

IF YOU
COULD
SEE THE
SUN



ROMANCE
VERSION

ANN LIANG

THE KING AND THE GHOST

Ann Liang

BEFORE



HENRY

Henry Li has always been well-acquainted with winning.

He is not being arrogant, he is simply being honest. The proof of it is all over the Airington school halls, the daily magazines, the news, the glass display at his father's company headquarters, the bookshelf in every single one of their holiday houses. It's everywhere, really. Photos of him receiving unnecessarily heavy trophies, committing himself to the tedious process of shaking hands with yet another important old man, holding up certificates with his own name written in gold italics. Sometimes he is convinced that if he were ever to make a timeline of his life, the easiest way to do it would simply be by marking out all the awards he's received.

You must be so happy with how accomplished you are, people like to tell him, pressing up close to him with their awe and envy. And he will smile at them with perfect, practiced charm and say *yes, yes, indeed*. But *happy* feels like a

gross exaggeration. A misnomer, even. It would be more accurate to compare the experience to the lavish gift boxes he receives every now and then from his father's many business partners. Certainly they are nice to have, and they may preoccupy his thoughts for a good two seconds, before he files them away and goes about his day as usual.

But winning at school, within the classroom—that is different.

Winning actually *means something*, because there is somebody he wishes, always, to beat.

So when Mr. Murphy announces that they will be doing a spontaneous History trivia quiz for extra credit, he feels his heartbeat accelerate. The change is only internal, of course. Subdued. On the outside, he is still spinning his pen casually between his fingers, his chin propped up against his other hand, while the class dissolves into utter chaos around him.

“Who’s picking the teams?” someone calls out.

Mr. Murphy smiles from behind his desk. Henry eyes it warily; over the past year, he has been watching the mess there accumulate at an exponential rate, the mountains of printed-out worksheets dangerously close to toppling over at any second. All it would take would be someone breathing with too much vigor in the immediate vicinity of that desk, and everything would collapse. He presses his lips together. As a general rule, he has little tolerance for messiness.

Still, it does not bother him quite as much as it usually would, because soon Mr. Murphy claps his hands together and declares, “You can pick the teams out yourself. Choose wisely.”

And then the commotion clarifies into just two names:

“*Henry*—Henry Li, come join our team—”

“Alice! We need you—”

“I pick Henry—I picked Henry first—”

“He hasn’t picked you back, you idiot—”

“Whatever, Alice is ours—”

Across the room, he catches Alice’s eye, and his reaction this time is rather harder to subdue. She is staring him down as a soldier would their enemy in battle, two vivid spots of color rising to her full cheeks, her dark eyes burning, her hair scraped into its usual ponytail, stray wisps fluttering past her chin. When their gazes meet, her lips twist into a scowl. And though he knows it is utter foolishness, that anybody else would run the opposite direction if confronted with such an expression, his stomach flutters. He feels those years of competition stretching between them like a rope, every loss and gain, every near-miss and hard-won victory. Never mind that this is merely a game of trivia. Alice has a way of making even the smallest quizzes and contests seem like breathtaking, life-changing events. Everything becomes brighter, sharper, more significant.

His pulse quickens, anticipating the thrill of it.

“Henry, come to our team,” Rainie Lam says, grabbing his arm. “*Please?* Pretty please?”

He barely looks at her. The other team has already started to form, half his classmates grouping themselves around Alice. She looks slightly flushed at all the attention, the redness in her cheeks rising, a small smile fighting its way up the corners of her lips.

Chanel steps forward from their side.

“Okay, okay, you guys, let’s be fair—we can’t have Alice and Henry on the *same team*, or else it’s not even going to be a competition—”

“Girl, I hear you,” Rainie says, holding up a hand. “How about this? You guys can have Alice, and we’ll have Henry. Okay?”

Chanel grins at her. “I don’t see a problem with that.”

Henry stands back and lets the exchange run its course. He doesn’t exactly remember agreeing to being on Rainie’s team, but no matter now. He wishes only to get started. But of course, his new, self-appointed teammates have other things planned.

“Say something to her, Henry,” Rainie urges.

He blinks. “I beg your pardon?”

“Oh my god, like, you know at the start of those battles?” Rainie flips her hair impatiently. “You need to make your dramatic opening statement, like, *we’ll crush you, or, you’ll regret ever going up against us*—It’s good for building team morale.”

“I still fail to see the point of such a practice,” he mutters. And yet he has never missed an opportunity to rile Alice up; there is something all too satisfying about seeing the little crease between her brows, the intense, murderous look in her eyes, and knowing it is entirely in response to him. So he strides forward, his chin up, and meets Alice at the center of the classroom. He is but vaguely aware of the people cheering in the background, chanting his name, of the old world map and black-and-white photos and various flags hanging over the walls. There is only her when he says, smoothly, with deliberate ease, “You must know that I’ll win, Alice. It’s what I do.”

Her eyes flash. “I’ll strangle you.”

“How intimate.”

“You—” The color in her face blooms deeper. “You’re *dead*.”

Behind them, Mr. Murphy taps his desk with a ruler. “Hey, hey now—no threats to personal safety, please. I don’t want to get any complaints about death threats in my classroom—it’s a very long process, lots of paperwork involved—”

Alice leans forward all of a sudden, her mouth unbearably close to his ear. He has to draw upon all his willpower not to move, to flinch. To lean in closer. The effort is almost painful. “Trust me,” she whispers, her voice pure venom, her breath tickling his skin, “it wasn’t just a threat.”

Then she’s spinning around, leaving him with the faint, sweet lemon scent of her shampoo and the fresh memory of her face so close to his. *Really, this is masochistic*, he scolds himself. He should not be deriving *pleasure* from the fact that she just expressed, in no unclear terms, her desire to kill him. He—the pride of the Li family, the very heir to what will soon be the biggest tech startup in all of China, the recipient of too many grand honors to count—should most definitely not be flattered that he is, from what he knows, the only person she likes to threaten. And yet there is the unnatural, insistent thudding of his heart, the tightness in his throat, the tingling in his fingers. It takes a long beat for him to pull the classroom back into focus, and even then, he cannot stop himself from glancing in her direction again. Just once. Just out of curiosity.

She’s staring straight ahead at the teacher.

“There will be a total of forty questions. The main topic today is, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, the French Revolution,” Mr. Murphy is saying, dimming the lights and flicking on the projector. The opening slide glows over the screen,

the quiz title written out in Comic Sans, the background an unnerving shade of lurid green. “Are we ready?”

Of course he is. He read a dozen books on the causes and consequences of the French Revolution when he was eleven. He was led on a private tour around the Palace of Versailles when he was twelve. He has memorized every date, every key figure, every event. This is nothing to him.

“You’ve got this, Henry.” Someone thumps him hard on the back; a gesture of supposed comradeship he believes is much better confined to football matches and wrestling. Somebody else has the audacity to massage his shoulders, as if *this* is the area he will be using for a purely cognitive competition. He stiffens and turns around, and finds Bobby Yu staring up at him with wide-eyed surprise.

“Damn, dude,” Bobby says, in a voice loud enough to be heard across the entire classroom. “Do you like, work out? I never really noticed, with the uniform and all, but you’ve got a lot of lean muscle there ... What’s your routine?”

He does not want to reply—and luckily, he does not have the time to. The first question goes up on the screen.

When was Necker’s Compte Rendu au Roi published?

His eyes latch onto the key words, and the answer springs to his mind in an instant, almost before he has finished reading the full question. “19th February, 1781,” he says calmly, certain he is right.

Only half a millisecond later, Alice calls out too, at a much louder volume: “*February the 19th—*”

“Too late, Alice,” Mr. Murphy says cheerily, switching the slide to the correct answer. “Henry’s already gotten it. Better luck on the next question.”

Alice glowers over at him, seething, arms crossed tight over her chest, and he has no doubt she is envisioning his slow, painful demise. It is wildly entertaining. Exhilarating, really, to know that her head is full of him—even if it’s in the context of murder.

“Who the hell is Necker?” someone mutters in the background.

“*What* is a Necker?” someone else asks.

Another person makes an incredulous sound. “Beats me. I don’t think we covered it at all.”

“Then how do Alice and Henry know?”

“Because they’re Alice and Henry.”

In fact, they had covered it not just once but twice that semester. The date was written clearly in Section 4E of the worksheet they received on the Financial Crisis, and the finance minister was a historical figure they were all meant to know. Sometimes it stuns him how little his classmates have retained from their shared classes.

“All right,” Mr. Murphy says, “moving on to the second question.”

The slide switches again: *Who famously made the warning: ‘The first shot will drive the state to bankruptcy?’*

“Turgot.”

“Turgot.”

The response is practically instantaneous, but this time, Alice is faster.

“One point to Alice,” Mr. Murphy confirms.

The other team cheers, and a triumphant grin lights up Alice's face, quick as lightning, bright as the sun after a storm. It is always disarming to see it; she looks how he believes art should look, the kind of beautiful that makes you feel something, that presses your heart too tight against your ribcage. Sometimes she is so radiant, so vivid in her longing, that he is afraid to even stare in her direction, lest he give himself away. But today he allows himself the uncommon luxury of gazing at her for one brief moment before snapping his attention back to the screen.

He has to focus. He has to win.

He breathes in.

Nothing is ever easy with Alice, and he is grateful for it. Nowhere else does he have to apply his full effort, does he have to contend with a mind just as sharp and nimble as his own, does he have to grapple with the likelihood of defeat. She is his single greatest threat, his most formidable rival, and he knows she would not hesitate to ruin him. The problem is that if she were only to smile at him, he would let her. He would relish it.

“Next question.”

Name two ways the writing of the cahiers between 1788 and 1789 fueled tensions in the lead-up to the revolution.

Henry can physically feel his mind working, the wheels spinning like a well-oiled machine. “It politicized the nation,” he says quickly, “and—”

Alice speaks up, the words tumbling out so fast they're almost a nonsensical blur: “It—It allowed the peasants to articulate their problems—”

“—It created expectations for reform,” he finishes.

“Another point to Henry,” Mr. Murphy says.

A dark expression passes over Alice's face, all her previous joy gone in an instant, and she squeezes her hands into fists by her side. Her frustration is near palpable, her eyes narrowed into black daggers at him. "*Whatever*. Just give me the next question." Then, perhaps realizing she is speaking to a teacher, adds hastily, "I mean—please, Mr. Murphy. Thanks."

Mr. Murphy's lips twitch, and the slide changes.

Like this, the questions keep coming, one after another. For every point Henry manages to seize, Alice steals one back in the next round. The air in the room feels hotter, tighter, as if trapped inside a pressure cooker. Nobody else has even tried to answer. It is a competition between only the two of them, just the way he likes it. He can sense her eyes drilling into the back of his skull, her growing agitation as they run through another dozen questions with no obvious winner yet.

Soon there's only one question left.

Name three of the successes of the National Constituent Assembly before the 5th of August, 1789.

"Royal authority was limited," Alice blurts out, her neck and face a feverish red, her ponytail spilling loose down her back. "Serfdom was abolished—and—and—"

"Go Alice," someone whispers.

"*Don't interrupt me, I'm thinking*," she snaps without even looking their way. "Oh! The taxation system was reorganized—"

"Wrong," Henry says. He is almost sorry for it.

Alice goes deathly still. "What?" she asks in disbelief. "I'm not wrong—"

“You are,” he tells her with what he hopes is a comforting smile, to lessen the sting. He knows all too well that she would rather throw herself off a cliff than be wrong about anything.

“How?” she demands, the line between her brows deepening. “Literally everything I said was from the textbook. The Assembly brought an end to royal absolutism, and—”

“Not about that. The reorganization of the taxation system was considered a success between August 1789 and 1791—*not* before August 5th, as the question says.” He points helpfully at the screen, in case she has missed it.

Her countenance pales, her fingers digging into the edge of the nearest desk, as if she is contemplating flipping it over. Or throwing it at him. She appears one school rule away from lunging across the space and wrapping her lovely hands around his throat.

“That’s—It’s not fair,” she protests, her voice shrill. “I didn’t see—I obviously ... I *know* the answer.”

“I know you know,” he says calmly, tilting his head. “But it’s not what you said.”

She makes a choked, violent noise that promises bloodshed.

The classroom is quiet. Someone has rolled down the windows to let in a breeze, but the atmosphere is still stifling, the air crackling with tension. Most people, used to his and Alice’s rivalry by now, are looking on with some mixture of alarm and amusement.

Beside him, he hears Bobby mutter, “You know, sometimes Alice Sun *really* scares me.”

He is not scared, but the blood rushing to his head feels curiously similar to fear. And as she glares at him, cheeks pink, glowing with perfect rage, he can admit to himself: this is why he must win. Because when he is ahead of her, if just by one question, one mark, one inch, that is the only time he can be confident she's watching nobody but him. That is the only way he can think of to hold her attention, to make her care, to keep her interested.

"I'm afraid Henry is right," Mr. Murphy says gently, sticking to the middle of the classroom, between their two teams. "Henry, you can go and answer this one—if you get it wrong, then it's a tie. If you get it right, then you win."

He hesitates, though for no more than a second. He has the answer ready. In his peripheral vision, he can see Alice pacing the corner of the room, fidgeting with the buttons on her blazer the way she does before every test. He could pretend to get it wrong, of course. Slip up and make it a tie. But a tie is the worst compromise; it would mean that nobody wins. And he has never gone easy on her before. That would be an insult to her intelligence, to her ambition. She does not need him to go easy on her, either; she may very well beat him in the next quiz.

"The corvee was abolished," he says, taking his time, "the tithes were abolished, and legislative authority was placed into the hands of the elected representatives of the people. Is that correct?"

This is a rhetorical question. He knows it is.

Mr. Murphy nods in approval, and his team explodes into cheers.

"King Henry! King Henry!" They're chanting, clapping his back, circling him, but he only cares for the reaction of one person. Her eyes have not left him

this entire time, and he feels he has won something far more than a history quiz or extra credit. Something better. Something integral.

She strides over to him first, her shoulders thrown back, determined not to bend beneath the weight of her defeat. He does not think anything in the world will ever be powerful enough to knock her down. “Don’t gloat just yet,” she says fiercely, a challenge in the set of her jaw. “There’s a test coming up next week. I’ll make sure you lose.”

“I look forward to it,” he says, grinning.

DURING



HENRY

He remembers everything.

He was in primary school when his teachers first noticed that he had a near-photographic memory. They needed only show him a list of cards with new vocabulary words on them, and a minute later, he would be able to recite them one by one in their exact order. It is the same with poetry, snippets from newspapers, a map showing every city in China, monthly reports, tables of statistics. Once, in England, his father had entered him into a school competition to see who could memorize the most digits of Pi. When it was his turn, he had to be cut off before he had even finished, because members of the audience were starting to grow restless.

He has never had to prepare for a speech; he simply types it out beforehand, and the words are etched into him. Cue cards are unnecessary. Mnemonic devices only complicate things. He has grown to pride himself on his mind, its function and capacity and cold, clear logic, how well it serves him as a

tool. He knows how to treat it like any computer, categorizing his memories by date and type, filtering and filing away the ones that don't matter, saving the ones that do.

Mostly, they are of Alice.

Her look of intense concentration before a test. Her nervous pacing outside the classroom. Her face in the crowded corridors, her textbooks clutched tight to her chest. Her laughter, which always manages to catch him off-guard, even after all these years; a sound sharper than song, but just as stunning. Her scowl when she can't grasp a particular concept as fast as she'd like. Her smile underneath the spotlight at every Awards Ceremony, like she's trying to capture the moment, hold onto it before it's gone. Sometimes he wonders how someone so small is able to contain so much within them: all that joy, all that rage, all that wanting.

He remembers the relay race in the Sports Carnival, how she had pushed herself so hard her hair was damp with sweat, how she'd collapsed at the finishing line, clutching her side and gasping for air. How she'd squeezed her eyes shut when their exam results came out last semester, then opened them slowly, checked her score twice to make sure it was correct.

And, more recently, how she'd approached him in his dorm room for the first time—but contrary to what he had been hoping, it was because she had acquired an inexplicable power out of nowhere and needed answers.

If he did not consider his memory to be foolproof, he would most certainly be inclined to think he had hallucinated the exchange. To believe it a humiliating side-effect of how often his thoughts strayed to her, how much he privately craved her company outside the classroom.

But no. Alice, the source of his richest, most indispensable memories, can turn invisible. And if he can just get this right, then they will be business partners.

He rubs his eyes with the heel of his hand and blinks into the gray light. The alarm clock flashes from beside his desk.

3:01 a.m.

He stifles a yawn, takes a tentative sip of the black coffee he bought just for tonight. The sharp, bitter taste is overwhelming. Grimacing, he sets it back down, cracks his knuckles, and focuses on the tiny lines of code dancing across his screen. He can feel the exhaustion starting to creep in, the white fuzziness at the edges of his mind, the heaviness of his limbs, but his coding skills have not been compromised.

Get this right.

Technically, he could make a simple app within a day. Pull together a decent wireframe and prototype well before midnight, get it all up and running before tomorrow morning. But he needs this to be good. Not just good, but *perfect*.

Another yawn escapes his lips. Outside his window, he can hear the cicadas chirping. He is not usually the type to pull an all-nighter, let alone *multiple* all-nighters—there is no reason to, as he can excel in any test without resorting to such ridiculous measures as cramming—and he finds himself woefully underequipped for it. His back aches from sitting in the same place for the past five hours, and his bed is right there—so soft, the sheets warm and ironed—

No.

Henry imagines the look on Alice's face when he shows her the final app. He already knows what to call it: Beijing Ghost. He imagines her smiling one of her small, rare smiles, impressed despite herself. Perhaps she will even compliment him, tell him that he did a good job. His skin flashes hot at the thought, and he drags his laptop closer. Pushes his fatigue away. Places his fingers back on the keyboard.

“Well done, Henry,” Mr. Chen says. “That was an excellent presentation. Exemplary.”

Henry smiles and slides back into his seat, crossing one leg over the other. Like many of his classmates, who are invited to all sorts of red carpet events and interviews and conferences on a regular basis, he does not mind public speaking. Unlike those such as Rainie, he does not particularly *enjoy* it, but he feels no dread beforehand, and no nerves during it, no elevated sense of self-consciousness. It is precisely his calm, he believes, that allows him to perform so well, so consistently, without any hiccups.

In either case, a five-minute English presentation to a class of twenty or so people is nothing. He has presented by himself to his father's entire company before, spoken to an auditorium of thousands. He could do this in his sleep.

Still, he cannot help but sneak a glance at Alice beside him, eager to assess her reaction. There is a certain sour expression she likes to make, jealousy mixed with indignation, whenever a teacher praises him and not her.

But for once, she is not glaring at him. She seems distracted, her brows furrowed as she rifles through her cue cards with a frantic air, muttering under her breath. He catches a few phrases here and there, “*elucidate the perpetual, unyielding forces of our natural world*” and “*civilization remains a mere artifice*” and something about “*the humanity absent from these artificial societal structures*”. A few sentences she repeats twice. Each time she stumbles over a word, she makes a sound of frustration, and starts again.

“Alice,” Mr. Chen says. “You’re up next—I’m very eager to hear what you have to say.”

Alice doesn’t appear to have heard him. She’s still bent over her notes, staring hard at them like she wishes to physically upload them into her brain.

“Alice?” Mr. Chen says, a question in his voice this time. The whole class is waiting.

She jerks her head up. Startles. “S-sorry? I, um, I just—” She stacks her cards together, slips them into her pocket. “Can I please go get some water?”

Mr. Chen falters. “*Now?*”

“Yes, please,” she says firmly. “I—My mouth is really dry.”

“Well ... Okay, go ahead. Jake Nguyen—why don’t you present first, then?”

At once, Alice is out of her seat, slipping through the door, her ponytail bouncing behind her.

Henry stares after her for a beat. Could it be that she's turning invisible again? But she had turned invisible only last night, using it to her advantage to steal from the school lockers. Another Beijing Ghost task accepted and completed. He disapproved of the stealing, of course, and had even intended to question her about it, but she had returned afterwards looking so exhausted that every single protest vanished immediately from his mind.

She has been busy. They both have, but while he assists as much as he can, she is the ghost. She has to see every task through herself. Not that she would ever complain—not that she would ever admit to being tired, even if she's pushed herself to the limit, even if she's breaking down right now, but—

He is a fool.

“Excuse me, Mr. Chen,” he says, his throat tight with some intolerable emotion. Concern. Fear. But the smile he plasters to his face reveals none of that. “Would it be possible for me to also fetch some water?”

“Of course.”

He pushes from his desk, leaving the classroom without a glance back, his footsteps quickening over the shiny floorboards.

He finds her out in the corridor. She is not invisible. Not at all. But she is pacing back and forth in circles, her hands gripping her cue cards so hard they're starting to crease. She's still muttering what he assumes to be lines from her presentation to herself. He stops a few feet away, half-hidden behind a corner, and just watches. Watches as she runs a rough hand through her hair, then tugs it free from her ponytail completely, shakes her head as if to empty it of all distractions. Her fingers are trembling.

“Alice,” he says, approaching her, careful to keep his voice light, soft.

She flinches anyway, then manages to pull her features into a scowl, regarding him warily. “What?”

He cuts to the chase. “You’re panicking.”

“I’m—I’m *not*—”

“You are,” he says, tilting his head to study her more closely. The skin under her eyes and above the bridge of her nose are a disconcerting shade of gray, and her cheekbones are more pronounced than he’s ever seen them. He registers a strange, dull ache in his chest, but the tone he adopts is teasing. He knows it would wound her pride if he were to show any outward sympathy. “I understand there is a lot of pressure, following up a presentation as great as mine. I assure you that even if yours is just half as good, you will still receive high marks—”

“Did you really follow me all the way out here just to be smug?” she demands.

“No, I was just checking if you’d given yourself a heart attack from self-induced stress.”

She rolls her eyes, which he considers a victory. Better that she be angry at him than agitated with herself. “Wow. Your concern is touching, but I’m *fine*.”

“Evidently,” he says. His eyes trail down to the cue cards still clutched in her hands. “And those are—”

She hides them behind her back, her face reddening. “Nothing,” she says, a defensive edge in her voice. “None of your business.”

“You don’t need those,” he tells her sincerely. “You can simply memorize your presentation, or improvise—”

Alice huffs out a short, harsh laugh. “Not everyone has your perfect memory, all right?”

He frowns. “It’s only five minutes. Your memory doesn’t even need to be perfect to—”

“*Only* five minutes?” she repeats. “Okay, yeah, you’re literally just showing off now—”

“No,” he tries to say. “No, I am not—”

“And *unfortunately*,” she continues, speaking over him, her words coming out faster and louder, “it’s a little hard for me to retain information when I’m running on two hours of sleep. Not to mention that Mr. Chen has unreasonably high expectations for my presentation and I have that thousand-word zuowen due for Chinese *tomorrow*, and another unit test for Math on probability which I *hate*, and we received four new Beijing Ghost task requests today and I need to get them all sorted and I can’t fail because—I can’t fail in any of this—” She stops abruptly, her breathing unsteady, unable to meet his eyes. “I just can’t fail.”

He gazes down at her in silence, the ache in his chest deepening. He is torn, as he always seems to be when it comes to her. There is a part of him—the part that recognizes the importance of excelling, that was trained from a young age to deliver no matter what, to project the best possible image at all times—that wants to say: *you can push through this*. That wants to challenge her, fight her at every step, fuel her to keep climbing to the top, where he knows she belongs.

But there is another part of him, a softer, unfamiliar part he cannot quite make sense of yet, that wants simply to draw her close. That wants to brush her

hair back from her face with all the tenderness he feels, to reassure her that it's already enough, that she's already perfect, that she can't keep functioning like a machine. That she should be allowed to rest, and catch up on sleep, and forget about what everyone else expects of her. Of course, she would refuse. She would probably laugh at him, or scorn him, or suspect him of deliberately sabotaging her so she'd fall behind.

Irrationally, he experiences a flare of anger. Not at her, but at their classmates, their teachers. He has witnessed with his own eyes the way they treat her, how they only pay attention when she's succeeding. None of them seem to realize she's burning herself out just so they can see her light.

"Alice," he says at last.

She lifts her eyes to his, and he tries to ignore the way it sends everything inside him into a frenzy. *This is madness*, a voice whispers in his head. *She holds too much power over you*. And he knows—he knows it's true. He would do anything for her. He would let her do anything to him.

"When you're in there presenting later," he tells her, "keep your eyes on my face."

She stares at him for a long beat. Then she snorts, some of the tension in her shoulders breaking. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Because. For one, my face is nice to look at—"

"*Sure.*"

He takes a step forward, until they're only inches apart, until he can see his own reflection in her dark, wide-eyed gaze. "Are you saying it isn't?" he asks, his voice smooth, as if his heart isn't beating so hard it'll bruise.

She swallows audibly. Turns her head away. “You ... You’re not making a very convincing case right now.”

“Second,” he continues, easing back, because it’s much too difficult to focus when she’s this close, “it’ll help you pretend the rest of the class isn’t there.”

“And what purpose would that serve?”

“Well, you won’t have to worry so much over what they’re thinking.”

She stiffens. “How do you know—”

“Just trust me on this one, okay?”

“Why?”

He offers her his most charming smile, the one he puts on when he’s meeting new clients. “You don’t think I’m trustworthy?”

“That’s not what I’m asking,” she says, too many emotions dancing over her features for him to name. “I mean, why ... why are you helping me? Shouldn’t you be happy, if I completely screw up in there?”

He hesitates.

A few answers present themselves to him. None of them are the total truth. “Because if I’m going to beat you,” he says in the end, “I want it to be a fair competition. It’ll be more satisfying for me.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s all.”

She considers him. “You’re sure this isn’t some kind of weird reverse psychology trick where it only *seems* like you’re being nice when you’re actually wiping my memory?”

“Alice.”

“Okay, okay—*fine*. But if I do find out it’s a trick, I’m—” She pauses, thinking. “I’m stealing all the clothes from your room the next time I turn invisible.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Are you really so eager to see me undressed?”

That rather effectively puts an end to the conversation. They go back inside together, him fighting a smile the whole way. Good timing, too—Jake Nguyen has decided to finish his presentation by rapping his conclusion, with Peter supporting him by beatboxing in the background, and Mr. Chen is making exasperated attempts to usher him away from the front of the classroom. Then Alice is up, and she does as they agreed, delivering her presentation to him and him alone. Five minutes that feel both like seconds and centuries slip past them, and it’s over. She’s perfect.

Of course she is.

AFTER



HENRY

He's having the nightmare again.

Not the old one, the one with the dark, locked room and the suffocating air and the windowless walls, the dry ache at the back of his throat and the formulas swimming before his vision. But the one that's crept in like a curse, that hasn't left him alone ever since their Experiencing China trip, the Beijing Ghost mission, everything that unfolded over the course of that terrible night.

He's back inside the hotel in Suzhou again. But this time, he's too late.

This time, it's Alice who's being taken away.

He freezes at the doorway—no, he's *frozen*. He can't move. Can't do anything except watch as the masked men seize her, wrapping the ropes tighter and tighter around her wrists. She's kicking out, screaming for help, her eyes wide and afraid, tears streaming down her face.

Alice, he shouts back, or tries, but even his voice fails him, the word caught in his throat. He wants to reach her, to free her. To keep her safe. He

should have known this would happen. This is the part that he keeps getting stuck on, that he can't forgive himself for. He should have been more persuasive. He should have anticipated the risk, should have taken more precautionary measures, should have planned the mission out better.

Then the men are marching out the door, past him, and everything dims. She's alone in the hotel room, struggling still, and finally he can move. He lunges forward, crossing the space in a heartbeat, his blood hammering in his ears.

"Why didn't you come in time?" Alice is saying, her breathing uneven, her voice small and raw. "I thought we had a plan—"

"I'm sorry," he says. He seldom apologizes, but now it spills from his lips like it's nothing. "I'm sorry, I was held up by Rainie and the others—I didn't intend to take quite so long—"

"I trusted you. I was counting on you ..."

"There were too many people outside." There's no logic to his words, but he says it with the uttermost conviction, the way people do in dreams. He's fiddling with the ropes, trying to stay calm. They're rougher than he expected, so hard that they keep grazing his skin, burning against his palms. "They—They would have seen you. And I'm here now, aren't I? It'll be all right."

She laughs sadly. With an awful lurch, he realizes the ropes aren't loosening—they're tightening.

"Wait," he says, feeling his composure shatter. He doesn't know how to do this. *He doesn't know how to do this.* The realization fills him with some foreign emotion, like hysteria. He's cracked codes university graduates can't figure out, solved impossible math questions at record speed. He's the heir, the

king, the prodigy. He knows everything, can do anything. But he can't untie a piece of rope to save the person he cares about most. "Wait—"

"Nobody can see me, remember?" she whispers.

"That's not true," he insists. *I can see you.*

But he blinks, and she's gone.

"No."

He grabs at the air, tries to hold onto her, but his fingers close around nothing.

"Alice," he calls, twisting his head around wildly, desperate to find her again. The room is empty. It's only him. His mind is spinning. He feels like he's choking, like he's drowning. He needs to bring her back. If something happens to her—if *anything* happens to her—he won't forgive himself for as long as he lives. "Alice. Alice, please—"

He wakes with a gasp.

The sun is bright in his eyes, and it takes him a few moments longer than usual to comprehend where he is. He takes in the room around him in bits and pieces: the gilded dust motes floating in the air, the faded books lined up on the shelves, the stained glass windows and handwritten notes spread over the mahogany table ... Yes. Of course. The library. His own private library—a place he has admittedly taken for granted in the past, but that Alice treats as some divine sanctuary, a blessing from the gods. He had brought her here in the morning to read together, and then—

He frowns, remembering through the lingering fog of sleep. He had been pretending to focus on the book in his hands, something about foreign taxes, while Alice sat beside him and threaded her fingers through his hair, the soft

sensation so pleasant that he must have eventually dozed off. It's strange. He is not the type to take naps, much less *by accident*. But he always finds himself relaxing in Alice's presence, perhaps to an irrational degree.

Alice.

The details from the nightmare rush back to him, and he whips his head around, heart racing. She's there. Still sitting right next to him, her hair tied back in a loose ponytail, a half-quizzical, half-concerned expression on her face.

He experiences a relief so immense his body goes weak with it.

"Henry?" she says slowly, as if he's still asleep and she doesn't want to disturb him. "Are you, uh, okay?"

He manages a faint nod. Even now, the nightmare still feels too vivid, more like a real memory than something constructed from his own worst fears.

"Were you dreaming?" Alice asks, leaning down to peer at his face.

"Because ..." She hesitates.

"Yes?"

"Because you were, um—" She clears her throat. "I thought I heard you saying my name. Multiple times. What exactly did you ...?"

He knows that he should be far more mortified by this. That he should probably make some attempt to deny it, to save face while he still can. But then she reaches out and places her hand gently on the back of his head, and it's like someone has struck a match within him. He can't stand it. Can't help himself. Without meaning to, he grabs her wrist.

She stills. In that short millisecond, he sees the surprise flash through her eyes. "Henry—"

He pulls her tight to his chest, wraps his arms around her body, buries his face in the curve of her neck. She smells like fresh lemons and vintage books, like safety, like home. He doesn't want to go anywhere else. He doesn't want to let go.

“Don't disappear again,” he murmurs, his voice muffled against her skin. “I'm afraid I do not have the capacity to withstand it.”

“What are you talking about?” She laughs at him. “I haven't gone anywhere ...”

“Just. Just promise me.”

She draws back a few inches, not laughing anymore, but gazing at him with a quiet, searching intensity that makes his throat ache. Then she takes his hand in her own, running her fingers over the thin, silvery scar on his thumb. The scar from when he'd hit those men, from the parking lot under the hotel. He suppresses a shiver. He had not been so afraid in the moment; everything had happened so quickly that all he had time to think of was what he needed to do next. No, the fear had come later: on the long train ride back to Beijing, in the days when Alice was gone from school and he didn't know if he would ever see her again. His mind had kept itself busy during the torturous wait, conjuring countless alternate scenarios where he and Alice had both failed. That was around when the nightmares started—and they've shown no signs of easing since.

“Are you worried about me?” she asks him.

“Yes.” He sees no point in denying it. “And I don't know how to stop.”

She sighs, a small, almost happy sound, looking more beautiful than ever in the golden library light. Then she draws his arms around her again. This time

she leans deeper into the embrace, her chin resting perfectly on his shoulder, and he feels his heart beat as if for the very first time. He wonders if she can hear it. “I’m safe, Henry. We both are.”

Henry doesn’t know what to say. The lump in his throat makes it impossible to speak.

“I get nightmares too,” she admits after a moment. “From ... you know. Before.”

“You—do?”

“Sometimes it’s just about me turning invisible again, but it’s like—I can’t turn back. I’m just cursed to be invisible forever. To haunt the school halls forever, wander this vast city alone. No one, not even my own parents, can see me. No matter what I say, what I do, no matter how loud I scream. And sometimes—sometimes I’m still Beijing Ghost.” She swallows. “I have to do another task, but it’s somehow even worse. Sometimes I have to injure, or kill, and—” Her voice grows quiet, and he realizes she’s never admitted this out loud before, not even to herself. “And the terrible thing is, sometimes I go through with it.”

“Then?” he whispers. “What happens?”

“Then I wake up,” she says. Gazes up at him, her eyes brighter than any sun could be, and smiles slightly. “And you’re there. And that’s how I know everything’s going to be okay.”



ALICE

“I’m really glad we did this,” I say happily, shoving my textbooks into my bag.

“Aren’t you?”

We’re walking together through the lanes of Solana, all the elaborate light decorations and window displays bright against the evening sky. It’s the Spring Festival holidays, just two weeks before school commences again. Snow has started to fall, catching in Henry’s long lashes, his dark curls, sticking to his wool scarf. I can just make out the white fog of his breath when he exhales, turns around, looks at me. Smiles with a softness I still haven’t fully gotten used to.

“Of course,” he says, but there’s something else in his voice. Almost ... disappointment. But I can’t understand why. We’d spent over four hours in that café, going over our notes. We’d even managed to tick off everything on my to-do list.

“Wasn’t it productive?” I press. “We covered like, ten different topics. We even did the challenge questions. At this rate, I might not fall behind after all.”

“Fall behind? Alice, I highly doubt anyone else at this new school of yours is spending their break studying ahead of the coursework.”

“You don’t *know* that. They could be way more hard-working than I am—”

“The chances of that are statistically very low.”

“Or they could all be geniuses,” I continue, adjusting my bag strap higher up my shoulder. “They could have photographic memories like you—”

He scoffs. “Again, highly improbable.”

“Well, either way, I need to be better than all of them. This is my first and last opportunity to be the *sole* valedictorian, remember?”

At that, his smile stretches into a smirk, his lips a brighter red in the cold. “I imagine you’ll be quite lonely, standing on the stage by yourself. Won’t you miss me?”

“You wish.”

“I’ll miss you,” he says, and he sounds like he’s joking, but the words make me stop and stare anyway. The snow has a way of bringing out the best of his beauty, casting him in an almost ethereal glow. The pale blue light circles his hair like the perfect crown, sharpening the slant of his cheekbones and the straight line of his nose. King Henry, in all his natural glory. For a moment it’s difficult to look directly at him, too hard to hide my own awe. A thought jolts through me: *I want to reach out and touch his cheek, run my fingers through his curls*. And it’s followed by a thought even stranger, even more exhilarating—that technically I *could*. I could do all that and more.

Except we're very much in public, and there are at least a dozen families strolling past us who probably wouldn't appreciate any overt displays of affection, and Henry will *absolutely* use it to his full advantage if he ever finds out just how often I think about kissing him. How badly I want to, right now.

I wrench my gaze away. Try to get back to the point. "Was there something else you needed to do tonight? I know we were mostly focusing on my subjects, but if you were hoping to like, brainstorm anything or whatever, I have a bit more time—"

"No. No, I'm all good."

I raise my eyebrows. "Then?"

"Then ... what?"

"Why are you sulking?"

He slows down, visibly affronted. "I am not sulking. I do not *sulk*."

"You are," I inform him. "Come on, tell me."

"No," he repeats, then hesitates. Stuffs his hands into his coat pockets. "It was merely that ... I'd invited you to go out on a date."

"Yeah?" I say, confused. "A study date."

"A date," he corrects, with emphasis, and suddenly I understand.

Wow. Oh, wow, I'm bad at this.

"I didn't realize—I thought you only meant—" I can feel my cheeks getting hotter and hotter as the truth grows increasingly obvious, guilt and giddiness jostling inside me. He had asked me out here on a date. A proper date. Not just to talk about graphing techniques together and critique each other's persuasive essays. "I'll make it up to you," I blurt out. "We can go do something now, if you still want to. Proper date-y stuff. Like, um, over there. That looks romantic."

I point haphazardly at a store in the distance. I can't make out what's inside it, only the neon pink signs and heart-shaped posters plastered over the front.

Henry's face turns an odd color. "That," he says. Seems to choke on a silent word. After what must be the longest pause ever recorded in the history of human conversation, he finally pushes out: "That, I believe, is a lingerie store."

"Oh." I let my hand fall as fast as I can, and find myself regretting my entire life. "N-never mind. In that case, how about ..." I scan the area, but I have no idea where anything is. This is my first time coming to Solana since the Beijing Ghost mission.

But Henry's laughing at me now. Or attempting to hide his laughter, and failing terribly at it. "How about we simply have dinner? There are plenty of restaurants here: this Japanese grill my father enjoys, and a Thai restaurant with excellent pineapple roti—the atmosphere is always rather lively inside ..."

I let him rattle off all the different restaurants, half-wondering how many of them are directly or indirectly tied to his father's company and hoping I don't look too overwhelmed. In the end we settle on the closest one we can find: a hot pot place that seems pretty new, with a modern glass design and tasseled red lanterns strung over the doorway to celebrate the Lunar New Year. The windows are fogged up with steam and covered with upside-down *fu* characters, for good luck.

Like the surrounding restaurants, though, the line is wrapped all the way around the corner.

"Uh," I say, stepping back. "On second thought, maybe we should try somewhere else ..."

“No, it’s no problem,” he tells me, and begins to make his way to the very front of the line.

“Henry,” I hiss, running after him, trying to convey both confusion and sheepishness towards the many families waiting behind us. “*Henry*, what are you—”

But he’s already struck up a conversation with the pretty waitress standing outside the door. “Do you have any VIP rooms available?” he asks in Mandarin, extending his hand. To the distant observer, it looks like he’s going for a handshake, but I’m close enough to see the business card held between his fingers, the SYS logo printed clearly over it.

The waitress stares down at it for a moment, then startles with sudden understanding, her thick-lashed eyes wide. “O-Of course, Li Xiansheng. You are one of our most esteemed guests. There is always room for you.”

I feel my jaw drop. It’s not as if it’s the first time I’ve witnessed Henry use his family’s influence to his favor, but it still comes as a shock.

Henry merely nods, like this is the natural response. “Thank you.” He turns to me, brows raised, a smug look on his face. “Well?”

“I—we could just wait out here with the others,” I say, flustered. The waitress is watching us curiously, her eyes flickering back and forth between me and Henry. “Or—or try another restaurant—”

Before Henry can reply, another voice breaks through all the background noise and festive, mall-friendly music.

“Yan Yan! Is that you?”

I turn around slowly. Xiaoyi is skipping up to us—truly, *skipping*, like she’s a teenage girl practicing for a ballet show—her cheeks rosy pink from the

outdoor chill, her black permed hair sticking out from under her polka-dot beanie. She's followed by two other women her age I vaguely recognize. The one on the left is tall and very slender, with a pinched face and a designer bag, which she keeps rearranging so that the Prada logo is in clear view. The one on the right has her hair tied into two long braids, her false lashes so long that they seem in danger of covering her eyes.

“Xiaoyi,” I greet, trying to recover in time. “Wow, what a surprise!”

It really is a surprise. Last time I checked, Xiaoyi only ever went shopping at the morning market for fresh fish and fruit and cheap blouses, not places like Solana.

“Lin Ayi invited us here,” Xiaoyi says, gesturing to the woman with the Prada bag. “I'd wanted us and Yao Ayi to just grab some youtiao and call it a day, but she *insisted* on treating us to—what did she call it? A *proper* meal. At a *proper* restaurant.”

“Ah.” I nod along, smiling at both women. I remember Lin Ayi mostly from Xiaoyi's rants—they've been mahjong buddies for years now, and it seems to be one of the only things they have in common. “Well, that's great. Ayi hao.”

They smile back at me with necessary politeness, but I can already sense their gazes drifting over to Henry. Of course.

In response, Henry straightens and puts on his best smile, the kind that could be used to promote world destruction and still win over hordes of loyal fans. “It's very lovely to meet you two,” he says, switching again to Mandarin. “Any friends of Alice's aunt must be impressive people.”

I don't know whether to roll my eyes or laugh. The strange, surreal thing about us being on the same side now is that his charm—which I once found to

be one of the most infuriating things ever, and proof of his inherent untrustworthiness— is more often than not used on me, or in any case for my benefit.

“Oh, he’s such a smooth talker,” Lin Ayi coos, scanning him from head to toe with such overt interest I almost want to step in between them. Protect Henry from view. Then her eyes latch onto Henry’s watch, and she lifts a dramatic hand to her lips. “Is that ... a *Cartier* watch? It must have been very expensive. And it is a new model, too, from the looks of it.”

Henry’s outward expression doesn’t change much, but I notice the faint amusement curling at the corner of his lip. “I believe so,” he says mildly. “It was a gift, from my father.”

Lin Ayi’s thin brows rise. “Your father?”

“The founder of SYS,” Xiaoyi jumps in, looking over at Henry with pure adoration.

Henry nods once in confirmation.

Neither of the women disappoint with their reactions. Yao Ayi clutches her necklace, and Lin Ayi’s mouth falls wide open. She actually looks like she might start drooling. “Your father is—You are from the Li family?”

“Yes. I’m Henry Li.”

She seizes her handbag and whips out her phone with alarming speed, all while ensuring the Prada logo is very much still visible. “Could I add your WeChat? I have a daughter around your age, I believe—she’s in the States now, but she’s flying back soon. Very beautiful, a swimmer’s body, and very single. Maybe I could arrange for you two to meet? I think you’ll like her—she’s

extremely popular with boys at her school, but none of them meet her standards. *You*, however ...”

A black vinegar taste fills my mouth. I have to resist the ridiculous urge to shove her phone back. Then I notice Henry watching me, his lips tugging into a smile, and the bitter feeling in me boils into annoyance. Does he actually think this is *funny*?

“You are single too, right?” Lin Ayi presses, beaming.

Henry doesn’t reply right away, just continues studying me out of the corner of his eye, and runs a leisurely hand through his dark hair, shaking out the snow. As if we could stand around in the cold all day while the hot-pot restaurant waitress waits for us and Lin Ayi plans out her daughter’s future honeymoon with him.

“Well?” Lin Ayi asks, with growing interest. “Is that a yes?”

“He’s not,” I blurt out before I can stop myself. I grab Henry’s hand with more force than I intended, lacing my fingers through his, and glance up just in time to catch the unguarded expression on his face—for a moment his eyes widen, and he looks very young, almost shy. “He’s my boyfriend.”

“*You*?” Lin Ayi gasps, her tone thick with disbelief.

Xiaoyi frowns at her. “Why not my darling niece? What’s so surprising, hah?”

“S-Sorry,” she says, perhaps catching the insinuated insult in her words. “I just—you two are so different. I didn’t think he would ... Well, I wouldn’t have assumed you were his type. You are—extremely lucky, is what I mean.”

My face heats.

“Actually, I was the one who fell for her first,” Henry says, still in that calm, charming voice, but there’s a new hardness to his gaze. He runs a thumb casually over the inside of my wrist while he speaks, tracing an invisible pattern over the lines of my palm, and all of a sudden my skin is burning for a different reason. He makes no attempt to hide it, either—he performs this small, intimate gesture right where everyone can see, in the same deliberate way Lin Ayi displays the designer logo on her bag. “In fact, I’d admired her silently for years before she ever even thought to consider me. If anybody is lucky, I can assure you it is me.”

I stare at him, my heart pounding, unable to speak.

Thankfully, the waitress speaks for me. “I hate to interrupt, Li Xiansheng, but ... are you coming into the VIP room after all, or ...?”

“Yes,” Henry tells her, holding my hand. “We would—”

“You’re going to the VIP room?” Lin Ayi interrupts. “Oh! Oh, is there any chance—I don’t suppose we could come along? The lines are so long around here and”—she makes a dramatic motion to the snow, like it might be poison—“it’s so awfully cold ...”

Henry casts me a quick, subtle look, the meaning obvious in his gaze: *the choice is yours*.

I hesitate. I’d wanted this to be a private moment, a proper date. But I also know how insecure Xiaoyi generally feels around Lin Ayi—if we let them come in with us, Xiaoyi will have bragging rights for at least the next month, and she won’t have to worry about losing face.

“Sure,” I say, offering them the brightest grin I can muster. “I’d love for you to join us.”

The air inside is so warm that within minutes of entering the restaurant, I'm already sweating. I loosen my jacket and brush my damp hair back from my face. White steam rises from the bubbling pots around us, the scent of spices and coriander wafting through the tightly packed space. There's a table at the end with small metal bowls built into the surface, all filled with various dipping sauces, alongside trays of fresh pineapples, watermelon slices, cucumber salad, crushed peanuts, and cold noodles. I'm silent as we make our way through the booths, busy trying to figure out how to keep this dinner under control, and trying not to feel too giddy over the fact that Henry hasn't dropped my hand. If anything, his grip tightens ever-so-slightly when a waiter rushes past with pots of boiling water.

Most people have taken their puffer jackets off and draped them over the back of their chairs, then covered them in a translucent sheet of plastic to fend off flying droplets of oil and hot soup. The women have their hair tied back; the men have their sleeves pushed up. All of them are wearing an apron with the restaurant name written across the front.

The waitress leads us across the main area, down a narrow corridor, and into a quiet, separate room. It's almost like we've entered another restaurant.

"You can order through the tablets," she tells us, sliding the lattice door open. "I'll be waiting right outside if you need anything."

The round table inside is big enough for at least ten people. A folding screen stands in the back—more a prop than anything, for aesthetic purposes—

with images of blooming chrysanthemums embroidered into the thin, shimmery material. As if this isn't enough, all the napkins have been folded into the shape of swans.

“Very fancy for a hotpot restaurant,” Lin Ayi observes with clear approval as she lowers herself onto the cushioned chair. “And the environment in here is so much better than outside.”

“Yes, yes,” Yao Ayi agrees, taking the seat next to her. “I think I tried to book a private room before, but they always said there weren't any available.”

“Ah.” Xiaoyi grins. “Well, that depends on who you come here with.” Her grin only widens when she looks across the table, and notices Henry pulling my chair out for me.

The two other women follow her gaze, their expressions a satisfying mixture of admiration and even jealousy. And I won't lie—it feels good. *Great*, really. As vain as it might sound, I've never minded being the subject of people's envy, because envy is just further proof that I have something others want, something worth wanting. But I've only ever been envied for my studies, my discipline, my winning streak across my subjects. Never because a beautiful boy is waiting for me to sit down before he does, the yellow-orange lights glinting off his dark curls, his eyes fixed on my face, as if nothing else in the room is of consequence.

A warm flush spreads through my body.

Lin Ayi sighs. “He would make such a great son-in-law.”

Henry catches my eye and, pretending to pass me the tablet menu, leans in to whisper in my ear, “Well, how have I been?”

I take the menu from him, lifting it higher to block my own face. “How have you been at what?”

“You invited them with us to show me off, didn’t you?” Henry murmurs, and I do my best to ignore his nearness, how his voice takes on an almost husky edge when he lowers it the way he’s doing now, his accent turning each word into something musical. “I’m happy to oblige. But you must let me know if I’m performing up to standard.”

I clear my throat. “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

Forgetting the menu completely, I glare over at him. “You’ve been very good. Happy?”

His lips split into a grin, and he tilts his head back a few degrees, his pale neck exposed, like he’s drinking the moment in. “I am,” he says, voice pressed quieter than ever, his breath tickling my ear. “Exceedingly happy.” It’s still a new discovery—like how he’ll make a small, soft sound with the back of his throat whenever I play with his hair a certain way, or how he’ll soften completely if I rest my head against his shoulder. But at times like this, I’m struck by the most bizarre idea that if I praised him enough, if I chose the right words and coaxed him and promised to reward him, he would seize the sun from the sky for me.

Perhaps emboldened by my positive feedback, Henry turns to smile at our guests, waving a casual hand at the other tablets. “Please, feel free to order anything you wish. It’s on me.”

“Oh, we couldn’t let you do that,” Lin Ayi says, even though she’s already reaching for the menu. “We’re the elders here.”

“It would be my honor,” Henry insists, sitting back with all the ease of a king on his throne.

Xiaoyi is gazing at him like he really is a king, or maybe a prince from the fairytales.

“No, no,” Lin Ayi tells him, now visibly scrolling through the seafood section of the menu. I watch her add the most expensive lobster option to her cart. “No, we simply couldn’t. I can’t let you pay for all this.” She adds two plates of fresh crab meat as she speaks.

“I have a discount,” Henry says. “My father is familiar with the owner.”

His family is familiar with everybody, I add inside my head.

“You’re much too polite,” Lin Ayi says, now selecting a family-sized serving of scallops. “And it’d be a waste—I have a very small stomach, you know. It’s necessary, to keep a good figure like mine. I won’t even be eating that much.”

But when our dishes are placed and wheeled in later by multiple waiters, I almost choke. There are countless plates of some kind of rare premium beef, a type of fish I initially mistaken for an odd-looking plant, a platter of crab legs so large I have to wonder if they’re of scientific significance, and three bottles of baijiu. The wine bottles themselves resemble vases, wrapped with gold foil and sealed with a shiny blue fabric.

Lin Ayi immediately grabs one and pops it open using her teeth. “You can drink, can’t you?” she asks.

It takes me a second to realize she’s asking *Henry*. My heart thuds. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so much as *touch* a glass of wine before. I can’t

even imagine what that would look like; him under the influence of anything other than his own mind and judgment.

He stills. “Er—”

“He’s quite young,” Xiaoyi interjects. “Don’t pressure the kid.”

“Of course, of course. But he must be eighteen at the least,” Yao Ayi says with a considering look. “Aren’t you?”

Henry nods slowly, his gaze flickering to me. “I turned eighteen recently, yes.”

I remember that day well. We had spent the evening together, strolling through a park an hour’s drive from the city. I’d packed a light picnic and bought him a cake from Paris Baguette with the money earned from our tutoring app. The cake was delicious, vanilla-flavored, with multiple layers of white cream so fluffy it looked like snow, and covered at the top with slices of fresh, sugar-powdered strawberries and a chocolate plaque that said ‘*Happy birthday Henny*’. We’d both stared at the plaque for a long time before I threw my hands up in horror. *I can’t believe this*, I said, pacing around the grass. *I swear—I wrote your name correctly. It must’ve been a mistake. I can go back and order another one for you. Or, I don’t know. Maybe I can make one. Not that I’ve baked a cake before, but it can’t be that hard, right? I’m so sorry—*And then he was laughing, catching my wrist and pulling me back down onto the picnic rug with him. The ground was soft, cushioned by the wildflowers and the loose soil underneath. It had rained, the day before, but you wouldn’t know it from how blue the sky was. *Alice, it’s fine*, he said. *It’s not fine*, I told him shrilly, my face red, my throat catching on nothing. *I just—I had it all planned out. I’d even made a vision board. I wanted it to be perfect. I want everything to be*

perfect, for you. He was still laughing, but his eyes had softened, and if I looked closely it was as if I could see the sun in them, those molten flecks of gold. Sometimes he was so beautiful I didn't know what to do with it. *It's already perfect,* he insisted. *Believe me. I can't recall the last time anyone has cared this much about my birthday.* I had calmed a little then, or perhaps I was simply stunned by his words, their sincerity. So we ate the cake with the misspelt name, and the strawberries were even sweeter than they appeared, and there was the pale light rippling over the pond before us, the white-feathered ducks floating on water, and I felt inside me a rising happiness that was almost like pain.

“Don't worry, we don't have great alcohol tolerance,” Yao Ayi tells him, pulling me back to the present. “We won't expect so much from you.”

Lin Ayi laughs, a loud, barking sound that reminds me of wild geese. “Speak for yourself—I can outdrink any man from my compound. What do you say, Henry? Are you up for a little challenge?”

I nudge him with my elbow, hoping to convey through a single touch what I mean. *You don't have to drink with them if you don't want to. You don't have to do anything if you don't want to.*

But I should've known that Henry Li isn't the type to turn down a challenge. His expression has already cleared, and he's holding out his empty glass. “I don't see why not,” he says lightly.

“Ah, perfect!” Lin Ayi cheers, promptly filling his glass to the brim before pouring the clear alcohol out into her own. Then she turns to me. “And Yan-Yan? Will you have some too?”

“Oh. Um.” I do my best not to look horrified. I’d read somewhere that alcohol can damage both memory and cognitive function, which has honestly turned me off the idea more than any number of public health campaigns about liver damage could. “That’s—Actually, I don’t think I’m ...”

Lin Ayi flutters her fingers, the giant emerald ring on her thumb sparkling under the lights. “It’s polite to accept drinks from your elders. A sign of respect.”

“I ...”

“I’ll drink for her,” Henry says quickly. “I’ll drink for the both of us. I would be honored to.”

Lin Ayi’s brows rise. “You will?”

“Of course.”

I throw Henry a meaningful look, gratitude warring with concern. “You really don’t have to, you know,” I murmur when the other women are distracted. “If you pretend to go to the bathroom now, I can empty your glass and refill it with water. I saw them do it in a TV show once.”

He laughs and leans back, calm, relaxed, swirling his wine with two fingers. “Alice. I can handle this.”

“Can you really?”

“When have you ever seen me struggle with anything?”

As annoying as it is to admit, he makes a good point.

“Besides,” he continues, turning to face me fully, a gleam in his dark eyes, “if I do get drunk, you will take me home, won’t you?”

“*What?*” I splutter. “I—You can’t expect me to—”

“Are you going to just leave me out here, then?”

“Of course not—”

“So it’s a plan,” he says brightly, and before I can even process what I’ve just agreed to, he lifts his glass towards Xiaoyi and the two women. “Cheers.”

The toast is echoed around the room, and I watch in stunned silence as Henry brings the glass to his lips, self-assured as ever, and downs it in one long swig. He makes no obvious reaction; only his mouth puckers slightly, as if he’s just eaten something sour.

Lin Ayi bursts into applause. “Oh, this is *impressive*—both handsome *and* a good drinker. Let me get you another glass.”

She refills his glass immediately. The process repeats itself. And again, she’s holding out the wine, watching Henry as he drinks. I’d expected him to stop at one glass, but he keeps going, his expression mildly pleasant, his complexion even. Lin Ayi’s face, on the other hand, has already deepened to a vivid beetroot red. While we wait for the vermicelli noodles and potato slices to finish cooking and fill the pot with fresh rolls of meat, the wine is passed around the table and emptied with astonishing speed.

“Aiya, slow down, all of you,” Xiaoyi chides. “This isn’t a competition.”

But everything with Henry is a competition. And as with everything else, he’s winning. Yao Ayi accepts defeat first, rising unsteadily from her seat and mumbling something about finding the bathroom. It’s not long before Xiaoyi sets her glass down too with a loud clinking sound, shaking both her hands and her head, then staggers out to find Yao Ayi.

“You’re all too weak,” Lin Ayi gloats, raising her glass in another toast towards only Henry. “I guess it’s just down to us two, hey? You’ve put up a very good fight.” She pauses, her eyes a little glassy and unfocused, sweeping over

the room before landing on him again. “Are you—Are you *certain* you’re in a committed relationship? You wouldn’t want to consider my daughter? You truly do meet all my criteria for a son-in-law ... Perhaps think on it—it’s not too late to add my WeChat ...”

For a second I almost wonder if I’ve turned invisible again. I bite down on the inside of my cheek. Does she not realize that I’m still sitting *right here*?

Henry finishes his wine. Dabs elegantly at his lips with the corner of a napkin. And when his gaze slides to me, I know with a rush like gravity that I can’t be invisible, because he sees me. He’s always seen me. “I’m certain,” he says. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

She makes a flippant gesture with her hand. “But you’re both so young still—I’m just saying that in the event you break up ...”

“If for some reason we are ever separated,” Henry cuts in, his voice lower than usual, his words deliberate, “then I am afraid I would not be of sound heart or mind to even look at anybody else.”

A silence falls over the room, expanding. I can only hear the blood rushing in my ears, my heartbeat skipping ahead of itself. If you’d told me a year ago that Henry Li, the closest thing to royalty in modern-day Beijing, my greatest rival and long-held grudge, could say such words about me, I would have had an aneurysm. But now—

The shrill sound of a ringtone cuts through the quiet.

Lin Ayi fumbles around for her phone as the song *Super Idol* plays on loop, muffling it with her hand and slipping out through the door, leaving just the two of us in the private room.

The second she's gone, Henry slumps back in his seat with a low sound, like a pained exhale.

"Are you—are you okay?" I ask worriedly, peering over at him. I hadn't noticed before, but his ears are flushed pink, his eyes dark and feverish, and a strand of wavy hair has fallen over his forehead. He makes no attempt to smooth it back, which is the ultimate sign that he's drunk. I shake my head. "My god, how much did you drink, exactly?"

He smiles up at me, but it's less guarded than his normal smile, not designed to charm or persuade or attain any particular goal. "I won, didn't I?"

"What?" I say, distracted. I realize too late that I have no experience with drunk people, unless you count that unfortunate time when Rainie and the others burst into our hotel room during the Experiencing China trip.

"I told you I could outdrink them," he says. "And I did."

"Right. Right, um, I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to get you water? To like, dilute the wine? Maybe ... Maybe I should google it. There's got to be a tutorial on this somewhere." I'm about to reach for my phone on the table and search up *'What to do when your very disciplined boyfriend who typically leads an enviably healthy lifestyle drinks at least ten glasses of white wine in a row'* when he pushes it away from me. I pause. Frown. "Uh ... Sorry, what are you trying to achieve here?"

He responds by pushing it even further away, like a kid playing a game only he understands the rules of. It's so absurd I almost laugh. "You haven't told me yet."

"Told you what?"

He huffs out a sigh. "It's not the same if I have to spell it out."

“Okay, wow, you’re like, *really* drunk. I have no idea what you’re saying.”

“Don’t you?”

“Not at all.”

“Alice. Look at me.”

I do, and immediately feel something in my chest seize. He’s gazing at me with an expression that can only be described as a pout. His thick, long lashes flutter, and for a moment my mind goes completely, unhelpfully blank. All my life at Airington, I’d wanted this. To see Henry drop all pretenses, forget his reputation for once, to witness the side of him that doesn’t make it into the newspaper articles and cover shots. But I’d never imagined it would be in this context. In this environment. The steam from the pot rises higher, unfurling in delicate wisps. The sweet scent of rosewood and cold plum tea seeps into the air.

Henry’s fingers go to his shirt collar. He tugs at it clumsily.

“Woah—*What are you doing?*”

“What?” He blinks, the perfect picture of innocence. “It’s very stuffy in here. They need better ventilation. In fact, I should reflect this to their upper management.”

“I—” I mean to argue with him, but this statement seems so reasonable that *I* feel like I’m the one causing trouble for no good reason. So instead I snap my jaw shut and stare with a burgeoning mixture of horror and anticipation as he loosens the first button, then the second. I clear my throat. Try not to stare at the sliver of exposed skin, the sharp hollow of his collarbones.

“What are you staring at?” Henry asks, his brows arching.

Clearly, I have failed. “N-Nothing,” I say. Pin my gaze on a random bottle of sauce instead. “Nothing at all.”

“You *can* look, you know.”

Instant heat shoots up the side of my neck, through my veins. “Huh?”

“I would be quite flattered, is what I mean,” he tells me. “And I don’t blame you if you can’t resist. I am pleasing to look at, aren’t I?”

I whip my head back to make a scathing comment about the ridiculous size of his ego, but I’m caught off-guard, stunned into quiet. That smile again, so beautiful it makes my heart ache inside my chest. Like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

“Alice,” he says.

“Yeah?”

But instead of answering, he just repeats my name, taking it apart slowly, like he’s learning it for the first time, like he can’t think of a better word. “A-lice.”

“Yes? What?”

His smile widens, his cheeks faintly pink now as well. “I just wanted to hear you respond. That’s all.”

“You must be very bored,” I mutter, but I can’t stop myself from reaching out and touching his face, my knuckles brushing the curve of his cheekbones. I don’t know what gives me the nerve—this is the kind of thing I would usually overthink until my courage wore out on its own. Maybe it’s the knowledge that he might not remember this tomorrow, or maybe it’s because he’s still gazing at me like I can’t do anything wrong, ever, no matter what. Either way, I’m rewarded for it. He angles his body closer, leaning into my touch, his eyes half-closed.

“Have I told you,” he says, his words softly slurred, “that SYS saw a four-hundred-percent increase in revenue in the last financial quarter alone?”

I frown. This is ... definitely not the direction I thought we were heading in.

“Not saying that the credit is *all* mine,” he continues, tilting his head back so my hand slips downwards, to his jaw and chin. “But I do take some credit.”

“Right. I’m sure.”

“And I was recently invited to speak on a panel for that big tech convention. They only invited three people in total. I’ll be the youngest one there.”

I snort, unsure whether to be irritated or amused by this drunken stream of information. “Are you going to start reciting your resumé next?”

His eyes flutter open. “You’re not impressed?”

“I don’t—” I stop mid-sentence as the meaning of his words hits me. So *this* is what he wants to hear, what he’s been hoping I’ll say the whole time. I choke on a laugh. “Henry, come on. I’m always impressed by you. Why do you think you annoyed me so much at school?”

His is silent for a moment, the color in his cheeks spreading. “And now? Do I still annoy you?”

“You want to hear the truth?” I beckon for him to come closer, my heart drumming against my ribs. He obeys at once. When he’s so close I can feel the warmth of his skin, breathe in his clean, familiar scent, sense the change in him in response to my proximity, I kiss his cheek. “Thank you,” I whisper, smiling at the surprise in his eyes, the rare hint of shyness. “For the dinner. And for studying with me. And everything else, too.”

After, I help Henry into the backseat of his driver's car.

It's late, and he looks more sleepy than drunk as he shuffles over to make room for me, his black, bleary eyes on my face. "You're coming, aren't you?" he mumbles. "You won't leave?"

"No," I say, shutting the door behind me. "I'll stay with you."

"You promise?"

I watch him with growing amusement as the car jolts into motion.

"Promise."

"Good." He sighs, nudges my shoulder with his chin like a cat hoping to be scratched, until I have no choice but to put my arms around him, steadying him, absorbing his weight. "Alice ... I miss you," he says, his voice so quiet I'm not sure if I've heard him correctly. "I miss you now."

"But I'm here."

"I know. That's when it's worse, almost," he says, a small crease between his brows, one hand curling around his shirt, right over where his heart beats. "Your presence ... it's so overwhelming, I cannot imagine the absence of it. I don't want to. Does that make sense?"

The words rise in my throat but stop halfway; everything I want to tell him, everything I don't know how to say. Outside, the snow has started to fall again in a wild flurry, illuminated by the yellow headlights, dancing over the hazy blue streets. Inside, the heater is blasting, the snowflakes quickly beading into water when they touch the window and running in rivulets down the sides, and there's a song playing, one I've heard before but can't name, soft acoustics

and a sweet voice. I think about the last time I was here: a ghost, a machine, someone half-alive, doomed to haunt the lives of those richer and brighter than I could ever be. But now, I've never felt so human, all soft flesh and tender skin and over-brimming hope.

“It does. But I won't give you the chance to miss me too much,” I whisper, stroking his hair. “I'll always be with you. You know that, don't you?”

The corner of his lip tugs into a small, private smile, somehow arrogant and earnest at once. “I know everything.”

The car continues down the long road home, and all of it is beautiful: the boy by my side, this city, this night. My life. And for once, I can't think of a single thing I want that isn't already right here in front of me, within reach.