

1 Over X - Drafts

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1 Over X - Drafts

by [Bavitz II \(Bavitz\)](#)

Summary

Older drafts of 1 Over X, written between 2017 and 2024. All of the drafts are unfinished and represent the story in a much different state from its final version. These drafts are unedited and thus may have errors.

- Inspired by [1 Over X](#) by [Bavitz](#)

Chapter 1: Draft 1 (2017)

I

Lim, Class Rank 2, woke with a headache and no recollection of the past—she checked her watch—seventy-five minutes. The headache she could abide, the minutes she could not. The stringent crimson décor and shield-and-cross emblem on the curtains gave away her location as a dormitory bedroom in All Saints Academy, Newport, Rhode Island, although she could only wonder as to whom the room belonged. It had a single bed (Lim sat upon it), which indicated a student with special needs or special privileges. Corbett shared a room with Weaver, Wintermint shared a room with Driscoll... As she paired off likely suspects, she realized her necktie had loosened and someone had undone the topmost button on her blouse. She rectified this situation, only to encounter one worse: the zipper on her skirt was only four-fifths zipped.

The bathroom door opened and Shinozaki, Class Rank Undefined, entered. She wiped her hands on a rag that she then tossed aside. "Hey-o Eden, feeling better?"

Elements began to cohere. Shinozaki was a recent transfer, which explained her lack of roommate. Furthermore, Lim remembered that she and Shinozaki had gone for tea at a nearby café, although the actual event of drinking said tea remained murky.

"My name is not Eden," said Lim. Shinozaki laughed and slithered off her own necktie with a single flick of her wrist. She had already removed her jacket, and her shirt had a burgundy splotch on the shoulder. Lim noticed another, darker splotch on the hem of Shinozaki's skirt.

"You uh, passed out." Shinozaki drifted to the dormitory-standard bookshelf and tapped the spines of never-opened religious tracts. "At the tea place. Remember? Spilled your drink on me."

"I don't typically faint."

"Well you did." Shinozaki extracted a book at random and flipped through it. Dust expelled into the sunset air.

Lim rubbed her temples and went to the mirror on Shinozaki's closet door. Tch, what a mess. She tried her best to ameliorate her slovenly garb, but too late. Her life was already ruined.

As she smoothed her collar, Shinozaki slithered an arm around her shoulder and pulled Lim inward. Lim became a perfectly rigid object that tilted on her soles.

"But hey, lots of fun before you uh, yeah," said Shinozaki. "You're really fascinating, Eden. Really. Blows my mind, the way you operate. Never seen anyone like you."

"My name is not Eden." Lim loosened a taut arm to check her watch. "I'm late. I need to leave."

"See that's what I mean, that's so wow." It became apparent, via repulsive lip-smacking between syllables, that Shinozaki was chewing bubble gum. (Contraband on school grounds.) "You're late for nothing. It's all in your mind. Seriously, tell me, what are you late for?"

"Pi—"

"Piano practice. Piano practice!" Shinozaki relinquished Lim, pirouetted across the room, and planted on her bed. "You'll see soon enough you're late for nothing."

What a meaningless remark. Nonetheless, with Shinozaki on the bed, an opportunity for egress presented itself. "Thank you for caring for me while I was incapacitated," said Lim. "But I must go now. Farewell."

She waited the requisite moment lest Shinozaki attempt to prolong the conversation, but received only a halfhearted hand wave. As soon as Lim opened the door and stepped into the hall, however, Shinozaki added: "Sleep lots tonight. You need the rest."

As the door swung shut behind Lim, Shinozaki lifted her face from the bed and winked.

When Lim was forced to walk, she became aware of an odd feeling in her legs. She pondered this feeling all the way down the stairwell and out the front gate of All Saints Academy Boarding & Day School, but could only liken it to a sort of vague soreness in her upper thighs. She decided she had never felt this sensation before, and her inability to categorize it into coherent words frustrated her. She became resentful of Shinozaki, despite her kindness. Had Shinozaki even acted responsibly? Had Lim truly collapsed, shouldn't the correct course of action have been to contact the paramedics? What if her collapse pointed to a brain tumor or stroke? And what of the café staff and patrons? Had they watched silently as Lim was carted out the door, heels dragging?

Furthermore...! Although the café was near the school, Shinozaki still would have had to cross the street and the courtyard, and then wait for the elevator. Even now, as daylight waned to a close, the pavilion outside the school building bustled with classmates in matching red jackets and ties. Did none of these people think to inquire as to Lim's health? Or had Shinozaki assured them nothing was wrong?

Lim approached Rosenfeld, Class Rank 6 (the highest-ranked male student) on an iron bench reading a novel. "Rosenfeld, did you see me enter the school recently?"

Rosenfeld shut his book and stared into the distance over Lim's shoulder. "Ehhh... yeah? With that new girl. What's-her-name."

"Shinozaki."

"Yeah! That one." Rosenfeld blinked behind his gigantic round glasses and adjusted his gaze slightly to actually look at Lim. "I waved, you didn't wave back. That's normal, though."

"I was walking?" said Lim.

"Yeah..." Rosenfeld bit his thumbnail. "Yeah, pretty sure? What else would you be doing?"

"And Shinozaki, what was she doing?"

Rosenfeld pondered long enough to prompt Lim to check her watch. He finally said:
"Walking too, I guess."

"Thank you Rosenfeld. That's all."

So did Shinozaki lie, or did Rosenfeld misperceive? Lim lacked time to answer this conundrum. She was, after all, already late. She exited the school grounds at a brisk pace homeward.

Her mother had choice words for her upon arrival.

"This is an outrage," she said, on the verge of tears, in the confined entryway. "I'm offended by your behavior, Enid. Offended."

Lim had to move with exceptional grace in order to remove her jacket and hang it on the coatrack without swinging a hand into her mother's face. "I'm sorry, mother. I went to a café with a friend from school and lost track of time."

"You? Lost track of time? HA!" Her mother wobbled out the entryway on her high heels. She had dressed well; Lim vaguely recalled something about parent-teacher conferences, although she rarely committed such information to memory. "I'm laughing at you, Enid, for such a pathetic lie. You check your watch every five seconds. Lost track of time!"

She clomped back up to Lim as Lim moved into the kitchen hallway. Despite the egregiousness of Lim's transgression, her mother had clearly dressed for an event and likely had to leave soon, so scolding would be kept to a relative minimum. If Lim kept moving forward, she would reach her room, where she believed her mother might be reluctant to follow.

She barely made two steps into the hallway, however, before her mother emerged from a corner and moved uncomfortably close, waving multiple fingers around Lim's face and upper body. "Your clothes are a mess. Your *hair* is a mess. Your eyes are bleary, what's wrong with your eyes?" The only spot of hope was that her mother clutched a purse that she did not have when Lim first entered, which indicated an imminent departure. As her mother would be forced to don a pleasant demeanor when conversing with the parents of her students, her immediate rage would likely diminish. Not enough to eliminate reparations, but enough to lessen them.

"I'm sorry, mother. I allowed myself to become disheveled—"

"Are you doing drugs, Enid?" Her mother's makeup began to run in parentheses down her face. "Answer me right now, are you doing drugs?"

This question astonished Lim, she had not anticipated it although in retrospect—she didn't have time to parse the variables, she needed an immediate and immutable response. "No, I

am not doing drugs."

At such proximity, Lim realized her mother was trembling. Her voice lowered to a rumbling whisper: "You embarrassed me so much, Enid. I had to explain to the piano instructor—I'm not talking about it. Have you done this before, Enid? Is this just the first time I caught you?"

"I have done nothing but lose track of time, mother."

"You hate me," said her mother. "You hate me because I'm so hard on you. You're lashing out, I know how it is." She placed her hand on Lim's throat. Her long, bony fingers wrapped around Lim's neck but applied no pressure. They only remained against the skin, cold and tipped with long, sharp nails. Then they pressed up against Lim's jaw and angled her face toward her mother's. "Your eyes are all wrong. Something's wrong in them. I can tell. I've seen it before, you know. Or did you forget about Eugene?"

Had Lim forgotten about Eugene. Hm, mother. Let's ponder this question. After all, mother, you're examining Lim's face rather closely. Assuredly you see the long scar Eugene left from her eye to her mouth? Difficult to forget things etched into one's own body, after all. Perhaps you would like to understand firsthand? Lim would be more than happy to oblige.

"No. Mother. I did not forget."

"Good." Her mother released her, straightened her suit, and stepped toward the front door. "Remember what happened to him before you act so flippantly."

"As I said before," Lim began, but hesitated. A sudden idea entered her mind: What if she *had* ingested drugs? Shinozaki's retelling of the events leading up to the blackout remained suspect—but a fast response remained imperative. "I took no drugs. I'm sorry for being late, but that is all I am guilty of."

The front door opened, although Lim didn't bother to look. "Well," said her mother, "I'll base your punishment on whether I believe you, which I haven't decided yet. Go to your room, do your homework, and don't come out for the rest of the night."

"Yes, mother." If, rather than an unexplained blackout at the café, she had fallen unconscious after taking drugs with Shinozaki in her room, it would explain Rosenfeld's eyewitness testimony. But if drugs were the culprit, why did Lim not remember taking them?

Her mother's voice buzzed fainter in Lim's ear. "And what did you get on your calculus test?"

"Ninety-six." Furthermore, why would Lim take them? Sure, she had a moderate interest in hallucinogens, but... And why would Shinozaki lie?

"Not good enough," said her mother. The door slammed.

Her mother was correct, ninety-six was not good enough. Others likely received better scores and would gloat about them at lunch. Lim's errors had been foolish, caused by carelessness of execution, rather than misunderstanding of fundamentals.

Stupid! This whole day was idiotic. She tromped upstairs to her room and flung her bag on the bed. She wanted to lie down and feel sorry for herself for a few minutes, but the delays had eaten into her homework and study time, and she certainly wouldn't fix any of her issues by becoming *more* lazy about her daily routine. A long time ago, she had thought it was possible to work harder and achieve more, but now the dismal oblivion faced her: she was working as hard as she could, and this was what she could achieve.

She powered through her homework, studied for three hours, and conked out before her mother returned.

She had a dream. A dream was unusual enough, because Lim almost never had them, and she certainly never had the kinds of lucid dreams where one experiences awareness of being in a dream while dreaming. But this dream was so clear that it was like being awake, and she only knew it was a dream because she remembered going to sleep.

The dream placed her in Shinozaki's bedroom. Dream Shinozaki was a total, as opposed to only partial, slob. Whimsical, multicolored clothes dangled in ruffled clumps from every conceivable outcropping, and someone had dumped hundreds of playing cards on the ground. The bed, which Lim stood on, had only a mattress split open down the middle. Among the stuffing were more playing cards and a lot of hundred-dollar bills.

Outside Shinozaki's window, Lim noticed the east wing of the school building, and beyond it, the cityscape. From omnipresent fog sprouted Grecian pillars adorned with round capitals painted to look like eyeballs. The eyeballs projected yellow rays that swept across the school courtyard like searchlights. At first, these columns appeared more or less logical, but Lim could not discern their bases, and some seemed further away than the trajectory of their light should allow. One column, which appeared to be behind the east wing, somehow shined its light upon the wing's front, causing its windows to gleam and sparkle. If Lim lost track of a column for even a moment, it vanished entirely, and new geometries sprang from the void at irregular intervals. Above everything, the moon hung in the shape of a smiley face.

"This place makes little sense," said Lim.

"Well duh," said Shinozaki, who had been on the ceiling the entire time. She detached from a crystal chandelier and swan-dived fifty feet onto the bed, which swallowed her like water even though Lim remained standing atop it. The mattress, which was now covered in satin sheets, rippled and undulated until Shinozaki's head emerged among the pillows.

"Care to explain," said Lim.

Shinozaki hoisted herself out of the bed and vaulted into a sitting position at its side. Lim had not noticed before, but Shinozaki wore an overindulgent red dress that frilled from every tapering and swaddled arms, waist, and neck in silk and lace. Bows and ribbons held the whole profusion together, and it seemed ready to come apart lest Shinozaki even bend funny. Shinozaki held out a gloved hand and faced the palm toward the floor. With a flick of one finger, she caused all the playing cards on the ground to levitate into her hand in a neat stack. She then shuffled them with unnatural dexterity and more than ten fingers.

"Explain what." She chopped her deck in two and rotated the cards around her wrist one after another. "The dream? Explain a dream, Lim? Wow you're something else."

"Even if it's a dream," said Lim, "There must be some purpose to it. Some internal strand of logic. Am I here for a reason?"

Shinozaki snickered. One of the eyeball columns sliced its ray across their window. In the moment that it filled the room with light, everything inside became a bland, rudimentary cubicle, the exact same as Lim had seen it before. Shinozaki wore only her school uniform and held a book instead of playing cards. Then the ray passed and everything became weird again.

"Alright, here's a purpose," said Shinozaki. "Don't let the eyeballs see you do anything out of the ordinary."

"What happens if they do," said Lim. "And what constitutes out of the ordinary in a dream, where nothing is ordinary?"

"Too many questions." Shinozaki plucked a single card from the deck and bid it march up her arm and onto her shoulder. "You ask all these questions at once, I dunno how to answer them. Just know that you can't let those eyeballs see you doing anything like it should be in a dream, else some real bad shit goes down."

This dream Shinozaki was a projection of Lim's subconscious, correct? After all, a dream happens solely in one's mind. Which meant Shinozaki's words all sprang from Lim's own mind. She found it difficult to believe that even in a dream she would stoop so low.

"The other thing we're gonna do," Shinozaki continued, "Is kill a thing."

"What kind of thing," said Lim. "Why are we going to kill it."

"What'd I say about too many questions?" Shinozaki seized Lim's sleeve and pulled. Together they ran through the mirror on Shinozaki's closet door and exited in the hallway. An infinite line of identical doors curved until the ends of the corridor were no longer visible, and between each door was either a portrait or a bust of the academy's founder, who lived in the 1800s. This part of the dream geography, at least, was relatively unchanged compared to its real-world counterpart. "Lucky for you," Shinozaki continued, "I've already corralled our target in those stupid, uh, gardens? Those trees behind the school."

"The Rudolph F. Winchester Botanical Gardens," said Lim.

They reached the end of the hallway, eschewed the elevator, and tumbled down the stairwell, which contained no stairs but rather a gigantic, circular slide.

"Yeah, that place." Shinozaki held her hands over her head as they went down and down. Her dress somehow maintained its form despite lacking the right to. "Great place. Trees will block the eyeballs so we won't have to worry about them so much."

"What are we killing, exactly," said Lim.

"Uh, dog thing. Don't worry, it's an evil, bad guy dog. Trust me, super evil, we gotta kill it." The slide shot them out a final chute and they cartwheeled to a stop in the lobby, which had transformed into a regal ballroom. Several of Lim's classmates, or mannequins that looked like them, danced in elegant classical styles. But Lim knew little of dancing, so she didn't know if the dances were legitimate or invented dream choreography. The front desk was replaced with a pipe organ, and although a puppet sat at it, no music issued.

Before Lim had a chance to process this new buffet of sensory information, Shinozaki dragged her down another corridor. If the real-world geography corresponded to the dream-world geography, then they had only a short jaunt until they arrived at a maintenance door that led to the rear entrance of the garden. The maintenance door was for the janitorial staff only, but Lim supposed in a dream such rules mattered little.

They crossed a line of windows that looked onto the rear courtyard. More of the eyeball pillars watched, and whenever one turned its gaze their way, Shinozaki seized Lim's head and forced it out of sight.

"And how exactly will we kill this 'evil, bad guy dog' thing?" said Lim when her head returned upright.

"Oh duh, thanks for reminding me. I already have a weapon, but I guess you need one." Shinozaki slowed enough to glance Lim over. "Well, it's a dream... dream something up."

"To fight a dog?"

"Doglike entity, yeah."

"Would a dog whistle work," said Lim.

"That's not a weapon, and also stupid, so no. Aren't you supposed to be smart? I picked you because you're smart, Eden. Be smart and choose a smart weapon."

A smart weapon to fight a, quote, "doglike entity." The dream operated on its own logic, so whatever Lim picked likely made no difference. Nonetheless, Shinozaki's insult actually dug at Lim a little, and she felt compelled to choose something "smart" enough to justify her opinion of Lim. Except, if Dream Shinozaki was part of Lim's subconscious, then was this dream all a way for her to justify her own intelligence to herself? She remembered feeling stupid about receiving a ninety-six percent on her calculus test shortly before she fell asleep. Perhaps that emotion, as well as a general preoccupation with Shinozaki given the unusual event after school, gave birth to this dream.

They stopped at the maintenance door. In real life, the door was generic and marked by an authorized personnel only sign. Lim walked by it every day on her way to United States History. Now, the door had transmogrified into a perilous gateway thronged by steel and spikes. The authorized personnel sign read ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE, which was so ridiculous Lim stifled a laugh. Was her subconscious truly so cliché?

"Alright," she said. "We're apparently entering the outermost ring of Hell, so I ought to take this seriously."

"Oh yeah, definitely." Shinozaki bobbed her head up and down, up and down. "If you die in the dream you die in real life."

"Of course," said Lim. "Well, I have a weapon in mind. What must I do now? Some occult ritual to summon it? Ouija?"

Shinozaki bent her deck of cards and launched them into the air. They sprayed in all directions, but landed in a perfect stack upon Shinozaki's upturned palm. "Close your eyes and think about it real hard. It's an actual weapon, right? No dumb shit like a dog whistle. I need you to be smart for me, Eden."

"Real weapon." Because Lim was smart. In her harmless fantasy dreamscape, she could be the smartest and strongest and prettiest and most powerful. The whole situation irked her, she felt patronized by her own brain. Nonetheless, she closed her eyes and imagined her weapon. She concentrated on its image, as Shinozaki instructed, and even held out her hands in expectation of its spontaneous generation.

When she opened her eyes it was there.

"The fuck's this," said Shinozaki.

Lim hefted the weapon and stared through the scope. "Karabiner 98 kurz, known also as the Kar98k. German bolt-action rifle used by infantry in World War II. With the telescopic sight it has a firing range of approximately one kilometer."

Shinozaki rolled her eyes. "Really Eden. You're in a goddam dream, you can imagine any zany magical weapon possible, you have no limits whatsoever, and you make a Nazi gun."

"It's a tested and effective weapon," said Lim. Lighter than she expected, too. Possibly a side effect of it being a dream.

"You're so boring you loop around and become interesting again," said Shinozaki. "Why do you know all those statistics anyway?"

"United States History. Our current section is World War II. You're in that class, Shinozaki—or do you not pay attention?"

The playing cards bounced back and forth between Shinozaki's hands. "Yeah I'm in that class, but I don't recall learning the fucking firing range of some random German rifle."

Lim grinned. Dreams, she realized, could actually be fun. "Page 492 of the textbook. In the Bonus Info section in the lower-right corner of the page. The section compares the capabilities of several weapons used by various countries throughout the war." She decided not to mention that she had only read (and thus memorized) the specs of the Kar98k before she became bored and skipped the rest of the weapons. But since it was her dream, she supposed Shinozaki already knew.

Shinozaki did not seem to know. "You remember that crap?"

"You did say you thought I was smart, did you not?"

"I dunno if that's smart or stupid."

Lim contained her glee. When it came to memorization, she was quite simply the best. Not Corbett, nor Weaver, nor any of the other class rank upper echelon could stand against her pure powers of recall. Sadly, mere memorization was not enough to assure the top grade-point-average in her class, but in moments like these, where her ability to manifest a random factoid out of the aether became useful rather than merely annoying, she got to bask in the glory. She gave her dream a mental thank you for stoking her ego so.

She might even enjoy this dream!

"Shall we kill this doglike entity, Shinozaki?"

Various playing cards, which drifted around Shinozaki's head, snapped back into a single deck. "Ooh yes, that initiative, I love it. You're maybe not so bad after all, Eden."

"Same goes to you, Shinozaki." Even though this Shinozaki was really a mental projection of—Oh, but who cared! She was about to murder an evil, bad guy doglike entity with a Nazi rifle in the Rudolph F. Winchester Botanical Gardens. She kicked open the Inferno gate and entered the gardens.

In real life, the gardens comprised an underwhelming square plot of land tucked into the northeast corner of the academy, at the intersection of the east wing and the athletic field. They featured five trees, a few flowerbeds (featuring plenty of violets, the Rhode Island state flower), a trellis with vines, a pond with aquatic vegetation, and a topiary in the shape of a dragon (the school mascot). A chain-link fence ringed the entire garden and students needed special permission for the key. In the dream, the quaint garden became an overgrown everglade forest, stuffed with mammoth trunks that stretched into the nebulous canopy. Repulsive infestations of moss and weeds choked an unseen soil, gored by coiling thorny branches that sprouted gargantuan roses. Creatures chirruped and hooted in the misty distance. Shadows flickered and foliage rustled. Neither end nor beginning of the mass existed; the moment they stepped through the door, the school building dropped into a void behind them.

"Try not to die," said Shinozaki. "You know how to shoot?"

"No," said Lim. "But if it's a dream, I assume I can pretend." She approached the nearest tree. It had hard chunks of bark that jutted at sharp angles, but by slinging the rifle over her shoulder, Lim could use them as hand- and footholds for climbing.

She did so. She ascended the sheer tree trunk with less effort than expected. Her limbs moved all the right places and she had no trouble perceiving the next handhold forward. She felt no fatigue or arm strain, even though she had negative athletic acumen in the waking world.

"What's this," said Shinozaki, far below. "Dogs don't live in trees."

Lim reached a sturdy, horizontal branch she believed would support her weight. She sat atop it and placed her back to the trunk, then aimed down her sights to test her visibility. She had ample range over the ground below for at least fifty meters in each direction. The underbrush

could conceal small creatures, of course, but anything dog-sized that moved beneath would create enough disturbance to attract her attention. She realized Shinozaki had spoken.

"Yes," said Lim. "I'd rather not encounter this doglike entity face-to-face. Better to gun it down from afar. Is the dog rabid?"

"Rabid," said Shinozaki. She remained in the bushes even though it made much more sense to follow Lim to her perch. The greenery swallowed her lower body and in her frilly dress she looked like one of the giant roses that dotted the area. "Like actual rabies? No. It's a magic dog, it doesn't have fucking rabies."

Magic, evil dog. Lim wondered if it represented anything. A symbol or the like. In English class, dreams always have ulterior meanings that clue one in to the hidden state of a character's psyche. Speaking of which, this dream had gone on a long time. She checked her watch, but instead of numbers and hands it only showed a smiley face. She disliked this smiley face. Who replaced her wonderful watch with this stupid thing. It annoyed her so much, she took the watch off and dropped it to the ground.

Then she stuck two fingers in her mouth and whistled as loudly as she could.

At first, nothing happened. Her whistle echoed in the still air, accompanied by an uncanny silence as the unseen insects, birds, and creatures went quiet in unison. She slid onto her belly on the branch, allowing her legs to dangle on either side for balance as she surveyed the area. Her body position was probably suboptimal, and if she knew more about proper sniper technique she might find a better one, but given the ease with which she scaled the tree trunk, she expected her dream body to make things work regardless.

Silence pervaded. A deep lack of motion settled upon her and she became aware of more intimate sensations: the heave of her chest against the branch, the aroma of sickly sweet fruits and sap, the palpable density of the fog. She ran her fingers along the grain of her rifle's wooden stock. Although she rarely dreamed, she thought sensory information in dreams was supposed to be muted. She had certainly never heard of anyone smelling something in a dream. But the fragrance of flowers—

A rustle. She identified it to her north and pressed her eye to the scope. Given the density of trees, she would likely hear before she saw, but she tracked her sights along the direction of the sound nonetheless.

"Sounds like it," said Shinozaki. "Get ready." Although Lim didn't look at her, she heard her cards shuffle.

Lim waited. The shuffling and rustling both stopped. She scanned the scope across the edge of her vision, before the plants and mist swallowed everything beyond. She sought the slightest movement. She lowered the rifle occasionally to search with the naked eye lest she limit her vantage too much.

Her position on the branch waxed uncomfortable, and she doubted whether it truly gave her more stability to aim her rifle.

A cicada, somewhere, hummed. Its pitch went up, its pitch went down. Lim noticed a single leaf fidget on a distant bush. It bobbed downward, snapped back to position, and became still. It did not move again, nor did the surrounding leaves. Dewdrops glistened in an ambiguous moonlight.

Patience was a trait that suited Lim well. Shinozaki, on the other hand, began to shuffle again. "That thing's literally designed to track people like us down and kill them," she said. "Dunno why it's camera shy all the sudden."

"Shh," said Lim.

Nothing happened. The distant cicada wailed.

In retrospect, the Kar98k was a poor choice. She should have researched a more modern firearm. A rudimentary internet search would have sufficed—

The leaves above her rattled like mad. By the time Lim looked up, a black and dripping form came crashing down on her. Her body, elongated against the branch, rolled off as a silver claw slashed clean through the bark. She fell parallel to the cleanly severed branch and both landed together in the brush.

Thorns dug into Lim's skin. Her arms, legs, and torso were perforated by a hundred tiny daggers. Before they sank in all the way, the slobbering ravenous monstrosity skittered and rolled down the tree trunk straight toward her. It had round red eyes, sharp white fangs, and a face full of rotting flesh patterned with patches of skin and black fur.

Then it was on top of her. A claw rent into her leg; Lim attempted to writhe away, but much of the mass had pinned her lower body. She had maintained her grip on the rifle, but it was too long to maneuver beneath the monster. When she struggled to lift it, she turned and found the two red eyes peering into her. A globule of saliva splattered against her cheek.

A playing card sailed out of the aether and its sharp corner stuck in one of the bestial eyes. "Jack of Diamonds," said Shinozaki. "Conflagration."

As soon as she said it, the card erupted into flame. Lim drew back her face and shielded herself with her arm as a blast of fire swallowed the demon dog's face. It reared off her, howling and choking, followed by a lick of the selfsame flame.

The momentary relief caused by the canine's spastic flight through the woods was replaced by a sharp sensation of pain in Lim's leg. She hefted herself on her elbows and discovered that she was incorrect in her initial assessment; she had no pain in her leg, because she no longer had a leg. It lay cleanly severed not far from her. Blood gushed out the stump rather benignly.

She thought: It's good one can't feel pain in a dream. Then she flopped onto her back and started to screech in agony. Her remaining leg scraped against the ground, the thorns tightened around her, she screamed until the breath left her aching lungs and she could only wheeze imploringly to the branches and vines that dangled over her face.

"Aw shit," said Shinozaki somewhere, amid the crushing bushes and the roar of the beast.
"You with me still Lim?"

Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up wake up wake up wake up WAKE
UP

"Lim, come on Lim, stay with me, it's not that bad. You get used to it, happens all the time."

Wakeupwakeupwakeupwakeupwakeupwakeupofhwrpeogpwigoth

"This is actually good Lim, trust me it's a good thing this is happening now. You see I
could've waited to bring you in but—"

"AOURGH," said Lim as she flung herself onto her belly and pointed the Kar98k in the
direction of Shinozaki's voice. Even with a madly twitching eye it took only a moment to
pick out the gaudy dress among the inferno that raged across the Amazonian landscape,
spurred by the frenetic movements of the burning hellhound. Shinozaki bounded from branch
to branch with unfathomable acrobatic leaps that kept her close on the tail of the dog, even
though it did its best to evade her. She drew another card from her deck and hurled it into a
haunch, where it erupted with a cartoon electric pulse that shocked the dog to skeleton for a
brief instant.

Lim angled her sights for Shinozaki's skull. Shinozaki moved fast, but not fast enough to lose
Lim's track. One shot to the brainpan ought to do the trick. If Shinozaki couldn't end the
dream, then Lim would swallow a bullet herself, anything to escape this stupid somnolent
hell and return to her imbecile world where she at least won when she played by the clearly-
defined rules.

If you die in the dream, you die in real life! resounded in her head. She drove her upper teeth
into her lower lip and diverted the aim of her rifle. Where did the dog go? She found it, it had
taken another card to the back leg, which gushed a sour venom. If the aim of this dream was
to kill the doglike entity, then she ought to stay on that course. Deviation might only
introduce new parameters. If she ignored her leg, it didn't even hurt—although even that
thought was enough to send a spasm up her spine. Regardless! She sucked in a breath,
pressed her eye to the scope, and aimed.

And fired. The Kar98k rocketed and her entire upper body jerked back. The scope jabbed into
her eye socket and butted back her head. She spat out blood and coughed. Who knew if she
hit her mark. She rubbed her eye but it no longer saw straight, so she switched her hands and
peered through the scope with her other one—ensuring a careful distance between it and the
glass this time.

The dog had turned. It barreled toward her, four legs skittering, jerking, sprawling in all
directions. The grass only just reached its total height, which now that Lim could survey it at
a relative distance, was actually quite tall—it was the size of a St. Bernard, except with the
pointed angularity of a Doberman Pinscher. Minus most of its flesh and fur, of course. Like a
dog turned inside out. She aimed right between its eyes.

And fired. Its head jerked back, a ribbon of blood splattered across the sky. The dog kept running at her.

She drew back the bolt only to realize she had no ammunition for this rifle, but that made no sense because she had already fired and reloaded the gun once. This unexpected conundrum froze her for a moment and by that time the dog was nearly on her. She rolled to the side, stuck the butt of the rifle into the soil, and hoisted herself up, spinning aside as a thousand razor-sharp fangs snapped shut inches from her waist. She whirled to the side on the single leg and in the moment of suspension while her balance drifted lazily to one side lifted her gun and aimed. The dog scraped to a halt not far from her, coiling its flame-eaten body to face her with a vicious snarl.

She sent another bullet into its maggoty face. Her precarious balance left her and she began to fall, but before she hit the ground she pulled the bolt and fired into its face again.

She landed on her back. The dog's jaw hung straight down and the left half of its face crumpled downward, taking its eye with it. The dog's breath burst out its maw in a hot, suffocating blast as it staggered toward her with an animatronic limp. One, two steps toward her. A clump of matter-streaked fur dripped onto her remaining leg.

Lim pulled the bolt back and fired into its cranium again. The remains of the skull blast apart and a black bubble of gore oozed out the cavity and plopped onto the ground. The brainless body swayed, took another step toward her, let its tail fall, and then slumped onto its side. The plants and flowers immediately coiled around to the corpse and pulled it under the earth. Lim pulled the bolt back on her rifle just in case.

II

The next morning Lim remembered her dream. Every detail. She supposed that made sense for one so vivid, but she was no dream scholar.

Her mother wasn't home. She must have left early for her class. Good, because Lim still didn't feel like a conversation with her. Lim ate oatmeal for breakfast and read the newspaper and checked her watch, but her watch was not on her wrist. It was not in her room, either. Or any of the other rooms in the house.

She searched until the last possible moment, and then walked to school at a brisker-than-usual pace.

At lunch she sat with the usual consortium on the two park benches beside the statue of the school's founder that provided the central landmark in the courtyard.

"What'd everyone get on calc," said Wintermint, Class Rank 2 (tied with Lim).

The typical moment of trepidation while the girls glanced at one another and wondered who'd be first to respond. Wintermint was of course absolved from such a position by virtue of having broached the subject. Lim saved the others the trouble and said:

"Ninety-six."

"Nice," said Wintermint. "Not bad. What about the rest of ya?"

Weaver, Class Rank 4, brushed hair over her ear and held a napkin over her mouth until she swallowed a mouthful of rice. "Ninety... eight, I believe."

"Ninety-eight also," put in Wintermint, now that enough girls had spoken. She dangled her legs over the side of the park bench and kicked her tennis shoes in time to an unheard beat. "Missed the last question. About the sand in the tank."

"Plug the surface area into the volume equation," said Lim. "Take the derivative and solve. It's actually rather simple once you understand what you need to find."

Wintermint twirled an upraised finger in the air. Wintermint never ate lunch, which she never explained but Lim assumed was due to self-consciousness about weight. Such self-consciousness made little sense, because Wintermint played varsity tennis and routinely trounced girls from other high schools in the state. Her athletic, limber figure twisted with taut and firm musculature. If she had anything to be self-conscious about, it was only her thighs, which swelled somewhat disproportionate to the rest of her body.

Or perhaps she skipped lunch due to some specific dietary restrictions placed upon her by her mother, a doctor. Or perhaps she simply didn't want to gorge herself a mere two hours before intense tennis practice.

Lim liked to believe the first explanation, however.

"I assume that means you got the question right," said Wintermint.

"I had seen a similar question in the textbook," said Lim. "It was one of the questions we were not assigned."

"How the hell do you have time for junk like that," said Driscoll, Class Rank 9, stooped over a Tupperware bowl of spaghetti, which she funneled into her mouth at an approximate rate of six cubic centimeters per second. Sauce dribbled down her chin, which she wiped sporadically with the back of her hand. "I can barely sit through the crap they do assign. It's sooo boring."

Wintermint pointed. "And what'd you get on the test, Amy?"

Driscoll made a grimace. "Ninety-three."

"I wasn't aware you could get an odd-numbered score," said Lim. "Each question was worth two points."

"Yeah, well..." Driscoll wiped a dot of sauce on her horn-rimmed librarian glasses, but it only smudged. "I didn't actually get any questions wrong. Answer-wise I mean. But they didn't like the method I used to get the numbers, so they docked me."

"What method did you use, Amy?" asked Weaver.

Driscoll shrugged. "I just thought real hard about it until a number popped in my head."

Lim exchanged glances with Wintermint and Weaver, uncertain whether to laugh politely or not. Eventually they erred on the side of caution and hiccupped minor giggles. Driscoll didn't seem to mind either way.

A silence fell over the group, interspersed with eating noises. Nobody wanted to pursue the Driscoll line of conversation further, so they started to look at the final member of the group, who had not spoken all lunch so far.

"Cherry...?" said Wintermint.

Corbett, Class Rank 1, opened her eyes. She sat on the far side of Driscoll's bench and had watched the tiny songbirds flutter until at some point she seemed to doze off. "Hm?" she said.

"Calc scores."

"Oh," said Corbett. "It doesn't really matter."

"But what'd you get," said Wintermint.

"I would like to know also," said Lim.

Corbett folded her legs and placed her hands on her knee. "Nothing special. I got an alright score."

"What number, specifically," said Lim.

"As though everyone doesn't already know." Driscoll snapped the lid on her Tupperware bowl and shoved it into her bag.

Corbett said nothing more, although Lim and Wintermint continued to stare at her until Weaver suddenly stood and shouldered her bag.

"Well, ladies," she said. "It's been an enjoyable lunch, but I promised Jeremy I'd spend some time with him. Goodbye!"

(Jeremy) Michaelson, Class Rank 7, was Weaver's boyfriend. Only Weaver had one, so the others watched her depart with a touch of wistful resentment. Or at least Lim did. Lim had to contend with the unfortunate fact that she was the least aesthetically appealing of the five girls, especially after what Eugene did to her face. If not for Driscoll, she'd be the only ugly one. Lim remained thankful for Driscoll's inexorable presence, which improved Lim in so many regards.

After Weaver's departure, Wintermint opened her mouth to segue the conversation somewhere else, likely the upcoming test in United States History, but before she sounded a syllable Rosenfeld emerged out the woodwork and dropped onto Weaver's vacant seat.

"Uh, heard you guys were talking the calculus test?" he said. "I got a ninety-six, bombed that last question. Y'know, the one about the sand in the funnel?"

Everyone shifted uncomfortably at the sudden intrusion, especially Lim, who sat next to him. Not that he was unhygienic or even unattractive, but he lacked decorum.

"Don't eavesdrop on girls, Rosenfeld," said Wintermint. "We talk about a lot of stuff not for boys' ears."

"Aw yeah right," said Rosenfeld. "You only ever talk about tests and homework. You're barely girls at all. Come on, I wanna know how to do the funnel question for next time."

Before Wintermint or Driscoll could tell him off, Lim got a foothold and verged into a more lengthy discussion of the funnel question, punctuated with a tone of abject authority bestowed upon her by virtue of her being the only one to understand the problem. She outlined step-by-step the route from rate of volume to rate of height. Rosenfeld nodded along and scribbled lines into his notebook.

When they finished, and Lim had commanded all conversation among the park benches for a full five minutes, Rosenfeld thanked her and slapped his notebook shut. "Awesome, so awesome Enid."

"Call me Lim, please."

"Yeah sorry, I forgot." Rosenfeld shimmied his arms into his backpack. His jacket rumbled and his necktie loosened. "Say, you figure out what you wanted to know about the new girl, Lim?"

His sudden betrayal after she had helped him with the question befuddled her and she glared his way. Rosenfeld's doofus face remained as affable as ever and indicated his utter failure to comprehend his folly.

The others, even Corbett, turned toward Lim. Wintermint leapt on the opportunity. "What'd ya wanna know about the new girl, huh?"

"I—"

"She hung out with her," said Rosenfeld. "They were walking around outside school."

What an annoyance. Her compatriots grinned and exchanged looks. Lim being sociable? they must be thinking. What a surprise! Lim knew her own reputation. They likely leapt to the conclusion she had sought Shinozaki because she and Lim were both Asian, as though Lim cared one whit about that. She wanted to leap in and defend herself, but nothing accusatory had even been levied her direction, so if she became defensive it would only prove testament to her guilt. Her guilt of what! So she went for tea with the new girl. The new girl *intrigued* her. A new girl was a slight aberration in the constant pulse of her life. A deviation from the norm of her routine. Deviations fascinated her, because she and her mother strove so hard to eliminate them. And, truthfully, the deviation of Shinozaki had proved more intriguing than even Lim expected! Not merely a cultural injection in the bloodstream of the stagnant All Saints Academy code of conduct, but a complete adjustment of Lim's own schedule. The blackout... Despite the headache, it had changed something. A day where she did not accomplish the same tasks she always did. No wonder she had dreamed about Shinozaki.

She rubbed her naked wrist. Well, the ordeal had its drawbacks. Her mother must have concocted a punishment by now, and she had a sinking suspicion the changes to her routine had led to the absence of her wristwatch. Perhaps Shinozaki filched it when Lim was unconscious? Hence her strange behavior and seeming contradictions with Rosenfeld's account. But Lim remembered checking after she left Shinozaki. Unusual. Not to mention, Lim remained ambivalent about the dream. She remembered the feeling when she blasted the dog's horrid face to pieces, and when she lost her leg, but the whole distorted landscape left her uneasy.

Not that it mattered, the dream had ended. Although—

"Lim? Gonna say anything?" It was Wintermint.

"Ah, well," said Lim. "I thought I'd welcome her... We went for tea."

"Nothing wrong with that," said Driscoll.

"Yeah," said Wintermint. "It's good you're more social, Lim."

"I'm adequately social," said Lim.

Wintermint snorted. Rosenfeld, after having lingered more than necessary, realized the topic of calculus had long since past and made swift egress.

The four girls sat in silence. Overhead, clouds swayed.

Corbett of all people broke the quiet. She propped her head on her hand and said, "Her name is Shinozaki, yes? She said she's from Los Angeles, but her accent is heavier than that. Did she say anything of interest to you, Lim?"

Her gaze wandered to Lim and a slight smile spread on her face. Lim, unsure how to read this comment, unsure whether Corbett were the kind of person (like Wintermint) to set a trap with an innocuous question, unsure why the whole topic of Shinozaki remained relevant to anyone—indeed, both Wintermint and Driscoll looked bored by the mention, and began to engage in a whispered conversation among themselves—unsure of these things, Lim tried to remember whether Shinozaki said anything "of interest" to her.

She found it impossible to disentangle dream Shinozaki from the real one. In some form or another, Shinozaki had said plenty of "interest" to her—about doglike entities and eyeball watchtowers and such.

"Um," said Lim.

"Or how about this," said Corbett. "Did you approach her first, or she you?"

Lim opened her mouth to speak, only to realize she did not remember. But Shinozaki had only been around for three days. How could Lim have forgotten? Did she suffer some slight amnesia from her collapse the day prior?

"I don't know," she said. "We must have both approached each other."

"Oh, okay." Corbett looked skyward. "The others are right, you know. It's good for you to be more social. But Shinozaki's a strange girl, don't you think?"

The bell rang.

Lim fumed through both afternoon classes. She stung with the impression that someone had pulled a prank on her at lunch, that something lurked within Corbett or Wintermint's words and actions that joked at her expense. They thought it was funny she went to hang out with Shinozaki, who anyone could see was an utter dolt, from how she babbled excuses when Mrs. Bell called on her in Physics. And with Lim already entering the conversation in a position of inferiority—only Driscoll had scored worse on the test, and only so with the cloying footnote that she had in fact gotten all answers correct—and Corbett had refused to even state her own score! That's Class Rank 1 for you, so self-assured of their superiority that they can afford pointless humility. Corbett could refrain from giving her score because Lim and Wintermint and Weaver and Driscoll all knew the score at the top of her paper, circled in red ink, was a rotund one hundred.

When did Corbett even become Class Rank 1, anyway? For most of high school, Lim and Wintermint had tied in contention for the prized valedictorian spot. For Corbett to swoop out of nowhere—she must have taken college courses for high school credit to bolster her GPA. The only explanation. Lim had never dropped a grade, never even received an A-, which was how faculty determined tiebreakers in regards to class rank. Some loophole, some unseen advantage...

She checked her watch about twenty times throughout the day and each time wound up shoving her wrist in her pocket until it felt covered again.

After classes ended, Shinozaki left without speaking to Lim and Lim made no effort to speak to her. After yesterday's snafu, she ought to be home early anyway. Even still, the hour after classes let up was Lim's one period of allotted free time, and she liked to enjoy it.

Wintermint had tennis, Weaver went with her boyfriend, Driscoll always went home as soon as possible for indeterminate reasons, and Corbett... nobody knew what Corbett did. So Lim surveyed the school grounds.

Autumnal cheer reddened the trees and coated the lawn with leaves. The janitorial squadron strove against the disarray with rakes and blowers, but to little avail. It created perfect conditions for a stroll, although Lim tended to take such peaceful moments to ponder her life. She had already fumed over the royal upstaging her friends dealt her vis a vis the calculus test, however, so she wondered about her lost watch. Mentally, she retraced her steps. She must have had it when she did her homework before bed, because otherwise she would have noticed its absence then. Perhaps she misplaced it when she showered? The only explanation. Although she checked the bathroom before she left the house. Had her mother stolen it as retribution for missing piano practice? Even for her mother, that seemed too petty.

Amid these postulations, a new idea sprang into her mind. A foolish, stupid idea—but one that took a mere minute to verify. She wound around the five-story east wing, down the narrow enclosure between the utility shed and the spiked iron fence, and to the chain-link gate that thronged the botanical gardens. A student, whose name escaped Lim but whom she

recognized as Class Rank 24, tended to the violets with a watering can. The student wore an apron and carted a box of small shovels and bags along with her.

The botanical gardens were small enough for Lim to lean against the fence and call out to the girl without strain on her voice. She beckoned the girl over.

"Hey Lim." She divested her apron of loose dirt. "Interested in the garden? You can for a permission slip at—"

"Did you perchance find anything in the garden today," said Lim. "A watch, maybe?"

The girl's eyes lighted with familiarity and even before she spoke Lim knew everything. "Yeah, actually. We found a watch by one of the trees this morning."

"May I see it?"

The watch was hers. She concocted a plausible story that unknown bullies had stolen it and thrown it into the garden, then received it back with no further questions.

A numb pulse reverberated throughout her body as she walked away from the front office. The dream could not be real. No. She refused to believe it. Yes, she had a lifelike memory of it. Yes, its vividness and sensory detail mirrored real life, and despite the distortion all of the locations and people encountered in the dream had also approximated reality. But...

For starters, it affronted all known information about the cause, capacity, and capabilities of dreams. Secondly, improbable but mundane explanations did remain for the watch's disappearance and reappearance in the same location where she had removed it in the dream. Although somewhat uncharacteristic, her mother very well could have taken the watch and thrown it into the gardens as punishment. Lim placed more faith in an erratic action from her mother over the fanciful notion that a dream somehow affected reality. Besides, schizophrenia was a genetic disorder, even though her mother far exceeded the age it typically onset. After Eugene, she knew all manner of unfathomable behavior became possible. Or—even more realistically—perhaps Lim misremembering checking her watch in the afternoon, and Shinozaki truly had stolen it and disposed of it for some reason. After all, Shinozaki had attended the school less than a full week. Corbett had hinted suspicions toward her character, and Corbett was intelligent, so Lim did not even make these conjectures without outside testimony. Regardless, multiple explanations remained for the location of her watch that rendered her dream mere coincidence.

Yes. Coincidence. No more.

She went straight home. Her mother scolded her and exacted an ultimately benign punishment—free time truncated, weekends to include additional studies—that Lim barely listened to or comprehended beyond the generalities. The entire time, her heartbeat rang cognizant in her chest. Breathing grew difficult and she erred numerous times during piano practice. Her genial instructor ribbed her for such decay after only one missed session, to which Lim replied with nods and murmurs.

The wristwatch hung heavy on her arm. She checked it twice as much as usual. When she laid in bed she raised herself every few minutes to view its face in the dim moonlight from the shuttered window. Despite the compulsive timekeeping, she had no idea how long it took her to sleep.

She appeared in a dormitory room at All Saints Academy Boarding & Day School. Not Shinozaki's room—it had two beds. Wintermint slept on one, although the eye mask and hairnet made her difficult to recognize. Driscoll, tilting on a chair, wedged herself between the foot of her bed and the opposite wall, nose deep in a comic book that promised romance between two men on the cover. She chewed a lollipop, which explained the plugs in Wintermint's ears.

What reassuring banality, nullified by the eyeball watchtowers that stood sentinel in the courtyard outside the window. Nonetheless, the new evidence point eased her anxiety. She had dreaded a repetition of the previous night's dream, but its actual occurrence became a mere evidence point. She checked her watch; the same smiley face as before had replaced it. Panic helped only caged animals. She had to remain calm and comprehend her situation before she took action.

Three possibilities presented themselves:

1. The dreams remained a coincidence. Lim's watch appeared in the botanical garden due to an unrelated, explainable happenstance. Lim experienced a similar dream two nights in a row due to her mental preoccupation with the first night's dream.
2. The dreams were a novel phenomena unexplained by known science. Lim—and a few other humans, such as Shinozaki—had access to a "dream world" of dubious purpose and internal logic. This "dream world" could, under certain circumstances, influence the real world, as evidenced by Lim's watch.
3. Lim had succumbed to insanity. It did, after all, run in her family, and the breed of mental disease that had afflicted her brother tended to develop in young people close to Lim's age.

Unless Lim failed to consider an outside-the-box explanation, she believed that one of those options must contain the truth, or at least approximate it. The more evidence points she discovered, the less likely Option 1 became. She theorized that her current ease, compared to her previous anxiety, stemmed from having crossed a threshold of plausible deniability upon entering an identical dream world on a second night. While Lim was loath to disregard established science, she also refused to deny her own observations.

(Isn't that the point of lovely little Option 3, though? That her observations ran counter to reality? That delicious exit, that quaint abnegation?)

Incorrect. Option 3 remained a clear possibility given her genetic makeup. She had to account for its possibility, or else she might end up like Eugene...

At a convenient time, she would submit herself to medical examination. For now, she decided to test her dream world. Something had changed since her last dream: the location she began in and the people she encountered. She waved at Driscoll and said: "I apologize for entering so unexpectedly."

Driscoll licked her thumb and turned a page in her salacious comic. Lim spoke again. "Hello, Driscoll. I—"

Something clamped against Lim's ankle. When Lim looked down, the hand wrenched her foot out from under her. She fell, but she threw her hands to catch herself and managed to land as though about to do a pushup. Her position allowed her to peer under Wintermint's bed, where the hand had come from.

Shinozaki was there. She held a finger to her lips. Her pupils roved in her head; they flitted from Lim to the room's one door and back again. Her hand curled around Lim's shoulder and slid her under the bed with her, where she whispered into Lim's ear:

"He's here."

"Who," said Lim.

"Quiet, whisper only," said Shinozaki. Up close, in the shadows beneath the bed, her face became angular, rough-hewn, pockmarked. Her black hair dangled around it in tangled clumps. Her thick eyebrows arched and widened her eyes. All trace of her typical nonchalant demeanor had evaporated. "The Dummy Man's here."

"Who," said Lim.

"Dummy. Man. Exactly what the name says. He's here to eat my heart."

Dummy Man. Eat her heart. And exactly when Lim had started to feel more secure in her understanding of this world, or at least aware of the gaps in her knowledge. The fact that Lim wasn't sure if "eat her heart" was colloquial or literal irked her, as did the knowledge that Shinozaki likely would not explain.

"Is the Dummy Man similar to last night's doglike entity," said Lim. "Do the rules of this world necessitate a new foe we must defeat each dream session?"

The manic expression on Shinozaki's face abated a moment, replaced by confusion. She blinked. "Wha—? Dammit Lim, I've been here eight years but English isn't my first language, you gotta talk more simple especially when I'm freaking the fuck out okay?"

She grabbed Lim's collar and shook her, although the tight confines under the bed only allowed Lim to rock back and forth a little. Lim spoke more slowly: "Do we have to fight the Dummy Man, like we fought the dog?"

Shinozaki only breathed, her hot pants buffeting Lim's cheek. Lim worried she had failed to understand again, but Shinozaki said: "No—yes—kinda. We gotta fight the Dummy Man, but he's—like—um—he's strong. Very, very strong. Way stronger than the dog."

Stronger than the dog, but in principle the same thing: an enemy to fight. How boring. Lim expected better, and she found herself suddenly more concerned with the appearance of Driscoll and Wintermint in her dream, and whether it were possible to interact with them or not.

"The Dummy Man, he uh, made the dog, with magic, to uh, to find me. To smell me. Look though, that's not important." Shinozaki had nearly nestled into Lim's shoulder. Her face had gotten so close to Lim's upper arm that Lim could only discern the arched eyebrows and the scraggly bangs. "I didn't think he'd get here tonight. I thought you and I, we'd uh, have time to practice—strategize. That's why I didn't try to rush things more than necessary, so you'd uh, ease into things? This whole dream shit, I know it's crazy at first. Oh Eden, oh fuck, he's here Eden, what the hell am I gonna do?"

Her words slurred together, her accent got thicker, and Lim had to expend a lot of brainpower only to disentangle her murmurs into coherent statements. Lim wondered if Shinozaki had put on an act to goad her into fighting another boogeyman without explanation. Even assuming Option 2 was correct, and that the dream world was real, Lim had no reason to trust Shinozaki—she had to remember that at all times.

"You mentioned last night, I believe, that if one dies in the dream they die in real life," said Lim. "I didn't pay much attention to it then, but given everything seems more real now, I would like you to affirm that I heard you correctly."

Shinozaki nodded. Her forehead rubbed against Lim's body. This whole experience was too intimate; it made Lim uncomfortable. She glanced over her shoulder and noticed Driscoll's feet patter across the room.

"If it's true," said Lim, "Then I have absolutely no desire to fight pointless enemies without cause."

"No-no-no-no-no, no let's not, let's not do this thing Eden, this is the wrong time to be like this, I need you one hundred percent on board right now or else we both fucking die you hear me?"

Lim rolled her eyes. "You expect me to trust someone who can't even get my name right?"

"Oh my fucking god Eden or LIM or whatever!" Shinozaki shook until the bed rattled. Lim wondered whether Wintermint might wake up. "It's America, we use first names here, it's no big deal."

"I wouldn't be so displeased by your insistence on using my given name," said Lim, "If you used the right name."

In moments of crisis—both real and manufactured—Lim had observed that her deadpan delivery and lifeless intonation often provided a stalwart, soothing presence that eased the nerves of those around her, as though she sucked the emotion out of the air and nullified it inside her body. While her companions often teased her for her colorlessness, she had always believed people like her were fundamental aspects of society. Furthermore, as the people around her became more disheveled, Lim became inversely more collected, which strengthened her presence as a stable entity. Any trace of self-doubt ebbed away in face of Shinozaki's fancy, even the doubts about her own sanity. Even if she were insane, she would face it with a rational calmness that might even cancel out her disability. Digressions aside, she noticed her calm aura descend upon Shinozaki's face at the casual but firm description of

the error involving Lim's name. The panic resolved into a placid dew and Shinozaki adopted a merely quizzical expression.

"Eden's not your name?"

"It's Enid. The D and N are switched."

"Oh." Shinozaki relinquished Lim and scratched her scalp. Her eyes gazed into an empty distance. "Wow. I feel like such an asshole now. I didn't—I didn't mean to be rude like that. Fuck. Enid. *Enid*."

"It's an understandable mistake," said Lim. "I only ask you endeavor to avoid it in the future."

She wanted out from under the bed, but Shinozaki flung her arms out (how did she move so effortlessly in such a constrained space?) and wrapped them around Lim's torso. The space beneath the bed contorted into a self-contained anti-atmosphere, a black space. Stars, planets, celestial bodies twinkled across the canvas that enveloped them, while Driscoll and Wintermint's beds floated nearby, with their respective owners nestled within their covers. Until now, Lim had almost forgotten she existed within a dream world. She supposed such a fact could be dangerous to forget.

Shinozaki burrowed her head into Lim's shoulder and started to tremble in spastic, asynchronous bursts. It took Lim a moment to realize she was crying. Lim had no clue how to react to this development, especially because she thought she had calmed Shinozaki down. She felt obligated to touch Shinozaki somehow, to pat her head or return the embrace. She extended a hand and almost graced Shinozaki's side with her fingertips, but felt awkward and drew back, certain if she went for such a gesture she would ruin it.

"Oh fuck." Shinozaki's muffled voice reverberated against Lim's jacket. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." And so on.

"It's alright," said Lim. A comet cut across an aurora borealis that Lim was fairly certain should not appear in outer space, although it did make things more conventionally beautiful. "Don't worry so much about my name."

"I screwed you Enid, I'm so sorry, I screwed you over hard, I did something really really bad to you, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." And so on. She became hysterical. She shook Lim so hard they careened around the nebulous space vortex, turning and twisting and spinning.

Lim disliked the spinning and especially the sobbing. She disliked her lack of control over Shinozaki's mental state, and attributed that lack of control to her lack of understanding, which was understandable as Lim had only met the girl a few days ago, but nonetheless exasperating. In this state, Lim had no hope of wheedling any relevant information out of her.

"You're not a, not a bad person," Shinozaki continued. Her voice became a constant deluge of words. "You're stiff but it's just a thing, oh my god why did I do this to you, why did I bring you in here?"

Lim wanted to know the answer to that question as well, and she assumed Shinozaki had some idea as to the answer, regardless of her current lamentation. But she couldn't pursue the point now, with Shinozaki such a wreck. She swapped tactics:

"Shinozaki. Shinozaki, stop. We're wasting time. Didn't you say the Dummy Man was here?"

The question had the intended affect. Shinozaki swallowed her sob and the planetarium scene cracked in half. The two halves fell apart like eggshells and returned them to Wintermint and Driscoll's room, the light now off and both girls asleep. Lim and Shinozaki sat between the beds, an improvement over being crammed under one.

"Yes," said Shinozaki. "Yes... he's here."

"Then what shall we do about him?" As soon as she asked, Lim became aware of how she had once again been goaded into some misadventure without any comprehension of her situation. She narrowed her eyes—had Shinozaki faked those tears?

"Alright," said Shinozaki, coherent and calm all in a suspiciously quick moment. "The main thing about the Dummy Man is that right now, he doesn't know you exist. Me, yeah. But you're nothing to him."

Hm. Then, conveniently, a purpose for Lim having been drawn into this dream world *did* exist. In fact, Lim's presence opened many strategic possibilities to combat this "Dummy Man" to which Shinozaki alone would have no access. It became clear to Lim that Shinozaki would never answer any more than she desired to; for the blanks, Lim would have to infer them herself.

She stood up and straightened her tie. She realized for the first time that she wore her school uniform. What had she worn the night before? Not the pajamas she slept in. And she had her watch, even though she took it off and left it on the stand at night. Meanwhile, Shinozaki wore her flouncy dress. The question of appearance intrigued her, but she considered it a minor issue—not something to waste much time puzzling.

"Alright," said Lim. "Do you know the Dummy Man's present location?"

"No." Shinozaki had half-crawled under the bed. "I saw him in the courtyard. He probably found my room first and went there, but I was smart enough to switch somewhere safer."

"Once he discovers you're not in his room, what do you expect he'll do?"

"Check the other rooms," said Shinozaki. "One by one."

"This room is on the third story," said Lim. "Out of five stories total. Logically, he would either start from the bottom and work his way up, or start from the top and work his way down."

"Exactly," said Shinozaki. "Look Enid, we gotta get outta here. It's not safe tonight, we'll need to plan during the day when there's less uh, trouble—shit, get down!"

She seized Lim's ankle, but before she could tug it away, Lim saved her the trouble and crouched low behind the bed. One of the eye watchtowers from outside scanned its light beam over the window. It did not linger long, and soon the light left.

"Fuck fuck fuck," said Shinozaki. "We're so fucked, we're so fucked."

"Does the Dummy Man control those towers?"

"Forget about the fucking towers," said Shinozaki. "I bought some time hiding here but I don't know how long and I don't know what to do, what do I do Enid, please tell me what I need to do!"

Oh dear, would she go berserk again? Lim had only a partial conception of the whole Dummy Man situation, but she knew Shinozaki freaking out would accomplish nothing. Lim had no desire to fight—and especially kill—anyone in this so-called "dream world," not when Option 3 remained her prime suspicion as to the world's reality, which meant that killing someone in this "world" might have unfortunate ramifications in a world of people who aren't literally insane. Luckily, Shinozaki had already babbled something about not wanting to fight the Dummy Man tonight—they needed a plan, she said—so Lim made sure to steer the conversation toward a pacifist solution.

"Shinozaki. How does one escape this world and return to the real one?"

"The only way is to uh wake up in the real world," said Shinozaki.

Alright. That made sense, considering how the previous night's dream had ended abruptly and with little fanfare upon the blare of her alarm clock.

"Then we must simply wait until the morning," said Lim. "So our plan must revolve around stalling for time—"

"There's another way," said Shinozaki, although she had just previously said there was only one way. Imprecision in word choice! "You see your buddies here? Uh, Lindsay and Amy?"

"Wintermint and Driscoll," Lim affirmed.

"Yeah. That's the real them. Normally they can't hear or see you, and you can't even touch them. Try it."

Lim leaned over Wintermint's bed and placed her hand on the sleeping girl. It phased through her body, as though either Wintermint or Lim were a ghost.

"You and I, our sleeping selves exist too," Shinozaki continued. "Exactly where we went to sleep."

Lim saw where the path of this logic. "You previously said that one *normally* can't interact with the real world people. But under certain circumstances—"

"Exactly. Lim." Shinozaki's voice became tiny, she transformed into the monster under Wintermint's bed, a sad urban legend, a wisp of a specter, not even a palpable ghoul. Only a

shadow, an ominous black space that did not exist under Driscoll's identical bed. "Lim. I need you to wake me up. The Dummy Man doesn't know about you. If he sees you, it uh, it shouldn't matter. He'll think you're like these two girls. I need you to wake me up."

Lim checked her watch and grimaced at the sickle smile that faced her back.

"Tell me where," she said.

III

Shinozaki did not normally sleep in her room. Instead, she snuck out at night and curled up in a sports equipment shed on the far side of the basketball court.

Lim found this action odd. From what Shinozaki claimed, there was only one way to interact with the real world while in the dream world, and that was to give a sleeping human a nightmare. Doing so would eventually wake up the sleeper in the real world—which was Lim's current mission. Why, then, did Shinozaki insist on an unusual sleeping location? The Dummy Man could not damage her real body in the dream world, and any attempt to would actually aid Shinozaki. Unless Shinozaki suspected the Dummy Man might not have qualms about which world he murdered her in...

She exited Wintermint and Driscoll's room. While in the previous night, the corridors connecting the dormitory rooms had been elongated to impossible degrees, tonight they were no different than normal. In fact, Wintermint and Driscoll's room had been identical to normal also. Which meant the geographic properties of this world can fluctuate. If she went to the gardens, would they be the same jungle as before? As she walked toward the stairwell she considered. The eyeball watchtowers, which remained a fixture of the landscape, likely had a specific purpose: to locate something or someone. Shinozaki had failed to answer whether the Dummy Man controlled them, but it stood to reason that if not him, *someone* did. Which indicated that geographic alterations might, at least in part, be due to the meddling of those who inhabited the dream world. Shinozaki had a definite reason to change the botanical gardens how she did, and the other oddities Lim experienced the previous night could be chalked up to a capriciousness of her character. Whereas tonight, with Shinozaki paralyzed in fear, everything reverted to a bland normalcy.

Only a theory. Other possibilities existed. But something, under less strenuous circumstances—assuming they existed in this world—to test.

Lim checked her watch and reminded herself to stop checking her watch. She walked into the stairwell and took a few steps down when she heard someone else ascending from below. The stairwell coiled in a square, switching directions ninety degrees every eight steps. Lim made halfway to the second floor when she heard someone ascending from below. When she turned another right angle, she saw him—two turns down, emerging from her periphery.

The Dummy Man. Middle-aged, Asian, dressed in a sharp pinstripe business suit. A full head of half-gray hair and an acute slope of lines stretched across his gaunt cheekbones. A dead forward stare and black eyes with almost no irises. A lifeless fellow plucked from the streets of a metropolis somewhere east; a beleaguered salaryman of neither malice nor passion.

Except in one hand he held a dummy, sleek and shiny, more like plastic than wood. The dummy, by contrast, wore a fiery red tuxedo, ruffled with a whimsical polka dot bowtie, adorned with a monocle and top hat and even a little cane that swayed in a clenched, three-fingered fist. The lower half of its face was swallowed by a grin of perfectly rectangular teeth aligned in a precise grid of black lines. Its saucer eyes bulged halfway out their sockets, swelled with bulging red veins that extended rhizomatic around dilated pupils. A cigar dangled from the corner of its mouth and dropped orange embers as it flared.

Before Lim left the room, Shinozaki had stammered two pieces of advice. The first: act normal. The second: the dummy's the man, and the man's the dummy.

The Dummy Man ascended and Lim, face forward and hand held in position for watch-checking, descended. Act normal. Even in real life, Lim had difficulty acting "normal," and now an inexplicable terror gripped her—no, not inexplicable, perfectly reasonable—except as far as she knew everything here was a figment of blooming schizophrenia—she didn't know.

She rounded her corner and he rounded his. They now stood on the same segment of staircase, facing one another. She forced herself not to look at him. She looked at her watch. She had been looking at her watch the whole time. Nobody except her looks at watches for this long, she suddenly realized, and lowered her arm. Could he see the face on the watch? She hadn't changed the watch to look that way, if he saw the face would he know she wasn't normal? She realized she was on track to brush shoulders with him—with the dummy. If she didn't cleave to the side of the stairs, they would collide; but if she moved, he'd know... She sought an excuse, anything to naturally move aside without arousing suspicion, she had only three steps before they met, only two—

The faceless Asian man who held the dummy turned slightly to allow her passage. At the same time, the dummy doffed his flamenco top hat. Its wooden jaw dropped and exposed a pure black hole, from which issued: "Pardon me, ma'am!" and a childish giggle.

Lim took the next step and passed him. Then the next step. She did not hear him take another step, however. Could he still be staring at her? She couldn't look. She had to continue downward. She turned the corner and sure enough, she noticed in the corner of her eye the dummy, in the same spot, fuming on his cigar.

Why watch her? Did she arouse suspicion? How? Doing what? She acted perfectly naturally. Except for staring at her watch too long. But sometimes she actually did that in real life, became entranced by the second hand, timing her blinks to the spaces between the ticks, one blink per five seconds—see the hand go round and round? She did that in real life, that wasn't unnatural, she was a normal human being Mr. Dummy Man, don't mind her! It had to be insanity. Eugene bought a dummy once. At thirteen. He saw a famous ventriloquist on television and wanted to be one. Not unusual; he churned through hobby after hobby those days, aeronautics, lacrosse, equestrianism, juggling, C++, et cetera. He had a genial little dummy in a white suit with a carnation in the lapel. It had a cowlick of brown hair and Eugene never managed to make it talk without moving his lips. When her mother shipped him to the asylum they cleaned out his room and she found it under his bed, she had totally forgotten about it, she got on her knees to see what was under the bed and its face was there, its big smile shrouded in darkness, its body contorted in agony. Her mind, in its insanity, had

conjured a fear from her subconscious. No, coincidence, if she could believe even in part that her watch's location had only coincidentally matched its location in her dream, she could believe in this coincidence. She had to.

"Scuuuse me ma'am, see a Miss Shinozaki anywhere?" said the Dummy Man. A faint lisp and an exaggerated city slicker accent, part Jersey, part Bostonian. Lim doubted he hailed from either area, as actual denizens rarely sport such exaggerated speech patterns.

Lost in these thoughts, she almost answered him. Her mouth opened and a negative syllable formulated deep in her throat. She drove down her teeth and clamped on her tongue. She transformed the sound in her mouth into a cough and forced the hand with her watch to her mouth to stifle it.

She moved downward and could no longer see the Dummy Man to determine whether her act came across as natural. She could only move, eyes fixed ahead, down one step after another, aware only that the Dummy Man took no further steps himself. Only silence above.

Then the chatter of wood against wood. Click-click-click. His unhinged jaw snapping against the mouth over and over. An approximate laughter.

She rounded a bend and continued downward. The chattering continued until she exited on the first floor, at which point she glanced over her shoulder, perceived nothing following or watching her, and broke into a stilted half-run for the exit. The entire thing felt so ridiculous to her; it didn't even follow an internal logic. Dummy men, dream worlds, Shinozaki and her playing cards... a vague mishmash, disorderly and random. Nonetheless, here Lim was, running at night through the school halls as though a real urgency imbued her purpose. Did she believe it was real? Well. It made sense to err on the side of caution. She only hated that the reasonable thing for her to do was operate under the least reasonable of circumstances. If this world did exist and Shinozaki was in danger, then yes, Lim must run. But that conditional statement caught in her throat like an oversized pill.

Nobody in the main lobby. She remembered dancing mannequins the night before. However, the path from the back door to the basketball court undulated at least a full kilometer across boundless hills and fields. In real life, this distance represented a meager grassy knoll the more jejune students rolled around on—a favorite spot for Weaver and her boyfriend, for instance. For all its distance, only a single eyeball tower stood sentinel over the area, although it stood taller and its beam yawned wider than the others. It seemed it too had been elongated by the same magic that stretched the knoll. The logical purpose of this extension made superficial sense. If Shinozaki didn't want the Dummy Man to find her real-world location in the shed, then hiding it through this geographical alteration made sense. But then shouldn't the change be less blatant? The single change to an otherwise-identical All Saints Academy stuck out, drew attention to itself.

Or was that the point? If the Dummy Man could not murder the real Shinozaki while in the dream world, then the alteration became misdirection.

Lim wished she knew anything about Shinozaki, anything at all, a foothold from which to vivisect her psychology. If she understood Shinozaki as a human entity, then Lim felt confident she could parse answers from her even when she refused to give any. (It's Lim.

Dream Shinozaki is only Lim. They're all only Lim. Figments of Lim's imagination.) No. The dream was too vivid. It started with mere auditory hallucinations, voices in her heads. Not fully-fleshed dimensions. (Nobody knows for sure how it works. If they did, then Eugene...)

"Bah," she uttered aloud. Didn't matter. She sprinted into the hilly field the moment the watchtower's beam swept past the school on its elliptical circuit.

Nobody in the world knew Enid Lim for her athletic acumen. She had never run a full kilometer in her life, and even a lap around the track during physical education left her lungs in splinters. The insufferable tennis goddess Wintermint invited Lim to morning jogs whenever an impish mood beset her, and Lim always had to conceal her shame as she refused in front of the other friends. But now, Lim bounded up and down endless hills and lacked even a dull ache in her chest. She blistered across the landscape at a pace to shred Wintermint to ribbons, she bounded each hill in one or two breakneck vaults. Her arms and legs churned and, opposite to reality, she made palpable progress. She crossed the monolithic watchtower, it made a noise like a low but monstrous murmur as its cylindrical form swirled past. The basketball court and the sports shed manifested like specks on the fog-shrouded horizon. An omnipresent but unseen ocean whispered all around her, waves crashed against waves. She rolled over a hilltop to build momentum on the downward slope and carry it into her next ascent.

She moved fast. Too fast to think about anything but how fast she moved.

Then she rolled onto the blacktop. It and the shed appeared normal at first, but upon scrutiny she noticed an almost comical padlock that welded the door shut. Shinozaki's real body supposedly existed in the shed, but Shinozaki might have helped her out some and removed the padlock. Unless it took more than a mere hand wave or magic word to do so. Of course, without any comprehension of this world's rules, how should Lim know! Should Lim even waste her time attempting to pry open the lock, or did she need to find another way inside? Could Lim nullify Shinozaki's magic lock with her own latent dream powers? Maybe the padlock existed in real life to seal the shed shut when unused. Then how did Shinozaki creep inside anyway?

Lim manifested her Kar98k, meaning she vaguely intuited a need for a weapon and it suddenly appeared in her hand. A sledgehammer might prove more useful for the occasion, but no matter how hard she envisioned such a tool, nothing else showed up in her hands. She found she could dispel the Kar98k into oblivion by envisioning her hands as empty, but if she tried to create any other weapon, only it returned. Bizarre! She wanted to test some more, to determine whether she had only failed to "envision" the weapon properly, or else confirm that she only had the capability of creating the very specific bolt-action rifle that she had created when Shinozaki first implored her to battle the dog monster. But time, she supposed, mattered, despite her watch's inability to track it.

The padlock remained a problem. Even if Shinozaki lacked the power to disengage the lock from her current location, she might have provided Lim with a key or at least advice. Even a warning—Lim had the sprint from the school to think up a plan, had she expected this. The shed had no windows and no other entrances, and the school's meticulous upkeep left no obvious structural weaknesses, such as rusty hinges or eroded plaster. If she had the magical

prowess to summon a rifle from thin air, she ought to have the capability to defeat this simple shed. Her heightened speed and endurance bespoke increased physical ability...

She swung the rifle around in her hands and brought the butt down on the padlock. Clang! She wasted no time and slammed again. By the fourth hit, the padlock had received visible damage. By the seventh, it snapped. Lim unhooked the shattered remnant and discarded it. She flung open the door.

Shinozaki screamed. Not the form of her curled between fishnet bags of volley- and basketballs, draped in a Navajo quilt. No, the scream sheared across the sky from the dormitories. It had a nasally, congested pitch that cracked at its height, and yet it carried the entire distance impeded by nothing. Lim assumed Shinozaki's situation at a moment.

"Simple," Shinozaki had said. "Murder my real form with a magic weapon. Magic doesn't work on the real world, all it can do is give me a nightmare. Then I wake up."

No sense in hesitation. Lim aimed the Kar98k at the sleeping, "real world" Shinozaki. But as her finger settled on the trigger, she did hesitate. A sudden fear gripped her: What if this was real? What if the dream world was a deranged figment of her imagination, what if Eugene's insanity had settled on her? What if she pointed a real gun at the real Shinozaki right now, what if a real bullet came out? Her hands clamped up, arthritic and brittle. Her eyes bulged, her brain throbbed, her breath thickened.

Eugene went at her with a knife. He said she was an imposter. The government—a conspiracy—and only he knew. So their agents had replaced his friends and family. Everyone wore realistic latex masks to take on the exact appearance. She was not Enid Lim, his little sister. She was FBI, CIA, Blackwater, the names didn't matter, he invented them. He wanted to take her mask off. He dragged the blade across her face. Her mother tackled him and wrestled his arm to the floor, even though he was taller and heavier than her. Lim didn't watch, she spiraled into oblivion, bounced down the walls of a darkened hallway holding her face and sobbing, into the bathroom where the lights turned on and a grotesque abomination manifested in the mirror, an entire half of her face blood-drenched while her mother and brother screeched in a distant realm.

Shinozaki screamed again and the scream sounded more real than those screeches back then. Lim clamped her jaw taut; the scar that ran down the side of her face burst open and a horde of maggots streamed forth. She fired the Kar98k directly into Shinozaki's throat.

Shinozaki—the real(?) one—snapped awake instantaneously, eyes wide, hand on her heart as she heaved for breath. She tossed the quilt off her and jolted to her feet, looking around anxiously. "Lim," she said. "Holy shit Lim your timing is fucking precise, another moment and—" She slapped herself in the face. "No no no, no time for this. Lim, if you can hear me, get the fuck out of here right now, he'll come for you next. Just run. Buy all the time you can!"

Then Shinozaki herself ran. She dashed directly through Lim and phased into her like molecules of air. Then she turned on a quick dig of her tennis shoes and sprinted into the darkness. The extended plain snapped back to its normal length, and Lim stood only a

hundred meters or so from the school building. Her Kar98k still smoked; she unconsciously worked the bolt-action and ejected the spent cartridge.

So it worked...

By the time Shinozaki's words registered, Lim realized she had made a mistake. A window on the school building shattered and a dark shape dropped onto the knoll. The Dummy Man.

He advanced on her. No other verb sufficed, for he—neither man nor dummy—moved his legs or any part of his body. The man part of him, in his business suit, simply propelled forward in a full standing position, the same placid expression on his featureless face. The grass parted around his unmoving feet and a stream of dust and dirt sprayed from his heels. The dummy chattered its jaw like mad. As the eyeball watchtower swept its beam toward him, the Dummy Man launched airborne with no apparent effort, flipped over the light, and hurtled directly toward Lim.

She raised the Kar98k and squinted one eye. Funny to think, after Eugene, she'd ever find herself in such a crisis situation ever again. She fired the gun.

The bullet bounced off the dummy's shiny cueball forehead. It did not even disturb his dandyish top hat. What? Even the dog had taken damage—she had no time to ponder, he came down hard upon her, she cartwheeled to the side and flipped onto her feet. She ejected the spent cartridge and fired, this time for the man part.

But the man wasn't there. Lim caught a glimpse of him sprinting after the dwindling form of Shinozaki as they both tore into the bushes that lined the south gate. Only the dummy remained, propped against the sports shed, one jaunty arm posed on a jutted hip.

If Shinozaki was awake, and dream people couldn't interact with real people, then why did the man part chase after her? To surveil her location? Or could the man be awake while the dummy—

"Kweh kweh kweh," cackled the dummy. "Thought I smelled funny on ya! You killed my doggie, din't ya? He sniffed a weird girlie. Wondered what that bitch's plot was. Tsk tsk tsk, bonehead move. She halved her power for *you*?" He pushed off from the wall and stood on his wobbly wooden legs. He swayed but remained steady as he slowly advanced on Lim. She stepped backward, onto the basketball court blacktop. He didn't attack right away. Likely he wanted her to take another shot, which would give him an opening in the brief moment she took to "reload." Or else he simply wanted to taunt her. Lim erred toward the former explanation.

Shinozaki said stall for time. How long? Until she woke up? Her alarm roused her in the morning, but considering Driscoll had only gone to sleep a few minutes prior, that time was nowhere near. Or had Shinozaki only said that so she could attract the Dummy Man's attention long enough for her to escape? Didn't matter. She needed a plan, and now.

"Yes, I killed the doglike entity," said Lim. The dummy seemed chatty. Engaging him in conversation would certainly fulfill Shinozaki's request. And perhaps she might actually learn something. "Did you create it?"

The dummy twisted its knobby fingers around one another. Its hands kneaded in and out, as though working an invisible device. Lim stepped backward with each forward step it took. "I did indeed, girlie. Forged it out of my own heart and soul." Was the accent meant to be Irish? It only approximated the dialectic traits. "Coulda pieced together a better one but it'd cost more. But even though it fell apart at the end it did its duty like a good doggie does."

So that explained why the dog had lacked so much of its flesh when they encountered it. She thought up another question: "Why are you after Shinozaki?"

"Bitch took half my power and ain't paid for it," the dummy chattered. "I've been at her eight years to get it back."

The dummy gave straighter answers than Shinozaki herself. If she trusted what he said, it meant that magical dream power could be taken from others. Who knew what more or less "power" meant in this realm, but generally more power was better. Could dream power be quantified? The dummy mentioned earlier that Shinozaki "halved" her power for Lim. Was that a mere figure of speech or did it speak to a mathematical method for power dispersal?

Almost assuredly, if Shinozaki transmitted power to Lim, it happened during or after their trip to the café, when Lim woke in Shinozaki's room without explanation and wound up late for piano practice. So power can also be given.

"Did she take exactly half your power?" Lim asked.

"Aye." The dummy swayed. Its head twisted until it was almost upside-down, like an owl. Its hands kneaded and worked the invisible machine. "And she gave you half hers, so you're only half mine. You ain't got a chance, girlie. Now granted, your power is mine by rights, so I can't promise to let you live. But I can promise to end it quick. You got one chance to surrender, bitch."

"I don't respond well to men who call me that word," said Lim. Should she shoot, now that he became more openly hostile? No, her raised but unfired gun kept him at bay so far. No need to switch her strategy while it still worked. On the other hand, he confirmed her theory even when she specified "exactly half." Which meant power *could* be quantified. Lim wasn't sure the importance of the revelation, but the sense of a mathematical structure behind the arbitrary oddness of the dream world eased her tension. If the world had rules, if it followed a logical structure, she need only understand it to come out on top. Like a math test. Except in math she tended to make idiotic mistakes and daft oversights—she understood that calculus material better than the lot of them, but Wintermint and Weaver and—

"Sorry then, girlie. I suppose I've distracted you long enough, kweh kweh kweh!" The dummy drew his hands apart and held them, wooden digits splayed. Lim felt something tug at the joints on her arms and legs. The unseen force drew her limbs apart and lifted her into the air. She turned her head—wires. The dummy had strung wires around her. It must have happened during their conversation. And Lim had thought she was stalling him!

Chapter 2: Draft 2 (2017)

I

On turned the world. One wide and narrow fragment at a time manifested to the rhythm of a thunderous crack and a festering hum of electricity. Tiles, glass, counters, stands. Crack! Palm trees, benches, balconies, banners. Crack! Fountains, advertisements, mannequins. Each crack and the world became more complete, more realized. Storefronts emerged, escalators. Columns and chandeliers. Walls, a floor, a roof. In the far distance, the cavernous mouth of a clothing department.

Enid Lim became cognizant of her existence within this space when her forefinger twitched against her side. She raised her hand and held it before her face, scrutinized it. She touched her head and shoulders and assured herself of her dimensions. She took a step toward a nearby bench and her footstep clanged against the overwhelming silence. She did not take another step, she stood frozen as she searched the shopping mall for a single sign of human presence. She checked over her shoulder and a department store loomed behind her. Inside, beyond the glass counters, rows upon rows of dresses and blouses and skirts and coats hung from neatly-spaced metal poles. A warmer, yellower light than the sterile whiteness of the mall proper pulsed within. Distant, on a stagnant trace of wind, Lim smelled a perfume of wilted petals.

How did she get here?

Her eyes shifted. She expected something to have changed with the part of the mall she had turned away from, and even for a moment thought that some of the storefronts had rearranged themselves, but she had not paid enough attention before to tell for sure. She read the names etched into the stonework arches above each doorway or glass display. They had vague, French and Italian names that Lim figured might belong to real stores. Eyeless mannequins demonstrated silky, frilly, pastel costumes with all proper accoutrements.

"A dream," Lim said aloud. She intuited that a confidant and vocal assessment would shatter its spell and wake her. "I don't remember how I got here, so it must be a dream." Or amnesia? She probed her scalp with ten spread fingers but detected no obvious injury. The only scar on her head remained the one that curved from the tip of her eye down her jawbone to the edge of her chin, and she remembered *that* one. She inspected her clothes: a distinct red tie and blazer over a long-sleeved white blouse. The uniform of All Saints Academy, where Lim attended high school as a junior and was tied for Class Rank 1. If she wore it, she must not be far from school. But she failed to recognize the mall and knew of nothing like it on Aquidneck Island. Either she had gone as far as Providence, or her mind had manufactured a dream reality to inhabit.

Into her thoughts cleaved: "*Wrrrrrrrrong!*" When Lim looked up, a figure vaulted the railing on the third-story balcony and plummeted straight toward a wide stone fountain in the center of the main walkway. Lim started for her, but before she had taken a single step, the girl flipped in midair three times, pirouetted with her legs and arms in a graceful ballerina

motion, and landed without injury on the tip of one foot at the very apex of the fountain, causing its water to spray all around her without a drop touching her.

The girl remained in the same pose atop the fountain long enough for Lim to recognize her, which took longer than it needed because her hair color had at some point changed from black to shiny silver. "Shinozaki?" she said. Shinozaki was the new transfer student—so new, she had only been in class two days, and Lim didn't even remember her first name.

Shinozaki rotated her arms in a generous wave and bowed. From her standing position, she performed another flip off the fountain and landed directly before Lim. She wore an outfit like she had tumbled out a vampire novel set in Victorian times but written in the present; she had a corset and everything, plus fishnet on all four limbs and all sorts of fabric constricting her long neck. Jangly buckles hung from most of her clothing. When she stood straight, she towered a full head over Lim, even though Lim's scant impression of the real Shinozaki envisioned her with an omnipresent stoop. It must be all the nets and ropes and vises elongating her.

"You are. Absolutely wrong, my dear friend Eden!" Shinozaki flicked back one hand and twisted a coil of long silver hair around the dainty wrist. "Forget dreams. You've entered an ascended state of consciousness—a new dimension bounded only by the limits of your imagination!"

She enunciated with an exaggerated British accent the real Shinozaki lacked. In fact, the real Shinozaki seemed to have only a tenuous grasp over the language. Lim tried to piece together what she knew about the real Shinozaki from the few instances they had interacted.

"So," said Lim, "This is definitely a dream."

Shinozaki tilted back her head and retched. "No, no, no! Let's not play this game, Eden. Say it with me: ascended consciousness!"

"My name isn't Eden," said Lim. "I guess even my subconscious feels the need to mock me." She turned away, she disliked this farce. Time to wake up and go back to school... No, school had ended for the day, she remembered that. Then time to study...

Something thwacked her in the back and she nearly fell over. When she turned, Shinozaki brandished a parasol and readied a second swing. "Let's not be difficult, we haven't much time."

"Fine," said Lim. "I'll humor this idiotic dream." She checked her wristwatch, but the hands span out of control in counterclockwise revolutions. Tch! Had she napped after class, somehow? If Lim didn't return home on time, her mother would gnaw her face to ribbons.

Shinozaki's demeanor ameliorated and she swept Lim up with one arm, drawing her into position for some sort of fancy dance Lim knew nothing about, like a tango or waltz or whatever. They swayed back and forth across the mall's central walkway, Lim in the position Shinozaki dictated while Shinozaki twirled and revolved in an intensifying frenzy.

"Okay this is! So perfect. Yes Eden my dear friend, my best friend, my only friend, welcome to the world of my devising, where whatever my imagination conceives comes to reality! Isn't it wonderful, Eden?"

She span Lim around. Lim felt slightly nauseous. "Your imagination conceived a shopping mall?"

"What a fun place! What a realm of infinite possibility! What mysteries, surprises, delights does each store hold? It's up to you, intrepid shopper, to discover! What antiques, what beauties, what bargains! All arrayed in a peaceful, placid, holy architecture that invites those on the inside and protects from those on the out! Consider—!" She swung her lithe body onto Lim's other side and left Lim sore from whiplash. "Consider how the shape of the shopping mall corresponds to the shape of a Roman Catholic church. Particularly of the Gothic style!"

Shinozaki and Lim shared the same Art History class. Yesterday's lecture, the first the transfer student experienced, compared the Gothic and Romanesque styles of cathedrals. The further comparison to the modern shopping mall, however, was a product of Shinozaki's—or Lim's—own mind. The real Shinozaki was nothing like this. Your typical new student: quiet, shy, and reserved. She sat in the back and said little after her stammered introduction to the class. When she approached Lim after school, she tugged on a sleeve and kept her eyes routed on her shoes. She wanted to talk to Lim and they went to a café together.

Yes, that's right. The café. Lim and Shinozaki had ordered, taken seats, and made stilted conversation. Lim didn't know what Shinozaki wanted to talk about, and Shinozaki never made herself clear. The drinks arrived, they began to sip...

Meanwhile, Shinozaki blabbered on. "—a cute outfit, what colors go best on you Eden? I'm feeling a navy blue or deep purple, definitely something dark though, your aura is too sedate for buoyancy. Oh yes definitely, mmmm I see it now, I visualize it in my mind's eye, you look so cute my dear friend! Yes, let's get you out of that drab uniform, this is important, and once we have a costume we can work on a weapon to get you—"

"Weapon," said Lim. She intoned the word, only vaguely cognizant of its meaning in the hurricane of words Shinozaki spilled into her ear as they danced across the tile and into one of the innumerable stores that lined either side of the central walkway. Like all the other stores, it was a clothes store, and a lot of outfits that shared Shinozaki's overarching aesthetic stuffed the shelves. The mélange of designs and colors, in tandem with Shinozaki's dizzying movements, deepened the nausea in Lim's esophagus. When Shinozaki seized Lim's necktie and hooked a finger into the knot, Lim jerked herself away and lurched toward the exit.

"No, no, no, back, come back!" Shinozaki had managed to unravel the necktie; it slid out from Lim's collar. "This is. Really important, my dear friend! Not something to take lightly. Oh, where are you going, it's dangerous if you go too far!"

Lim stormed out the store and kneaded the top button of her blouse, which had undone in the scuffle over the necktie. She looked both ways down the shopping mall for an exit and saw no obvious one, but she assumed one had to exist in the large department stores at each end. She tromped toward the closest and ignored Shinozaki.

"Bad bad bad, bad Eden, bad! Come back, you're being very bad!"

"I told you," said Lim, undeterred, "My name isn't Eden."

Not long after she entered the department store, she sighted an exit, or what appeared to be one. It was difficult to tell, because beyond the long line of glass doors floated only an inky miasma. From Shinozaki's continued protestations, Lim assumed this darkness would murder her. Which was perfectly fine with Lim, because she needed to wake up and go home and not waste time on frivolous activities like trying on corsets and other goth lolita fashions. She had assignments for United States History, Art History, Calculus, and English; she had the latest Calculus exam results to review so she might better understand her mistakes; she had to study for the upcoming French exam; and on top of that, she had to placate her mother, who assuredly wondered about her. Reflexively she checked her watch again, even though it showed the same useless information as before. Lim prayed this was one of those dreams that feel as though they last forever but occur within a brief speck of a time as one nods off. She pushed through the last dense cluster of clothing and reached for the doors.

Shinozaki came from behind and tackled her. Her head struck the door's metal handle and she recoiled with a distinct sensation of pain, much like when Shinozaki hit her with the umbrella. Then Shinozaki's hand buried her face against the tile and pinned her down. She struggled, but the grip tightened.

"Shh! Quiet, stay still!"

Lim twisted her head and managed to see upward, out the doors into the blackened mist. Deep in the dark reaches, an entity loomed. It moved as mere shape, too obscure to cohere into a logical object, but came into focus as it stalked toward the entrance. First emerged a pinched, triangular face, swallowed by two blank and bulbous eyes, and a pair of spindly antennae that flicked against the glass overhead. Then, a long and sticklike neck expanded outward into a winged carapace. The insectoid creature had four legs and two arms, raised and adorned with scythe appendages that gleamed in the pale light from the mall. Lim recognized the creature: a praying mantis, grown to an enormous size, twice as tall as Lim herself. Its eyes, lacking pupils, gazed into the doorway.

As Lim inspected closer, she saw the scythe arms were drenched in blood. Globules dribbled onto the glass and ran down in turgid rivulets as the mantis pressed itself against the doors.

They remained in silence for several moments.

Then the wings on its back sprung open. They reverberated at twelve hundred beats per second with a constant metallic ripple. The mantis pushed backward and shot into the air; it vanished in a second.

Only once it had fully gone did Shinozaki unclamp her hand. Unimpressed, Lim said: "What's that?"

"Somebody's bug. There's magicians in this world, and they all got their familiars. I've been seeing spiders and centipedes since New York." Shinozaki helped Lim up and dragged her back toward the mall's interior. "Come on come on, no need to worry about any of that."

Even though the only one worried was Shinozaki in the first place. This whole dream felt suspiciously lucid, and a lurking terror gestated in Lim's gut that it may not be a dream at all. And something worse than a mere shopping mall beset by monstrous insects.

Before she realized, Shinozaki had wrangled her back into the same clothes store as before, or maybe a different store that nonetheless appeared generally identical. Shinozaki's mood melted back into easy affability, as though the encounter with the mantis never occurred.

It didn't occur. Lim had to remind herself. She must never forget what this was. But could it really be? It seemed so sudden, such a rapid onset. Didn't it begin with auditory hallucinations? Didn't it begin at eighteen years? She supposed halfway to seventeen was close enough. But Hector had—

Her eyes snapped open.

She laid on her back on a bed. A ceiling fan revolved indolently above her. Her desiccated esophagus sucked in a tiny stream of air and she flung to her side and coughed. Nausea coalesced in her stomach, but she kept it down as she hacked and wheezed over the side of a bed. Not her bed. Red sheets and a red carpet, and a desk and a lamp she recognized—standard-issue furniture for the dormitories at All Saints Academy Boarding & Day School, where the students from Providence or out-of-state lived.

Although Lim attended the school, she had a home in town, she did not sleep here. She wiped a dry trickle of drool from her lip and pressed a hand to her throat. Her necktie was gone, the top few buttons of her blouse undone. She buttoned them furiously and flung herself out of the bed and rebounded off the desk, a few papers scattered in a lazy breeze. She smoothed down her skirt, it had become completely uneven and rumpled, and her socks—she had no shoes either, what happened here, how did she—oh no, oh no, oh no. She clutched her hair and tried to pressed it down against the sides of her skull, she tried to remember what had happened, but the vivid dream confused her recollection. She went to the café with Shinozaki and then—

Shinozaki was on the bed Lim had vacated. She slept facedown, her head half-swallowed by the pillow, one foot twitching spasmodically as a light murmur bubbled from her nostrils. Shinozaki's shirt was completely unbuttoned, and it fluttered around her smooth, bare stomach.

Lim tilted to her shoes and her bag which she found by the door and floundered out the door with her limbs only vaguely able to comprehend whatever her brain told them to do. She bounced off a wall in the hallway and careened in the vague direction of the exit, she checked her watch but everything in the world was trembling too hard for her to read the dials, it might as well have been the lunatic watch from the dream. A voice called out to her from a nebulous plane of existence, she ignored it and stumbled down the stairs and out the front door of the dormitory building, into the academy courtyard. The sky was orange and long shadows spread from every angle. A few students loitered, all turned their incomprehensible faces toward her as she passed. She began to run the moment her legs became marginally more cooperative. Her bag and the books inside slammed against her ribs again and again but she felt only a dull ache.

Had she had she had she had she had she had she had she had she had

Amazing how after everything she had failed to vomit well she always had a strong stomach
oh no oh no—

"Enid, you alright?" A vague voice—a classmate.

"Hey, Lim."

She held up a hand as if to communicate not to worry, your friend and classmate Enid Lim is quite alright no need to worry, nothing wrong has happened, at this point in time she prayed for insanity, because at least then she had an excuse, she groped past the topiaries and toward the iron front gates of the academy, she was late after all, her mother would be furious and she—had so much—homework—her studies—

A black shape stepped in front of her and she almost crashed into it. But its overwhelming blackness blocked all her senses and imbued her with a moment of stark clarity. She managed to seize control of her body and stop herself before she collided with the large adult man who stood in front of her.

She blinked and looked around. She had not only exited the academy but managed to meander a full block down the path back to the town's residential area. She and the man stood on a cement path that cut through a public park with gentle undulation, embowered by friendly trees. She looked up at his face.

He was an Asian man in a business suit, but tall and broad-shouldered. His face maintained a stolid, expressionless guise that communicated only minor impatience, if anything at all. His hair formed a black skullcap that clamped tight to his scalp. Little else about him stood out; he seemed like one of those FBI agents who are recruited because they prove so difficult to identify after the fact.

"Excuse me, miss." His accent was heavy. It reminded Lim of Shinozaki's accent—her accent in real life, not in that... dream, hallucination, whatever it was—but much thicker. No way had he spent much time in this country. But he continued as though he had long practiced exactly what he intended to say: "Have you seen my daughter? I am looking for her very long time."

A stiff, mechanical arm raised. It clutched a photograph of Shinozaki, although she wore the uniform of a different school and stood with a couple of friends, also Asian girls. In the photograph, Shinozaki beamed at the camera and posed with her hands on either side of her head, one finger on each upraised to give her a semblance of alien antennae.

The coincidence ought to have shocked Lim, but the momentary lapse in her hysteria had restored enough of her rational faculties to facilitate the reinstatement of the others in the brief moment allowed her to respond to the man's question. She straightened her collar, although she realized her necktie remained missing.

"No, I haven't seen your daughter, sir." A reasonable answer, considering Shinozaki only started attending school two days prior and Lim needed to return home as soon as possible.

She checked her watch, and for the first time in awhile understood it: fifteen past five. Quite late.

She expected a polite thank you and good day. But the man's face solidified, his eyes cracked open and he said: "You lie."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I," he advanced toward her, "Smell her." His face was a solid mask, its sallow complexion gleamed in the oblique rays of light that filtered through the canopy. His skin radiated like plastic or polished wood.

So this man was clearly not Shinozaki's father, and possibly dangerous. Lim took a step back to match his step forward and contemplated her ability to outrun him. He was middle-aged, but by no means old, and as a larger man he likely had more raw power in his legs to match any advantages her youth lent her. His shoes, although they did not clash with his business apparel, appeared light and flexible, while hers were clunky. She had not even tied them in her dash from Shinozaki's room. A question of strength, meanwhile, needed no analysis. Her best option was to scream.

Her took another step forward and she braced herself for action. She needed to put distance between her and him with an unexpected spurt of speed. That way, he could not quickly silence her by putting his hand over her mouth, like Shinozaki had done in the dream. She would bolt in a random direction and duck her head...

"Hey, Lim!"

The voice came from behind. Lim glanced over her shoulder. Two of her classmates waved at her from further down the walkway. She recognized them as Lindsay Wintermint, Class Rank 1 (tied with Lim) and Amy Driscoll, Class Rank 9. Driscoll had about as much athletic acumen as Lim—none at all—but Wintermint played tennis, and she played it better than most girls in the state.

The man's brazenness did not extend so far as to contend with three girls instead of one. He spit a garbled apology and absconded in the opposite direction as Wintermint and Driscoll came to Lim's side. Lim tried to catch where the man disappeared to, but he managed to make himself scarce with remarkable adeptness and agility.

Wintermint clapped a hand on Lim's shoulder. "The hell you doing Lim, we saw you sprint out of the dorms like I don't even know."

"Nuts." Driscoll adjusted overly-large, overly-round glasses.

"And what a freaky dude," Wintermint added. "What's that Lim, secret lover? Spicy rendezvous?" She nudged Lim's ribs and danced all around her with devilish glee. "Oho, look at this ruffled shirt, these unkempt stockings! Amy, I do believe our friend's became a real woman."

"Psh," said Driscoll. "Like you'd know, Lindsay."

Lim had little time for the antics of her friends. And little patience. As Wintermint stooped and made a big display out of straightening Lim's socks, she remembered Shinozaki's outgoing personality in the dream. Lim must have transposed Wintermint's personality onto Shinozaki's appearance for some reason that made sense only to her subconscious.

"Dirty girl, what a dirty girl!" Wintermint clapped her hands and loosed an exaggerated laugh. "Well, you might be second to me in our classes, but at least you're first to lose your virginity."

Driscoll slipped a cell phone out of her jacket pocket and tapped some buttons with disinterest. "You're only half as funny as you think you are."

For once, Lim was thankful for Driscoll's omnipresent apathy. "Sorry, I need to go now..."

"Home to your dear mother." Wintermint lurched upright and stretched her arms and back with a contented sigh. "Aren't you super late? You're normally outta here by four. And missing your tie, you sure she'll leave you alive?"

"I'll manage," said Lim. Then, because she couldn't resist: "Aren't you supposed to practice tennis right now?"

Wintermint visibly flinched. If not for the fact that Wintermint took even the most marginal jab with such outward dismay, Lim wouldn't have been able to stand her. "I," Wintermint began, "Am taking a day of recovery due to shin splints." She tapped one ankle with her other foot. She had white tape coiled around both ankles.

"You sure get shin splints a lot," said Driscoll. Which was what Lim had been thinking.

"Well, it's the offseason, so who cares."

And Lim remembered why she couldn't stand Wintermint most of the time. For someone so good at everything, she almost never tried at anything. Lim remembered she had somewhere to be and turned to leave with an abrupt goodbye.

"Ah wait, wait," said Wintermint. "One last thing before you go." She wriggled the knot of her necktie and loosened it, then pulled it apart and slid it from her collar. "Take this, so your mom doesn't eat you too bad."

Lim thanked Wintermint for the necktie and hurried home.

II

Lim managed to mollify some of her mother's rage with an impromptu excuse formulated on true events. "On my way home from school I saw a strange man," she said. "Loitering around. He tried to speak to me. I was worried, so I stayed at the school until he went away."

In the entryway foyer, crammed between two narrow and slightly uneven walls, her mother leaned forward and scrutinized her. The story had some holes, but Lim hoped her meager

talent for improvisation might carry her through unscathed. The story was believable enough, it seemed, to evade immediate immolation.

"Did you contact the proper authorities?" Her mother, like most people, loomed over Lim. Although most of her height came from the heels she wore at all times, even on weekends.

"I mentioned something to one of the secretaries in the main office," said Lim. "She said they'd handle it."

Her mother drew back and folded her arms into a violent pretzel. She paced as much as the narrow entryway space allowed and barred any progress into the house proper as she deliberated, likely whether to chew out Lim for failing to contact her or the school for letting suspicious men wander around.

But Lim was incorrect. Her mother jabbed a finger against Lim's cheekbone. "And why are your eyes bloodshot, hmm?"

Lim maintained a face of utter passivity despite her surprise. She had taken assiduous care to smooth her wrinkled clothes to the point that she could explain any disarray as typical daily wear-and-tear, and Wintermint's necktie proved serviceable for completing an image of normalcy. But Lim had not managed to check her face in a mirror, and she struggled for a rebuttal.

Which was a mistake. After five seconds of silence, her mother went on the offensive. "You said a strange man outside, yes?"

Lim nodded. "I think some pollen affected me on the way home, my allergies—"

"No," said her mother. "No." She pulled away again and turned her back to Lim. "Too convenient. Strange man and allergies on the same day? And it's autumn."

"I walked home at a different time than normal, maybe there's greater concentration later in the day—"

"First I've heard of it," said her mother, although her word choice indicated that she hadn't heard otherwise, either. More deliberation occurred, and for a long while. Lim stood upright and proper in the doorway while her mother murmured to herself.

Hopefully she'll ask why Lim didn't contact her beforehand. Lim had a vague excuse prepared—too wrapped up in dealing with the secretary, or maybe her anxiety about the strange man caused it to slip her mind—so it was worse that her mother didn't bring it up at all. Perhaps her mother knew something was amiss about the story but couldn't pinpoint that the lack of contact was the reason, the way people sometimes forget the most obvious aspect of a math problem even though they can perform the infinitesimal details to perfection. Lim contemplated bringing the point up herself, but then the "slipped her mind" excuse lost some of its luster.

She waited.

Her mother turned. "Drugs, isn't it."

Lim blinked. She half-raised a hand to rub her eye, as it did irritate her a little, but let the hand fall. "No," she said.

"The eyes, the lateness," her mother's voice settled into a resigned despair. "Hector did the same exact thing, Enid. He did the same exact thing."

"No, honest." She said it with absolute certainty and only after she said it did she allow the doubt to creep in. She had no idea what she had been doing in Shinozaki's dormitory, and her dream exuded a certain vividness unlike any dream she ever had.

No, her doubts didn't matter, reality didn't matter, at this moment what mattered was placating her mother. The subject of Hector was broached, the conversation deteriorated instantaneously. "It's the same thing, the same thing!" Mixed fury and agony. Her mother swung side to side and scratched at her neck. "He got so withdrawn, and came home late, he said he had band practice, but it was lies, all lies...!"

The melodrama buffeted Lim and she shrank under her mother's theatrics. Her voice came out tinny and compressed: "I'm not an idiot, I saw what happened to Hector, I'm not going to let the same thing happen to me."

"He turned his mind to *rot!*" An operatic hand swept past Lim's nose. "He decayed it with those pills. How can you do this to me, Enid, how can you do this to me?"

Enid—Lim—remained level. "Hector suffered from what is primarily a genetic condition. His drug use was only a minor factor—"

"He had such a bright future—so bright—and now you—Enid—what are you *doing* to me?"

Her mother tumbled down the hallway and toward the kitchen. Lim followed at a deliberate pace. She wished she had gotten chewed out and had everything over with. "I took no drugs, mother."

Her mother went on for the next seventeen minutes, as Lim had little else to do but stand by and check her watch. All the usual lamentations about poor Hector, tragic Hector, sad Hector and his miserable fate. Such promise! Her pride and joy. The entire tale of his pathetic decomposition related in full, frequent interjections and plaintive refrains, miscellaneous objects slammed against the kitchen counter. As though Lim needed any reminders about what happened to dear brother Hector. She had the scar etched on her face to remind her every day.

The only upside to the situation was that by the end, her mother was too distraught and fatigued to dole out any serious punishment beyond a stern reprimand to go to her room and complete her homework. The implicit addendum was that nobody would eat dinner that night, neither Lim nor her mother: Mutually Assured Starvation. A frequent happenstance whenever Lim's mother found her a millimeter out of line.

Lim preferred to be alone in her room with no interruptions. She put the day's events out of mind and focused solely on her school assignments. She had to work with even more diligence to complete them before bed, given she had lost almost an hour of worktime. Three, four, five hours passed of textbooks, notes, calculators, and revisions, almost an hour dedicated to each of her six subjects. She pronounced French phrases, committed dates and names to memory, and analyzed passages of centuries-old fire and brimstone sermons. By ten o'clock she finished everything and prepared for bed.

She had a chance to check her messages before she went to sleep. Wintermint and Driscoll wanted to know whether the necktie worked and how bad her punishment went.

Tomorrow, she decided, she needed to speak to Shinozaki. Until then, her understanding of the situation was too incomplete to bother hypothesizing. She laid in bed and turned the new French words she learned that night over in her head until she fell asleep.

She stood suspended in a black space. Actually, she soon understood that she did not stand; she remained horizontal, as if on a bed, but she sensed no solid object around her. She lifted her upper body and stepped out of the bed she did not lie in. The blackness extended an indeterminate distance. But when she reached out her hand and touched the space where the wall of her room should be, she came against a barrier.

She wore her pajamas and lacked her watch. The moment she thought about it, though, it materialized on her wrist, although its hands revolved aimlessly and uselessly. Her next thought was that if she were to go out, she would like to be dressed, and her pajamas became her school uniform.

Another dream.

Her mother drifted in a space above her. She sat on a stool in front of a tall gray mirror and wore a velvet bathrobe. Her eyes held a vacant expression and she pantomimed the motions of brushing her teeth.

"Mother," said Lim.

"These are the monks that immolate," her mother intoned, mindless and faceless. "Tarnish my reputation. That vice-principal will summon a dark Piaget. The children are burning. These are the souls I swallowed. Please skewer me."

Lim did not bother another attempt to gain her attention. She wanted to leave this place, and a door opened beside her. How convenient, but it only made sense that her dream bent to her command. But then how did one explain nightmares? Dreams did not follow a set a logically consistent rules. Lim never had patience for them.

Outside, a clear blue sky stretched over her culdesac, although there was no sun. Only the moon, swollen to a vast silver disc. The sky and the moon unnerved her, an agoraphobia stirred in the dregs of her stomach, she wanted it to be night, which she knew it was despite her useless watch. Unlike her clothes and the door, the sky and moon remained fixed in their spheres. Nor could she force her watch to work. So her power in this dream was not absolute.

A gigantic millipede undulated down the road. She stared at its thousand skittering legs from the sidewalk as it passed. The millipede reminded her of something, although she was not sure what. She racked her brains and remembered the giant praying mantis she saw outside the shopping mall in her previous dream, the one with Shinozaki. Bizarre to have giant insects in two separate but consecutive dreams. Well, technically speaking, millipedes were not insects. She was not sure what family they belonged to. She wanted her phone to look it up, and the phone appeared in her hand, but it showed only a garbled mix of pixels.

She wanted to wake up to morning already, but the dream denied her.

Lim meandered down the sidewalk and almost reached the next street when a figure launched out of some bushes and tackled her behind a sedan parked by one of her neighbors.

"Oh. My gawd, Eden." Shinozaki pinned Lim to the ground and covered her mouth. She checked over both of her shoulders, although the sedan hid them from view from everywhere except the nearest two homes. Lim noticed that Shinozaki wore the same corset costume as before (and got her name wrong in the same way), an odd coincidence for two consecutive dreams. "This is terrible, terrible, terrible. You never told me you didn't live on campus!"

Lim blinked. "You never asked."

"I thought all the students lived on campus, I thought it was a boarding school!" She squirmed with dismay, she kept looking around wildly. Her knee continuously jabbed Lim's gut, whether by accident or on purpose Lim did not know.

"The full name is All Saints Academy Boarding *and* Day School," Lim said. "I've lived in Newport my whole life. My mother's a Kindergarten teacher here."

The door of the sedan opened and a senior citizen that Lim recognized as one of her neighbors stepped out, a vacant gaze on his face reminiscent of her mother in the dark room. He walked onto his front lawn, fell down, and started to roll around.

"Terrible, terrible," Shinozaki kept saying. Lim received another knee to the gut. "This ruins everything, everything! All my plans assumed you lived at the school, now you're going to start every night in the most dangerous place at the most dangerous time. Oh no, oh no."

"Will you get off me, please," said Lim.

After another two seconds of frantic murmurs, Shinozaki snapped to attention and stood up, and even extended a gracious hand to help up Lim. Lim patted herself to remove the dirt, but there was no dirt on her.

"Okay, okay. Okay." Shinozaki twisted back and forth, she regarded the old man on the lawn with suspicion, she tapped the tip of her parasol against the sidewalk. "We can hash everything out later, what's important is we gotta get back to the mall, yes yes."

The moon overhead revolved at a rate perceptible to the human eye.

"Why is it important to go to school," said Lim.

Instead of answer, Shinozaki flung an arm around Lim's waist and shoved her into the sedan again. She pointed down the street with her parasol at the millipede, which had curled around the end of the culdesac and skittered back and forth with no seeming aim. "What's that," she said.

"A giant millipede."

"Did it see you?"

Lim shrugged. "It didn't act like it did."

"Dammit, dammit, no good, no good." Shinozaki seized Lim's wrist and dragged her down the sidewalk, away from the millipede. "We need to get to the mall and nobody can see us do it. Not those bugs and not the Dummy Man."

None of it made any sense to Lim, but Shinozaki's appearance posed several uncomfortable questions. Regardless of Hollywood tropes, in Lim's experience, recurring dreams were rare. But this dream—were it one—had both Shinozaki and the manifestation of another giant bug, similar to the mantis from the last one.

As they ran down the street, which was like the normal street but with only vague changes, Shinozaki said: "You disappeared like blap, no warning or nothing. I guess the drugs wore off too soon. I drugged you by the way, hope you don't mind, kinda essential to the whole operation."

If Shinozaki drugged her, how did she dream before? She learned in one of her classes last year that drugs inhibit dreams. But to pursue that line of logical thought forced her to accept Dream Shinozaki's words as a reflection of Real Shinozaki's actions. A dangerous path to tread, the kind of path her brother once tread. What was any of this! She scratched her scalp and knocked her teeth together.

"I had to get a general idea of where you live from one of your friends," said Shinozaki.

Lim only had two friends. She wasn't sure if either Wintermint or Driscoll knew where she lived. But they might. She wished she could have said with certainty that they did not, because then she could catch Shinozaki in a logical contradiction... Somebody's house, on a road a few blocks from Lim's own house, had transformed into a rocket ship. Smoke billowed from its engines and cardboard stars and planets were taped to the sky.

"You mentioned last time," said Lim, "You mentioned last time that this wasn't a dream, it was an ascended plane of consciousness. Then why was my mother here, and my neighbors. What's going on—"

Shinozaki suddenly flung Lim into a line of well-trimmed topiaries and then jumped in herself. Branches and leaves scraped against her face and hands, but Shinozaki hissed at her to remain still.

A large hornet buzzed by.

After it had left, Shinozaki allowed Lim to leave the brushes. "Whoever's got all the bugs is something scary. I've never seen one person with so many familiars, we def-def-*definitely* don't wanna run into them."

If her brother had the disease, Lim had a chance too. That's genetics for you. She surely *felt* insane, at least. Especially as they dashed through a distorted version of her neighborhood, replete with oddities that ranged from subtle to severe. But the route they took had not changed from the real world: it was the route to school, walked hundreds of times over the past two years. Only fifteen minutes, and faster at a dash. Lim, not the most athletic specimen, could not sprint more than ten seconds without needing to breathe. But in this false world she found she could keep consistent behind Shinozaki's breakneck pace without the slightest ache in her lungs. Shinozaki herself did pretty well for a girl in a corset.

They entered the park outside school, the place where she encountered the Japanese businessman. Speaking of which, Lim ought to inform Shinozaki about the encounter. But this wasn't the real Shinozaki anyway, right? All the trees in the park were cherry blossom trees. And an impenetrable black miasma swallowed half the park entirely.

"In here, let's go." Shinozaki grabbed Lim's wrist again and they plunged together into the darkness. Lim's vision became nothing. Total blindness enveloped her, only Shinozaki's guiding hand showed the way. When Shinozaki spoke again, her voice was strained and submerged: "I put this darkness here, don't worry."

"Oh, of course," said Lim. But the darkness devoured her voice.

Then a door opened and they tumbled into the department store. The same racks of clothing, the same dull light, the same tepid perfume. Past the racks, the same shopping mall. Everything from her previous dream, back in perfect order, no details changed. Well—maybe some details changed. The mannequins no longer wore any clothes, although she thought they did before.

"Safe! Relatively safe at least. Okay, okay, awesome, good job us!" Shinozaki held her hand toward Lim. It took Lim a moment to realize she wanted a high-five. When Lim did not reciprocate, Shinozaki clapped instead. "I don't wanna waste time, we need to get you loaded and looking pretty. Let's get you out of that uniform and into something a tad flashier, hmmmm?"

"No," said Lim.

Shinozaki pranced around her. "Aww come on, I thought you'd be excited about the clothes, you get the chance to wear any outfit imaginable here!"

"I prefer my uniform," said Lim. "It doesn't make me look foolish."

"Gawd, it's soooooo boring though." Shinozaki leapt onto a wheeled coatrack and rolled past Lim with an arm outstretched. "But I guess that whole logical attitude is why I picked you over the Lindsay chick."

"Picked me? Over Wintermint?"

But Shinozaki rolled into a wall and tapped her finger against her chin, swallowed in contemplation. "Yeah... Now that I think about it... Maybe trying to hook you in with clothes... Not the best idea." The finger flicked upright and Shinozaki effected an image of inspiration at odds with her outrageous costume and painfully arched back. "Here's what we'll do."

Her coatrack propelled from the wall with no seeming impetus and zoomed past Lim. Shinozaki's arm shot out and snagged Lim by the waist, and together they careened out the shop and down the mall's main thoroughfare. Everything looked similar to Lim's previous visit, although she noticed that a large number of the stores now seemed dedicated to selling puppets and marionettes. The glass storefronts swelled with armies of the wooden dolls, posed in various patterns but all with wide grins painted on their faces. The rack wobbled, tilted, but never tipped entirely as Shinozaki swung back and forth between the poles and among the rattling outfits, uproarious with laughter. Lim tried not to fall off.

The cart turned at a ninety-degree angle and lurched to a halt. Shinozaki and Lim went flying into the open entrance of another shop, one with hard stone floors that Lim hurtled toward. At the last possible moment, a bright crimson covering snapped open beneath her—Shinozaki's parasol, expanded to elephantine proportions. And even though parasols are made out of the thinnest material imaginable, it caught Lim's fall and bounced her safely to her feet.

Shinozaki landed next to Lim and swept up her parasol onto her shoulder as it contracted back to normal parasol size. She twirled it and click-clacked across the stone floor as she indicated the shop's wares. "Weapons! Guns, swords, axes, bows, flails, whips, chainsaws, spears, trebuchets, gauntlets, magic wands, wizard staffs, spell books, pixie dust, flamethrowers, hammers, machetes, wolverine-claw-hand things, uh whatever this thing's supposed to be, more guns, dangerous decks of cards, grenades, acid, dynamite, ball-and-chains, caltrops, even more guns, evil gremlin robots, uh..." She leaned against a glass case and panted for air. "You get the idea."

If only she did. The shop stretched the size of a warehouse, even though it had only a regular façade like the other shops in the mall. Shinozaki's list did not even border on exhaustive, and even more idiosyncratic contraptions and implements jutted out of boxes on the shelves.

But that wasn't the issue, was it?

"Why do we need weapons," said Lim.

Shinozaki did not seem to hear her at first, too absorbed with a carton of crossbows that she rummaged through tentatively. At a random moment, she perked up and made a quizzical humming sound. "Wouldn't worry about any of that, Eden. We only have to fight the Dummy Man, nothing too serious."

Lim's eyes narrowed. This cagey, ambiguous talk irritated her to an immense degree, and Shinozaki's continued use of the wrong name only drove the stake deeper. "No. I will not fight anyone. Not even a dummy—"

Man.

She closed her mouth and chewed her lower lip. Shinozaki displayed no outward sign of acknowledgement that Lim spoke at all.

"What does the Dummy Man look like," said Lim.

"Oh, that's the fun of it." Shinozaki dragged a sturdy metal container from off a high shelf and rifled through it. "The man part of him is nothing special. A boring, normal, middle-aged Japanese man in a business suit. The dummy part—"

"No. No, no, no, no, no."

"If you've got qualms about violence, I assure you the Dummy Man deserves it. He's not a nice man."

Illness swept over Lim. Her legs lost their strength; she wobbled to the counter and leaned against it, draped her head over the old-fashioned cash register. Sweat beaded on her forehead and dribbled down the slope of her face. It had to be—just a dream. She saw the man in the park, he had threatened her, the trauma of the event had lodged in her psyche, and her subconscious regurgitated his image into Shinozaki's description. It made sense. It made perfect, logical sense.

That was the exact problem.

She had never known dreams, even her own, to be so logical. Perfect Freudian interpretations did not exist. Sure, sometimes figures from her daily life surfaced in a dream, like Wintermint or even Driscoll. But this... Too real, too lifelike, too coincidental, too convenient...

The word flashed in her mind: *Hallucination*. That far more insidious form of brain imagery, the kind that reveled in a tantalizingly real illogic, the kind that weaved narratives believable to the one possessed of them. Did the Japanese businessman who accosted her in the park exist at all? Was her encounter with him part of the hallucination? Or Shinozaki? Did the two of them exist only in her mind, recurring characters manufactured and deposited at her split brain's pleasure?

She sucked in a breath and lifted her head. She couldn't jump to conclusions like that, it could easily still be a dream—dreams often feel real when you have them, only to dissipate upon awakening. But, another voice whispered, isn't it safer to assume it's a hallucination? After all, Shinozaki wanted Lim to pick out a weapon and attack someone. If this isn't a dream, if it's some kind of false reality that she's draped upon the real world, doing what Shinozaki said might have severe consequences. Lim's hand pressed against the scar on her face. If she picked up a weapon and attacked the so-called "Dummy Man," how could she be sure that some innocent, normal person made monstrous in her infirm mind did not receive the brunt of that assault?

With a familial history of schizophrenia, Lim knew the responsible thing to do was turn herself into a doctor, have herself examined, put herself on medication. If she let things escalate, she might prove harmful to both herself and others. Damaged people must go in for repairs. Can't have them walking around in the sunshine. Choking hazard—small parts.

But, but, she didn't want to go to the asylum, where Hector lived. Locked in a sterile room, attended by physicians and nurses, another burden to society. She was a good person, she was Enid Lim, she did everything the culture asked of her, she aced her classes, she avoided drugs and sex and crime, she obeyed her mother. She followed the rigidity of routine day, day, night. School, homework, sleep. School, homework, sleep. She didn't *want* to be crazy! She refused to accept it!

Her head sagged against the glass pane, its cold touch seeped into her forehead. Mania, she thought. Too early to tell whether she suffered from dreams or hallucinations. The paranoia came from her experiences with her brother.

A doctor can know for sure.

No doctors. She didn't want doctors. She wanted to be herself, Enid Lim. That's all she wanted to be, she asked for no favors, she would make the best of her life along her lines. She wanted—

"Eden?" said Shinozaki.

"Enid, Enid, it's Enid!" said Lim.

"What? That's a name?"

Lim wiped her forehead. She had lost control, even if only in the privacy of her own mind, and the look disgusted her. If she was to go insane, she would do so with dignity, not the unhinged ravings that marked her brother's descent. She straightened her necktie and checked her watch. The hands revolved and revolved.

"My name is Enid Lim. I prefer you call me by my surname, but if you insist on using my given name, at least get it correct."

"Enid," said Shinozaki. She tongued each of the two syllables. "Eeeeenid. Alright, got it. Sorry, I didn't mean to..." She scratched the back of her head. "I bet I look like a total asshole right now, ha."

Well, at least Dream Shinozaki had the propensity for honest self-assessment. Lim maintained her dignified persona, as it held her together, and strode away from the counter with sure steps. "Well, we've only known each other for two days, so it's an understandable mistake."

"I'll admit I kinda rushed and gunned this whole affair," said Shinozaki. "But I'll be honest: I needed your help, and fast. The Dummy Man's been on my scent for over a year, and in the last month he's gotten scary close. I don't have many options, you see..."

Shinozaki shuffled; her confident demeanor had evaporated upon the revelation about Lim's name. And while Lim felt she finally had some substantive conversation to engage with, she refused to play into a fantasy, be it dream or worse. "If that's the case, tell me about it at school." She thought, then added: "And tell Wintermint. Tell me and Wintermint at the same time."

"Lindsay Wintermint? What's she got to do with anything?"

"Nothing. But I want a third party I can trust to hear it, too." Wintermint and Driscoll had both seen the Japanese businessman, too. Wintermint even commented on him. And since she had known them both since junior high and could believe in their existence, that meant the businessman had to also exist, at least in some capacity.

Shinozaki fiddled with the handle of her parasol. "I don't like Lindsay Wintermint that much. Her personality's... abrasive."

"Too bad," said Lim. "If you want me to help you, you'll have to make concessions. That's only fair, right?"

This plan eased Lim's worries. She had a grip on the situation now; she could test things empirically without the need of doctors or CAT scans. Shinozaki grumbled, made vague protests, but ultimately acquiesced. "Could we at least pick out a weapon today? We're low on time and it's important you get equipped. I swear we won't fight anyone until you 'trust' me or whatever."

Fine. Lim cared little one way another. But she had no taste to browse the endless profusion of shelves in the store. If she did have to fight in this world—let one merely hypothesize a moment—she could immediately eliminate all melee weapons from consideration. Although flashy in films and video games, when faced against the might of guns and artillery they became devoid of use. Modern militaries did not send their men into battle with cutlasses. And while Lim knew almost nothing about firearms, there was one contemporary rifle she could name.

"AK-47."

Shinozaki blinked. "Huh?"

"You asked me to choose a weapon. I choose the AK-47. It's still used around the world today, isn't it? Should be at least reliable, then."

After a moment of silence, Shinozaki laughed and then covered her mouth to stifle the laugh. "Enid, please. You can't think quite so logical. I mean, I know I said your logical attitude is why I picked you, but that's *too* logical."

Somewhere, far away, Lim heard a doorbell ring.

"You have to realize," Shinozaki continued, "That in this world, magic is real. You are a magical entity, Enid Lim. You burst with limitless potential that escapes description or categorization! Consider *my* weapon: this parasol." She tapped the object in question against the stone floor. "Now I know what you're thinking, Logical Girl Enid Lim—A parasol, it's so *stupid*, how could it ever be a weapon? But ah, you're not thinking with *magic*, my dear pupil. You see, the capabilities of this parasol far exceed those of any—"

Lim cared little about the capabilities of Shinozaki's dream parasol. Especially because the doorbell rang again, louder. She checked over her shoulder, but only saw the stores opposite

the weapons store, all of which were chocked with puppets.

"Do you hear that?" she said.

"It provides offense, it provides defense, it—hear what?" Shinozaki stood on tiptoe and looked over Lim's head. "Oh, if you're worried about the dummies—Yeah, they're kinda worrying. But uh, not *that* worrying, I mean, they only mean the Dummy Man is close, he can't like—uh—"

The doorbell rang a third time. It was close, but it seemed to come from below. Underground. Which made sense, because Lim's bedroom was on the second floor.

"It's my doorbell. At home," said Lim.

"Oh gawd. Really? *Really?*" Shinozaki stomped her heel on the ground and swung her parasol down with exaggerated petulance. "You just got here, and now you're going to wake up again? Is there ever a time where you sleep for more than an hour, Enid, or have your powered your automaton body to function on minimal energy levels?"

Lim shrugged. "I didn't ring the doorbell."

After some more foot-stomping, Shinozaki slumped her shoulders. Her hair dangled around her face, despite being strung up by enough ribbons to prevent any motion whatsoever. "Bah! Fine. Hurry up and answer the door, then get back to sleep fast alright? We *need* to get you in fighting shape as soon as possible."

"Alright," said Lim.

The doorbell rang again. Lim felt the world around her ebbing away. The walls and glass rippled, then dissolved.

Lim woke up. In her regular bed, in her regular room. The doorbell, now unmistakable as her house's, rang again. She rubbed her eyes and picked her watch off the desk. Shy of midnight. She switched on her bedroom light.

On top of her dresser sat a dummy. One of those classic ventriloquist kinds, in a dapper red suit with a bowtie and a flower in the lapel. Its smile and slick black hair gleamed with the light from Lim's ceiling fan and one of its arms hung limp at its side. Its tiny wooden hand clutched a top hat upside-down to show a total blackness within.

"It's not real," Lim whispered.

A door slammed open and footsteps shambled across the upper-story hall. Lim opened her own door as her mother stormed past in a bathrobe. "Whoever that is better be prepared to explain why they feel the need to ring that idiotic doorbell so many times at this hour and if it's a prank I swear I will run them down in my car and call the police to arrest whatever roadkill remains..."

Lim's mother was halfway down the stairs when everything coalesced in Lim's head and she realized what was happening and who was at the door. "Wait," she shouted, "Wait—don't

open it—"

Her mother reached the base of the stairs and Lim nearly tumbled after her. A purely emotional plea, Lim knew, would have no impact on her mother, in fact might even push her mother through sheer stubbornness to do the opposite of what Lim proposed. She needed logical arguments—facts—

"I heard on the news," she said, "House robbers—they ring the doorbell and when you answer they pull a gun on you—"

Her mother flipped on the porch light and pressed her eye to the peephole. The anger drained out of her and her taut muscles slackened as she exhaled a distended sigh. "Oh. This must be about your brother. It's a man in a suit."

Lim flung herself forward, she reached for her mother's shoulders to wrench her back, but no speed propelled her fast enough. The door opened. On the porch stood the Japanese business man—the Dummy Man.

"What's he done this time," her mother said.

The Dummy Man stepped forward and pressed a rag to her mother's face. Lim seized her mother around the waist and pulled. They fell in the narrow entryway and Lim struck her head on the wall. When she turned to her mother, her mother's head lolled downward, her eyes wide open, her mouth agape, her skin pale. No movement, no consciousness.

Lim shook the head to rouse her mother, but the Dummy Man soon stepped across the threshold and towered over her and she forgot everything and scrambled backward. He was gigantic, a monster, her odds in a fight were minuscule. She screamed as loud as possible, half from terror and half from a practical need to alert her neighbors. Her own scream sounded foreign to her, like a movie sound effect and not something that burst from her own vocal chords.

Her back hit the base of the stairs. The Dummy Man advanced, she had no options but upward. She turned and ran. Fingers swiped at her Achilles tendon but she pulled ahead in time to evade. Her upper body lurched over the top half of the stairs as she dragged herself onto the second-story carpet. Her elbows and wrists scraped the rug. She jerked herself upright and bounced between the enclosing walls. She reached for the door to her room and remembered at the last moment the dummy inside, a trap laid for this very eventuality? She span and flung herself toward her mother's bedroom, in her periphery the Dummy Man rose from the stairs. She lost her balance, hit the floor, and skittered fully into the room. Her wild thrashing legs kicked the door shut behind her and then she pushed herself up and to the lock. It clicked and she braced her body for the Dummy Man to force his way in. He was a massive man, with enough determination he assuredly could—

A childlike digit tapped her shoulder. Her skin went clammy, the blood throbbed in her brain. She turned her head.

The dummy stood behind her. It lifted its little hand and waved. Its joints creaked.

"Hey there, amigo!" It spoke with an exaggerated circus carney accent. "Hope I didn't scare ya too bad!"

Lim remained by the door, on her knees, unable to respond. His wooden hand and the scarlet felt of his sleeve reached past her and undid the lock. The door swung open and the Dummy Man stood in the doorway. His face, shadowed by the narrow light at the end of the hallway, remained emotionless stone.

"Heya, eyes here," said the dummy. The little hand reached under her chin and directed her gaze to its soulless, swallowing eyes. The smile clacked up and down as it spoke. "Now don't you worry a bit lil missy, my associate and I aren't here to hurt you or your mum, now are we big fella?"

The man in the doorway said nothing.

"We only want one iddy biddy lil bit of information from ya, then we'll be up and on our way before you can say bottom dollar." The dummy clapped his hands. They made a dull thud noise each impact. "You and mommy won't remember a thing and you'll get to keep on living your lovely lil lives like nothing never happened, howzit sound?"

Lim fought down the urge to sob. She clenched her jaw; she needed to remain rational. "I screamed," she said. "The neighbors have already called the police."

The dummy shook his head and grinned. He tapped the brim of his top hat. "I don't think so, lil missy."

The man's palm fell on her shoulder and gripped tight. He leaned down and brought his face almost against hers. His broad lips parted and he uttered a single word: "Where."

Lim knew what he meant by the question, but figured it smarter to play dumb. "Where what."

"Aw come on lil missy, don't be like that." The dummy folded its arms behind its back and paced behind her. "Where's the bitch. Shinozaki—if she's even using that name anymore. I think you get who I mean, though."

"Why do you want to know."

The dummy took off its top hat and rolled it along its arms, back and forth across its undulating shoulders. It did not appear invested in the conversation. A deliberate act. Good cop, bad cop. "Now now lil missy, you don't need to ask any questions. After all, you ain't gonna remember a word of this conversation after we leave. So be a doll and tell us where she is."

Lim narrowed her eyes and looked from the dummy to the man. Clearly they would not leave without what they wanted. She could feign ignorance, but she doubted they had targeted her without a pretty good idea she knew some things. What had the man said in the park? That he *smelled* Shinozaki on her. But she did not need to tell them everything.

"All Saints Academy," she said. "Boarding and Day School."

"Come on doll, we know that already," said the dummy. "She exudes a certain scent, after all. We can't just barge into that place, though. We wanna know some... eh, let's call em specifics."

The businessman reached into his inner suit pocket and retrieved a folded paper. He pulled it open and shoved it into her face without a word. When her eyes adjusted, she realized it was a map of the school grounds. The gymnasium, classrooms, courtyard, and dormitories were neatly marked and the floorplan rendered in striking detail. Insets to the side depicted the individual floors of each building with the complete floorplan laid out.

"All ya gotta do is tell us her dorm room, doll. Then we're gone. But rest assured, Shinozaki's not in the room you specify and we come back tomorrow night to ask why the nice lil missy felt the need to lie to our faces, yeah?" The dummy slung an arm over her shoulder, as though holding her in a friendly embrace. It pressed a wooden cheekbone against her face.

"She's only been at school for two days," said Lim. "I don't know her room number."

"A shame, a real shame," said the dummy. "Cuz really, it don't matter one whit to me whether you live or die. Tell the truth, tell a lie—give me what I want and you live, give me what I want or you die. And your mummies too."

He snapped the top hat into his hand and reached into its innards. He retracted from it a dummy-sized rapier with a gilded hilt and pressed the tip of the blade against her throat. The face only smiled.

She tilted her eyes toward it. Did she even remember Shinozaki's room? She knew, at least, it was on the third floor. She tried to think what the window showed when she woke up in Shinozaki's bed, but she had no recollection of even seeing one. Maybe the curtains were drawn—or maybe she had the inner corner room, the one dorm without a window. It made sense, it was the least desirable room, the room a late transfer student might wind up with. She focused on the floorplan held in front of her face as the rapier point pressed in and drew a trickle of blood.

"And if you don't say anything, well doll, I can sure make it hurt before you go."

"W-well..." How much time she could reasonably buy? Did she sell out Shinozaki or try to protect her? Why protect her, when she explained nothing and seemed as set on killing the Dummy Man as he on her? She raised her hand slowly, extending a single finger that aimed toward the school map. The dummy lessened the pressure and chuckled as her fingertip inched closer to the third-floor representation. Shinozaki might not even live in the corner room. It might not even matter.

Her finger pressed the map. "Here. 3Q."

The businessman leaned over and looked at where she pointed. "Tch," he said.

The dummy returned the rapier to his top hat and stroked his chin. "No window. Well, she's always been a clever lil bitch, I'll give her that. Whaddya think, big guy? We gotta bust down the front door, yeah?"

Lim allowed her hand to fall and the businessman took the map away and folded it back into his pocket. He said something to the dummy in what had to be Japanese, a terse and abrupt statement. Neither he nor the dummy acknowledged her at all as they walked out the room and down the hall. Lim remained on her knees, her head slumped, her palms splayed on the floor before her, as heavy footsteps descended the stairs. The front door slammed shut.

All became silent.

She remained on her knees five seconds more, and then her body lurched upright without her cognizant of the mental command to do so. Her mother—she needed to call the police, the ambulance—

She rushed down the stairs and into the kitchen, to the phone fixed near the microwave. She pulled it off the receiver and pressed it to her ear and hit the number 9 when her mother, who was seated at the dining room table, said:

"What are you doing."

Lim let the receiver droop onto the crook of her neck. "I'm calling the police."

Her mother sipped from a coffee mug. She turned a page in the newspaper and shifted her legs. "Whatever for, Enid."

"There's a man—don't you remember? He—"

She fell silent.

You and mommy won't remember a thing, the dummy had said.

"Enid." Her mother placed the mug back on the table. It resounded with a hollow noise. "Did you see a man? In the house? Outside your window? In your room?"

Lim opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

"Enid. Did you hallucinate?"

She and her mother stared at one another. Moonlight imbued her mother's face with a certain ghostliness, a pale aura that emanated across the stark and angular kitchen.

"No," Lim finally said. "No—a dream. I had a dream, a, a nightmare."

"A nightmare."

"A vivid, lucid nightmare," she said. "But only a nightmare. I realize that now."

Her mother folded the newspaper into a sharp half. "Please let it be so," she said. "Please God, let it be so."

When Lim arrived at school the next day, she expected something. She did not know what, but something had to have happened.

Nothing had happened. No police or ambulances in the courtyard, no hubbub among the students, no obvious signs of cataclysm. The same trickle of scarlet jackets and neckties filtered through the iron gates, the same red tide ebbed around the statue of the school's nineteenth-century founder. Did she expect something to have happened, or did she hope for it? What was worse, a puppet stalker or a schizophrenic hallucination of one?

If nothing else, she thought she might find Shinozaki. Regardless if the dreams were real, Lim had apparently passed out during or after a meeting with Shinozaki at a local café, and woken up in Shinozaki's bed. Dream Shinozaki claimed she drugged Lim, and although she had not exactly explained why, it at least was an explanation. What others existed? Drugs fit the short-term memory lapse aspect of the equation, but Lim did not necessarily ingest them involuntarily. Imagine a scenario: The new transfer student Shinozaki approaches Lim and wants to hang out. Lim has an hour after school for extracurriculars or tutoring allotted by her mother, so she decides to take the time to oblige the request. The two girls become fast friends, at which point Shinozaki invites Lim to her room for some recreational substances. Lim, who has never even smoked a cigarette before, suffers a poor reaction; she passes out, forgets the encounter, and has a series of vivid dreams and audiovisual hallucinations. This explanation also made a semblance of sense. Even if Lim doubted any recreational drug had enough potency for its effects to be felt up to eight hours after consumption, she was no expert on the subject and could also not deny the possibility outright.

This explanation tantalized Lim, as it promised an end to these hallucinations once the drugs were fully flushed from her system. But the element that made no sense was Lim—Why would she agree to Shinozaki's request? Drug use increased the risk of schizophrenia. Her brother Hector had partaken in his fair share and it brought him only ruin. She had no interest, not even curiosity about the experience of drugs. It did not cohere...

She headed toward the doors of the school building to search for Shinozaki, but her friends accosted her first.

"Alright girls." Wintermint winked and tapped a finger against her temple as she sashayed a jaunty hip. "It's been a full night, everyone's got the chance to mull things over. Now it's time to spill: Scores on the calculus test?"

A silence from the others prompted Lim to respond first. "Ninety-six. I made two careless mistakes on questions seventeen and twenty-one. They were the last ones I had to do before time ran out."

"Not bad, not bad at all!" Wintermint shoved herself against Lim and balanced a chin on her shoulder. "Ninety-six, good score for a good student. Amy?"

Driscoll leaned against a wall and shoveled cereal from a paper bowl into her mouth. She wiped a spot of milk that managed to land on her glasses. "Uh, eight-eight? No, eighty-nine."

"You can't get an eighty-nine, you can't have an odd score. Each question was two points," said Wintermint.

"Yeah I remember now," said Driscoll. "I didn't actually get any wrong answers. They just docked me half points for a bunch of 'em cuz they didn't like *how* I got the answers." She wolfed down another spoonful of cereal.

Another silence. Wintermint grinned and bit her lower lip. "I got a ninety-eight," she said.

Lim expected such a number, and she already knew the question Wintermint got wrong, but she asked anyway. Wintermint answered as Lim expected: the examination's final question, the word problem not covered by the lectures. It involved the rate of sand pouring into a cone.

"I got that one correct," said Lim.

"And two others wrong," said Wintermint.

"I did not get the others wrong," said Lim. "I ran out of time before I had a chance to do them."

"Same difference."

"The final question was almost identical to one in the textbook. If you'd studied it at all, you would've been able to do it."

Wintermint shrugged. "Waste of time when I beat you anyway. How many hours you prepare for that test, Limmy? Five, ten?"

Upwards of twenty. "It doesn't matter."

"I just reread my notes before class started."

"How fortunate that the test only had one question from the textbook, then."

"That's the problem with you, Lim." Wintermint poked her in the ribs. "You don't know how to do things efficiently. You gotta know where you can cut corners—valuable skill. Will serve you in the workforce."

"How are your shin splints," said Lim.

"Hey." Driscoll looked up from her cereal bowl, which contained only a puddle of milk and a few stray flakes. "What about you, what'd you get?"

Wintermint, halfway into her next barb, shut her mouth and turned her head. Lim turned her head too. The fourth member of their group, Cherry Corbett, stood somewhat off to the side, stooped toward a rosebush at the side of the walkway. She had her hair in a vibrant purple ribbon that clashed with her uniform in both aesthetic and school regulation.

They looked at Corbett and Corbett did not look back until Wintermint cleared her throat, at which point Corbett lolled her head and tilted a droopy expression back at them. "Hm...?"

"What uh, what score you get," said Wintermint. "Cherry."

Corbett's mouth hung slightly open, as though she did not comprehend the query. She placed a finger on her lower lip and gazed skyward. "Ah... You know, nothing special..."

And they did know. They drew back, Wintermint and Lim at least, and both felt somewhat foolish for even asking. Even though Lim herself didn't ask, so she wondered why she felt foolish at all. She assumed it had to do with her harboring the same sentiment that led Wintermint to ask—Either way, it didn't matter. As a shoe-in for valedictorian, Cherry Corbett never received a score lower than one hundred. On any assignment.

It actually made Lim angry to think that someone with such a dopey expression permanently plastered on her face could have usurped Lim's own claim toward Class Rank 1, but she suppressed this inconvenient and ugly ire that she knew had no basis in fact. Corbett was a nice girl, and nobody had anything bad to say about her. A defect in Lim's own personality fostered this—let's call it what it is, jealousy—and she had to detach herself in order to remain placid. Beside her, Wintermint crossed her arms. The best part about Wintermint was that if Lim felt an ugly emotion, Wintermint surely felt it in triplicate.

The bell rang.

The students slouched together toward class. Driscoll flicked her bowl like a disc toward the nearest trashcan. It bounced off the rim and flapped to the ground with a splash of milk, and Driscoll stared at her disaster with perplexity. Corbett dallied near the rosebushes, so Lim and Wintermint went ahead alone, which was exactly what Lim wanted. The craziness of the previous night did not alter Lim's plan moving forward. She needed to confirm her visions, and the only way to do so was to have a trusted third party confirm them. No amount of empirical evidence, experienced by Lim alone, would suffice; all of it might merely be part of her delusion. Of course, an affirmation by Wintermint might also be a delusion—but Lim had a solid faith in Wintermint's abrasive corporeality, and her memories of Wintermint reached several years back, long before any stirrings of psychosis might have stricken her.

"Wintermint," she said as they entered the classroom, "After the lecture, would you mind coming with me to talk about something?"

"Oho!" Wintermint plopped her bag and tennis racket in the aisle between the rows of desks and fell into her seat. She kicked her legs onto the desk of the hapless fellow who sat between her and Lim and defied gravity to keep her skirt in order. "About what? Rrrromantic advice, hm? Has Lim set her eye on a devilish rogue?"

"No."

"You're right, that'd be too interesting." Wintermint sighed.

The boy whose seat Wintermint had her feet on appeared. "Please take your feet off my desk," he said. Wintermint begrudged him an acquiescence.

"I want you to talk to the new transfer student with me," said Lim. "Shinozaki." Although about half the class had already filtered in, Shinozaki was not among them.

"Oh yeah, *that* girl," said Wintermint. "Why?"

Lim had failed to consider what excuse she would feed Wintermint in order to rope her into the plan, as well as how she would explain the bizarre things she wanted Shinozaki to utter in their presence. She had brushed off this aspect of her plan as an awkward social moment she would simply endure; Wintermint would crack a joke or several when Shinozaki described the "dream world," but ultimately she would play along because she was Lim's friend and had nothing better to do. But now that she had initiated the conversation, her lack of a viable cover story seemed like a grievous oversight, made worse by the hapless boy who sat between them and would overhear everything.

"It's, hm." Quick, she needed to cobble something together. A thread of an idea flickered in her mind and she pursued it. "Remember the man in the park yesterday? He wanted to see Shinozaki, but I think he's suspicious. I'd like to talk to her about it—and you too, since you also saw him." Tenuous—but it'd do.

Wintermint tapped her forehead. "I don't remember any man in the park."

The boy who sat between them slapped his notebook on the desk. Driscoll and Corbett entered the room, but neither spoke and both went to their own desks at opposite corners.

"Yes you do," said Lim. "I ran into him in the park after school yesterday. I was still talking to him when you showed up, but he left soon after."

"Yeah, I remember the park. But there wasn't any man."

Oh no. No, no, no. "You made a comment about him, Wintermint. You joked that he and I were having a romantic encounter—not true, by the way."

"You sure you're not crazy?" Wintermint asked. Her smile died and she suddenly grew flustered. "Uh, I mean, I didn't mean *crazy*—I meant, figure of speech, you know?"

Lim stared at the top of her desk, at the intricate grain that ran along the wooden surface. A sickly heat throbbed in her brain and she started to blink.

Wintermint left her seat and knelt next to Lim. She whispered: "Did you have a hallucination, Lim? If you need to talk, I'm always—"

"No." Lim crushed her hands into fists and kneaded them into her thighs. "After class, let's talk to Shinozaki. Then everything will be clear."

For ten seconds, Wintermint said nothing. She stared at Lim, an expression of genuine concern etched on her face that only made Lim feel more abominable, because Wintermint would only show concern over something serious. The boy that sat between them pretended to read his textbook, but his eyes watched her.

"Okay," said Wintermint. "We'll talk to her after class."

Then class began. Lim glanced over her shoulder; at some point, Shinozaki had slipped into her seat at the back. She sat with a pronounced hunch and her hair dangled in twisted strands,

the polar opposite of her demeanor in the dreams. Nonetheless, she raised a tepid hand and waved Lim's way.

Wintermint didn't remember the man in the park. Lim wanted to tell herself that was fine, normal even, who remembers every generic passerby they see, which from Wintermint's perspective must have been what the Dummy Man was. She saw him, she uttered a careless joke, she flushed the entire incident from memory as soon as it happened. And her expression of concern, that was a product of Wintermint's vanity, her self-assurance that her memory was stronger than Lim's mental health. From a logical standpoint, these behaviors fell in line with the Lindsay Wintermint that she knew. Perfectly in line.

Perfectly.

The words she told herself did not alleviate the tension in her chest, or cool the sweat that dribbled down her brow. The teacher's lecture became tinny and distant, a buzz in the background. Perfectly, perfectly, she could repeat "perfectly" all she wanted, it didn't matter. Driscoll, she had to ask Driscoll somehow if she remembered the man in the park. She had to ask her now, even though Driscoll sat on the other end of the room, near the front. Lim needed only to stand up, shout: Driscoll, do you remember the man in the park? The class would laugh at her, the teacher would reprimand her, it didn't matter. She needed to know this instant. Now...

No! She had a similar episode like this in her dream. If she succumbed to dread every time she had the slightest cause to doubt her sanity, the paranoia would consume her. Wintermint forgot the man in the park. That was the fact, the sole fact. Anything else—mere conjecture.

She focused on the lecture until the bell rang.

They had ten minutes between classes. Lim and Wintermint found Shinozaki outside in the hall. She stood with her back propped against the beam between two windows, her head turned toward the classroom door as though she expected them. The hall's long stretch of windows peered onto the courtyard, although a line of maple trees swallowed the view in a blaze of autumnal red leaves. Shinozaki, in the standard red uniform, blended into the background. Lim supposed everyone blended into the background, but Shinozaki's hunch pronounced the effect.

"Hello, Shinozaki," said Lim.

"Hi, Eden. Er, I mean Enid. And Lindsay." None of the vivacity of her dream self, and her accent became more apparent.

Lim and Wintermint stopped beside her. Compared to most people, Lim was short, but even with a stoop Shinozaki towered over Wintermint, and Wintermint had a long and athletic body.

"Yesterday I met a man in the park," said Lim. "He had a photograph of you and asked me if I had seen you. He claimed to be your father. He was a middle-aged Japanese man in a business suit."

Shinozaki's eyes widened in surprise. She stooped lower and folded her arms. "Oh. You should have told me last night..."

"You mean during the dream?"

"Ha ha, what." Wintermint looked from Lim to Shinozaki.

Shinozaki, meanwhile, looked from Wintermint to Lim. "Enid, uh, can we talk in private?"

"No. The exact point here is for you to tell me what happened and for Wintermint to affirm that you said it. I need to know if this is real. So tell me, tell me the name of the man I saw in the park. Tell me his name."

Students passed them in the hallway. Most conversed in their own little groups, but Driscoll muttered something to Wintermint that Lim didn't care to convert brainpower to comprehend. Corbett came after Driscoll and only stared at them before she passed.

Shinozaki scratched her arm below the shoulder. "I dunno... This isn't a good idea."

"I'm so confused," said Wintermint. "Lim, I don't want to sound like a douchebag, but maybe it's time for you to see a doctor? Considering your family history and all—"

"I *know* my own family history, thank you." Lim slammed her palm against the window next to Shinozaki's face and leaned close to her. "Tell me. Tell me so Wintermint can hear. What's his name. What's the name of the man."

Shinozaki averted her eyes. "You know. He's the, uh, Dummy Man."

Dummy Man. Dummy Man. Dummy Man! The memory of the previous night, which Lim had managed to dull, flared back into her mind. The solid, stonefaced man. The wisecracking, ominous dummy. She stared at Shinozaki and thought: *I could be hallucinating right now, at this exact moment.* To a lunatic, a hallucination feels like reality. It could be her.

She wheeled on Wintermint. "Tell me what she said, say it back to me. Tell me the name she said."

Wintermint placed a hand on Lim's shoulder. "Lim, honey, calm down. I, uh, I think, uh..."

"Tell me what she said. Say the words to me. You're real, Wintermint, you're real and always have been, so if she's real too you need to tell me."

Most of the students had left the hallway. The next class would start soon. Lim became suddenly aware of how deranged she must look, how her words must sound like gobbledygook. She drew back, ashamed of herself, ashamed that she had shown this face to Wintermint of all people—why did she not drag Driscoll along instead, Driscoll who would only give a casual shrug and do whatever Lim asked? She smoothed down her jacket and necktie, she checked her wristwatch. She tried to return her face to placidity, but had no way to know if she succeeded.

"Dummy Man," said Wintermint. "I don't know what it means, but that's what she said. If you really gotta know."

Dummy Man. The words, spoken by Shinozaki with such gravitas, issued from Wintermint's mouth laced with disdainful cyanide. Wintermint's face grew angry as soon as she stopped speaking and she raised a fist in front of Shinozaki's chin.

"The hell are you doing, new kid? Are you pulling a prank here, huh? If you're screwing with Lim I'll knock your damn teeth out you silly bitch. Dummy Man—Pah!"

She spat onto Shinozaki's jacket. Shinozaki only looked down at the spot and frowned. "You're right," she muttered. "I'm sorry. I made it all up, so go away now."

But Wintermint had said them. Said the words that ought to only exist in Lim's delusion: Dummy Man. That meant it had to be real, right? That her perception had not failed her? The only other explanation was that Wintermint herself was a hallucination, a hypothesis Lim refused to even entertain; she had to draw a line somewhere. No, she must now assume the Dummy Man existed. Although that meant he had actually entered her house, knocked out her mother, and threatened to kill her, this knowledge put her at ease. If she trusted herself, her own perception and rationality, she knew she could resolve any problem.

Despite Shinozaki's hollow apology, Wintermint looked ready to sock her in the face. But it was the middle of school, and someone was bound to intervene. The someone was Corbett. "Hey guys..." she said, her eyes half-closed, "You'll be late if you don't hurry..."

She smiled at Lim. Lim smiled back.

The rest of the day proceeded smoothly. Lim focused on her classes with no further panic attacks or bouts of labyrinthine postulations on her situation. Everything became perfectly clear: the Dummy Man existed, so all she had to do was call the police, explain the situation, and wait for the end. Wintermint said nothing further about the incident, although she did keep her eyes focused on Lim throughout lunch while Driscoll talked about video games and everyone else was silent.

A very simple solution. Call the police, mention that a strange man loitered around the school, and let them handle the rest. Simple, simple. And because the man existed, verified by Wintermint, upon his arrest all her odd behavior would become validated in the eyes of her mother.

By school's end she had poked a thousand holes in this logic.

She shouldered her bag and descended the stairs into the grand entryway alone. Wintermint had tennis practice, Driscoll her own hobbies, and Corbett... who knew. Lim had only doubts, suspicions. Even if Wintermint were real, what if Lim only imagined her speaking the words "Dummy Man"? Or, for a more terrestrial supposition, what if Shinozaki had heard Lim mention the words herself—perhaps in the amnesiac chunk of time after they went to the café—and repeated them to satisfy an insistent Lim?

The police still seemed the best option. Young women had stalkers all the time, and even if the police did not find one they were not apt to disbelieve her. Her mother, however, was the problem. But her mother already had her suspicions about Lim's mental state. The safest option was to inform the—

An arm wrapped around her chest and yanked her back. She skidded on her heels through a doorway and into a dark room. An unused office or janitorial closet, she had only a single panicked glance before the door slammed shut and sealed her in a darkness perforated by a single slat-like window near the ceiling.

The arm around her chest moved up and clapped a hand on her mouth. Lips pressed close to her ear and whispered a hot breath: "You are not playing well with others, Enid."

Lim sighed. Shinozaki.

"You cannot simply expect me to believe in a dream fantasy world because you say so," said Lim as soon as Shinozaki's hand moved away. "I need to take precautions."

"I don't ask you to believe me, believe your own damn senses." The accent remained, but the demeanor had altered. After she relinquished Lim and Lim's eyes adjusted to the dim light, she noticed that Shinozaki no longer slouched, either. They were in the reception room for the rich parents who came to tour the school, unused for most of the year. Portraits of wealthy alumni and faculty choked the walls, plus a plaque with the academy motto: *Civium in moribus rei publicae salus*.

"My senses aren't trustworthy," said Lim, aware of how ridiculous it sounded. Was this how the Pharisees thought when they beheld Christ perform miracles? Not that what she saw in Shinozaki's world constituted a divine benison. "I might be insane."

Shinozaki tsked. "What an idea. But look, that's not why I'm mad at you. Bringing Lindsay Wintermint into this means nothing to me, it's her problem now. No, I'm mad because you saw the Dummy Man on the prowl for me and didn't think to even mention it!"

She had a point. Even if she didn't believe the Dummy Man voodoo magic, he was still a creepy man on the hunt for Shinozaki. Lim's only excuse was that she had a lot on her mind the past day, which was so weak she did not even voice it. "I have more to tell you. I saw him again last night."

"Shit." Shinozaki leaned against the small table in the center of the reception area. "He came to your house, didn't he."

"He broke in, knocked out my mother, and threatened to kill me," said Lim. "At least, that's how I experienced it."

"Yeah... Only makes sense he'd stalk you down after he met you. He probably smelled me on you if it was after school." An eerily true assessment. "But he didn't murder you outright, so he must not realize I gave you some of my power."

"My intention is simple." Lim remained near the door, she didn't intend this conversation to last long. "I'll call the police and explain that a strange man is threatening me. I'll receive police protection and—"

"Thaaaaaaat won't work." Shinozaki pulled out a chair and dropped into it, kicking her feet onto the table in a gesture reminiscent of Wintermint. "Well, it'll work a little. It'll slow him down maybe a day or two—trust me, I've tried it. He'll figure out a way around it, he has certain powers at his disposal."

"What kind of powers."

"Yeah, police will only make things way worse here," Shinozaki continued. "Because he'll realize you remember him enough to call the cops on him, which can only mean you have powers of your own. Then he'll actually try to kill you."

Realize Lim remembered him? So her mother and Wintermint... "These powers you mentioned. He can make people forget about him?"

"Smart girl, that's Class Rank 1 in action for ya."

"I'm Class Rank 2." Although Lim hated to admit it, she hated inaccuracy worse. "Tied with Wintermint."

Shinozaki sent Lim a quizzical glance. "I thought you two were the smartest girls in class, that's why I decided on one of you."

"Corbett is Class Rank 1," said Shinozaki. "Cherry Corbett. She was absent the past few days, so you probably haven't met her." Which also meant Corbett could not have possibly received her calculus test score back, so her deliberate caginess in the conversation that morning was calculated to make everyone think she scored well when she had no way to back it up. Stupid, sly Corbett.

"Well, probably doesn't matter." Shinozaki shrugged. "Class Rank 1, Class Rank 2, just a number. What matters is the Dummy Man. You see, he can make normal people forget they saw him, which really sucks for me."

It explained Wintermint and Lim's mother, at least. For sake of convenience and her sanity, she decided to accept the explanation. Tentatively.

"Look, Enid." Shinozaki stood up and moved closer to Lim. "I really need your help here. I staked everything on you, everything. This guy's been after me for eight years now, and I'm cornered on this stupid island for some reason, in a state I didn't even know existed until like a week ago. All we need to do is surprise him and take him out quick. Easy freaking peasy."

The idea that flashed into Lim's mind was that, if the Dummy Man didn't know Lim was involved, then perhaps she had no need to become involved. He had threatened her, sure. But the information she gave him about the location of Shinozaki's room was accurate, she had checked during the day. Once she warned Shinozaki, Lim had no obligation to do anything else. After all, the Dummy Man was clearly villainous, but Shinozaki had admitted to

drugging Lim and did not seem to care about anyone but herself. And the lingering specter of whether any of this was real crept around behind Lim's shoulder. The safest option was to do nothing. If she was insane, nothing happened. If she was sane, nothing happened to her.

Shinozaki got on her knees before Lim. She clutched Lim's skirt and gazed up at her, her eyes fidgety. Had they been like that the whole time? Shinozaki's face was surprisingly gaunt, she had raccoon circles under her eyes. She needed Lim's sympathy, so she put on this appearance. But, augh, it never worked to think of people like that. Whenever Lim attempted to apply logical structures to people—Wintermint especially—they came apart. She said the Dummy Man chased her for eight years. She had an accent, she didn't know Rhode Island was a state—had he chased her all the way from another country? From Japan? Eight years, pursued by that man and his horrible, grinning dummy.

Lim didn't know what to do, she was unable to reach a conclusion, her rationality failed her as Shinozaki buried her face against Lim's skirt and hugged her legs. "Please Enid, I know I'm not great, but I don't want to die. I didn't choose to have this life, I don't want to die."

She shook Lim, Lim rocked back and forth on her heels. She didn't want to die. The logical decision was to avoid involvement at all costs. Lim's head burned, she rubbed the scar on her face.

She turned away. "Fine. What's your plan."

It turned out Shinozaki had no plan. Or rather, she had a plan, but it had already gone awry. For reasons "too complicated to explain right now," Shinozaki had wanted her and Lim to combat the Dummy Man in the dream world. Despite their ostensible complexity, Lim assumed these reasons had to do with his ability to make people forget him, which would place him at an advantage if bystanders became involved in the real world. Lim herself would have preferred to "fight" the Dummy Man in the dream world, as she had more confidence in its lack of real world implications, even though Shinozaki seemed to imply that defeating their foe in the dreams would eliminate him in reality.

Regardless, the Dummy Man had interrogated Lim about Shinozaki's real world whereabouts, so an attack in the real world proved likely. Shinozaki had not prepared for this contingency.

Well, alright. Lim lacked faith in a plan by Shinozaki anyway. The girl rarely seemed to account for all the details. So Lim cracked her knuckles, checked her wristwatch, and sat at the reception table to draft a plan on a sheet of clean graph paper. First, she considered the desired objectives. Shinozaki wanted the death of the Dummy Man. Lim wanted to avoid committing physical violence, although she did not mind if Shinozaki did so.

"But I need you," said Shinozaki. "I can't beat him by myself. He wins every fight, I can only run away."

"I can provide assistance in a non-combatant role," said Lim. "It's not like I can handle any weapons anyway."

"Sure you can!" Shinozaki plopped her bag onto the table. She rummaged through it and pulled out a revolver.

Lim lurched upright and against the wall while Shinozaki span the revolver around her finger and proffered it by the... handle. The butt. Whatever they call that part of the gun. "Put it away," Lim hissed, "Are you insane?" Someone was insane between them, at least. The revolver had a shiny silver realness to it that churned Lim's stomach, it glinted in the dim light from the room's sole window.

"Point and shoot," said Shinozaki. "Real easy peasy. Doesn't even have a safety to worry about."

"Put it away, now." Lim's head throbbed, the onset of a migraine coalesced into a hard kernel clogged in a brain artery. Someone was going to die. Where had her life gone.

Shinozaki lowered her arm, but did not put the gun away. "You're scared? Seriously? And you saw the Dummy Man last night. That's the scary guy. I'm your friend here."

"I had a much easier time pretending the Dummy Man wasn't real."

"Keep pretending that and he'll eat your heart." Shinozaki sighed and shoved the gun back in her bag. The lack of care with which she handled a revolver with no safety only intensified Lim's migraine, and she had to sit back down and close her eyes and take deep breaths. "I don't get why you're so damn hesitant about this. It's pissing me off, honestly."

Lim pressed the fingertips of her two hands together and imagined her brain in the empty space between her palms. A pulsing, throbbing gray mass. Her skull, empty. Dark and cool and devoid of pain. The pain was in her hands, not her head.

Bit by bit the migraine ebbed. Without opening her eyes, she said: "Do you know how I got this scar, Shinozaki."

"You have a scar? Oh wow, guess you do, never noticed that."

"My older brother's name is Hector." Her fingers kneaded the invisible brain in her hands. They slipped their fingertips into the partition between the lobes. They inched deeper and deeper toward the aneurysm, that little calcified bead of blood bulging out of her vein. "Two years ago, when he was eighteen, he developed schizophrenia."

"I don't know that word," said Shinozaki.

Lim's fingertips pressed lightly around the swollen bead in her brain. They rubbed the circle back and forth, she could feel it between her fingers. "Put loosely, it's insanity. My brother went insane. He was normal the first eighteen years of his life. Then a switch flipped and it went dark. I don't know how it started, exactly. He started to say strange things. Things that didn't make sense. Most of the things he said were normal, but then he'd say something strange. My mother and I, we would ignore the strange things, we figured they meant something we just didn't understand. It was my brother, after all. My normal brother, Hector."

Shinozaki sat down. Lim's eyes remained closed, but she heard the creak of the chair. She had the kernel in her fingers now, the kernel that made her brain hurt. "Enid, I'm really sorry, that's awful—"

"He started to skip school. He stayed in his room all day. He took drugs. When I knocked on his door, he'd open it a crack. Only his eye would look, and he'd ask me: Are you really Enid. Are you really my sister."

She squeezed the kernel. It popped without effort, the blood splashed on her fingers. It squirted out the artery in her brain. A burst aneurysm.

"You see, I didn't know at the time, but he had started to hear voices. Voices that weren't there. He started to get strange ideas. He kept doing drugs, more and more of them, I don't know how he got them. His mind deteriorated. He lost weight, about fifty pounds over a few months."

Shinozaki said nothing. All the blood drained from Lim's brain, out and over her fingers.

"One day, my mother had left for a parent conference. I was in my room, studying. My door opened, and it was Hector. I knew right away something was wrong with him, I could sense it, my heart started to race as he stepped toward me. By the time I realized he had a knife he had already grabbed me by the throat."

"Shit," said Shinozaki.

"He thought that I wasn't Enid Lim, his sister. He thought I was actually a government agent who wore a mask to look like his sister. He had this narrative, this entire, intricate narrative about the government and their ability to replace people. Webs upon webs of conspiracies. He wrote notes about them, we found seventeen notebooks in his room with this stuff. So he forced me on my bed and tried to cut open my face."

Her brain became a desiccated husk. Too dead to feel pain. The migraine became only a faint murmur deep near the cerebellum.

"Most schizophrenics aren't violent," said Lim. "My brother didn't think he was violent. He thought he was peeling off a mask. When he had cut a jagged line down the side of my face, and the blood started to flow, he drew back, his arms trembled. His gaunt face stared down at me, I was too scared to do anything, I remember my skin felt numb all over, so numb I couldn't move. Then he turned the knife on himself."

"Oh..."

"I stopped him. Somehow. I had to call the ambulance. The rest of the night is a blur, I spent it in a hospital. My brother is in a hospital too. They call it a hospital, but it's an asylum. I see him every few months."

She slumped her head and opened her eyes. She did not tell the story often, and it always filled her with a strange melancholy, like her soul was detached from her body and floated

over her shoulder. She probably could have avoided telling the story to Shinozaki, whose first name Lim did not even remember, but with everything that had happened... it felt necessary.

Shinozaki sat in silence. She rubbed her wrist and stared directly into Lim's eyes. Then, she burst into tears and rushed toward Lim and swept her up in her arms. "Oh no, oh no, oh no... I didn't know, I didn't know."

Her body was warm, she pressed her face against Lim's shoulder and Lim felt her tears. She had not expected this reaction. She had only wanted Shinozaki to understand... But Shinozaki's body trembled with the force of her sobs. This emotion seemed difficult to fake, although Lim was so bad at faking her own emotions she wasn't totally certain. It... actually felt nice. That someone, almost a stranger, cared enough to sob at Lim's sob story. She extended an arm, hovered her hand over Shinozaki's back, wasn't sure where to touch her. Her palm settled directly between the shoulder blades.

"It's alright," she said. "It's not that sad of a story. I didn't even cry this much."

But the sobbing continued.

"I only want... I only want," said Shinozaki. "I only want a nice life for everyone."

Lim suspected she cried for more than the story. Which was fine, but did the point of the story even make it across?

"A nice life... Safe and happy. Safe and happy..."

IV

Lim concocted a simple plan. Simple plans had a higher rate of success than complex ones. Step 1: Lim distracts the Dummy Man. Step 2: Shinozaki kills him. How was Lim supposed to come up with anything better when she had only a tenuous idea of the situation? But Shinozaki liked the plan, said it might work. On reflection, Lim considered the whole thing sketchy. Shinozaki claimed the Dummy Man had chased her for eight years. And she hadn't tried something similar already? Well, Shinozaki seemed somewhat dim.

The problem remained that the Dummy Man intended to attack the school, and would probably do so at night, while Lim was home at that time. So Shinozaki needed to buy time for the ten minutes it took Lim to rush to school. Shinozaki assured her this was "A-Okay."

At home, Lim studied and checked her wristwatch every few minutes. Seven o'clock, eight o'clock. Calculus, History, English. Nine o'clock, ten. After the Dummy Man's appearance the previous night, Lim had failed to sleep at all, so it took all her willpower to keep herself awake. She used her mother's coffee pot and played the most abrasive music she could find.

"Enid, will you sleep soon?" said her mother.

"Yes, I want to study some more before bed."

"Alright, I'm going to sleep." A door shut in the hallway.

Eleven o'clock.

Midnight.

The cellphone buzzed. Lim answered. Shinozaki said: "He's here. Come now, and hurry will ya?"

Lim took a deep breath. She slipped her phone into her pocket and stood up. She pushed her chair in and turned off her light. She opened her window, careful not to let it squeak. Despite the darkness, she knew the safe route down the wall into her backyard from a hundred memorized hide-and-seek routes with her brother as a child. Her mother was not so uptight then. Lim was not so uptight then.

She sprinted down the neighborhood. It had to end here, one way or another. A hundred students slept at school, if the Dummy Man existed one would see him, one would verify his existence to her. In the time she waited for Shinozaki's call, she looked up symptoms of schizophrenia. Although visual hallucinations were possible, most of what she read described auditory ones. But she had experienced no such hallucinations; voices, words spoken by nobody, uttered only in her mind.

One way or another it ended at school tonight. She dashed down the sidewalk, her arms bent at trenchant angles. She crossed each streetlight, each familiar house deadened by night. Her feet formed the only sound on the block. Her side started to ache. It felt wrong being out this late. Unnatural. She shouldn't be here. Her lungs throbbed.

She had to slow down by the time she entered the park. She lacked physical fitness. Until then she had considered physical fitness trivial and spurious. Something Wintermint did. Swinging a tennis racket around for no purpose, for a competition that meant nothing. Now it embarrassed her. She slowed to almost a walk and panted for breath.

The walkway that coiled through the park had small lights on its side to guide her way. The trees cast long shadows, shook with a faint wind, and concealed nocturnal creatures. Something skittered into a bush as she passed. She kept her eyes open, in case some odd man hide behind a trunk and waited to ambush her—maybe the Dummy Man himself, maybe a more ordinary rapist.

She was about to start running again when she saw something underneath a park bench near the duck pond. It was big, coiled up on itself, and at first she thought it was a snake. Too big for a snake though, unless it were an anaconda. When it moved and the moonlight reflected off its sleek carapace, she realized what it was immediately.

A millipede.

No, not a millipede. The millipede. The one she saw in her dream. The exact same, unearthly large arthropod. She stopped, blinked, and rubbed her eyes. It remained there, the end of its segmented, thousand-legged body pointed at her, as though it watched her.

"Are you real?" she said. She almost expected it to speak, but it said nothing. It only stared.

She decided not to approach it. In fact, she decided to ignore it completely, it had nothing to do with the present situation. Shinozaki needed her. And not just Shinozaki—if the Dummy Man had appeared at school, then other students might be in danger. Shinozaki had a gun, and given her recklessness she might not use it wisely. Who knew what weapons the Dummy Man had. Collateral damage—why hadn't she thought of this before? The sudden panic made her forget the millipede. She sprinted through the park, to the tall iron gates of the school. The three-story dormitory building rose into the misty night sky, a checkerboard pattern of lighted and unlighted windows scrawled across its façade.

Shinozaki had a gun, and Lim had done nothing about it! And she knew why—the same reason why she had made so many stupid errors the past two days. Because she didn't believe it was real. She didn't want to believe it was real.

The gates were locked. She had no idea why she didn't anticipate this. Her sides crumpled inward as she caught her breath, she made mistake after mistake. Could she climb it? The gates had sharp metal spikes at the top and no obvious footholds; only vertical metal bars.

She was about to call Shinozaki when someone appeared on the other side of the gate.

Chapter 3: Draft 3 (2017)

CHAPTER 1

Someone, who did not exist, laughed. Enid Lim heard it clear: two abrupt and bitter notes, the first sharper than the tapering second. Derisive, mocking laughter, with the voice of her mother, although her mother had left to teach at an elementary school and the house was empty. Besides, Lim heard the laugh loud and forceful, as though it came from just over her shoulder. But nobody stood behind her in the mirror. She tightened the faucet, dried her hands, and put on her watch.

A voice that did not exist. Either a ghost laughed at her or her brain imagined it. Lim did not believe in ghosts, but the scientific community had ample documentation of auditory hallucinations. Besides, Lim had family history regarding the matter. But she had more than enough to worry about already, like the calculus test in first period. She hoisted her bag onto her shoulder and started for school.

The path to All Saints Academy Boarding & Day School took her to the end of her cul-de-sac, out the gap in the stone wall, along the winding pathway that bisected the park, and through the tall, iron, spiked front gates of the campus grounds. Red leaves rustled all around her, and between the flitting branches she glimpsed traces of a murky sky.

Lindsay Wintermint, the girl tied with Lim at the top of the class standings, loitered on the grassy knoll near the female dormitories with several other students. As Lim approached, Wintermint broke from the pack and flicked a conspiratorial hand at her.

"Hey, hey check it out, new kid."

Lim approached with a modicum of interest, as the academy had infamously strict acceptance policies and transfer students never appeared, even in autumn when the school year had just begun. Wintermint took Lim's wrist and bounced back to the circle, amid which a tall Asian girl without a uniform stood. She had one hand in the pocket of a hoodie and the other gesticulated in time to her voice.

"—technicalities y'know? They came to me, they said *you know we don't accept late registration* well see I'm a special case, given my particular situation, they reviewed all my files of course and let me in, well then I said—"

The gathered students bobbed heads and grinned. It was rare for a student to arrive who had not attended as a freshman, and the girl exuded an affable sociability refreshing for a newcomer, so no wonder so many had flocked to her already. Wintermint especially seemed intrigued, likely because the girl's long-legged physique made her a potential addition to the tennis squad Wintermint captained.

Lim noticed that the new girl kept shifting her eyes to look over Lim's shoulder and at the front gate. The new girl's voice lulled and a student interjected: "You live in the dorms or your family move here too?"

The new girl winked and somehow did not look foolish doing so. "Nah way, Mom's an exec for a big company in Toronto so she'd never move, plus Dad does insurance so I'm on my own out here, guess they'll put me in a dorm? Sounds right to me, I'd freeze my ass off if they left me in the cold y'know."

The students giggled. Lim said: "They approved you to attend the school and didn't give you somewhere to sleep?"

"Ah well y'know only arrived this morning after all, don't even got a uniform yet." She reached out with the hand not in her hoodie pocket and tweaked Lim's necktie.

"They required us to order our uniforms well in advance of our first day," said Lim. She checked her watch. "They're strict about dress code. You should report to the main office."

The new girl continued to grin. "Sure," she said. "But I'd like to feel the air a little bit longer, Rhode Island's nice and toasty compared to Toronto y'know? Plus the principal said I didn't need to do that crap right away." Her eyes flitted again to the front gate and Lim had other ideas about why the new girl wanted to remain outside.

"Class starts in fifteen minutes. The school didn't send anyone to escort you? Do you even know where your first class is? And why is the Headmaster handling these things, that's not his job."

"The hell," said Wintermint. "Don't be difficult Lim, it's her first day."

"Either the school's being irresponsible or she is," said Lim. "And I doubt it's the school."

The ring of students groaned and shuffled to make way as Lim detached from their bulk and headed toward the main academic complex. Like then groan, whine, hiss, boo. It did the girl no favors to linger outside when she had better things to do.

She took three steps before the new girl reached out and grabbed the strap of her bag. Lim turned and the new girl glared directly into her eyes. Her mouth still smiled.

"You don't believe me?"

Lim shrugged. Although the girl's eyes were hard, something in her strained posture and the forcefulness of her grin indicated to Lim a note of anxiety. The way her eyes kept going to the front gate. Maybe first day jitters. Maybe Lim had no reason to suspect anything, and she had once again made herself look idiotic in front of her peers.

"I just want to make sure things go smoothly for you," said Lim.

She broke the new girl's hold and walked away. As she left, Wintermint said to the new girl: "Ah, she's a stickler for stupid rules. Or she's pissy about something."

Who knew. Something about the new girl struck Lim as wrong, but while her story had holes it held together on a basic level and Lim had no real reason to doubt her. Or maybe Wintermint was right, and what upset Lim was not the new girl's mannerisms but rather the tacit acceptance of them by the other students.

Ha ha, said the someone who did not exist.

The new girl did not attend first period calculus. Of course, Lim only assumed the new girl was a junior. She might be any age. And even if she were a junior, she might have calculus in the afternoon with the other class.

It was exam day, and a restless murmur pervaded the room as students took their seats. Mrs. Weaver had not yet arrived. Wintermint, who sat diagonally behind Lim, tapped Lim's shoulder.

"You freaking goon, what's your deal today?"

"I don't know," said Lim. "Something felt odd about her. If I'm wrong, I'll apologize."

"She's super cool." Wintermint settled back into her desk and stretched her legs under the chair in front of her. "Let's hang out with her after class."

"You want her to join the tennis club."

Wintermint stuck out her tongue. "Aren't you smart."

The classroom door swung open and the scattered chitchat fell silent. Lim checked her watch; five minutes was a long time for the teacher to be late on exam day.

But Mrs. Weaver did not walk through the door. Nor did the new girl. Instead, a middle-aged man emerged. He had no color whatsoever. His conservative suit contrasted his ashen face and his eyes sank deep into his skull. He moved to the teacher's desk with long, straight steps and turned a perfect ninety-degree angle to face the class.

In one hand he held a ventriloquist dummy.

The dummy's wooden jaw, painted with rows of even, straight teeth, clacked open. "Your teacher ain't coming today, kiddies. Think of me as your substitute, *got it?*"

Lim shifted her eyes to gauge the reaction of her classmates. They regarded the dummy with dull faces, took in its flamboyant tuxedo and swollen oval eyes. Nobody spoke. What could they say? Lim herself was incapable of speech in face of such nonsense.

The only thing she could grant was that the man was a skilled ventriloquist. His face remained stone while the dummy continued: "Now I hear you kiddies got a new student today, a nice dame by the name of Miss Shinozaki, seen her anywhere?"

The class fidgeted, the students glanced at one another to see who seemed ready to respond. "Yeah," said Wintermint. "We sent her to Administration for her uniform."

"Thanks-a-million!" said the dummy. "Now, it's real important she's in class today, so lemme hop on over to the Administration building and fetch her—"

Lim shot her hand in the air. "Excuse me sir. Are we still going to take our calculus examination today?"

"Don't remind him," hissed Wintermint. Other students shared her displeasure, but Lim did not care.

The substitute teacher, if one deigned call him that, had already lurched toward the exit in stiff, mechanical motion. He stopped with one leg frozen mid-step and the dummy's head rotated on its neck to face her. "Yeah sure, we'll do that stuff later, don't worry about it." He raised a wooden arm and waved her away.

But Lim stood up. "Sir, the examination is designed to take the entire class period. You have already arrived—" (she checked her watch) "—seven minutes late, and this delay will only further consume our available time. I request that we begin the examination now." Exasperated as she was by the substitute's antics, she struggled to maintain an even and emotionless tone.

"I said. *Don't worry about it.*" The dummy's eyes bore into hers. The man extended a rigid arm and opened the door.

Ire boiled inside her. To prevent it from spilling over, she retreated into more complex language, more tangled and academic sentence structure. "Honestly, your reassurances do little to assuage my trepidations in this matter, sir. If we do not receive the full time allotted —"

He stepped out of the classroom and into the hallway.

Lim started after him. "Then I will accompany you to the Administration building and inform them of your misconduct!"

She wound between the desks as her peers stared up at her with uncertain, hesitant expressions. "What the hell, Lim," said Wintermint. "So he's late on the test, no need to go ballistic."

"The lateness is circumstantial," said Lim. "His silly ventriloquist act has made a mockery of this classroom. I—" She reached the doorway and nearly collided with the substitute teacher as he leaned his upper body back into the classroom. The dummy's head tilted at an angle and its arm dangled free from its shoulder.

"What's that?" said the dummy. "Whaddya mean... *ventriloquist act*?"

"I mean that dummy through which you're speaking to us this very moment," said Lim. Her whole body pulsed with blood. Her temples throbbed and her bones felt like wood, like she was a dummy herself. She glanced over her shoulder, and all her classmates were baffled.

"Dunno whatcha mean, missie. No dummy here," said the dummy.

"Lim, what are you *talking* about?" said Wintermint.

Lim's eyes widened. Her teeth clenched and ground against each other. How could they be confused? The dummy was *right there*. It was inches away from her. She could reach out and seize it, and only extreme self-control prevented her from doing so, from dangling it before them and saying, "This, I'm talking about this!" Everything became an affront to her senses, the immutable face of the substitute teacher enraged her as much as the affable uncanniness of the dummy's.

"What an *idiot!*" said the someone who did not exist. The voice sounded exactly like her mother and cleaved the lobes of her brain. She raised trembling fingers and probed her forehead, one eye squinted as the voice subsided into an echo.

She remembered her brother, and the fate that befell him. She remembered the doctors and diagnoses, the explanations and medication. For a moment she wondered... But no. She was not her brother, she was smarter, more disciplined, more focused. She had not erred, she knew to trust her own senses.

"Excuse me," she said and slipped past the substitute into the hallway. Her plan was clear: She would complain to Administration that the substitute teacher had not only been late on an important test day but had endeavored to delay the test further for no relevant reason. And when he arrived behind her, the office staff would see for themselves his ridiculous ventriloquist act.

She crossed the silent, empty upper-floor hallway of the Academic building, her pace brisk but unhurried. The long row of windows on her right rustled with the red tops of trees. The substitute's footsteps matched her own, but they resounded heavier, more forceful down the corridor. Lim passed Room 203, the bulletin board, Room 202. The voiceless howl of the corridor encircled her. It seemed to condemn her—class had begun, why was she not in her seat. Nonetheless, Lim kept her shoulders straight in the confidence of her actions. She shifted her eyes and glanced over her shoulder. The substitute teacher's eyes, and the eyes of his dummy, watched the nape of her neck.

Down the stairwell, through the exit, he maintained a distance of ten steps behind her. He said nothing and she said nothing. She emerged into a bitter autumn chill, colder than before. Red leaves scraped over the walkway and not another soul stirred.

The substitute's footsteps got faster.

Lim at once increased her speed to match. It was imperative she reached Administration first, or else his story would undercut her own. And also—something else spurred her, a phantom weight against her back, an aura that emanated from the substitute behind her. The skin on her neck prickled. His footsteps were so rigid, so cataclysmically heavy, as though the narrow concrete path from Academic to Administration reverberated with each one. The trees shook all around her.

The Administration building neared. It was a churchlike structure, with a rectangular form and a sharply pitched roof that gave rise to a spired bell tower. Stained glass representations of academic symbols—books, quills—patterned the façade between the buttresses. The walkway winded up to its arched double doors.

The substitute moved faster.

Lim started a half-skip, half-jog to keep ahead of him. A vast shadow crept across the school grounds from some cloud above. It swept over the Male Dormitories and the botanical gardens and cut crosswise for Administration.

"They're coming for you," said the someone who did not exist. This time, the voice was not her mother's. It was a man.

Lim started to run. Her heart throbbed and the blood beat in the veins of her arms. The substitute remained close behind her, but his footsteps remained at the same heavy walk as before, only sped up to an unbelievable pattern. Lim did not glance back, she maintained her focus on the doors of Administration. She dashed up the stairs that led to them, she gripped the handrail to pull herself further. Even at the stairs, the pattern of the substitute's footsteps did not change, the steady rhythm, the endless metronome. She stumbled on the seventh step, caught herself on the handrail, and continued, but with the substitute now closer, the heat of his aura now pressed against her back. Ragged exhalations wrenched out her throat. She reached the top of the stairs and shoved an arm into the Administration doors. Her momentum carried into them, they opened with a click, and she staggered into the front office with its counters and computers.

Lim whirled around and slam the door shut. In the moment before the door closed completely, she caught a glimpse of the pathway that sprawled back to the Academic building, and nobody was there. Nobody was behind her.

The door shut. She backed against the counter, with the sign-in ledger for visitors. A sweet smell of milk and coffee pervaded the warm air. She pressed a hand to her heart and tried to still it. What happened? What had she imagined was happening? Where did the substitute go?

She turned and leaned over the counter, only to realize the main office was empty. Neither of the Headmaster's secretaries were at their desks, although their computers were on and sizzling mugs stood near their keyboards. One of their chairs had tilted over.

"Hello?" she called. Behind the counter, an open door led into the teacher's lounge and various offices. An orange light blazed from within.

The farthest she had ever gone into the Administration building was the counselling office, which was adjacent to the room she was in now. The door was closed and there was no light coming from under it. She knocked nonetheless and called the name of the student counsellor, Mrs. Devries. Nobody responded.

Ditto for the infirmary. Lim checked her watch, then glanced over her back. She oscillated between a certainty that something was wrong and a certainty that she was wrong. She remembered the reaction of her classmates when she called out the substitute's dummy, how they had stared at her with such baffled expressions and asked what she was talking about. She rubbed her eyes and leaned over the counter.

How many auditory hallucinations so far today? How many times did the someone who did not exist speak to her?

With sudden resolve, Lim shoved herself up from the counter and waltzed passed it into the teacher's lounge. "Hello!" she said, indignant that the Administration could go completely unstaffed during school hours. "Hello, is anyone here?"

Papers strewed the floor of the teacher's lounge. Lim lifted her foot and picked up one. It was the calculus test they were supposed to take today. Half a stack of them sat on the table in the center of the room, beside a coffee mug with characters from the Garfield comic strip on it. Lim recognized that coffee mug. It belonged to her calculus teacher, Mrs. Weaver.

She realized a lot of things at once and spun around almost certain the substitute would be standing behind her, the dummy seated on his shoulder. But nobody was there, the lounge and the main office remained empty.

"He killed them," said the someone who did not exist.

"Quiet!" she hissed. Her mind whirred and she searched around the room frantically, the substitute was dangerous, he did something to the faculty, she needed—she needed—

She needed to call the police. At once she took out her cell phone. It had no service, not a single bar. Which made no sense, they were in Rhode Island, not an inch of the entire state lacked satellite coverage. The only explanation was that the building itself caused interference, maybe the bell tower—she had no idea—she hurried back to the main office and grabbed the landline phone off the secretary's desk.

No dial tone. She pressed the buttons for the police anyway. Nothing happened.

The intercom system, it was somewhere in this building. If she couldn't call the police, she had to warn everyone on campus. But she had never used the intercom, she did not know where it was. She overturned loose items on the secretary's desk and chided herself for such a pointless motion, she needed to maintain clearheaded focus and think rationally. The intercom was most frequently used by the Assistant Headmaster, who announced important news and led the daily prayer, so it stood to reason the system would be located in his office. Only students with disciplinary infractions ever went there, but Lim figured it would be easy to find from the teacher's lounge.

The dummy was in the teacher's lounge.

It sat on a chair with its gangly wooden arms crossed atop the table. It stooped forward and its head faced her. What did that ghoulish smile mean to say? She remained in the doorway with her back to the jamb and looked into both the lounge and the main office for the dummy's keeper. He must be near the lounge somewhere, she had only left it for a minute, he could not have gone far. But she was unsure about the Administration building's geography, it surely had more than one entrance, corridors that twisted back to one another, he might be anywhere. She struggled to keep her breathing under control and her hands twitched against her sides.

Forget the intercom. She had to run. Back out the front and at a sprint to—the front gate? The only thing past that was the park, where nobody would be, he was larger than her and likely

faster. He'd catch up. No, she needed to make it back to the Academic building, she had to find a teacher, or even organize the students—

The dummy stood up.

She stared at it, dumbfounded. It lifted one leg, then the other off its chair and planted them onto the ground. Shaky, as though guided by strings she could not see, it lifted. Every motion creaked its joints. At full height, it rose to her middle. Its head lolled as it stepped toward her.

Lim ran back into the main office, leapt the overturned chair and skidded across the tile into the double doors. She flung them open and took one step into the dusky red aura that had settled over the school grounds before a hand of hooked fingers swung for her face. She tried to stop herself from running into it and slipped onto her rear. The substitute teacher stepped out from around the door, he towered over her, his pitiless gaze bore down upon her. She scrambled back into the main office until her back struck the counter and the ledger for visitors fell beside her.

The substitute advanced. His steps rose and fell without a single bend at the knee, everything about him remained rigid and straight. Lim pressed herself against the counter and used it to rise, everything in her body felt numb, everything in her body pulsed with horror. She turned to go—somewhere—but the dummy stood atop the counter, and her face nearly collided with its macabre grin.

"This—no—" she said.

The substitute teacher shot out his arm and seized her throat. His hand was cold as death and his fingers constricted around her windpipe. The sharp edge of the counter dug into her back between the discs of her spine until she felt something warm and wet dribble down her skin. She rose her hands to his fingers and tried to pry them away as her body lifted and her feet left the floor. Her shoes clattered against the side of the counter as she struggled to breathe. Her eyes shifted from side to side, and saw only either the dummy's joyous face or the substitute's emotionless one.

She wheezed, spit sputtered from her lips. A hoarse, wretched note was crushed to death in her esophagus. The man's fingers were a vise and nothing her feeble hands did budged them in the slightest.

The ledger—a pen—her hand dropped to the countertop and scuffled around. Her fingers scraped something thin, narrow, and plastic, but jostled it out of the way. She glanced down as pen rolled toward the edge of the counter, she shot out her hand and caught it instants before it fell. Her vision blurred and purple forms ebbed around her periphery. One chance—needed to incapacitate—his neck—

"His eye," said the someone who did not exist.

She tightened her grip around the pen and drove it directly into his eye socket. The substitute teacher jerked back and the dummy beside her screamed in agony. The hand loosened around her throat and dropped her onto the counter. She rolled off it and charged for the open doors.

His hand swung out and clipped her thigh and she teetered off balance and crashed into the doorframe.

"I'LL CUT YA INTO BITTY PIECES," said the dummy.

Something sliced under Lim's kneecap. She glanced down and a thin silver wire that stretched diagonally out the doors glistened with droplets of her blood. She hopped over the wire and felt another zip past the back of her head.

She flung herself down the stairs and sprinted across the walkway. Her head rang with mangled statements and disordered thoughts and only her previous goal of reaching the Academic building remained to guide her. The sky shone red as though it were sunset although it was still assuredly morning. An invisible sun cast elongated shadows across the courtyard. Lim churned her arms and legs, her skirt slapped against her knees, the hem wet with something—her blood. Her feet slapped the pavement hard until she left it for a lawn slick and muddy.

She slipped, rolled forward, shoved herself up. Grime coated her left half. The clouds swirled into a heavenbound spiral, the redness of the sky melded into the redness of the treetops. She did not hear the substitute's footsteps in pursuit, or even the wooden clatter of the dummy, but she did not stop or look back.

Diamond eyes peered at her from the long shadows of the trees. She noticed them only once she had crossed half the distance to the Academic building, but once she saw one glittering pair she suddenly saw ten, twenty of them. Only eyes, nothing else. The shadows were too narrow to conceal anything, but she perceived no darkened forms within them. She could even make up the individual blades of grass that swayed behind the eyes, which turned as she passed them. What was happening, what had hit this world? How was it sunset at half past eight in the morning? How had the man's dummy walked on its own?

She entered the Academic building. When she shut the door behind her and looked through it—it was made of glass—she tried to see the eyes in the shadows again. She felt for sure they would no longer be there, like how the substitute had vanished the moment she reached the Administration building. But the eyes remained, and every set of them watched her.

They did not do anything else, though, and she caught no trace of the substitute, and her heavy breaths subsided.

"Ha ha," said the someone who did not exist.

CHAPTER 2

Her class remained how she left it. The fourteen students sat scattered around the room, engaged in casual conversation and fiddling with phones. They piqued their heads like dogs when she flung open the door and staggered inside.

"Lim, holy crap." Wintermint rose from a conversation with two other girls and rushed to her. "You're filthy, and what happened to your knee? Holy crap."

"I," said Lim, but her throat was drier than she expected and the word got stuck and she had to swallow hard before she could say more. "I was attacked. By the substitute teacher."

Several other students rose. "Are you okay?" said Amy Driscoll, a mediocre student who spent most of her downtime reading pulpy fantasy novels, which she seemed to be doing at the moment. "I mean like, you're not hurt bad? Do we need to call like a, hospital?"

"I'm getting a teacher," said Richard Rosenfeld. He rushed past Lim into the hallway.

"If you see the substitute teacher, you need to stay away from him," said Lim. "He tried to kill me. I think he did something to the office staff in Administration, nobody was there. Does anyone's phone work?"

Her classmates gaped at her. They wore the same dumbfounded expressions as when she mentioned the substitute teacher's ventriloquist act, and uneasiness cobbled together inside Lim's gut.

Wintermint said: "Wait, slow down Lim. *Who* attacked you?"

"The substitute teacher," said Lim. She checked her watch. "He was in this room less than fifteen minutes ago. He asked about the new student."

Even though she omitted all mention of the dummy, their expressions did not change. Some exchanged glances.

"Uhhhhh, what are you talking about?" said Driscoll. She put down her fantasy novel. "There hasn't been any uh, substitute teacher. We've been waiting for Mrs. Weaver this whole time."

No. Lim refused to—she couldn't—this wasn't—No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No.

"He was in this room, we all saw him," said Lim. "He wore a business suit. Why—Why do you think I left, Driscoll? I left because of him, why do you think I left?"

"Dude, nobody knows why you left," said Driscoll. "When Mrs. Weaver didn't show, you just stormed out the room saying something about a fucking ventriloquist or something."

"Christ Lim are you having a breakdown?" said Wintermint. She leaned in and whispered into Lim's ear: "Does this have anything to do with your brother?"

Lim ground her molars together. They made a heavy, groaning noise within her clamped jaw. She scratched her hair and clumped mud dropped to the floor. Her eyes squinted and started to water. No, no. It couldn't. It couldn't have anything to do with Hector. Nothing to do with him, nothing. He was a broken individual. He had serious psychotic problems. She was just Enid Lim, a normal girl who worked hard in school and received good grades for her trouble. Nothing was wrong with her, nothing. She knew what she saw. It was real, she saw it.

(But if you consider things rationally—)

For once in her life she did not want to do that.

(But if you consider things rationally, it makes sense. When the population has a certain sensory experience and an individual has an opposing sensory experience, isn't the logical assumption that something is wrong with the individual's ability to perceive, rather than the population?)

She knew what she saw. She knew what she felt. She had the slice on her knee to prove it—

(You tripped and fell as you ran. You hurt yourself. Logical explanations for everything. And truthfully, you know it. After all, I'm not the someone who does not exist, I'm your own mind, your own thoughts. It's not that you don't believe me, you simply do not want to believe—)

The window, through the window the sky still blazed red and she was about to fling a finger toward it and demand the class to tell her what color the sky was when a large presence appeared at her back and she whirled around certain she would see the substitute teacher. But instead it was Rosenfeld and Mr. Yuzon, the physics and chemistry teacher who taught two classrooms down. Mr. Yuzon was nearly fifty but still had an air of a hip young yuppie, with slick starched shirts rolled up to the elbows, a trim goatee, and narrow rimless glasses. He was by far the most popular teacher on campus, although Lim had always felt his instruction had more style than substance.

He held one hand on his hip and looked over Lim's state with both a smile and an expression of genuine concern. "Well, you're right, that does look pretty bad. What happened, Enid? Took a tumble? Let's get you to the infirmary and figure out why Mrs. Weaver's so late."

Mr. Yuzon had a habit of stringing a lot of words together real fast, so Lim only managed to speak once he had already turned to lead her down the hall with a beckoning hand. "Mr. Yuzon, a man on campus attacked me."

His demeanor changed immediately. He turned toward her with a sudden uncharacteristic sternness and placed a hand on her shoulder. "Enid. Are you okay? This man, did he...?"

"I'm fine," said Lim. "Mr. Yuzon, the school is in danger. I was the Administration building, it was empty but—" She remembered the overturned chair, the strewn tests. "—But there were signs of a struggle."

Mr. Yuzon expelled a long breath of air. He looked around the hallway and then back at Lim. "I'm going to believe you, Enid. You're not one to make up stories. Alright, alright... What we need to do is..."

A door down the hall opened and a freshman girl peeked her head out. Everyone in the hallway—Mr. Yuzon, Rosenfeld, Wintermint, a few other students from Lim's class who had trickled out—snapped their heads toward her and the freshman retreated back inside with a little yelp. Whispered voices hissed behind her door and she soon reappeared with her eyes pointed at the ground.

"Um, mister...? Is something wrong? Mr. Hudson never showed up today, so none of us know what to do..."

"Mr. Hudson too?" said Mr. Yuzon. "Alright, alright." He stepped back from Lim and held up his hands. "I want everyone to go back into their classrooms and stay there. And stay away from the windows, turn off the lights. Stay under your desks even. I'm going to check on the other classrooms in the building and make sure everyone is safe. Enid, this man who attacked you, did he have a weapon?"

If Lim told them what she saw, that a living dummy had sliced her with razor wire, they would not believe her regardless of whether what she saw matched reality. "He had a knife," she said. "At least, that's what he attacked me with. He might have more weapons, I don't know."

"And what did he look like?" said Mr. Yuzon.

"Tall, wearing a business suit. White male, black hair." She tried to conjure more distinctive features from her memory, but the exact details of his nondescript face faded away.

"Alright, alright, everyone stay calm," he said. "Everyone back in their classrooms. Enid, can you call the police?"

"My phone broke."

"I'll do it, my phone works," said Wintermint.

Mr. Yuzon herded them into their classroom; the freshman girl had already disappeared back into hers. Lim's classmates buzzed with discussed, many of them cast glances her way but few said anything to her. She and Wintermint kept close to the door as Wintermint took out her phone and held her finger to the screen.

"Lim, you're sure?" she whispered. "You're sure you saw this?"

"Yes," said Lim.

Wintermint told the class to shut up and dialed the number. Everyone fell silent and watched her as she held the phone to her ear. A second passed, then two, and then Wintermint started to speak in the voice she reserved for when she spoke to adults. "Hello, is this the Newport Police Department? Yes, hello, my name is Lindsay Wintermint and I'm a student at All Saints Academy..."

She explained the situation exactly as Lim had: a man on campus, dangerous, armed with a knife, the details of his physical description. Her tone remained cordial and polite and she paused intermittently, ostensibly because someone on the other end of the line was speaking to her.

Even though it was dead silent in the classroom and Lim stood right next to Wintermint, she did not hear even the quietest voice on the other end.

The phone call ended, everything went by the book. Wintermint turned to the class and said, "They're coming. They're sending the whole cavalry, yeeha."

Driscoll, who had returned to her fantasy novel, did not even look up from the page. "At least we got out of the calculus test."

When Wintermint lowered her phone, Lim kept her eye on the screen. She only caught a second's glimpse of it before it disappeared into a pocket, but the blinking NO SIGNAL message was unmistakable. Nonetheless, she held her tongue. If she operated under the assumption that she was sane, then it meant something had affected the perceptions of her classmates. A mass delusion, brought upon by paranoia? Could science or sociology explain their behavior? No matter how she sliced the problem, Occam's Razor cut only her own wrists.

Mr. Yuzon returned with a looser necktie and an undone shirt button. He reported that the only other teacher he found was Miss Britz, who taught French (and who went by "Madame" despite her unmarried status). For safety, he had shepherded the students downstairs into Class 201, the empty upstairs classroom at the beginning of the hall.

"I want everyone to stay in their classrooms, alright," he said, arms wedged in the doorjamb as he craned his neck and looked each of them in the eye individually. "Miss Britz and I will patrol the hall. We wait things out until the police fix everything. They coming, Lindsay?"

"Yes," said Wintermint.

Mr. Yuzon expelled a sigh of relief. "I hope this ends quick. Alright, alright. Anything else, anything else..." He noticed Lim's leg. "Oh yeah, let's get that fixed up. There's first aid in my classroom."

There was first aid in every classroom, but Lim had to limp over to Mr. Yuzon's class for him to disinfect the wound and wrap a bandage tight as a tourniquet under her knee. It made it difficult to bend her leg.

"Now go with Lindsay to the bathroom and get that mud cleaned off."

Most of the mud had already dried, so it came off in clumps when Wintermint and Lim dabbed at it with tissue. The restroom's dim lights sealed them into an isolated, subterranean space. Pipes overhead hummed and chimed. Water dripped somewhere. The temperature plummeted.

Wintermint discarded a crumpled paper towel. "How late last night did you study for the calculus test?"

Odd question. "My usual routine. I never stay up later than ten."

"And you slept well?"

Lim watched her over her shoulder as she picked clods off Lim's back. "You think I imagined the man."

"Nah," said Wintermint. "I'd tell Mr. Yuzon if I thought for sure. What I'm saying here Lim is that you have a family history of psychosis and you've already acted weird enough today. You

mentioned a substitute when we never had one, you stormed out of class without explanation—and you even acted weird to the new girl."

"You think I'm insane," said Lim.

Wintermint tossed another wadded paper towel over her shoulder and sank it into the trash. "I did not say you're insane, Lim. But you need to consider—"

"I already considered it," said Lim. "I know it seems likely. I *know* that, do you think I'm idiot?" She lurched away from Wintermint and leaned over a sink. Her fingers curled into the porcelain. After all—and she would never tell Wintermint—the auditory hallucinations, the someone who did not exist, those were telltale signs of the same mental disorder that afflicted her brother. "Look, if I'm crazy, then the only person in trouble is me. But if I'm sane and there truly is a dangerous man out there, then everyone's in trouble. It's safer to proceed this way until a resolute confirmation to the contrary. Do you agree?"

Although Lim watched her in the mirror, Wintermint avoided Lim's eye contact. "Yeah. I guess. Christ Lim."

Lim pressed her forehead to the glass. She gazed at the drain in the sink, half-jammed by a wad of gum devoid of color. "Despite everything, despite all the logical evidence, I don't believe I'm insane." She thought of something and laughed. "To think I'm sane, I have to disregard the logical evidence. I have to be illogical in order to be logical."

"Your sanity doesn't depend on whether you believe in it or not," said Wintermint.

"True. But consider the opposite: If I believe I'm insane, that means I accept the logical evidence. So I would be following a logical line of thought to prove that I am illogical."

"I don't even know if sanity is all that connected to logic," said Wintermint.

Perhaps that was right too. Wintermint, despite her brusque demeanor and predisposition toward athletics, did not lack intelligence. Was this so-called "contradiction" of logic and illogic simply another flimsy shield to defend herself from encroaching certainty?

"If I'm wrong, how do you explain the absent teachers?"

"I never said you were wrong."

"I'd rather you said I was wrong," said Lim. "Then I can argue against you and win. I lose when I argue against myself."

"I'd rather you were right," said Wintermint. "You're my sole competition for valedictorian. Without you, everything's too easy."

She turned and exited the restroom. The door swung shut and sealed Lim into the cavernous chamber. She eyed herself in the mirror, her hair disheveled, her eyes sunken and dark. Now would be a perfect time for a quip from the someone who did not exist, but the voice inside her head remained silent. Auditory hallucinations—another great piece of evidence against her. She tried to remember when she had begun to hear them. A month or two ago. They had

built in frequency and intensity in the past week. She assumed—wanted to assume—that stress, lack of sleep caused them.

But she recognized them as auditory hallucinations. A crazy person can't recognize that their delusions are delusions, right? Or was that also wishful thinking?

Mr. Yuzon and Miss Britz stood in quiet conference at the far end of an otherwise-barren hallway. A third adult slouched between them, hands splayed in expressive animation, jostling stiff cuffs and a necktie adorned with a blood-red cross. The teachers, gathered so close to the newcomer, obscured his face, but Lim recognized the loquacious demeanor and ostentatious religious iconography: they belonged to the Assistant Headmaster, who handled all disciplinary matters and served as the internal face of the school to students and faculty (as opposed to the true Headmaster, who served as its external face).

Lim approached the door to her classroom, which moved her closer to the trio. The ineffable anti-noise chamber of the hallway swallowed their whispers but within this space her footsteps thundered, even though she did her best to conceal them. The tiles pulsed with the redness that seeped through the long line of windows facing the courtyard. All angles cut long shadows, and half of Lim's own body was swallowed in the starkness. The Assistant Headmaster's hands elocuted, the teachers nodded.

When Lim reached halfway to her classroom's door she stopped. The Assistant Headmaster must have come from the Administration building. If she eavesdropped for even a moment—heard only a snatch of his conversation—she might know whether what she saw was real or —

But they ceased talking. Mr. Yuzon and Miss Britz turned. "Enid, oh good it's you," said Mr. Yuzon. "Come talk to the Assistant Headmaster, tell him what you saw, it's important."

He extended a hand and beckoned her. But Lim stepped backward. When the teachers turned, the Assistant Headmaster's full body became visible, even his face, and Lim understood immediately something was wrong. Although he wore the Assistant Headmaster's clothes, the red cross tie, the belt with the walkie-talkie, the American flag pin on his lapel, the man who had joined the teachers was not the Assistant Headmaster. Not even a superficial resemblance; instead of a balding, rubicund, round-cheeked man, what stood before her had long, scraggly bangs that dangled over and obscured his eyes, plus a cigarette that wobbled lit between pursed lips. The smoke swirled in the dusky light and glowed with red emanations. It had a palpable thickness, like a smoggy cloud, and further shrouded the man's indistinct facial features.

"He needs to know about the man who attacked you, Enid," Mr. Yuzon continued. "He's in communication with the police, so anything you can tell him will help everyone."

The fake Assistant Headmaster grinned and his cigarette turned upward. He spoke, gravelly and low and mired in an unidentifiable accent: "Correct. They told me about your encounter. Step closer and explain. Please."

First a man with a dummy nobody saw. Now a man with a face others mistook. Mere verbal requests would not coax Lim a step closer, and she took a guarded stance, one foot braced to

break into a sprint if need be.

"I guarantee," he continued, "I can stop that man. He will not hurt you. You need only cooperate. Rumors and lies breed hysteria. This is bad for everyone. We don't want anyone hurt. Correct?"

He knew. His words were coded with a double meaning: *Keep quiet and we won't kill you.* Elements of the situation clicked in Lim's head. The substitute teacher, before he left their class, had asked for one thing. They weren't interested in Lim.

But Lim needed to make sure. "Have you found the new girl yet?" The non sequitur baffled the two teachers, so Lim added: "She didn't show up to class today. I'm worried she might not be safe."

"Enid," said Miss Britz. She was a younger teacher in a conservative coat with large buttons. Lim had her for third period. "Enid, I'm sure the Assistant Headmaster is doing everything in his power to keep all the students out of danger, so please just tell him what he needs to know and—"

The fake Assistant Headmaster raised a hand and sauntered between the two teachers, toward Lim. "Quiet. It's natural to show concern for others. Unfortunately, Miss Shinozaki—" (spoken with bizarre emphasis on the "za") "—is absent. But we will find her. Then we will resolve the situation."

Lim stepped backward as he advanced, but her backpedaling did not keep up with his limber, bowlegged movements. He swayed with each step, his bangs shuffled and a glint of an eye twinkled in a dark socket. The cigarette smoke trailed behind him, encircled Miss Britz and Mr. Yuzon. She wondered if she needed to flee, she had difficulty reading his demeanor. She understood the ulterior meaning of his words, but did he intend to trap her? Lure her in? She had wasted so much time concerned whether what she saw was real she had not considered why it was happening. Did they want her dead? He moved forward still, if she wanted to run she needed to at this exact moment, but Miss Britz and Mr. Yuzon both watched her, their grim authority petrified her, she could do nothing to defy their adulthood.

The fake Assistant Headmaster reached out and grabbed her shoulder. Not hard. Not with clenched fingers. If she shook her shoulder she would break free. His face leaned toward her, his hair brimmed with static electricity that tickled her forehead. The heat on the end of his cigarette wafted against her face and a lump of its smoke settled in her throat. He whispered, so only she heard: "I am not a savage. Unlike my comrade. I hate to hurt young women. So do not give me a reason."

She turned and coughed. Her eyes, irritated, welled with tears.

"Assistant Headmaster," said Miss Britz, "The girl's clearly upset. I'm her teacher, so maybe she'll be more comfortable if I ask her."

"Oh no." He raised a hand and curled his horribly chapped lips into a granite smile. "Do not worry. We have reached an understanding. There are no more issues. Correct, Enid Lim?"

The tiny cobalt spark in his eye socket winked.

Obviously, in her current situation, she must acquiesce. "Correct," she said with a firm certainty. However, she harbored reservations about silent agreement. Firstly, she had no reason to trust this man. Secondly, even if she did, did she want to allow him to track down and assumedly murder the girl Shinozaki?

The deep-set eye twinkled and the fake Assistant Headmaster drew back. "Very well. You are a good girl. I expect best behavior from you."

"Did she tell you what you need to know?" said Mr. Yuzon.

"Yes." He swung a lazy half circle and teetered precariously back down the hall. "Please inform me if she says anything new. I have one more thing. I wish to check the students. I must know how many are here."

Both teachers agreed to this simple request. It made sense for the police to know such a statistic. But Lim figured the real reason was to check the classrooms for Shinozaki, as the substitute teacher had done earlier in the morning. She checked her watch. An hour had passed since first period began.

"You crazy bitch," said the someone who did not exist. She had her mother's voice again, and Lim flinched because her mother never used such foul language.

"The fun fellows wear their mask," said the someone who did not exist.

God, she really was crazy. What was she doing? Nothing was real. The Assistant Headmaster was not fake, she was fake. Nothing he said harbored the meanings she thought. She imagined his whispers like she imagined the someone who did not exist. Schizophrenia! It burrowed in her brain. She had bugs inside her, they crawled and crawled. Great shuffling cockroaches with long whisker antennae. It tickled the backs of her eye sockets and she sagged against the wall while the Assistant Headmaster, Mr. Yuzon, and Miss Britz went into the first classroom full of students. She checked her watch again and realized her whole arm trembled.

A conspiracy of magicians. They kept the world unaware of their existence and prowled the hallways of her school. Ha! They must have been watching her a long time. In her bedroom she had only one object of sentimental value, a stuffed dog with spots. You can surveil someone through one of those, she should have eradicated it with all the others. Damned if her brother bought it for her! Who did it? Who did it? What was her mother hiding in her bedroom?

She seized her necktie and drew it taut around her neck. Her mouth unhinged with a breath and her eyes roved. She had to get ahold of herself. These thoughts, these ideas were wrong. She had something her brother did not—an expectation of the disease that afflicted her. She could defeat it through willpower. Through logic. She knew that certain precepts governed this world. If she applied those precepts to her delusions she could dispel them. She knew it! No matter what ideas felt right, facts could prove anything. They would never do to Enid Lim

what they did to her brother. They would never lock her up. She wanted none of their medication, either. She could live a normal life, psychosis or not!

A door opened and the Assistant Headmaster emerged with the other teachers. He had counted the students. Mr. Yuzon laughed in good nature, Miss Britz giggled at the end of an untold joke. Both seemed reassured after a bout of nervousness.

"Ciao. Enid Lim." The Assistant Headmaster saluted her with a lazy flick of two fingers. He swiveled on his heel and swayed toward the stairwell.

The red treetops outside went still. Light rippled against the long line of windows. The Assistant Headmaster went rigid at once and turned toward the light, one hand jabbing into his blazer as his red cross tie flapped upward.

The window beside him shattered. The Assistant Headmaster lurched back as blood splattered from between his shoulder blades and struck the wall in a red circle. A second shot pierced the air and plastered him against the same wall, then a third and fourth shot, each rocking the Assistant Headmaster's body with rapid but total spasms. His head slumped, although the cigarette remained clutched in his lips. The hand fell out of his jacket; it held a pistol.

Miss Britz said, "Oh, the window broke."

Mr. Yuzon said, "You okay there bud?"

Lim clapped a hand to her mouth, which was how she avoided shrieking in terror. The Assistant Headmaster's blood dribbled the outer wall of Classroom 202. Mr. Yuzon extended a hand like he might help him stand back up, while Miss Britz bent down to examine the shards of broken glass.

Out the trees and through the broken window somersaulted the new girl, Shinozaki. Miss Britz hopped back in surprise but Shinozaki, her face streaked with determination, only pushed past her and extended a hand with a bright golden revolver toward the slumped head of the Assistant Headmaster.

"Did you *shoot* him?" Lim said, even though it sounded like a stupid thing to say, but she had no other words in her brain at that moment to say instead.

Shinozaki's head snapped toward her. "You saw?!" And the next moment the smoke from the Assistant Headmaster's cigarette turned from red to black and both Mr. Yuzon and Miss Britz dropped to the floor without the slightest sign of life in either's body. "Fuck!" said Shinozaki as she reaffirmed her aim and discharged her revolver again, but by the time it went off it was already sailing out of her hand after the Assistant Headmaster's leg shot upward and kicked it away. The gunshot thundered and another window shattered and the classroom door beside Lim opened and Wintermint stuck out her head and asked:

"Something happening out here?"

The black smoke, which had previously hung in the air in a lazy pattern, suddenly coalesced into a large shadow and sped toward Wintermint. Lim shoved Wintermint back into the classroom and slammed the door shut moments before the smoke shadow cascaded upon her. Lim's lungs swelled with ash and she fell against the door unable to speak but determined to keep Wintermint and the others inside, nothing else but a vague idea of the danger of this smoke and what had happened to the teachers and the gunshots and—

A huge force hit the door and she hurtled back. Two male students her eyes were too bleary to identify had slammed the door open and the moment they did so both of them dropped to the floor with the same glass-eyed expression as Mr. Yuzon and Miss Britz. Someone said "What's going on!" and someone else started to scream and Lim tried to stand up only for another big unidentified object to plow into her from the side and drag her across the tile. She looked up, it was Shinozaki now, Shinozaki had her by the collar and hoisted her against the wall and drew a knife to her throat.

"ARE YOU CYAN PARFAIT?" she said.

Lim opened her mouth to say "What" but from her lips only billowed a thick plume of cigarette smoke that lunged at Shinozaki in the shape of wolf with a jaw of wispy dagger fangs. All the gurgling black filth in her lungs wrenched its way out in one suffocating gasp that caused her vision to flash a murky red. When her eyes saw things again she was on the ground and the ceiling swirled above her. Liquid trickled from the corner of her mouth.

She sat up. Everything rattled inside her, but her first thought was for the classroom door, she had to close it before any more of her friends—the door was already closed. She glanced at the hallway and for a moment thought nothing had happened, she had hallucinated everything, but then she blinked and the prone forms of Mr. Yuzon and Miss Britz remained and so did the tableau of the fake Assistant Headmaster's blood and so did the Assistant Headmaster himself, his suit full of holes and red rivulets running down his body. He swayed drunkenly, with a little less control than his similar movements previously, and half of him was almost completely shrouded in his smoke. It enveloped his head, then streamed into his gunshot wounds in tuberous coils. She had no idea why she thought the word "tuberous" at that moment. Did she mean to liken the shape of the smoky tendrils to the shape of a root? The comparison didn't seem quite right, and Lim clenched her teeth in frustration as she tried to better convey herself. She needed more exactitude in her thoughts. She had lost control and all sorts of insane things had happened in quick succession. It felt to her as though everything she had seen happened *because* she lost control over her perspicacity of thought. "Perspicacity" was the correct word. Lim loved that word and everything it signified.

She stood up, feeling as though she had regained control. The Assistant Headmaster no longer had bullet wounds. Alright. So the smoke from his cigarette healed him. It exhibited a wide array of fantastic properties. She needed to sort her experiences into clear plastic containers and test each to determine the real from the fake—

A hand wrapped around her chest from behind and the barrel of a gun shoved against her temple. Shinozaki's face shoved past Lim's shoulder and said to the Assistant Headmaster: "Make another move, Malmaison, and I blow Miss Parfait's dome off."

Despite her situation, which Lim had still not decided was real or not, she found relief in the fact that she finally had a name for the fake Assistant Headmaster. Malmaison tapped his lower lip and his cigarette bobbed. "That girl is not Cyan Parfait. She is merely immune."

"Yeah. Sure," said Shinozaki. "Like they let nutters into a school like this."

Terror welled up in Lim again, as Shinozaki seemed clearly deranged and liable to actually pull the trigger, but this time Lim had the foresight—wrong word—had the preparation—not right either, but close enough—to force it back down. She said, as calm and *perspicacious* as possible: "Mr. Malmaison, has your smoke murdered my teachers and classmates?"

"No," said Malmaison. "I made them insensible. It is better they did not see Shinozaki. She flagrantly disregards our rules."

"Step back." Shinozaki gripped Lim tighter. "Step back now you Quebecois piece of shit or I'll splatter her brains, Cyan Parfait or no."

Malmaison swayed back, forth, like a charmed cobra, but he did not step back. Lim felt Shinozaki tighten with rage; the revolver's muzzle pushed into her skin. To deflect the situation, she said: "May I inquire as to why I have been mistaken for this Cyan Parfait? I assure you, I would never don such a dubious moniker." Yes, these words were right. These were perspicacious words that conveyed exactly what Lim meant. Not the slightest disjunct existed between Lim's thoughts and voice, and when she spoke her words made sense, so that meant her thoughts made sense as well. As long as that fact held true, she could trust herself to make the right decisions.

"Look you wordy dumbass shut up and stop fucking around," said Shinozaki.

"Let her go," said Malmaison. "Her peers will realize she's insane. Then they will intern her. That is the natural order. She means nothing to you. She is not Cyan Parfait."

"I will not be interned," said Lim.

"Aw crap," said Shinozaki. She swung her back against the nearest wall and dragged Lim with her, covering her body with Lim's. The purpose of this movement became clear immediately. Down the hallway in the direction previously at Shinozaki's back stood another figure. Lim recognized him: the substitute teacher, his dummy perched upon his shoulder. No trace remained of the wound Lim inflicted upon his eyeball, and his comportment was as rigid as before.

"Took some time," said Malmaison.

"Bah!" said the dummy. One wooden arm creaked in a dismissive wave. "I came soon's I heard the gunshots. The hell's this, Shinozaki's in cahoots with this obnoxious broad already?"

"Nobody's in cahoots," said Shinozaki. "She's my *hostage*, you fucking dolt. Move closer I kill her."

"Ah, well that's easy," said the dummy. "Let's slice em up both."

"No no no," said Malmaison. "We are not doing that. We are not killing civilians." He shook his head sadly and the smoke inched closer. Shinozaki sidestepped away from it.

"She stabbed Murdock's eye out." The dummy indicated the man who held it.

"You tried to strangle me," said Lim.

"You tried to blow my cover ya dumb bitch!"

"We can refrain from the slurs," said Lim.

While they traded their banter, Shinozaki's body became tense. She pressed Lim closer to her and hooked her hand with the golden revolver under Lim's arm to point alternatively on the slowly-advancing Malmaison and the less-slowly approaching man with the dummy, apparently named Murdock. Lim, despite the calm demeanor she took great pains to convey, had her own anxieties about this situation, which contained three dangerous people of whom two expressed no qualms about killing her. Malmaison's wispy smoke extended the width of the corridor and ebbed closer, while from the dummy's gesticulating hands emerged long silver threads perceptible only from the glint caused by the light against them. The threads—similar to the one that had sliced open Lim's knee—dropped to the floor and spread out in long, evenly-spaced lines down the tile.

The primary aim of these preparations seemed to be to limit the available space for Shinozaki to maneuver. A bad situation indeed, but Lim perceived two possible options to escape. First, there was the door to the calculus classroom, directly beside them. But that would endanger the students inside. The other option—

The door to the calculus classroom flung open and a female student staggered out, her nose and mouth covered by a rag, swimming goggles over her eyes, and what looked like an Ethernet cable tied around her waist. It took the tennis racket clutched in her hands for Lim to recognize Wintermint.

"Lim—you okay?" she said. "What's going on, is there a gas leak?"

"Get back inside," said Lim, "It's—"

Shinozaki hoisted Lim with one arm and hurled her out the shattered window. Lim's body twisted in air, her knees flung up close to her face, her necktie slapped her chin, and her skirt went all over. She revolved, the tile and plaster of the Academic building transmogrified into the pure red oblivion of the sky and trees, and then—with a crash of leaves—she struck a heavy branch. Her spine bent hard and a rash breath escaped her. She bounced forward—or backward, she could not tell—and plummeted.

CHAPTER 3

She hit three more branches on the way down and landed on her head.

Ouch.

From her inverted vantage, she saw only Shinozaki's shoes plant in the ground in front of her face. Lim was about to voice a complaint about the rough treatment (although the window had been the second option for escape Lim was considering), but before she managed to speak something rough and thick curled around her chest.

It was a tree root. Living, writhing. Loamy soil churned where it emerged from the base of the trunk. It crept under her arm and looped around her back.

Then it started to pull her into the ground. The soft dirt parted as her head sank. These proceedings stunned Lim so much she did not even react until she could no longer see and the soil started to clog her nostrils. She sneezed with a violent tremble of her entire body that left a hard and scratchy lump in the back of her throat, but the dirt only cleared for a moment and soon came back, and now her mouth was underground too, and her neck. What was this? A tree? Did Murdock or Malmaison do this, or Shinozaki? This couldn't be real. Somehow she could believe everything else, or at least believe it as a hallucination, but this was so bizarre and bogus she thought it had to be something else, caused by the slam her head took when she fell. But she really could not breathe, she opened her mouth and only dirt fell in, her arms braced against the ground to try and pull her head back out but they only began to sink as well, her legs kicked the air uselessly. A root or branch or something rough and hard got around one of her ankles and bound it. Another branch went for the other leg, and she had to strike furious with her foot to keep it at bay.

All the while not a shred of oxygen went into her lungs. She thrashed every inch of her body to break the hold of the monstrous living tree and it only constricted tighter against her, it only dragged her deeper down, down. She was in past her shoulders now, and only her one frantic free foot remained to fight back, but fight against what and to what avail she had only the barest comprehension. Her scalp struck something hard which she at first thought was a more solid layer of ground under the silty topsoil but which by touch she soon identified as the rough texture of tree bark, something in this coarse edifice broke open and the roots and branches funneled her head between its fragments. A mouth, it had to be a mouth underneath the ground, glutinous sap dribbled onto her head and gummed up her hair, the tree was *eating* her. This made no sense, this defied logic and rationality. What even could it look like for a tree to have a mouth under the soil, at the very base of its trunk?

No.

It made no sense. It could not be real. In her mind she visualized a tree. It had a trunk and branches and leaves and long rhizomatic roots that formed their own sort of support structure. For a tree to devour food, that necessitated some form of digestive system, but only an unnatural digestive tract would—would—

"Die bitch," said the someone who did not exist.

—Would propel the food upward from the base of the body, it would be needlessly energy-intensive to develop such a system, if not altogether impossible. It fought against gravity. Here was Lim, being fed upward into the body of the tree—it defied reason. No, if a tree were to devour living food rather than derive energy via photosynthesis—and what would the

point even of that adaptation be for a tree species with a broad canopy that had ample opportunity to capture sunlight?—even if we assume this tree is in fact carnivorous, would it not make great sense to capture food in its branches, let's say birds or squirrels or even large insects, and then pull them downward into the tree's body, where gravity would pull the morsel through the digestive tract and deposit the waste into the soil, thus fertilizing it?

Die bitch!

Her mind drifted on a wave of air and colors crept across her lack of vision. She had no idea whether she were alive or whether she had suffocated.

Then the roots coiled around her loosened. The branch around her leg fell away. She swung her legs to the ground and with what remained of her strength she tried to wrench her head out of the ground.

At first, nothing happened. Then the sticky sap congealed in her hair gave way. The ground next to her ears rumbled and her head popped back into the air.

She spat a mouthful of dirt and heaved for air. She rolled over on the ground and spat, and then vomited. She sneezed three, four, five times, and each time a solid jet of dirt sprayed out each nostril.

"Hnnnrgh, heeeeah," she said. She retched, although little came out save a trickle of stomach fluids. She blinked fifty times in rapid succession until she could see more than a painful sting in her irises.

Lim, lightheaded and unsure, pulled herself to a simulacrum of standing. Did the tree stop eating her? *Why* did it stop eating her? Well, that was simple. Because the tree could not eat her. It was physically illogical that a tree would have the proper internal organs necessary for such a task, and even if by some evolutionary fluke it did, in no way would they operate in the way they were attempting to operate on Lim. She had proven as such in her thoughts, and because she proved the tree could not exist in its current form, it ceased to exist in that form. She blinked again and rubbed her eyes and before her loomed a normal, red-leaved tree.

"Duck," said Shinozaki.

Lim barely needed to attempt to duck; she made the slightest movement and lost her balance entirely. As she toppled, something twanged over her head fast enough to split the stagnant air and leave a metal echo on its stillness. She rolled over and spat more of the acrid wash of grainy nausea out her mouth. In the narrow strip of lawn between the Academic building and the line of red trees, Shinozaki danced and darted. More of the barely-perceptible silver lines sliced in ripple patterns across the battlefield, rending the ground and tossing up chunks of earth and grass. They skipped with the pliability and fluidity of jump ropes, even though they looked and sounded metal. They extended from the hands of Murdock's dummy, who had joined them on the grassy strip, devoid of his master.

(Or did the dummy master the man? No, a dummy is an inanimate object. Murdock was quite the ventriloquist.)

Lim clung to the trunk of the tree that tried to eat her and used it for support to rise again, careful to remain on the side defended from the dummy's wire attacks. She peeked around the edge and sought out Murdock and Malmaison. She spotted the former in the second-story window they had jumped from. No sign of the latter. How close did Murdock have to be to operate his dummy? In the Administration building it had been in a completely different room and worked seamlessly. But Lim had as of yet not seen it function more than twenty or thirty meters from its master.

The taste of vomit would not leave her mouth. At least she started to breathe again. Shinozaki bolted into a side flip as a line whipped down at her, then she cleaved to the Academic building wall to avoid a second swipe that bounced against a pair of engaged columns and chipped shards of brick off each. Another wire—it might actually have been the first one she dodged, Lim had difficulty keeping track—slapped down between the columns and skittered back and forth. Shinozaki jumped against the side of one column, ricocheted off it, and dove to the other side to evade the onslaught. She still clutched the golden revolver but the wires struck so fast she lacked an opportunity to discharge it. Her skin bled from twenty tiny lacerations and one deep gash on her shoulder.

The dummy cackled with a hollow clatter of its wooden jaw as it raised its arms and brought them down again to conduct its wires. It clearly only had two wires, one for each hand, although in the hallway Lim remembered at least four. Perhaps the dummy (it still felt strange to think of it as an entity separate from Murdock) was holding back, or perhaps the extra wires came from Murdock himself... Lim paid especial note to this information, now certain her entanglement in these affairs necessitated it.

Shinozaki had leapt between the columns until she was halfway back to the second story, but a high slice from the second wire forced her to dive sideways, through the open air and onto her shoulder in the middle of the arena.

It soon became clear from her extended arm and her revolver aimed directly at the dummy's skull. It erupted with a flash of gunpowder and the dummy snapped back with a steaming hole in its forehead. Nonetheless, it continued to cackle, although the wires went slack.

"Lim, Lim what the hell!" shouted Wintermint. She burst out the Academic building's front door and dashed along the line of trees, no longer bound by the Ethernet cable but still flailing the tennis racket. No, "flail" was another one of those incorrect words. Wintermint had far more graceful movements than that. She did not captain the school's tennis team—among the best in the (admittedly small) state of Rhode Island—for no reason. If one described Lim as precise in her academics, then Wintermint was precise in her athletics. The infuriating thing about Wintermint, however, was that despite being an utter slob in her academics, she still aced every test plopped on her desk.

Wintermint skidded to Lim's side behind the tree and tugged down the rag over her mouth. "You okay? The hell's going on, is that new girl gonzo?"

Shinozaki crouched behind a column and reloaded her golden revolver. The dummy, the hole in its head still fuming, trembled and started to rise. Lim wondered how much Wintermint had actually perceived, but asking her outright obviously would pay no dividends.

She pressed a hand to her head. "I'm a trifle dazed. What happened to me." As a terrible liar, the best she could manage was a dull monotone.

"The new girl pushed you out the window and jumped out too, me and the Assistant Headmaster—Jesus and what's she doing now, she's just freaking out."

So Shinozaki "pushed" Lim out the window. Rather than "hurled." And if Wintermint could see neither the dummy nor the revolver, as Lim hypothesized, then Shinozaki's erratic dives and rolls must look like insanity.

The front door opened again and Malmaison moseyed out, taking especial caution. He had his hand in his jacket and likely his gun in there, too.

"Let's get the fuck outta here Lim." Wintermint seized her sleeve and tugged with unexpected force that almost tilted Lim off-balance. "I don't like whatever this shit is."

She started to drag Lim back toward the Academic building, while Malmaison approached Shinozaki. Shinozaki fired her revolver at him twice, but all he did was sidewind slightly and neither shot connected. Wintermint made no reaction to the explosive blast, but Lim gripped her wrist and stopped her.

"No." She pointed to the window, where Murdock lingered. "That's the man who attacked me. That's him. You see him, right?"

"Yeah, I see him, shit he's staring right at us." Wintermint danced back, away from the line of trees and into the school's central courtyard, around which most of its buildings were arranged in a loose circle. "Okay, this way, we'll go somewhere else."

A change, slight but perceptible, had overcome the school grounds since Lim's previous foray. The red sky still glazed everything, but now amid its tenebrous clouds hovered a distended moon. Its pure whiteness sheared through the bloody aura that pervaded all other things; Lim's eyes were drawn to it as Wintermint dragged her into a meadow of tall stalks of wheat and chaff. The bent and snapped back against her cheeks but all she saw was that moon, nearly half her vision consumed by it. Unnaturally large. And—she checked her watch—only three forty-five in the afternoon.

Wait...

Wasn't it only nine in the morning a few minutes ago?

"Stay out of there. You idiot children. Stay out," said the tiny voice of Malmaison. Lim's petrified sight broke from the moon and she turned back to see him and the row of trees and the Academic building miles away, far down a winding stone walkway amid the meadow.

"Stay out of what!" said Wintermint, more to herself than as a reply. She delved deeper into taller and taller stalks and Lim stumbled as well as she could to keep up.

A coagulated lump formed in Lim's respiratory system. So much had happened she had not remembered right away. But when she first fled the Administration building, when the

dummy first sliced her knee, she had seen—shadows—eyes—in the dark spaces, among the trees and shrubs, in the crevices between walls. The landscape had only become more unreal sense then, and in this tall grass—

Wintermint's feet flew out from under her and she dropped onto her hip with a tangled grunt. Lim, clutching her hand, toppled over her.

The grass that Wintermint had shoved aside snapped back into position and sealed them into a chamber comprised of jointed, dewy stalks. The expansive sky contracted into only the white surface of the moon and a pale effervescence shrouded them both.

Something, a large insect or avian perhaps, chirruped nearby.

"What the fuck," said Wintermint. "What tripped me?"

"It doesn't matter," said Lim, although she had a suspicion it mattered. She helped Wintermint up and pushed her to get her moving again. "If I tell you to swing your racket, will you swing it? Even if it looks like nothing's there, I need your trust right now."

Wintermint made no response but continued forward. Lim bit her lip, unsure if Wintermint simply did not hear or whether the patent idiocy of Lim's request had pressed past the threshold of what Wintermint was willing to stomach.

The grass in front of them parted and Lim wrapped her arms around Wintermint's waist and dragged her to the ground before a scythe slashed through the space where their necks had been instants before. Wintermint shouted: "Jesus fuck, did you trip me last time too?" But Lim's attention was focused on the monstrous creature before them, a gigantic chittering insectoid that loomed overhead and examined them with bulbous compound eyes. For arms it bore two gleaming curved scythes and despite notable anatomical deviations Lim recognized it as a praying mantis. *A creature fit for a Catholic school.* Yes, of course. But it was not quite a praying mantis, even beyond the magnified size, because its arms were incorrect, you see a normal praying mantis does have hooked arms in a shape reminiscent of scythes, this praying mantis seemed to have actual metal implements affixed to its arm, blades so smooth and polished Lim's face rippled in their reflection, and so long they reached close to the ground which was likely impractical for the creature's mobility.

Like the tree. It quit devouring her the moment she proved it impractical. A similar dissolution of this creature—

Wintermint jolted upright with a frustrated hiss. The moment she stood, the mantis lashed out with freakish agility. Wintermint fell back onto Lim, her mouth open wide. A diagonal gash from her shoulder to her hip had appeared in her uniform's coat, blouse, and necktie, and after a moment's delay this gash welled with blood. Real blood.

"Hey, hey, are you okay?" Lim shook Wintermint and jostled her head. Her face remained unchanged—total stupefaction and shock. Then she blinked, she was not dead, and the gash on closer observation had only glanced against her.

The mantis skittered forward on its collection of legs until it cast a shadow over them formed by the moonlight. Its head tilted, its scythe dripped with a thin line of Wintermint's blood. Lim wrenched the tennis racket from Wintermint's hand, it moved its scythes swiftly, she had to strike before it—

A rocket erupted by her face and crushed her eardrum, she jerked both away from and toward the sound in *A creature fit for a Catholic school* no why did she think that phrase that made no sense her head rang with abominable noise and from the thicket beside her burst Shinozaki and her golden revolver which unleashed a second shot that Lim was better prepared for and farther away from but which still slammed a dumbbell against her skull. Half the mantid's triangular head exploded in a gush of unguent gore. The insect staggered back, the remains of its head twitching on its elongated neck. Its bloody brains splattered the swaying grain and its whole body ticked back and forth like a stopped—Lim checked her watch. It too was drenched in blood. She had blood all over her, mixed with dried dirt and solidified sap that pricked her skin.

"Move moron, it's not dead and it's not alone!" Shinozaki tore into bush.

The half-headed mantis planted its scythes in the ground for support as it reeled from the removal of most of its central nervous system. Probably that ought to make it dead or at least totally paralyzed but Lim remembered stories about cockroaches that could survive when decapitated so perhaps it was feasible; she had little time to ponder anyway. She dragged Wintermint off the ground and started to run after Shinozaki but Wintermint remained rooted to the spot.

"Lim," she said, her eyes still shellshocked, "The girl's a maniac. She cut me, do you see this? She pushed you out a window!"

Lim kept an eye on the mantis as it started to recover. "She didn't cut you. You were cut from the front and she was behind us, so it's impossible. And she pushed me out the window to save me from the real maniac in the suit, so—"

"In the suit?"

The mantis tilted its head to the side and more of its brains dripped out in goopy masses. "Yes, the man in the suit. I pointed him out to you a minute ago, he was on the second story of the Academic building."

But Wintermint only blinked in dumb incomprehension. Shoot, that was right! When she first returned to the Academic building, none of them remembered Murdock at all, even though he had introduced himself as their substitute teacher. If Malmaison had an ability that made him look like the Assistant Headmaster, then an ability that erased memories remained similarly plausible... She seized Wintermint's wrist and ran with enough of a sudden jolt to wrench her from her stalwart standing position.

"I'll explain once we're safe, it's dangerous here!" She almost added that they could trust Shinozaki, but stopped herself because she had absolutely no reason to trust Shinozaki beyond the fact that she saved them from the mantis, an action that might be coincidental to Shinozaki's own flight from her pursuers.

The mantis, rebalanced, retracted its scythes from the soil and raised one to swipe at their backs, but Wintermint became pliant enough to pull forward and the grass closed behind them before the slash came to fruition. Lim led the way in utter blindness a few moments before Wintermint overtook her. For the best, as Wintermint's blindness to the bizarre additions to their landscape gave her a much better idea of the route to the next building.

"Do you see Shinozaki?" said Lim.

"The new girl? She right there in front of us—you blind?"

"Shinozaki!" Lim shouted even as the whipping stalks slapped against her lips. "Slow down, we need to stay together!"

"She's *right in front of us*," said Wintermint. "New girl, I like you but if you cut me I'm gonna run you down and smash your fucking face in!"

A gunshot cracked from far behind but the bullet drilled into the ground close enough for Lim to spot the spray of dirt it sent up. Lim flinched; Wintermint flinched too. The movement was so natural it took Lim a moment to realize how unnatural it was.

"They're shooting at us," said Wintermint, surprisingly calmly.

"You *heard* it?" said Lim.

"Malmaison has real guns," said Shinozaki's disembodied voice from some distance in front of them. "He must have gotten on the roof with a rifle. Quit screaming and he's as blind as we are."

Another shot landed. Closer, the whirr of the bullet traveled a foot or two from her ear. Wintermint screamed: "We're in an open fucking field and you think he can't see us?!"

"Cyan, who is this basic ass bitch you got with you," said Shinozaki.

"I told you, I'm not Cyan Parfait," said Lim.

"*What?!*" said Wintermint. If Lim was confused, she could only marvel at the utter bafflement Wintermint must have to put up with at the moment.

A third shot that landed near Lim's foot stifled further conversation. She had considered Malmaison the reasonable one, but if he was firing blind based on their voices, then he could hardly be *that* concerned with Lim's safety. Or else he considered himself a hotshot. Or also he had more voodoo magical powers at his disposal.

The grass parted and they hit the Girl's Dormitory, a grand Gilded Age holdover with every frilly architectural accoutrement in the book—colonnades, Corinthian capitals, elaborate cornices, semicircular abutments, gables, spires—which stood in stark contrast to the Boy's Dormitory on the opposite end of the school which had a more bland industrial brick style. Shinozaki kicked at the front door and the two pointless windows that flanked it on either side.

As Wintermint and Lim tromped up the stairs, Shinozaki's shoulder blew open and her blood splattered across the stonework. Wintermint bowled her aside with a tackle and swiped her identification card over the door's electronic reader. A mechanism clicked, the door opened. Wintermint shoved Lim inside, then doubled back to drag Shinozaki in afterward. Another shot rang out but only thudded harmless into the closing door.

The foyer of the Girls Dormitory matched the aesthetic of its exterior, a dimly-lit but grandiose entryway that belonged in a haunted mansion or funeral parlor. It had two curved stairways that ascended along its rotund walls to a partial second level. Everything was doily or frilled with a rococo sheen, but the chandelier did not work; its bulbs had shattered. The glass covered the circular floral-patterned rug in the central space and crackled as Wintermint tromped over it in her tennis shoes.

Shinozaki staggered to the base of the left stairway and toppled a small table with a vase of carnations. She hooked her good arm around the banister and sagged with heavy exhalations as blood rushed down her shoulder. Lim approached with caution; the revolver remained clutched in Shinozaki's mobile hand.

"Nobody else is gonna be here," said Wintermint, "Is there anything we can do for her?"

"...I'm fine... Don't worry about it," Shinozaki muttered. Her wrist twisted and the barrel of the revolver aimed at Lim's face. After another breath, Shinozaki spoke with more cohesion: "The bullet only grazed me, it looks way worse than it is."

It clearly looked as though Shinozaki had a blasted hole above her armpit. But Wintermint considered the wound by biting her thumbnail and nodding. "You're right, that's not as bad as I first thought. Shit. At least we're safe now."

Lim was about to interject, but when she glanced back, Shinozaki's shoulder *did* seem not so bad. The bullet hole had contracted and only a thin trickle of blood ran from it. Malmaison had recovered from several gunshots, so Lim supposed surprise was foolish.

"The cut on your chest is probably worse," said Shinozaki. "What's your name again?"

"Lindsay, Lindsay Wintermint. And you're Adrienne Shinozaki. And this is my friend Enid Lim, now everyone knows everyone's name and we can focus on the important crap, like not dying."

"That's right." Shinozaki leaned against the banister, now appearing more casual than pained. The barrel of her revolver remained aimed at Lim, but her arm was at such a relaxed angle it might have been pointed that way by sheer accident—except it was most definitely not. "What's this place, a reception hall? Some kinda, uh, I dunno. What is this place."

"Dorms," said Wintermint. "I have room here, let's go."

"Yeah yeah." Shinozaki and Wintermint bounced off one another well in conversation, they had an agreeable rapport and Lim's lack of sociability excluded her. "Uh first, go find a bandage or paper or something, something we can wrap our wounds. Eden and I will watch the windows to make sure nobody's coming."

"Right." Wintermint tromped up the stairs without bothering to correct the mistake on Lim's name.

After she left, Lim said, "My name is Enid, not Eden. But I would prefer you call me Lim."

Shinozaki's arm straightened and any ambiguity regarding her intentions in aiming her gun dissipated. "Look kiddo, you still top my Cyan Parfait suspect list, in fact you're my only damn suspect right now. Seems like a Parfait move to rope in a normie to keep me on leash."

A... normie. Lim supposed she meant Wintermint, although who knew what threadbare strand of logic this Adrienne Shinozaki operated upon.

"I assume Cyan Parfait is the one behind the transformations to the school's geography. Neither Malmaison nor Murdock seemed too keen to follow us into the field, so I doubt they had control over what occurred there, at least." It also explained how Lim escaped Murdock and his dummy when she fled the Administration building. That had been when the red sky and peering shadows first manifested.

"Don't be fucking cute," said Shinozaki. "Very few people can even *perceive* magic, and I know for a fact this school already has one."

A portrait of the scenario began to sketch in Lim's mind. This "Cyan Parfait" identity attended All Saints Academy, either as pupil or pedagogue. Shinozaki, for reasons unknown, intended to kill Cyan Parfait, while Murdock and Malmaison intended to kill Shinozaki. These personages had thus converged on the academy and plunged everything into madness.

Although Lim had leapt to conclusions and assumed Cyan Parfait was the one who altered the school, it was possible that Shinozaki herself had done so in order to elude her pursuers. But she had saved Lim and Wintermint from the mantis. Alternative possibilities existed; Lim must not exclude anything except the absolutely excludable. Understanding the rules of this so-called "magic" became imperative for placing its effects within a logical framework.

Despite what she had seen, Lim did not believe in magic. She did have a modicum of faith in hitherto-unobserved but ultimately scientific phenomena.

And if all else fails, you can always fall back on the schizophrenia angle.

Lim would rather not do that.

Occam's razor. Snick, snick.

Shut up.

"What defines whether a human can perceive this 'magic,' as you call it," said Lim.

Shinozaki narrowed her eyes. She brushed her shoulder with her empty hand; the wound had almost entirely healed although Lim had at no point discerned any trace of regeneration. Instead, every time Lim happened to notice the wound, it simply seemed to have be less severe than the previous time she saw it. "Quaint question, kid. Stop playing dumb."

"If you truly believed I was feigning ignorance you would have shot me already. Malmaison did not think I was Cyan Parfait. And everything outside tried to kill me as much as anyone else."

"You're too cool under pressure to be a normal human." Shinozaki unlaced from the banister and shoved the revolver under Lim's throat. "Something's off about you. Uncanny."

"Wintermint is relatively calm as well. Human beings do not all conform to the same mold." The whole situation was too bizarre to experience true terror. Or perhaps that was backwards? What did humans fear more than death and the unknown, and had not both of those confronted her?

Lim, as a human being, was a little overtuned. The unknown she feared most was inside her own brain.

And the worry remains that unknown outside your brain is just a byproduct of that internal unknown.

Ha ha.

CHAPTER 4

Wintermint dashed down the stairs. In her hands she clutched several flapping strips of cloth. It seemed she had shredded a t-shirt, perhaps one snatched from a wayward laundry basket. "Yo let's get everything bundled up."

Bandages went onto wounds. Wintermint plastered one to her chest and Shinozaki bound what remained of the hole in her shoulder. Lim reapplied gauze to her knee (the old bandage had come off in the chaos) and some minor injuries she sustained elsewhere.

Then they went to Wintermint's room on the second floor, at the end of the hall. She shared the room with Amy Driscoll, hopefully still alive in the Academic building. The room was a tornado in which swirled the collective belongings of both girls, tennis gear and sweat-stained tank tops draped over stacks of fantasy novels and comic books and video games. A poster of a Korean boy band hung next to one of Picasso's *Guernica*. Figurines of cute cartoon girls stood shoulder-to-shoulder with posable art mannequins. Lim stepped on a juggling ball and she had no idea to which girl it belonged.

The window between the two beds opened onto the east quad. Beyond a vast plain of red wheat that undulated with the movements of unseen creatures were the Art building and the Chapel. Shinozaki's first action upon entering the room was to shut the window and draw the curtain.

"Our next action," said Lim. "We ought to plan it."

"Easy," said Wintermint. "We hide here until the cops show."

"The men who attacked us saw us flee here. They may show eventually."

"They're cautious little twerps," said Shinozaki, "So they'll take their time. But no doubt they're planning a way to get here ASAP."

"The police will come," said Wintermint.

"Doubtful."

Shinozaki paced the narrow, junk-clogged corridor between the two beds and flicked the curtain with a periodic finger to glance outside. Lim checked her watch, but a solid film of gore had solidified atop it and obscured all time. She eyed a water bottle on Wintermint's desk.

"May I drink?"

Wintermint nodded; Lim, parched, downed the whole thing with little decorum. The warm liquid washed the taste of vomit off her tongue and soothed the cracks in her esophagus.

The rehydration afforded her sudden clarity. "Our best plan is to flee the school," she said.

Shinozaki clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth several times in rapid succession while shaking her head. "I get the feeling that's not a possibility. Maybe you know that too and that's why you said it. To fuck me over."

"Whoa calm down," said Wintermint. "Lim's weird but she's fine, she's going to think of the best thing for everyone." She sat upright and looked from Shinozaki to Lim; neither responded. Exasperated, Wintermint rolled onto her feet and dragged open a drawer in her dresser. "I'm getting out of these ruined clothes."

The room remained silent while she shimmied out of her jacket and undid the few buttons that had stayed on her shirt. Her bra had been slashed open too and she took it off. Lim, anxious over Wintermint's casual undressing, turned to the side and stared at a yellow stack of dog-eared fantasy and science fiction paperbacks. They promised melancholic elves in verdant glades and hotshot pilots in solemn space.

"You change too Lim, you look like crap." Wintermint pulled on a maroon polo and pointed to a closet door. "Amy's uniforms will probably fit."

"I would rather not steal your roommate's clothes," said Lim. She did feel disgusting, but she lacked Wintermint's. Self-assurance, so to speak.

But Wintermint insisted and Lim had to swap her clothes hunched over in the corner of the room, half-concealed by the closet door. Driscoll's uniform did fit Lim well enough, but they had several more wrinkles than regulation.

Lim drizzled some water from Wintermint's bottle onto her hand and tried to wash her watch's face. The congealed muck came off, but the hands on the watch only revolved and revolved.

The school's intercom system came to life with the peal of the Administration building bell tower.

"Students," spoke a beleaguered, drained, elongated voice. Lim, Wintermint, and Shinozaki tilted their heads and listened. "Something unfortunate has occurred on our beloved campus."

Despite the extreme exhaustion that plagued it, Lim recognized that dreary drone. Assuredly, everyone at All Saints Academy recognized it. Every single student had to take Theology with Reverend Charousek, a mandatory elective that gathered pupils from all four grade levels into the Chapel for religious instruction. That same emotionless, uncharismatic murmur prattled about Catholic history, Christian morality, interpretations of the Gospels, new translations of the Hebrew and Greek, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the role of Mary, the metaphysics of the Holy Trinity, liturgical symbolism, St. Augustine, hundreds of other saints, the Counter Reformation, and the power of faith. He also taught World Religion, in which he effected an even drier, more detached tone to vivisect Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Confucianism, and various non-Catholic sects. The students languished in pews while Rev. Charousek gripped the pulpit for support in what looked and felt like a service but which, as ample disclaimers explained, was not a service. (Sunday service in the Chapel was also expected, and at these times the reverend managed to animate himself past the point of bitter anemia.)

Rev. Charousek continued: "The situation is... quite dangerous... Everyone should remained indoors and away from windows... for your own safety. Don't attempt to flee the school... The exits are closed." Somnolence dripped from every word. "Good children... who stay quiet... will survive. Bad children will disappear."

"What the hell," said Wintermint.

Shinozaki looked at Lim. She drummed her fingers on her hip and twirled the revolver around her thumb.

"The reason this is happening... is because... some people who do not belong have come to our fair academy. These people are... a dangerous intrusion on our idyllic lives and livelihoods... Kill them. There are three."

The intercom went silent.

"What the hell," Wintermint said again.

"Do you still believe that I am the person you're looking for?" asked Lim.

Shinozaki rose up to Lim, a taller woman than her typical slouch suggested, and gave her shoulder a hard shove toward the door. "We need to talk outside. Alone." She cocked a glance at Wintermint. "Don't worry, nothing you need to worry about."

"Yeah bullshit." Wintermint rose. "Do you two know something I don't? Lim, what is this?"

"Yes, there's no reason to exclude her," said Lim. "She's seen and heard enough by now. She'll believe what we both explain—"

"No, no, no." Shinozaki crushed an exasperated sigh between her teeth and tossed her head with a violent shake. "Normies break when you pull back the curtain. Lindsay, just stay here."

I swear we're not gonna discuss anything interesting to you. Plus we need a lookout. Watch the window will ya?"

The word "normies" had to be the most infantile slang yet invented. Were it not for the situation Lim would have admonished her dubious cohort for its application. Especially toward Wintermint, among the most abnormal people Lim knew, a student who never studied but aced every test, and who exhibited immense athletic acumen on top of it. And everyone liked her, and she had lots of friends. Lim equaled her academic prowess, but had only defeat to concede on every other point. Wintermint brimmed with exceptionalism and for Shinozaki to dismiss her with such a puerile, idiotic word caused Lim to seethe. Why even support Shinozaki? Because she killed the mantis? She had used Lim as a hostage prior to that and seemed concerned only for her own ends. At least Malmaison had objected to threatening lives.

But like fear and many other emotions, Lim concealed anger well. She needed something from Shinozaki: information. After Wintermint made cautious acquiescence to Shinozaki's demand, Shinozaki dragged Lim outside and pulled her around the first bend in the hallway. She shoved Lim against the wall and imprisoned her between two long arms. Shinozaki had rolled the sleeves up on her hoodie and displayed unexpected musculature.

"Okay sunshine I'm willing to tentatively accept that you're not Cyan Parfait, although you're not one hundred percent clear on that?"

"Reverend Charousek certainly seemed to imply he was the one behind the transformation of our school."

Shinozaki glanced over her shoulder. "Likely, sure. But magic goons like me are pretty good at influencing normies to do our bidding. Your friend Lindsay? Pretty fiery chick, no way she'd let us have our chat by ourselves without a good explanation. But I got a way with making people believe me when I tell lies, like about us needing a lookout."

Or about being a transfer student to their school. Up close, Shinozaki no longer seemed like even a teenager. "I'll take tentative trust over nothing. May I at least have some explanation as to what's going on here?"

"Bah fine." Shinozaki glanced over her other shoulder. She kept looking around at the dim dormitory halls and most of the words she spoke away from Lim. "First thing to know: Magic's real. Nuts, right?"

Lim decided to withhold a debate about the reality and definition of "magic" as opposed to a scientifically-explainable but mostly unobserved phenomena. She had no idea how long this precious question and answer session would last before some bizarre interruption flung her into bafflement and incomprehension. "Why can only I perceive your so-called magic?"

"Magic is completely alien to a normal, healthy human brain. They simply cannot see, hear, smell, taste it. Their brains do not operate at the wavelength necessary. Like how a dog can smell shit humans have no idea exists."

"Or light radiation invisible to the naked eye, but which advanced sensors can detect."

"Exactomundo. Which is how the Deep State's kept its existence under wraps. Not hard to hide something nobody can fucking see, am I right?"

Deep State. Normies. Oh dear, who was this person. "But I can see it. Why?"

"Only two reasons why you can see magic," said Shinozaki. "Only two. First is you're magic yourself, duh. Right now there should only be four people in this school who fit that category. Me, Malmaison, Murdock and Happy Harold, and Cyan Parfait."

"That's five."

"Murdock and Happy Harold are one person. Happy Harold's the dummy, Murdock's the man."

Shinozaki's explanations only made everything stupider than Lim had originally supposed them. "And the second reason?"

"Well." Shinozaki hemmed, she stuck a finger in her mouth and stretched out her cheek. She turned away from Lim and paced down the hallway, taking enough steps for Lim to wonder whether she intended to leave. Then she revolved on a heel and said: "Reason two is you're crazy. Literally insane."

"Insane."

"Yeah. I said normal, healthy human brains can't see magic. Well, if your brain's fucked up, if it operates different from other brains, that's a different story."

Lim closed her eyes. "I see."

"Pretty good cover for us, of course. Only people who can see us are the mad ones. Nobody can pick their legitimate observations out of their dime-a-dozen crazy talk. So that sound right, Lim buddy? You got toys in the attic?"

Well. It made sense, Lim supposed. If Lim could see things others couldn't, there must be a reason. If someone was special, they were special because something about them was different from the herd, the "normies" as Shinozaki labeled them. And while Lim had above average intelligence, above average was nothing special. With that in mind, only one other possibility singled her out.

In the dark space behind her eyelids she lingered in solemnity until a ragged sob burst deep down her esophagus, where the nauseous phlegm still rolled in a hard ball. She fought to suppress a second and failed. It did no good to deny it anymore, even though she wanted to, she wanted anything but this answer, she wanted to find something else, some other reason that set Lim apart, anything, maybe a mere genetic deviation, she had a rare gene that gave her the ability to—Foolish, foolish, foolish. Just like her brother!

She pressed her hands to her face and cried. The tears flowed fast and hard at this reality that had lingered at arm's length for some time and only now closed in for the kill. Her head buzzed with the auditory hallucinations, the voices of the someones who did not exist, their

jumbled jeers, their abortive laughter. Ha ha. You can split a pineapple on your arm. The bridges are nice this time of year. They didn't even make sense and Lim hated them. Non sequiturs and nothing else.

Enid Lim had schizophrenia.

Even if she survived this ordeal, they'd just put her in a house. They'd make her swallow pills until she became placid and docile and couldn't think straight. And she had a moral and societal responsibility to accept. Something had singled her out as special, that was for certain. But most special people must be eradicated.

She became aware of someone else sobbing and thought at first it was another voice in her head but she pried open her eyes and through the bleary sheen of tears saw Shinozaki seated beside her. Shinozaki's arm coiled around Lim's shoulder and hugged her close.

"God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," said Shinozaki. "Shit, why am I. Why am I crying too. Fuck. I get so damn emotional over stupid shit like this. God."

"I don't want to be crazy," Lim managed to say.

"God. God they treat people so bad," said Shinozaki.

"It's only just started for me," said Lim. "My brother... My brother, he..." She could say no more.

All previous antipathy toward Shinozaki dispersed. Shinozaki became in an instant a comfort and Lim pressed herself against her side, the two of them crying together in a dark empty hallway filled with doors. The idea that someone could feel empathy for her, for Enid Lim, who was crazy... When for her brother they had only felt disgust... Her mind mixed with confused emotions and thoughts. Her woeful attempt to elucidate her emotions died. Shinozaki held her, she was warm and she felt the feeling Lim felt at that moment and only that mattered.

"They called me crazy too," said Shinozaki. "The bastards out there. You have to always remember you're still a real person. You can't ever forget that."

What under normal circumstances Lim would have disregarded as a meaningless platitude swelled gigantic and profound in her head. She had to remember she was a real person. She was still Enid Lim, because what scared her worst of all was that the disease would eat her brain enough that she would be someone else. A lunatic, with ideas that were not her own. She didn't want to be that someone, that lunatic. She wanted to be Enid Lim the smart girl, the potential valedictorian, who went to school and followed the rules. Even if that life had little else save academic achievement—even if she had sacrificed all other assets for that single-minded success—even if she had foregone sports, hobbies, friends, romance, everything in the pursuit of high grades and a murky potential future as a doctor or lawyer or some other prestigious career of financial security—even if her life was empty it was her life and she had a thing to strive for and now they wanted to take even that. Even that. Even that.

She sobbed for some minutes and then abruptly stopped and dried her eyes. Shinozaki had stopped some time prior but still held her. Lim's confused mixture of emotions ebbed away and embarrassment replaced them. She had displayed weakness.

"It doesn't matter." She stood up and straightened her necktie. She checked her watch. "Thank you for your empathy, Shinozaki. I truly mean that. I don't know why you cried alongside me, but it meant something to me. But it doesn't matter. If I'm insane, that's only relevant to me. It does nothing to ameliorate our current situation."

"Geez." Shinozaki stood too. She kicked a foot and also looked foolish. They both turned away from one another, as if ashamed of such unheralded and distracting intimacy. Neither of them had acted within the confines of their limited characters, and now both had to reaffirm the cages within which they had molded their bodies.

We think of the key, each in his prison. Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison. Another thought in her head. She had a harder time distinguishing whether it was her own thought or not. She recognized the quote from Eliot, which she studied in class.

Lim spoke first, still facing away. "The man who spoke on the intercom was Reverend Charousek. He normally would have taught first period in the Chapel, but the intercom can only be operated from the Administration building."

"I'm surprised you're not gonna ask why I want Cyan Parfait dead and why that Quebecois fuck and his partner want *me* dead."

A trace of the goodwill Lim had felt toward Shinozaki flared again. If Shinozaki offered to explain her situation, perhaps that meant she was not an antagonistic figure, like Lim first suspected. Perhaps she had good reasons for everything.

"Alright, tell me."

"Actually." Shinozaki grabbed Lim's wrist and checked her watch, even though the watch told only useless nothingness. "We can't waste that kinda time. I thought you had to be Cyan Parfait because you're not that crazy for a crazy person but I see now—no offense—I was wrong about that. The odds are low enough I'm willing to take them, so what I need to do now is go to sleep."

"I would prefer to receive some explanations," said Lim.

Shinozaki shook her head and stepped in a random direction with the urgency of needing to go somewhere. "No, this is important. I can't keep dicking around with this shitty revolver." She raised a hand that clutched the golden gun despite her not having had it for the past few minutes. "Before we got sucked into the Fuck Dimension it was pretty good, I almost offed Malmaison, but the reload time's too long and it doesn't have enough bullets."

"You hit him four times, I believe, and he was fine in a few moments. Can he even be killed through conventional means?"

"Oh yeah, he sure can." Shinozaki decided on a direction. It was back toward Wintermint's room; Lim realized her prior hesitation was due to her forgetting the way. "Murdock too. You just gotta kill em real fucking dead."

"You swear too frequently." Lim's goodwill was gone. She wanted explanations, rules. Not generalities. What did, ahem, "real fucking dead" even mean? Dead, as far as Lim knew, was a binary state of being.

Shinozaki knocked on Wintermint's door and it opened. "Alright Lindsay, Lim, I'm gonna take a catnap. You got an alarm in here?"

She did, although it slumbered under a pile of discarded blazers. When Wintermint unearthed it, the digital display blinked random numbers in nonsensical sequences.

"Set it for exactly twenty-one minutes from now," said Shinozaki. "Exactly twenty-one, I got a pretty strict sleep schedule."

"Is this necessary for some reason?" said Lim. Probably to "change her weapon," although Lim saw no reason why sleep controlled such a variable. "I still have no reason to trust you. Why should I even support you? You're dangerous and your motives are unclear."

Shinozaki flopped facedown onto Wintermint's bed. "Honestly, I don't need you to trust me. I don't need you at all, you're a nice girl and I hope things turn out swell given your issues, but Lindsay is more useful to me. I'm low on time because I got caught up in your little pow-wow anyway."

Her words came muffled because her face burrowed into the pillow. She crossed her arms under her body and twisted her lower body to the side to fold her legs at the knees in a sleeping position like a mangled and upside-down mummy. Lim wondered whether Wintermint might remark about the comment on her usefulness, but she seemed absorbed in the task of setting the alarm clock.

More useful because Wintermint can't see the illusions. So to her, the alarm clock's erratic display appeared only as the true time, and she could set the machine as necessary. Meanwhile, Lim saw the illusions but had no "magic" powers. Which made her useless.

"I set the alarm," said Wintermint. "You sure this is the best time for a nap?"

"Oh yeah, trust me. Super important."

"Right..." said Wintermint. "If you say so, I guess."

"Shinozaki has narcolepsy," said Lim. "She experiences extreme drowsiness at times." A thought in her head added: *Dumb bitch could at least offer a plausible explanation instead of relying on magic to convince people.*

Lim shuddered. "Dumb bitch" did not sound like a thought she would have. Worse: the rest of the thought did.

The narcolepsy excuse worked, Wintermint nodded. Lim added: "We discussed it outside. Shinozaki was worried she might nod off at an inopportune time, so I advised her to sleep now. Her disorder embarrasses her, so she only wanted to tell me, but current circumstances leave no time for quibbles."

Wintermint rubbed the back of her head and blinked several times. "Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense."

Lim did not like the way Wintermint spoke and acted when Shinozaki convinced her to do things she had no reason to do. It was still Wintermint, it wasn't like Shinozaki hijacked her mind, but something was off, her demeanor changed. She became... servile.

"Watch the halls while I'm out. If bad guys arrive, stall. They don't know what room I'm in. Got it?" And with a thumbs-up sign, Shinozaki dropped her head onto the pillow and went still as a corpse.

For a time, Lim and Wintermint watched her slumbering form.

Then Wintermint went for the door. "Well, we better do what she said."

Lim snatched her by the upper arm as she passed. "Wintermint, you know a lot of people at this school. Do the words 'Cyan Parfait' remind you of anyone here?"

After a moment's thought, Wintermint shrugged. "Nah. Someone's online handle?"

They went into the hall. Now that a man had actually fired a real gun at them, Lim felt that she had a better chance to convince Wintermint of the more surreal elements of their misadventures. But Shinozaki had made that ominous remark—that normal people break when the curtain pulls back. She was worried, though. If Shinozaki intended to make Wintermint "useful"... It put Wintermint in danger. Given Shinozaki's uncertain morals, she might even consider Wintermint an expendable pawn. And yet what could Lim do to explain, if Shinozaki truly did have the power to influence Wintermint via "magic"? Bah! What should Lim do, should she try to convince Wintermint anyway? Or should she try to flee with Wintermint and leave Shinozaki behind while she slept? It seemed too risky to leave the dormitories alone, even though they were the building closest to the exit. The Reverend *said* the exit was closed, but did Lim trust that? Did she trust anything? In a perfect world she could test these claims. But with the danger as it was... How many students and teachers had died already? Most would have been in class, and the interiors appeared safe. But some would have gone outside, into the fields. And even if the interiors "appeared" safe—Lim was *sick* of the words "appeared" and "seemed"! Sick!

Kill Shinozaki. Easy.

Yeah, she's the problem. Reverend even said she and the other two were the reason why everything got fucked.

Cut her head off.

Shut up. She wanted the someones who did not exist to go back to pointless, idiosyncratic interjections. These savage but logical arguments disturbed her.

"Adrienne's not bad," said Wintermint, and it took Lim a moment to remember that Adrienne was Shinozaki's first name. "She's got a lot more life than most people around here. Hell of a first day at school though."

The minutes passed. Lim had little to say to Wintermint. She checked windows although she remembered the Reverend's warning to stay back from them. The fields outside were changing. The long stalks of grass coiled into wily, narrow tree trunks that bloomed broad canopies and cast the ground in darkness. The red leaves bunched against the windows. Soon they obscured everything.

At least it made it tougher for Murdock and Malmaison to reach them.

"The alarm should go off soon," said Wintermint in the vast solitude of their hallway sentinel, during which they noticed not a single living creature in the halls, not even a wayward student who had skipped class or stayed in bed with a cold. "Let's head back."

When they opened a door a nude woman was lying on top of Shinozaki. The woman's skin was pitch black and she had leathery wings that had folded inward and enveloped Shinozaki's head. The woman's head twisted like an owl's to face them with bright yellow eyes that had no pupils.

Wintermint, of course, failed to see this succubus creature and continued inside. Lim shot out a hand to pull her back but before she reached Wintermint's shoulder the succubus exposed a grin of long fangs and said:

"Aw don't worry about a thing baby, I won't eat ya."

She winked. The alarm rang and the succubus melded into Shinozaki's body. In a second every trace of her, even her wings, had vanished inside Shinozaki.

Shinozaki awoke with an abrupt spurt of energy, her body animated as she swung off Wintermint's bed and bounced to a standing position as though she had only pretended to sleep the entire time. She twisted her upper body in a series of swift stretches and bounced onto Driscoll's bed to circumnavigate Wintermint and Lim, who blocked her path to the door.

"Great. Whoo. Awesome!" By the time she reached the door, she held in her hand a black umbrella with a hooked handle. Wintermint's room was so cluttered with stuff that for a moment Lim thought she snatched it from nearby, but then she realized it was a "magic" weapon similar to the revolver or Murdock's dummy.

An umbrella. She truly thought it would be a better weapon than an actual gun? Well, Lim had no idea what special properties it might have.

Shinozaki streamed into the hallway and Lim and Wintermint followed. "Alright I've had my nap now I feel fucking dandy, just fucking fantastic. Ready to kick some ass and take some names, yo. Now let's find this Reverend guy."

"Uh, Shinozaki," said Lim. She had to speak up and speed to a brisk powerwalk because Shinozaki jaunted toward the stairs. "When were sleeping, I noticed something odd..."

"Ain't got time for this shit, Limmy. Wasted too much already. Part of that's poor planning on my part, whoops. But part of that's because you talk too much, Lim my girl."

"There was something on your back..."

Shinozaki swiveled on her heel, she faced Lim for a moment with her posture at a precarious bent and clicked her tongue with her fingers formed in the shape of a gun and the umbrella hooked around her wrist. "Don't worry about that." Then she swiveled again and continued forward.

Did that mean Shinozaki knew about the demon lady that had subsumed itself within her body? Or had it been a general "don't worry about it" to make Lim shut up? Although Lim had first assumed the succubus harbored malevolent intentions, could it instead be a manifestation of Shinozaki's "magic," perhaps part of the process of "switching her weapon" from the revolver to the umbrella? It felt so undignified to say things like "switching her weapon," as though her life had devolved into a *Y'know just let the naked devil girl kill her* a video game or schlock fantasy novel, the kind Amy Driscoll might read.

"Uh, yeah," said Wintermint. "Why are leaving again? I don't wanna go out there, there's a guy with a gun."

Lim knew that Wintermint would normally say "I'm not going out there" instead of "I don't wanna go out there."

Shinozaki said: "Aw come on Lindsay, you heard the Reverend on the intercom. Totally weird, right? He's obviously behind this whole thing, so we gotta take him out if we want it to end."

"Yeah..." said Wintermint. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

"No, that's not right at all!" said Lim as they descended the stairs. "Listen to yourself, Wintermint. In what way does it sound like a good plan, even if the Reverend is involved? Our adversaries have guns, we have nothing—you didn't even bring your tennis racket."

"Au contraire, mademoiselle," echoed Shinozaki's voice from far below. "We have youthful vigor and feminine wiles. Those doddering old fogies ain't got a chance in hell. Where's the intercom located? In that main office building?"

"Administration, yeah," said Wintermint. She and Lim entered the foyer, where Shinozaki jogged in circles with her umbrella swinging from one hand.

"Suhweet, lead the way my dear Lindsay." She pronounced Lindsay the way it was spelled and struck a dramatic pose that pointed at the front doors. Through the windows, the entire space outside the building had transformed into dense and dark jungle.

sex is weird my mind just goes haywire and weird memories and phrases pop up and idk

Chapter 4: Draft 4 (2020)

Chapter 1

At the edge of All Saints Academy awaited a terrible goddess. But Enid Lim, unable to sleep, knew nothing about it. Instead she assessed the ceiling's slanted geometry and categorized its angles as either right or obtuse. In this way, she might empty her head of thought.

Her roommate always made noise in her sleep. Not to suggest her roommate snored. Lim used "noise" deliberately. The generic word, along with Lim's circumambulatory explanation for her choice of it (said explanation playing in arduous real time inside her head), allowed her to delay striking the true heart of the matter: Her roommate moaned.

When Lim first heard it, she thought her roommate was masturbating. After the fourth night Lim mustered the nerve to tell her to stop, only to discover that her roommate, despite writhing and arching her back and tangling herself in her sheets, was unconscious. Once, Corbett the room over asked Lim about the moaning and Lim automatically told her the truth. She disliked gossip, but when someone asked a question her impulse was to answer. Many considered Lim a measured and reasonable person, but in truth she needed a concerted effort to overcome even the most minor impulses.

Lim's mother laughed.

Sharp cutting laughter that trailed into an echo, a perfect repetition of the same breathy syllable, and only the objective knowledge that her mother was not in the room, was not at the Academy, was not even in Newport corrected Lim's immediate certainty that her mother actually laughed. Lim's roommate made sounds; Lim concocted sounds in her mind. Her mind never rested, it had to whirr and whiz, and no matter how hard she estimated the exact angle of the ceiling her mother's laugh continued to echo. Diminished now, a chuckle, but ringing inside her inner ear, a quiet corkscrew deeper into her brain. Inescapable.

She had to escape. She threw herself out of bed and slipped on some shoes and grabbed her phone and glasses. Curfew started three-point-five hours prior, which meant the faculty-in-residence had already turned off the lights. Lim's eyes adjusted to the darkness long ago, so she effortlessly wandered down the dark hallway and stairwell. She exited via the side door.

All Saints Academy regulated internet use to a few scholarly sites and maintained an elaborate system of prohibited domains, but past the athletic fields and track one could catch a signal from the Wi-Fi of a nearby café. Aimless browsing might clear her head, or maybe she would meet another late night delinquent (the spot was well known) and chat. Anything other than that ringing laughter, which recalled an image of her mother at a party many years ago, wearing a black sleeveless dress and pinching a wineglass by the neck. Lim cut along the edge of the quad, snuck behind the assembly building, and reached the line of trees planted along the east wall that concealed the path to the Wi-Fi hotspot. Her feet crunched leaves. Something small skittered.

Idiot, her mother said, and Lim gripped one eye socket and pantomimed plucking out the eyeball to erase the thought.

The narrow route between the trees and the wall spanned three hundred meters. On the way she checked if her phone picked up the café signal yet, although she knew it hadn't and wouldn't until she reached the end. Twigs stuck in her pajama legs, but she didn't mind, because plucking them out later gave her something to do. The crisp chill on her neck made her shiver delightfully as she walked through the light that shone between the gaps in the trees. Only a few minutes browsing, then she'd return. The chill made her confident she could sleep. When she reentered her room it would linger on her skin and comfort her under the blanket.

She heard voices.

She pocketed her phone and realized she had almost reached the end of the path. The utility shed and the Wi-Fi signal were around the bend, but she heard voices so she stopped and listened.

"Right, right. She's right."

"Not a big deal, yeah? Yeah."

Two different people had spoken, but they had identical voices. Lim leaned forward slowly and peeked around the bend in the wall. Three figures stood in front of the utility shed, their bodies burnt black in the floodlight from above. Two short, one tall.

"The fact of the matter is, ladies, you're outdoors after curfew. That's the fact—objective reality. Your excuses will not *change* objective reality."

That voice Lim recognized. Mrs. Latimer, calculus (Lim had her class tomorrow), and also one of the faculty-in-residence, but for a different dorm hall. The moment Lim made the connection the black splotch became her, definitive features such as her inverted-triangle face and incomprehensible bolo tie, even the slight laziness of her left eye even though Lim could not with this light possibly be able to see that. To her admonishment the smaller figures groaned in unison:

"Awwwww."

"Awwwww!"

"I won't hear about it," said Mrs. Latimer. One hand swished the air and jangled the massive ring of keys she carried everywhere with her. "Our rules at this Academy exist for a reason. I understand you're both new here, but you *will* receive punishment."

The situation, like Mrs. Latimer's features before, revealed itself. Knowledge of the café Wi-Fi had become so ubiquitous that even freshmen and teachers knew about it. Mrs. Latimer had gone to investigate and found these two first years; restrictions awaited them.

The first years protested with such dramatic gesticulations of their limbs that even submerged in shadow the full complexity of their drama became clear. They were like puppets, meant to express as much as possible past the limits of realistic human movement. Lim ceased peeking lest Mrs. Latimer see her but the image of them remained in all their tragic glory and Lim felt zero pity because now the spot was no longer the spot. Well, in truth, the spot didn't matter to her much. She wasn't like some students who had long-distance boyfriends and required the spot to function. Really, she only came this way to clear her head. She expected Ryan and Corbett to grouse when she told them, though, and played out the entire future conversation in her head as she walked back the way she came.

Soon the voices by the utility shed trailed off behind her. Who had those stupid first years been anyway? All Saints Academy only had so many students, but then again, they were probably freshmen, which meant they had only existed in Lim's world for a month. Would their unexpected drama help Lim sleep or hurt? Maybe this small scale tumult was the perfect thing to both occupy and bore her. No phantom laughter for the past few minutes at least—

Her head snapped up in anticipation of a phantom laugh now that she had foolishly called it mind. She heard nothing, nothing at all, not even an insect or mouse. Perfect deafness.

But at the end of her path, peeking out from behind the final tree in the long row, was a black figure. Fifteen or twenty trees away from her.

Her first irrational thought, which at the moment she believed wholeheartedly and only dispelled as irrational a few seconds later, was that the figure was her—Enid Lim—and she was peeking out at Mrs. Latimer and the freshmen. She had a strong sense of what she looked like in 3D space at all times, and the way the figure peeked at her was exactly how she had peeked before, even though she could not have seen herself peeking before. The moment she erased the irrational thought she reached a conclusion more conventional. Another student wanted to go to the spot, but stopped and became nervous when they saw Lim coming. The path between the trees and wall was too narrow for two people to pass each other without awkwardly squeezing their bodies together, and the gaps between the trees were too narrow for someone to exit that way unless they wanted to get covered in sticks and leaves and bugs. Lim herself always made sure to check that nobody was coming the other way whenever she used the path, so the figure's hesitation made sense.

"You should turn back," Lim said. "Mrs. Latimer found the spot. She's lecturing a couple of freshmen now."

The figure made no reply. It did not move.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" Lim obviously declined to shout, but everything was so silent that even normal speech ought to have carried to the figure. But the figure said nothing, did nothing.

Something crawled along the skin on the back of Lim's neck and when she put her hand to brush it off she realized it was her skin that was crawling. The autumnal chill that had once refreshed her now caused tiny filaments of hair to become acupuncture pinpricks.

No. That sensation was ridiculous. The figure at the end of the path was a student. Probably another first year who wanted to test the truth of the rumor about the café Wi-Fi. Nonetheless Lim's legs refused to move forward. So she took out her phone and shined a light on the figure.

Nothing about the figure changed. Either the light did not reach it, or—Or nothing. The light did not reach it. The figure remained black, remained motionless, remained silent.

Lim glanced over her shoulder to see if Mrs. Latimer and the freshmen were heading this way, only to realize that they would have returned the normal, non-secret way, through the athletic fields. She glanced back at the figure.

The figure now peeked from the second tree in the row of trees.

No, wrong. It had always peeked from the second tree. Lim had only glanced back for a second. A literal second. If it had moved at all she would have heard a rustle. Leaves crunching, anything. The figure had always been behind the second tree.

Idiot, said her mother, who then laughed. Lim flinched but refused to take her eyes off the figure. She stepped backward.

The figure now peeked from the third tree.

But that was impossible. Lim hadn't taken her eyes off it. Not for a second. Not at all. She had stepped backward, and it had simply moved forward at the exact same time, so that—due to a trick of depth perception—an optical illusion—her shitty eyes—it had not seemed to move at all. Or maybe she couldn't count. No, she could count, the figure looked from behind the third tree. It was still a black figure. Still a silent figure. Silent even though her mother's laughter resounded in her head, that sharp and brutal slice of a laugh, or maybe the figure had laughed, but the figure was silent, everything was silent and laughing at the same time.

If she ran and screamed, Mrs. Latimer would hear. In this silent field, a scream could carry that far. But why would she scream? The figure was a student. A wall surrounded the entire school except where it reached the ocean, and at night they locked all the gates. So it had to be either a student, or faculty, or the night watchman. Unless someone climbed the wall. Nothing stopped someone from climbing the wall, did Lim think walls could not be climbed?

And did the figure move again? One, two, three, four, she counted the trees only to realize she had lost track of where the figure had and had not been, the grip of her own skin tightened and she threw herself at the gap between the trees next to her to push through onto the athletic field and put herself out in the open where someone might see her, except thick webs of thin branches caught her and tiny topiary leaves densely clumped jabbed into her skin and clothes. She recoiled, rebuffed, and in the split second she had to consider whether to attempt again a breakthrough or turn and run down the lane she caught in the corner of her eye the figure speeding toward her and the decision occurred minus thought or consideration, she simply started running.

Mrs. Latimer—the freshmen—if she screamed—she *did* scream, but a moment later understood that she had not screamed. A nocturnal bird's plaintive shriek pealed overhead or

maybe that was her mother's laughter. Her arms scraped against the wall on one side and the foliage on the other and the path drew narrower than she remembered and only this narrowness prevented her from teetering forward from too fast a sprint. Her legs fumbled in a rhythmic pattern and everything jolted around her too fast to consider how far she had run and how much farther she had left. To her left she noticed a big black hole in the wall, arched like a doorway, and she flung herself through it.

The ground fell away in a sharp incline and Lim lost her balance the moment she reached the other side of the wall. Her head bounced against the ground and her legs flipped over her and then she landed somewhere soft and flat with a rough thwack. Her phone skidded in view beside her, the screen luminous.

She had landed on her back. The incline down which she fell rose before her, the wall at the top with its perfect archway all black. The occipital area of her skull throbbed and she shifted herself onto her elbows and blew a few leaves off her nose. Because she landed on her back, her glasses were fine.

Who put that hole in the wall? It was carved with too much meticulousness to have not been part of the wall's design, but had it always been there? Lim seemed to remember similar archways along the wall, usually filled with grates to let water or wildlife or something through, but not people. This hole lacked a grate. Had she ever seen these grates before though, really?

And obviously, there had been no black figure. Obviously. No figure. No, she had seen— Look. She *knew*. If she considered the situation rationally, revisited her memories and observed all the angles, she reached no conclusion other than the deception of her own senses. Like her mother's laughter, the word *Idiot* that sometimes cut into her thoughts even midsentence. Just because she did not want to consider that possibility—Did she want to end up like her brother? No. Auditory hallucinations had become visual. Not good, but reality. She would tell Dr. Ng, the school psychiatrist, at her next appointment. She refused to end up like her brother.

But if she entertained the possibility she *did* see a figure—

No, stop. If a figure really chased her, it would still be chasing her, right? Well, then where was it?

Her head snapped up to face the hole in the wall, which had somehow drifted out of her sight, and for a miserable moment she one hundred percent expected the figure to peek out of it like it had peeked between the trees. But nothing. Nothing.

Lim exhaled. She collected her phone, stood, and plucked leaves and twigs from her pajamas, at which point a sense gripped her, neither visual nor auditory, a simple certainty of someone—something—behind her. She resisted the urge to turn around. She told herself: Nothing's there. Nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing! How could anyone, anything be here? Where even was she? And so she turned around—not because she expected to see something—but only, *only* to check her environment.

In truth, she expected to see the figure. Not that seeing it would prove definitively whether she hallucinated it or not; she had the same auditory hallucination of her mother all the time, after all. But hallucinations can't stab or shoot you, or wring your throat, or disembowel you, or crush your head between their teeth. So either she died that moment, or she had complete proof of her decayed mental health, and the finality of either option brought her a sense of relief. So when she saw the girl with no clothes, her face scrunched and she hissed under her breath.

It had to be a freshman. The girl, thin and bony and short, barely appeared pubescent. But folded neatly beside her on the grass were the unmistakable components of the All Saints Academy student uniform, skirt and tie and white button-up blouse. The girl sat cross-legged, her body completely devoid of hair, and although she must have seen Lim tumble down the incline she had made no motion to cover herself or acknowledged Lim's presence.

Could this be another hallucination? Lim doubted it. The black figure, which moved like a sunspot on her eye and abjured physical laws, fit Lim's categorical understanding of a "hallucination" much more. The figure had lacked dimension, but this girl clearly existed in the round, to borrow a term from her Art History elective. It fit, because the girl remained still like a statue, and her skin shone ivory in the light that filtered through the trees.

"Um, hello?" said Lim. "Is this some religious thing or what?"

The girl remained cross-legged, her palms turned upward. She sat amid a circle of dead brown leaves, arranged so and unstirred by wind. The whole area turned out to be a small clearing in a little grove of trees, and the light that reached them came from far away, where the café and some other shops that catered to the students must have been. There would be a road out there too, but Lim heard no cars, which made sense because the school and the shops were clustered on a small peninsula the locals called a "neck," and past the shops you got golf courses for the Newport elite and then past that you got the colonial-style Gilded Age mansions that served as seasonal dwelling places for said elite, and only past that did you get to what most students called "town," or Newport proper. So at night, with the shops and golf courses closed and the students ensnared by curfew, nobody had much reason to come and go.

Lim realized what she had thought were leaves arranged in a circle were actually the heads of dead roses.

"Is this some sort of... Wiccan thing? Paganism or whatever? I really don't care, I just want to know." She wanted the girl to speak to assure herself everything existed.

But the girl said nothing, she simply sat with her entire body bared like a statue of a goddess that melded ancient Greek with Hindu. The girl's short hair and total lack of a chest gave her a boyish appearance, not that her gender was in doubt with her legs spread like that, and honestly the whole scene started to embarrass Lim. The last dregs of her adrenal response to the black figure ebbed from her pituitary gland and she decided she better head back to her dorm.

When she turned, the girl spoke, and Lim wheeled around as fast as possible to make sure the girl's lips moved in time to the words. "Next time, bring five candles."

"Candles."

"And blood," the girl's voice, like her face, at the interstice between masculine and feminine, "if you can spare it."

"Yeah, no." Definitely some Wiccan dumbassery, what socially inept girls got up to so they could affirm their uniqueness to themselves. Candles and blood and circles of roses. Probably meant to draw a pentagram and pray to Satan. Lim got what she wanted: A definitive return to reality. And so she climbed up the incline, stooped through the hole in the wall, and returned to her dorm with no further incident and no black figures peering between the trees. And she slept.

Chapter 2

Cherry Corbett strained her hair, already tied back into a ponytail, through her fingers as she contorted her body in the cramped path between the trees and the wall and considered the grate. She shot Gina Ryan, to her right, a glance that Lim, on her left, didn't see; but since the glance accompanied a shrug, Lim assumed some expression of lackadaisical bemusement. Corbett hooked her fingers through the steel bars of the grate and tugged, but the grate only rattled. A lock held it in place.

"Here?" Corbett asked Lim, and Lim nodded. In truth, Lim couldn't remember exactly where along the wall she had encountered the hole, and during the day the narrow path had a completely different look than at night. But logically, this had to be the same place through which she stumbled, especially since it had the same arched design.

"How fucking weird." Corbett tossed her head as she straightened her back and then bent it backward in what approximated a stretch, arms upraised. "I pass this place every other night and never noticed it. It must, like, be for drainage. Or whatever."

With the grate closed, the hole looked less like a doorway and more like a decorative fixture on the wall, so Lim didn't find it odd none of them had ever seen it before. But at least she had eyewitness verification that some kind of opening did exist here in the wall, lending at least some credence to an encounter that felt more and more like a dream the more she thought about it.

"Guys, gross, check it out." Ryan stooped off to the side, hands on her knees to smooth out her skirt. "Dead bird."

"I don't wanna see that shit," said Corbett, with an experimental kick to the grate. "Lim, buddy, pal, you're starting to develop a knack for finding sexual deviants."

"What?" said Lim. "I don't know if this girl was doing anything—"

"Your roommate, this wood nymph," Corbett counted them on her fingers, "and me. Two's a coincidence, but three's a pattern."

Ryan tilted back her head and rolled her eyes. "You *wish* you were a sexual deviant."

"Zzt." A noise uncannily akin to a fly buzz. "Cram it up your ass Ryan. The key here is that Limmy girl is in need of an *intervention*. The more she's exposed to deviants, the more it corrupts her, and we can't have that right?" Corbett slithered an arm behind Lim's neck and reeled her in by the shoulder until they were cheek-to-cheek.

"I wonder if this bird just fell out of the tree or if a cat got it," said Ryan. "Kill, kill, kill, that's all cats do."

Corbett flipped Ryan off behind her back and then tapped Lim's forehead with the extended middle finger. "Excuse my roommate Limmy. If it's not sex, it's violence, the two great fixations of our epoch. Oi vey, what our world has come to!"

"Uh, sorry Corbett, you're not Jewish, so that's, ahem, cultural appropriation? Cancelling you as we speak." Ryan pulled out her phone and made a show of tapping a sentence onto it, and only stopped when Corbett kicked her in the butt and she had to catch herself with both hands. "Oh my god, you almost shoved me into this bird, I could get bird flu!"

Ryan leaped up, made an acrobatic reorientation of her body in the narrow space, and flung herself at Corbett. Lim stumbled back as the two girls, both taller and more athletic than her, tussled back and forth, giggling, bouncing between the wall and the trees and causing leaves to flutter from the higher branches.

The moment it popped into Lim's head that someone might overhear, a trenchant voice barked from beyond the trees: "What in God's name is going on in there?"

Ryan and Corbett went still instantly and looked at each other and then Lim with wide eyes. Ryan wore a smile, Corbett a grimace, and Lim supposed she completed the trifecta with an expression of utter indifference.

"Don't act dumb, I want to know who's there, now!"

"It's me ma'am," said Corbett as she broke away from Ryan and stood at attention.

"Me too Coach," said Ryan.

"I can tell there's three of you."

"It's just our friend Lim."

"Who?"

"Enid Lim, Coach. She's not on the team."

"I know who she is, I just thought you said 'limb' for some reason. Like an arm, you know? You better learn to enunciate, young lady!"

The brutal voice opposite the trees belonged, of course, to Coach McCandless, who handled a variety of sports on campus, from tennis to softball. As the three of them pressed their faces to the slats between the trees they saw her rigid with a gaggle of freshmen in school-assigned t-shirts and shorts running laps around the field behind her. By this time of day, freshmen had

mandatory physical education classes, while Lim and most other seniors enjoyed a spot of free time before after-school extracurriculars and homework. Coach McCandless, who as Headmaster Grand loved to remind everyone was once the top high school-level female tennis player in the state of Rhode Island, now lacked her left arm due to an unfortunate car accident, and her tied-off sleeve flapped in the breeze. When Lim had P.E. with her as a freshman, McCandless demonstrated her peak physical condition by performing one-handed pushups and pullups with ease and then berated the scrawny students who struggled to do even one of either with both hands. She wore aviator sunglasses always, even though the sun was gone and would not return for a few more months.

"Sorry, Coach," said Ryan.

"Now tell me what in God's name you're doing back there?"

"Well, we found this—"

"We were just wondering about the grate in the wall, ma'am," said Corbett, shoving Ryan aside to look through the trees. "We had never seen it before, that's all."

"Grate in the *wall*? What in God's name?" Coach McCandless tromped forward and tilted up her aviators to get a look. Corbett and Ryan parted to show her. "Oh, that? That's a, you know, maintenance door. Groundskeeper uses that sometimes, dunno what for." Her eyes shifted left and right and it became clear she had gotten close to see if anyone had paraphernalia on them. Her eyes crossed Lim like a laser and Lim flinched.

"So the groundskeeper has the key?" asked Corbett. This comment shot Coach McCandless's glare toward her and Corbett quickly appended: "Sorry! Just wondering, ma'am."

"How should I know? You ladies planning a prison break or what? Don't you know Latimer caught those freshmen twins running around out here past curfew? You ladies better not try anything funny now, got it?"

"Yes, of course ma'am."

"Now you three get out from there and go do, oh, whatever it is young ladies should be doing nowadays." Coach McCandless flicked her remaining hand like shooing an insect and turned away from the trees. "Corbett, you and Ryan better be careful or I'll have you do extra suicides at practice. Don't think I won't."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Right, sure thing Coach."

They left the row of trees and meandered back to the main quad. Everyone called it the quad, but it lacked the quadrilateral shape typically associated with the word, formed on five sides by the two dormitory halls, the science building, the auditorium, and—in front—the school administration building. Headmaster Grant tried to get everyone to call it the "pent" instead of the quad, but the term never took on, except among incoming freshmen. The auditorium, partially its own building and partially an addendum to the administration building, was a

relatively recent development at a school almost two centuries old, so even distinguishing the quad as a "pentagon" required creative thinking akin to the assemblage of constellations into figures from Greek myth. Ryan and Corbett engaged in conversation about the most recent episode of a television show currently popular but verboten at the Academy due to its gratuitous bloodshed and nudity. Corbett had managed to stream the episode during a recent trip to the off-campus café, while Ryan had yet to see it, so their conversation mostly consisted of Corbett offering tantalizing ambiguities to a Ryan who made a big show of cupping her hands over her ears and droning about how she couldn't hear.

Corbett danced in front of them, arms waving, while Ryan and Lim sat at one of the benches in front of the stairs to the dorm. The discussion sank to a subsurface level in Lim's mind, a meaningless but welcome buzz that imbued her with a languid sense of calm she had not felt all day. The revelation that a door in the wall really existed meant most of what she experienced the night prior probably happened. Some odd bird filched the keys or found the grate unlocked—a mistake from the groundskeeper, it could happen—and partook in a silly ritual. That left the dark figure as the only inexplicable apparition (obviously she had not mentioned it to Ryan and Corbett), but the more time passed, the less significance she ascribed to what she had seen, the particulars blurred in her mind, it faded like a dream until she could reasonably say to herself, *It was another student who wanted to go to the Wi-Fi spot, or a shadow cast by the trees.*

But only part of herself could say that. The other part, the part that kept all her itineraries and schedules, that pressed her to complete every homework assignment no matter how insignificant and to read and reread her textbooks, that took assiduous notes in every class that were basically transcripts of the lecture verbatim which she later memorized, the part that pushed her to her current prestigious position as Class Rank 2 with a 4.15 GPA, could not help but worry and worry and worry over every minute happenstance in her life. Her brother loomed. Over everything. He had left an indelible mark on her life, literally and figuratively, and thinking that she ran a finger along the scar that went from the corner of her eye to her jaw, the soft strip of tissue with a different texture than the rest of her skin.

The buzz from Ryan and Corbett helped push that part to the back. A flagpole stood in the center of the quad, and from each building to it ran thin cobblestone paths, giving the quad the appearance of a misshapen wheel. The United States flag and the Rhode Island flag flapped. Someone—Olivia Holtzclaw, an intelligent junior who took many of the same classes as Lim—stared from the base of the flagpole to the top. She did nothing but stare, by herself, until her head turned suddenly and she noticed Lim watching her, as though she had somehow felt her gaze. Holtzclaw waved, and after a second of hesitation, hurried down the spoke toward them.

"It's Holtzclaw," said Lim at a lull in Ryan and Corbett's conversation.

"Holtzclaw, Holtzclaw, Holtzclaw!" Corbett made a grandiose bow as though ushering the girl into a soiree.

Holtzclaw half-smirked, half-sneered at the introduction, the corner of her mouth lifting in what could have been mistaken for a tic. She blinked two or three times, started to speak, decided she wasn't close enough yet, and then tried again when she stopped in front of the

bench, although not without glancing both ways conspiratorially. "Hear about the freshmen twins who got caught last night?"

"We sure did," said Corbett.

"Lim here saw it happen." Ryan patted Lim on the shoulder. "Eyewitness account."

"Fucking freshmen," Holtzclaw muttered, wearing the same sneer as before. Holtzclaw's academic aptitude and abysmal attempts at hair and makeup (the former a frizzy a mess, the latter nonexistent) gave the impression of a nerdy teacher's pet, but if you wanted weed on campus you went to her and the rumors went she kept a dildo in a locked box under her bed. Rumors were rumors, but Holtzclaw did, at least, love to swear. "Can't fucking believe it. Ruin the whole scene for us all cuz they don't know jack fucking dick." She turned her head to the side and spat into or clicked her tongue at the rose bushes that swarmed the outside of the dorms and which were probably how the mystery girl assembled her Satanic circle.

"That's the way it goes," said Ryan.

"Twins too. I hear they're les for each other."

"The twins?"

Holtzclaw nodded. "Yep. Somehow they're roommates of course. Pretty sure they don't let you pick your roommate even if you're related but who knows, a lot of people here have parents who might fork over a few grand for perks like that. But I have a friend who's in the room next to them, and the shit she hears is, *woo*."

"So they were twins?" Lim put as much faith in Holtzclaw's rumor as she did in the rumor about Holtzclaw, but she wanted to ask about it anyway. Even though she hadn't seen their faces the night before, Lim somehow sensed they were twins. "I didn't even know there were twins on campus."

"Oh, they're always together. Fucking weird."

"What'd I tell you Limmy." Corbett hopped onto the twisted steel armrest of the bend and balanced against it, her arms splayed as she fidgeted and threatened to fall on Lim and Ryan. "You are a magnet for sexual deviants."

"Oh yeah?" said Holtzclaw. "More roommate trouble?"

"Nah nah, you'd never guess. It's another freshman. Limmy here—"

The front doors of the dormitory building behind them opened with a tactile clanking noise that stopped Corbett short and caused her to hop from her perch. They all looked; in the doorway manifested Lim's roommate.

The mention of her must have summoned her, but it was not so, or maybe it was, but Lim's roommate didn't show it. She remained the doorway and swept her gaze across the quad, at first not noticing the four girls gathered just outside, but eventually settling her narrowed eyes upon them. Every element of her maroon uniform had been attended to with immense

diligence, not a fold or crease out of place, and with a casual backward flick of her hand she brushed a selection of buoyant locks behind her ear before reaffirming her grip on her school bag and setting off down the stairs, her shiny black shoes clacking with each step. Everyone watched her, she watched them watch her, but as she passed she managed only a sharp, brief fragment of a nod to Lim specifically. Her skirt, kept to regulation length, swished about her knees with each straight stride, and only when she had passed the flagpole en route to the school administration building did Corbett risk a chortle, which soon turned to a half-snort, half-laugh she shared with Ryan and Holtzclaw.

"She has so much fucking money you know," said Holtzclaw. "Like I'll be honest, I'm not here on financial aid, but her family compared to mine is like, *woo*."

"Can't buy her friends," said Ryan. "Why do you think she's heading to administration?"

"To talk to Headmaster Grant probably." Holtzclaw meandered toward the edge of the bench's sphere of influence to indicate she planned to leave soon. "Her family knows him of course."

"Next time she starts moaning Limmy, you should film it," said Corbett. "You could probably use it for blackmail. Family like that'd drop mega bucks to stop it from getting out."

Lim shrugged. "Oh, I don't think—"

"Does she know she moans in her sleep?" Ryan leaned forward in her seat and stared at the spot where Lim's roommate had vanished, even though she had been out of view for several seconds. "Or was her house so big she could do it and nobody was close enough to hear?"

The chatter continued on the subject and Lim's eyes wandered again. Even though the conversation concerned her roommate, she had nothing to add, since it seemed all three of them knew more about her than Lim did. They had barely exchanged words since moving in, and even though Lim "knew" her from previous years at the Academy—with only fifty students to a year, you generally knew everyone—she had always just been "there," existing, with a class rank in the top ten but not in the hyper-competitive tippy-top. Lim understood that part of the frigidness dwelled on Lim's part; the only reason she had a rapport at all with Corbett, her roommate the previous year, was due to Corbett's natural amiability.

"She's probably not so bad," Lim muttered, unaware of the exact position of the conversation.

"Yeah, yeah, of course not," said Corbett. "It's just funny." Then the conversation continued without Lim again.

Holtzclaw finally broke away from the group so the buzz resolved itself to the standard repartee between Ryan and Corbett. Familiar. A few younger students passed over the grass toward the other dormitory building, and the groundskeeper zipped by on his golf cart, but otherwise the quad exuded a peaceful, quiet tranquility, a nostalgic gloominess with the gray autumn sky and the waves that rippled through the manicured grass. The flags clapped every so often, like a drop of water that created ripples on a smooth surface.

A black figure peeked at her from the edge of the auditorium.

Lim had no way to know, but it made sense to her that the figure had been there a long time, its head and shoulders leaning from around the corner, watching her. The same way she had watched Holtzclaw until she drew Holtzclaw's attention. It stood out somehow in the shadow of the science building and the general murk of the afternoon, blacker than its surroundings.

"Anyway," said Corbett, "we should sneak out tonight and see if that chick returns to the grate."

"With faculty on red alert thanks to those twins? Absurd."

"Okay, maybe not tonight. But some other night."

The black figure didn't move. Lim didn't move. Their gazes tethered them together and somehow an understanding passed between her and it. An understanding of what? Lim had no idea, but some kind of understanding. No, those thoughts meant nothing. She blinked hard, and when it didn't disappear she closed her eyes for a few seconds and opened them. Still there.

She almost never experienced her auditory hallucinations when with others. Always in silence, always alone, those conditions created a gap within which her head could manufacture a noise when one refused to exist. Then how could she experience visual hallucinations, which were (she assumed) much more severe, with Corbett and Ryan blabbing beside her? It must not be a hallucination. No, it must be. It made no sense with the light for the figure to be so dark in its current position. Was that true? Was Enid Lim an expert in the field of optics? How could she state with certainty such a claim? A dark day, the shadow of a nearby building, the figure might be an actual flesh-and-blood human being watching her for whatever reason, a student maybe—a freshman—whom the faculty tasked with watching her. Or a faculty member themselves. Her weekly appointment with Dr. Ng was scheduled on Wednesday, tomorrow. Would Dr. Ng know? Or maybe Dr. Ng was the one who appointed the freshman to spy on her. Because of her brother, of course. Family history, hereditary mental illness. They had to keep watch on her to make sure she didn't try to cut anyone's face off with a knife.

No, no, no, no. Her thoughts only confused her, she refused to plunge herself in doubt. She conceived a plan immediately. She tugged on Ryan's sleeve and pointed across the quad at the figure and asked, "Who is that over there?"

If Ryan and Corbett saw nobody, even though the figure remained in its same location, then Lim knew with certainty her mental state had devolved and that she needed to consult Dr. Ng immediately. If they saw somebody—

"Oh you're right," said Ryan. "Who *is* that?"

"How'd she get on the roof?" said Corbett.

They weren't looking at where Lim pointed. They looked directly above it, at the roof of the auditorium. A girl stood there.

"Oh my god," said Corbett, as the girl's leg swung out slow, pendulous, and she stepped off the roof.

Chapter 3

A blank spot remained in Lim's memory, between the image of the girl's leg swinging out and the image of the girl draped over the fence that surrounded the rosebushes at the base of the auditorium. No memory of the actual falling, as though it happened instantaneously, but she did remember the sharp, clattering crack that echoed across the quad, a crack that subsided in a snap. The girl's head lay on the cobblestone pathway, her body bent up with her legs twisted over the railing, and a dark liquid seeped in a circle around her, so dark only contextual clues identified it as blood. Lim thought she saw the body twitching, but from such a distance she understood that probably the shaking originated from Lim herself.

Lim also didn't remember screaming, but she remembered the sound of her scream, and also the incomprehensible blend of expletives Corbett uttered as she wrenched herself away from the sight. Ryan jolted upright, but Lim remained on the bench, unaware of the possibility of motion.

The crack-snap died, the scream died, the expletive died, and all that remained was the ripple of the flags. Lim had no idea how much time passed in stillness. All thoughts of the black figure left her, but since she remembered the image of the girl's body ruined and because the background of that image included the spot where the figure had been standing, she could recall later that the figure had gone away at some point. Perhaps in the missing moment between the fall and the landing.

Nobody came; nobody moved until Corbett started forward at a sprint across the quad, made it halfway, twisted mid-step and shot a finger toward the administration building. Something like "Get help" came out of her mouth, but neither Ryan nor Lim moved, and so after turning her head back and forth between the body and the administration building, Corbett settled on the latter and disappeared the same way Lim's roommate had.

After she left, Ryan started to approach the body at a measured, deliberate walk, her head tilted. Lim somehow stood, and had clarity of mind to wonder at how she had not stood before, how something must have become dysfunctional about her fight or flight response. She did not move from the bench. By the time Ryan reached the flagpole, an entire platoon of staff from the administration building sprinted out in their suits and conservative long skirts, ties flapping in the wind as they pumped their arms with wild abandon. Like a general, Corbett led them, her hand pointed like a compass toward the body. Students streamed out from the dormitory buildings, Lim became away dimly of Holtzclaw shaking her and asking what happened, but before the tide got far two of the secretaries at the front office intercepted them and held them back with arms outstretched, so that only Ryan remained in the void between the two surging tides of bodies. Enough personnel reached the front of the auditorium that Lim could no longer see the body, and around her some of the girls started shouting they could see better if they went to the third story of the dormitory, so in a confusion people pushed and pulled her around until she sat back down in the bench and waited for it all to end.

Sirens wailed. An ambulance rumbled over the lawn and left deep muddy gouges in its wake. From the other direction came the groundskeeper's golf cart with three people clinging to its side, among them Coach McCandless whose empty sleeve trailed behind her. A hand fell on Lim's shoulder: Miss Kennefic, the faculty-in-residence for Lim's dorm building.

"Hey there, let's uh, let's go inside Enid. Come on." Her milky voice, which floated in the air when she lectured on American literature, reached Lim via miracle amid the fervent clamor of the quad. It flowed like cream through her ear and pooled inside to coat the sound of the body dropping and the sound of her mother's laughter and all the other sounds in a glossy, sugary sheen, at which point it solidified into cotton candy and everything became a cloud. Lim nodded, wobbled upright, and was among the last of the students herded back into the dormitory hall, with Miss Kennefic's fingers around her upper arm.

She glanced back, or more likely her head lolled on the neck, and Ryan remained out there, eyes riveted to the location of the body, and Corbett darted this way and that, waving her arms at the paramedics or the faculty or someone.

Obviously, the whole thing became an event. Lim sat on the foot of her bed and watched students rush back and forth past the open window, plucked out the tufts of cotton candy in her skull with the help of their animated chatter. A few juniors led by Holtzclaw poked their heads into her room and asked her if she saw it, to which Lim first shrugged and then nodded.

"Who the fuck was it?" Holtzclaw asked.

Lim never saw.

A fidgety hair chewer named Miriam Neves asked, "Do you think they're, I mean, are they dead?"

Lim thought about it, thought about the position of the body draped over the fence, the blood around their head, but decided she lacked the medical knowhow to pronounce death.

"It was a student though right," said Holtzclaw.

To that Lim nodded. Unmistakable uniform.

"How awful..." said Neves.

"Jesus fuck." Holtzclaw tossed her hand and revolved away from the door. "Monstrous, the shit that goes down. Just monstrous. Fuck."

Neves clung to the door frame. Her mouth tangled along with the few strands of hair clutched between her lips. "Are you... okay, Enid?"

"I guess."

Without warning Neves rushed forward and swallowed Lim into a hug. Her arms latched around Lim's back and constricted her. "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry! It must have been the worst. The worst."

"Ey, ey, ey. Come on." Holtzclaw put a hand on Neves's shoulder and Neves relinquished Lim, which allowed Lim to breathe again. "Lim, you should come with us to my room."

Lim suspected they planned to ask her more questions, so she hesitated, but she assumed being with other people would help keep her mental state acceptable compared to a deep drill down into the winding coils of thought she tended to work up in her head. So she acquiesced.

She, Holtzclaw, Neves, and a third junior named Kayleigh Chaumont who was Holtzclaw's roommate congregated in Holtzclaw's room, a disaster zone strewn with crumpled clothes and college-ruled notebook paper. A few posters of Van Gogh paintings formed a colorful strip opposite the window, which fortunately looked away from the quad instead of into it like Lim's room. At Holtzclaw's invitation she and Neves sat on Holtzclaw's unmade bed and stared at Chaumont while Holtzclaw rummaged through her closet.

"I was saving these for a special occasion but fuck it, I think we could all chill out now." A dislodged carry-on bag fell from above and bounced off her head without her commenting on it or even fixing her hair afterward. "Here we go."

She returned with a ceramic plate covered with tinfoil, which she peeled away to reveal a stack of brownies. Somehow these brownies had existed inside Holtzclaw's jampacked closet with minimal smushing. Of course, Holtzclaw had to keep this stuff hidden. Dorm rooms suffered semi-random checks by faculty for contraband.

"Normally I'd charge but, given the circumstances, I'm feeling a little fucking generous." And each of them received a brownie.

Lim pinched hers between two fingers and sniffed. She cradled her other hand under it to catch the crumbs and realized both hands shook. The image of the dead girl flashed in her mind before she had a chance to tell herself she didn't know if the girl was dead. Holtzclaw, Neves, and Chaumont bit into their brownies. Lim had never... ingested anything like this before, and she had no idea what to expect, what effects beneficial or deleterious. Ominous warnings from childhood anti-drug campaigns resurfaced but she wondered how her lungs could turn into shriveled black coals if she didn't even smoke it. Maybe it could help. Stop the shaking hands. Who knew.

It tasted like shit and she fought the urge to gag. When she finally swallowed and unsqueezed her eyes the three-quarters of the brownie remaining confronted her with its semicircular bite mark. The other three girls had finished their brownies and Holtzclaw pulled the plate away from Neves, who reached for another. "Five bucks."

"O-livia," Neves pouted.

"I fucking mean it—"

The door creaked open and Lim jumped so much she dropped her brownie, only for it to land in her other hand. Holtzclaw reacted nearly the same way, except she had Neves to catch the plate.

"Hey..." said Miss Kennefic, no more than a head that floated in the doorway.

"Hi, Miss Kennefic."

"You girls alright? I'm just checking in on everyone. I understand, um, that you might be scared right now."

"We're fine." Holtzclaw wrenched the plate out of Neves's hands. From the half-crinkled tin foil, several brownies showed.

"Are you sure? I'm inviting everyone to join us in the common area so we can sit and talk things out."

"Yeah sure, be there in just a bit." Holtzclaw became a bobblehead and even flicked her wrist as though trying to sweep Miss Kennefic's pretty head away, a gesture to which Miss Kennefic was utterly oblivious.

"Who died," said Chaumont. The entire time, Chaumont had not spoken. In fact, she wore cordless earbuds from which tiny music filtered in the silence after her abrupt question. When nobody spoke, she took one earbud out and repeated: "Do you know who died?"

Miss Kennefic's mouth, pursed into a tiny o, flattened and then slanted as her jaw shifted and her eyes went nowhere in particular. "I think, um, I think at this time... Headmaster Grant has asked us not to reveal..."

"At least tell us," said Chaumont, much to the chagrin of Holtzclaw, who gave her a look as if to say *Let her fucking leave*. "Was it a junior?"

A hand emerged from behind the door, white and pretty fingers that played with the imitation gemstone that fastened Miss Kennefic's collar. "Um. Well. I was told not to..."

"We'd really like to know, Miss Kennefic," said Neves. "Is it one of our friends?"

Miss Kennefic gnawed her lower lip. "N, no. It was—a first year. That's all I can say though!"

Neves and Chaumont—even Holtzclaw—didn't quite sigh but nonetheless sank in their seats, loosened tangibly from their previous postures. For them, a first year meant someone they had only known for a month, if they knew them at all. None of their classmates for the past three years. Perhaps callous to express relief when a mangled corpse remained only fifty meters away, but nobody could begrudge them the sentiment, least of all Miss Kennefic, who managed a wan smile at the response.

For Lim, the phrase "first year" cracked inside her head like a shotgun. Certainty gripped her: The girl. The one from the night prior. That pale androgynous nude body, the circle of roses. First year. First year.

By the time she caught up to herself, Miss Kennefic had gone on to the next room and Holtzclaw chewed out Neves and Chaumont while she rushed to the closet to hide the plate of brownies. Chaumont shot back: "Kennefic is such a ditz you probably could have fed her a brownie and she wouldn't know the difference." Then, to signify the end of the conversation, she put her earbud back in and forced Holtzclaw to turn her complaints to Neves.

After a minute or so, however, Neves said something silly or told a joke and she and Holtzclaw started to laugh, and their laughter prompted Chaumont to crack a smile, and Holtzclaw added something to the silly comment that prompted more laughter, and they continued this way giggling, giggling, giggling. Lim choked down the rest of her brownie out of politeness (she considered offering it to Neves, the one laughing the hardest) but became aware of no effects on her mental state or her shaking hands. She lingered, made an excuse that she wanted to find Ryan and Corbett, and left after another heavy hug from Neves and expletive-laden, performative goodbyes from Holtzclaw.

Nobody answered when Lim knocked on Ryan and Corbett's room. From the second floor common area wafted muted words and discussions—Miss Kennefic's powwow. Somebody sobbed.

In Lim's room, her roommate read a book. She looked up when Lim entered.

"I heard someone committed suicide." She spoke the phrase "committed suicide" like a medical prognosis.

"Yeah," said Lim.

"Tragic." Lim's roommate licked her thumb and turned a page. "I wonder why she did it." When Lim said nothing, she added: "Have you ever thought of killing yourself?"

"Yes," said Lim.

"I suspect everyone does at one point or another. What a romantic notion."

The conversation ended.

Chapter 4

Sleep? An obvious impossibility. Every imaginable injunction against it weighed upon Lim. First: The suicide. That image of the corpse refused to fade away. Second: The lights. Lim's room faced the quad, where red-and-blue lights flashed incessantly, even as the night hours drew deeper and deeper into oblivion. At first she wondered why the ambulance had not left yet with the body, but when she hefted herself on her elbows and tugged away a corner of the curtain she discovered a police car in the quad instead. Nonetheless, even with curtains the flashing lights proved an impediment.

Third: The moaning. The coin landed tails and now Lim's roommate wagged her tail in the air and undulated like a caterpillar against her pillow. Her roommate slept as though the suicide had been a news article about a child starving in Africa; in fact, she had fallen asleep even more quickly than usual.

Chapter 5: Draft 5 (2024)

I have a hole in my brain. When I look inside, an eyeball looks back at me. And—

Let me start over.

My name is Enid Lim. I am a senior at All Saints Academy, an elite all-girls boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island. I am Class Rank 1. Tomorrow is my eighteenth birthday.

[From black, the room fades into view. Two beds, with a window between them showing a full moon. This is LIM'S ROOM.]

I am lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. I cannot sleep. My roommate is making noises. When I said that All Saints is "elite," I didn't just mean academically. To illustrate what I mean, let me mention that my roommate is the daughter of the richest man in the world. Not *one* of the richest men; the richest man. He owns a company in Silicon Valley that develops artificial intelligence.

The phrase artificial intelligence terrifies me. Because my own intelligence—

Let me illustrate what I mean. I have an older brother. He is three years older than me. When he turned eighteen, a bomb went off inside his brain. Not literally. But one night without warning he came into my room and pointed a knife at me. He said I wasn't me, I wasn't his sister, I wasn't Enid Lim. I was something else, he said, a creature pretending to be me, and he was going to get proof. I screamed.

They put him in what is called a psychiatric hospital, which is a nice way of saying an insane asylum. My mother said it came from my father's side of the family, which makes sense, because my mother is the most sane person in the world. Compared to my roommate, I'm not rich, though compared to most people, I think I am. My mother is a very important lawyer in New York City.

[The background changes to a wine glass on a table. The atmosphere is smoky. Only a dredge of wine remains.]

Right now, she's probably at some wealthy client's party. She hates to go, she always complains, but she goes. She's probably swiveling a wine glass. She's probably laughing,

[Sound Effect: MOTHER'S LAUGHTER.]

a sharp sudden laughter, because she always laughs too sharply when she's faking it. It sounds like mockery. None of her wealthy clients ever realize the laughter is fake. I always realize.

[Return to LIM'S ROOM.]

I can't sleep. My roommate is making noises.

To be more specific, my roommate is moaning. She moans in her sleep, the way some people snore. It's... uncomfortable. To be honest, at first I thought she wasn't asleep when she did it. I thought she might simply be ignoring me, as though I weren't there. But I figured out she does this in her sleep almost every night.

I can't tell her about it, obviously. But I'm worried what Ryan the next room over thinks, and also it makes it so difficult to sleep, and I wind up staring at the ceiling, and seeing within the grooves there an eyeball staring down at me—

I decide to go for a walk.

[The background changes to a COMMON AREA at night.]

All Saints Academy has a strict curfew. But Ryan tells me she breaks it all the time, and nobody has ever caught her.

[The background changes to a QUAD outside the dormitories. The dorm buildings are tall and gothic. Ambient sounds play.]

I've started going for late night walks to the far end of the athletic field. The school throttles internet access and cell signal, but it's sometimes possible to get a blip at the extremities. This is the only way I can keep up-to-date on my hobbies.

[The background changes to a narrow WALKWAY between a tall brick wall and a line of tall trees. Ambient sounds continue.]

This is the safest route across the school to avoid being seen by any teachers or faculty. It goes along almost the entire eastern wall of the school. The school is completely enclosed—

[Sound Effect: MOTHER'S LAUGHTER. No more ambient sounds.]

Um...

What was I...?

Let me start over. My name is Enid Lim. I am a senior at All Saints Academy, an elite all-girls boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island.

[The background changes to the CORNER of the school. An intersection of two brick walls. It is a strikingly plain, agoraphobic background. There is plain green grass on the ground and a plain black sky with a simple moon. It looks like a screenshot of a Windows maze screensaver. There are still no ambient sounds.]

This is the end of the school.

[Activate PHONE MINIGAME. A cellphone display appears in the center of the screen. It shows a basic, scroll-based social media app. Let's call it APPER. The PHONE MINIGAME can be exited at any time; its only functionality is to scroll up or down. The posts in the feed are, in order:

[1. (I'll think of these later.)]

[When the PHONE MINIGAME ends, the CORNER background is altered slightly. Now, on the moon, very small, one of the craters is now the shape of an eye.]

I should go back now.

[The background changes to the WALKWAY, but going the other direction. The image is of lower quality than it was coming.]

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