

She shut the door, but the voices below were not silenced. She hurried to the sink, her hands shaking, and opened the medicine cabinet, trembling as she she searched for the little brown bottle. When she found it, she opened it, counted. *[i]Two pills.[i]* She let three fall into her hand, and swallowed them without water. Her throat felt dry, but the simple act of taking her medication made her feel better. She closed her eyes, breathed slowly, and put the bottle back in place. Then she opened her eyes.

*[i]He moved them around again,[i]* she realized. The boxes and pills were all out of order, some opened, some lying on their side out of place, all carelessly thrown together. This could not do. She took each box in turn, closed them carefully, then put them back in the right order, his on the right and hers on the left, and closed the cabinet. She looked at her face in the mirror - *[i]ghastly, I look ghastly.[i]* She searched her drawer for make-up, and applied more concealer to her cheeks, hiding the dark fatigue circles under her eyes; then she put on her pearl earrings, to draw the attention away from her eyes and wrinkles.. Now that looked much better, and there was much less noise below. She forced a couple of smiles, decided they didn't look natural enough, and simply went for a relaxed, unworried look.

She came upon him as she descended the stairs; he was grabbing his coat, face deformed by anger. Her throat tightened, and she could barely ask: "Are you... leaving?"

He glared in answer, then deigned say: "You damn well knew how it would end. It's always like that. I just can't stand him anymore."

*[i]He can't mean that.[i]* "You don't mean that. I know you get angry at each other, but..." she lost her train of thought, trying hard to keep her hands steady.

"No, you don't know anything. You see him every day, and yet you just won't get it. You won't accept it. He's *[i]gone.[i]* That's not the father I knew."

She wanted to yell back, to become angry at him, to scold him for such insensitive words, but all she could do was look away and cross her fingers, so hard her hands went white.

"I'm going," he said, and this time she did not stop him. The door slammed and silence returned.

She stood there for several minutes, not moving, trying to keep herself from falling back into her routine.

*[i]You do not need to open the door to verify that he's gone. You do not need to open and close every door and window in the house to "make the rooms breathe." This is the illness talking. Control yourself. You took your medications. [i]*

"Is he gone?"

The voice interrupted her thoughts, full of spite and bitterness. She could feel him even across the door, sitting in the living room, smoldering with anger, waiting for someone to enter, for something to happen upon which he could turn his rage lest he turned on himself. Her mind went back to the medicine cabinet and she knew instantly - she had always known - exactly how many pills they were in each bottle and box she had closed and put in place, and she knew he hadn't taken his medicine, just like yesterday, and the day before.

She knew what she should do. Enter the room, let the brunt of his anger fall upon her, and ignore it. Simply nod and move along. She was used to it. He would feel better, he would hate on someone else rather than turning to self-loathing, and besides she knew how to shut off his ranting, she just had to focus her mind on something else, clean up the room, set back all the

decorative trinkets he had put out of order [i]again, [/i]and then she could talk to him, soothe him, and...

It took all of her mental strength to remember what her doctor had said, and to resist the urge. Instead she grabbed her coat, put it on very slowly to avoid making creases, and said to the door:

"I'm going out for a bit. I'll be back soon."

"Where are you going?" it answered back. She focused on that. A door talking. A faceless object. Not him. She could resist it. She did not have to obey a door. She did not answer, and walked out the house.

She wanted to go to a friend, but he would be asking where she'd been, and what was she gonna say? That she had been with Adrienne? She didn't have any good reason to see her right now, he would get angry at her for leaving him alone for something so frivolous at chatting with girls. So instead she went to see his sister. She wasn't her friend, but they had known each other for years, and wasn't that really the same thing?

She drove carefully all the way, not so much out of safety concerns than to get a bit more time alone on the roads. Driving was relaxing, as long as she didn't pay too much attention to how everyone else was driving and how reckless they were, no wonder accidents happened, and then that reminded her of...

No. She focused on her small corner of the road, and drove very carefully all the way to his sister's house. She brushed invisible dust of her coat, brushed each foot exactly four times on the doormat, and rang for precisely two seconds. She counted the numbers of steps Celine took to walk down the stairs, and when the door opened she was smiling brightly. "Good afternoon," she said.

Celine looked back at her, puzzled. "Hi. Is everything all right?"

*[i]Why does she ask? Do I look wrong? Oh god, I should have put on more make-up, I should have... No, she's asking because there's no reason for me to be here, not without him, not without calling her, I don't ever just come to visit, it's not normal, so of course she asks, of course she...[/i]*

Her smile twitched slightly as she silenced her thoughts. "I'm sorry to bother you. I can come back later, if you..." she made a waving gesture of her hand instead of actually finishing her sentence.

"No, no, it's all right. Do come in," Celine said and stepped back, letting her come inside her house. "I'll prepare some tea."

The two armchairs in her living room were too stiff to be comfortable, and the tea was too hot when it was served, but she sat and drank it anyway, the scalding taste distracting her.

They exchanged meaningless chatter, and she let her mind run empty, staring without thought at the decor and delivering automated lines without thinking input. It was relaxing, but it could only last for so long. After a while the chatter slowed down as they ran out of platitudes, and the room became quiet again.

"His son came by today," she said when she could not postpone it anymore. She saw Celine's

features harden, a shadow cast over her face.

"What did he have to say?"

"I wasn't there. I let them talk, and... Well it ended as usual. They got into a fight, and he bolted out."

"That ingrateful little bastard," Celine said, fisting her hands. "He owes him everything. How dare he..."

"I know," she said to cut off the coming rant. "I know, but it's him, too. Malcolm is so... Angry..."

She looked at her with wide eyes, hoping for a sign of recognition, of understanding that this anger was not only against his son, that it was hurting her...

"And well he should be, when he's treated like this by his own son!" Celine's eyes flared with anger, and she sat back in her chair, fearing her gaze.

"Yes," she muttered. "Yes, it's not right to treat your father that way."

"Look at you," Celine added, and a chill went down her spine. "You're so pathetic, so submissive, so insignificant. You're not worth his love or attention. He's only staying with you because he thinks he can't find someone else, but even there he's wrong. He should have left you ages ago."

"I beg your pardon?" she said, eyes wide with fear. Celine looked back at her quizzically, and she realized that she had not actually said anything.

*[i]She's thinking it though. I know it. I know it because she's right.[/i]*

She left soon after that, exchanging polite words and glossing over the fact that the discussion had been entirely pointless and she could just as well have given her a phone call for what little she'd had to say. She was back home before it was dark, the sun casting everything in red and orange. She took several deep breaths while parking her car, calming herself down. It was gonna be all right. This was just one bad day, it would be over soon.

She came inside to the sound of the television, and sneaked into the kitchen where she began preparing dinner. He probably had heard her car; but she did not want to go and talk to him right now. Instead she took her time preparing rice and pork, and made two plates that she carried into the living room.

He was looking away from her, not even at the television but at the window. It was a sign she knew well - a sign that he'd just looked away when she entered the room, rather than let her see him staring at the shelf on the opposite wall, with all its silver and bronze and, here and there, gold. She pretended she didn't see anything, and set the plates on the table, and they started eating in silence, the television replacing their conversation.

He didn't ask where she'd been, and that made her heart beat a little faster. She had been wrong to think that of him. He respected her life and privacy; he was not the tyrant her fears made him out to be. He still loved her, and he trusted her. It made her blush, but she did not say anything.

"Will he come back?" he asked suddenly. She did not need to ask who he was talking about.

"Of course he will. He's your son."

He chewed on his meat for a moment, ruminating in silence.

"He's not. He's the son of the man I used to be. And he sees me as I am now, broken, lame."

Her hands were shaking. She considered carefully what to say; she had to take care not to

offend him, not to make him angry. But if she was to elusive, he would be angry as well, thinking she was trying to avoid the conversation.

"Don't say that. You haven't changed. You're still the same, you're the man I married. I..."

"Don't!" She shut up instantly. "Do you think I don't see the way you look at me? Do you think I don't realize how you [i]pity[i] me? I know why you're still here. I know..."

Tears rushed to her eyes. "Please, Malcolm, stop. I never meant to say..."

"Shut up. Please shut up. Go away. I'll carry myself to bed."

She protested, made a gesture to help, but he already moved his wheelchair away from the table and to the door. She stayed here for several minutes, silent, then finally took the plates and brought them back to the kitchen.

She saw his empty wheelchair down the stairs as she came back to the entrance corridor, and felt a chill. She rushed to the stairs to find him two thirds of the way upstairs, panting, seating on one of the steps. She held back a shout, and hurried to his side, grabbing him by his shoulder, helping him stand up.

"What are you doing?!" She scolded him; he had been crying, but his answer came back through gritted teeth, without a sob.

"Just... Help me get up. I can... I can get up there."

"No. No you can't." He fell quiet, and she helped him climb the last few steps. Then she helped him walk to the bedroom, and sat him on the bed. He said nothing as he took off his clothes to put on his pajamas. She knew what he was thinking - how he hated himself for being so weak, how he wanted to just ignore it and 'power through', and how the impossibility of doing so burned him like fire.

And how he hated her and himself for needing her help.

She looked away from him and went to the bathroom. There she sighed deeply, eyes closed, cutting herself off from everything around her. [i]Breathe. Calm yourself down. Control your impulses.[/i] She could do it. She knew she could. She was getting better, and seeing a doctor, and she had taken her medications. She opened her eyes.

Her reflection was looking at her from the mirror, shaking her head disappointedly.

"Wake up, Xiaolan. None of this is real."

She let out a yelp and instinctively threw a hairbrush at the mirror. It bounced off, and when she looked again, her reflection was perfectly ordinary - her scared, pathetic, tired self. She took a few moments to regain her composure, then took another pill and prepared herself to go to sleep. When she walked out of the bathroom, Malcolm was already asleep; she slipped between the sheets without disturbing him, and fell asleep within seconds.

Adrienne came the following evening, as she was preparing to cook. As always, Xiaolan did not expect her until she opened the door on the smiling red-head in her denim jacket.

"Hi. I'm taking you. Girl's night out. Put on something nicer."

"...good evening, Adrienne," was all she could answer at first.

"What are you doing still here? Up you go! Wardrobe, nice clothes, make-up. Clock's ticking!"

Xiaolan sighed. "You should have called me. I can't come right now; Malcolm is waiting and I need to prepare diner."

"Listen, girl, if I called you in advance you'd have time to find an excuse to bail out on me. I'm

not leaving you that chance. We're going out, both of us."

"I can't!" she said, more harshly.

"Why? Can't Malcolm cook his own meal?"

"Of course he can." Her answer was defensive, rejecting the suggestion that her husband might be so diminished he couldn't even cook for himself.

"Then we're going. I'll leave you five minutes, then I'm dragging you outside by the ear."

Xiaolan shook her head. Adrienne's presence was exhausting... And yet, liberating, in a way. There was part of her that longed to give someone else the burden of responsibility for her actions.

"All right. Give me five minutes."

"That's my girl," her friend answered with a wide grin.

At first, Xiaolan had feared that Adrienne would take her to a night club or some other loud, chaotic venue of the same type. She knew very well she could not handle so much confusion and disorder around her, and she would have a panic attack within minutes. Besides, she was long past the time of going out to dance, sing, and meet strangers. Only Adrienne refused to admit that this time was gone too, and so she feared to be taken into the wake of her reckless partying. But such was not the case; instead, Adrienne took her to a bar downtown, where she greeted the barman with a smile and a wave of her hand, laughed at a customer's joke, and sat down to a two-person table with all the ease and confidence of someone who would own the place.

"I thought you'd take me someplace... Wilder," Xiaolin mused while carefully putting her coat on her chair.

"I'd like to. I don't handle club music very well these days. Tends to bring up memories."

She did not ask any question. She understood.

"Listen," Adrienne said, staring at her intently. "Is everything all right?"

She shrugged off the question. "I don't know what you mean. I'm not better or worse than any other day, if that's what you mean."

"No. That's bull. I've known you for a long time, Xiao. You're not well. You're never well. But I can tell right now, you're *[i]worse.[/i]*"

"That's... That's none of your business. And you're wrong."

"Yeah? I don't think so. You're not a very good liar, Xiao. Which I guess plays a part in how he can manipulate you so easily."

"You didn't want to go out," Xiaolan answered accusingly. "You just wanted to take me aside and..."

"And talk to you? Yeah, real evil right there. Hooo, bad Adrienne. Besides, I don't see how the two activities are incompatible."

"I am perfectly fine." Her hands started shaking again, so to focus her attention she started tapping on the table with her fingers, counting the number of 'taps.' If she could reach a prime number higher than twenty before Adrienne noticed her behavior and called attention to it, her anxiety would go down. Small rituals like this helped her preserve her calm and not turn into a neurotic wreck.

"I know you're not all right, and I know you haven't been for a long time. He's hurting you."

"Malcolm never laid a finger on me."

"He doesn't need to. Look at you: he's making you vulnerable, scared, defensive of everyone who cares about you."

"You're talking nonsense." But she could not finish her sentence; a waiter had arrived, and she would not talk about anything personal in front of strangers. Instead they commanded lite drinks, and Adrienne pounced right as the young man left.

"You need to let go. This relationship is hurting you. It has been for a long time now."

"It's hard, yes," she said with her most reasonable tone, tapping into her reserve of easy platitudes that she could deliver without thinking. "But every relationship is. We pull through together. He needs me and I need him."

"You need *[i]nothing[/i]* from him. He depends on you, and he hates it, and so he hurts you to make you pay for him needing you. He's insane and you should leave him."

She tapped her finger for the twenty-third time, and stopped. Instead she grabbed the glass that was handed to her, and tightened her hand around it so hard her knuckles grew white.

"You don't know anything about him," she hissed. "You think you're any better? Still alone at your age, never going to marry? I don't think you are exactly a role model, Adrienne."

Adrienne should have been angry, glared at her, scolded her. That's what normal people did when you insulted their lifestyles. But she just laughed and relaxed in her chair.

"Love hurts. I learned that. I don't like to be hurt. So I stopped loving."

"That's a lie. You can't stop loving someone, let alone stop yourself from loving *[i]anyone.[/i]*"

"I can. I did. I realized that relationships - of all kinds - only held me back. Made me suffer.

Family is there so you will lose it and grieve. Lovers are here to betray and hurt you. Friends are here to profit from you. That's why you need to let go off all this. Find peace. I did."

"I am not here to profit from you, Adrienne," she answered, insulted.

"No." The redhead smiled. "Of course you're not. That's why you're still my friend for now, and why I'm here: to help you see. This relationship has run its course. You need to dump him. Find someone else if you need to, or just enjoy life alone, or do like me: take what comes and enjoy it while it lasts."

She shook her head. "I'm not... I can't do that. This life isn't for me anymore."

"In what century do you live, silly? You're forty, wow, big deal. Do you know how many people still find new relationships at forty? There's probably an entire industry based on this, websites or whatever."

"It's not about age."

"No. 'course it's not. It's about your fears and issues."

"No! It's about *[i]him.[/i]* He needs me."

"You can't base your life around someone else's needs. Especially not when that someone is Malcolm."

"You don't have a say in how I lead my life," she said gritting her teeth.

"Right. I don't." There was a moment of awkward silence, then Adrienne stood up. "There's someone I need to talk to. I'll be back in a bit. Enjoy your drink."

Xiaolan said nothing, and looked down at her glass as Adrienne disappeared from her view.

How dare she tell her how to live her life. She understood nothing of Malcolm's life. If he was hurting her, it was because he was hurt himself. Only she could appease him, bring him back

from his depression. Day after day, she built him back, and she hated it when others came in with their doubts and accusations. She knew better than anyone...

She shook her head to chase the angry thoughts. Instead, she tapped her feet on the ground in rhythm, one to the left, three to the right, then five to the left, then repeat. Repetition was comfort.

Someone slid into the chair in front of her, but she did not look up. She had no desire to talk to Adrienne right now. It was only after one long minute that she noticed the gloves on the hands of the person in front of her, and then the black shirt; she looked up to see a black-haired, black-eyed man staring at her. She felt her heart skip a bit, and drew her glass closer to her.

"Hello, Xiaolan," he said softly.

"Hi, Ted." She swallowed, feeling suddenly very uncomfortable.

[i]He's going to talk to me. He's going to lie to me. He's going to hurt me, to bring up everything I don't want to think about, and he's going to turn me into a trainwreck. I need to get away from him.[/i]

"It's been a while," he said.

"I've been busy."

He smiled a poisonous smile. "Taking care of Malcolm?"

She hated that smile. She hated it so much she wanted to leave her drink and Adrienne and walk into the street and just go back home by herself, just to get away from him and every memory he brought up. But she couldn't do that.

"You know it's not like that," she said sharply.

"Of course it's not."

His smile faltered, for a brief moment. She only noticed it because she had trained herself to notice the cracks in her own facade. This threw her off; his facade was always perfect.

"I didn't know you'd be here. Adrienne and you come to the same places?"

"Adrienne is here too?" he said surprised. "I had no idea. No, it's a place I go to sometimes, nothing else. I don't know anyone here."

"Uh-uh." She did not know what else to say. His sole presence was sending chills up her arms, as if a thousand tiny spiders were creeping up her body.

"There was something I wanted to ask you," he said finally. She muttered a non-committal response. "Do you dream?"

She blinked, surprised, and hesitated. "No. Not anymore."

"Not since you have been taking your drugs."

"Medicine. Yes. It helps me sleep, but I don't dream."

His eyes looked at her, pierced through her, but he seemed... Lost, confused. Weak.

"When you dreamed... Did you, some nights, dream that this was not the world?"

"...of course. Dreams are always strange."

"No. That's not what I mean. Did you dream of another world, a world so vivid, so *[i]strong* that you knew you belonged here, and when you woke up and looked around you at this pathetic, miserable place, you thought: 'none of this is real'?"

She did not answer. Her throat was dry, and she wanted nothing more than to get out of this chair, but the power of his gaze pinned her to it, unable to move, and she could not answer.

"I know you did. We all did. But they drugged us, they *[i]cured* us, and we do not remember.

We do not dream anymore.”

Suddenly his hand fell upon hers, and she was paralyzed, as if lightning had struck her; his grip was terribly strong, and there was madness in his eyes when he leaned towards her.

“This world is not the real world. They have trapped me inside this body, pathetic, lame, blind, and made me forget who I am. But now I remember. Soon I will be free, and I will break this shell to rise and cast a shadow over all that exists. And I will see it all *[i] burn.[/i]*”

Cold sweat ran down her neck, but she dared not push his hand aside, not with this violence in his eyes.

She didn’t have to, however. He leaned back into his seat and let go off her hand, then shook his head with contempt. “You don’t see it. None of you does. Fine. I’ll be going.” He got up, and within a moment had disappeared from the bar.

Xiaolan’s heart was beating uncontrollably, and none of her small rituals would do anything about it. She could feel the walls, the place, the sounds all grow intolerable to her, and looked desperately around her - and with relief saw Adrienne moving towards her table. She stood up and put on her coat.

“What’s the hurry?” said her friend upon seeing her up and dressed.

“I want to go. Please.”

“All right, all right. Let me finish my drink.” Adrienne gulped down what remained in her glass and took her jacket. “Tell the truth, I was kinda done here.” Xiaolan nodded, eager to get out, and they walked out the bar at a brisk pace.

“So, where do you wanna go next?” Adrienne asked cheerfully once in the car.

“I’d like to go home. Please.”

“But we barely did anything yet!”

“I’m not feeling well,” she said in a neutral tone.

“All right.” Adrienne started the car, and they both fell quiet.

After a while, Adrienne pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. “Do you know what that is?” Xiaolan shook her head. “There was a cute guy at the bar. I went to talk to him. He was all right. He thought I was all right too. Now I have his number. I’m going to call him, and we’ll meet, and we’ll screw like mad, and then we will probably never see each other again.”

“I didn’t need to know that,” Xiaolan whispered.

“Yes you do. You need to know that some people find happiness in freedom, in knowing to let go. I’m gonna screw this guy and I’m gonna be happy about it and not make it an issue, or a complex, or anything that would prevent me from simply enjoying a good time. You don’t need Malcolm. You don’t even need me. You don’t need that house you share, you don’t need your common bank account, you don’t need his car. You don’t need anyone but yourself. If you could just let go, you would find that you are happier without all these things binding you and keeping you down.”

She tightened her fists and gritted her teeth, trying to keep the words inside, to not say anything. But she was angry, and scared, and Ted’s words lingered in her mind. She, too, wanted to see it all burn.

“That’s a lie,” she interrupted.

“I’m sorry?”



"You know you're lying. Come on! You rant about how you know me and can tell that I'm not all right, and you don't think the opposite applies too?" Part of her wanted to stop now, but the words were flowing out of her control. "You're not doing this because you're *[i]free.[/i]* You're doing this because you're *[i]terrified.[/i]* You're still a scared little girl who's lost her sister and who's afraid that if she ever loves anyone ever again, they'll be taken away and she will hurt even more. You put your life on hold and never accomplished anything, never left anything behind, because you're scared of losing what you're attached too; and you're pretending that this is happiness, but you have to lose yourself in mindless encounters and parties and reckless behavior and put yourself and everyone else in danger over and over again, because that's the only way you can get a thrill when no one, nothing actually *[i]matters[/i]* to you."

The car had slowed to a stop, and Adrienne was staring at her with wide eyes and gaping mouth.

"You're doing all of this because of Lily."

The surprised turned to offense, then pure rage, and Adrienne said with a voice cold as hell:

"I think this is your stop."

And that's when the rush ended. Upon seeing her friend like this, upon seeing her anger, Xiaolan's righteous fury and perverse delight at saying hurtful truths faded in an instant.

"Adrienne, I..." she began.

"Get the *[i]fuck[/i]* out of my car."

She hurriedly unbuckled her seatbelt and stepped out, expecting the door to slam and the car to disappear in a moment, leaving her alone. Instead, Adrienne stepped out on the other side, and looked at her full of barely restrained anger.

"You had no right to bring this up. Not when I'm trying to help you. But you know what? That proves me right. You get attached to people, and they will hurt you. I shouldn't have bothered with you. I should have let you ruin your own life, but I had to get involved, try to shake you out, and all I get in return is you throwing Lily in my face. Well, I stand by what I said. I know how to let go. I hope you'll find happiness on your own, Xiao, and that you'll dump this bastard someday, but I don't care anymore."

Tears rushed to her face, and she took a step forward. "Adrienne, I did not mean what I said," she pleaded, crying. "Please. You're... You're my only friend left."

"Then I guess that would be a good thing to start working on, wouldn't it?"

They stood face to face for a minute, separated only by the car, saying nothing. Finally, the red-head broke the silence:

"You need to wake up, Xiaolan. None of this is real. You are setting your own limits when you could cast off your shell and rise."

She blinked. "What?"

"I said, you need to wake up. You're the only one giving yourself limits. Drop Malcolm. Change your life. That's my final advice."

She slipped back into her seat, started her car, and then she was gone.

It took Xiaolan some time to make it back home; when she arrived, she found the blinders shut and the house dark. She came in, called out hesitantly to Malcolm, and received no answer. She searched all the house, but he wasn't there - and he hadn't left any note. She was alone.

*[i]Calm down. He's probably with his sister. There is no way he would have left you just because you went out with Adrienne for one evening. Besides, it's his house; even if he did leave you, he would not go away. He has to be with Celine, it's the only explanation. Maybe he felt lonely because I had left him and... No. Don't blame yourself. Stay calm. He'll be back tomorrow. Everything's fine.[/i]*

By the time she made it to the bathroom, her hands were trembling and her eye twitching. It had to be the pills. She hadn't taken them right on time, and so there she was, a broken mess, and... She was holding the bottle in her hand, staring at it, and felt suddenly overcome with disgust, unbearably nausea at the sight of these drugs. They made everything wrong. They made her bolder and stupid, and then she lost her friend and Malcolm and she was still ill and... She screamed, punching at the wall, and threw the bottle into the bin.

She did not quite realize what happened after, overtaken by anger and sadness, but when she came to her senses she was in her room, sitting on the bed and gazing emptily at the wall. Around her, the drawers were all open, clothes scattered everywhere, small pieces of furniture broken and strewn about, and she could not remember if it had been her or Malcolm who had done this, if it was already this way when she'd come home or if she'd really lost her mind for a moment.

*[i]I should tidy up,[/i]* she thought, but instead she lay down on the bed fully clothed and fell asleep.

That night she dreamed.

She woke up the following morning and felt a strange clarity. She stood up slowly - somehow she was in a nightgown. She rubbed her eyes and smiled at everything that surrounded her.

"None of this is real," she whispered to no one in particular. She left the room.

The house was bathed in a green glow that illuminated everything around her, and the stair rail was cold as metal under her touch, but this felt comforting.

In the living room, she saw Malcolm standing by the window. He was wearing his jackets from his glory days, the one with the stars, and he looked strong and beautiful, though his face was turned from her and she could not see it. Celine was sitting on the sofa away from him, thoughtful, and she greeted her with a wave of her hand.

"Hello, sweetheart," she said from afar, and somehow she knew he was smiling. She went in the kitchen, where Adrienne and Lily were having breakfast, and she poured herself a cup of warm coffee. From the window, she could see the beautiful garden around her house, and the sun in the skies shining so brightly there was no shadow in the world, bathing all in its green aura. "Hi, Lucien!" she said to the sun.

When she turned back to the kitchen, she saw that Lily was gone, and Adrienne seemed a bit sad; long cracks ran through the ceiling and walls, glowing with green light themselves. She went to serve herself another cup of coffee, but the coffee pot burned in her hand; she shrugged, and went back into the corridor.

Cracks ran through everything now, except the door itself, though thin plumes of smoke

escaped from its frame, and she could catch glimpses of a pure white flame burning behind it. "Don't you want to know what's behind?" Ted asked. He was by her side, and he was the only thing in the house that cast a shadow.

"Don't," Celine said softly, coming from the living room. "You already know. You always have."

"Madness," Xiaolan whispered.

"Freedom," Ted answered.

"I don't want this life anymore," she said.

"Then let us open this door together."

"You will lose everything. You will become a babbling mad, thrown into a hospital room and beyond hope of cure," Celine said.

"She's lying," Ted said with mad fire in his eyes. "We are gods in waiting, shackled in this world by fools beneath our station. We will be free again."

"You're not a god, Xiaolan. You're just a poor, traumatized girl looking for an escape."

Xiaolan turned slowly, and they stopped bickering, waiting for her word. She smiled, and said to Celine:

"Do you remember when we were young, and you played in that sandbox in the Institute's yard? You made up world and stories inside it. Is this any different?"

"I was a child. I got out of the sandbox."

She shook her head sadly. "No, you didn't. None of us ever did. We were playing at being sane and grown up, but he was the only one to understand," she said looking at Ted. "If this is the real world, then better to embrace delusion and make up a better one."

Celine looked away, and she turned to the door, putting her hand on the doorknob. She felt it pulse and throb with fire, and it whispered her true name to her ears.

She smiled.

Then she opened the door.

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