

It was early December a week or two before my birthday. I have finally received the news about my mother. She was sent to the future in hopes there would be technology that could cure her illness she mysteriously received. It's been so long since I could remember my youth I could not possibly assign a numerical value to the time that has passed that a human could comprehend. All this time I had to live without closure, without her guidance, her unwavering support to me and my sister. All of those feelings came to a crashing halt when I was told that she passed away. I was reassured that she was well taken care of until her death so that I could at least have that much peace of mind. What a load of bullshit having those angels try to console me that way, but I guess I shouldn't balk at my own brothers. Still, I couldn't deny the fact that a huge weight has been lifted knowing what happened to her. There are rules in place in order to preserve the flow of different timelines so that even divinities like me cannot travel to timelines outside of specific universes without clearance. Rules. Rules, rules, rules. That's all heaven can come up with if they don't have solutions. I also couldn't deny the fact that this put me in a particular mood. I didn't want to let it show, but even Sahara was able to pick up on it. I should have known better that even in what I would consider a short amount of time, we have been together for a third of her life.

"Hey, I'm gonna go to therapy but do you wanna meet up with me at Pho Dong?"

Speaking of therapy, I was going to have to get therapy of my own with a divinity who was also a therapist in a past life as a human. I needed a divinity to talk to who understands mortals because of my proximity to them. I was supposed to do research on a divine therapist for Sahara too so that she didn't need to rely on just her human one, but a lot has happened in a short period of time we were grasping for straws trying to stabilize our situation. I didn't want to think about it too hard while she was expecting a response.

"Yes, of course cherie. I'll try to get out of work early so you don't have to wait for me."

It's been a long time since I used to be an assistant professor at SFAI. Shortly after Sahara graduated, the school went through a series of costly decisions to expand their property leading up to Covid-19 which drove them to bankruptcy. Since I could no longer fall back on my cover as an assistant professor, I had to switch gears for another career. I honestly could have my pick since my experience in the Gendarmerie could land me work in law enforcement, but I get enough excitement as an angel so I opted for a simple job that allowed me to work from home so I can maximize my time with Sahara. I live out in the sunset district of San Francisco and she was about a 25 minute drive south of the city so I often find myself at her home. She has parents who are well off to support her during her job hunt and I help pay her rent thanks to Heaven making an exception after she almost died from one of Michael's little sparring matches. The more I am reminded of what happened, the more it soured my mood on top of the news of my mother.

Anyways I digress. I work as a Developer in IT so I can get all my work done on a laptop. I make a little less than I did as an assistant professor but at least it's easy work and overtime if I stick to this job I can grow my salary to actually reflect the net worth I used to have. Once I finished work, I made my way down to Redwood City where Sahara's old stomping grounds are. This is where she spent her high school years as a delinquent stealing from stores and sneaking into the movie theatre when it was still new. Sahara once told me that an "old head" from Chicago told her that the north side is like Redwood City and the south side is like Oakland. I can only take her word for it since this is her country. Pho Dong is a restaurant that has stood the test of time surviving Covid-19 and Sahara has known the owner since her youth. Not unlike when she was friends with the owner of a wine bar that went out of business a month or two ago right in this city. It was the middle of the day so the place was empty but with Sahara sitting comfortably in her usual spot, I couldn't help but feel welcomed.

"Took ya long enough. I only got crispy rolls and a Vietnamese coffee so I can still eat more."

"Sorry, I tried to get here as soon as I got off work."

"Ohhh come now, I was just fuckin around. I know you're going through a lot."

She promptly took a sip of her Vietnamese coffee and the waitress joined us to take our order.

"Hi there! Are the both of you ready to order entrees?"

"Yeah, I'll have a small steak pho please!"

"I'll also have a steak pho but make mine large please."

"Ok! One small and one large steak pho coming up!"

We wait for the waitress to walk out of earshot. Sahara finishes up her appetizer and washes it down with a Vietnamese coffee before she spoke again.

"I'm goin' through a lot of shit too. I still remember what Michael said. About how if I keep holding on to my hate that I would 'never hope to reach such heights'."

"Oh... so you heard him."

I was less prepared to talk about what happened during the summer than I was about my mother. It looks like it was going to be one of those days.

"Michael is old fashioned. He's never had to fight something like that even if he was always going to win."

Sahara nodded while she sucked in her teeth as if to reluctantly agree with that harsh reality.

"He's right you know. I need to let go of my hatred. The only way I can let go of my hatred is to heal but... You're the one that needs to heal more than I do."

Our steak pho arrived shortly after Sahara made her statement. I responded while we made our own preparations with the pho adding hoisin sauce and sriracha with a mix of bean sprouts and basil.

"Why do you say that?"

Sahara slurps in the noodles first and relishes in her meal while she takes in my words. The long pause after the bite she takes indicates to me that she is thinking seriously about what she will say to me next.

"All this time... I had to act ruthless so that demons much stronger than me wouldn't eat me alive... And it changes the way I act around you."

Sahara is taking more bites than usual from her meals as she continued with her statement. Knowing that she has difficulty eating, my mood improves but it is overpowered by bittersweet emotions because of my mother. I know what Sahara had to go through that caused her anorexia in the first place.

"I'm... sorry for the way I treated you. But I'm more sorry that I didn't tell you that I love you enough. I thought that if I let my guard down, I would be too weak to fight. I thought that if I told you that I love you at any point that it would hurt the more you saw me get hurt."

I make sure to match her pace so that I'm not leaving my bowl unattended. It's surreal. I feel like we can share anything with each other and I don't have to put on a mask. So why do I feel like I'm still trying to hold back? What did I have to hide at this point when she was pouring her heart out to me?

"I'm not gonna take any more missions. I'm going to go straight for the Devil's Right Hand Man and when we destroy his armies that will be enough to get me into heaven. I won't be able to top something like that again."

"You can."

"What do you mean?"

"The coin flip."

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"That would just cheapen our love even if I won the coin toss."

She finished her bowl of steak pho for the first time in years during Covid. I couldn't help it... I became emotional and I could not hide my own tears.

"You finished your meal... I'm sorry, Sahara. My mother has passed. I wish I could have been there during her final moments. To let her know she was not alone... I finally know what happened to her, but... she's gone..."

I broke down as anyone would at the loss of a mother. These are the bonds that can be understood between mortals and divinities alike. Sahara didn't shy away from my anguish. She got up from her seat and rubbed my back. She looked over towards the owner's direction and got their attention with eye contact.

"Two Singha beers."

The owner nodded and everyone carried on about their business. He even closed the double doors to the restaurant since these are the dead hours of the day. We were offered conditional privacy while I allowed myself that vulnerability to cry in public. I would never break down like this in any other circumstances. I composed myself enough when our drinks arrived my face partially swelled. It's not like I was bawling my eyes out but I still showed a side of myself I try to keep under control. Sahara poured out our drinks from the bottles.

"I'm sorry. There is nothing I can say to take away that pain. I'll be here for you as long as you need me."

She gestured her glass to me as if to invite me to take my drink too and drink to my mother's memory. She was absolutely right. When mortals die they go to the afterlife. When divinities die that's the end of the road. There is nothing after the afterlife. That is why it is called the afterlife and it is really difficult to die but there are fates worse than death.

"Thank you..."

I was able to calm down from Sahara's solemn composure. I take my beer and get a hold of myself so that I'm not inconveniencing the owner of the restaurant and making him lose business on my account. We sat in silence for the rest of our drinks but it was a comforting kind to know that I can show weakness to her. When we finished our drinks I made sure to leave a tip. Sahara's home was on the way back to mine up in the city but I didn't want to go to my place just yet. Not alone. Sahara was quick to pick this up when I stood in front of her door and I still had the swollen eyes of an old dog.

"Come inside, cheri. Let's listen to Barry White in bed."

Barry White was before her time but she grew up listening to it thanks to her mother. Perhaps it's fitting that she would listen to the music that her mother shared with her with me to soothe my sorrows. She played "Let The Music Play" which was even more fitting while she mulled about around her space, slowly undressing and getting comfortable in her inside clothes. She prepared Pineapple Ginger tea that she got from the local Mi Rancho from the recommendation of an Abuelita. While the tea steeped in the kitchen, she gestured towards me to come to her room. She has a queen sized bed that can barely accommodate the both of us which is why she would come to my place when we have had a night out in San Francisco since I have a bigger bed. However, I can appreciate the small proximity that this bed offered us to cuddle closer to one another.

She lit candles in her room she got on sale at a Joanns that advertised as rose flavored, but Sahara says it reminds her of the smell of the Grande Mosquée. The last time she was there was with her grandfather who passed away when she was 19, shortly after we met. Once the tea was prepared, she set them on the side of her night table and joined me in her bed. She spooned me from the side of my chest where she rested her chin and had her leg lazily wrapped around mine. She still had the faint smell of the perfume she made when she was in Kyoto that she had to create using her sense of smell. It was a tantalizing mixture of jasmine lily, coriander, rose oud and cherry blossoms. Normally this would be an aphrodisiac to me, but instead it comforted me with its familiarity. She adjusted her position to raise herself up to my ear and soothed my aching soul with wispy words in her low, raspy voice.

“Shhh... It’s ok cheri... Let the music play... doucement, doucement...”

It would remain this way for the rest of the evening well into night time, planting kisses around my face, feeling her lazily caressing parts of my body. These are the moments I cherish when we are out of uniform. When we are outside of our uniforms, that is when we can be open to each other the most. I’ll have to remember that next time it’s my turn to comfort her.