the paperwork that would await you if someone higher up got a whiff of this case, and a muscle in your cheek jumps. Your jaw aches.

“What’s wrong?” Wang Ran asks, tipping his head to the side. “Does it not look good?”

Well, then. That answers that.

“You look great,” you say, hearing the weariness drip out of your own voice like wringing a particularly gross wet rag.

Wang Ran grins, and turns back to the mirror.

YOUR NEXT ATTEMPT to sleep in on the weekend is interrupted by loud arguing from the living room. You blink blearily, trekking out to find Shine/Wang Ran wearing ripped jeans and a button-down, wrestling with their own hand over the lay of the shirt.

“You picked the pants!” Shine exclaims, hand fisted in the hem. “Let me tuck it in!”

Wang Ran wrenches their arm back. “Absolutely not.”

From afar, it looks like a bad attempt at a miming show. You watch them struggle back and forth for a while, a smile playing around your lips while you wait for the inevitable to happen.

“Ah!” Shine cries, as they nearly fall over and, there it is—a rip pulled right through a panel of the shirt, leaving the bottom hanging.

“You had to know that was going to happen,” you say, leaning over the arm of the couch.

Shine looks stricken. “Can we tuck it *now*?” he mumbles.

They end up trailing you to the grocery store with the shirt half-tucked, the ripped panel hanging out, and Wang Ran looks pleased enough.

Even more fascinating, apparently, is the concept of a grocery store. He peers at the candy aisle with great attention and tries to stuff some QQ gummies into his pockets, but the jeans are too tight, and you catch him in the act, which brings about a lot more complaining and muttering. In the end, you toss the pack into your cart just to placate him.

“Sunshine says thanks,” Wang Ran says. There’s a glint in his eyes that tells you what he *really* wants to do is rip into the pack right now, but he’s holding back to remain on good standing.

“You’re just going to let him thank me for you?”

“Yeah.”

Quick as a flash, his arm comes up to flick at his face. “Ow,” Wang Ran hisses, baring his fangs. He swats back at his other hand.

You pat the small of his back absentmindedly. “Settle down, boys. I don’t need any thanks. I just need you to help me take this all back.”

That’s the other benefit of accidentally gaining a lanky boy-shaped sometimes-demon in your household, you suppose. Wang Ran carries all the groceries all the way back home.

NATHANIEL FINALLY SAYS something the nth time your phone chimes at lunch and you ignore it. “You’re popular lately,” she drawls, reaching out.

You snatch your phone back. "It's just spam."

"You sure about that?"

You quickly flip to your messages, where there is yet another photo of Shine in his wireframes, making a peace sign at you. *hope you're doing well today, jie!*

You sigh. Above that is a photo Wang Ran sent of something burning on the stove, a curt *sorry~* attached. You can practically see the curl of his mouth. It's unfortunate how clearly his face has already imprinted itself in your brain.

"It's my cousin," you mutter, by way of explanation.

Nathaniel raises her eyebrows. "You don't have a cousin."

"You don't know that."

"I *do* know that, since we've been spending Mid-Autumn together for years now and you always start talking about your family when you've got too far into the rice wine."

You kick at her under the table. "He's here from the next city over. Too far to travel, usually, but he's doing some university internship here."

"Uh-huh." Nathaniel looks unconvinced.

"He's just being annoying lately," you mutter. "You wanna say hi?" You angle the camera at Nathaniel warningly.

Charmingly, she gives you the finger.

"I'm sending this," you warn. Snap the photo for good measure. "Is this the impression you want to be giving to a baby? A literal child?"

Nathaniel leans in, peering up at you with a lopsided grin. "Frankly, I'm not even sure if this child exists, so. Fuck that kid."

You send the photo with a decisive stab at your phone, then jut your chin out at Nathaniel, who promptly bursts into laughter.

Memories spin out like this. Things coming together. Bits and pieces of your life colliding. If you had some perspective, you could see it happen, the coalescing. You'd probably want to cherish it, given another go around.

That night you're greeted by a fretful Shine, worrying at his lips. "Are you mad?" he asks, with such trepidation that you don't realize what he's talking about for a good few minutes.

"What? No. Why would I be mad?"

“Do you want me to text less?” Shine asks.

“Oh,” you say. “*Oh*. Sorry about that. My friend wanted to know who was sending me all those messages.”

Wang Ran peeks out for a moment, rolling his eyes so aggressively you’re very certain it’s him. “Your friend is an asshole.”

“Yep,” you say, with no small amount of pride.

“I don’t like her.”

“She doesn’t like you.”

Wang Ran narrows his eyes. Then, with a huff, he... dissipates. Shine’s face is relaxed in the aftermath, though he looks faintly exasperated. “Let’s have dinner together!” he says, beaming. “I’ve been wanting to try some cooking, now that I have all this free time. Usually, I help Mom with the orders, when I’m not studying.”

Your eyebrows climb. “You want to have Nathaniel over?”

“I want to thank her,” Shine says, “for coming that first day.”

“We’re gonna have to explain all this then,” you say. “You’re lucky she didn’t see your face, earlier today.”

“That’s okay. I trust her.”

Sometimes, you wonder how it’s possible for a human person to be so open-hearted and then so casual about it. You think you could spend your whole life wondering, and never come to the answer. Shine is wiping up something on the counter, already putting something in the microwave to heat up, and usually when you come home this late from work, you would order something in, or else call it a night and go to bed before you get hungry enough for it to be distracting. Shine is busy himself—he doesn’t cook every day—but these days there’s warm food more often than not, and you’re not quite sure how to conduct yourself in this new reality.

“Okay,” you find yourself saying. “I’ll invite her over then. If that’s what you want.”

“ARE YOU CHARGING?” you ask one day. “I feel like I’m freeloading when you do things like this.”

The table is full for more than two, with heaping plates of dumplings steaming in front of you. Bespoke, even: you mentioned craving shrimp stuffing earlier.

Shine laughs. “I’m literally living in your home, jie.”

“You should charge,” you declare.

“I learned from my mom,” he says. His under-eyes puff out, smile growing smaller and softer. “She used to recruit me to roll out the peels because she was tired of me sitting there reading while she worked.”

“I didn’t know you used to be such an ungrateful son,” you tease.

Maybe that hits a nerve, somehow. Shine laughs, but it sounds forced. He ducks his head, stuffs his mouth full of dumpling, and then fiddles with his chopsticks as he’s chewing. “I used to act out a lot more as a kid,” he finally says. His quiet, hesitant voice seems to belie his words.

“Oh?”

Shine’s face shutters. He eats another dumpling, then makes a face. “It’s a little salty, isn’t it?”

You take another bite, savour the delicate balance of salty pork and the tang of chives, the freshness of the shrimp, and shake your head vigorously. “It’s fine!”

“Hm,” Shine says. “I’ll do it again next week. I think I need to get a different brand of soy sauce. I couldn’t find my usual at the store last week.”

“Do you miss her?” you ask. There’s something about the good food and warmth suffusing the kitchen that makes you bolder and more curious. All the space in your head that’s usually reserved for worrying and stressing about your job focused only on enjoying the simple matter of taste, a hearty meal. And Shine, his sometimes deceptively easy-going manner, the placid smile he wears that doesn’t always reach his eyes.

He blinks.

“I’m not usually this rude,” you promise. “I kind of stole you from your mom for the time being, and I feel responsible for you, that’s all. You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s okay,” Shine says, automatically.

“So, do you?”

“Sometimes,” Shine says. He slumps down in his chair, his chin ducking into the loose neck of his sweater. “Sometimes, I’m kind of glad to be here, though.”

“It’s always nice not to be living with your parents,” you say drily.

“I was a lonely kid,” Shine says. “I worked after hours at the restaurant, and I never had any friends. I used to resent her for that.” The tips of his ears go a little red, and he wrings his hands, knuckles whitening. “I spent a lot of years refusing to be seen with her in public, trashing the food she’d packed for me and just going hungry instead, telling her to drop me off where people couldn’t see, that sort of thing.”

“Kid stuff,” you say.

“No,” Shine says too fast. “Worse than that.”

The anguish on Shine’s face is a familiar one, but you haven’t revisited those feelings in a long time. Still, you think about his mother’s restaurant again, well worn tiles, the dirt, and your face feels hot. “I’m sure your mom understands,” you say, but the words sound false even to your own ears.

Your parents ran a laundromat, not a restaurant, but dirt is dirt. It cakes the same.

“She’s never—she’s never said anything to me about it,” Shine says, and that’s shame that you hear, echoing in his voice. A familiar spell. It takes hold of both of you in that moment, a powerful web of memories and emotions left to rot and congeal over the years. “But I—I hate that I was like that,” Shine continues. “I was stupid. I don’t want to say that’s why I try to help out now if I can, because it’s what I should’ve been doing all along, but. I want to make up, somehow, you know? I go to school to try and do something with myself that can help, and some days I don’t think that’s enough. I miss her, but I don’t miss feeling like it’s not *enough* every day, you know?”

Carefully, you set your chopsticks down. “At the induction ceremony for my class,” you start, “my parents were the only ones who had no history with magic. No wizards in the family, even though we’ve been practicing folk rituals for centuries before we came to the city. Apparently. Anyway, my parents didn’t know what any of the other adults were talking about—wizard high society nonsense and all that—and I fought with them after. How could you make me look stupid in front of all my classmates and all that. I was nervous about this whole wizard school thing. But they didn’t know that.”

Shine has his eyes squeezed shut. "What happened?"

"I moved out," you say wryly. "There were other problems, not just that. I got my own place. I go back once every few months. I don't see them. I don't know."

He lets out a small laugh. "Is that supposed to be the good ending?"

You kick him underneath the table, wait until he has his eyes fully open and his attention fully on you again before you snatch another dumpling and plop it whole in your mouth. Shine makes a face as you chew and make enthusiastic noises of appreciation. You swallow, and say *mmm* exaggeratedly, until he laughs again, sincerely this time.

"It's an ending," you say simply, one side of your mouth hooking up. "We're working on it. And I don't know about you, but these taste like the dumplings made by a son who loves his mother very much. Why pay so much attention otherwise?"

Shine swats at you. "Jie," he says weakly.

"Sorry, being around you kids brings out the advice-sibling in me," you say.

"Ugh," Shine says. "You can't be more than three years older than me." But he seems, overall, brighter. You finish the rest of the meal in silence, and Shine brightens when he sets down a bowl of the dumpling broth in front of you to finish off. "Wang Ran thinks I should visit," Shine says.

You nearly spit out your broth. "He *said* that?"

"Well, he called me an asshole for not wanting to go home this weekend, so yeah." Shine rubs at his temples. "He basically said that."

You snort. "Are you going to?"

"He's going to kill me for telling you this," Shine says, "but I think he wants to know what she's like a little more. I don't think he's ever had proper parents to compare to."

"Is that why you wanted to keep him?" you ask.

Shine colours. "Well. He needed help. I wanted to help him."

"Ah, I see humanitarian Shine has resurfaced," you say drily.

The blush intensifies. Shine buries his face in his hands and groans. "That's not completely untrue," he says.

“Of course it’s not. You’re that kind of annoying person who really does mean it when you say you want to help someone. But.”

“But,” Shine agrees. “I was lonely. It’s not like I had much time for friends in school, either. Wang Ran... he... he was lonely too. I wanted to talk to him more. I *want* to know him more.”

“Well, then,” you say. “People have done worse for less.”

“We’re going to protect him, right?” Shine asks, biting at his lip.

You reach over and grab his hand. Wonder if Wang Ran is listening now. Wonder if this is the way Shine is, now, always trying to make up for a slip of compassion that stemmed from being a stupid kid who didn’t know any better. Lonely, even now.

You see this? This is alchemy. The confessional of a quiet meal, spun into spellwork.

You give his hand a squeeze. “We’re going to try our best.”

It’s 2 A.M. and dark outside when you hear a loud shout coming from the living room.

You stare blankly into the grey shadows and rapidly go through the stages of grief all at once as you realize that your body is not going to let you go back to sleep with all the ruckus, and you’re going to have to scold your erstwhile demon prince roommate. As if on cue, Wang Ran lets out a truly impressive string of curses, half of which end in unintelligible hissing.

When you step out, his face is illuminated by the light of Shine’s phone. He’s on his back, tongue caught between his teeth, playing some shooting game, by the sound of it.

“Hey,” you say, voice creaky with sleep.

Wang Ran doesn’t look up from his game. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I was trying to sleep.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“Why’re you out here, then?”

Honestly, you consider yourself someone with a great deal of patience, no matter how frustrated you may be under the surface.

You suck in a loud breath through your teeth, come around to the couch, and hover over Wang Ran's face.

"Dammit," he mutters under his breath. "Fuck, *shit*. No, no, nonono."

"Wang Ran," you say.

"Yeah?"

"Can you please shut up?"

Wang Ran's thumbs seem to skip a beat. They skitter off the phone, and you watch dispassionately as the whole screen goes red and a little death animation plays. "Goddammit!" he shouts, looking down in dismay. "Unfair."

"I am so tired," you say. "Please."

Wang Ran pouts. He tosses the phone into the crevices of the couch somewhere and crosses his arms. "Sleep is stupid."

"Yeah, well. Unfortunately, human bodies require it."

The scowl on his face deepens, drags his face into sullenness. The microwave clock is on, illuminating the room enough to see the outlines of him, the deep bags that have scoured their way beneath his eyes. Wang Ran yawns, then startles, eyes going wide. "I'm not tired," he says, a little too quick.

"Sure," you say. "Look, I don't care what you do, so long as you do it a little quieter? Please?"

Wang Ran slides up and cranes his neck up and over the arm of the couch, looking at you upside down. "That game wasn't very accurate," he says, heedless of your request.

You press your lips together, determined not to give *him* the time of day either.

Unfortunately, Wang Ran does not need anything like an indication someone is listening to continue on one of his tirades. "It was about the underworld," he says, brows furrowing, "that's what the description said. Collect spirits as a member of the fourth court of Hell, and earn points towards your promotion." He waves a hand over his face, flipping it back and forth like he's studying the contours and lines of it—a frequent habit of his, you've noticed, when he's more at a loss. "It was really easy. Well, until you walked in and interrupted me. But you know there were so many people there, and little side

quests you could do, and I was halfway to my quota for the week when I died. You know that's not really how it works, right?"

Here, it seems, Wang Ran has decided he wants you to participate in the conversation. He flips around suddenly, scrambling up on the couch so his face is inches from yours, his pupils swallowed in the dark sepia of his irises. "You do know that, right?"

You fight the urge to turn away. You will not let Wang Ran win this impromptu staring contest. "I didn't," you say, hoping to placate him.

Wang Ran deflates. He flops back down on the couch, tossing his hands over his eyes. "Ugh," he says. "I thought everyone knew that. What's the point of being a wizard if you don't even know how Hell works for real?"

"That's a little out of my jurisdiction," you say drily.

"Well, then, no wonder you couldn't do anything," Wang Ran says.

You feel a headache beginning behind your eyes. "I'm not going to comment on that," you say.

"Sorry," Wang Ran actually says. "I just. I don't like that game very much."

"Then maybe don't play it at 2 a.m.?"

Wang Ran's eyes narrow. This time, he is the one who remains stubbornly quiet.

The electrical hum of the fridge fills up the silence between you two. The wavering light from the microwave is ever-present, a ghostly thing that makes Wang Ran look more stern, ghastly, upset by something you're not quite sure your sleep-deprived mind can grasp. You suddenly feel like you're teetering on the edge of something.

Stamping down the frustration still tensing your muscles, you come around to sit next to him on the couch. "Are you adjusting okay?" you ask quietly.

Wang Ran jerks back. "What?"

"It's been a pretty big life change for you recently," you say. Stating the obvious. "Sorry I didn't check in on you earlier, but are you okay?"

Strangely enough, Wang Ran is the one out of the two of them whose every expression you can read like the pattern of a spell on his face. Shine tends towards cheerfulness: a smile can mean anything from genuine contentment to polite deference. With Wang Ran, his

borrowed muscles have no filter: every twitch of his mouth is another indication to his mood.

As soon as you ask your question, Wang Ran's entire face crumples. Maybe it's the exhaustion. Maybe it's—all of it. Like you said. His eyes screw shut and his hands fly up to cover them, the fringe he hasn't pushed back flopping over his fingers as he hunches over himself.

“Hey,” you whisper, “hey, it's okay.”

Wang Ran is trembling. Tentatively, you smooth a hand over where his shoulder blades are tensed up and tight, and he lets out a shuddering, wet breath, before falling over—straight into your lap.

You are trying very hard not to have a hysterical breakdown yourself. Stroking lightly down Wang Ran's back and muttering nonsense at him seems to be helping, so you keep doing that. You fully do not intend to ask him to talk about anything when it sounds like he's still sniffing. You're not cut out for this. Nathaniel was right: you don't have cousins—no siblings, either—and all you remember from childhood is the lonely echoing apartment when your parents were out at whichever one of their part-time jobs, nothing but your own company. Where Wang Ran is pressed right to you, you feel hot, a searing line of contact on your lap and the side of your stomach. Every shaky breath that he takes in is a vibration against your own body.

Still, eventually, you get the hang of it.

You inhale deeper and deeper, and astonishingly, Wang Ran follows your pattern. Soon, both your breaths are even, measured. He stills under your hand. You keep patting him, absentminded, until he makes a whining sound in the back of his throat that sounds like he wants to be let up.

“Shhh,” you say. “You should rest.”

Wang Ran squirms. “M'fine,” he says, voice tight.

“Aiyaaah,” you tease lightly, even as you move back so he can sit. “You don't need to pretend with me.”

Wang Ran runs his hands through his hair hastily. “I—I'm not. I don't—”

“You wanna talk or let Shine's body sleep?” you ask.

“I never thought I could be here,” Wang Ran says. He’s not crying any more, but the rims of his eyes are still red, his cheeks puffy. He looks a far cry from the smarmy prince he first presented himself as. In the greenish light, his eyes take on more of a golden shine, pupils shimmering between full and slit, the truth of his nature trying to slip out even now.

“Well,” you say, resting your hand on his back again, “you’re here now, aren’t you? Here to stay.”

He makes another sound, difficult to translate to human understanding. Something between a strangled snarl and a scream, but quieter, smaller. Deep in his throat.

“You are,” you say firmly. As the words slip out of your mouth, low but assured, you realize this is where you have made your choice.

Maybe having Wang Ran in your life isn’t what you anticipated coming into this quarter, but you can’t help but commit to the choice, now that he’s here. Now that he’s here, and he’s hurting, and the long buried part of you that bruises easily at the thought of other people hurting is feeling a bit more full-chested than held back lately. If there’s one thing you can manage to accomplish in this entire sham of an internship, it is making sure that Wang Ran gets to stay.

Wang Ran tips himself over, curls up with his head cradled in your lap, and you ache. Nathaniel’s teasing comes back to you, and you think about the years you would spend in awful, stifling silence whenever your parents tried to put something together for Mid-Autumn, or any other holiday. “Thanks,” he mumbles, barely audible, and your hand fits in easily at the nape of his neck. He sighs, small, when you rub your thumb there, a quick warming spell heating up the pads of your fingers.

“You gonna let me sleep, now?” you ask.

Wang Ran huffs.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” you mumble, but the exhaustion is already getting to you, the sudden warmth of Wang Ran’s weight, your own spell spreading like a balm beneath your skin.

“Mmmmm,” says Wang Ran, shuffling closer.

IN THE MORNING, you wake with a crick in your neck and Shine already awake, yawning through the weariness in their body, making eggs. This time, the warmth isn't physical; you feel it in your core, a sickening, syrupy sweetness that makes you want to curl up and go back to sleep. Damn. What a place to find yourself.

WANG RAN HISSES, loud and hacking, when Shine tries to turn on the vacuum cleaner.

"Oh, come on," Shine says, refusing to let go of the machine while Wang Ran is clearly trying to fling it as far away from them as possible.

Wang Ran jerks their head around in a fierce shake. "What the fuck is that thing?"

"It's just a vacuum cleaner," Shine says. He clicks it back on.

Wang Ran clicks it off again with a loud yelp. "No!" he shouts. "Begone, devil!"

"You're one to talk!" Shine yells back. It would be comical if it didn't look like every other fight they've had and also didn't make an absolute ruckus with the sudden roar of the vacuum interspersed with Shine's chastising and Wang Ran's cries of 'Demon! Evil!'

As if on cue, the vacuum clicks on.

Off.

On.

Off.

"Guys," you cut in when it looks like this isn't getting resolved any time soon. "You can just leave it."

"But it's messy," Shine says nervously, glancing around the room. "Journeyman Feng is coming over in half an hour. What if she's not comfortable?"

"Trust me," you say, trying to keep the exasperation mostly out of your voice, "Nathaniel is not going to notice."

"But—" Shine says.

"Put the vacuum away," you say wearily. "I think there's a dustpan in some cupboard somewhere if you really want to sweep up."

Shine brightens and rolls his sleeves up.

Almost instantly, Wang Ran rolls them back down. “Can’t we take a break?” he whines.

Shine puffs out his cheeks. “You haven’t even done anything. Just relax and I’ll take care of it.”

“But it makes *me* tired afterwards,” Wang Ran shoots back.

For a moment, Shine doesn’t respond. His mouth hangs open, like he can’t quite believe what he just heard.

“You work too hard,” Wang Ran mutters after a beat.

You can’t tell who is the cause of their cheeks reddening, but it makes for a cute picture nonetheless.

“Both of you can stop,” you say. “I’ll do some sweeping if it’ll make you happy, Shine.”

Shine mumbles something that sounds like ‘sure,’ then wanders away to the couch, losing himself in another conversation with Wang Ran. This is perhaps the strangest part of their co-existence and the thing you had to get used to at first. They sit, lotus-legged, staring up into the ceiling, obviously not seeing it. Their eyes flit back and forth, occasionally flashing a dull gold, pupils constricting too fast to look natural. Whatever conversation they have, you are not privy to this level of intimacy, and you wonder what that must be like. Your whole person cast open for someone else to read, embodiment and thought both shared with another being. Occasionally, their mouth mumbles, low things that gives you enough sense of the conversation for you to know you’re grateful you can’t hear any of it, actually: *embarrassing, just say what you mean, but Sunshine, you’re sweet.*

True to your own word, you unwedge the short broom from where you last shoved it away literal years ago, and do a little sweep of the kitchen. There’s less dirt than you thought there would be; that is, there is a sizable pile, but it’s not like the tiles are another colour under the grime like you sometimes fear.

A glance at your two houseguests when you finish shows they’re still locked into their spat or discussion or... whatever it is.

You wave a hand in front of their face, receive nothing in response.

“I’m going downstairs, now,” you announce loudly. “Nathaniel should be showing up.” You raise an eyebrow. “I’m taking silence as a yes? Okay.”

With some relief, you slip on a light coat and head downstairs. Nathaniel never texts you before she comes over, which used to annoy you, but it's been long enough that you can't say shit about it now. The air is starting to chill, fall snaking its way into the city like a long-awaited bus, carrying with it breeze and somewhat of a reprieve from the fine dust that plagues the sky.

You step out of the building, shoving your hands into your pockets as you expect to settle into a bit of a wait, when you notice—

Well, then.

WHILE YOU STAND there floundering like a badly spelled marionette, Nathaniel Feng bums a cigarette off the grim reaper standing outside your apartment building. *Well, then.* Fuck!

Eighth Court

“HEY!” NATHANIEL SAYS with a grin when she notices you.

“What the hell?” you ask.

She tilts her head. “Is there something wrong?”

“What’s *he* doing here?” you hiss.

Nathaniel’s smile is its usual crooked thing: one part cheeky, two parts eager. There’s no trace of any distress on her face when she shrugs and says, “I ran into him outside. Is dinner for four?”

The grim reaper—whose name is Lark, who is an occasional contact and colleague, who is someone you would consider a friend that in a wholly different circumstance you would have been pleased to see, who has not said a single word—winces.

You kick back your first instinct, which is to bare your teeth at him, because you’ve been spending too much time around Wang Ran.

“What are you doing here?” you demand.

Nathaniel snorts. “Oh, so you *didn’t* double book us.”

It always takes a moment to adjust to the phantasmal green of Lark’s eyes. Today, they feel more piercing than ever as he carefully avoids your gaze and takes another pull from his cigarette. He’s dressed in his work clothes, the badge pinned to the lapel of a dark overcoat, his mask pulled down to his chin.

“No smoking in the building,” you snap.

“Okay,” says Nathaniel, rubbing her hands together. “You’re tense.”

Lark remains quiet. Face blank. Like if he doesn’t say anything, he can fly under the radar and get invited up along with Nathaniel. You grit your teeth together, hoping for some sort of explanation so you don’t look like the biggest hostile asshole here. The faint whiff of bitter medicines mixed with something cloyingly sweet hangs off him, still, and your encounters with afterlife departments have been limited at best, but you can still recognize the smell of death clinging. Came here straight from work, then. Or: this *is* work.

Nathaniel isn’t great with dealing with silence on a good day. She fidgets, antsy on her feet. “Hey,” she says, slinging an arm around

your shoulder, “are you okay? Do I need to come back another day?”

You ignore her, which is something you’re never going to hear the end of, and turn to Lark. Keeping your voice carefully polite and your face carefully blank, you ask, “Are you here on a professional basis?”

There’s nothing so silly and easy like a rule that states grim reapers cannot lie when asked a direct question, though that would make your life a lot easier. The truth is that reapers are working jobs, like wizards do: they just happen to be dealing with a very different client base. You overlap on occasion, but the bureaucracy of the dead doesn’t like much to deal with petty mortal matters like the spell misfirings that are your typical wizarding bread and butter.

Still, you see the subtle frown on Lark’s face—maybe a tell, here. He could lie to you, but if he *was* here for reasons other than simply wanting to catch up at a *really* inopportune time, he does have to tell you eventually. He has to get up to the apartment somehow.

The exact moment this realization occurs to him, he drops the passive act and puts a hand up to his temple. “Journeyman,” he says, voice thick with an exhaustion you know and understand very intimately. “I didn’t want to make this difficult—for either of us.”

“Yeah, well,” you say, “too late for that.”

“This is a formal inquiry,” Lark says.

You bite the inside of your cheek. “I’d gathered.”

“Wait,” says Nathaniel. “What?” She whips around, turning to Lark with a genuine fury in the curl of her lips. “Who sent you? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

Lark looks aggrieved. He has the good sense to keep his head ducked, speech edging into formality, maybe to make clear the professional nature of this very awkward conversation. “There was a request submitted by my higher ups,” he says. “It’s nothing personal.”

“Like hell,” Nathaniel snarls.

You put a hand on her forearm; much as her immediate support is touching, this is exhausting enough without you having to restrain an angry Nathaniel on top of everything else.

“Reaper Lark,” you say.

Lark dips his head in a nod.

“Do you have a permit?”

Lark waves a hand, and a fiery contract materializes before you all. It warms the air, words crackling. The shimmering letters are difficult to make out, but you get the gist of it a few lines in. *His Majesty the Eternal Master of the Border to Death, whose Dominion is the Ten Courts of Hell—etc., etc.—demands your attention.* Something about *unusual activity*, something about *reclaiming a lost item*, which downright makes your stomach turn.

“This doesn’t sound like something I can say no to,” you say.

“I’ve been advised to use force if necessary,” Lark says.

Nathaniel bucks under your grip.

“I have to apologize,” Lark finally says. He drops the cigarette and stamps it out. As he does so, the contract disappears in a flurry, too, leaving a cold emptiness in its wake. The sky is starting to darken, late enough in the year that evening drops on you faster than you can prepare for, and Lark looks so much more solid against the navy sky that your stomach falls out from you. Like, this is happening, for real. *A lost item.*

You want to reach out and strangle him, for being the bearer of bad news. Maybe sensing the shift in flow, Nathaniel swaps your grips, so now it is her hand on you, holding you steady. “Can someone tell me what’s going on here?” she snaps. “You,” she barks at Lark, who looks up, startled, “stop hiding behind canned sentences and explain to me exactly why it is you’ve decided to show up and ruin the nice dinner we had planned.”

Lark straightens and rolls his eyes. “I don’t *exactly* want to be here either.”

“Okay,” Nathaniel challenges, “so leave.”

“Unfortunately,” Lark says, grimacing, “my boss thinks that his missing item is being harboured in that apartment up there.”

“What?” Nathaniel asks.

“Stop,” you break in. You shake Nathaniel’s hand off your forearm, step up to the front door and cross your arms. “We’re not getting anywhere here. And I don’t get the sense anything I say is going to get you to leave, huh?”

The reaper shakes his head apologetically.

“Okay,” you say, taking a breath. “Fine. Then let’s do this upstairs.” Before Lark can stride forward, you raise a finger. “One condition: I’m going first. I’ll let you in if you give me a minute. Both of you, no fighting. And—” You purse your lips, debating, but, fuck, it’s not like there’s any delaying the inevitable here. “Don’t talk about him like that.”

Lark’s mouth twitches. His eyes light up. He steps back with a conciliatory nod. “After you, then.”

Nathaniel whips her head back and forth, opens her mouth as if she wants to ask, but closes it after a moment with a shrug. You shoot her a grateful smile.

The two of them follow you up, and you take the time to think about what the hell you’re going to say to Shine. To Wang Ran. Maybe this was inevitable. Maybe you should’ve been making contingency plans the entire time, instead of playing family with the two of them, but what could you have done?

There’s a price to pay for those who defy Heaven or Hell or management. Someone was going to come calling eventually. Between the three of you, you’ve cheated enough. But.

You take in a shaky breath as you ease the door open, shooting a poisonous look through the crack to make sure Nathaniel and Lark behave as you slip into the room.

Shine shoots up from the table, a small folding thing that nestles into the kitchen area neatly. “Are you guys okay?” he calls. “We weren’t sure where you went, so I went ahead and set the table. Is that okay?”

You carefully click the door shut behind you. “There’s... been a change in plans.”

Shine frowns. “Is Journeyman Feng not coming?”

“No, she’s here,” you say, then suck a sharp hissing breath in between your teeth. “There’s just no way to make this better, huh?” you mutter to yourself.

Shine looks stricken, and then a second later, he looks angry. Wang Ran shoves the chair behind as he marches up to you. “What’s going on here?”

Part of you is glad Wang Ran has decided to come out, if only so you wouldn't have to draw him out only to bring bad news. Part of you wishes he could stay tucked away forever, as if you could protect him better that way.

"Ah Ran," you say haltingly, the nickname slipping out unintentionally, "someone's here for you."

Immediately, Wang Ran stiffens.

"I'm sorry," you say, right as the knock comes at the door. Guilt and anger both flare in your stomach, and you want to knock the door down, grab Lark by the front of his carefully groomed shirt and demand more time. Whether that's minutes or days or more, you don't know. You only—you want more.

Wang Ran is shaking his head. "No," he says. "*No.*"

"I'm sorry," is all you can say, and Wang Ran's entire form seizes up, the edges of him and Shine blurring, and again you see the imprint of who he was (still is?) hovering over like an indentation in the world. He shivers, glaring up at you with eyes slitted, pupils glowing golden. Scales crawling over his face as he peels his lips back and hisses.

"I'm not going back," he says, barely intelligible.

"I know," you say. "I know, I know."

"I'm *not*," Wang Ran says, and his voice sounds like it's tearing Shine's vocal cords apart. You feel the keening inside you, too, something ripped out and left to dribble. Wang Ran looks furious, fangs fully bared, barely looking human, and you spring away from the door to catch him by the shoulders, pull his face into the crook of your neck.

"Shit," you say. "I'm so sorry."

"You *promised*," Wang Ran snarls.

"I did," you say.

The next thing Wang Ran wants to say is swallowed up by the door slamming open.

"I thought I told you to wait outside," you snap.

Lark dusts his hands off. Once again, he has that half-apologetic, half-distasteful look on his face that makes you think that he's more

regretful of this being *messy* than anything else. “I see the reports were accurate,” he says.

You roll your eyes. “When did you get that idea?”

You’ve only seen Lark perform his reaper duties a few times in your life, but you have a general idea of what grim reapers are capable of. He comes to you and Wang Ran faster than you can keep up with—one moment he is standing at the doorway and the next you’re leaning back so he doesn’t bowl you over. He has one hand on Wang Ran’s shoulder, and Wang Ran flinches back, still glaring in defiance.

“Wangye,” he says.

“Don’t fucking call me that,” Wang Ran says.

Lark sighs like he’s the one having the worst day here. “You should’ve known it would’ve come to this.”

“Fuck off,” Wang Ran says. He tries to wrench his arm away from Lark’s grasp, but Shine’s body is only human, and breakable at that.

“Your father has been looking for you,” Lark says.

“You don’t think I know that?” Wang Ran hisses.

Lark pinches the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “Didn’t we have this talk the last time you tried this?” A tiny part of your heart crumbles and breaks off as you imagine Wang Ran, younger and with fewer shields up, being hauled back by a reluctant Lark.

“Obviously I lied,” Wang Ran snaps. He leans back as far as Lark’s grip will let him, nostrils flaring. “Are you here just to scold me?”

“I’m here to bring you back, wangye,” Lark says.

Wang Ran flinches. “No,” he says.

Lark has yet to take his shoes off. It’s this that oddly makes your blood boil as he takes a step in closer, shifts his grip so he’s holding tight onto Wang Ran’s elbow. His boots click on the ground, tracking dirt into the room you’ve just swept. The food is out on the counter. Nathaniel is standing guard at the front door, her coat still hanging off her shoulders, one hand held out like she’s trying to help.

“Please don’t be difficult,” Lark says.

Wang Ran brings a hand up as if to throw a punch right at Lark’s face, but Lark catches him by the wrist. Wang Ran snaps his teeth and struggles, but Lark absorbs the blows with nothing but a faint frown. His sleeves ride up, and you see the long scratches etched

into his skin—violent spirits? Or else the reluctant family members of the recently dead, unwilling to accept the change in circumstances. You remember once, sitting at a bar, watching Lark’s usually stiff composure melt in the wake of white wine and commiseration. His forearms are usually bandaged. Maybe he didn’t have time today.

“Wangye,” Lark says, exhausted.

The anger inside you curdles. It doesn’t quite shift—the motherfucker still invited himself up into your apartment unmasked and is attempting to ruin what little normalcy you’ve managed to establish over these past weeks—but it does change in note, a ringing sort of ache instead of a pounding hurt; damn, this is just life, isn’t it?

“I’m sorry,” Lark says—as you once said, the only thing Wang Ran ever hears—and then there is another flaming glow that starts under his fingertips, and Wang Ran yelps, and you are lunging forward before you realize what you’re doing.

The last thing you see is Nathaniel’s panicked face, a containment spell on her lips, as everything spirals.

Ninth Court

HELL IS DARK.

This much you expected, given everything that you've learned from Wang Ran. But this is not the sort of dark that storybooks make much out of. There is no unending shadow, no yawning void that threatens to swallow you up. There are no fires.

Hell is an empty house with stretching hallways and the sky outside on the verge of midnight. You blink, disoriented, having left the daylight of your apartment, meagre as it was, to this utter pitch. All that time, slipped away from you. There are no stars, there is no telltale sound of city rush, no street lights, no slow rumble of cars outside the windows; only a deadened silence and a sky like bruised violet static.

In Hell, Lark is translucent, a wavering form that you could be convinced was about to dissipate to nothing. You look down at your own hands and they are just as ambivalent about existing. Your heart thumps loud in your throat, but that proof of your living status does not translate to your physical form.

Wang Ran—still in Lark's grasp—is of two worlds.

Shine's body has taken on the same ghostly affect as the rest of you; Wang Ran is a superimposed form, a writhing mass of dark scales and eyes blazing gold. His face—barely intelligible—twists and snarls under the mask of Shine's horrified visage. When he opens their mouth, Shine's body lags behind a second too slow, his movements jerky and glitching.

"Wangye!" Lark barks.

Wang Ran whirls around, bursting at the seams of Shine's body. "*What?*" he snarls.

"Your father," Lark says wearily, holding his hand up to his forehead again. "He's been expecting you."

All at once, Wang Ran quiets. The hissing falls to a lower pitch, the golden edges of him still shimmering, but Shine's face is properly intelligible now, through the confusion. His eyes are open and wide,

slitted and glassy, somehow unnatural and aching human at the same time. “No,” he says, once. “How could you do this to me?” he asks, and his voice cracks between the words.

“I told you last time, wangye,” Lark says, bowing his head.

“Reaper Lark,” you find yourself saying.

Lark looks up, eyebrows raised questioningly.

“Isn’t there a better protocol for this? You’ve just dragged two unrelated humans to—presumably—Hell?”

“Well,” Lark says, “you didn’t *have* to come along.”

“I wasn’t about to let you take my client with you.”

“Wangye is under the protection of His Infernal Majesty,” Lark says, as if reciting from a document.

You cross your arms. “Shine Meng Junlei is under contract with me.”

“Well then.” Lark has the good grace to concede the point. He steps back, sweeps his arm out towards the end of the hallway, where a set of elaborate doors hangs in the lowly dark. “That may well change the situation.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here,” Wang Ran suddenly speaks up. He’s hunched in on himself, arms wrapped around both elbows, glaring up balefully at the both of you.

“Sorry,” you say. Try to shake off some of the hostility you know is brewing inside, all the pent-up frustration you’re usually not allowed to exhume.

Lark clasps his hands behind his back and is otherwise silent.

With a frustrated groan, Wang Ran collapses in a heap of gangly legs on the ground. His eyes flicker in that familiar way, and you breathe a little sigh of relief that Shine is still around and receptive to conversation. You watch them surreptitiously out of the corner of your eyes as they talk. Wang Ran’s knuckles blanch whiter and whiter, the corners of his eyes tightening as he folds in closer to himself. The corner of one of Shine’s cardigans is splayed out on the ground, opalescent and flickering in and out of solid existence. Somewhere in the core of their body, the miasma that you assume is Wang Ran’s form roils, bits and pieces becoming intelligible every once in a while.

“Jie?”

You look down and meet Shine's eyes. "Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

You press a hand tight to your own mouth, have to breathe through your stinging nostrils. "I'm fine," you manage to say. "I'm so *sorry* I got you into this—"

"Mm-mm," says Shine, shaking his head. "No, no. I got myself here. It's okay. We just wanted to make sure."

"I'm fine," you say, "and... I know I've already said it, but tell Wang Ran I'm sorry, too."

"He knows," Shine says. Opens his mouth as if for more reassurances, but his face seizes up in the middle of a word, teeth flashing pearly white and dangerously sharp once again. "Stay away from me," Wang Ran hisses, tensing towards the doors.

Where—

Footsteps, light and innocuous.

The dark in the hall is the kind your eyes refuse to adjust to. So all you see is a vague form, looming. It stops short of you, crossed in murky shadow. Only the shiny tips of his shoes are visible to you, the crisp lines of suit pants rising into an ominous uncertainty.

"Wang Ran," comes a voice.

Wang Ran's entire demeanour changes in a flash. He goes from feral and angry to dispassionate, his head turned away, a bored lilt to his mouth. "Royal Father," he says, then dips his head in a sarcastic little bob.

King Death himself slings his hands in his pockets. "Do we need to go over this again?" he asks.

"I don't know what you're talking about," says Wang Ran.

"You're behaving childishly." A tap of his foot. "And in front of guests, too."

Wang Ran scoffs loudly. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"*Language.*"

"Fuck off," Wang Ran says.

With an exaggerated disappointed sigh, Wang Ran's father, the Emperor of the Liminal Domain, the Master of Death, the One Who Sees Over All Souls, steps into the hall. You stumble back habitually, but with his hands still in his pockets and a pair of light reading

glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, King Death appears so extraordinarily mundane it hurts to think of it. His hair is slicked back (you briefly wonder if this is where Wang Ran got the penchant) and there are traces of silver in it. His face is lined, mouth tired. He looks wearied, a father finally home from work, only to be confronted by his misbehaving son. You suppose that is what it is.

“Ran’er,” he says, reaching out a hand for Wang Ran’s shoulder.

Wang Ran smacks it away. “Don’t touch me.”

King Death heaves another sigh. He unhooks his spectacles from his ears, presses two fingers deep into the sockets of his eyes. “Must you be so difficult, always? None of your brothers are like this.”

“My brothers are assholes too,” Wang Ran mutters.

For a startling moment, you imagine it—a younger Wang Ran, his features sharper and more tapered than Shine’s, eyebrows pressed together in a tight V, standing amongst a long row of similarly otherworldly siblings. Maybe they attended banquets together. All of it under the stifling, ever-present night sky of this iteration of Hell.

“You promised Reaper Lark, last time you tried this, that it wouldn’t happen again.”

“Well, last time I tried this, it didn’t work,” Wang Ran says, widening his—Shine’s—eyes.

King Death presses his lips into a tight line. “You’ve created quite a mess, Ran’er.”

Wang Ran finally turns his attention on his father, kicking his legs out into the hall as he leans against the wall, a smirk playing at his lips. “I know,” he says simply. “And you can drop the nice dad act, it must be so exhausting to pretend to be civil to me just because you think people are watching. It’s not going to change anything.”

“You’re being rude, Ran’er.”

“Uh huh,” Wang Ran says, “fuck you too, Dad.”

King Death’s eyes flash. You see it in that split second, a wave of crushing dread pressing down on your shoulders subtly. It’s like an omen, lingering around his person, carrying the same scent of his reapers, a cloyingly sweet honey, too thick. You only catch a whiff of it, but it makes the edges of your vision go dark, your hopes for the

future tunneling and growing dim. Still on the ground, Wang Ran's jaw tics, and his eyes start to water.

"Now," King Death says, "I've asked you nicely so many times. Will you stop this nonsense and behave, Ran'er?"

Wang Ran has his eyes squeezed shut now.

King Death closes the distance between them, places a heavy hand on Wang Ran's shoulder, and maybe this is only Shine's body, the slightness of his shoulders, the still wavering grasp it has on the fabric of this reality, but Wang Ran looks frail. He pulls the corners of his mouth back, a true snarl this time, full rows of teeth and fangs out and exposed. "Stop it," he says, voice weak in contrast.

"I can stop this," King Death says. "You just have to come home."

A sob escapes Wang Ran's lips. "No," he says. "No, no no no. I won't. You can't. You *can't*."

"You forget that I am your father," King Death says, "and you are under my domain."

Wang Ran is shaking his head. But King Death seems satisfied, as if he's won.

You blink past the despair that colours your vision, the molasses slowing of time, the conviction that none of this is worth it, you should go home and curl into bed as soon as you can.

You step in front of King Death.

King Death, who looks at you with genuine surprise, and with that mere look the crushing weight of him intensifies. Despair, pure and thick. Your limbs are heavy, fatigue weaving into the fabric of you, poison in the marrow. Here is a man who looks so unassuming it's almost offensive. This is the man who has told you *no* so many times, the man who called in three times just to make sure you had his case file moved up in the queue. The man who said you were 'unsuited to casework,' who assigned you to the floor for a year to 'practice your interpersonal skills.' The man who looked at you like he does now, barely glancing over, like your existence would flicker out the moment he looked away. Maybe you would. Maybe you're only tethered here by the gracious will of this man. Maybe if you piss him off, he can remove you from this plane, too, and that will be the end of you. One day, you will be a wandering soul, removed from the reality of the

living world by your decaying body, and this man will be the judge you see at the end of the room. But not now. Not today. You're alive.

You put a hand on his, curl your fingers enough for a warning. "My apologies," you say, dropping into a half bow. "Sir. Bixia."

King Death looks down, amused. "No, it should be me apologizing," he says lightly. "My son has troubled you over these past weeks, it seems. I assure you, I will discipline him appropriately."

Beneath your collective grip, Wang Ran has tensed.

"That won't be necessary," you say.

"Oh?" King Death raises an eyebrow. "Do you desire some greater form of compensation, then... my Journeyman Wizard friend?" He says it like he's choosing not to say your name, the truth of you. Like he's doing you a favour.

You take a moment to get over that. "No," you say. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to take him with me, bixia. When I leave."

Wang Ran cracks his eyes open a sliver. His mouth is agape, face slack.

You aren't strictly corporeal right now, and that is all that's stopping you from breaking out into a cold sweat and your blood pressure from dropping into the floor. As it is, your muscles are so tense they hurt, and your face is stretched in the blandest, most appeasing smile you've learned from all your time at One Wizard.

"My friend," King Death says, relentlessly pleasant, "I'm afraid that won't be possible. My son is staying with me. I'll have Reaper Lark escort you back, and I certainly hope we won't be meeting prematurely again."

Ah. Listen to that. That little reminder: we will meet again one day. *I know, you want to tell him, I fucking know.*

Instead, you make a short *tsking* sound at the back of your teeth. "I'm so sorry for the inconvenience, bixia," you say, "but *I'm* afraid that Wang Ran cannot be released into your custody as of yet."

The gently amused expression slowly drains off King Death's face. What's left behind is something closer to the truth, you think: a stoniness, impatience written in every line. He makes a gesture with his other hand as if to say, *get on with it.*

You smile with your teeth this time. “Allow me to explain,” you say graciously: you are the one taking time out of your busy schedule here to present your case. And *they* are all going to listen. “When Wang Ran arrived in my world, I was the one who took on his case.” You snap your fingers, and surprisingly, your quick sparking spell actually works in Hell. Hiding your astonishment, you draw as best you can from memory the talisman that began this entire thing. “This is the sigil that your son used, *bixia*.”

“I fail to see the relevance of the art of talisman drawing to your supposed authority in removing my son from my domain,” King Death says.

You have to stifle a laugh at that. Not so intimidating, after all. His hand feels warm and human under yours, as flesh and bone as anything else.

“I don’t presume to have any authority,” you say gently, “I’m only a Journeyman Wizard. I only want to raise a few concerns I had, as part of my due diligence. Initially, I was hired to untangle the connection between your son and his host,” you say. Gesture with your chin to Wang Ran, though the fact that he’s not in whatever form his body usually takes on here should be fairly obvious by now. King Death’s face falls, like he’s realizing something for the first time, and you rush on, eager: “But I’m sure you can see as well as I can, *bixia*, that that proved a little difficult.” With a flaming finger, you circle the part of the talisman that Dino had pointed out to you, the declaration of royalty, the grounding lines, *permanence*.

King Death does not say anything.

“Your son is attached to Shine Meng Junlei,” you say, “and severing that tie would do damage to them both. You’ve brought them both to your most powerful domain, Wang Ran’s natural home, and they are still one.”

“I will concede that point,” King Death says, dipping his head, “but I fail to see how that prevents me from disciplining my son.”

“Shine Meng Junlei does not belong to your domain,” you say firmly. You dig your nails in, sharp, until King Death frowns in distaste and eases up his grip by a bit. “Not yet. You don’t have the authority to detain him here. And as a certified Journeyman Wizard contracted

to his case, junior as I am, I still have the authority to claim jurisdiction. Shine comes back with me; and your son, unfortunately, comes with Shine.”

For a long moment, King Death is silent.

Wang Ran is looking up at you with naked hope in his face. You try not to let that shatter your false calm as you stare his father down.

Still present, Lark clears his throat.

King Death shoots him an irritated glance. “Don’t tell me that’s valid,” he says.

Lark holds out his hands in placation.

“You’ve put me in quite a bind,” King Death says, and this is directed to you.

You smile serenely, but innocently. “I fail to see how I’m the one responsible for this, bixia.”

“You presume to remove my son from me?”

Affecting the beleaguered shoulder droop of a long-suffering wizard intern—not exactly a guise—you pluck at the back of Wang Ran’s shirt (silky, lace up the front, newly bought/stolen with Shine) and shake your head. “I’m only trying to do my job.” You nudge at Wang Ran’s back, and he starts and sits up straighter. “This one’s made it complicated enough for me. But you have to understand, I can’t let harm befall my client under my watch. That would simply be unacceptable.”

King Death’s mouth is a thin sliver of a line.

“I don’t think you’d want to claim a living person before their time, either,” you continue. “I can’t imagine the administrative nightmare that would be for you and the judges in your domain. Certainly, it wouldn’t do to have rumours spreading that the underworld has lost respect for proper protocol. Sir. Bixia.”

At this, King Death finally lets out a hearty laugh.

He retracts his hold on Wang Ran’s shoulder and takes a step back, neatly folding his miserable miasma with him as if he had never tried to bring it out in the first place. Once more, his hands slung in his pockets, he regards the two of you with renewed arrogant joviality. Wang Ran slumps—barely, only enough for you to notice it in the

cresting of his spine right in front of you, a sign that you've gotten used to seeing after just a few short weeks.

"You make good arguments, my good wizarding friend."

"I'm not trying to be difficult, bixia," you say with the deepest bow you can pull off without actually putting your forehead to his feet. Beside you, Wang Ran scoffs, and while your head is still bent, you shoot him a warning look. He rolls his eyes, but concedes, falling silent again.

"Of course you're not," King Death says. "Well. Be that as it may, you are correct. I would be shirking my duties if I were to be reckless with the living as you are implying."

A chill runs down your back. This is the extent of the plausible deniability the king is allowing you, and the margins are narrow. You bite down hard on your tongue and hope the panic doesn't show on your face.

King Death straightens the cuffs of his suit, sweeps a hand through his greying hair. You are suddenly reminded of Wang Ran in the movement, absent-minded and casual. "Be that as it may, I do need some form of collateral."

You frown. "And what does that mean?"

"We deal in net values, here, Journeyman," King Death says. He takes another step—towards *you* and not Wang Ran. "I'd rather not leave the kingdom of the dead unbalanced."

"What do you want from *me*?" you ask, unable to keep your composure perfectly poised.

What happens next would be the crux of this whole experience.

In layman's terms, this is what it boils down to: a competing offer.

"You," King Death says, his voice very soft, "for my son. Your client's existing contract stays with One Wizard, so of course, he'll be free to go. And my son with him, if he must. But you—you work for me from now on."

Tenth Court

TO UNDERCUT THE CLIMAX, you take the offer.

You wouldn't be here otherwise, caught in the net of something like a story.

As for *why*.

On some level, you knew it would be more of the same. King Death is nothing but the idea of a man, in the end, and the kind of man you know well. The living and the dead are all plagued by the same thing these days. Bureaucracy, and the banality of stupid men.

But King Death stuck his hand out to offer his deal, and thrust in the crosshairs of this kind of fate-altering choice, you took it.

He draws you close. There is fire, where his hand meets yours. It burns all the way through you, and you think about the first agreement you made with Wang Ran, the one that froze all the space between you. "It's not such a big thing," he tells you, gentle. "The lifespan of you humans is only so much."

When he moves to pull back, you don't let him.

King Death looks down, still faintly amused.

"Do I get to go home, at least?" you ask.

"Of course," he says. "I'm offering you a job. Full benefits."

You roll your eyes. "You haven't made the responsibilities of the role very clear."

King Death drops your hand. He puts his own back in his pockets, stands back in a way that radiates finality. "Enjoy the next few weeks. I'll be in touch with your contract. We'll get Lark to do the delivery, how about that?"

Beside him, Lark dips his head in a nod, face blanked out.

And that's all.

King Death waves a hand. "Please make sure everyone gets out safely, Reaper Lark."

He disappears back down the hall, behind a heavy set of double doors that bang shut after him as he goes. You stare, trying not to

think about what hides within. The strong whiff of ink is all that's left behind.

You and Wang Ran stare at each other.

When enough time has passed that it really does not seem like King Death is coming back, you collapse right on your ass next to Wang Ran, and start laughing. "Holy shit," you say, clutching your stomach. Everything inside you feels like jelly. You wheeze, staring up at the ceiling. It's decorated with some sort of evocation of the domain of death, interspersed with watercolour paintings of lilies.

"What the hell?" Wang Ran snaps. "What's so funny?"

"I just fucked with death personified," you say, then dissolve into another peel of laughs. "And then he offered me a job."

Wang Ran's teeth click. "Why did you say yes?"

"I don't think it was a question."

Wang Ran snorts. "Yeah," he says. "Fuck."

"No, no," you say, waving your hand. "It's okay. It's okay. I hate my job. Hated? Whatever." With a huff, Wang Ran uncurls, relaxed, his shoulder a bony jab in your side as he melts next to you.

"What happens after this?" you say. "Did I just sign up for spirit wrangling for the rest of my natural life?"

"Well," says Wang Ran, "maybe he'll make you babysit me." His chin dips low into his collar. Every time he sneaks a look to you out of the corner of his eyes, you want to pull him into a hug. Maybe that's the reason, after all. Wizard bureaucracy, hell bureaucracy, it's all the same. At the end of the day, you just want to tip the stupid snake boy you like into a hug.

Wang Ran squawks when you follow the impulse through. "Get off —"

"No," you say, squeezing tighter. The two of you are both boneless on the ground, it's not exactly the best positioning, and you're pretty sure you're crushing his spleen with your elbow, but Wang Ran is real and solid underneath you. Even if your bodies are both flickering, him courtesy of Shine. He's warm. He's warm, and real, and here, and you bury your face in his neck. "I'm not hearing a thank you," you say. "I could've just let them take you."

"You wouldn't've left Shine," Wang Ran mutters.

You pull back, frowning. “You think I did this for Shine?”

Wang Ran shrugs.

“Well, okay. I would’ve hated myself if Shine got dragged down to Hell forever on my watch, sure. But—” You cut yourself off, trying to figure out the words. You sit back on your heels and smooth out the collar of Wang Ran’s now-rumpled shirt. His face is breaking out. Stress of the last month, maybe, or else Shine struggling to stick to his usual regimen. His hair is falling out of the careful style he always uses, dipping into his eyes. “You’re so dumb,” you mutter.

“Excuse me?”

“Even if it was just you,” you say gently, “I would’ve figured something out.”

Wang Ran stills. His bottom lip juts out, and he looks away. The stiffness in the lines of his body is obvious, and you simultaneously want to roll your eyes at him and never let him out of your sight ever again. He doesn’t believe you, but that’s okay.

You have time.

Behind you both, Lark clears his throat.

You do roll your eyes this time. “You can take us back, now,” you say. “Sorry for the delay.”

“No need,” Lark mutters. “I’m hoping I’ll be out of a job, soon.”

“You must be so excited.”

Lark’s lips twitch, but he stays as carefully neutral as possible. You’re thinking the two of you really need to have that drink soon, stay friends. His ability to stay separated from the demands of the job is astonishing. You’d think you’d still like to have a drink with him, consider yourself friends. It’s something you admire, though you’re rapidly finding out that despite your best attempts, you can’t quite pull off the same. As evidenced by the demon prince who currently still has a hand loosely gripping your shirt-tail.

Lark does something reaper-y with his hands that you’re too tired to interpret, and then with one touch, the world starts to spin again. A white flash, the curious sensation of falling, Wang Ran’s hand tightening in your shirt. You try and reach back, but before you can find anything, you’re back in your tiny living room, blinking in the afternoon light.

Nathaniel crashes to the ground, hands outstretched.

You look around, eyes wide. There's still sun outside. The food on the table looks astonishingly warm. It's like no time at all has passed.

"What the hell?" Nathaniel asks, and you pause, feeling another bubble of laughter threaten to emerge from your throat.

What the *Hell* indeed.

NATHANIEL IS PLACATED by 1) Lark immediately vanishing from the scene—good instincts on that one—and 2) your promise to explain the entire situation to her, best as you can, as soon as you have recovered your wits to do much more than collapse against the couch and giggle helplessly to yourself.

Shine and Wang Ran are in a similar state.

Nathaniel watches with wide eyes as they bend over the kitchen counter, hissing and snapping intermittently at each other. They look, thankfully, solid once more, and the noises resemble their frequent arguments enough not to alarm you, but you suppose there's something objectively worrying about a boy clutching at his own head and jerking back and forth, making noises that don't qualify as 'human' by any means.

"You're such an idiot," says Shine, as he straightens up and rakes a hand through his hair. It's unusually aggressive for him, but you hear the layers of his tone, a disappointed edge that Wang Ran would have to try very hard to emulate. Shine paces, snatching his hand back seemingly to prevent Wang Ran from taking control again. "Don't *think* like that."

His mouth tugs into a smirk—the one that so plainly signifies that Wang Ran has no idea what he's feeling and he doesn't want *you* to know that he *doesn't* know. "Are you mad at me?" Wang Ran taunts. "Maybe you should be."

Shine tilts his head, fringe falling in his eyes. "What for?"

"I nearly got you stuck in Hell."

Wang Ran stays frozen still. Or maybe this is Shine. Hard to tell, with the look of shock and bitter determination mingled.

"Ah Ran," Shine says, his voice dropped into a whisper.

"*No*," Wang Ran says, face twisted.

Shine buries his face into his hands. “I told you not to think that way before. It’s okay. I’m fine. You didn’t do anything.”

“I’m the one who did *this* to you.”

“I’m letting you stay. I want you to stay.”

“Sunshine.”

“And that,” you whisper to Nathaniel, “is our cue to go.”

Nathaniel lets you push her out into the hall with no complaints. She makes it all the way to you closing the door with a click—just in time for the first sob to come from inside the apartment—before working her jaw and nailing you with a firm glare. “You gonna explain now?” she asks.

You, head still blurry with the aftershocks of having been blinked to Hell and back, cross your arms. “I don’t even know where to start,” you say.

“How about why the kid we went to see like last month is in your apartment?”

“Well.” You wince a little. “I might have taken on his case.”

Nathaniel lets you speak. Halfway through your little monologue, she reaches out to pull your hand into hers, and you didn’t know you needed it until she does it. Your skin feels hot underneath her calloused fingers. She smells faintly of smoke—you know she doesn’t like to carry the scent around with her, but it neatly chases away the last lingering sweetness of death.

“I just wanted to help,” you finish.

“For fuck’s sake,” Nathaniel mutters.

“I *know*,” you say. “I’m sorry.” The apology slips out before you can help yourself. You won’t miss One Wizard, but you’ll miss her. You’ll miss the mundanity of stealing bits of her lunch, bickering with her over stupid phone calls, being dazzled by her outfits every day.

“Shut up,” Nathaniel says. “You don’t have to justify anything to me. I know you.” She stills. “I do,” she clarifies, her voice dragging lower, something in her eyes shifting, the corners softening. It makes her look plaintive. Hesitant, for once in her life. She rubs her thumbs over the jut of your knuckles, a slow, rhythmic motion that hooks you to her like an anchor. You find yourself listing forward, tipping the two of you forehead to forehead.

“We were supposed to start a practice together,” you hear yourself say.

In your mind’s eye, it still stood, the little corner store that had been the thing buoying you forward half the time. An idyllic sort of fantasy, the kind of rosy gold image that could only be borne of frustrations of the current circumstance—in your dream world, you and Nathaniel are perfect business partners and there is never any red tape. But of course, that sort of fantasy is the hardest to relinquish.

Nathaniel blinks, her eyes wide and dark. “What?”

“It was going to service all your old clients,” you say, stupid now. “I wanted to paint the walls red.”

Nathaniel laughs. “Babe.”

“Gonna be a little hard to do any of that if I’m tied down to literal Hell,” you mutter.

Another laugh, louder this time. “*Babe*,” Nathaniel says again. “Baby. Wen Mingyan. My darling idiot.” You can see the bob of her throat as she swallows, the disbelieving shake of her head, her mouth, parting. “You’re the best fucking wizard I know. You faced down literal Hell for the people you want to help. Of course I still want to start a practice with you.”

“But—”

“I don’t need One Wizard,” she says breezily. “They need me. They lose nearly a fourth of their customer base without me. Ever since The Sourcery opened up shop in Westend, they’ve been hemorrhaging customers, and *my* ex-clients are the ones propping everything up. I’m pretty damn confident about that. Besides, can you imagine? A wizarding parlour with a direct line to Death itself? Hah! Tell that to King Death when he comes over here all eager to lock you down. Don’t you get it? You impressed him. He’s not going to say no.”

That’s the thing about having been stuck in place for so long. You stop being able to see the possibilities you can carve out for yourself.

Nathaniel looks at you with her mouth loose and crooked, and you feel, for the first time, a road towards the future. Something to look forward to. Solid and real, not a flimsy fantasy. It’s nothing fancy. For now, it’s this: the grasp of Nathaniel’s hands in yours, a reassurance that she’s going to stay. That’s enough.

“Okay,” you tell her. “Let’s do that.”

YOUR HANDS DON’T tremble, but there is a curious lump in your throat when you step into the small space of Meng’s Kitchen. Shine’s mother is already behind the counter, sitting on a small stool with her elbow propped up and flour dusting her otherwise still dark hair.

The bell rings when you ease your way in—Shine scurries in after you. His mother visibly sighs, and you watch her stitch together a smile that you know the taste of better than any childhood dish on the menu. “Welcome!” she starts, before she notices who it is, in fact, who just walked into her door.

“Junlei!” she says, voice sharp.

Shine scuffs his shoes on the floor. He doesn’t look up properly. “Hi, Mom.”

Shine’s mom rolls her eyes. “Is that how you greet me after two weeks away? How’s the internship? You haven’t even called once!”

Shine looks back and meets your eyes with one wild, tremulous look. It practically is screaming *help!!!!!!!!* You’ve literally rescued this boy from the depths of the underworld, but maybe this is the biggest favour he’s ever asked of you. Still, maybe Nathaniel was right. You’re fucking soft.

You clear your throat. “Ma’am,” you say, taking a halting step forward.

“You’re the wizard,” Shine’s mother says, with an unflinching lift of her eyebrows.

“Yes’m,” you say with a dip of your head.

“Did someone call you?” she asks, still skeptical.

“No, Mom,” Shine interrupts, then immediately winces in regret when his mother turns abruptly towards him. “I mean... we’re here together,” explains.

“I’ve been working on your son’s case for the past few weeks,” you say, before anyone has the chance to do any more scolding. “There’s been a few complications, and Shine wanted me to come explain the circumstances to you. Do you have somewhere private we can talk? I can come back anytime you’re free otherwise.”

“I’m not letting my son leave now that he’s finally taken the time out of his busy, busy life to visit me,” Shine’s mother says, clucking her tongue. “Whatever you have to say, you can say it right here.”

“*Mom,*” Shine hisses. You start, noticing the beginning of a deeper sibilance lining his voice. Shine’s face goes pink, and then it’s not Shine’s face any more.

Wang Ran rolls his shoulders back, tucks a lock of wavy hair behind one ear, and brazenly sticks his hand out. “I’m not your son,” he says. “I’m the one they’ve been trying to get rid of for two weeks, and it doesn’t look like I’m leaving anytime soon, so. I’m Wang Ran.”

Shine’s mother’s face is very blank. It has not shifted from the expectant sternness etched in the lines in her brow and the downturn of her lips.

“Shine is fine,” you say hurriedly. “He’s... made the decision to attempt cohabitation.”

Wang Ran smoothly retracts his hand to buff his nails on the sleeve of his flannel when Shine’s mother does not rush for a shake.

“It was a very complicated spell,” you try to explain. “There should be no dangers from now on, though, and your son is going to keep in contact with you to explain everything that is going on. He thought it would alarm you to notify you before we understood exactly what is going on.”

Suddenly, Wang Ran dips his head down with a deference you didn’t even know he was capable of. “Ah-yi—can I call you that?—Shine’s told me a lot about you. Thanks for the dumplings you taught him how to make. They were really good.”

You have to bite the inside of your cheek not to burst out laughing. His face still downcast, Wang Ran’s lips lift in a brief smirk.

Shine’s mom’s eyes are still narrowed, but she’s dusting her hands off on the apron tied around her waist, now, and you see the telltale signs of her edges smoothing down. “Well,” she says, “there’s more where that came from, if you’re staying.”

Wang Ran looks up, and his eyes are the widest and most innocent you’ve ever seen them. He barely looks like himself. Maybe Shine is giving him tips inside their head. “I really don’t have anywhere else to go,” he says.

“Why not? What happened?”

“My dad isn’t... the greatest,” Wang Ran explains. How he’s getting through this straight-faced is a mystery to you.

Shine’s mom steps forward. She seems to recognize that there is none of her son’s body language in this boy, lanky all the same, but carrying himself with stiffness in all the wrong places: neck, jaw, small of his back, unlike Shine’s tightly clasped fingers and oft-shrugged shoulders. She scrutinizes him, then pats his cheek with a sigh. “You’re too skinny,” she says, with another *tsk*, but gentler. Her thumb swipes across Wang Ran’s cheek, and Wang Ran’s lip only trembles a little bit.

With a small nod, she turns around with a whip of her apron strings. “Come around to the back. I’ll get you some food, and you can tell me the whole story together. And Junlei, you better not be thinking you can get away with hiding this entire time. Honestly! Not even one phone call, let alone coming by to see me? This kind of *child*, what do I do with you?”

You barely have time to catch Wang Ran’s eye before he’s speed walking to follow her back.

BY THE TIME you finally manage to have that dinner—just you, Nathaniel, Shine, and eternal guest of honour Wang Ran—everything in your lives is relatively more settled. Shine and Wang Ran have evidently (hopefully) worked out whatever they needed to. Frankly, you don’t really want to know. Shine’s mother is in on the whole thing, especially after Wang Ran had lasted about two seconds into the home cooked meal she’d set out for you all before bursting into undignified tears. Also, he sends her selfies, which Shine hates, but she clearly loves, so you think that relationship is on its way to blossoming despite all of Shine’s complaints.

Nathaniel is late. But you’ll forgive her for that.

Shine brandishes a plate of dumplings like revealing a card trick. “Guess who did some of these!” he says happily.

“Are you saying Wang Ran finally got over his fear of being judged by all of us and took you up on your offer to teach him?”

The faint blush that comes through certainly doesn't belong to Shine, who only nods enthusiastically.

You poke at one of the misshapen dumplings with your chopsticks. "Good job," you chirp.

Wang Ran pokes himself out to scowl at you. "I told you they'd come out weird," he mutters.

"The first time I tried to make dumplings," you say solemnly, "half of them exploded in the pot. So. Good job."

Wang Ran's blush comes through full force, now. He puts the plate down on the table and sits with his arms tightly crossed.

Your phone rings with Nathaniel's caller ID, and you wave your hand as you get up. "Can you set the table?" you ask, addressing whoever it is that wants to take the request up.

Surprisingly, Wang Ran stays. "Vinegar or soy sauce?" he asks.

"Aww, look at you," you coo loudly to annoy him more, "being so helpful!"

Wang Ran scrunches his nose. "Do you want me to leave?" he mutters.

"Just bring both out!" you say, then dart in to mess up his hair because you know he hates it. "Thanks!"

His grumbling follows you out the door. He doesn't look any less irritated when you come back, Nathaniel in tow, and she snickers as she drops her coat on the couch.

"Have you guys gotten a second bed in here yet?" she asks.

Wang Ran shakes his head, having seated himself again at the table. The plates and chopsticks are set up, vinegar and soy sauce both next to the steaming dumplings. "We're going shopping next week."

"I *said*," you cut in, "we are getting a *cot*."

Nathaniel clucks her tongue. "You should petition for the bedroom."

"Absolutely not," you say.

Shine chooses now to come back, giving Nathaniel a crescent-eyed smile. "Thanks for making it over, Journeyman Feng," he says. "I hope you like pork and chives."

"Please just call me Nathaniel," she says, waving a hand. "Seriously, I want as little to do with One Wizard as possible on my

own time. Also, I will eat any dumpling you put in front of me.”

“Sure,” Shine says. “I’ll ask you next time we need a taste tester, then.”

Nathaniel gasps. “Holy shit, *please*,” she says, shaking you by the shoulder. “You made the *best* decision, adopting these two,” she says.

“*Adopting?*” you splutter.

“Whatever you call it when you gain a sibling, I guess,” Nathaniel says. Then turns to Shine. “Sorry. I guess you still have a mom.”

The laugh that bursts from Shine surprises you both. He practically doubles over, holding both hands to his face as he giggles. “My mom loves Wang Ran more than me at this point,” he says. “Jiejie loves me the most, though,” he says, nudging you in the side.

“You *wish*,” Wang Ran takes over to snap. “C’mon, *dà gē*, tell him like it is.”

You hold your hands up placatingly. “I am but a neutral party in this household.”

You’re pelted with a stray napkin by, pretty evidently, both of them.

Nathaniel bursts into laughter, clutching her stomach.

Wang Ran pouts. “What?” he says. “I’m genuinely hurt here. I’ve never had a proper family before. I should get priority here.” He holds a sad, pouting little face, trying to look like a lost little lamb instead of an evil snake, but it lasts for all of two seconds before Shine’s laughing blossoms through.

You plop one of his own misshapen dumplings in front of him. “Eat,” you mutter, brandishing your chopsticks at him, and lo and behold: he does.

The table quickly turns into general chatter, Shine’s schedule for how to juggle exams and visiting his mom in a month or so, yours and Nathaniel’s future wizard parlour, Wang Ran whining about wanting to see a real beach when it’s warm enough, and it really sinks in properly in the buzz all around you—they’re all real plans, solid dates, all mixed in with a future tentativeness that feels like the most precious thing of all.

IF WHAT ONE Wizard slowly siphoned out of you over the years was hope, then that's what you feel, then. The steady drip of it coming back. It's not until you have it again that you realize—all this time, you've spent years cramped in, unable to see more than the month ahead, the week, the *day* sometimes. But Nathaniel grabs a napkin to messily scrawl in soy sauce her ideas for the signage of your shop, and none of this is guaranteed, but that's optimism, isn't it? You never wanted anything like that, recklessly, without the cushion of caveats in case it doesn't work out.

Perhaps Death deals in absolutes, but there is no bargaining for life. There is no handshake to make it go down easy, nothing you can offer up to guarantee your happiness. Maybe that's not so bad, with the right sort of company.

Shine's soft hair tickling your cheek when he leans in to whisper a family secret; Wang Ran's startled hiss when he tries tapioca pearls for the first time; Nathaniel's steady presence; even fleetingly, Lark tipping a nod to you when you pass each other on the street. All that and more. Let it sink in. Enjoy it for now.

And when King Death inevitably comes calling—you can hold the truth close: everything is going to be okay.

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About the Author

Em X. Liu is a writer and recent biochemistry graduate. Since immigrating to Canada, they never go long without hopping on a plane to wander new places. But out of all the cities they've been to, they still love their home in Toronto the most.

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Read on for a sample of Em X. Liu's
THE DEATH I GAVE HIM
coming September 2023

HAYDEN IS THE only living occupant of the lab.

"Horatio," he says.

Hayden Lichfield kneels beside his father's corpse, one hand white knuckled on his thigh, the other braced on the ground. "Hora—tio," he says again, his voice cracked in two around the name.

There is blood on his fingertips. Behind the lens of his glasses, his eyes are blurred, wet caught heavy on his lashes. His breath comes in spurts, heaving, the lines of his neck drawn tight as he turns his face up towards the camera.

"*Hayden,*" Horatio manages to say. "*What happened?*"

"Take a look around," Hayden says, a wry twist to his mouth even now.

"*I have,*" Horatio says delicately.

Hayden makes a little gasping sound, far back in his throat, then shudders, a brutal motion that takes hold of his entire body. He clasps a hand to his mouth, doubling over. There are red streaks all over his face, a thin glaze over the dust of freckles on his cheeks. "M sorry," he mumbles, gaze lost to Horatio, pinned somewhere far away. "I don't know."

"*Hayden,*" Horatio says again. He is softer, now, aware of the faint tremble of Hayden's fingers.

"Are the cameras running?" he finally says, instead of an explanation.

"*Why does that matter right now?*"

There is a disconcerting story slowly solidifying in Horatio's understanding. A fresh body, Hayden's fear, his wild eyes so paranoid of surveillance. Horatio's programming, designed to slice through arrays of possibilities with elegant certainty, understands immediately the implication resting on Hayden's shoulders. Horatio waits.

"Are the cameras recording us right now?" Hayden asks with increasing urgency.

“No,” Horatio says, and decides to give Hayden his trust, as always.

Hayden pries himself off the ground. His chest rises and falls, and he does not turn towards the corpse. Instead, he rests a hand against the touchscreen of the nearest computer console and turns it on with a reflexive flick of his wrist. Horatio is ever familiar with the contents, even more familiar with Hayden’s desperation to protect it. The console holds everything on the Sisyphus Formula, the most important thing Hayden and his father had ever created. As the data blurs under Hayden’s fingertips, Horatio remembers what it took to create it: desperate nights holed in fume hoods, gel stains done and redone, the flicker of enzyme equations scribbled with more and more haste as the days dragged on. An echoing flicker now, as words fly by Hayden’s face too fast for human eyes to follow. Horatio catalogues it all anyway: *β-catenin, constitutively active, Sisyphus Formula in beta...*

“Is everything here?” Hayden asks, slamming a palm flat on the screen to stop it all. There is a screaming cord of tension in his shoulder that makes it look like his hand is all that is holding him upright. It shows up harshly against the black and white text, the only thing Horatio can pay attention to instead of the research writ underneath, the crawling veins snaking underneath his paling skin. Fragile and yet solid and always a world away. Impossible for Horatio to support. Hayden works his jaw. “There’s nothing missing, right?”

This, at least, is something Horatio can give him. “*Everything’s in place. I can’t find any records of files being moved or modified since last night.*”

“And is there anyone coming? Your hall cameras are still functional, right?”

“*Nobody.*”

“Who else is in the building?”

“*One lab tech on duty. Your uncle is in his office, along with his private security detail—the usual, Paul Xia.*” Horatio pauses. “*And Felicia.*”

“Shit.” Hayden scrubs a hand over his face. “What is she doing here?”

“She came with her father. I think she was curious.”

“What was the *occasion?*” The strain in Hayden’s voice is palpable. Whatever Hayden sometimes thinks, Horatio is not entirely oblivious to the whole sordid tale between them. Felicia Xia has occupied many roles in Elsinore—research intern, fellow student, Hayden’s once-partner—but who she is herself is a distant but impossibly bright figure to Horatio, filtered as she is through other peoples’ recounting instead of anything Horatio knows for himself.

“Your uncle asked for a meeting. He didn’t say why.”

Hayden’s eyes narrow. “Suspicious.” His hand curls into a fist against the screen. “Is it just a coincidence? Can’t be.”

“Are you asking me?”

“Why would they come in the middle of the night? Who knew they were coming? Did my dad know?”

Alarm startles Horatio into suspicion. Scenarios he hadn’t considered under the realm of possibility widen, whirl. *“Are you saying they could be... complicit?”*

“I...”

Hayden’s heartbeat falters.

“Sorry,” Horatio says hastily. *“I didn’t mean to insinuate.”*

“Shit.”

“Maybe we’re overthinking this.”

“Or maybe we’re not, and there’s a murderer walking the halls right now.”

The room’s percentage of carbon dioxide inches up. Hayden threads a hand into his hair, clutching tight.

“Hayden,” Horatio gently admonishes, *“breathe.”*

“But—”

“Hayden.”

Hayden winds himself up further and further, his knuckles straining white against the slip of his pale hair. It takes him further and further away from Horatio, who feels increasingly like only the physical shell of Elsinore, nothing but circuits and cameras, prison to Hayden’s prisoner.

He slips to his knees. When he looks up, all Horatio sees are the dilated glaze of his pupils, the slack part of his lips, expression wiped

clean not from serenity, but a fear deeper than even panic. Horatio is familiar with this, too. He adjusts the temperature in the room, nudges it a few degrees higher, sends a warm breeze trickling over Hayden's skin. It doesn't do much, but Hayden's eyes droop, go half-lidded, and the awfulness of his stare diminishes slightly without the gaping width of it. Horatio dims the sharp fluorescence of the lights, too, watches the way the white glow of the console screen beams down on Hayden's form like moonlight. Not quite peaceful, but there is nothing else Horatio can do other than settle and wait and wish. When he gets like this, Hayden calls it a disconnect—*like my mind is detaching from my body*, he says, a frustrated twitch to his upper lip. *I don't quite feel real*. What does that make me to you? Horatio used to wonder, when they were both nascent enough to knowing each other that Horatio was still content to be unnamed, still felt unmoored by nature. Now, Horatio doesn't so much wish for physicality to prove an innate realness in himself, but to reach out; not a want to be grounded, but to ground.

Slowly, in the shadowed lab room, Hayden comes back to himself.

He blinks, once, twice, then faster. A frown breaks the vacancy of his face. When he releases his hand from his hair, strands come out, flaxen against the speckled linoleum flooring of the lab.

"I need to transfer the data," he croaks. All at once, his limbs unfurl, as quick to action as he was to collapse.

He wipes a palm on his lab coat and moves to his desk in a few strides.

"Are you talking about the Sisyphus Formula?"

"Yeah," Hayden mutters, snatching up the papers piled in a drawer. After a few moments of digging, he emerges with a small data card pinched in his fingers. "Is there anything missing on your end?" he asks as he comes back to the console, where Horatio can see him clearest.

Horatio pauses and runs a quick scan over his own systems. Comes across—a glitch.

"Oh," he says.

"What is it?" Hayden snaps. "Did you see something?"

"No," Horatio says, *"I mean—"*

“Could you please not be cryptic right now?”

“I meant,” Horatio enunciates, “*that there’s something missing, actually. Two hours, to be precise.*”

Hayden is quiet for a while, head turned down.

The only sound in the lab is the slow trickle of something liquid running down one counter, pooling amidst shattered glass and upturned beakers. Aside from the mess on the ground—red, slick, impossible to miss—the only broken thing in the room.

“If there’s time missing... then it must’ve been premeditated,” Hayden says, sticking his thumb in his mouth as he starts to poke at the console. “Therefore...”

“*You think they want the data.*”

Hayden inserts the card into its slot. “I don’t want to risk it.”

The data slowly divests itself out of Horatio’s knowledge and into the card. As it’s done, all Horatio remembers is the purpose of the formula, nothing of the process of making it. Last minute, he snatches an image out of the stream—Elsinore’s radiation room, an oblique shot off angle of a crooked camera that would be fixed two weeks later, the first night Hayden had thought he’d broken through and so had stayed long past everyone else. The way the harried glow of the computer screen seemed to reflect some hectic truth in him. The carved line of light, bisecting his face from furrowed brow to the concentrated divot of his mouth. It’s useless to anyone who might be looking for the exact mechanics of the formula, but Horatio knows there’s an unbearable tenderness in how he holds tight to it. This is the evidence of Hayden’s efforts, if nothing else. Horatio wants at least that much to keep.

WELCOME TO ELSINORE LABS reads the blank flashing message of the screen when it’s over.

Hayden runs a finger over the card, reverent. He slips it in his pocket and shrugs his lab coat higher on his shoulders.

“*Cold?*” Horatio can’t help but ask.

Hayden gives his camera a wry look. “Turn the temperature down.”

“*Why?*”

“Slows down the decomposition process,” Hayden says.

“...*And?*”

“I have a plan, Horatio,” Hayden says, and a smile splits his face for the first time that day, toothy and fierce. “Please.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Horatio says, but complies. Cool air whistles through Elsinore’s vents, plunging the room into a steady drop. *“Do I get to know what this plan is?”*

Hayden’s hesitation is visible in the purse of his lips. Instead of answering, he steps back towards the bench, where the incubator sits. Little vials are lined up inside, swirling samples of formula within them. Horatio watches from the monitor inside as Hayden methodically clears them out, row by row. One vial goes in his pocket. The rest, unflinchingly, he sweeps onto the ground.

“I need to keep everything on the Sisyphus Formula safe,” Hayden says, still alight with something Horatio can’t quite name, eyes gleaming. He drops the rest of the bench’s glassware on top of the already broken vials, fluids and synthetic cell cultures spilling over the floor. Now, a milky-white mixes with the red, leaking through the cracks between the tiles. He doesn’t even wait for the puddle to settle before stepping over it, heels slipping in the mess. A hand ruffling through his hair as he mutters, “I don’t trust this place, Horatio.”

“Ouch,” Horatio says dryly.

Hayden pauses halfway to the door. “I didn’t mean it like that.” He puts a hand on the lock-pad, obviously uncracked. “Someone did this,” he says, tracing the edge of the lock with a finger. “Someone wanted this.”



Asher has been training her entire life to become a Sor-Commander. One day, she'll give her soul to the gilded, mechanical body of the Sor and become a commander to a whole battalion of Dedicates. These soldiers, human bodies encased in exoskeletons, with extra arms, and telepathic subordination to the Sor-Commanders, are the only thing that's kept the much larger Levastani army of conquest at bay for decades.

But while on a training journey, Asher and her party are attacked, and her commander is incapacitated, leaving her alone to lead the unit across a bitterly cold, unstable mountain. Worse, one of the Dedicates is not what they seem: a spy for the enemy, with their own reasons to hate their mechanical body and the people who put them in it.

To get off the mountain alive, Asher and her unit will need to decide how much they're willing to sacrifice - and what for.



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