

## **Balancing Act**

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## I

Imagine, for a moment, that you live in the city of Anqu.

It is a singularly beautiful city. Standing on the southern hills, you can see the faint outline of mountains on the peach fuzz horizon. Track the grey outcroppings; parse where the ridges fade into gentle slopes that melt into the lush green valley. It looks close enough to touch—the dewy grass, the painted sunset, the mouth of the river that runs to the north. Behind you, the city expands in roiling, shimmering tongues of light. The brightness is concentrated in the center of Anqu, around the government buildings and the tall office towers. The grid of the city, faintly visible, provides a woven backdrop for the highway. Tiny vehicles thread through downtown to the residential areas, which fade from pristine to crumbling until they reach the outer edge of the suburbs and roll into a muted grey dusk.

It is a tremendous view, and it would be a tremendous city as well, if not for two important caveats.

The first is the Wardnet, Anqu's massive, electrified fence. It was the best that the engineers and the scientists and the contractors could come up with. Normal fences demarcate borders on the ground, but this one is a true net, rising into the sky in one fluid woven dome and back down again, sealing the city in. The Wardnet arcs over everything—skyscrapers and shops, apartments and parks, the entire inefficient motorway. Woven out of holographic wires and powered by the generator in the center of the city, it is a tight weave of rigid pink and gold strands knotted into a hexagonal pattern.

The second caveat is the Buzzards. They are the *cause* to the *effect* of the Net, the reason why the shield is needed in the first place. Pure white vultures with a wingspan of one to two hundred feet from tip to tip, the Buzzards sweep over Anqu in constant surveillance, flying in perfect polygon formations, each bird always flanking its peers to make a sharp edge in the shape. Tonight, the Buzzards have retreated far into the reaches of the clouds, and from this altitude they could almost be normal birds.

Even the experts agree that the Buzzards came out of nowhere. No one had seen so much as a feather before they started appearing on the horizon, wings so pristine they hurt the eyes under bright sunlight. At first, they only circled, symmetrical and uniform, rotating on themselves. Ornithologists were stunned at the anatomy of birds their size. The scientific community buzzed about cloning, experiments gone wrong and released into the wild. The aviation industry, which was something that existed back then, was more than a little perturbed they had to navigate around new obstructions in the air. The hyper-religious were the most excited of them all, hailing the creatures in the sky as angels, blessed omens, sent to watch over the saints and punish the sinners.

Ironically, the fanatics got the closest in the end. Even the logical minds had to give them credit, when the Buzzards began attacking.

They liked hospitals best. The vultures would target the trauma bays, flocking to the emergency room doors and sweeping their wings over those attempting to gain entrance. They were also fond of swooping down and pecking at the windows, dive-bombing the higher floors, dragging out patients and health care professionals alike with their curved and needlelike beaks. Not that the Buzzards were picky. Before

essential services moved underground, they also enjoyed terrorizing nursing homes, hospices, rehabilitation centers, free clinics, and especially any kind of counseling office.

The Net helps, now, but it only addresses the surface of the problem. The officials of Anqu had arranged a series of emergency meetings (in the basements of their skyscrapers, just to be safe) and decided that if the Buzzards were targeting Disease, then sickness should be the city's target as well. Under that philosophy, the Balance Bureau was formed to assign and track the Public Health Quotient, and work with the new treatment centers to cure those who were not Of Sound Body and Mind.

Which brings us back to you, citizen #R3YO97. Your name is Jia Wei, and your ID has you at a month shy of twenty-four years old, five-nine, black hair and brown eyes. What it does not say is that if you had been considered among the Healthy, and did not have either your gnarly medical history or that penchant for risky behavior, life would have been very different for you in this city. Of course, that is only wishful thinking. You cannot change the verdict the Bureau has passed, and you do not much care to. There have been times when you've longed for sanity, but it comes at a very high price. And as for the body, it is destined to break down.

Instead, you work as a Birdwatcher. Given where your Quotient is, this was the best job you could have hoped for. You used to think 'Watcher' was too tame a title for those who serve as Anqu's last line of defense against the horrors in the sky, but now you've realized it is fitting. After all, when the Buzzards attack and the Net strains, most of the time all you can do is watch.

Tonight, you have been assigned to the first shift of patrol. Twilight is falling as you walk down to the gate with Qiang, a coworker and a rare friend. He is as unhappy about the job as you are impatient, because although you crave the fresh air and the space outside the Net, he is a “normal” person who would much prefer to remain *inside* the city.

Both of you nod at your colleagues sitting in the station through a tiny, smudged plexiglass window. They wave you through, not even bothering to check IDs. You pass through the border wall quickly and, a minute later, are right up against the Net. The strands pulse and sizzle; a small sector buzzes and the wires split open. You and Qiang dash out, quick to exit in the second before the fence remakes itself into a smooth weave once again.

“Don’t be scared,” you call out with a wink as you throw the hoverboard clamped under your arm to the ground. It lands flat before levitating six inches into the air.

“Maybe you should be,” Qiang replies.

It is an old ritual, this exchange, a little like shaking hands or taking vows, an easier way to say *I have your back*. You grin at him, step onto your anti-grav device, find your center. With a quick tap of the remote on your wrist and a rocking motion, you’re off, flying into the faded black twilight, whooping at the top of your lungs. You make a slow loop around the city, taking a moment to enjoy the view. The Net is not really circular at its base. There are irregular bumps and wedges carved out to cover a few

outlying factories and a smattering of neighborhoods. Underneath the weave of wires your home splays out like an electromagnetic heart.

Qiang pulls up beside you and bumps your shoulder, your two armor panels tapping against each other. You glance at him, the big flat feet on the hoverboard, the skinny legs, long torso, wide shoulders. The tremor is back in his hands tonight; you can tell it has been a bad few days, because he notices your stare and clamps both his hands into his armpits, crossing his arms tightly. Like you, Qiang does not have the most laudable medical history.

“You alright?” he asks.

“Restless,” you reply.

“Don’t be. It looks like a quiet night.”

You look down at the city – so many tiny people scurrying down there, so oblivious, perpetually and dishonestly safe – then up at the sky, at the wheeling birds, each flap of their white wings perfectly coordinated.

“Until it’s not.”

“Nothing we can do about that. What was the last Quotient reading?”

He’s asking after the Public Quotient, which is broadcast constantly by the Bureau at all hours of the day.

You scratch your nose, think back. “One-forty-eight, maybe?”

Considering every citizen in the city, the number usually averages out at around one hundred and fifty. If it trends higher than one-sixty-five, though, the birds start to get restless. They’ll start dropping out of formation like white stones, falling down

before pulling into a guided descent. This is why surveillance patrols are needed – when it comes to Buzzards, the Quotient and a couple pairs of human eyes are more accurate than even the city’s best radar, which the birds have somehow managed to throw on multiple occasions.

“Not bad. If anything happens, it’ll be the next shift’s problem, anyways.”

It’s always someone else’s problem. That’s the way everything in this damn city works. You are about to suggest a quick pass over the southern sectors when your phone rings. You work it out of your pocket, glance at the caller ID, and sigh.

“Who is it?” Qiang asks, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

“Fen.”

“Oh?”

You put the phone away. “Anyway. How about you go east, I go west?”

“Wait, wait. Didn’t you and Fen break up, like two weeks ago?”

“Actually, do you mind taking west? I think I can –”

“Jia! What does she want?”

Rolling your eyes, you slump on your hoverboard, bobbing a little in the air for dramatic effect. “Ugh, can we not?”

Qiang wiggles his eyebrows, shoves you to the left so you have to scramble not to fall off. “Answer the question!”

“I don’t know. I haven’t answered.”

“Voicemail? Text?”

“No, and yes.”

"And?"

"Haven't read them, either," you lie.

You're far too sober for this, and he's being insistent. Reaching into your pocket, you take out your flask, pull at it until the sharp burn fills your mouth and throat. Now, there are rules to drinking, just as there are rules to patrol, but it just so happens that tonight they overlap. Qiang, who is watching you, shakes his head to turn down the offer when the container is shaken in his direction.

"Is that really a good idea?"

"Course not. You have a better one?"

"I do, actually. Like, I don't know, maybe call your girlfriend back."

"It was *not* that serious."

He laughs, shakes his head – half resignation, half exhaustion. "Yeah, sure. You were just living together for like a year."

You make a face, stuff the flask back into your jacket. "Listen, If you want to lecture, just go ahead."

"Feel like listening today, do we?"

"I would, if you had anything new to say."

Qiang rolls his eyes, which makes you smile. You believe in defiance in the face of the impossible. Defiance, always.

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By the time you are stumbling home, the streetlights have turned into misty, golden arcs expanding at odd angles into the street. The stairs down to the subway



threaten to greet you bodily as you descend into the earth. In these small hours, the cars are deserted. Polishing off the flask, you feel the buzz shift from a jagged edge to a smooth centerpiece, and marvel at the strange glow of the greasy metal railings as they double and fold into each other.

You manage to get off the train at the appropriate stop and wind your way back up, over cold concrete streets, until you arrive at your ratty apartment. The front buzzer is broken, and the halls, pale with crinkling yellow paper, curve around the staircase. Take the stairs one and a half at a time; the railing is your best friend. When you reach your door, your hands won't still long enough to get the key into the lock. While you rattle at the handle, the metal ring with its attachments slips out of your fingers and clatters onto the floor.

You're on the ground, scrambling for the small pile of metal notches – goddamnit, if depth perception isn't a complete and utter lie – when you realize there's another woman in the hallway. You slide up the wall into a standing position.

"Why, hello there."

It's your neighbor, Mrs. Wong. She is at least eighty, slightly bent over, the smooth slope of her shoulders covered by a pale blue cardigan with knitted white flowers sown on the front. Their yarn-petals are curling inward from the many trips into the wash. Mrs. Wong's face is exceptionally youthful, the skin only slightly spotted, with no more than a handful of wrinkles around the mouth and forehead. She looks at you with milky brown eyes, the sclerae a smooth, shiny silver.

"Hi," you reply.

Seeing Mrs. Wong untethers you. Sometimes, you wonder if you should even call the figure standing in front of you by your old neighbor's name. *This* creature should not belong in an apartment building. Mrs. Wong used to be a kind old woman, before she got Balanced by the Bureau and traded in her soul for those metallic eyes. Back then, she would scold you regularly for your admittedly awful habits, but sometimes on Saturdays she would bring over warm buns and a pot of tea.

The woman that you remember is no longer there. She started suffering from lapses in memory about a year ago, forgetting appointments and turning to you to ask for help tracking the bills. Her children and grandchildren, who visited often, commented on her leaving the stove on or forgetting conversations. Once, at two in the morning after a long shift, you found Mrs. Wong standing in the hallway, unsure which door was hers.

Her family had made the decision together. It was the best alternative; much better, in everyone's eyes, than a nursing home, and several times cheaper. Six months ago, Mrs. Wong had filed for an appointment through the Bureau, going under the knife to treat her mind and *rejuvenate* her body. Balancing is the Bureau's pride and joy, the flagship operation, the ultimate solution. The procedure reboots the brain and more or less embalms the body. Or is it the other way around? You can't remember the byline right now.

Mrs. Wong had returned from the hospital as the picture of health. Except that she could not remember her favorite color, and much less her children. Her memories, too fragile to save, had been considered unsalvageable in the procedure, and with most

of sixty years of experience gone the personality had frayed as well. Her apartment, once rowdy with visiting toddlers and warm with the steam from fresh meals, has been silent for months now.

“You’re certainly up late,” Mrs. Wong says, her voice strangely sing-song.

“I’m – uh, had a late shift.”

“Interesting.” Mrs. Wong pauses, smile frozen, her eyes jerkily roaming over your face as if trying to remember the directions for making conversation. “Forgive me, but I seem to have forgotten where you work.”

You lean against your own door, pick through the keys in your hand until you find the right one. “Don’t worry about it. You...have a good night, okay?”

Talking to the Balanced does have one upside. If they don’t have a specific goal in mind, they are very easily redirected – the result of having no curiosity whatsoever.

The elderly woman nods stiffly. “You too, dear.”

You let yourself hope, for a fraction of a moment, for the biting reprimand, the concern in the crinkled eyes, a cry of *Aiyah, young women should not be out so late!* None comes. Instead, Mrs. Wong turns around with a vacuous smile and disappears into the door across the hall.

Throat clenching, you wrench at your doorknob. When the lock finally clicks, you barge past your front door, slam it behind you, slap at the deadbolt. You drop your bag on the floor and head right for the kitchen, rustling around in the cabinet until you find a bottle that is at least half full. Slinging it along in wide arcs at your side, you prowl back into the bedroom, then collapse on top of the sheets. You’ve just gotten

comfortable when your phone rings again, the screen sending a burst of light into the dark room. You surprise yourself by hitting the green button.

“Hello?”

A startled cough from the other end. “Jia?”

“Were you expecting someone else?” It’s not really a joke, but you laugh at yourself anyways.

“Sorry about the hour. I didn’t think you would—I mean, you weren’t picking up earlier.”

“What do you want, Fen?”

“I—just wanted to, you know. Check in. Um. How are you?”

“Fine.”

A pause. She’s chewing the inside of her cheek on the other line, you can practically see it. “Really?”

You take another pull from your bottle. The uglier part of you feels a bit of satisfaction letting the silence drag out.

“So, uh, listen,” she finally says, “I got your...delivery in the mail today. From Yang?”

The pseudonym used by the black-market doctor you used to see. At your last appointment, you’d still been giving Fen’s address as your own. Safer that way, actually, considering she comes closer to having the right to prescription medication.

“Oh. Right.”

“Should I mail it over?”

"Probably not," you answer, tossing the now empty bottle onto the nightstand.

It's too easy to have contraband intercepted in the mail these days.

"I can swing by, then," Fen rushes on, excitement starting to spark in her voice.

"No need. Why don't we meet at the metro station tomorrow? One o'clock?"

"Oh! Sure, that works. Did you...maybe want to grab lunch, too?"

"No time."

"Right. Sorry." A pause. "See you tomorrow, then?"

You hang up instead of answering, then lean back into your pillows. In the next moment you are drifting away, weightless.

## II

Around the time you are falling out of bed the next morning, stumbling to the toilet before the nausea surfaces onto the floor, Fen is arriving at work.

She's crowded into a corner of the elevator, behind a tight squeeze of very professional people in very professional suits. The elevator, like everything in the Balance Bureau, is beautiful. The building houses Anqu's hope for the future, so—for marketing purposes if nothing else—it has to look pristine. The contraption she stands in is all sleek steel and pane upon pane of polished glass, sliding up and down with nearly silent swishing sounds. Even the chime of the door is pleasant on the ears.

Fen gets off at the thirty-eighth floor, with the other sorters. On the way she passes Taojing, who does not like her—barely a nod, eyes returning immediately to his screen—and his sister Lanqing, who rolls her eyes at the back of his head and gives Fen a wave. Today, Lanqing also follows up with a frown and jerks her chin very slightly toward the corner office behind the work area, which means: *the boss has to speak with you.*

Fen groans and walks past her own desk towards the boss's office, which is glass on two sides, with large clear panes opposite the windows that give a spectacular view of the city. The boss is sitting behind a large mahogany slab that spans an entire corner, her back to shelves of journals. One of the chairs opposite her is already filled. The back of a young man's head is visible to Fen, his collar starchy and rigid. Intern, she guesses, or a new hire—they seem to percolate about this floor like a particularly obnoxious gas. Her line of work is difficult—very few really have a knack for it—and turnover is high.

“Fen! Right on time. Take a seat.”

“I thought Rong was training today,” Fen pouts, settling into the other chair.

The boss is a big fan of her work, so Fen always exercises the leeway this gives her to protest a little, see how stringent the demand is going to be.

“He can’t come in today, he isn’t feeling well.”

Fen tries not to make a face. Bureau employees falling ill is never good; even if it’s a one-day stomach bug, the office can’t have anyone dragging down the Health Quotient in their building. Bad for PR, and too great of a risk that it will spread to the most vital workers.

“What about Taojing?”

“Fen,” the boss says, “We really need *you* to lend your expertise, here.”

*Translation:* Taojing isn’t good enough to handle training. Not a fact Fen can argue with. Instead, she goes with, “I still have the files from yesterday to go through, and —”

The boss pulls her glossed lips pulled tight over a high-shine smile. “Just for a couple hours, alright? I would really appreciate it.”

Fen swallows a groan and turns to the young man in the next chair, who has been listening intently. He has narrow shoulders, a plain face, smooth skin. Entirely too eager. She takes one look at the rosy cheeks and is positive he won’t last here.

He follows her around like a puppy as she shows him around the office. Fen is irritable at the wrench thrown into her schedule, but tries her best to answer the deluge of questions.

“So why do we need so many people to assign Quotients?”

“It’s more complicated than it sounds,” Fen explains. “Lots of factors have to be considered. The medical records, psych consults, family histories, lifestyle estimations, the daily habits, past traumas, symptoms, prognosis – exposure, if it is contagious.”

“Why can’t the machines do it, then?”

The interns that are stupid enough to ask this always get a bad review from her.

“They’re simply not accurate enough,” she gives the short answer. What she wants to say is that what she does is not really an evaluation; it is more of an art. The machines can crunch numbers, but they do not really know humanity. Fen can sense personality like a warning sign, inclinations like red flags. The Diseases are puzzles, mazes, intricate mechanisms. And symptoms can be misleading. As a sorter, she must be diligent.

“What happens after you sign off on a subject?”

“The folder gets passed off to the Enforcement Agency, of course, and then they send out the Balance Notices.”

Fen shows him her piles of folders – cross-stacked into sharp right angles – on the right side of her desk, goes through her process for marking them off before they can move to the stack on her left. Each piece of folded manila cardstock is a human life, or the closest approximation of one. The subjects each have a serial number, their own



sheaf of papers. She emphasizes that she must work methodically, be exact. She leaves out the fact that her colleagues sometimes laugh at her, tease and question the necessity of printing the papers out, for the hard copies are wasteful and the monitor holds all of them in a fraction of the space. But Fen disapproves of sloppiness in everything – and most especially, in her work.

She tries not to think too hard about the subjects, after they have shuffled off to the left side of the desk. This was not a hardship for her, before she met you. You had asked her, once, how she felt with that much power. *What power?* she had responded. Fen was not, after all, doing anything that wouldn't be accomplished otherwise. Even if she were to leave the Bureau, someone else would take her place. She used to find some comfort in this notion, that she was just a cog in the machine, small but effective, doing exactly what she was supposed to do when she was supposed to do it.

Besides, working for the Bureau is paramount to the city's safety. The Bureau not only maintains the numbers, the warning system that tracks Buzzard activity, but also broadcasts the average to all their citizens. A high level of transparency is crucial. It would not do to have a repeat of the Meng Strike thirty years ago, when a group of dissatisfied workers (with significantly low Quotients, Fen might add) refused to operate the generator and the Net went down for a whole day. Both your parents and Fen's mother were lost in that slaughter, though it is but a faded memory now.

Fen is checking through her third folder, showing the intern how to convert the family history into the correct variables in the spreadsheet, when the blaring wail of a

horn cuts through the air outside and slices into the office building. She jumps, her wrist jerking her pen off the page, and a splotch of ink stains the paper.

“Hey, you alright?” the intern asks.

She shakes her head, glances out the window. The city siren only ever means one thing: an attack.

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On the other side of town, you are cursing up and down the locker room, trying to put on the last of your gear. It has been an agonizing morning – your head is still pounding, your mouth is dry, and all your joints feel a little stiff – so of course the Buzzards have decided they need to wreak some havoc.

Technically, you are always be prepared, any time you are at work, to get called in for an attack. The Birdwatchers have never, not even once, been given sufficient notice. If the Bureau fucks up the Quotient and the Buzzards get excited, you will know it at the same time as the rest of the city. And though there are twenty-four watch Towers around Anqu and the work is split evenly between the districts, you never know when another unit will call for backup.

“Six minutes!” someone yells, poking her head in the locker room door.

“Everyone get to the station now!”

You swear on the messenger’s mother, kick the nearest bench, and then leap out the door. Exiting the lockers, you come out on the highest floor of Tower One. The windows in the observation room are small and dotted across the top half of the reinforced walls like so many pieces of a Tetris game. Marching over to one, you can

feel your heart beating about your temples, anxiety peeking over your shoulder. You press your face to the window, daring yourself as much as the abominations circling in the sky. Outside, the Buzzards are getting closer, breaking formation to make sweeps at the tower, and patches of the Net are bending inward, tensing and denting.

Making a beeline downstairs, you leap onto your hoverboard, fly over the edge of the city until you reach the appropriate spot. The other Watchers are assembled in long loose rows under the fracturing part of the border, and everyone takes to the air together. When the first talon punctures the Net, the threads crackle and strain around it, sending sparks flying. Unfortunately, it is designed only to shock and deflect, not to maim. The Buzzard is burned, but presses on, talons scraping at the fence.

Commander Xi, who is technically your boss, zips over to you on his own board. Clear blue eyes with silvery metallic sclerae show little more than impatience, which is all the man can manage these days. He used to be a boisterous one, all pent-up rage and passionate pessimism. It is a shame, considering you had some respect left for him before he went and got himself Balanced.

“We have estimates they might try a coordinated attack – congregate at the northern sector to lure us away, before striking up east,” he says.

“Speculation,” you shout back over the barrel of your laser gun. Diving, you get as close to an offending talon as you dare before pulling the trigger and then sliding out of the way.

“Still, keep an eye out,” he shouts as he zooms away. “You’re our best shot, don’t waste your ammo!”

He reminds you of this at least twice a month. You do not need the encouragement. The best is the best, not an arguable fact, and even if you weren't the current record holder on the training ranges it wouldn't make a difference. What *does* make a difference is what you do, here, in the air, anything that will take a bird down.

You let loose two more lasers, and one strikes the closest vulture in the eye. It shrieks, the skeletal framing of its jaw pulling open, the bony calcified beak expanding on tenuous sinews to reveal fangs that are stained brown and continuously puncturing the deep purple tongue. The maw is dripping with blood so dark it is nearly black, drops sizzling as they hit the damaged Wardnet before splattering against snow white feathers. The Buzzard roars, shaking its head as the charred remains of its eye fall out of the hole in its scarred face.

Retreating behind a flurry of bone-tipped feathers, you whip your bow off your back. You are one of the few Watchers who chooses to carry an older model along with the more advanced weapons. The guns are shiny sleek things with a real kick, and they even connect back to the Bureau's mainframe for stats and updates, but at the end of the day when it comes to the Buzzards you don't trust the technology of an organization that more or less wants you dead. (And to think, the city used to have fighter jets in the sky, before all the development went to the generator.)

You nock an arrow, but your angle is all wrong. Increasing the hoverboard's grip with a twist of your heel, you steel herself and drop upside-down, legs and torso suddenly dangling in midair. The world turns on its head as you draw the string, and the arrow sings when it shoots forward, impaling itself solidly in the creature's

remaining eye. Someone behind you yells their approval, and you offer a sloppy salute before righting yourself and speeding upward another five hundred feet into the air, to where Qiang is fighting off a new challenger.

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Before the siren has even faded, Fen starts arguing with a coworker. She has managed to assign the intern some busy work so he'll leave her alone, but still she is nervous and her thoughts will not settle. You are on her mind again, now more than ever. There is no way for her to know whether you are responding to the current attack without checking the news, but turning on the television means seeing the possible casualty reports, and that is not something she can stomach unless alone. The dilemma makes her unbearably irritable, so instead of finding a solution she picks a fight with the first person that stops by her desk.

"It barely skews the error. We're well within the city's average," Taojing says as she corrects his latest report.

"But it'd be closer to target, if we went only with AT829F."

"Why can't we add R9N84D? They're both sick, it won't make any difference!"

Fen bites her lip and tries not to reply with something cutting, because although Taojing is mildly incompetent and can't fix an error bar to save his life, he is not entirely ill-intentioned. He simply doesn't see the folders the same way she does, the *people*, the lives they are changing.

"I think it will give us a larger margin for adjustment next week," she finally offers.

He sneers back at her. "Why should I listen to you? You're not better than us, just because you get good numbers. It's all the same result at the end of the day."

"I didn't mean to offend. I simply suggested —"

"You know what, do it your way, I don't care. Waste of my time."

He storms off, taking his tablet with him. It takes a few folders with it as he swipes it off the table. An hour later, when she comes back from the bathroom, Fen finds that the entire stack of folders on the right side of her desk has been knocked askew, the angles all wrong, her pens splayed across the manila. Half of the pages are soaked, brown with the stain of coffee that has been poured over them and left to dry. But that is not the worst part — when she realizes the contents have all melded together, the records swirled into jumbles of mixed information, she wants to scream.

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Two hours into the attack, the Buzzards finally get their claws on a Watcher in your unit — Mei, a rookie, barely on the job for two months. She struggles, but it is no use. You watch it happen — you always watch, because turning your back is fucking cowardly — and afterwards, the white vultures peel away from the Net, leaving in pairs and sets of three. Everyone is recalled to the Tower, with a smattering of injuries. Another day, another life. Overall, it has not been a bad attack.

You are sitting in the med bay, a nurse cleaning up a laceration on your shoulder where a vicious bastard got a claw in, and trying to recall if Mei had any close family left. You did not know her well, but you've been at the same tower for six months now, and you should offer condolences to those that loved her if you can.

Qiang is walking up to you, and lifting your head to nod at him you notice immediately that something is off. He is wincing, probably because his wrist got a little smashed today, but it can't be that bad. You wave the nurse off, pat the seat next to you, wait.

He just settles down and stares at the tile between his feet, plays with one end of the compressed gauze taped to his hand.

"Out with it."

"I..."

"Almighty fuck, spit it out. I don't even have the energy to be mad. Not sure I can think of anything worse than that fucker we barely fended off today."

"I'm getting Balanced."

Your shoulder gives an entirely uninspired twitch, and the chair you are sitting on shrivels, presses against your hips and the back of your thighs until it is welded there, a metal prison, the backrest gluing itself to your shoulder blades, metal supports poking into your lungs. Qiang winces as he meets your eyes, and a sick feeling once again churns in your stomach.

You swallow, clench your fists. "What?"

Qiang just nods; you do not really need him to repeat himself.

"I—when did you get Sorted?"

There is something boiling in your veins, and with it rises the image of Fen's pursed lips, the way she used to shake her head when you disagreed, as if she were an elementary school teacher given the wrong answer.

“I didn’t. I...”

“Volunteered,” you finish for him, the truth dawning.

Damnit, this isn’t even on par, it’s *much* worse than the Buzzards today. You take a second, close your eyes, offer a silent prayer to some all-knowing motherfucker who you are sure doesn’t exist, somewhere above, somewhere everywhere in their omniscience, and you promise that you will take two, three Buzzards; you will take a fucking *army* of them if only this is not true, if only it is not happening, if they can just give you this.

It achieves nothing, nothing at all.

Qiang is blurry when you look at him again, your throat thick with mucus as it works around the words.

“Why? God, Qiang, they’re going to turn you into a goddamn *zombie!*”

“I...can’t do this anymore. I’m...I’m not you.”

His hands are shaking again, a blatant tremor, not rhythmic but jolting, and you can tell by the clench of his jaw and the veins in his neck that it is not the sprained wrist, that he is trying his best to hold still, but his body has betrayed the order.

“What does that even *mean?*”

“They can *fix me!* I won’t have to wonder – about a bad spasm, or if and when I won’t be able to pick up a damn...”

The room fades out, white walls and metal gurneys and the smell of antiseptic dulling. You look out into empty space and you can see clear as day the last time you saw Fen, the last time you really talked to her.



She had finally suggested it, after the second time you (accidentally) passed out in her bathroom instead of your own, after she'd had to take a day off to keep an eye on you.

"You know...you could get Balanced," she'd said.

You'd blinked, and suddenly she was every other smug Bureau *asshole*.

"You've got to be *fucking kidding me*." There were a myriad of reasons you did not want to be a walking organic robot, but you'd skipped the explanations and exploded instead, arms waving, spit flying. "Maybe *you're* the one losing your mind."

She'd been in tears, you remember now. This is a detail you have tried to forget, but she had been facing the window, cheeks slick and shiny in the weak sunlight. Fen had been so angry she was hiccupping, fighting the jolt in her diaphragm.

"I don't want to turn on the monitor tomorrow and see you torn into pieces," she'd whispered, low but strident, "if you don't find a way to drink yourself to death first."

You had very clearly realized this was the end of the line. There was no point letting this go on, if it was going to be more of a burden than not. You'd laughed in her face, for the full effect.

*"If I want to kill myself, isn't that my own damn right?"*

Fen, no longer the wordsmith, had slapped you across the face, and the bright sting of it had stalled your half of the conversation. The red rush blossomed out of your cheek and cut into reality for a moment, leaving both of you wordless, nearly thoughtless.

“Jia?”

Qiang is looking at you now. His eyes have a touch of the same anger you felt that day, but it is drowned out by a plea you cannot ignore. He has told you before, the prognosis of this disease he has. It once had a name, but after the Bureau categorized everything none of the names mattered anymore. All you know is that is a Category Z – incurable and fatal, the slow fade.

“When?”

“Next Thursday.”

He must know what he is doing to you. It is selfish, but you *know* as he utters his next words that he is perfectly aware of where he has left you, alone here in this cold, silver tower.

“I’m sorry.”

“I understand,” you whisper back. It is the kindest lie you can manage.

---

It is pouring rain outside, the water sluicing down from the sky in a particularly vengeful manner. Fen thinks of the umbrella in her desk drawer, folded there for this very purpose, then looks up into the crying sky and walks straight on. Her mind is still on the folders, the skewed documents, the ruined work. She will have to stay late tonight, make up all the hours she put in, but she will cross that bridge when she gets to it. The anger is fading into nerves now, and more than that relief, for she has checked the news and knows that you are alive, even if you happen to blow her off today.

By the time Fen pulls herself onto the dry refuge of the metro platform, she is soaked, thin brown coat flapping around her knees, hair dripping onto her shoulders. She rakes it away from her face, and then pulls the soaked coat off of her legs and takes a seat on the bench. Rooting through her bag, which is thankfully only damp through the outer layer, she retrieves a pack of cigarettes and flips open the lid, inspects the contents.

She knows no one smokes anymore – really, it brings a Quotient down something awful – but people have their habits, and she likes the symmetry of cigarettes in their little boxes. Three rows to make twenty, the seven-six-seven formation uneven but stacked perfectly in the little carton. Fen loves the smell of the newly opened pack, the perfectly even white circles that make a foamy flat surface.

Her lighter is slick in her wet fingers, and she can't get any traction on the sparkwheel. The train in front of her finishes collecting its passengers and departs, one long gust of wind, and it combined with the weather blows her tiny flame out. She sighs, hands dropping into her lap. Drops of water are collecting under the overhanging roof of the platform. Fen watches the round tips forming, stretching, dragging until they fall onto the concrete.

She looks...wrong, you think as you approach. A little more exhausted, and paler now that the weather has turned, but mostly just sopping wet. You have never seen Fen leave her apartment with so much as a strand of black hair out of place, but today her crisp white collar is a little skewed, and the suit jacket looks down right soggy.

You stop at the bench, your umbrella arcing down and out. Slick nylon folds back, metal springs popping as the wet material swishes together. Giving it a perfunctory shake, you drop it on the ground and stick a hand out.

“Here.”

Fen looks up, then places the lighter into your outstretched palm. You sit and lean over, cup your hand around the little metal hood. Flick once, twice, and it catches. Fen pokes the cigarette between her lips and leans forward, sings the tip in the tongue of ember flame. Paper crackles and blackens, and she breathes in slowly.

“Thanks,” she exhales. Smoke blows away on the wind and she turns to you, one eyebrow quirked, holding open the pack.

You shrug, pluck one out, light up. Her pack is, as always, nearly untouched. You wait, watching out of the corner of your eye. Sure enough, in the next moment she’s fishing in the bag again with her unoccupied hand and withdrawing the second pack. Fen takes two cigarettes out of her replacement carton, which is dwindling, and slides them very carefully into the first box, so as not to wrinkle anything. The pack is symmetrical once again, orange tips standing at attention, when she puts it away.

A smile twitches at your lips; evidently, not that much has changed.

“So,” you begin eloquently.

“Um,” she replies, just as expressive, “I, uh, have it.”

She reaches into a coat pocket and withdraws a tightly clenched fist, passing it to you furtively. You accept the small orange bottle and look at it from under a flap of your own coat. It is full, the labelled prescription bearing someone else’s name—it’s

always a different person, every time – underneath the little white cap. Shaking it just slightly, you watch the little blue pills fall to the bottom of the container and pile on top of each other.

“Much appreciated.”

Back when you didn’t meet on metro platforms to make this little transaction, you’d joke that Fen was your dealer, which was hilarious to you mostly because it was aggravating to her. In reality, she has the money and the connections, and as a Watcher with about one strike left you don’t dare to set foot into a real hospital, underground or not. They’d Balance you before you got a word out.

Fen helped you get what you need – or she did, regularly, until you stopped seeing each other. Today was going to be the day you ran out, and although you had to double check your calendar, you are positive Fen had the date memorized. You *are* grateful that she’s come through. Fen has access to the nice shit – the doctors, and the procedures, and, most importantly, the sinfully nice pills without the side effects – in the center of the city where people are still getting real treatment. (Anqu decided two years ago that there was no point offering much medical care to the Watchers. If your Quotients get too high, the Buzzards only get more to snack on.)

Which is not to say you don’t feel a little guilty about the whole thing. You’re a little surprised that she even reached out about it, and so punctually. Then again, guilt tends to move the feet. Silence has descended on the platform now, and you decide to throw Fen a bone before raindrops on the bench start boiling.

“How are you?”

Fen blows a careful stream of grey, watches smoke and water mix. "Long fucking day. Some asshole is after me at the office."

The nastier part of you wants to sneer back *oh no, poor you*, but now is not the time to be petulant. The nicotine is hitting smoothly, easing the reaction.

"You gonna get them back?"

She cracks a smile. "Sure." Remembering herself, she turns to you, the amusement fading. "Was it bad today?"

"We lost one. Didn't know her too well."

"I'm sorry."

For what, you want to ask, but that's a little further into uncomfortable territory than you're ready to traipse. Fen turns to look at you as you swivel your gaze away. She watches as the lighter still in your hand flips over and under the fingers, twisting this way and that, the scratched red plastic a blur. She is thinking of the puckered circles of skin scarred red and white under your sleeve, the marks she used to run her hands over when you were curled up in bed together. Fen had asked you, once, if they had hurt. *That was kind of the point*, you'd replied.

You go still when you realize she's staring at you. Her brow is creased, and the concern she can't hide draws your thoughts magnetically back to Qiang, that same expression on his face not twenty-four hours ago. Your eyes are watering again for the second time in as many hours, and a heavy-handed knot ties itself in your stomach.

The words are out before you know what to say.

“Qiang’s getting...” You wave your hand through the rest of the sentence, tongue suddenly sticking to the roof of your mouth.

“Oh,” she flinches. “Oh.” Fen is suddenly rewinding the past two weeks, desperately sorting through manila folders in her mind. She knows Qiang, has met him multiple times. Did she carefully settle him on a pile, not so long ago? “Was he—”

“No. His choice.”

Thankfully, she doesn’t apologize again. She just reaches across the bench and takes your cold fingers in hers, squeezes. You don’t draw away.

Suddenly, she laughs, a rueful little chuckle. “You know, it occurred to me, the other day—how do we know that their...*tastes* haven’t changed?”

You’re completely lost for a moment, until your brain catches up. “What, the Buzzards?”

She nods, slowly, and her next words tumble out of her mouth at a faster rate than the smoke. “We don’t have any new data, you know. They could be after anybody, except that the average Watcher Quotient is purposefully high, and you’re the only ones who get any real contact. It doesn’t prove anything.”

You turn the idea over in your head. “We have data. From the early years.”

“Yeah, before either of us was even born.” She rolls her eyes, and there’s a hint of the person who used to laugh at your jokes and correct your grammar. “The city should really conduct another investigation.”

*The city should do a lot of things.* “You plan on testing this theory?”

“I—” Fen sits back, her hand sliding away, onto the bench. “I could bring it up to the boss, I suppose.”

You nod. That’s never going to happen. “They’re smart motherfuckers, you know. I’d doubt it if they didn’t have some sort of target in mind.”

“Sure, I guess. You’re the expert.”

You can tell Fen is unsatisfied, but she flicks away some ash and shrugs.

“Or,” you muse a beat later, taking a long pull at your dying cigarette, “maybe they just enjoy watching us destroy each other.”

Fen smiles, but leaves it at that. The two of you smoke in silence for a long stretch, the trains coming and going, the rain starting again in heavy sheets. Up above, over gleaming strands of electricity, the Buzzards hover like so many white caveats in the sky.



### III

The next Thursday, Fen receives a stream of data from the hospital. One of the numbers is Qiang's, but she does not know this as she adds it to the correct column on her sheet, then lets the machine run the numbers again. It makes a pleasant hum as it works, but the result is exactly as she predicted.

The City Quotient is still too high.

She starts to worry, for she has already worked through her stack for the day and will not be getting any new folders until next week – when it will be far too late to raise the numbers out of the hazardous zone that could mean increased attacks for the weekend. She skips lunch to go looking for new records, and is sitting chewing the end of her pen, stomach growling, when Taojing raps on her cubicle.

“Found this for you,” he grumbles. He still feels a little bad about ruining her things after a few of their fellow Sorters gave him the cold shoulder all of last week, and he keeps any sharp words reigned in as he hands over a short stack of folders.

“Thank you. What are these?”

“A collection of really low Q's, in the right areas. Should balance us out for the next week, at least. The upper floors are pissy with the rise in attacks lately. They want everybody to double down.”

She nods, thanks him again, feeling relieved. Fen spends the rest of the day going through them, and is feeling confident when she opens the last folder. Halfway between the birth date and the occupation, she stops short. Fen takes in the details again, the

medical history, the base of operations, the stamp from the city, and walks herself over to Taojing's desk.

"This subject is a Watcher," she announces, passing over the folder.

He flips through it, only using one eye to scan the pages.

"So?"

"They're off limits. We don't mess with the Defense employees."

"Listen, Fen, all these folders are above my pay grade. We just need the extra body. It's a go-ahead from the boss, so if this one doesn't work then take it up with her."

"No, it—it works."

When Fen still does not move from behind his seat, Taojing sighs. "But?"

"I...I think I know who this is."

"Happens," he shrugs. "Know her well?"

"She's..." There is no good word. Fen doubts there even *is* a word. "She's a friend."

"Well," he says, as he passes her back the folder and turns to his screen, "someone has to do it. Tell your friend that she's going to save the city."

---

You get the call right after work. You're already at the bar under the Tower, so you just give the address and wait. Fen storms in ten minutes later, sweaty, red in the face, a wild look in her eyes. She takes the stool next to you and actually orders. This is going to be good.

"Are we celebrating?"

In response, Fen places a manila folder onto the counter. Raising an eyebrow, you place a finger on it and slide it closer, use one hand to flip it open. You're feeling a little invasive getting into someone else's information until about halfway down the first page. The details fill themselves in a little too rapidly, and before you can get into the really gritty parts you've nudged the cardstock closed again.

"God," you sigh, "it looks *so* much uglier in writing."

Fen takes a long drink of her beer, slams it down. Thankfully, the rest of the bar is empty. The amount of frustration in your immediate two feet is actually hazardous.

"Any chance...that it's not—"

You close your eyes, seeing the black sentences on white paper, breathe out very slowly through your nose.

"Nope," you reply, popping the last consonant. "That's definitely me."

"Damn." It is impossible to meet your eyes, so Fen looks at the foam in the mug instead, counts a few bubbles as they pop. "That came across my desk today."

"Figured," you deadpan.

"You—"

"Matter of time."

It is true; you were just waiting for this to happen. It is moderately fortunate, that you landed on *her* desk, when there are so many other Sorters in that building. On the other hand, the in-person warning feels a little forced.

Fen doesn't know what's worse, the acceptance or the nonchalance. She runs her finger around the rim of her glass, clockwise, then counterclockwise.

"I'm not going to let it happen," she whispers.

"Pardon?"

"I won't sign off on you."

You snort. The tables have somehow done a full turn, and you are very late to this party.

"How...kind of you?"

"It's not funny."

"No one's laughing. What changed your mind?"

"Nothing," Fen exhales. "I'm just as fucking hypocritical as the next person, okay? Are you happy now?"

"Not particularly." You stab at the olive in your glass, feeling the fleshy skin pop as the toothpick slides through and finds purchase. "Though I do have a question."

"Yes?"

"Say you pass on me this time. What poor fucker takes my place?"

"What? I..."

"I'm not a Sorter, Fen, but I know how the Bureau works. If it's not me, it's going to be someone else. The Public Quotient is an *average*."

Fen drinks instead of replying. She's beginning to understand how much easier it is. When you turn a stare on her that is pure accusation, she shakes her head.

"I don't know his name."

“What’s he do?”

“He’s a teacher. Little younger than you. Bad history, so—”

She stops because you are laughing, a full-throated laugh, the kind that starts in the belly and moves up until it’s coming out in sustained beats.

“You’re trading *me* in so that they can get rid of a teacher?”

“He’d still have his job! And if he doesn’t work, there’s another woman in the quarantine sector — ”

There is a crash as you throw down your glass — like smashing a brick into the bar — and shards fly everywhere, startling Fen, who leans back. She’s not quick enough to avoid you, when you step out of your seat and slam her back into the wooden counter, one hand clenching around a fistful of her collar, forearm at a diagonal across her chest, elbow pinning her in place.

You lean forward, letting your lips graze against her ear. This is the closest you’ve been in a month. Fen is paralyzed, but not afraid. She feels a flimsy panel pressed up against her chest, and realizes it’s the folder, clamped between you.

“You *are* going to sign off on this,” you hiss.

“Why is that?”

Somehow, Fen still doesn’t get it. Goddamnit, but Fen has never gotten it, and now it is much too late to learn. She has once again made the decision for you, tied your hands in another intricate knot. It was never about the procedure, you want to scream, shake her until she understands. It was about *control*.

But if this is the one thing you *can* control, then you're more than ready to pull the trigger. That teacher probably has a family, and a life; teaching positions are difficult to get as is, and especially with a history. The man is probably in *recovery*. And you don't want to think about the other people, the other *options* that she is thinking of substituting for you.

"If you don't," you enunciate very carefully, still inches from Fen's face, "I will tell the entire Bureau what you have done. And then, not only will they *ensure* that I get the procedure, but you'll also lose this *job* you love so much."

Fen barely manages to catch the falling papers before they hit the floor. By the time they're safely in her hands, you have stormed out. The bell on the door dings merrily, and she feels the weight of a hundred silver eyes falling on her, as if released from a catch in the ceiling, all the debt she has accumulated over the last five years cobbling down onto her skull.

---

A week later, on the afternoon you are expecting your Notice, you are above the city again, fighting for your life. White feathers are cascading down everywhere, striking the Net and breaking before falling through, showering the Watchers in a snow storm of quills.

You spin in and out, doing more rescue work than any real striking. You're not exactly sober, and your fingers are shaking a little, or maybe twitching for some revenge. The depth of your anger has filled the cavern in your chest, and you do not remember why you cared, why you would be scared up here. You want nothing more

than to grab one of the vultures by the shoulders and wrestle with it, break the fowl apart in your hands.

As if in response to your thought, two Buzzards land in front of you, their claws sliding down the Net, which crackles and buzzes with indignation until a lucky talon finds traction.

The whole sky shudders for a moment as a large chunk of the fence rips open. The other snow-white attackers take this time to latch onto the failing field before it corrects itself, and then suddenly two more are pecking and tearing. The city's dumbasses who didn't make it to a shelter in time run screaming beneath all of it.

You are pushed up against the Watchers from Tower Seven after an hour, because your unit cannot hold the breach alone. Five Watchers swarm forward toward the bird that has most of its head through the gap, beak spewing hot black blood, tongue snapping, fangs lashing from side to side. They aim for the eyes and the back of the throat, and the Buzzard pulls back slightly, its large left wing flapping down, bludgeoning the Net. There is a scream as a watcher from the other tower gets impaled by the bone-tipped appendage, the sharp edge lashing through her stomach.

Before you can so much as blink, the Buzzard has grasped the wounded woman in a talon. It dips its head through the huge hole in the net, its scream oddly reminiscent of a crying child, and lowers the needle-beak, tearing another chunk out of the woman's shoulder. She is flailing, her scream a gurgle, writhing as the claws tighten slowly. The Buzzard stops screaming and lets out a pure caw, and it expands into the clouds, echoed by its brethren. The woman twists in response to the noise, and a talon

punctures through her ribcage. Blood gushes out of her, and she is twitching, the whites of her eyes visible from hundreds of feet away.

It is nothing you have not seen before, but today it is a little too much.

*"Fucking do something!"*

The man screaming at you has blood and tears all over his face; he is looking at the woman with barely contained desperation, fidgeting with the trigger of a gun that will not click, refuses to respond to his sweaty fingers.

The entire sky slows. The air around you thickens, shifting into a thick, clear jelly, and each beat of your heart fills your ear canals like the screeching of a vulture.

There is a humming beneath you, from the board under your boots. The string draws back, a line across your fingers, delicate as floss, tensile strength burning potential energy.

Aim the sharp tip. It is not shaking.

*Do something.* Let go.

There is a silent moment when the atmosphere twitches, whistling wind warping your surroundings like the ripples in a swimming pool.

Your arrow buries itself in the woman's eye, and as she goes limp, body arcing in the wrong direction, the talons finally come apart. She falls straight down, and somebody chases her, trying to catch the body.

The man at your side has gone slack, and he turns to you with empty eyes. His mouth is working, but there are no words coming out. You cannot hear a thing but the scream of the fucking Buzzard, deprived of its prey, screeching its anger to the skies.



Don't think about what you do next. Drop the bow. Swerve left, to grapple with the grieving man. He grabs at your shoulders, but he is not really fighting you. Take the next minute to snatch the rapier from his waist. Fly forward. You would call for the others to clear space, but they are all watching you, muscles tense, unmoving.

Use both hands to grip the hilt of the sword. Breath goes in, and out, and when your hoverboard shudders beneath you, ready to give way, you urge it forward until you are brushing up against sharp white feathers.

Globs of thick, boiling blood land on your shoulders and neck as you plunge the blade into the neck of the bird. You drive it in until your gloved knuckles are brushing against the spiny wings, and then pull back before stabbing down again, and again, all the way through. You think you can see the rapier burning a flaming blue streak into the Buzzard, singeing it from the inside out.

You do not stop until the neck is raw and red, hanging on a hinge.

The bird's body gives a few last shudders before the head breaks off, falling to the ground. The wing still caught in the Net tumbles away down the other side, and the rest of the body plummets down into the highway below, pouring black blood.

---

In the break room of the thirty-eighth floor of the Bureau, the sorters are cheering at the live broadcast as the enormous white birds peel away, fly back into the heavens.

"Holy hell," Taojing says, clapping Fen on the shoulder. "That was...kind of awesome. Hey, are you okay?"

She wipes at her face – it is wet, for some reason – and snuffles, nods. Her heart is still pounding, and her palms are absolutely slick with sweat. Still, she has seen you return to the ground, and for that reason alone she cannot stop smiling.

The Sorters slowly return to their desks. Fen sits down, blows her nose. She is contemplating giving you a call, Bureau be damned, when Tao walks up behind her.

“Are you seeing this?”

Fen turns back to her computer, clicks through the stats, looks at the Quotients marching across the screen. “The city average looks good.”

Taojing glances at the pile of folders on her desk, then grins. “Guess we don’t need those anymore, huh?”

Fen is agreeing, butting together the pile with her fingertips, when a shadow falls across her desk. She looks up into her boss’s dark eyes, and something in her chest stills.

“Almost done with those?”

“The numbers are levelling out, ma’am. We were thinking we’d save these for next time –”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to work. We need to sign off on that pile, now.”

It might be Fen’s imagination, but the boss looks tired. She has to have seen the broadcast, and Fen is confused, annoyed; the death of a Buzzard will keep the Quotient low for the next several months at least.

“But my calculations show that –”

“Fen, it doesn’t matter. I’ve been sent a memo from upstairs. They just set up a new monthly Balance quota. They’re announcing it tomorrow, and we need fifteen names, now. You understand. It’s all marketing. A certain percentage of the population will now be treated every quarter...”

Fen’s no longer listening. All that math, for nothing. She’s thinking about how it doesn’t matter anymore, how diseased the person is. At the end of the day, all they want is the right number of names.

It won’t be yours, she decides. Not this time.

---

They confirm that the Buzzard is dead – really dead, not knitting itself back together again – but you are not sure you care. By the time you are released from the med bay, the nurses have scrubbed the black blood off of you, and your skin is raw and tingling.

There are a lot of people who want to talk: the other Watchers, Commander Hong, and even a flock of journalists, shoving microphones with little channel logos attached into your face. They swarm you, asking questions, tugging at your clothes, shoving things in your hands. You do not indulge them.

When the quiet falls, you find yourself back in the Tower’s empty mail room. It’s been hours, now, and you can see the darkened sky outside of the windows. There is quiet here, much better than the clamor that made you shake in the locker room, but still you are slightly confused until you remember what day it is – you have been

expecting a message. Today, you suppose, is a good a day for it as any. Sure enough, there's something in your box.

You reach in, dig around until your fingers close on a sheet of paper. But it's the wrong size and shape to be a Balance Notice. Instead of a thick envelope bulging with the necessary papers, you find a small greeting card, the cardstock a pristine and beautiful texture. A golden monogram is lettered at the top edge with familiar initials.

You turn it over. There are only a few words scribbled there, the letters rushed but still stately in a way your own handwriting would never allow.

*I'm sorry. I couldn't let them fix you. And you wouldn't let me use anyone else.*

It is...an explanation, you realize.

You are running, then, sprinting down the hall and past the lookouts, down to the bottom floor, out the doors. It is way past working hours, but still too early for a workaholic like Fen to leave. You nearly fly out into night, covering a mile of sidewalk a minute, veering past the crowd still milling around in the street. You head downtown until you are on the wide avenue in front of the Balance Bureau.

You stalk right past the lobby with the high windows and the spacious atrium, climb into the empty elevator. You nearly bruise yourself on the doors once it stops, ignoring the woman at the front desk who tries to hail you down like a taxi.

The floor opens out in front of you, rows of dark cubicles in between glass windows and the larger offices that surround the perimeter. As you scan the room, head swiveling, lungs deflating, a voice drifts across the carpet. It is a little unaffected,

halting, but still recognizable. It is the right voice, one you could almost reach out and touch.

“Oh, that’s alright, I won’t be needing these anymore,” Fen says to a passing coworker. They seem to be the only ones still here.

She seems thinner, slightly more comfortable in her clothes, but that hair and profile are unmistakable. Fen is walking with a sheaf of manila folders in her hands, stacked up to her shoulder, and dumping them in the recycling bin in the corner. She is right there, a mere twenty feet away. Before you can move forward or open your mouth, she turns, as if she knows there is someone watching.

The space in the office seems to contract, all the air delving down your lungs and not returning. The card in your hand falls from your fingers, gently swaying left and right before it hits the floor. You do not feel it, do not see it, because you are staring into a pair of silver eyes, metallic sclerae that used to be Fen’s.

They blink back at you, reflecting the fluorescent lights overhead, and she asks—

“Can I help you?”