

There's Not Much Saving I Can Do

Alt. title: The Friendship that Never Was

BY

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“Only once in your life, I truly believe, you find someone who can completely turn your world around.”

-Bob Marley

August 2025

Before Li-Hong ascended, he met Yize three times. The first was in their youth, the second preceded war, and the last was moments before Li-Hong became a god.

And each time they encountered one another, Yize said the same thing.

★+★ □ ★+★

His bones ached and his eyes blurred, but the pulsing in his heart continued to swell. It didn't matter how many times he was kicked or how tightly he curled into himself; the hate burning in his chest could never be extinguished.

His parents often said he'd been upset with the world since the day he was born. Li-Hong didn't have any friends, he always had something negative to say, and he'd lash out at anyone who ruffled his feathers. And although many questioned why, Li-Hong has known for a very long time.

It wasn't that he was upset at everything; he was just upset with the world, which happened to encompass everything.

As he grew older, the simplicity of the detestation wasn't sufficient, so he wandered about the streets of his hometown to observe and pinpoint his dislike for the world. It wasn't until this moment of being dragged and beaten in an alley that he was finally able to put it into words.

Li-Hong doesn't know what he did to deserve the abuse; maybe these kids were from the neighboring city. That would make sense.

The two communities have been at odds for several years now, and tensions have escalated to the point where citizens are lashing out at each other. But he doesn't care enough to think about it. The only two things on his mind were pain and rage fueled by pain.

Although it felt like an eternity, the beating ended once the children grew bored. For good measure, one spat on his fine, green hanfu—a small act that made his blood boil more than the blows themselves.

After attempting to get up and to go after the scoundrels, Li-Hong realized it would be best to wait until the pain numbs a little. He didn't think anything was broken, though he had nothing to compare it to, never having broken a bone before.

Near-black strands of hair clung to the sweat on his forehead as he tried to take a stuttering breath. When he shut his brown eyes, the words finally came to him:

What's the point of being content in a world full of hate?

The thought made sense, and he clung to it fiercely.

A few minutes passed as he lay against the cold, dirty stone floor, waiting for the pain to fade slowly. He would've remained like that had it not been for the sensation of someone watching him.

Li-Hong's body flinched before he could stop it, though he tried to mask the reaction as nothing more than a shiver while his gaze slid toward the mouth of the alley.

There, with the sun glowing behind him, was the silhouette of a boy no older than 13, making him about the same age as Li-Hong.

Li-Hong didn't know many swear words, but what he did know flashed through his brain as his muscles clenched in preparation for another unprompted lashing.

Light steps approached and echoed against the stone walls, each tap louder than the last. They sounded ominous, or maybe Li-Hong was just projecting.

As soon as it started, it stopped, and Li-Hong opened his eyes after realizing they were squeezed shut.

Above him was nothing short of an angel, and he thought for a moment that maybe the gods had taken pity on him. The angel was sure to be benevolent, gracious, and able to take him far away from this malicious world.

The one above him was void of any bodily expression, looming over his beaten and bloodied form with indifference. The sun, still casting a shadow over the newcomer's face, formed a sort of halo around his head.

It was like art, and it almost made Li-Hong forget why he loathed the world. Almost.

A small glint of an amulet caught Li-Hong's eyes as it hung around the young boy's neck. It was familiar because he had one too—a longevity lock. A nice one if that golden glimmer was anything to go by.

Then the shadow moved, and Li-Hong flinched despite himself. The figure looming above subsequently froze in response. When Li-Hong tilted his head back to the individual, all he saw was an outstretched hand.

“Are you okay?”

Everything hurt, his clothes were disgusting, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to make it home before sundown.

His spite told him to say yes, but he shook his head no.

Minimal as the movement was, the other one got the idea and decided to sit down next to Li-Hong's shriveled physique. Once settled, Li-Hong heard the shuffling of fabric, and then a

baozi was presented in front of him from his horizontal position. The bun appeared cold, and perhaps a little stale, but looked quite tempting to his rumbling stomach.

“They were hurting you, and all I did was watch,” the squeaky voice said, sounding remorseful. “I apologize.”

Li-Hong remained silent and still, disheartened by the snack that had been removed from his line of sight.

The boy continued. “I can’t fight; I’d end up like you if I jumped in.”

That statement left Li-Hong astonished. This person was selfish, and he was aware of his selfishness. Just the notion of someone being self-aware enough to recognize their faults struck a chord with Li-Hong. This boy was already more mindful than any adult he’d ever encountered, and in his mind, that was worthy of some fragment of respect.

Wordlessly, Li-Hong pushed himself into a sitting position and looked at his lap. Then he stuck out an expecting hand.

The boy, as perceptive as before, began to hand Li-Hong the baozi but faltered.

To the surprise of Li-Hong, he watched as the gentle and tan fingers of the stranger brushed against his pale and dirty palm.

Now facing the sun, Li-Hong could clearly see the boy’s soft complexion. It looked untainted by the world’s cruelties, yet carried wisdom beyond his years. His hair framed his face, its shade nearly matching the depth of his dark eyes.

Li-Hong’s lips parted in awe as he watched the boy finish brushing off the alley’s dust before finally releasing the baozi into his grasp. Gazing at the humble bun, Li-Hong tried to take in the figure before him—outwardly kind, perhaps inwardly selfish, yet angelic all the same. He had never met such a being, and with every passing second, his carefully guarded malice drained away.

Shaking the awestruck feeling away, Li-Hong asked, “What's your name?”

“Yize. May I know yours?”

“Li-Hong.”

Yize nodded in acknowledgment and took a bite from an identical steamed bun, slipping it from the wide sleeve of his blue hanfu robes.

Li-Hong followed Yize's lead and discovered that the bun was filled with pork and cabbage. He wasn't a fan of cabbage, but free food was free food.

Swallowing his bite, he asked, “Do you often show up to save people?”

“No, there's not much saving I can do.”

A beat of silence passed before Yize added, “But I can try to help.”

The two sat in silence while eating their food until both were left empty-handed.

Everything continued to ache with each shift Li-Hong made, and Yize seemed to be staying for the sake of offering company. Eventually, Li-Hong broke the ice.

“Why are you helping me?”

Yize smiled. “I want to be a doctor when I grow up, so that I can help people.”

“I don't think I'm worth helping,” Li-Hong looked down before faintly smiling back. “But I hope to one day repay your kindness.”

The duo continued to chatter meaninglessly for some time, and unbeknownst to Li-Hong, a grin grew from ear to ear.

As they spoke, Li-Hong was thrown off when Yize made a random comment.

“I like your smile.”

It was simple and unprovoked, yet it was said.

Something about the statement warmed Li-Hong's heart. It was the idea that someone he barely knew cared enough to compliment him on something so inconsequential.

It almost made him want to give a compliment in return.

“In fact,” Yize giggled. “Your smile is so bright, this gloomy alley is now bathed in a light that could rival the sun!”

He emphasized his declaration by pointing to the sun, just peeking over the horizon.

Li-Hong covered his mouth, trying to stifle his chuckle. But the absurdity of the claim was so outlandish, he couldn't help bursting into a fit of hysterical laughter.

The two laughed together until their lungs burned, finally stopping to take a deep breath.

The sun that Yize pointed at moments before grazed where land met sky, and the solemn realization made Li-Hong somber.

“I have to go,” Li-Hong began. “I'm supposed to be home by sundown.”

Li-Hong used to be able to stay out past dark, but there have been reports of locals being jumped by the residents of the neighboring city, so it's safer for him to get home before getting hurt more than he already was.

“Oh,” Yize murmured.

The boy got up, and Li-Hong tried to follow, but was unable to do so on his own until Yize offered his hand. With some struggle, the two ended up finding themselves face to face.

Yize offered, “Do you want help walking home?”

Li-Hong declined his offer, and after walking to the entrance of the alley together, it appeared the two were going in opposite directions.

Having realized this, the boys were at an impasse.

Something deep inside Li-Hong told him that this wouldn't be the last time he saw Yize, and based on the look on Yize's face, he thought the same thing.

Just before the two went their separate ways, Li-Hong made a promise to Yize as the fire in his heart turned from a burn to a warmth.

“You couldn't save me, so you helped me instead,” he began with a grin. “One day, I hope to do for you what you couldn't do for me.”

Although Li-Hong couldn't see the smile on the boy's face, he noticed Yize's ears perk up as he turned and walked away. A sparkle flickered alongside him as the golden longevity lock, engraved with a lotus flower, caught the sun's light with each step.

As he watched him go, Li-Hong swore an oath to himself:

I will save you.

★+★ □ ★+★

At the age of 22, Li-Hong had a loving wife, three rambunctious children, and was bestowed the title of general. He was given this title due to his family standing and superb performance across all ranks. The increased responsibility granted him a camp near enemy territory, waiting for the time to strike.

The two neighboring cities finally had enough and decided it was best to settle their difference with violence, which fanned the fire of hatred in Li-Hong's chest—a feeling that had been steadily rising as he grew older and discovered the greater evils of the world. This all led Li-Hong to his current situation.

Barely an hour earlier, he had set off into the woodland, hoping to quiet the once-dormant hostility gnawing at him, as well as the burden of leading thousands of men toward what he could only hope would not be their deaths.

So lost in thought, he didn't notice the forest had slipped into shadows. Time had betrayed him—for when he first set out, he had believed sundown was still far off

The current predicament said otherwise.

Li-Hong, expecting to be back at base before nightfall, didn't bother to bring anything other than a sword in case an animal couldn't keep to itself. That choice had consequences as he was now surrounded in darkness with little idea of how to make his way back.

This didn't trouble Li-Hong. At worst, he would spend the night on the forest floor and find his way back at sunrise, then face the inevitable backlash for missing a strategy meeting.

Fate redefined Li-Hong's worst-case scenario shortly after, as he found himself several meters away from an individual wearing clothing of the enemy.

The two stood in tense air, each man unsure how to react. Something like a simple 'hello' was inappropriate, but no other words felt like a good fit.

Li-Hong, thankfully, didn't need to decide as the other person spoke up.

“I have no intention of harming you.”

Li-Hong scoffed, “Right. And I have no intention of breathing.”

In one hand, a lantern cast a wavering glow, throwing his features into restless shadow. In the other, the enemy's sword caught the light, its steel glinting as it shifted in its grip. What was peculiar was how his hold on the sword was lighter than that of the lantern.

The interplay of darkness and distance kept Li-Hong from making out the man's face, yet something yellow on his chest shimmered in the lamplight, sending a ripple of déjà vu beneath Li-Hong's skin.

“My name is Officer Wang. I was just out for a stroll.”

It was unwise to underestimate an opponent, but Li-Hong couldn't shake the thought that this figure was ill-suited for battle.

“As was I,” Li-Hong replied.

Wang chuckled, “A bit unprepared, it would seem.”

Li-Hong was sure his glare could be felt as he took wary glances at the blade.

Feeling the rise in hostility, Wang made slow, calculated movements as he set his sword down onto the grass.

If Li-Hong had any intention of attacking, now would be the time. That was if he had any intention—but something pulled him back.

His mind screamed at him to fight, to take advantage of the situation and rid the world of another useless ingrate. But the heart that continued to be fueled by rage faintly recognized this Officer. So he mimicked Wang's truce and set his sword down by his foot, kicking it away.

Wang took a small step forward and tentatively asked, "May I know your name?"

Li-Hong surprised himself by not only replying but also matching Wang's step.

"General Jin."

The strangers closed the distance between them one careful step at a time, until Li-Hong stood near enough to reach out and touch the pendant resting against Wang's chest. It was then that they both halted, caught in a silent stare.

Wang's gaze lingered on Li-Hong's face, but Li-Hong found his attention pulled elsewhere.

That golden flicker he'd caught glimpse of earlier revealed itself to be a longevity lock, its polished surface glinting in the soft light etched with markings too faint to decipher.

The sight made his heart squeeze, though Li-Hong wasn't sure what the muscle was trying to tell him.

It was all familiar. Not just the pendant, but the presence of Wang himself. Familiar in a way Li-Hong couldn't name, as if some part of him already knew this man yet couldn't place why.

"Forgive this one for the informalities, General Jin," Wang smiled, in such a way that could melt snow.

The tension in Li-Hong's shoulders faltered at the sound of Wang's voice. He felt almost at peace.

"Unneeded. We are of opposing forces; there is no need to address me with such deference."

Wang shook his head. "Nonsense, you're a general. That alone is worthy enough of admiration."

The way he spoke was endearing, and it made Li-Hong feel like he could blabber for hours, and Wang would listen intently to his every syllable.

"Is that so?" Li-Hong's question was phrased more as a comment.

He hummed, "Indeed. This one gained status through frivolous means and should be held lower than many."

Tilting his head, Li-Hong urged Wang to continue, so he did.

The next 30 minutes passed faster than Li-Hong would've liked, and he learned more about Wang than he knew of his lieutenant. Granted, his subordinate isn't nearly as interesting as Officer Wang.

During this time, Li-Hong learned that Wang's current position was not his desire. Wang wanted nothing more than to be a physician, but his commander won't even allow him to be a medic. Moreover, his title of officer wasn't even appropriately awarded. It was thanks to Wang's family status that when the war began, he was given the high-ranking position—and the company under his command resented him for it.

In addition to the undesirable occupation, Wang admitted that he had no desire to hurt people. Thankfully, the moment has yet to arise where he'll need to choose between his life and his morals. To that, Wang admitted he was unsure which path he would take, but hoped that when the moment came, it would reveal the answer to him.

“I want to be a doctor so that I can help people, not kill them,” Wang emphasized. “How could I kill people? I can't fight, much less lead others to do what I myself am unwilling to do.”

Above all the discomfort and strain, Wang was certain of one thing: no matter how this war ended, he would not survive it.

His words left Li-Hong unsettled. The convictions this Officer spoke of echoed those of a child Li-Hong had met long ago. Yet Wang was the enemy. By all logic, Li-Hong should have felt relief—one less threat to watch for. But if this was relief, it carried the same weight as despair.

Yielding to the open atmosphere, Li-Hong admitted his thoughts on the war: he saw no meaning in it at all. It was a confession he had long kept secured, yet within the span of an incense time, he found himself voicing a secret that could brand him as a traitor. Not that this chance meeting would do anything to ease such an accusation.

It was at this point in the conversation that the two came to the consensus that it was time to leave. Both were probably being searched for, and making either side aware of their run-in would be best avoided.

This left Li-Hong in a bit of a predicament, for he still had no light nor direction to guide him.

Not a second after the thought had crossed his mind, he heard fabric ripping. When he turned to the source, he saw Wang holding a piece of his cloth armor while walking off to find a stick to wrap it around.

“You'll have to walk quickly,” Wang said as he picked up a sturdy branch. “I don't have any fuel to enhance the duration of the flame.”

Wang was tying the cloth around one end of the stick as he walked back towards Li-Hong. Then he held out the makeshift torch, and Li-Hong grabbed it.

“Thank you. For the light,” Li-Hong said sincerely as he gave a small bow.

The captain smiled as he opened his lantern, “It's nothing. You listened to my woes, so it's the least I can do.”

Someone like you shouldn't have any woes.

The thought left as soon as it came, giving Li-Hong whiplash from the strange comment.

“Besides,” he continued while maneuvering his lamp to the unlit torch. “I have a feeling you'll share that light of yours with others.”

As he finished, the torch grew bright as it was set ablaze, and Li-Hong was left confused on whether he was supposed to take that information literally or figuratively.

“Your camp should be that way,” the Captain said as he pointed in a direction behind Li-Hong.

With nothing left to say, Wang closed the door to his lantern, gave a smile and a bow, and turned around to leave.

Li-Hong felt his heart pull him in the direction that Wang was walking off to, but his feet knew better.

Despite Wang's warning about the limited duration of his newly acquired torch, Li-Hong stood unmoving as he watched the acquaintance pick up his sword and disappear into the tree line.

Once out of view, he did the same and, through some miracle, found his way back to base with a light heart.

By the end of that week, he met with fellow strategists and tried to arrange some sort of compromise to end the battle between the opposing forces, but his efforts were fruitless.

Thus, his heart became heavy again.

★+★ □ ★+★

Red oozed from his left arm as dust clogged his lungs. The area around him was the depiction of frantic bodies and glinting steel. And still, all that existed for Li-Hong in that moment was the beast of a man before him, one who could easily carry ten men.

Li-Hong wasn't stupid; he was going to die. And although others would try to find acceptance and peace, his mind was in turmoil. This was not how it was supposed to go.

No more than an hour ago, his men ambushed the opposing, but their plans were crushed upon realizing the enemy was waiting for them. Not only that, but they lacked the numbers to win, so all capable men, general or otherwise, were put onto the battlefield.

He took several steps back until he felt his head throb from hitting the dirt. Standing up or lying down, Li-Hong didn't stand a chance without his sword, which had been cast out of his hand just moments before.

His heart was beating so fast that he might've been able to see it jump out from his chest if he had nothing else to be concerned about.

The sun did not rise today; the clouds, in their grim compassion, shrouded the light from the gore of war, obscuring the violent display of rage from the gods. Behind their soft, impenetrable walls, perhaps the men in battle could feign ignorance before heaven for the blood on their hands.

However, Li-Hong wasn't concerned with pleading his case; instead, a deep sense of dread washed over him.

He was going to die with hatred in his heart, and that both reassured and tore him to pieces.

A glint of metal caught Li-Hong's eye. He drew a breath as he turned away, bracing for the end.

An instant later, metal tore through flesh. But it wasn't his.

Above him loomed the neckline of a battered chest plate, framing a golden pendant that dangled inches from his face with a lotus engraved at its center.

His gasp wasn't born with recognition, but instead of the hovering body suddenly pinning him down. Accompanying it was a pressure that molded into a burn as Li-Hong's skin and muscle parted to make room for the cold metal.

The narrow sword had skewered them both—one through the abdomen, the other through the chest. They fought to recover from the shock, but before the agony even began, the blade was gone, whisked away, and the soldier's footsteps faded into the distance.

The clothing he wore stuck against his skin as warm liquid pooled in the dip of his chest.

Li-Hong's air supply suddenly felt limited, but that didn't stop him from pushing the other man off of him with his good arm, making a bloody mess of the ground as he did so.

A groan escaped the individual's mouth as he rolled next to Li-Hong onto the hard earth. Li-Hong didn't care about the distress in the croak; he was more worried about his own injuries as he shifted into a sitting position.

It was difficult to catch his breath, but not impossible. Based on where the wound was located, one of his lungs had been punctured.

Li-Hong's not sure he'll live, but he has enough will to find a way.

Coming so close to death made him realize that he refuses to die with hate in his heart. Loathing has consumed him for his entire life; it's time for Li-Hong to accept that people will never change.

Onto the matter of the idiot that subsequently saved his life, Li-Hong's pupils shrank when he saw it was none other than Officer Wang.

His enemy. The one he thought he'd never see again and hadn't seen for months.

Wang's wound was far more extensive than his, so much so that an impending sense of foreboding scratched at the back of Li-Hong's brain.

The beating of his heart had yet to cease, and it grew faster as Wang began to violently cough, and bubbles of crimson crept along the edges of his lips.

Quick on his feet, Li-Hong forced Wang to his side as he began to spit up blood. Wang hacked, and when he was eased back onto the dirt, every crevice of his face had some remnant of red.

Although some part of Li-Hong was grateful to the daft Captain, his face flushed with fury.

"What were you thinking!?" he tried to shout, but it sounded more like a hiss. "You hardly even know me!"

The grin on Wang's face wasn't supposed to be sinister, but between standing on death's door and the blood-stained teeth, he looked manic.

"I wanted to be a doctor," Wang replied, like it were the most sensible explanation. "And doctors help people."

"Help who? Sure as hell not me," he seethed. "We—" He let out a laugh, the kind born of sheer absurdity. "We've been over this. I'm not worth helping!"

That comment only made Wang smile wider.

"Ah," Yize panted. "So you do remember."

Li-Hong tried to scoff, but it came out as a wheeze.

With a shaking hand, Li-Hong watched as Yize reached for his pendant and held onto it. Not a moment later, a droplet of rain fell onto that very fist and rolled off his skin, collecting dirt along with it.

Li-Hong looked up and noticed the storm clouds brewing.

He couldn't help but think this was a perfect moment for rain.

Continuing, Yize said, "Doctors don't care who... who they're helping, they just do."

Li-Hong looked back at Yize with one part disdain and two parts nostalgia as everything started to sink in.

"I can't save you," he whispered.

"But you have."

"...What?"

His eyes met Yize's deep brown ones.

Yize made a lighthearted attempt at shrugging, but it resulted in more of a squirm.

"I was going to—"

The captain's monologue was cut off by a coughing fit as speckles of maroon flew out of his mouth. Some flecks found themselves on the general's face, though he couldn't care less. Instead, Li-Hong was compelled to give him a pat on the back, but it would be redundant.

Swallowing the foam in his mouth, Yize carried on, "—going to die without reaching my dream. Yet here you are. Alive."

Yize paused and tried to catch the breath that would always be out of reach.

"I did that. *I'm* the reason you're alive." His grin persisted through the pain, as if he weren't feeling anything at all. But the twitch in his eyes told a different story. "And I hope that you repay my aid by—by spreading that light of yours tah others. 'Ike before, 'ike now."

A tear broke free from Yize's eye and ran down the side of his face, indiscernible from the beads of sweat littering his face. Li-Hong had no words to say, so he remained silent as he glared at his bloodied lap.

A constant shiver raked across Yize as his grip on the longevity lock loosened and eventually fell to his side.

For a moment, the captain closed his eyes, then they blew open again as he looked around, confused.

"Where—My... that amulet," he rasped.

Li-Hong reaches his hand under the back of Yize's head and gently guides it onto his lap. Then he tilts Yize's head in a way that allows the two to meet eyes again.

“The one on your chest plate?” he clarified while pointing.

Although Yize's face held no expression apart from exhaustion, there was a panicked fear in his gaze as the water droplets from above went from a gentle drizzle to a light rain. Raindrops fell onto Yize's cold skin and fell from his face like tears.

Yize tries to nod but can only croak, “Yes. Please, please.”

“Please what?”

“Hold...” Each labored breath is shallower than the next. “Hold it, for—for me?”

The captain's chest rose and fell so minimally that it's almost impossible to detect.

Instead of replying, Li-Hong wordlessly reached for the twisted rope that tied the locket to Yize's armor. After a moment of fumbling, he successfully separated the two objects and looked at Yize as he asked:

“Now wh—”

Yize was dead.

His eyes were open, but there was no twinkle in his irises, no breath caught in his throat. The rosiness in Yize's cheeks was a smeared remnant of hacked blood, and his heart had grown as cold and lifeless as jade.

Li-Hong felt like he'd truly been stabbed in the heart, even if the death had been expected.

Something in his gut spoke in tongues, taunting him on how this was how it was always going to end. Something deeper and far quieter whispered about how it was only the beginning.

That quenched hate returned with gusto as the rain turned into a pour, soaking his clothing through and through. Each drop filled his heart with poison as it began to rumble like an earthquake.

But Li-Hong was confused—this hate felt different. As raw as the meat of his body.

And it was at that thought that he realized the hate in his heart was not directed at the world, but at himself.

Glancing down at the gold in his hands, he recognized it as the same necklace the young boy had worn all those years ago. Lotus flower and all.

He knew, of course. But something about holding Yize's possession in his hand confirmed the fact.

“I am truly human,” he whispered to himself. “The most selfish of creatures.”

The truth had hurt, and it took the death of an equally selfish person to learn it. But he'd grown because of it, and now Li-Hong knew the type of person he wanted to be.

“I promise...” He bit on his tongue until he could find the right words. “This one promises to spread whatever light you thought I had.”

I will save myself.

And then, the rain cleared—but not all of it.

The clouds above dispersed in a ring, allowing rays of light to pour down over Li-Hong's pathetic display.

What he saw when he looked up wiped the fatigue from his demeanor.

Right from his position on the battlefield, beaten, bruised, and bloody, Li-Hong ascended to heaven not as a man, friend, or general, but as a god.

The God of Light.

[Beginning of Story II]

The involvement of Li-Hong in this second part is minimal, but present. As of the beginning of this second story, a few hundred years have passed, and Li-Hong has renounced his position as the God of Light.

But I Can Try to Help

BY

E. Hornet

“There are no happy endings. Endings are the saddest part, so just give me a happy middle and a very happy start.”

-Shel Silverstein

August 2025

“P adma! Where are you?”

The voice bounced off hollow trunks and chipper leaves, ricocheting to the young girl deep within the forest.

“Come home!”

It was a familiar call made by her mother, one rehearsed daily since Padma always found herself wandering too far. Around this time, the curious eight-year-old girl, Padma, would be scavenging the woods for anything pretty to bring back to her mom. Today, it was a bush with the most beautiful purple flowers she had ever seen, along with a plentiful amount of dark-skinned berries scattered along the natural twine.

At the pitched sound of her mother’s shout, Padma hurriedly stuffed handfuls of berries into her mouth, too rushed to savor their sweetness. Juice dribbled down her chin as she struggled to swallow the mouthful. For a moment, she had choked, but after a few rough bumps to her chest, the blockage made way for air.

Rising from her crouch on the soft forest floor, she turned and sprinted home. The berries, along with those flowers, would still be there tomorrow.

She’d wandered deeper into the trees than usual since she had finished her chores early and had more time to venture. This fact made her mother's loud call all the more impressive.

Had she not gone so far, though, Padma never would've found that hidden shrub full of treats. And she'd never be able to give her mother those amethyst flowers. When she goes to pick again, that is.

The run home took less than ten minutes and left Padma breathless for more than one reason. The berries that had stuffed her belly earlier started to climb back up, and halfway there, they won. She left the mess in a bush where it would be obscured from passersby.

Suffering from the loss of her afternoon snack, her once-dimmed appetite returned with gusto, leaving her relieved that it was time for lunch as she stepped into the little shack she called home.

“Ah, ah,” her mother chastised without even looking. “Wipe off those muddied paws of yours.”

With a pout, Padma walked two steps backwards and grabbed the rag hanging from the door. It wasn't that her feet were too dirty; they just happened to be outside, and that was enough for her mom to get after her.

“And I don't want you going into the forest alone anymore,” she began. “The neighbors are talking of something evil coming from the forest, and I don't want you to get caught up in it.”

Padma whined as she sat on the bamboo floor, scrubbing the grime off her soles. Going into the forest was her favorite, now what would she do for fun?

Her feet were certainly dirty, but admitting that to her mother would make her legs drag in defeat.

Hanging up the rag, Padma walked over to her mother, who stood in the kitchen.

In the cramped one-room home built from stick and clay, not even her little steps echoed. Parts of the shack were divided into dedicated living spaces, the one her mother was in right now being the kitchen.

Her mother crouched beside the fire pit, a small flame crackling beneath the pot hanging above it. Padma wrapped her arms around her mother's neck, trying to sneak a peek at what was cooking.

“What fo' 'unch?” Padma inquired, her speech impediment in full swing.

Her mother tsked. “Padma, speak properly.”

Padma grumbled and let it go, not wanting to give in to her mother's every whim. Instead, she opted to simply sit in the area of the ground where they typically ate.

Not long after, Padma was presented with a small bowl of rice and an even smaller side of roasted cucumber and spinach. It could hardly be considered a meal.

Regardless, her nose coiled at both the sight and smell.

“Stop it with that face,” her mother scorned as she took her seat across from Padma on the floor.

At times like this, Padma envies her father. He was out working in the fields and was probably eating something more pleasant. Certainly not cucumber and spinach.

Like all great ideas, a plan came suddenly, and her head whipped up to her mother.

“Ma?”

“Yes, Padma?”

“This one’s chores are done fo tah-day. Can this one play 'ith Yang?”

Her mother looked up at her with displeasure. “Is Padma able to say that properly?”

Padma's cheeks puffed in irritation, and she decided to drop the respectful tone while still trying her hardest to be allowed playtime with her friend.

“Me chores are done today. I play with Yang, okay?”

The smallest smile crept up the older woman's face.

“Close enough, okay.”

Padma nearly ran out of the house, but her mom caught her by the hem of her dress. The unspoken condition for her freedom was finishing the dishes. So, she haphazardly washed the dishes, and barely a moment later ran out the door.

Yang didn't live far away; they both resided in a small village of no more than a few hundred people. There were no schools in her community, so Padma couldn't count that high, or at all really, but that's what her mother told her. Still, the usually short walk stretched on, with the sun beating down on her head and leaving her cheeks hot and pink.

Eventually, when she did make it to see Yang, she engulfed him in a hug and began to explain her day. From waking up to running on over, Padma didn't leave a single detail out. In turn, Yang explained his day.

This is how it normally was for the two, and after they were done talking, they started running around and having fun. From teasing the street dogs to rolling around in the dirt, they giggled throughout it all.

Padma's heart quickened from the excitement, but it only fueled her drive. At one point, she pointed at a rock and called it a toad, to which Yang burst out laughing and called Padma silly. She laughed along with him but continued to try and convince Yang that it was, in fact, a toad.

After their restless shenanigans, Yang recalled something Padma talked about earlier and asked, "Were the berries good?"

Padma enthusiastically nodded her head.

"Want 'ome?"

Yang smiled widely and mimicked the nod.

"Can I come over tomorrow morning?" Yang checked.

Without thinking, she invited Yang to visit her at home and indulge in the berries with her in the morning.

As the sun began to set and the air turned cooler, the two departed to get dinner.

The day was long and full of activity, so Padma was once again hungry. However, on her walk back home, Padma realized a mistake. She had no berries to give Yang, and her mother told her to stay out of the forest! He'd be over in the morning, and she promised to give him some berries.

Padma didn't know what to do. On one end, she'd disappoint her friend without the berries, and on the other, disappoint her mom if she went into the forest.

It was after she welcomed her father home, and they had all settled down for a barely satisfying dinner, that the solution popped into her mind.

"What's got you glowing?" her father smiled.

Padma shook her head while trying to hide her grin. She didn't want to bring attention to the deviously devised plan.

Both parents looked at each other for answers, but upon not finding any, dropped the topic of their daughter's typically strange behavior.

A smile stretched on Padma's face for the rest of dinner and into bedtime. If her mom never found out she went into the forest, then she wouldn't disappoint anyone. The punishment for getting caught going against her mother could be anything from extra chores to a beating, but Padma didn't bother to dwell on those specifics.

Her father tucked her under the blanket as she lay upon the straw mat. Then he looked at her and chuckled, "I don't know what's got you so giddy, but I hope you keep up the attitude for chores tomorrow afternoon."

The smile dissolved into a frown as her father laughed.

Soon, she was left alone to sleep.

Leaving undetected is difficult in a shack with no rooms, but she did it. Padma made sure not to fall asleep as she waited for the prime moment to sneak out. When that moment came, she envisioned herself as a fox and crept along the floorboards. They were uneven and wobbly, so much so that she froze at one point when she heard her father's breathing hitch after a particularly loud step.

As she approached the door, she continued to take fearful glances back towards her parents and sighed in relief every time she saw their eyes shut.

When she finally got close enough to grasp the rope handle tied to the bamboo door, she tentatively pushed it open and gently closed it shut.

One moment, she stood outside her home looking out into the dark night, the next, she was darting past the looming tree line. She knew the majority of this forest like the back of her skin-kissed hand, from the frog that lived under the roots of an old ginkgo to the dead willow tree by the stream.

Like a performer on a stage, she danced across the forest floor as the moon lit the path of her performance.

The night held its breath—no wind, not even a whisper—but as Padma ran, the air rushed past her ears in a constant, howling stream. It was like a warm hug, a gift from the summer evening itself.

Padma couldn't help but giggle in between labored breaths, overjoyed by the thrill of running in the middle of the night. Every exposed root and anthill was avoided or jumped over. This forest, at this moment, belonged to no one but her. And soon, she would have her prize.

The half-formulated plan was progressing without a hitch until a tug pulled at her chest, then pulsed. It was a type of squeeze she had never experienced before, and although it wasn't painful, it still caused her to slow to a stop.

Padma grasped at the place where she suspected her heart was, bunching up the hemp nightgown where her dainty, malnourished fingers clung. She took measured breaths to release the pressure, but it continued to linger. Eventually, she settled down onto the earth and waited for the sensation to pass as she observed her surroundings.

Padma noted that she had paused in the center of a small glade, an area she normally spent hours in, plucking wildflowers to present to her mother. She'd never been in the forest at this hour and couldn't help but lighten up, her eyes widening at the beauty around her.

Many of the flowers were closed, shy under the attention of the moon. This was, however, not what Padma was paying attention to.

Stars glistened all around her. Not the normal ones she observes in the night sky. No, these glowing flecks of gold surrounded her. They gave off subtle buzzing sounds as they shifted and bounced under the night, seemingly wishing to fight the moon with its own bright light. It flickered slowly, talking of tales the young girl couldn't fathom. But it was whimsical, nonetheless.

Her cheeks ached from the wide grin stretched across her face, a shimmer dancing in her deep brown eyes. She let out soft, breathless puffs as she finally caught her breath, lost in awe.

“Whoa!”

Just as the verbal astonishment left her lips, the pulsating lights vanished in a blink, as if they had never been there at all. Padma rubbed her eyes to try and rid herself of any drowsiness, but the clearing remained empty when her gaze refocused.

Padma knew what she had witnessed. Her whole life, she had only seen stars in the sky, but a moment ago, they had surrounded her, telling a story she had yet to decipher.

Spinning her head in all directions, Padma tried desperately to catch just one more glimpse of the phenomenon. The celestial light she could almost touch.

But alas, nothing.

Frowning, she pushed her bottom lip out in a pout while cradling her cheek with a small hand. Padma almost wanted to cry—but she's not a baby, and there wasn't anything to cry over.

At this point, Padma had forgotten about the ache in her heart. It seemed to have vanished on its own. And now, the most pressing matter was discovering where the light had gone.

Rising to her feet, Padma squinted to see better in the dark as the moon above dimmed its light without a single cloud blocking the sky. Those miraculous stars must have scared the moon into submission.

Padma tried her best to sift through the black night for any glimpse of a sparkle, but what she ended up spotting wasn't anything she expected.

On the other side of the vacant, overgrown grass was something that almost looked like a smooth rock. If she didn't know this forest as well as she did, a rock is what she would've taken it as. But she did know this forest well, and that rock was staring at her.

Her mom's warning bounced in her skull.

'The neighbors are talking of something evil coming from the forest...'

It was hard to tell from such a distance, and even harder with the minimal light, but Padma could make out the reflection of two beady eyes. If not for the faint moonlight catching those irises, the creature would've remained hidden. Instead, its burning gaze crawled over her skin, sinking invisible teeth into her neck.

Padma didn't make a peep, paralyzed under the pressing glare. Fear held her down as she hoped the creatures hadn't spotted her and would decide to carry on with their night.

One part of her froze as her heart pounded like a warning drum in her chest, each thump screaming of danger. As another part, the part she couldn't suppress, felt a strange pull. Close as Padma was to an undoubtedly vicious creature, she couldn't look away. Those golden eyes held something she didn't understand, something that made the fear shiver through her like electricity.

Pushed by the naive belief of personal fable, the blades of grass folded under her bare foot as she took a shaking step forward.

'...and I don't want you to get caught up in it.'

The living 'rock' remained unmoving, with its only acknowledgement being its narrowed eyes.

Then she took another step.

The summer night's warmth slipped away like a ghost, leaving Padma exposed as the brown hair on her arms stood rigid. Her lungs filled with snow, and each breath became a struggle.

Rather than taking another step, she moved with a slow, dragging gait. Each foot found itself one unwilling step closer to the creature as the distance shortened.

Her heart slammed against her ribs, pounding in time with the crickets' relentless chirping. It once reminded her of the serene noise of nature, but now the chirps shouted in her ears like a taunt as they chanted in warning.

The moon's pale light barely lit her path, but with every step, it seemed to dim further. It was as though an unseen force was blotting it out, piece by piece. The darkness thickened until even the shadows lost their shape. Until all that remained were those bitter, gilded eyes.

Padma's bones were cold, and her face reflected fear. It took a moment for her to realize the cessation in movement. Her frame was pinned in the spot just three steps away from the creature.

It was with this narrowed distance that Padma realized she was right to assume there was something different about this creature. Her cautious approach was rewarded by the sight of a figure curled in on himself—a pitiful young man veiled behind a fierce, defiant glare.

He looked scared, worried, and more than anything else, guarded.

Although a thousand troubles littered her mind, she couldn't help the childish gaze that gawked at the man's hair of all things.

It was long, so long it pooled around him like ink, spreading across the ground as he curled in on himself, knees drawn taut to his chest. It might've been longer than she was tall.

Leaves and dirt clung to the strands, tangled in the black sheen. Perhaps his hair had once been beautiful. But now, in its wild and unkempt state, it made him resemble roadkill more than any ill-intentioned monster.

His clothing was in no better shape. It looked like it was a step up from rags with tears scattered along its surface. At one point, it was possibly white, but now it had stored dirt and indiscernible splotches within its fabric that made it turn brown.

This man possessed a sinful aura she couldn't shake—but is he the same evil Padma's mom warned her of?

She couldn't help the doubt as she continued to gaze at the poor man. He looked more scared than scary. And Padma was raised to be kind, if nothing else.

Just as Padma outstretched her quivering hand, the moonlight returned with sudden vigor. Her dark silhouette fell over the man as the moon rose higher behind her.

The actions of the moon were abnormal, and not as simply explained as the progression of night and the resulting rise of the moon. It was almost as if someone had manipulated the light around her.

Padma could deduce that from his perspective, only the outline of her head was visible as the silver moonlight formed a sort of halo around her brown hair. Any trace of expression vanished beneath the shadow that cloaked her face.

He didn't look at her with fear. Instead, it was bewilderment. His eyes kept glancing from her outstretched hand to her obscured face, as if searching for something familiar. And then, a flicker of something akin to recognition crossed his face.

Padma swallowed the bile rising in her throat before mustering her confidence.

“Are ya 'kay?”

That speech impediment her mother vowed to disarm heightened, amplified by the tremble of her body and subsequently, her vocals.

The strange man continued to stare at her, yellow eyes widening in a mixture of fascination and puzzlement. He looked like a curious, beaten-down puppy.

She cleared her throat and tried again. “Are 'ou okay?”

Again, silence.

An entire minute passed with the two staring at each other while her heart continued to beat out of her chest. Then, Padma's hand dropped like lead, and her limited composure snapped. In a blink, she was halfway through the clearing, running in no discernible direction. What she didn't catch was the man leaping up to his feet, his expression torn between chasing her and staying put.

The air blew against her ears as it had earlier that night, but this time, instead of feeling like an embrace, it whispered sneers only she could hear. Padma's eyes were unfocused, and the newly brightened moonlight did little to guide her. In her panic, she paid no attention to where she was going until her face slammed against the dirt.

Tears prickled in her eyes for a moment until they crawled down her roughed-up cheeks.

Padma was scared, hurt, and disoriented. A hug would help her relax, but a hug she will never get.

The forest was calm apart from Padma's quiet sobs as her hands clutched over her mouth. She tried to muffle her cries in fear of attracting unwanted attention.

She took a few moments to calm down and gather her bearings before noticing the pulsating pain from her forehead.

Looking around, Padma realized that she didn't recognize where she was. None of the trees looked familiar, leaving her lost in an uncharted part of the forest.

After a few moments of observation, her eyes spotted a bush only a few steps away.

Though not identical, the shrub looked strikingly similar to the one she had picked from earlier that day. A ray of silver light filtered through the leaves above, catching on to the berries and making them glisten in the soft glow.

Crawling over, she sat on her knees and looked at the shrub.

Accompanying the little jewels were the same violet flowers she had found just that afternoon, along with the sweet smell that surrounded them. These berries were the very reason for her entrance into the forest this night. And now, with berries presented, she had no idea how to get back home.

The blood in her veins rushed, and her face grew hot. Padma had half a mind to hit the foliage in frustration, but the other half comforted her with the vision of Yang's happy face.

Plucking a singular purple pearl from the greenery, she stuck it into her mouth and confirmed that it tasted the same as the ones from before.

With no clear direction and nothing else to do, Padma gathered the hem of her nightgown, tugging it up to form a makeshift sack. One by one, she filled it with the sweet, familiar treat.

This activity occupied her mind, and eventually her rapid heart settled down into a steady thump. The tears on her cheeks dried, leaving a dirt-stained residue she would wipe off later.

Halfway through her gathering, a thought surfaced—absentminded, but sincere: *Is he hungry?*

She couldn't help but frown.

That strange individual radiated a wickedness that sent her running, yet here she was, rubbing at a berry as she thought about his well-being.

As her project wrapped up, she made sure to pluck a few of the pretty flowers to gift to her mother in the morning. Padma didn't know how to explain where she got them without

exposing herself, but she hoped to manipulate her cheek-pinching cuteness to her advantage and avoid the questioning.

With one hand holding the cloth tight and the other grasping the flowers, Padma stood back up carefully and looked around to determine which direction she should start walking.

Although it would appear the decision was made for her.

Not too far away was a faint, glowing light that flickered lazily. It resembled the stars from earlier, so she couldn't help but walk towards it.

Even standing directly in front of it, she couldn't make it out to be anything other than a star: beautiful, bright, alluring.

Depositing the flowers on top of the berries and subsequently freeing her hand, Padma reached out to poke the tiny orb.

But the moment her finger neared, it flickered out.

Padma drew her hand back and placed it alongside her other hand while her eyes scanned the dark space around her.

Not far off, she spotted another, and beyond it, an entire stream of stars trailing in a line, leading in no particular direction.

Curiously, Padma walked to the next light and, like before, it dimmed when she got near.

This cycle continued for some time, with her hesitantly following the stars as they kept lighting her path. Her bare little feet pulsed, and her eyes drowsed, but she continued forward.

Padma was back in the clearing before she could figure out what the little lights wanted.

Though her earlier sincerity had been genuine, something about being near the ominous man again sent a fresh jolt of fright down her spine once she stepped back into the glade. Padma's hands were clammy as her eyes darted across the clearing. Although what she found was something beyond beauty.

The stars that had once guided her now flooded the clearing, returning with newfound energy and shining brighter than when she first discovered them. Gathered together, they

mirrored the vast night sky and seemed even more dazzling than anything she had ever beheld above. And although her heart picked up in pace, wonder slowly shrouded her fear.

“Are you scared?”

Padma jumped so high she nearly toppled over, a squeaky yelp escaping her lips. All her wide-eyed wonder scattered like marbles, and she fumbled with the nightgown-bag, almost dropping it in her fluster.

Out of reflex, she whipped around to identify the source of that hoarse voice, and once again, she was met with those two shimmering eyes.

For a moment, only the outline of who she assumed was the individual from before could be made out. Despite all the light behind her, this corner of the opening was darker than the color of coal. However, this purblind issue was resolved as soon as they made eye contact, as clusters of the small bioluminescent orbs blanketed around the two.

There, in his unwavering slouch, was the same man from before sitting against what Padma was certain to be the same tree. The only notable difference was his demeanor, which shifted from the former hostility and fear to a more discernible version of piqued interest.

He looked to be waiting for her response, and although Padma wasn't repelled by meeting new people, at this moment her lips remained sealed, throat clamped tight. To cure this, she curled her toes around blades of grass to ground herself as the kindling of a fire burning in her eyes.

“I'm 'ot scared,” she trembled.

His face lifted up a minute amount. “I never said you were.”

“I 'ink ya 'ink I'm scared.”

Perhaps how Padma spoke was undiscernible, for not a second later, she was met with furrowed brows and a quizzing expression.

She almost grumbled but held herself back as she tried to speak again, slower this time.

“I think ya think I'm scared.”

His mouth shaped into an 'o' once he realized what she was trying to convey.

Then he nodded after placing his elbow on his knee and propping his cheek with his hand. “Should you be?”

“I dunno.” Wrinkling her face, Padma asked, “Are ya the evil me mama 'alked about?”

A crow cawed in the distance as the two fell into uneasy silence.

Her body went through the motions of tensing and untensing, synchronically aching in nerves, then calming herself.

“I might be,” was his response. Ever so apathetic.

Her next question was crucial, so she paused to mentally rehearse the syllables and ensure her words would come out coherently.

“Will ya hurt me?”

Seconds crawled by like molasses as she waited with bated breath. And his response, although cold, brought Padma much-needed relief.

“No.”

All worries vanished from her mind, her naivety making her trust the word of this malicious creature.

She continues, “Then 'ow come I 'otta be scared?”

“There's no reason to,” he said. “So don't be.”

Padma clenched the fabric in her fists, huffing in agitation, “I 'ust 'old ya I'm 'ot scared!”

Then she looked down at the forest bed and furrowed her eyebrows in rumination. After a fleeting moment, her eyes lifted back up to meet his. “Can't ya unnerstand me? Mama says I 'alk all wrong.”

The sitting one looked like he almost wanted to chuckle. “No, I understand you just fine.”

“Then what's the problem, huh?”

“Uh,” his words fumble as he nervously tries to conjure a response. “I suppose the problem is me?”

Padma simpered, a hint of smugness in her voice. “Yeah, I know.”

The resulting laugh surprised Padma, not expecting to hear something so loud come from the otherwise quiet individual.

After a brief moment, he collected himself and replied, “So, why are you talking to me?”

“Ya looked sad,” she answered bluntly.

This response, although honest, seemed to agitate the previously relaxed man.

He released a faint sneer as he retorted, “So you came to relieve me from my sadness? Help me reach tranquility?”

Padma's face scrunched as she mumbled, “I dunno what that word mean.”

“Okay...” he rolled his eyes and said, “Do you approach everyone who looks sad?”

“No, only those ‘hat ‘eed a hug.”

This irritates him further as he scoffs louder. He shifted from his relaxed position, pressing his back harder against the tree and crossing his arms.

His next response incorporated a mocking tone—though Padma and her naivete wouldn't catch it.

“My, oh my, what a bleeding heart. I don't suppose you go around saving people from burning shacks?” He released a dry laugh. “Or maybe rescuing some poor elder who tripped on their way to your *quaint* little church?”

As expected, she replies earnestly, unaware of which she's just been jabbed.

“I don't think I can save people.”

Taking a deep breath, the young man rubs his face in what could be taken as annoyance, then buries his head behind his knees. It's hard to subtly deride a child when they're sharp and innocent simultaneously.

Padma, in turn, let her eyes wander as she pondered more about what he asked, until eventually she decided to carry on.

“But I can try to help.”

Like a twig snapping in half, his breath hitched, and his shoulders tensed.

Slowly, his hidden face tilted up to stare at Padma. And Padma stared back.

He looked like he was analyzing her—caught somewhere between conflicted contemplation and a look that was steadily becoming increasingly remorseful.

The forest was nearly silent save for the quiet buzzing of insects and shifting of leaves.

Padma didn't understand why she was being looked at so hard—and didn't care. She was tired of standing and her feet hurt, so, after making sure the treats were secure, she went ahead and plopped down next to him without asking.

Tracking Padma's movement, his upturned eyes never once left her face until he was further astonished when she reached into her pouch and offered him a handful of berries.

Eyes equivalent in size to saucers, he gingerly held out one of his ghostly pale hands to accept the offering.

Padma glanced down at his hand, her face scrunching in disgust. She released the purple orbs back into her pouch, then used that same hand to brush the grime off his.

While doing so, the glint of a gold pendant slipped from beneath his black tunic and into her view, but her attention shifted when she realized how terribly cold he was.

Padma had no warmth to offer, and the tips of his fingers weren't even pink yet, so she remained quiet.

Once his palm was rid of any dirt, she wiped her hand across her nightgown to rid it of any residue. Then she grabbed another handful of berries and placed them into his now-clean grasp.

After a moment of the treat lying within his clutches, Padma came to realize that the berries were only good for staring at, because he didn't seem the least bit interested in eating any.

Shrugging, she popped another berry into her mouth and leaned against the same tree he was slouched on. It's taking everything in her not to just gobble them down—she had to preserve them for when Yang comes over in the morning.

Just as she was about to speak, he beat her to it.

“Do you...” he slipped back into how he was when they first met—timid and, this time, even a little hesitant. “Do you want to be a doctor one day?”

She hummed, “Can't.”

“Why not?”

“Imma girl.”

He grimaced, “I don't see how that's relevant.”

Padma shrugged. “Mama an' Papa say I gotta do me chores good, so's I can 'ind a husband. They say 'inding a husband'll help 'em. An' I wanna help my family.”

“You don't want to help others?” He inquires.

“Huh?”

“Do you only desire to help your family?”

“I'm confused,” she confessed. “I'm 'elping yah aren't I?”

That began another spout of silence, one that Padma was happy to accept.

She knew the point of this adventure was to collect and present the berries to Yang, and having none to present would defeat the purpose of coming out so late. But the moon reflected off the violet pearls temptingly, and she couldn't help herself as she chewed down on another sweet delight. It wasn't her fault—or at least that's what she kept telling herself. Padma rationalized that a tiny indulgence couldn't possibly be missed amongst the sea of near-black pearls.

Savoring the sugary euphoria, Padma had what could only be described as a childlike epiphany.

The most important question had yet to be asked, and if it wasn't answered by the time she got home, she'd be in a complete state of dishevelment. Truly, the most pressing issue was at hand.

As the air thickened, Padma cleared her throat in preparation. Then, with the most serious demeanor an eight-year-old can reasonably pull off, she pried:

“What's ya name?”

Although trivial to some, it is possibly the most important question to ask when the intentions are to make a new friend. And Padma loved to make new friends.

The other person, to Padma's dismay, was too lost in thought to provide an adequate answer.

“My—I don't—it doesn't matter.” He shook his head, trying to regain his senses. “Yours is bound to be more interesting.”

“Padma's tah name me papa 'ave me,” she answered the unasked question. “Why don't yur name matter?”

He released a nervous chuckle, poking at one of the berries.

“This one is a nobody.”

His sudden shift into a deferential tone threw Padma off—it didn't make sense. She wasn't older than him, and there was no reason for that kind of respect.

Tilting her head, she tried to brush off this change in demeanor and pried, “Why ya a nobody?”

“Most individuals like this one are nobodies.”

There it was again, the strange submission.

How peculiar.

“An' what makes 'em 'obodies?”

“Well,” he began, turning his head to catch her reaction. “There's just no point in getting to know the dead.”

Padma's mouth became a desert.

“Yur *dead?!?*” she shouts, loud enough to scare any nearby bird.

His chuckle was soft and carefree as he replied, “Hard to tell, huh?”

Any hesitation an adult might've had didn't apply here, because Padma believed the most appropriate question to ask was:

“How ya die?”

This time, his chuckle was less soft and more strained.

Children really don't have a sense of discretion.

“I...” he rubbed the back of his neck, trying to pull himself together. “This one had a rather high fall.”

Padma tilted her head curiously. “Did it 'urt?”

“Falling didn't hurt. Landing didn't hurt either,” he said, pausing. “The only thing that hurt was the mind—as it burned with resentment.” He glanced away. “But if that hadn't been the case, this lowly one wouldn't have become a ghost in the first place.”

“Ya be a ghost?!”

Her outburst left the man baffled. He stared at the ground and mumbled to himself, “...I said I was dead, didn't I?”

“Whoa.” Stars were forming in her eyes. “I've never seen a ghost before.”

“You probably have,” he began to clarify. “We look—”

“No. I've *never* seen a ghost before.”

A beat of stillness.

“...okay,” he relented, dragging out the word.

Padma's mouth continued to shrivel, and it only seemed to get worse the more she talked. On top of that, she was getting tired if her flushed face was anything to go by.

In an attempt to rectify the unpleasant parchedness, she popped another ripe berry into her mouth, but it didn't help much. Even when she continued to eat two more, the juicy treats did nothing to quench her thirst.

Naturally, the purpose of consuming the berries was to fix her dry mouth.

And absolutely no other reason.

Definitely.

How would Yang even know what's missing if he never saw the initial haul?

Padma opted it was time to head home for some water after experiencing the discomfort of swallowing foamy saliva from her otherwise sandy mouth.

“I'm tired. Imma go 'ome now,” she announced as she rose to her feet, careful not to drop any berries or smush her mother's flowers.

But the movement was too sudden—Padma's heart rate spiked the moment she stood, and it took her a second to steady herself as everything around her moved.

She was more exhausted than she believed.

“Okay,” the man said, noticing her disorientation. “Do you want to be walked home?”

“No,” was her response. “Mama says imma big girl.”

“Okay,” he repeated. Then quieter and almost unsure, he murmured, “Can I... can this humble one see you again?”

Padma's response was discouraging and came without hesitation.

“I'm not gonna go back out in duh nighttime, too scary fah me.”

His expression shifted to a flame being snuffed out. His shoulders sagged, and his eyes fell to the ground, dark with quiet disheartenment.

“But me come here lots in da day,” she added brightly, smiling down at him.

He blinked, as if her words didn’t register at first. Slowly, his face softened, and the corners of his mouth lifted as his eyes glistened with cautious hope.

“Okay,” he said, voice barely more than a whisper, almost afraid Padma would disappear if he were too loud.

Padma's grin never faltered.

“Bye, friend! See you tomorrow.”

Disbelief fills his eyes as they swell and threaten to release tears.

“Bye, friend.”

Padma didn’t know why he reacted so dramatically, but she had bigger issues than to dwell on the strange young man she’d no doubt meet again tomorrow. So, Padma turned her back and looked out into the familiar clearing, searching for where she needed to go. After spotting a known marker, she made her way back home while trying to grab the flowers from her hemp bowl.

Padma has never been to the forest at night and would be quick to agree that it's a very different experience than what she's used to when the sun is out.

For one, her heart is racing. Padma isn’t necessarily scared of the dark, but the forest feels *different*—especially in the deeper, shadowy pockets where the moonlight can’t reach. Secondly, walking is a struggle. With such low visibility, she keeps stumbling over seemingly nothing. And finally, the croaks of the night are nothing like those of the day. Sporadically, she'll hear scratching or a growl. Even worse, there’s the unmistakable unease that she’s being watched. But aside from that man, there shouldn’t be anyone else in the forest.

It was only about ten minutes into her walk when the inconvenience of cottonmouth started to truly irritate her. Frustrated, Padma maneuvered her flower-and-nightgown-filled hands so that she could eat two more berries, but, like the ones before, they didn’t help. They only

made her mouth stickier. Deciding the little pearls were useless for thirst, she promised herself she wouldn't eat any more.

She'd fall to her original plan and save them for her friend instead.

But the feeling was getting worse with every minute. The dryness had crept down her throat, making it harder to swallow. On top of that, she was starting to struggle for breath, each inhale shallower than the last.

However, her trademark stubbornness persevered as Padma continued her trek. She stumbled to the edge of the forest, where she then slumped against a tree to gasp for breath.

It was like she had just gotten done running around the village rather than a serene walk through the forest. And now an internal force was hitting her on the head. The pain throbbed, and it was at this point that Padma began to realize there might be something wrong.

Padma's efforts were rewarded in the end, as she could now faintly recognize the back wall of the shack she lived in. Everything was becoming distorted, but she knew her home when she saw it.

It was the last stretch, and soon she would be able to cuddle up against her parents after a well-needed cup of water.

Pushing herself off the trunk, she took one step, then met with the rough ground. The dark berries in their cocoon tumbled out of her grasp, as her other hand tightened around the stems of the violet flowers.

Everything throbbed, and it felt like her skin was melting.

“Padma! Where are you?”

That was her mother's voice! The older woman must've realized Padma was gone.

Padma knew with certainty that a few beatings were in store, but the punishment could wait until after she got a good night's rest.

Realizing she'd need to get up and call out, Padma managed to roll herself over the discarded berries and onto her back, but she was left gasping from the exertion.

She tried to yell and get her mom's attention, but all that escaped her lips were incoherent noises. Thankfully, it was enough, for almost at once she recognized the distinct sound of frantic footsteps approaching from afar.

Moments later, a shadow on her left leaned over her fallen body, one that looked to be her mom, but Padma's eyes were made of glass and had been glazed over. In her irises was a beautiful painting of the moon as it reflected the night sky like a lake.

The mouth of the shadow moved, but no words came out. Padma couldn't tell if that was intentional or if she's gone deaf.

Another shadow appeared in her vision across from her mother; this one was about the same size as Padma, but Padma was unsure who it could be. Certainly too small to be her father.

They crouched down low enough for Padma to faintly make out Yang's light curls and dark eyes. His gaze was like a cold winter night that pierced an icicle threw her soul. But this is her friend, he wouldn't look at her so modestly. Padma was just misinterpreting.

Trying to turn her head, she attempted to communicate with her eyes to Yang about how she needed help giving the flowers to her mom.

The soft grass brushed against her unruly hair. The blades were spongy, like one of those fancy pastries that the rich folks have. Padma wished she were able to have a taste of that dessert, instead of sucking from those semi-sweet bamboo shoots she gets now and then. And she also wished... what was she doing again? Right, the flowers.

Padma's mind was all over the place. The headache made it difficult to stay on track, and any distraction was a good one if it ignored her current situation. Because everything was torture at that moment, and so she'd rather ignore it.

Darting her eyes back to Yang, she watched as he continued to look at her with that chilling stare.

Realizing her eyes didn't have the intended effect, Padma tried to move her arm so that he'd look at her hand and get the idea. However, much like her head, her arm didn't move as it rested limply outstretched beside her, a cluster of smashed flowers in the palm of her hand, fingers lazily relaxed around them.

She couldn't move anymore. Between the dry mouth, high fever, hammering headache, and circling disorientation, Padma just couldn't get any of her motor skills to operate.

Yang tilted his head and asked, "Already?"

He seemed disappointed. Why was he disappointed?

Voices surrounded her in minorly varied tones, the same as it would if a dozen people were speaking concurrently in a cramped room. Then hands grasped her limbs, more than what belonged to the two above her.

At least eight arms lifted her off the ground, making her unable to see who the other people were.

Padma was weightless, like she'd grown wings and was prepping to soar to that heavenly place in the sky.

It sounded nice.

Although the sky did not move, Padma recognized that she was being carried across the small field and into her home. She knew it was her home; the ceiling looked like the one she stared at no more than two hours ago as she waited to sneak out.

Padma tried to laugh at the fact that she didn't need to sneak back in, but her throat, dry as high noon, allowed her little leeway.

Her body was placed on the bamboo flooring of her home, yet she still couldn't determine who had set her down. Not that she was focused on that, however. Instead, it was the way the plush floor felt against her hot skin, like a pastry.

And the ceiling, which was certainly the one she's used to, flashed with lazy lights. It could've been the silhouette of a candle, but they looked just like those stars she found in the forest.

The voices around her continued to be muffled, but for a moment, just barely, she could hear her mother. Deranged, frantic, on the edge of tears.

"Consus! Get the apothecary!"

Consus? Was her father there? Was he the one who carried her? How nice. Her mom, dad, and friend, all in the same place.

Padma didn't know what was going to happen, but her family was there, and so she had nothing to worry about. Perhaps that's what that big word means.

Tranquility.

Yeah, Padma thinks she's experiencing tranquility.

But she doesn't think much after that.

Padma doesn't remember what happened after her mother spoke. And to be completely honest, she doesn't remember the pain ever going away. She doesn't remember when her heart started squeezing and her body seizing. And she doesn't recall when she closed her eyes. And she doesn't remember falling asleep.

In actuality, she stopped remembering altogether. Instead, quite literally, there was nothing.

And Padma wasn't Padma anymore.

★+★ □ ★+★

A drop of dew slid along the skin of a cold cheek as wind rustled some frayed strands of brown hair.

The trees leaned in to get a better look, curious about what creature offered itself as fertilizer.

No fertilization would occur, however, because shortly after the sun peeks its face over the vast plains, dozens of feet begin to gather in haste.

Shouts, cries, wails—every distraught vocal could be heard and labeled as the chime of a bell sung across the village.

Not long after the search had begun, a corpse was found lying peacefully in eternal slumber by the forest line.

To the right of the body was a limp fist of purple flowers, and on the left was a pile of squashed belladonna berries.

No later than that afternoon, the small child was laid to rest. The grave was dug a few paces from where she was found. A handful of purple flowers was placed in front of the wooden headstone as a warning to all those who wished to venture into the forest.

Then, after the warm sun disappeared and the bright moon reached high in the sky, the serene peace of the night was shattered by an agonizing wail of a stranger, who had lost their only friend.

Again.

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