

Almost Blue

Brevis

Genre: Surreal Literary Horror

Word Count: 12.860

Description:

Somewhere between the city and the water, forgotten people gather beneath fading music while a young man searches for the mother he may have already lost once before.

mariaemm123456@gmail.com

Bybrevis.com

1.

The rain had been falling for so long that the streets no longer remembered what they looked like when they were dry. He didn't remember either. It felt as though he had been running forever, until pavement and horizon blurred into one continuous line.

He couldn't tell if whoever had been chasing him was still there, somewhere behind him, folded into the rain. But he wasn't about to find out. Every small sound—a footstep, a splash, the soft collapse of water against concrete—seemed to carry intention. So he kept running. As long as his body allowed it, he kept running.

The southern monsoon had arrived earlier than expected that year. Everything felt wetter than it should have been. Even his skin carried a strange, unfamiliar heaviness, as if the humidity had settled into it, quietly altering its surface. He hadn't really noticed until now. Being in the middle of a city that was, in some sense, also the middle of a jungle, running for his life—this was new to him. The last time he had run was in a marathon, and even then, only for fifteen minutes. Now time stretched differently, without shape or limit.

Gradually, the lights of the city dissolved behind him.

At the next corner, he stopped. There was a low wall, slick with rain, and he climbed onto it without thinking, as if the act itself might give him a clearer view of whatever was following—or not following—him. For a

moment, he simply stood there, arms hanging loosely at his sides, chest rising and falling in uneven rhythm.

His face burned with heat, though the rain was cold. Each breath came heavily, echoing somewhere deeper than his lungs. He listened.

But the rain kept its secrets.

“There’s no one here, idiot.”

The voice came from beneath the brick wall, low and irritated. He jumped, the sound cutting clean through the rain.

His head jerked toward the ground while the rest of his body stayed frozen in its awkward, uneven stance. On the wet, dust-streaked pavement, there was nothing—only two large trash cans. One stood upright, its greasy lid half-slipped to the side. The other lay on its flank, black bags spilling out like something unwilling to stay contained.

“Who—who said that?” he muttered.

Under the pale wash of moonlight, a slender silhouette began to gather among the piles of trash. At first it was only a suggestion—a distortion in the shadow, something that didn’t quite belong. Then it shifted, stretching and folding into a shape that refused to stay still, as if undecided.

Finally, it settled.

A thin white cat stepped out from the mess with quiet precision, its movements almost deliberate, almost knowing. It crossed the slick ground without a sound, then leapt lightly onto the wall, landing beside him as though it had always intended to be there.

“I did.” The cat replied in a calm and reassuring voice.

Confusion rushed through him, quick and invasive, until it filled every corner of his body. Fear followed close behind, settling in his chest. His heart beat too fast. His breaths came short, uneven. His thoughts scattered, piling over one another like the trash below.

“I saw a motorbike speeding down the highway,” the cat continued, curling her tail neatly around herself. “You were struggling to climb the wall.”

So he had been right. The serpents knew. They had seen him. And now they were coming.

He had to hide. He had to disappear completely, leave no trace behind. Staying in the city wasn’t an option. Sooner or later, they would find him. The Gecko—and the serpents in general—had eyes everywhere. Best case, he’d be dead by morning. Worst case...

“Why are you sweating, sweetheart?” the cat asked lightly. “Or is it just the rain? This heat doesn’t help. Makes a cat want to tear off her own claws. You understand.”

He sat at the edge of the wall, his feet dangling, swaying slightly back and forth. Maybe the drug had already started to take hold. His body felt strangely light, detached from itself. Sweat clung to his skin. And a cat was talking to him.

"I'm Jasmine," she said, stepping closer with measured ease. "If you smelled my collar, it would remind you of the flower. That's why I chose the name."

She tilted her head, studying him.

"And you are...?"

"Simon," he said.

"Ah. A good name," Jasmine replied softly. "Now, Simon... why are the serpents after you?"

Simon lowered his gaze.

"I stole something."

Jasmine nodded once.

"That usually does it."

2.

The neon city was slowly settling into the warm light of morning. A faint, almost stubborn glow lingered in the signs overhead, though the day had already begun to claim them. From the bakeries, a dense, comforting smell of fresh bread drifted outward, pushing gently against the remnants of the night—alcohol, damp concrete, and something metallic in the air. One by one, engines came to life, their low growls blending into a steady hum.

A dog barked. Then another answered. Windows began to open. Somewhere, an alarm rang, muffled by walls, as if unsure whether it should fully wake.

"Amfang Chinese Deli" was one of the few places that never closed. It had watched everything—quiet mornings like this, heavy noons thick with heat, the restless tides of evening crowds, and the slow, uncertain movements of the night. It never moved, never changed. It simply remained, collecting time.

A man pulled up outside on a red motorbike. He wore a white tank top that struggled to contain his belly, stretched thin across it. His moustache was uneven, thinning in places, and his eyebrows had grown together into a single, stubborn line. Typical Serpant.

As he walked into the long, narrow room, the smell of freshly baked fish cakes drifted into his nostrils—warm, salty, and strangely comforting. It lingered there, persistent. For a moment, he considered stopping, just briefly, to take one. Even a single fish cake might settle the dull nausea left behind by the hour-long motorbike ride.

The thought stayed with him a second too long.

Then he imagined his boss's reaction.

Just like that, the idea dissolved.

Behind the tall stacks of cereal boxes and premade curry sauces—still waiting to be arranged on the shelves—there was a small metal door. It had been set so carefully into the wall that most customers would never notice it. They came in for their favorite delicacies, eyes fixed on familiar things. The door didn't belong to that world. It asked not to be seen.

But he knew it was there. He knew the difference between concrete and metal.

He knocked once, then twice.

A moment passed before the door opened inward, revealing a narrow, cold room. Darkness pooled inside it, thick and unmoving. Still, he stepped in without hesitation. He knew his way around, even like this.

What he didn't understand was why.

Why would his boss remain in the dark, even after hearing him arrive?

Instinctively, he reached toward the light switch, a quiet unease rising in him—the sense that someone else might already be inside. His fingers were inches away when a voice cut through the darkness, sharp and immediate.

“Touch that light,” the Gecko said, “and I'll have your arm cut clean off at the root.”

A pause. Then he continued colder:

“Keep this in mind—you're not a real serpent. It won't grow back.”

■■■■

3.

It wasn't the smell of burnt rice clinging to the bottom of a pot that woke him. Nor was it the faint, lingering sensation of a linen tablecloth draped over his body. It was the cold breeze—coming and going in quiet intervals, as if unsure whether it belonged there.

He had never owned a fan. Never known the simple luxury of falling asleep in front of one. So the feeling struck him as unfamiliar, almost deliberate.

His eyes widened.

This wasn't a place he recognized.

“Finally,” a trembling voice murmured nearby. “Would you like some durian ice cream? It's the only one I have left. Each grandchild has their favorite flavor, but they eat them all with the same excitement... Not durian though.”

He turned his head, searching for the source of the voice.

But all he could see were cream-colored wooden floorboards, floral tapestries lining the walls, and delicate furniture that seemed to belong to another time entirely—something preserved, untouched, and slightly out of place, as though it had been waiting for him without ever expecting him to arrive.

“Where on earth am I?” he whispered, letting his body fall back against the wooden floorboards.

“In granny’s paradise, silly,” a familiar soft voice replied.

He turned his head.

The same white cat sat beside him, composed as ever, her legs crossed neatly, tail curled with quiet precision.

“You fainted in the alley,” she said casually. “Very dramatic.”

“Jasmine, dear, don’t confuse our guest.”

An old woman stepped through the open doorway that led—presumably—to the kitchen. She moved slowly but with a certain ease, as though the house adjusted itself to her pace.

“My name is Nana,” she said, smiling faintly. “That’s what you can call me. It’s what everyone calls me, to be fair.”

She let out a soft, amused giggle; the sound was light but carried something deeper, something that lingered just a moment longer than it should have.

“You can hear her too?” His upper body jerked upright, alert all at once.

There were only two possibilities. Either Nana knew about the drug and had somehow inhaled it herself—that would explain why she could hear Jasmine. Or... Jasmine was actually a talking cat.

He wasn’t sure which was worse.

Both felt too strange to examine for long. The moment he tried, his thoughts grew heavy, like something pressing down from the inside. His head dipped, and he let himself fall back against the wooden floor.

“Well,” Nana said, her voice firmer now, “why don’t you both come into the kitchen, and we’ll have a proper talk? That seems fair, doesn’t it, Simon?”

By the time he managed to sit up again, they were gone.

Only the open kitchen doorway remained.

A soft, sweet smell of crepe butter drifted into the room, warm and inviting, curling around him as if it had intention. His stomach responded immediately, tightening, urging him forward. If he had listened to it—really listened—he would already be in the kitchen.

The serpent stood by the doorframe, waiting for permission to step further inside. He knew the Gecko was not in a good mood, and he had no desire to risk being decapitated. He liked to think he was smarter than that.

“Will you sit down already?” the Gecko asked sharply. “I do not like to wait.”

He hurried into the nearest chair he could recall. His body barely fit; his thighs pressed tightly together, the wood creaking under the weight of him. Still, now that he had sat down, he knew there was no getting back up.

“If you stretch your hand out in front of you,” the Gecko began, “as far as it will naturally go, you will be able to touch the leather cover of a small notebook.”

A gramophone in the corner scratched through an old vinyl on repeat—something between jazz and country music, drifting through the thick darkness like a tired memory. It sounded almost like a whisper. Almost like silence before thunder.

“I need you to do something extremely simple,” the Gecko continued. “Take that notebook to the nearest pond. Make sure it reaches the deepest part. Make sure it sinks—and sinks well.”

His gravelly voice made the request feel heavier than it was, as if the act itself carried more weight than its words should allow.

At that exact moment he felt important, more important than the other serpents. He thought that if he completed this task exactly as asked, he might finally become the Gecko’s left hand. A serpent, elevated to something important. The thought sent a quiet rush through him, though he did his best to hide it. Fortunately, the room was dark, and his expression remained unseen.

The notebook’s cover felt soft beneath his rough touch. He grabbed it quickly and slid it under his left sleeve.

He stood, waiting in case the Gecko had anything else to add.

Silence.

After a moment, he bowed slightly—halfway through realizing it was meaningless in the darkness—and made his way toward the small metal door.

Outside, sunlight hit his eyes with sudden force. He squinted, disoriented, as if he had just surfaced from a tunnel after hours underground. It took him a few seconds to reconnect with the world around him.

He bought a fish cake without really thinking, eating it before reaching his motorbike. Then he started the engine and rode off, heading—seemingly—toward the nearest pond.

5.

A ceiling fan turned slowly above him, mimicking the soft movement of the earth. Though lately, it had felt to him as if the earth itself had stopped spinning.

The heat inside the room sat only a breath away from the temperature outside, beyond the cream-tiled walls. The fan offered almost no relief as it spun and spun and kept spinning.

"Where's my notebook?" he asked carelessly, though the sound of his own voice startled him a little.

"It's all here, darling. Don't worry," Nana replied, a soft laugh escaping with the words.

The warmth of the setting sun rested gently against his skin. Beyond the windows, somewhere between the outside world and the fading light, remained a patch of space untouched by people. A strangely calm place. He imagined how comforting it might feel to exist there at this hour of the day.

Then again, maybe it would be depressing.

A place not entirely real. Not entirely unreal either.

How lonely would it be to exist somewhere in between?

"Are you sure it's not lost?" he asked again, calmer this time.

For reasons he couldn't explain, the old woman's presence brought him comfort. Maybe it was her eyes. Or the softness of her voice. Maybe it was the settled floral scent that followed her quietly through the room.

"Oh please," said the white cat across from him, grooming one paw with slow concentration. "Like she'd have any reason to lie."

Silence filled the room gradually, the way evening fills an empty street. Somewhere in the distance, an old record played the same melody over and over again. Time seemed to leave it alone.

Smoke drifted from a nearby chimney into the pale afternoon sky, as though it were trying to escape something not fully visible, not fully there.

"So, Simon," Nana said at last, "Jasmine told me she found you running from someone in the alley. Do you mind explaining what happened?"

He swallowed.

Only then did he notice the three small porcelain cups resting on the table between them, each placed with equal care. Their patterns looked strangely familiar, like the remains of a fire that had been burning for far too long.

6.

Beneath the elevated highway, the city stretched into unfamiliar distances.

At its edges, smaller houses disappeared quietly into the overwhelming green of blooming vegetation, as though the jungle had been waiting patiently for the right moment to reclaim them.

He flicked his cigarette onto the warm pavement and watched it vanish beneath the movement of traffic far below.

The road ahead was empty. No cars. No mopeds. Nothing except kilometers of fading asphalt and the low hum of evening insects beginning to wake.

He knew better than to throw the notebook into any body of water within the city limits. There was an old saying he believed in more than he cared to admit: even walls have ears.

Lately, he had started suspecting they might have eyes too.

The nearest place that resembled a pond was Alan's Water, a few miles beyond the center. He hated the place. Still, the thought of driving any farther exhausted him.

He was realistic enough to admit that to himself.

And somewhere deep down, he suspected the Gheko already knew too.

He took a sharp turn to the left and continued riding into the golden light of sunset. Behind him, the city slowly dissolved into whispers, until it no longer felt entirely real.

Freed from the trapped heat between the buildings, the evening air turned softer now. A warm breeze moved through the trees and tall grass with the calm certainty of something long predetermined.

Summer was coming.

In fact, it was already close enough to smell.

7.

"Okay, hold on for a second," the cat hissed, pressing both paws against the linen tablecloth.

Outside, the low murmur of the melody remained, though the rhythm had shifted into something slower now. Crickets moved through the tall grass as if searching for a better view of the evening. Above them, a flock of ducks crossed the sky in a nearly perfect triangle between the clouds.

"So far we know a few things about you," she continued more calmly. "Your name is Simon, and apparently one of Malaysia's larger mobs is looking for you." She paused to groom one paw again. "But why? Why are you here? And where did you come from in the first place? You don't exactly look like someone visiting for the views and nightlife."

Simon felt both pairs of eyes resting on him while he slowly swallowed his tea.

"Family issues," he said.

The kitchen would have felt empty if not for the faded green cabinets. The appliances were plain and colorless, almost blending into the walls. Even the wooden floorboards seemed determined not to stand out.

Only one thing in the room demanded attention.

A large framed photograph hung beside the windows, stretched across the wall like a memory refusing to disappear.

It had once been a beautiful black-and-white photograph. Time had stained its edges unevenly, as though someone had spilled broth over it years ago and never bothered to wipe it clean.

At the center stood a thin man with a thin scratch covering the right side of his face, staring directly into the camera, though his eyes seemed fixed on something much farther away. There was hope in them. The kind people rarely carried anymore.

But there was loneliness too.

“That’s my husband,” Nana said softly, following Simon’s gaze. “Well. Late husband. Wira.”

Simon kept staring at the photograph. It reminded him of an old textbook left too long in the rain. Something fragile that still insisted on surviving.

“He disappeared in the mines a long time ago,” Nana continued. “A sweet soul.” She smiled faintly to herself. “He would’ve loved seeing what became of our children. Some of them have children of their own now.”

A quiet sigh escaped her.

“They barely remember him anymore. Life can be unfair like that.”

Silence entered the room then with the confidence of an unexpected visitor. It settled between them at the kitchen table. Depending on the person, it might have sounded like the ceiling fan turning endlessly overhead.

Or maybe not.

“My mother disappeared too,” Simon said after a while.

He rolled the porcelain cup slowly between his fingertips.

“My aunt said she took those pills.” he licked his bottom lip “The blue ones...”

Outside, the sun continued sinking behind the distant trees. It was already obvious the night would be humid and sleepless, like every night before it.

“My aunt says the pills made her disappear,” he said quietly. “That’s why I came here.”

When he looked down, he noticed Nana’s wrinkled hand resting gently on his knee.

He glanced up.

She smiled at him apologetically.

Across the table, the white cat remained expressionless while the last traces of golden light gathered around her paws.

“Some people,” Nana whispered, “have nothing left waiting for them in this world.”

At first her words sounded harsh, almost cold.

Then she turned toward the old photograph again.

“So they go looking for another one.”

8.

“Alan’s Water it is,” he murmured, tossing the finished cigarette onto the wet pavement below.

The heat rising from the road felt different here, as though something deep beneath the ground had been burning for years.

The gate stood tall before him, its iron frame spiraling outward into shorter metal bars on either side. Behind it sat the remains of a small wooden security house. At least, that was what it used to be.

Now it looked abandoned.

Tall grass had nearly swallowed it whole, and the loose wooden door swung back and forth each time the wind shifted direction.

Far below, near the horizon, the city lights glowed softly in the dark like distant stars, each carrying on inside its own separate universe. The buildings blurred together into a gray haze beneath the night sky, which was slowly beginning to reveal itself.

He parked the red motorcycle near the entrance and stood quietly beneath the worn sign.

ALAN’S WATER

The faded golden letters had almost disappeared beneath rust.

There was a time he loved walking through the narrow trail beyond the gate, between the trees and the wildflowers that only bloomed during spring. His mother would walk beside him holding his small hand while they made their way uphill toward the pond.

Wearing flip-flops had been a mistake.

The muddy ground swallowed his feet almost immediately, still warm from the heat of the day. But he didn’t pay much attention to it.

He wanted to finish this quickly.

The pond remained exactly where he remembered it.

Or maybe slightly farther to the left.

Its dark surface barely moved, shallow near the edges and deeper toward the center, holding all kinds of unseen life beneath it. In the mornings, cranes, ducks, and geese would gather near the water to bathe and drift through the reeds.

At this hour only koi fish remained, moving slowly beneath the surface like lost travelers wandering through a forest.

No geese.

Good.

He was terrified of geese.

When he was young, his mother once left him alone by the shore while she sat on a nearby bench talking with a friend. He still remembered the half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

He would tear off tiny pieces of bread and drop them into the water one after another, waiting for the koi fish to rise to the surface.

Again and again.

But koi fish weren't the only creatures interested in bread.

The thing about geese is that they remain perfectly still until the moment they decide not to. By the time he noticed the bird approaching him, it had already bitten into his little finger hard enough to leave a scar along the side of it.

That was why he feared them.

Not because they attacked.

But because they understood how to remain unnoticed until the very last second.

He stepped carefully into the pond, lifting his trousers to his knees. His flip-flops remained near the shore, and every few moments he glanced back to make sure they were still there.

Then he pulled the leather notebook from inside his coat.

He flipped through a few pages.

Truthfully, he had thought about reading it many times on the drive over.

His boss had been right about one thing.

He wasn't a real serpent.

He was human.

And curiosity, more often than not, was stronger than loyalty.

9.

"Simon, trust me. It's better if we leave," the cat said, her voice strangely calm.

"We can't just leave her like that." Simon's hand remained on Nana's shoulder. "We should call a doctor. Or an ambulance. Something."

Nearly ten minutes had passed since Nana removed the old photograph from the wall.

Now she simply stood there holding it in both hands.

The man inside the picture stared directly outward while Nana's eyes wandered somewhere far beyond the frame itself, as though she were looking toward a place neither Simon nor the cat could see.

"Now," the cat hissed more firmly this time.

A knot tightened deep inside Simon's stomach.

For reasons he didn't fully understand, Jasmine's stare always carried the quiet pressure of a command.

"Where's my notebook?" he asked suddenly, glancing around the room.

In the living room, the cat circled lazily around a white linen shirt hanging beneath the ceiling fan.

Simon recognized it immediately.

A thin red thread still dangled from the back of it, moving softly in the wind. Beneath the spinning fan it danced to rhythms no one could hear.

Somewhere farther, the gramophone had grown slightly louder.

The leather notebook rested untouched beneath the shirt.

Simon grabbed it quickly and shoved it into his back pocket while Jasmine watched with visible boredom.

"I feel terrible leaving her like that," he admitted quietly, holding the shirt against his chest.

"Simon," said the cat, brushing her head against his leg, "some people need to be left alone inside their own world."

She nudged him gently toward the front door.

"Let Nana stay in hers for now."

Outside, the sun had long disappeared, replaced by an equally bright moon. The tall grass swayed beneath its pale light, turning the horizon blue and silver.

Before leaving, Simon glanced back one last time.

Inside the kitchen, Nana moved slowly through the candlelight with the framed photograph pressed against her chest. The movement of her body strangely resembled the grass outside bending beneath the night wind.

Only warmer.

Far away, the gramophone continued repeating the same melody.

10.

RM 404 — November RM 474 — December RM 1044 — January

Red envelope. Dragon postcard.

The entries continued for pages and pages until the notebook finally ran out of paper.

He stood motionless in the pond, cold water surrounding his legs.

If he could have burned the notebook instead of drowning it, he would have.

It wasn't the handwriting that disturbed him.

Nor the strange repetition of the entries.

It was the numbers themselves.

That damned number.

Something about it made his skin crawl in a way he couldn't explain.

He shut the notebook quickly, trying to erase the image of the curved symbols from his mind. He told himself it was meaningless. Just ink on old paper.

Nothing more.

Then he pushed the notebook beneath the surface.

The pages absorbed water almost immediately, the ink dissolving slowly into the dark blue pond like smoke dispersing into air.

But the notebook refused to sink.

It only floated there, growing heavier and wetter without disappearing.

He stepped farther into the pond.

Koi fish circled around his legs, gently biting at loose skin near his feet. His shirt drifted at the surface behind him like an abandoned life buoy.

He had to make it sink.

He had to finish this.

Now.

11.

"Are you sure this is the fastest way?" Simon asked between breaths.

They had been walking for nearly twenty minutes now. No matter how quickly he moved, the cat's pace remained strangely effortless.

"No," Jasmine replied. "But it's definitely the most beautiful."

Simon sighed quietly.

Since leaving the house, he had checked his back pocket at least a dozen times to make sure the notebook was still there.

“No one’s going to steal that miserable stack of papers,” Jasmine said, climbing onto a nearby rock to inspect their surroundings. “I promise.”

She gave him a sarcastic smile.

Simon lowered his eyes immediately, embarrassed by how obvious he must have seemed. Heat rose slowly into his cheeks, though it had nothing to do with the weather.

“What do you even keep in there?” the cat asked as she continued walking.

Simon took a moment before answering.

“I write down the money I send home.” He paused. “After my mother disappeared, my uncle took care of me.”

His voice flattened slightly.

“He had an accident a few years later. Now he can’t really work anymore. Him and his wife have three daughters. They’re good kids. Just too young to help with anything yet.”

“And your aunt?” Jasmine asked.

Simon let out a small breath through his nose.

“She’s deeply committed to doing absolutely nothing.”

The cat laughed softly.

“So you came to the city to support them?”

The moon hung low above the trees now, bright enough to silver the narrow path ahead of them. On either side, the forest had begun growing thicker and darker.

“Well,” Simon said after a while, “that’s what I told everyone.”

He glanced toward the distant glow of the city between the trees.

“And part of it is true.”

Then he shook his head.

“But really, I came here looking for my mother.”

Something in his voice carried the quiet exhaustion of someone older than he should have been. Responsibility rested on him naturally, like clothing he had worn too long to remove.

Jasmine slowed her pace slightly.

“So where do you work?” she asked. “I know a calico near Jalan Ampang named Kali. She spends most of her time stealing scraps from tourists. Thought maybe you’d know her.”

Simon tilted his head thoughtfully.

“No, I don’t think so.” He smiled faintly. “I work at an American-style diner. Route 99.”

“You’re kidding.”

“You know it?”

“Of course I know it,” Jasmine scoffed. “Tell Juan that pancake butter and actual butter are two completely different things. Cats have standards too, you know.”

Simon laughed despite himself.

Their voices echoed softly through the night air.

For the first time in days, he felt something inside him loosen slightly, as though someone had lifted part of a weight he’d been carrying alone for too long.

By now, he and the white cat walked at the same pace.

The scenery around them had barely changed, yet somewhere far beyond the trees the distant shimmer of the city glowed through the darkness like a foggy Sunday morning that refused to fully arrive.

12.

He never truly understood how a single second could change everything.

Growing up, he had always believed change required time. More than a second, certainly. That was what the adults around him used to say whenever they talked about his father.

“You know how he is.” “Give him time.” “He’s trying his best.” “A person can’t change overnight.”

Only he knew how much time had already been given to him.

He remembered the bruises on his pale skin changing color one after another — deep blue, then green, then yellow — before fading completely, only to be replaced by new ones days later.

Change did come eventually.

Just not in the form he had expected.

It arrived lightly. Almost gently.

Strange, he thought, how people insisted change needed time, yet death — perhaps the greatest change of all — seemed completely untouched by it.

When death arrived, time lost its shape.

And just like that, at the exact moment his fingers forced the leather notebook into the muddy bottom of the pond, the world around him shifted.

His body suddenly felt weightless.

The cold water surrounding him changed too. The ripples from his dive no longer felt cold at all, but warm somehow. Soft against his skin.

Like an embrace.

Or the brief touch of lips against a cheek.

And then, quietly, he disappeared.

13.

“Alright, Simon. Five minutes,” the white cat sighed. “But only five. We’ve already stopped five times since we left. Once because you couldn’t breathe, once because something crawled on your leg, and another because you had to use the bathroom.”

She rolled her eyes.

“At this pace we’ll reach town by midday tomorrow.”

Simon let himself collapse onto the damp ground without protest.

Rocks covered in thick moss rested along the roadside like sleeping animals. Behind them, a line of trees stretched endlessly into the forest, growing darker and denser the farther the road continued.

On the opposite side stood a steep cliff.

Far below, an empty highway cut through the landscape, and somewhere in the distance the city continued moving at its own separate rhythm.

“I still can’t believe we walked all this way last night,” Simon murmured, pulling his knees close to his chest.

“You’re easier to deal with when your brain weighs less,” Jasmine replied casually.

Then she paused.

“You know. Because of the drugs.”

The sentence arrived awkwardly, as though even she regretted saying it aloud.

She sat beside him carefully, leaving just enough distance between them. Her paws disappeared beneath the white fur along her stomach. Even sitting in mud, she somehow looked untouched by it, as though the world itself struggled to cling to her properly.

“You think that serpent’s still looking for you?” she asked after a while.

Simon shrugged slowly.

Truthfully, he didn't know.

Lately he had begun realizing there were very few things he actually understood.

He had come to the city searching for something. And in a strange way, he had found it.

Cities changed people. Time moved differently there. Faster somehow. Hungrier. In cities, people could usually find whatever they wanted within arm's reach, provided they were willing to pay enough for it.

That was why he believed his mother had gone there.

When the pills became harder to find in their small rural town near Ipoh, the city must have started calling to her.

The city always had what people needed.

"Maybe you should leave for a while," Jasmine said quietly, still watching the empty road below them.

"That's impossible," Simon answered immediately.

"If I leave now, then it's like none of this ever happened." His fingers tightened around his sleeves. "No more money gets sent home. And my mother stays exactly where she is."

Missing.

His voice trembled slightly on the final word.

The cat said nothing.

Below them, the highway remained empty. No headlights. No movement. Just wet pavement stretching endlessly into the distance.

After a while Simon reached into his back pocket and pulled out the small notebook.

He opened to the first page.

"That's what I sent back this month," he said, trying to lighten the conversation slightly. "It's not much, but at least it's something."

Jasmine glanced at the page briefly.

Then her eyes narrowed.

"444 ringgit," she hissed softly. "You must really hate them."

Simon looked down at the scribbled number and smiled to himself.

A tired, crooked smile.

"I wish I could see their faces," he said quietly.

For once, the cat didn't laugh.

14.

Under the dimmest trace of light, the whistle of a passing train pulled him awake.

His head throbbed.

He must have fallen from somewhere.

At least, that was how it felt.

Slowly, he pushed himself upright and looked around.

Nothing.

Only darkness swallowed by fog.

Not ordinary darkness either, but the kind that seemed to erase distance itself.

He swallowed hard. Even breathing felt strangely unwelcome here.

“I’ve told you countless times,” a sharp voice echoed somewhere behind him, “don’t go wandering too deep into the water.”

The voice clicked its tongue softly.

“And now look at you. Completely soaked.” A pause followed. “Honestly, you look like a towel abandoned on the floor of a very wet bathroom.”

The voice felt familiar.

Not familiar in the ordinary sense, but in the way forgotten dreams sometimes are — something buried so deeply inside memory that recognizing it almost hurt.

A shaky breath brushed against the back of his neck.

Then another.

“Aziz,” the voice whispered more gently this time. “It’s time to come home.”

“H-home?” he repeated quietly.

Behind him, the breathing changed shape.

First into the distant rattle of train tracks.

Then into a whistle.

Then into birdsong.

A small sparrow landed near his feet.

Or at least, he thought it was a sparrow.

The creature had no wings. No color either. In truth, he couldn't fully explain why his mind insisted on calling it a bird at all.

"Aziz," the voice faded somewhere far away.

He turned slowly.

The Chinese deli stood motionless in the fog.

Its neon red sign glowed weakly now, colder than before, as though the color itself had begun drifting away from it. The windows were impossible to see through clearly. The glass concealed whatever existed inside with the quiet determination of deep water.

15.

"One, two, three, four, five... catch the fish while it's alive..."

Jasmine sang softly to herself as they walked.

Simon knew the song.

He used to sing it years ago in the schoolyard during recess. Somewhere deep in his memory he could still hear the rope slapping against the ground while he jumped in uneven rhythm, trying not to miss a step.

He remembered the sound clearly.

The faces, however, were gone.

Whenever he tried imagining the children holding the ends of the rope, they dissolved into blurred shapes and shifting colors, as though they had never fully existed in the first place.

"Six, seven, eight, nine, ten..." the cat continued lightly. "Catch the fish in the—"

She stopped suddenly.

The silence that followed felt unnatural somehow, like a skipped heartbeat.

Simon lifted his gaze from the ground.

"Pond?" he offered quietly.

"Yeah," Jasmine replied after a moment. "I think that's it."

She looked back at him briefly, making sure he was seeing the same thing she was.

Ahead of them, the grass began thinning out.

Beyond it opened a vast dark space where the land seemed to simply disappear.

At first Simon thought it was the edge of the cliff.

Then he realized it was water.

A pond.

Or something resembling one.

It stretched impossibly far beneath the pale light, larger than any pond had a right to be. The surface remained perfectly still, suspended beside the cliff as though held in place by something invisible.

The color of the water unsettled him most.

Blue.

Almost too blue.

16.

He wandered through the city.

Or rather, a place attempting very hard to resemble it.

Buildings only existed as far as his eyes could reach. Beyond that, they dissolved into a gray haze, waiting for him to approach before deciding what shape they wanted to take.

At first he searched for his red motorcycle.

After a while, he forgot he had ever owned one.

The scent of spices drifted through the empty streets from a small Arabic food stall near the roadside. Two pieces of meat sizzled slowly above an open flame, thick with marinade and smoke.

No one stood nearby tending the fire.

That was what felt wrong about the city, he realized.

Not the fog.

Not the silence.

The emptiness.

The city had never been empty before.

Soft jazz floated from a small bistro at the corner of the street. The building carried no sign, no name, nothing to suggest it was open, and yet the front door stood half-open as though quietly waiting for him.

Nothing about the place felt welcoming.

Still, he stepped inside.

Near the entrance sat a small gramophone spinning lazily beneath the dim light. A saxophone murmured softly through the room while he walked farther in.

Wooden tables and stools were scattered unevenly around the bistro. Some remained empty. Others were occupied by people sitting silently with their backs turned toward him, as though his presence made no difference at all.

At the far end of the room, a man dressed entirely in black stood behind the counter polishing glasses.

He never turned around either.

Behind him, rows of bottles lined the wall. Some were empty. Others half-full. Their labels looked unfamiliar, faded by distance or age.

Simon moved carefully through the room.

He barely glanced at the customers as he passed them. His attention remained fixed on the man behind the counter, whose slow repetitive movements had begun feeling strangely hypnotic.

“E-excuse me,” he said quietly.

The room fell even quieter.

It was the kind of silence that made him immediately regret speaking.

As though conversation had not been permitted there.

As though his voice had interrupted something already unfolding beneath the surface of the room.

He suddenly became aware of people staring at him.

Dozens of them.

Their attention pressed against his skin heavily enough to feel physical.

Slowly, Simon turned around.

Every face in the bistro was pointed directly toward him now.

None of them had eyes.

17.

“What do you mean we’re lost?” Simon snapped. “You said you knew this path better than anyone.”

“First of all,” the cat replied, pacing slowly along the shore, “I never said we were lost.”

She paused briefly.

“I only said something feels wrong.”

“Well, it definitely does,” Simon muttered with a dry laugh. “And honestly, when exactly did anything start feeling right?”

Jasmine’s pace slowed slightly.

"I got chased by the mob." He shook his head in disbelief. "The literal mob."

The words came out almost jokingly, though the tension in his voice remained.

"Then a cat starts talking to me and leads me to the house of a woman I've never even met before." His breathing sharpened. "And that same woman suddenly turns into something that barely feels alive anymore."

Jasmine continued walking without looking at him, though her movements had grown quieter now, more careful somehow.

"And now," Simon continued, "the same talking cat somehow gets us lost in the middle of nowhere and tells me something feels wrong."

He let out another short laugh, tired this time.

"When did any of this ever feel right to begin with?"

The realization arrived gradually.

Then all at once.

He had taken the same drug his mother disappeared because of. Followed a talking white cat into the middle of nowhere. And now, somehow, he was lost too.

Simon kept his eyes fixed on Jasmine's impossibly clean fur as she continued moving back and forth near the water.

"You..." he said quietly.

The word barely left his mouth.

"You knew."

The cat stopped walking.

"Knew what?" she asked without turning around.

"You knew about her."

Moonlight spilled across the lake behind her. The white fur along her back remained perfectly still, though Simon suddenly had the strange feeling it should have been standing upright.

Her paws pressed firmly into the wet earth.

Beyond the water, the distant city lights shimmered weakly against the dark horizon.

She waited.

"What is all this?" Simon asked softly. "Who are you?"

For a moment he considered stepping closer.

Then decided against it.

“I can’t tell you who I am,” the cat whispered at last.

Her voice sounded strangely calm. Almost practiced.

“But I can tell you who I’m not.”

18.

If it hadn’t been for the man dressed entirely in black, Aziz thought he might have become one of them too.

Without saying much, the man had taken hold of his arm and guided him through a narrow metal door hidden almost perfectly within the peeling wallpaper at the back of the bistro.

The room beyond was small and dim.

A single lightbulb hung from the ceiling, swaying slightly overhead. Even so, it gave off more warmth than the entire city outside.

Aziz tried to remember whether the world beyond the bistro had always been that dark.

His memory refused to answer.

“Who are you?” the man asked at last.

His voice sounded sharp, though not unkind.

“I...” Aziz hesitated. “I’m Aziz.”

The answer immediately felt incomplete.

The man studied him silently beneath the yellow light. His eyes looked unusually glossy, almost feverish, and every now and then his lips twitched as though resisting the urge to say something else.

Eventually, he did.

“Why are you here?”

Aziz opened his mouth, then closed it again.

“I don’t know,” he admitted quietly after a while.

And it was true.

His eyes wandered around the room searching for something familiar.

Anything.

He had seen nearly every hidden corner of the city before — underground gambling rooms, abandoned buildings, narrow alleys thick with cigarette smoke and heat.

Yet this place felt entirely separate from all of them.

Not hidden.

Unreal.

As though it had never existed until the moment he entered it.

“Where am I?” he asked softly.

Something in the man’s expression shifted.

The tension in his shoulders loosened slightly as he lowered himself into a worn leather armchair nearby. Crossing one leg over the other, he stared at Aziz with a mixture of disbelief and exhaustion.

“You’re a serpent, aren’t you?” he sighed, rubbing his face slowly with the palm of his hand.

Aziz froze.

“How do you know that?” he asked immediately.

Fear moved through him fast and cold, like electricity beneath the skin.

The man laughed quietly to himself.

“Because all of you react the same way when you first arrive here.”

Aziz stared at him uncertainly.

Then, against his better judgment, he laughed too.

Only a little.

Only because the man seemed to expect him to.

19.

“All actions carry consequences,” the cat said quietly.

Simon remained frozen where he stood.

For some reason he suddenly thought of Nana standing motionless in the kitchen, holding the photograph of her missing husband against her chest.

The difference was that Nana still had something to hold onto.

Something to drift beside while time continued passing quietly around her.

Simon had nothing.

Nothing except the soft voice of a talking cat beneath the moonlight.

"I'm not a punisher," Jasmine continued, her gaze fixed on the lake. "Or a murderer. Or some evil presence humans can neatly divide into good or terrible depending on what suits them."

The water barely moved.

"I won't deny that I knew your mother," she said. "Or that I know what brought me to her."

Her tail shifted once behind her.

"But what happened afterward was never mine to decide."

Simon's pulse quickened suddenly.

Then slowed.

Then returned hard enough to make his chest ache.

"One thing leads to another," the cat murmured. "That's always how it happens."

Her voice had become softer now, almost distant.

"A moment follows another moment. A sadness stays with you a little longer than it should." She paused briefly. "And before you realize it, your whole existence begins wearing a veil."

She turned her eyes toward the lake again.

"An almost blue veil."

Simon frowned.

The words barely made sense anymore.

It felt as though Jasmine were slowly losing her ability to speak in human language altogether, using the last fragments of it to leave behind riddles no one would fully understand after she was gone.

"And then one day," she whispered, "you disappear."

The night wind moved gently through the grass.

"Not into thin air. Air has never possessed that kind of power."

Jasmine stepped closer to the edge of the lake.

The water remained perfectly still beneath the moonlight, glowing faintly blue against the endless dark horizon.

"But water..." she said at last.

Now she finally looked back at him.

"Water remembers how to keep things."

Simon swallowed hard.

“Did you...” His voice caught in his throat. “Did you drown her?”

The cat let out a quiet, humorless laugh.

“No,” she said softly.

She began walking slowly back toward him.

“Your mother simply faced the consequences of her choices.”

Her yellow eyes met his.

“As everyone does eventually.”

For a brief second Simon noticed something strange move through her irises, something almost unnatural passing beneath the gold.

And suddenly he had the uncomfortable feeling that Jasmine’s words were not meant only for him.

20.

“Is he here?” Yaziz whispered sharply.

The man immediately raised a finger to his lips.

“Quiet.”

Yaziz lowered his voice at once.

“The Gecko...” he said more carefully this time. “He’s here?”

The man sighed softly and leaned back into the chair.

“Oh, people always come back eventually,” he murmured. “Even when they leave.”

His glossy eyes drifted toward the wall behind Yaziz.

“After enough time, it almost starts feeling like they never left at all.”

Yaziz frowned.

The words barely settled properly inside his mind before dissolving again. Everything around him felt strangely distant, as though his thoughts had to travel through water before reaching him.

His knees trembled when he tried standing.

He collapsed back into the chair almost immediately.

For a moment he couldn’t even remember why he had tried getting up in the first place.

“That’s what this place does,” the man said quietly.

"It drains you."

The gramophone outside crackled faintly somewhere beyond the walls.

"Drains you of what?" Yaziz asked weakly.

The man rubbed his thumb against the edge of his glass.

"Everything."

His voice remained calm.

"Strength. Memory. Identity."

Yaziz immediately thought of the eyeless people sitting silently inside the bistro.

"The people outside..."

"They used to be people," the man replied. "Now they're just things drifting between places until eventually there's almost nothing left of them."

A tired smile crossed his face.

"This place used to be full, you know."

For the first time, the man sounded genuinely sad.

"People talking about lovers they lost. Families waiting for them somewhere. Endless questions about the lives they left behind." He glanced toward the doorway. "Now it's mostly just a resting place."

His eyes lowered slightly.

"A place for existing in-between."

The sentence seemed to exhaust him.

"But you..." Yaziz began.

"I'm different," the man interrupted gently.

Then, almost immediately:

"Bourbon?"

He tilted his head slightly toward the hallway.

"I think there's still some left out front."

Under ordinary circumstances Yaziz would have refused. Alcohol had never become a daily habit for him the way cigarettes had.

But now the thought of warmth spreading through his body sounded almost necessary.

He nodded slowly.

The thin man disappeared through the hallway without another word.

Yaziz remained alone beneath the hanging bulb.

He tried desperately to remember what had happened before arriving there.

Nothing came.

Only flashes.

Silver scales.

Orange light.

Something reptilian moving beneath water.

If the Gecko was here, then he needed to find him.

Needed him to explain things.

Needed him to lead him back.

Because there was a place to return to.

Wasn't there?

The gramophone continued playing softly somewhere beyond the room. Every scratch in the vinyl seemed to pull another thought loose from his mind before it could fully form.

There was somewhere he belonged.

There had to be.

"Here," the man said suddenly, returning with a half-filled glass. "Drink. It helps clear the fog a little."

He lowered himself into the armchair opposite Yaziz once again.

The brown leather creaked softly beneath him.

As Yaziz looked at the man, a strange thought surfaced suddenly through the haze.

"A notebook..." he murmured. "Did I bring a notebook with me?"

Even he sounded uncertain asking it.

The man laughed quietly.

Then his eyes drifted downward.

Yaziz followed his gaze.

Resting silently across his lap was a brown leather notebook.

21.

“So... she’s there?” Simon asked quietly.

The cat nodded.

“I think you still have time,” she replied.

Her voice cracked slightly near the end.

Simon looked down at the mud swallowing his feet near the edge of the lake.

“And what if she isn’t?”

Jasmine didn’t answer immediately.

Her yellow eyes met his while his own wandered restlessly between her face, the water below, and the distant glow of the city.

Above them, the moon had already begun drifting toward the horizon.

It looked tired somehow.

As though it had finished everything expected of it and now wanted nothing more than to disappear somewhere beyond human sight.

Far below the highway slowly returned to life. The first engines of the morning growled awake one after another, reluctant and heavy.

In the distance, the city itself seemed to pause briefly.

Waiting.

“You’ll find what’s meant for you,” Jasmine said at last. “Or it will find you.”

The rising sunlight softened the edges of her white fur.

“I can’t tell you what that thing is.” Her tail moved slowly behind her. “Maybe it’s your mother. Maybe it’s the mob. Maybe it’s the family waiting for you back home.” She glanced toward the waking skyline. “Or maybe it’s something farther away than any of those things.”

The wind shifted softly through the grass.

“But one way or another,” she continued, “you’ll arrive where you’re supposed to.”

Simon stayed silent.

“You can’t escape consequences,” the cat said quietly. “Not by running faster. Not by going farther.”

The morning light had almost fully reached them now.

“You made choices. And eventually you’ll make more.” Her eyes locked onto his for only a brief moment. “Just remember that whatever you choose will always find its way back to you.”

Then came silence.

Not sudden silence.

But the slow kind.

The kind that settles naturally after certain words have already said everything they needed to.

A horizon fading so another can take its place.

A sky preparing to close itself completely.

And finally, the white shape of the cat dissolving gently into the morning fog as though she had never existed there at all.

When Simon opened his eyes again, he was lying in a narrow city alley.

The pavement beneath him felt warm and damp against his skin.

Only now the city was quiet.

Almost too quiet.

22.

Yaziz tried using the phone booth outside the bistro.

Nothing.

No signal.

Worse still, he slowly realized that even if the phone had worked, he couldn’t remember a single number worth calling.

The thin man stood leaning against the open doorway behind him, arms folded calmly across his chest.

“What are you trying to do?” he asked.

Yaziz didn’t answer.

His eyes wandered desperately through the empty streets searching for some kind of exit, some recognizable road leading back toward the life he thought he remembered.

But every street dissolved into fog after a certain distance.

Nothing beyond his immediate sight seemed fully real.

“I don’t know anymore,” Yaziz snapped suddenly. “I just know I don’t want to become like them.”

His voice echoed louder than intended through the silent street.

The man instinctively motioned for him to lower his voice, though halfway through the gesture he seemed to realize it no longer mattered.

Slowly, he walked toward him with both hands slightly raised, the way someone approaches an injured animal.

“Please,” he said softly. “You need to listen carefully.”

Yaziz’s breathing had become uneven now.

“You can’t shout here.” The man’s voice remained calm. “Even the fact that we’re speaking openly like this can become dangerous if you still want to remain yourself.”

The fog drifting through the streets thickened slightly around them.

“Come back inside,” the man continued gently. “You can’t reach anyone from here.”

His glossy eyes lowered toward the pavement.

“But eventually something will reach you.”

A faint smile crossed his lips.

“It always does.”

Yaziz looked around one final time.

And deep down, he understood the terrible thing the man had been trying to tell him since the beginning.

No one was coming to save him.

Not here.

Maybe nowhere.

People rarely arrived in time when he needed them most anyway.

Slowly, Yaziz followed the thin man back toward the entrance of the bistro.

But the moment they reached the doorway, his feet stopped moving.

Something inside him resisted entering that room again.

The smell of old wood, cigarette smoke, and fading music spilled outward through the half-open door.

His hands tightened into fists.

He wanted time to think.

But the alcohol had only made the fog inside his head heavier.

The thin man stepped back inside effortlessly.

For a brief second, the gramophone lost its rhythm.

Then the music returned slightly altered, as though someone had quietly replaced the record while no one was paying attention.

The man turned toward him with a tired smile.

“Come on,” he said softly. “There’s no point standing out there forever.”

He was met with no answer at all as Yaziz was unable to speak among all.

“Alright.” he sigh “Suit yourself.”

Then he slowly extended one arm outward into the empty air beside him, as though reaching for the waist of an invisible partner.

The saxophone swelled quietly through the room.

And just like that, the man began to dance.

Not wildly.

But with the slow mechanical grace of someone continuing a habit long after forgetting why it once mattered.

Only then, watching him move beneath the dim light, did Yaziz finally notice the long thin scar stretching across the man’s cheek.

Perhaps it had always been there.

Or perhaps the fog inside his mind had only now thinned enough for him to see it properly.

23.

Making his way toward the highway, he realized there were no cars rushing past one another, no angry horns splitting through the humid air.

The horizon melted together into a haze of color, heat, and distant smells, as though the approaching summer had stitched the entire city into one endless uneven blanket.

He checked his watch.

His head throbbed painfully, though not in the ordinary way headaches usually did. It felt deeper somehow, as if the ache existed somewhere behind his thoughts rather than inside his skull.

He figured he must have fallen from the wall in that alley while escaping the serpents the night before.

44:44

The watch was probably broken too.

That at least made sense.

He continued walking slowly along the empty road, wondering what kind of district he had wandered into after running for so long.

His feet should have hurt by now.

Strangely, they didn't.

Rows of shops stretched endlessly beside the street. Their metal shutters remained tightly closed, the faded signs above them half-swallowed by dust and heat.

Nothing looked open.

Nothing looked abandoned either.

Just paused.

A forgotten district, he thought.

The road itself seemed strangely dusty for a city like this. He was certain traffic should have swept most of it away long ago.

But there was no traffic anymore.

Only silence.

Then somewhere in the distance, he heard music.

Soft at first.

A familiar melody drifting slowly through the stillness.

If there had been any wind at all, he might have believed the wind carried it toward him. But the city remained motionless, humid and breathless beneath the pale morning light.

He stopped walking.

Listened.

The melody sounded distant and tired, like something replaying itself from another room.

And because it was the first sign of life he had encountered in what felt like hours, he decided to follow it.

Perhaps, he thought to himself, everyone had gathered there for some reason.

24.

Aziz had been sitting outside the bistro for what felt like hours.

Every now and then he reached into his pockets searching for a cigarette, only to find crumbs, dust, and the small leather notebook he insisted on keeping close to him.

If the man inside was telling the truth, then the Gecko would arrive eventually.

He just didn't know why.

Maybe it was another one of the Gecko's strange arrangements. Maybe someone needed disappearing quietly. Maybe another situation involving the pills had spiraled beyond control.

There was no point thinking too deeply about it anyway.

His role had always been simple enough.

At least he thought it had been.

Only moments ago he could have sworn he remembered exactly what his task was.

Now he could barely remember having one at all.

Somewhere in the distance, a train whistle echoed softly through the city.

The sound cut through him instantly.

And for one terrible second, everything returned.

Alan's Water.

The notebook.

The lake.

The strangely intimate feeling of drowning.

The rusted gate.

The voice calling him closer through the dark.

His red motorcycle waiting beneath the trees.

The Chinese deli glowing red against the night.

And finally—

The boy.

The boy who stole the pills.

The boy who served him pancakes late at night beneath fluorescent lights.

The boy he once shared a cigarette with outside the diner.

The boy the Gecko wanted.

Anger rose violently through Aziz's stomach.

Sharp enough to hurt.

His breathing quickened.

Then, just as suddenly, the memories vanished again.

Gone.

Like smoke separating into air.

Aziz blinked in confusion.

Only then did he realize tears were sliding down his face.

He wiped at them instinctively, startled to find more replacing them almost immediately.

And there he sat outside the silent bistro, crying without understanding why.

Which somehow only made him cry harder.

25.

It was him.

There was no doubt about it.

The serpent sat collapsed near the roadside, his heavy stomach hanging sluggishly between his knees while both hands covered his face. A low broken howl escaped through the cracks of his fingers as he cried.

Simon froze.

His own knees began trembling violently, as though the earth beneath him had started shaking too.

He tried thinking of somewhere to run.

But the horizon ahead of him shimmered like a wall of heat, trembling endlessly in both directions. There was nowhere to escape to. No real distance left in the world.

And before Simon fully realized what was happening, the serpent looked up.

Their eyes met instantly.

The man's breathing remained uneven from crying. His eyes were swollen and red, irritated from tears and the rough scraping of his palms against his skin.

For one strange moment, the entire world seemed to groan softly around them.

As though the sky and earth had begun arguing somewhere very far away.

"You..." the serpent whispered.

His voice carried more surprise than anger.

“I—I’m sorry,” Simon stammered immediately. “I wasn’t thinking properly. I didn’t know what I was doing..”

But the man suddenly stood up.

Not aggressively.

Almost desperately.

“You’re not one of them,” he said breathlessly.

Relief spread visibly across his face.

Behind him, through the open doorway of the bistro, the familiar melody Simon had been following continued playing softly. Deep inside, a thin figure moved slowly beneath the dim lights, dancing alone with someone invisible.

“One of who?” Simon asked cautiously.

“Them.” The serpent pointed weakly toward the city around them. “Your eyes are still there. You’re actually looking at me.”

His face twitched strangely while he spoke, his exhausted muscles pulling unevenly beneath the skin.

“We have to find a way back,” he continued suddenly. “There has to be a way back.”

Simon inhaled slowly.

He wanted to answer the man properly.

But the only thing that came to mind was another question.

“Back where?”

Even to himself, his voice sounded oddly distant.

Hypnotic somehow.

The serpent’s gaze drifted away immediately after hearing it.

As though those two words alone had unraveled something fragile inside him.

A second later he collapsed back onto the pavement.

His expression twisted into an almost cartoonish sadness, exaggerated and painfully childlike, before he buried his face in his hands and began crying again.

Simon looked around uncertainly.

His watch still displayed the same impossible numbers from earlier.

44:44.

And though he was certain he had been walking for hours, the light around him had never properly changed.

When he finally looked up toward the sky, he realized why.

There was nothing there.

No clouds.

No birds.

No sun.

Only an empty pale brightness stretching endlessly overhead.

Then, somewhere along the silent highway, a bright blue sports car appeared.

Dust exploded behind it as it approached at impossible speed.

Ordinarily a car like that would have roared loud enough to shake the entire road. But this one moved in complete silence.

The only proof it was real came from the sharp scent of fuel leaking into the humid air behind it.

The car slowed beside them and stopped.

Its engine continued running softly.

Minutes passed before the driver's window finally rolled down.

The inside of the vehicle seemed darker than the world outside it.

As though night still existed in there.

"Hello, Simon," the driver said calmly at last.

The serpent's crying became the only other sound on the highway.

"So we meet again."

Simon narrowed his eyes, trying desperately to remember where he knew the voice from.

It felt familiar.

Painfully familiar.

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions," the man behind the wheel continued.

His voice sounded smooth, almost gentle.

"Don't worry."

A faint smile appeared somewhere inside the darkness of the car.

“I’ll give you all the answers you need.”

26.

The man dressed in the dark cloak had half his face hidden beneath neatly wrapped bandages and the sharp shadow of a wide-brimmed hat, as though he had taken great care to leave as little of himself visible as possible.

After stepping out of the blue car without bothering to lock it, he bowed deeply toward Simon.

The serpent sitting outside the bistro remained too lost within his own grief to notice that the person he had been waiting for had finally arrived.

The cloaked man brushed past him effortlessly, like something boneless slipping through a space too small to contain it.

Without acknowledging the silent customers or the thin man moving slowly around the dance floor, he crossed the bistro and disappeared toward the back room.

For a brief second he stood facing the peeling wallpaper.

Then he turned slightly toward Simon.

A signal.

Simon understood immediately.

He hurried inside, nearly stumbling over the serpent still collapsed beside the doorway, drowning inside his own sorrow.

The cloaked man felt strangely familiar.

Not in the ordinary way people did, but like something Simon had once seen in an old childhood nightmare and spent years trying to forget.

He imagined sharp nails hidden beneath the thick black gloves.

A crooked skeleton beneath the heavy fabric of the cloak.

The sort of creature children describe with absolute certainty before adults convince them monsters aren’t real.

Simon stopped himself from thinking further as he stepped closer.

The gramophone had changed melodies once again.

This one sounded softer.

Warmer.

The instruments melted together into something almost lullaby-like, the music humming gently through the room like a memory trying not to disappear.

The thin man behind the counter no longer danced.

Now he stood polishing glasses again, as though he had never moved at all.

Simon lingered near the gramophone longer than he intended to.

The music held him there.

“Mama’s lullaby,” the cloaked man said quietly. “Trust me. You never really outgrow it.”

Then, with one gloved hand, he pushed against what Simon had assumed was part of the wall.

A hidden door slowly opened inward.

The room behind it smelled faintly of old leather, dust, and liquor left untouched for too many years.

Simon sat carefully in one of the armchairs opposite the cloaked man. His feet barely reached the floor.

The man’s posture remained impossibly straight.

Too straight.

Almost unnatural.

But Simon convinced himself that must have been his imagination.

“So, Simon,” the man said at last, folding his gloved hands together, “how are you finding this place so far?”

The question sounded absurd.

Almost childish.

Yet Simon understood immediately that the man was asking something else entirely beneath it.

“What is this place?” he asked instead.

The cloaked man sighed softly.

“You don’t need to understand what something is in order to know whether you like it.” His hidden mouth seemed to curl slightly beneath the bandages. “It’s like sup torpedo. A delicacy, apparently. But once someone explains what you’re actually eating, the whole experience becomes unfortunate.”

Simon stayed silent.

“It’s also rude,” the man continued calmly, “to answer a question with another question.”

“It’s fine,” Simon muttered.

In truth, the place terrified him.

Not because it felt unfamiliar.

Because it felt almost familiar enough to be real.

The cloaked man tilted his head slightly.

“And it’s very rude to lie.”

The distant crying of the serpent echoed faintly through the walls.

“Another one, please...”

Then a sharp hush.

The crying softened again into quiet drowning sobs.

Simon lowered his gaze.

“I don’t know,” he admitted finally. “It’s scary here.” His voice sounded smaller than before. “Everything’s been scary for a while now.”

“That,” the man replied gently, “sounds much more honest.”

The smell of alcohol lingered quietly beneath the room, not fresh enough to belong to a drink recently poured, but old enough to feel absorbed into the walls themselves.

“You see, Simon,” the cloaked man continued, “this place is something I accidentally created a very long time ago.”

He paused briefly.

“Or perhaps it’s more accurate to say I created the passage. This place itself probably existed long before either of us did.” His fingers tapped softly against the armrest. “I simply made the entrance easier to find.”

The gramophone crackled softly somewhere beyond the hidden wall.

“People don’t come here because they want to,” he said. “They come because something inside the world no longer fits them properly.”

Simon frowned quietly.

“It’s difficult feeling only half-present in your own life,” the man continued. “You know that already.” His voice grew softer. “But what’s even worse is having everything you thought you wanted and still discovering there’s an emptiness inside you large enough to swallow all of it.”

For the first time since entering the room, uncertainty touched his voice.

“An unbearable kind of loneliness.”

Simon studied him carefully, trying to understand whether the man was truly speaking to him or merely speaking aloud to himself.

"I know why you came here," the cloaked man said eventually. "And I know who you were searching for."

He paused again.

A brief fracture in his otherwise careful composure.

"As we both know," he continued quietly, "you already found her."

Simon's stomach tightened.

"You've been here before," the man whispered.

"Long before tonight."

27.

It was true.

He had seen all of this before.

Only back then it had felt less like understanding and more like pure terrified confusion, the kind that arrives too suddenly for the mind to fully absorb.

He remembered her now.

He had found her once already.

Or perhaps she had found him.

She hadn't spoken much during their meeting. In fact, he could barely remember any words at all. Only the warmth of her arms holding him carefully against her chest while somewhere beyond them water moved in slow dark waves.

And eventually she told him it was time to go.

That was all.

A part of him left with her then.

And another part followed years later.

Leaving behind something unfinished.

Something half-formed.

Harsh around the edges.

Broken in places no one else could properly see.

Afterward, Simon spent years trying not to think about it.

He worked constantly.

Sent money home every month without fail.

How could he not?

One purpose had already abandoned him. The other remained.

So he held onto it desperately.

He convinced himself that if he kept sending enough money back, eventually the years of absence between him and the people waiting at home would begin shrinking somehow.

As though debt could erase disappearance.

As though responsibility could silence memory.

And all the while, the secret remained entirely his.

Locked somewhere deep inside him.

A thing too strange to confess aloud without sounding insane.

He met all kinds of people during those years.

Men soaked permanently in motor oil and cigarette smoke, debts hanging from their shoulders like wet laundry.

Others dressed elegantly in silk shirts and satin dresses, carrying cruelty with the same effortless grace as expensive perfume.

And after enough time, he slowly became difficult to separate from them.

Because eventually, whatever surrounds you long enough begins leaving fingerprints behind.

Still, the notebook never left his back pocket.

Always there.

Always recording the payments.

Dates.

Amounts.

Proof.

Not just that he had sent the money.

But proof that some part of his life still carried purpose.

Even if it was the only part he could still explain.

28.

“You know,” the cloaked man finally said, “when I was younger, I used to believe loneliness was something physical.”

His gloved fingers rested motionless against the armchair.

“Like rain, or humidity. Something that enters through the skin.”

Simon stayed quiet.

The man tilted his head slightly, listening to the music for a moment.

“But loneliness is much stranger than that.” He paused. “It removes things.”

The dim light hanging above them flickered once.

“First voices. Then faces. Then entire years.”

His tone remained calm, though somewhere beneath it Simon could feel exhaustion resting quietly like sediment at the bottom of deep water.

“When enough disappears,” the man continued softly, “you eventually become difficult to separate from the empty spaces left behind.”

Simon lowered his eyes toward the leather notebook resting on his lap.

Something about the room had begun feeling warmer.

Or perhaps smaller.

“You said I’ve been here before,” he murmured.

“You have.”

“But I don’t remember.”

The cloaked man gave a faint nod.

“That’s probably why you survived.”

The gramophone skipped softly somewhere outside the room.

Just once.

Then continued normally.

Simon swallowed.

The melody sounded painfully familiar now. Not in the way songs on the radio become familiar after repetition, but in the way childhood sounds return years later inside dreams.

His mother humming softly while hanging wet clothes outside.

The ceiling fan spinning above him during sleepless nights.

The distant sound of trains passing Ipoh after midnight.

“You found her once already,” the cloaked man said.

Simon’s chest tightened.

“But children don’t always understand what they’re seeing.” His hidden face turned slightly toward the wall. “Sometimes the mind protects itself by dividing things apart.”

A long silence followed.

The air smelled faintly of old liquor and rain trapped inside concrete.

Simon glanced toward the hidden doorway.

“Can people leave this place?”

The cloaked man smiled beneath the bandages.

“Some do.”

“And the others?”

The man didn’t answer immediately.

Outside, somewhere beyond the walls, the first faint sounds of morning traffic echoed through the distance like waves arriving from another country. Or an entirely other place.

“The others,” he said eventually, “become part of it.”

Simon’s fingers tightened around the notebook.

A strange pressure had begun forming behind his ribs. Not fear exactly.

Recognition.

The uncomfortable kind.

The kind that arrives before memory does.

“You talk,” Simon whispered slowly, “like you know me.”

The cloaked man laughed quietly at that.

Not mockingly.

Almost sadly.

“I know many things about you.”

The room fell silent again.

Then, after a moment:

“You still keep the notebook in your back pocket even when there’s nothing left worth writing.”

Simon’s breath caught.

The cloaked man continued staring somewhere beyond him.

“You smoke when your thoughts become too loud.” Another pause. “And when you lie, your left shoulder stiffens before your face changes.”

Simon slowly straightened in his chair.

“You...” he began quietly.

But the words stopped there.

Because suddenly he noticed it.

The melody from the gramophone.

The cloaked man had been humming along to it under his breath the entire time.

Without realizing.

Exactly the same way Simon did.

The exact same pauses.

The same uneven rhythm.

Even the small tap of the fingers against the armrest arrived at the same moment Simon himself would have done it.

The room suddenly felt unbearably narrow.

Outside the hidden walls the world groaned softly, like metal settling after years beneath heat.

“You said this place appears when someone no longer fits inside their life,” Simon whispered carefully.

“Yes.”

“Then why are you still here?”

For the first time since they met, the cloaked man seemed unsure.

Not frightened.

Simply tired.

His gloved hand slowly reached toward the brim of his hat, though he stopped halfway.

“As people grow older,” he said quietly, “they abandon things.”

His voice sounded farther away now.

“Small things at first. Then larger ones.”

The gramophone crackled again.

“Eventually some people abandon entire versions of themselves.”

Simon could no longer hear the city outside.

Only the music.

Only the spinning of the record.

Only the strange feeling that the room had somehow existed long before either of them entered it.

The cloaked man slowly stood from his chair.

When he moved, Simon noticed a slight limp that hadn't been there before.

Or perhaps had always been there.

“You should go now,” the man said softly.

Simon looked up immediately.

“Go where?”

A faint smile appeared beneath the bandages.

“Somewhere summer still exists properly.”

The hidden door creaked open behind them.

Warm humid air drifted inside.

For a brief second Simon thought he could smell pond water.

Koi fish.

Wet grass beneath highway shadows.

And cigarette smoke melting into evening rain.

The cloaked man stepped aside, allowing him to pass.

Simon stood slowly.

His knees felt weak.

Before leaving, he glanced down at the notebook in his hands.

The pages had become damp somehow.

The ink along several older entries had begun bleeding softly into the paper.

RM 404 November.

RM 474 December.

RM 1044 January.

Further down, beneath numbers Simon did not remember writing, another line appeared faintly across the page.

The handwriting looked strangely familiar.

Almost identical to his own.

Some people stay too long.

Simon stared at the sentence.

Then looked up sharply.

But the cloaked man had already turned away from him.

The gramophone continued playing.

Soft blue music drifting endlessly through the dim room.

And for one impossible moment, Simon felt certain he was about to remember something enormous.

Something waiting for him for years.

But the feeling passed almost immediately.

Like waking from a dream seconds too late.

Outside, dawn had finally started settling over the empty highway.

The city looked ordinary again.

Almost disappointingly so.

Simon stepped forward into the humid morning air.

Behind him, somewhere deep inside the bistro, the melody continued playing softly.

Patiently.

As though it understood that sooner or later everyone returns to the songs they heard as children.

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