

Lina's Golden Cage

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A short story of the Grand Experiment Collection

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CHAPTER 1

The warm evening air wrapped around her like a comforting blanket. Her chest opened up as she breathed deep, taking the breeze into her lungs, embracing its soft tendrils as it fueled her blood and caused a comforting calm to wash over her. Then she was off, walking down Riverstone Parkway, her street in a high value neighborhood of corporate elites. These occasional outings were not routine or ritual, but an intermittent escape.

After a block or so she stepped onto the asphalt and picked up her pace into a soft jog. The black road was far easier on her slim, yet strong knees than the hard concrete of the sidewalk. It would seem the families in the surrounding neighborhoods had already arrived from work and school and were nestled into their own little castles, shut out from the rest of the commoners. Her special fortress held one such denizen who never accompanied her on these outings, much to her relief.

When she left the house, the man she married sat on the couch with a glass of merlot, his favorite political news blaring on the giant TV screen before him; he only ever watched the news. “Breaking news!” they shouted. “Celebrity gossip,” Lina knew it to be. The talking heads in their little boxes yelled over each other in argument of one party’s policies over the other or what the

president said or did not say at some rally or press conference. Whenever she attempted to speak with him while he was in his trance, he uttered only single syllable acknowledgments with his wine-soaked breath. Over time, she realized the effort was futile.

Every evening, the silence gnawed at her brain.

Looping around the blocks adjacent to hers, she spotted another lone jogger, a mere speck in the distance. Every so often she would run across another who sped along the quiet streets of Riverstone Parkway. She often wondered what their motivations were; were they simply trying to maintain physical fitness, or were they too escaping a home of emptiness, a bitter experience given they know they must always go back to those who reside there. At least she always did.

And yet Lina couldn't bring herself to resent her husband. Their marriage wasn't really his choice, nor hers; it was the product of four powerful Chinese American parents who had manipulated the outcome. "William's family is very prestigious," her parents would say behind smiles and glinting eyes. "He's very handsome," her mother would add, which wasn't a lie, as William was in phenomenal shape; his athletic body very muscular, with firm pectorals. Jet black hair, like hers, graced his long face, and his finely chiseled jawline caught her eye. With the added bonus of his wealthy family, her parents talked him up to the point of near deification.

Lina was intrigued, at first, though the young man seemed all too good to be true. Sure enough, the first date with young William was quiet and boring. This polite and kind gentleman sitting on the other side of the table seemed utterly uninterested in her or the situation. And that had never changed. Though they soon became decent friends when she discovered that they were both lawyers, just like their parents, their conversations generally revolved around that fact. When the details of work fizzled out, they found themselves picking at their food nervously in silence, unable to look each other in the eye. But as time went on, even that connection became lost in the void between them.

By now the lone jogger had drawn closer, and Lina saw that it was a tall and slender man. This wasn't the first time she had seen him; he was out there almost every other night. She could tell he was an experienced jogger given his breathing and the way he too stayed on the asphalt. Earphones hung down the sides of his partially freckled face as a few beads of sweat slid down his light olive skin. And what a handsome face it was: symmetrical, somewhat thin, with a little stubble. The lips on his clenched mouth were full and looked soft below his thin nose, the perfect size to accentuate his eyes. Despite having seen him multiple times, they never actually spoke. Often a simple nod or smile would be exchanged in passing, but that wasn't odd to Lina as most in this neighborhood kept to themselves. As they passed, his eyes darted up to hers. She immediately looked away, nervous, but when he was well behind her, she chuckled to herself. *What are you, twelve?*

Her steps increased after their encounter, causing her to finish the short jog a little sooner than anticipated. Now she paced outside her front yard, hands on hips and a look of dread on her slightly reddened face as her eyes locked onto the menacing front door of her house. This was supposed to be her sanctuary, her place of comfort. But what comfort is gained in a vacuum of loneliness? A dismayed sigh escaped her soft lips, and she reluctantly headed inside.

Passing William on the couch, she wondered if anything would ever change between them. It wasn't until Lina started observing him around his parents that she began to understand her husband. His dark eyes would stay fixed on the floor while his head drooped slightly and his shoulders slouched. This was especially noticeable when he spoke to his father, a short, slender man who always donned dark suits and strong cologne that nearly made Lina sick; it was suffocating, much like his presence. And the man was a lion. Dominating the top five percent of his firm's earners, he was as intimidating as a threatened grizzly.

William's mother was no different. Although retired, she had been a pit-bull litigator at the same firm, winning almost one

hundred percent of her cases that went to trial; mainly because she was brilliant in knowing which to settle and which to take to court. This woman had eyes that would pierce the soul and stare into the very essence of one's being. These were a hard people.

But it wasn't until five years into their marriage that William finally opened up to her about his parents. He unfurled secrets: being beaten for a B on his report card. Being forced to wear sweaters to hide the bruises on his arms. They were very methodical in his punishment; they never struck his face unless they lost control. During his piano lessons, if he missed a note, his father would force him to keep his hands on the keys while he slammed the fallboard on them just hard enough to hurt, but not enough to break; he must continue practicing after all.

And in some horrible way, the abuse worked. William was an excellent piano player and an even better lawyer. With a focused mind and ruthless determination, William made partner within three years; much faster than Lina, but she was happy for him, albeit a little jealous. He put in more time at the office than most of the shareholders, and as a result was one of the firm's highest earners. With this came wealth, a beautiful wife, and a nice car. The lavish home in which they lived had been Lina's purchase before their marriage. To an outsider, he was a worldly success. But at what cost? The fallboard always hovered over his hands.

As she stepped into their bedroom, she couldn't help but think of her feelings over the years they'd been together: tedium, mundanity, anger, impatience, and eventually apathy. She would desperately try to recall events linked to other words: kindness, caring, comfort, stability, wealth, luxury, but as the list went on the words became materialistic. There was nothing there worth noting anymore.

Her disdain had long since turned to pity; her abrasiveness became sympathy, but her loneliness only grew. That giant, magnificent house was an empty abattoir of emotion. She wanted to grip him by the shirt collar and scream, "Love me!" But he never would, and perhaps he never had.

CHAPTER 2

Lina stood up from her desk, took in a deep breath and stretched. The sound of joints popping and cracking echoed across the high ceiling as she arched her back and reached to the sky. Then she sighed, looking at the leaning tower of legal documents piled on the landscape of her home office desk. It stood as a monolith of her contractual shackles. Having resigned from her and William's firm over a year before, she had taken some of her clients with her, much to the dismay of the other partners; this home was now her workplace. The office lifestyle and politics of such a large firm had ground her down over the years to the point where she needed to escape. Working independently and from home allowed her the freedom to take on what she could handle without added pressure from her peers or superiors. Plus, the ability to operate on her own time was a godsend. *The pleasures of being your own boss; no more alarm clocks for this gal!*

She peered down at her phone as she stepped out onto her back patio. William would still be at work for a few hours, and she had finished many of her daily tasks that morning—she deserved a break. The spacious backyard was all lush grass and tan lawn furniture. A vented awning shaded the red cobblestone patio. There was a brick firepit and barbecue sitting in the middle of the lawn

that had only been used once since she moved in all those years ago. They sat there alone, calling out to the neighbors to be loved. Lina never really liked to have guests over. She always cringed when William would bring clients over to woo with expensive wine and dinners—the pleasures of corporate acquisitions and mergers.

The spark from her cigarette lighter brightened her face on the shaded patio. The afternoon air was cool and refreshing and she made sure to change that by inhaling a lungful of hot smoke. A foolish practice, she knew, but everyone had their vices. She hugged herself as the empty backyard loomed ahead of her, begging for more company. Her mind wandered back to the young man who'd jogged past her the other day. Oddly enough, she'd found herself thinking more on him since that evening. What had he thought when he saw her? Did he think of her now? Was he married? Did he have kids? Perhaps he would like to have a chat in her backyard. She sighed and covered her eyes in embarrassment. *What's wrong with you Lina? Get abold of yourself!*

Uncovering her eyes and then looking closely at her feet, she could see a line of black ants marching along in front of her, heading back with more fuel for the nest. Some carried leaves and insect parts. All stuck to the line, all except one: It had broken off from the group and now scurried around her toes. Its little antennae prodded her big toe as if the creature wondered what this soft, giant, pinkish-white mountain was. Lina's skin was so white that she jokingly thought the diffused sunlight might reflect off it and fry the poor little guy poking at her. But after it realized she wasn't food, it moved along, adventuring the vast wastes of the stone patio.

She stood and stretched again before putting out her cigarette in the firepit. A dozen or so filters and half-used cigarettes littered the inside. Lina yawned in boredom as she looked down at her phone yet again—she'd only been out there seven minutes. The entire day was still ahead.

CHAPTER 3

Could she be the one? The demon perched on Lina's awning, watching her silently as she smoked her stress away. Its giant, bat-like wings stretched behind it like dark sails in the wind. Bright, piercing yellow eyes stared into the woman's very soul. The connection between her and its host was unmistakable—the demon had felt the jolt travel through him when their eyes met on the jogging path. It was more than simply lust. But the man had experienced a similar jolt before, in his youth, among his university classmates. But nothing came of it, just a small burst of infatuation that swiftly declined. Perhaps this one was different.

Lina put out her cigarette in the firepit before walking back toward her house. The demon slid off the awning and followed her in. Its dark grey, ivory-veined skin was unaffected by the light from the sun. If she could see it, she would notice neither shadows nor brightened areas upon its flesh. It was as if it were a sentient silhouette.

The woman was similar to the man in many ways. Both were physically active, and she too seemed to have an appreciation of nature, though perhaps not as powerful as his. *Completely different class, however. Successful Chinese American attorney and an Irish/Italian*

American mailroom worker; it's possible I suppose, but likely? Hmm. Yet greater disparities had been overcome.

Lina had started making herself a plate of food in the kitchen: leftover chicken breast and potato salad, topped off with a handful of blood red grapes pulled from a large stainless-steel bowl in the refrigerator.

The demon observed her movements and mannerisms now that she was alone. She seemed confident, but unmotivated as of late. *There is much unhappiness, that is obvious.* Given her connection with its host, it had no doubt this was due to her marriage—a not uncommon occurrence among humans. It rubbed a large hand over its bald head, brushing past its short, pointy ears and the dark red horns that protruded from its forehead and curved to the back of its skull like those of a ram. Perhaps she was merely searching for escape from a mundane life. It was not sure she would be the type of human to end a marriage over an affair. But it had been wrong before.

Lina went back to her couch and plopped down on the soft cushions before picking up her Nintendo controller. The demon watched curiously as she played through her game, letting out an occasional expletive when things didn't go her way. A fart escaped her every now and then as her stomach, empty all morning, adjusted to the new sustenance. Apparently she had more in common with its host than it would seem.

The demon stepped in front of her and crouched down, its eyes flush with hers. The grey sails spreading out from its back filled the large living room as it studied her features. Black hair—long, straight and well-taken care of. Slim features, petite frame. Brown oval eyes, dark; a common trait among her people. Her lips, however, were very full. Her frame was lean, yet strong; healthy. *Such white skin; pure, few blemishes. I can see why he took a second glance; she is an attractive specimen.* Lina let out a giant belch that sent a scrap of chicken flying through the demon's neck and onto the tan carpet.

"Shit." She sighed as she paused her game and tossed the errant foodstuff back onto her plate.

The demon stood and explored her home, noting the housekeeping habits and differences between the woman and her husband. Their separate spaces for instance; his was well-kempt and tidy. William kept all his paper documents in categorized, properly tabbed file folders or with paperclips in neat, symmetrical stacks on his desk. All his pens were in a receptacle.

Lina's desk, on the other hand, appeared to be victim of a major earthquake. Documents were splayed out across it in no discernable order. Pens and paperclips seemed to have been tossed about as if she were using them to play dice. A layer of dust covered her computer monitor. It was clear who was structured and who was more carefree. Unfortunately, the woman's carefree nature only manifested with her household items.

The disparity didn't stop there. At the front door were a few pairs of shoes. William's were neatly placed with care like little soldiers standing in line, whereas Lina's seemed to have been kicked off into a pile from across the room. The nightstand next to her side of the bed was covered in combs, loose hair, a tablet, lotions, creams, more hair, and jewelry. The disaster on her side of the bathroom sink would keep a crime-scene-investigations unit busy for weeks, with overtime. Even William's side couldn't withstand the onslaught. His little shave and trim kit as well as his toothbrush were pushed to the edge of the counter, desperately trying to hold on to what little land they held.

Of course, this was not unheard of, two opposite mindsets joining together. Many had succeeded in relationships despite the polarization. And its host, too, was organized more like this William than Lina.

But just because Lina and William were together didn't necessarily mean they were happy or even content. It could see that. The way she lost herself in her videogames. The way she grimaced when observing her empty house. How she sighed upon hearing her husband's text or ringtone. The demon could only assume from what little it observed of William that he felt the same way about her. What they were clinging to, it could not say.

However, the demon had seen her change when she laid eyes upon its host. A spark had ignited in her in that miniscule instant, something only the demon could sense, for humans lacked the capacity. While this may have been lust, her loneliness demanding satisfaction, the demon suspected something more—much more. It would see it in her eyes when she was thinking about him. While lying on her bed, chest heaving, skin moist as her fingers explored her depths, she wasn't thinking about her husband. And her fantasies weren't fantastical, but very plausible and within reach. The woman was becoming smitten. And given the simultaneous jolt found in its host, it sensed that he too had some interest in this woman, whether he knew it or not.

CHAPTER 4

“And when will we be hearing about our future grandkids?” Lina's mother asked over the phone in Mandarin, with a playful, albeit demanding tone. “You have been married for years now and I still don't hear the soft pattering of little feet.”

“I know, Mom, you bring it up every single time we talk.” Lina rolled her eyes. There was no way she would dare bring a child into this so-called relationship. “It's just not a good time. William is really busy now that he's made partner, and I'm still getting things settled with my own clients.”

“Nonsense. You are more than capable of handling your clients. We taught you well in that regard.” The playful tone was gone, but Lina knew her mother was right: They had turned her into an excellent lawyer. She'd even ended up enjoying it. Was it her parents knowing what was best for her, or had she simply conceded and become content? She was their perfect little project.

“I know, I know.”

“Don't forget it. Our family has worked hard to get to where we are.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Okay sweetie, so long as you understand. I have to go. Your father says hi. Love you.” The older woman briskly disconnected the phone before Lina could respond.

Lina threw her phone at the couch cushions and let out an angry cry, clutching her head. Altogether, she loved and respected her parents and was thankful for their methods of raising her, imperfections and all. There was never any doubt that they loved her, and they were nothing like William’s parents. They pushed her to improve through motivation rather than fear. But her mother’s constant pressuring for children and her dismissive demeanor was getting to Lina. The family’s legacy always came first. Lina was growing very tired of it all, but she never could muster the resolve to tell her mother the truth about how she felt.

Lina stared at the coffee table with its art books and pretentious magazines. William kept them up-to-date for when his associates or big clients came over for dinner. She never liked the table covered—it was always meant to be used as a footrest, something William didn’t approve of. *No*. In a compulsive movement, she brushed the books and magazines to the floor. Then she lay back and placed one foot onto the table, then the other. The moisture from her heel left damp markings on the wooden lacquer like hot breath on a cold window. She didn’t care—this was her house. But when she heard the familiar sound of keys jingling outside the front door, she realized she actually did.

Panicked, she jumped off the couch and scurried around the table grabbing the books and magazines off the floor. *Shit, why is he home so early?* She’d just put them neatly back on the table in their correct order when he walked through the door.

“You’re home early,” she exclaimed as she put the final adjustments on the books, somewhat laughing inside. *I’d never bear the end of it otherwise. Well, at least he’d be talking to me.*

“Uh-huh.” Her husband didn’t even look in her direction. He opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of iced tea.

“Um, you just on lunch? Going to work from home the rest of the day?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good. Good to get out of the office.” She tapped her knees anxiously. Attempting to converse with him was like making small talk to a complete stranger on an elevator. “How’s the new case coming?”

“Fine. Lots of work.”

“I bet. Those tech companies always giving us hell, huh?” She chuckled nervously.

“Yeah. Our associates aren’t doing much to help out either with their constant redacting errors.”

“I know how that goes. I spoke to Mom today.”

“How is she?” He sifted through the mail on the kitchen island, his eyes never looking up.

“Good. Fine. Still irritating.”

“Yep,” William said, before taking his iced tea and snacks up the stairs to their bedroom. Lina sat staring at her reflection in the dark TV screen until she heard the bedroom door close. Then she thrust her face into one of the small couch cushions stifling a sorrowful, rage-filled scream.

CHAPTER 5

“And that’s when I told him that if he wants it all done by October, he can suck my fat tits.”

“And what lovely tits they are,” Michael joked in response to his wife’s remark.

“Aw, thanks baby.” Tiffany stroked the back of his neck with one hand while holding a glass of pinot noir in the other. “Naturally, I didn’t really say that, but he got the idea. These corporate execs think the world should dance to their every fucking tune.”

“True that,” Michael agreed.

“More water ma’am?” The waiter in the white shirt and bowtie turned to Lina as she listened to the couple’s banter. She and William never bantered, not even to keep up appearances. The cool, clear liquid filled her glass.

“Sounds like the usual elitist ‘world revolves around me’ client, yeah?” she added.

“More like ‘the world revolves around my company.’ The guy seriously sent his assistant down to scold us as if that would change anything. This little Ivy League, mouse-faced tramp straight out of JD thinks he’s gonna show up and move mountains in my firm? He

had another thing coming.” Tiffany sipped from her second glass of wine.

“They expect the service they pay for,” William interjected. That was the first thing he’d said the entire time after their cordial evening greetings.

“Should have expected you to take their side, Will. First time you open your mouth all night and it’s to defend the client,” Tiffany teased.

“I only mean, they pay us a lot of money to do a specific job. We are expected to provide optimal service with the amount we charge. You can’t blame them for wanting perfection.”

Michael bit into a large piece of filet mignon. “He’s got a point,” he said. “That’s why we get the big bucks.”

“Precisely.”

“I get it.” Tiffany leaned forward, pointing a finger at Lina’s defensive husband. “But there’s a difference between expecting optimal performance and trying to micromanage said performance to the point of borderline harassment. I mean, if they think they could do the job better, why hire us?”

Oh my god! Is work all these people talk about?

“Also a good point,” Michael the bobblehead agreed once more.

“I am simply trying to make the point that you shouldn’t be upset over a client expecting a certain level of professionalism and results.” William looked straight at her with an expressionless face. “It’s our job after all.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tiffany sighed as she set down her empty glass and stood up. She was a tall, lithe woman with dark brown hair and semi dark olive skin. Lina wasn’t surprised to see William admiring her physique in her dark blue, form-fitting dress. He never stared at Lina in that way. But tonight he’d undoubtedly want sex like he always did after these nights out, much to her dismay. “I’m off to the ladies’ room,” Tiffany said. “Care to join me Lin?”

“Oh, sure,” Lina replied with a fake smile; she knew being asked to the bathroom was code for “need to talk.” She also didn’t

like it when Tiffany called her “Lin,” that nickname was reserved for those close to her. But she hated rocking the boat even more, so her lips remained sealed.

“I swear your husband can be such a corporate shill,” Tiffany said as the two ladies reapplied their makeup in the bathroom mirror.

“He can be fiercely loyal,” Lina replied. Deep down she’d never really liked Tiffany. The woman was a supposed friend of William’s, not hers; although, she doubted he truly cared much for her either. Lina suspected she was simply a means of keeping up connections. And the openness of her criticizing William always left Lina with a sour taste in her mouth. Maybe she felt a requirement to defend him, defend the family. Rumors spread rarely ended with positive results, after all.

And yet whenever they went on a double date, Tiffany would confide in her as if they were good friends, a shoulder to whine on. *Maybe she’s fucking him and feels guilty.*

“More like a lapdog. But hey, it works. It’s no wonder he got partner so fast.”

“Perhaps.” *Cunt.* “Or maybe he just worked really, really hard.”

“Always a possibility, no doubt.” The tall brunette smacked her lips, evenly spreading her freshly applied brown lipstick. “But let’s be honest, you’ve been gone a while, Lin. It’s a fucking shark fest at the firm—feeding frenzies for clients, and there’s been like three sexual harassment claims since you left. That feeling that everyone is one big family is gone.”

“If that’s the case, then I suppose Will is acting accordingly, yeah?” Lina fixed her eyeliner, wondering when Tiffany would get to the real reason she called her in there.

Tiffany seemed slightly stumped at the observation, but she didn’t relent. “He could leave a little for the rest of us, ya know? Hey, maybe you could talk to him for me!”

And there it is. “Oh?” Lina acted confused, as if she didn’t know the entire purpose of this interaction. “How so?”

“Rumor has it there’s a new client up for bids, somewhat hush hush right now as the bosses don’t want the sharks to freak out at the first smell of blood. I need this, Lin. But William, he’s relentless. He’s always number one on the list for the best cases.”

Maybe you should get off your lazy ass and work harder then. “He’s earned it, Tiff. God knows.” She still didn’t entirely know why she was defending her husband—tribalism probably. Tiffany was pushing in on her turf.

“Yeah, but the rest of us are tired of scraps.” The tall woman took Lina’s hands in her own and looked deep into her eyes with a false sincerity that Lina saw straight through, almost making her laugh. “All I ask is that you speak with him. Get him to back off on this one, just this once. Please?”

Lina hesitated to make it appear as if she were contemplating the proposal. But she wasn’t going to say a word to William. *Not for this bitch.* “Okay, for you Tiff,” she said.

“Great!” Tiffany exclaimed and immediately dropped Lina’s hands. “And don’t call me Tiff. I fucking hate that name.”

“Sorry.”

CHAPTER 6

An evening walk had become part of the young man's routine when he would simply get the urge to escape his house and get some not-so-fresh city air. Tonight, the tall, slender demon accompanied him, watching over his host like a silent bodyguard. Naturally, it didn't watch him all hours of the day; it would often leave him be as it did other tasks, such as observing Lina or the interested woman at his place of work. And when he slept, there was little reason for it to hang around unless it wanted to go through the difficult task of observing his dreams, never an easy feat even for one so experienced as itself.

However, it always made sure to accompany him on these little walks around the neighborhoods. This man was fairly content when walking in the suburbs. When he would go hiking in the mountains his state was entirely pleasurable, even borderline euphoric, something the demon appreciated because it showed respect for the natural world. The man's love for nature kept him stable, which was perhaps the trait he had most in common with Lina: They both craved nature now and then. Although that wasn't entirely uncommon amongst humans generally; they all needed an escape at some point.

The sun would be setting soon, giving the smog-strewn sky a fantastically orange and pink hue. Even the demon, which had witnessed firsthand the shaping of galaxies and stellar systems, still enjoyed these simple sights. They were a testament to the Grand Experiment that was the universe and all within it, and the sunsets in the city were a proper representation of mankind's clash with nature. The pollution from vehicles and factories contrasted with the clouds and rays of light, leaving a landscape of corrupt beauty: the chaos of technology meeting natural order.

They passed the familiar houses holding all the not-so-familiar families. The demon knew its host well. He didn't have a real connection to any of the people in these little tan and white boxes; on the contrary, there was quite a disconnect between him and his human counterparts. That was what drew it to him in the first place. The host's minor lack of empathy for his fellow humans left space for the demon to observe and infiltrate his mind.

Lately, it was curious as to what Lina found so interesting in him. He had always had admirers in the past, undoubtedly due to his looks. But once they discovered his separation from humanity, they mostly moved on. He was simply not a man easily capable of true intimacy.

But there was something different when it came to Lina; the demon could feel it. They didn't know each other, but it had sensed the magnetism between them when they passed on the street and the other times she had seen him walking by her house. They had no direct connection, not yet at least. But something was there that the demon sensed mustn't be taken lightly. It didn't know if it should be happy for its host, or afraid.

Could this Lina be dangerous to its plans? It had spent so much time grooming him, and she could disrupt it and waste all the years it had invested in his future. The demon could not let that happen. On the other hand, what if she was a positive force? It'd seen this before; love could be a valuable resource for weakening the human mind, but it could also be a great source of strength. If something did come to pass between them, she could make or

break him; women always had that power over men. The question was, was that something that the demon was willing to risk?

CHAPTER 7

Lina took a large gulp from her second glass of wine; this was no time for sips. The dining table was covered in half-empty platters of rice, meat, noodles and vegetables. William had done the cooking as he always did when their parents came for dinner. She'd felt for him when she watched his sweaty palms struggle with the pots, pans, and cutlery in an attempt to make everything perfect—because no matter how hard he tried, he would never satisfy his parents. As always, they all sat together, chewing silently while staring down at their plates.

“How's work?” William's father asked in Mandarin over a mouthful of food. “I heard you were all struggling after losing the Bryson case.”

“No.” William cleared his throat, fidgeting slightly in his seat. “It was a hit, but we're doing fine.”

“Hmph. If you were still at our firm, you wouldn't have to worry about such things. Amateurs.” His father waved his fork around. William simply nodded.

“Is that why your firm botched the union contract in Chicago?” Lina's mother quipped before taking a sip of her wine. Her eyes pierced William's father's from over the rim of her glass.

“Ha! Nonsense. They wouldn’t listen to reason. Blue collar workers, they only see the world in one way. No room in their brains for innovation.”

“Yes, you are absolutely right. Twenty percent wage cut is very innovative.”

“In the greater scheme of things, yes. Absolutely. That’s the price for greater benefits.”

Lina's mother simply scoffed and shook her head disappointedly.

The stoic man addressed her husband next. “You all seem to be doing well, eh John?”

Lina's father raised his light brown eyes from his plate. He had taken the name John in order to fit in with American society; his real name was Wei. After swallowing a mouthful of food (he always liked William's cooking), he replied to his inquisitor in his usual calm and polite manner, “Well, yes. I suppose we’re doing just fine. Can’t complain really.”

“One can always complain, John.” William's father pressed the issue he always did when they all got together: a relentless striving for success and perfection. “There is always room for improvement. You should push forward. Work your hardest to be the best. No excuses!” He pointed his fork at his son as if the message wasn’t clear enough. *At least he lives by his words.* Lina knew in all honesty that her husband’s father and his wife were by far the most financially successful among them.

William simply nodded, moving the food on his plate from one side to the other. Lina could hear his stomach rumbling despite the loud conversation. His nervousness oozed across the large table like an ever-growing pool of blood.

“Not everyone can be the best, Zhu,” her mother replied. William's father had kept his traditional name. If Americans couldn’t pronounce it, then Americans be damned. William's mother, Mei, had kept hers as well, mainly because it was easy to pronounce. “Success isn’t always measured in dollars nor by being

the best anyways,” her mother said. “There’s plenty of successful lawyers who aren’t pulling eighty-hour weeks.”

“But you can always tell them apart from the best. You must admit that Qing.” Zhu looked up at Lina’s mother. “The best are remembered. The best change the world.”

Is this what I have to look forward to in life? Spending my latter years discussing the same shit I do every single day now? Lina took another gulp from her big glass of wine.

“That’s what it’s always about, legacy,” Mei added, agreeing with her stern husband. It wasn’t because she was submissive; their minds were simply very much alike, leaving them almost always in agreement. She was probably the only woman who could handle him.

“Speaking of legacy.” Lina’s mother had brought up the inevitable. “When are we going to have some little grandkids running around? You both are successful in your careers, so it’s about time, don’t you think? You’re not getting any younger.”

Here we go. Lina was buzzed enough to roll her eyes without caring what they thought. William shoved a ball of noodles into his mouth and took his time chewing as slowly possible.

“Well?” her persistent mother leaned forward with a raised brow and inquisitive eyes. “Have you at least talked about it?”

“Leave them be dear,” Lina’s father said. “They’ll do their duty when they’re ready.”

“Duty?” Lina burst out in laughter. The wine had gotten to her head. “Didn’t realize it was my duty to further your legacies.”

“You are our legacy baobei.” Her mother put a gentle hand on Lina’s shoulder. “We just want you to have your own, that’s all.”

“Shouldn’t that be our choice? What if we don’t want one?”

“Nonsense.” The comforting hand was briskly removed. “Family is everything. Every woman wants one. You’ll understand when you’re older and you’ll thank me.”

“Oh, I’m sure I will.” Lina laughed again with as much emphasis on sarcasm as possible.

"It's true," her father interjected. William's parents stared at her with such intense scrutiny it could've burned a hole in her mind. "Your aunt, may she rest in peace, was an absolute misery when she reached her fifties. Her one regret was that she never had children."

"Her regret Papa, not mine." The third glass of red nectar sloshed back sending more confidence buzzing in her chest. Seeking support, she looked over at her silent husband whose eyes never once left his plate. *Coward*. His parents never bothered to get his opinion; they already knew it would be theirs.

"Just think about it, that's all we're saying. Children are a wonderful thing—look at all the happiness you brought us. Without you we would be incomplete."

"Sure thing maestro." Lina drained the contents of her big glass. "I'll be sure to pop out as many drooling spawn as I can. For the legacy!" She stood up, bumping the table, and held up the wineglass in a toast. Realizing it was empty, she burst into laughter and tipped it upside down allowing what few drops remained to sprinkle onto her half-eaten plate.

Her mother smacked her lips in shame and her father sighed as she stumbled out of the room. Her hysterical laughter bounced off the high ceilings, making it sound like the house itself was guffawing at them.

"I should make sure she doesn't fall down the stairs," William said.

"She's fine," his father asserted, immediately shutting down his escape; he wasn't getting away that easily. The table grew silent once again, with only the sounds of clinking silverware to be heard.

Lina clung to the handrails with both hands. Each step was a chore and a potential disaster, but she took it one at a time and was eventually graced with the solid foundation of the upper floor. Throwing her fists up, she cheered at her glorious triumph before she hobbled toward her bedroom. Before passing the threshold, she noticed her father watching her at the base of the stairs; one foot resting on the first step, a hand on the railing. She wondered if he'd been there the entire time.

“Got to protect the legacy!” she scoffed as she stepped into the master bathroom and plopped down on the toilet. Red cotton panties hung from her ankles above her high heels; William always made sure she got dressed up when his parents visited. The smell coming from the water beneath her was strong and acrid due to slight dehydration. *Should’ve drunk more water dummy.* Lina kicked off her shoes and underwear, then wiped herself clean and ghosted past the mirror, skipping washing her hands. She didn’t want to see her reflection above the dual sinks.

With a groan and a sigh, she collapsed face first onto their giant memory foam bed. Immediately, she felt the tension in her neck as she cranked her head to the side giving her a view of her dark reflection in the TV. The occasional echo of William’s father’s voice could be heard vibrating up the stairs and hallway like a taunt. This time, he was talking about a new case that had to do with a big construction contract. She groaned yet again and pulled a pillow over her head. But as she started to drift off to sleep, all she could hear were the clinking and scrapings of silverware on her porcelain china. The demon looked on.

CHAPTER 8

“You made me look like a fool!” William somehow exclaimed it in his quiet, stable tone. Sometimes it was difficult for Lina to tell when he was angry. “You disrespected me and my parents. Now what will they think?”

Lina sat on the couch, holding her head. *Oh my god not now. Please, not now.* The hangover had commandeered her body leaving it achy along with a throbbing brain. The last thing she had at that moment was patience. “I’m not going to simply sit there and take your dad’s shit anymore,” she replied, her voice acidic. “The least you could’ve done was defend your wife.”

“I’m never going to hear the end of it. They might even talk to Harold, ask him to give me some sort of punishment and make my life miserable.”

Like it isn’t already. “Yeah, I’m sure your boss will be more than happy to dole out justice for your father’s petty family drama.” She shook her head, very aware that he’d ignored her previous statement. Unfortunately, that wasn’t unusual.

“They’ll probably take me out of the inheritance just to spite me.” He was starting to sweat profusely as he always did when anxiety hit him. “You have to apologize. Tell them it was the wine. I can’t talk to them.”

"I will do no such thing, Will. I'm tired of being coerced and interrogated all because of their stupid legacy they so desperately want to force onto us. They want a fucking legacy, they can adopt!" *Maybe create another spineless weakling.*

"Well, maybe we should have a baby." William was simply rambling at that point, like he always did when they fought. This wasn't the first time they'd had this argument. Whenever they spent time with his parents, the next day ended up like this: He released all his anger and she exploded under the pressure, yelling back at this sentient black hole of emotion. "We never really talked about it before. Maybe that's what we need."

"Yes, we have. Multiple times." *How the hell can he forget the dozens of times we discussed this? Is it me? Am I not able to get my point across? It can't be.* "I will not bring a child into this world for the wrong reasons. I mean, look at us! You want all this dumped onto some poor soul? For what? Your father's legacy? Hell, we barely talk unless it's fighting over your parents!"

"Our parents. Yours are just as guilty as mine, always planting their seeds in your head. They're just more subtle and manipulative. At least you know exactly where you stand with mine."

Lina scoffed and turned away from the red, sweaty face of the man she'd married. She couldn't respond because she knew that, to a certain degree, he was right. That was it then; she conceded and stormed out of the room as tears of anger slid down her face. *Perhaps you should go and marry your precious Tiffany then! That'd be a godsend. Make us both free. Yeah right. What woman would have an affair with a little boy like him? Still...*

She went to their bedroom and threw on a black, form-fitting dress and matching heels. *He likes the look, then I'll show him what he's missing. I bet a real man would respect this, treat me right, get my back.*

"Where are you going?" William asked as she stomped down the stairs, car keys and a pack of cigarettes in hand.

"Away from here," she replied coldly, not even looking him in the eye. *Away from you.*

“Fine. Leave and suck up that poison,” was all he said, pointing to her cigarettes. Then he walked to the living room and plopped down on the couch with another glass of wine.

The front door slammed shut behind her as she charged down the walkway towards her dark green Range Rover. The sparks from her cigarette lighter signaled that it was running out of fuel, and with a growl, she angrily flicked the silver top open again and again. Some of her friends teased her for not having a plasma lighter, but she always loved the flame. *Finally!* The dancing light brightened her face in the early evening sun as she puffed at the cigarette gently bouncing between her lips.

Inhaling deeply, she sighed in contentment. *Why are the things that make us feel the best, the worst for us?* she thought, looking down at the smoking cylinder. *Or maybe I just haven't found the best feeling, and this is all I know.* The cigarette seemed to empathize as a few tears of ash fell from its smoldering tip and floated down to the stone walkway. She could always rely on her burning little friends.

CHAPTER 9

Her green SUV rolled smoothly down the cobblestone driveway as she backed into the street and drove off. To where? She could not say. But drive she did, passing the houses in her neighborhood and those beyond, and then the retail blocks with all the little shops and outlets accompanied by the occasional strip mall. Before she knew it, she was on the freeway heading downtown. She still didn't know where she was going, or why.

Traffic was light so she was able to focus on her thoughts. Images of William and his parents at the dinner table filled her mind. They were laughing at her, laughing at the complacent wretch she had become. Then she could hear more laughter coming from the other side of the table as her parents smiled those smug, manipulative smiles that drove her insane. In her mind, she sat among them as they bellowed at her, a bombardment of disrespect and hostility from both sides. Then she burst into flames that consumed them all and left only her laughing while the house fell down around them, burying them all under cinder and ash. *If only*, she sighed to herself as the fantasy left and then the guilt of it immediately washed over her. She didn't actually want to hurt anyone, and she loved her parents. But sometimes a lady had to vent.

After fifteen minutes or so, she found herself in downtown Ghetti. The sidewalks and streets were packed with office drones making their way home after a long day's work. Lina didn't know why she had driven down there at that time of day. But when she pulled over and stopped out front of her old firm's building, she figured she needed to think on the past and what had led her to her current life.

Peering out her windshield, she cranked her head back and stared up at the 60-story glass plated behemoth. The firm leased the twenty-seventh through the thirty-first floor, with her office on the thirtieth; William's was on the thirty-first. She thought back to the times when she would go up to see if he wanted to have lunch with her. He rarely did. "Too busy," he would say. It wasn't entirely a lie—the man put everything into his work which left little for anyone else. But it would have been nice for him to spend a few moments with her.

A knock on the passenger window brought her back to the present. One of the valets was signaling for her to move. "Sorry!" She waved apologetically at her and pulled out into the street. The tower of her past moved farther and farther away in her rearview mirror as she headed down the main streets. Soon, she was out of downtown again and in the surrounding neighborhoods, a thousand little boxes filled with unfortunate souls.

As she passed the pawnshops, liquor and convenience stores, and little hole-in-the-wall restaurants, her gaze settled upon a bar nestled away on a dark corner across from a fast-food chain. She turned onto the street and parked a ways down. The sun was dropping closer to the horizon; it would be getting dark soon, which worried her. But the area didn't seem to be high crime or dangerous, and although a great many of the buildings were rundown, they were occupied. There was still a decent amount of traffic given that everyone was getting off work. She looked in her rearview mirror, the neon lights of the bar beckoned her like a seductive incubus. *Fuck it*, she thought. She put her phone inside her clutch bag and locked the car doors.

The interior of the bar was a pleasant surprise. She'd half expected it to be a dirty dive bar with sweaty bikers and drunk middle-aged women trying to find a man. But it was clean, well-maintained, and had a friendly vibe. The walls had been painted by an abstract artist in greens and blues lending a soothing, natural feel to the atmosphere. The bartender was a younger woman with a bob haircut and black halter top. There were only four other patrons at that time, but the evening was still young.

Sure enough, the number of customers increased as the evening went on. She looked around, observing them all, nursing her second mojito. With the exception of a middle-aged couple, everyone seemed to be there alone. They all sat with their eyes glued to their phones, avoiding human interaction while simultaneously craving it, hiding from everyone while in plain sight. *Am I any different?* She took another sip of her sugary drink. She was hiding, or running away at least, that much was for sure. The thought of going back and confronting William sickened her. *Not this time. I'm not in the wrong here.* She didn't look forward to the coming days of silent passings in the hallways and ignoring each other in bed. *And this is the life I lead.*

The third mojito was starting to make her stomach queasy. She tried pushing herself to finish, but the sweetness was too much to handle. Sliding the glass away, she was about to get up and leave when a voice spoke to her.

"You're not going to finish that? For shame." She spun around on her stool to find a tall, pleasant looking olive-skinned man staring back at her. He had no accent but looked to be of Greek, Italian, or maybe Middle Eastern descent given his thick, dark curly hair and well-trimmed beard. His cologne was subtle and smooth, and his dark grey suit was finely made and well-cared for. He stared at her through bright green eyes. It was only a matter of time before she was approached, she'd assumed, but she could have fared far worse.

"Oh, uh..." She hadn't been accustomed to this game for quite some time. "Just a bit sweet. Too much for me."

"It's all about moderation. Take it slow, enjoy the flavor, relax and pace yourself." He offered a friendly smile and sat down next to her. "I haven't seen you in here before. Judging by the way you dress and carry yourself, I suspect you're out of downtown. Corporate? Finance?"

"Law, but close. Corporate law. No longer in downtown though. I have my own little practice." She pulled her half-finished drink back and took another sickening sip, much to her stomach's protest.

"Oh? Desired your freedom, eh?"

"You could say that." *What the fuck am I doing talking to this man? I'm married. Ugh.* But it was harmless—they were just talking.

"Do you miss being a part of a big team, and all the perks that come with it?"

"Sometimes. But the stress and frustration would often outweigh the benefits." She didn't know why, but she moved both hands underneath the bar and attempted to pull off her wedding band, only to find that she wasn't wearing it in the first place. *What the hell, where is it? Did I take it off already?*

"I will say, it must be nice being your own boss, that's for sure. I envy you in that regard." The handsome young man sighed, genuinely self-reflecting. Lina was somewhat impressed at the man's ability to converse; she never had these type of chats with William. "I'm Isaiah by the way."

"Lina," she replied, shaking his outstretched hand. Knowing where to go from there escaped her. This was foreign territory, or perhaps old country she hadn't visited in years.

"Well Lina, pleasure to meet you. So, what are you doing around downtown during rush hour?" He chuckled. "Business sucking you back into the lion's den?"

"No." She paused slightly, her eyes gazing past him as she contemplated answering the question truthfully. "No, I just wanted to get some fresh air, go for a drive."

"Understandable. We all could use a little 'me' time now and then. Especially you, being a lawyer and all."

It was stunning how much attention he was giving her. The concept wasn't entirely alien; she had always been an attractive woman. But not once had he talked about himself or made it obvious that he simply wanted to get in her pants. She wasn't completely naïve, but she enjoyed the conversation and small effort of interest, nonetheless. "It can get a bit taxing. What about you, Isaiah? What line of work are you in?"

"Marketing. I head a firm specializing in social media, websites, internet ads, and whatnot."

"Ah, so you're the clickbait king," she teased. The alcohol was getting to her brain, making her more confident.

He chuckled again. "Not quite," he said. "That is generally left to supposed news articles and videos as of late. I just do advertising to help companies and products get out there—work with a lot of car and tech companies selling hardware. It's actually fairly rewarding. We take pride in it."

"I envy you that feeling."

"What? You mean to tell me you never get that rush of accomplishment and pride when you wrap up a case and all parties are happy? They send you gift baskets and wine thanking you for a great job?"

"Well"—she paused to take the last sip of her drink—"I have gotten baskets and wine, sometimes flowers. But my experience is more one of relief than pride I suppose."

"That's unfortunate. I just hope you're not unhappy."

"I don't know," she replied, slightly taken aback at what seemed to be his genuine concern. *Very bold Isaiah.*

"Just remember, the only person who can bring you happiness is you."

She looked into the young man's shining green eyes and an involuntary smile spread across her face.

CHAPTER 10

The beer on his breath was slightly off-putting, but Lina didn't care. Her mouth willingly opened to his, letting him thrust his tongue inside and explore her own. His firm hands squeezed and caressed every part of her body as he held her tightly against his in the dark alley between the bar and the closed pawn shop next to it.

Inside the bar, a glass crashed to the floor, and their heads shot up in surprise. A light laugh, and then Isaiah went back to adventuring over her body. He pressed her back against the brick wall as he fondled her breasts and buttocks. A soft gasp and moan escaped her lips when he gently bit her exposed neck. His juicy lips were soft as silk. *Oh my god, I can't believe I'm doing this. Stupid girl.* Reaching under both her firm cheeks, he pulled her into him. The obvious stiffness protruding from his groin pressed into her inner thigh through their clothes. *Wow, he's huge!*

The taboo nature of her predicament sent a wave of lustful pleasure over her body. Her legs shook. With a swift swivel of her hips, she pressed her buttocks into the young man; he gasped and pushed back into her while groping her breasts from behind.

Lina quietly squealed as the man tousled her dress, hiking it up to her upper thigh, and placed his fingers into her moist, warm place. Her knees instinctively rubbed together. She bit her lip. She

could feel her wetness intensify as he expertly rubbed back and forth. The fantasy was intoxicating, so much so that she almost forgot that she was living it.

But as a deep grunt escaped the man's throat, her mind suddenly turned to William. Guilt washed over her, soaking her in pity for her damaged husband and reminding her of the duty to her marriage. Duty: a word she had come to loathe, yet it always stuck in the back of her mind, showing her where her supposed place was in this world. *This is wrong.*

"Huh?" the man mumbled in between kisses. He didn't seem bothered that she had pulled his hand away, perhaps thinking she was teasing him.

"Wait, stop." Lina turned back around and gently, but firmly, pushed him away.

He looked at her, hands held palms forward, his head tilting back slightly. "Um, did I hurt you?"

"No. It's not that. It's just, I'm married." She was unable to look him in the eye. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be doing this."

"No," Isaiah exhaled, frustrated. "No, I suppose you shouldn't." He buttoned up his suit jacket and with a deep sigh, wiped her saliva off his beard.

"I need to go. Sorry, I just—I need to leave."

"Yeah. I'll go jump in a cold shower," he joked, trying to lighten the mood. "I guess I won't be seeing you around then."

"Probably not."

"Fair enough. Unfortunate." He turned from her and walked back towards the street, rubbing his fingers through his curly locks. But before he passed the corner, he spun around and addressed her one last time: "You may want to decide what it is you want in this world Lina, before it's too late and the world decides for you." Then he was gone.

Lina stood with her back against the cold brick wall, her mind going over a thousand thoughts a minute. The sweat on her soft flesh turned from lustful warmth to sticky cold. She could feel every air particle from the cool evening breeze flow over her skin.

The drive home was quiet and lonelier than ever, despite the blaring radio and the wind through wide-open windows battering her face. Her hair thrashed about like a den of disturbed snakes. *What the fuck was I thinking?* The thoughts kept coming back, and she slammed her hand down on the steering wheel and screamed them out of her head, much to the confusion of those driving next to her. The embarrassment was overwhelming. *Stupid hypocrite! So what if Will and Tiffany are fucking, doesn't mean I have to. I'm not some dumb girl that seeks revenge. I'm better than that. Aren't I?*

The comment the young man made stuck in her head: “I just hope you’re not unhappy.” *Is it that obvious? If a complete stranger can pick up on it then who else knows? What am I doing with my life?*

When she finally pulled into her driveway, she sighed in relief at the sight of the lights on inside her house but an empty parking space where William's car usually sat. Should she tell William of her exploit? Maybe he would admit his, if there was any. But ultimately, what good would telling him bring besides relieving her own guilt? *I guess that's kind of selfish, isn't it?* The stress of that conundrum brought on the craving for a cigarette. Giving in, she grabbed her pack before stepping out of the vehicle.

The night sky was grey and cool with the rampant light pollution giving everything a bluish-grey hue—soothing, yet daunting. The flickers from her near-empty lighter illuminated her face like an orange strobe light. Eventually, she was blessed with the flame and the calm that came with it.

She headed out for a stroll around the street. The cool night breeze accompanied her, caressing her face. She exhaled, and the smoke distorted the orange and yellow light from her neighbors' porches and the streetlamps.

Riverstone Parkway was in a very large yet quiet neighborhood. There weren't ever any spawn out playing because they were too busy studying another language or practicing violin—a bunch of little Williams watching their childhoods go by as their parents attempted to turn them all into little successful prodigy progenies.

But where the void of children's laughter resided, the sound of rustling leaves brought her an inner peace that helped her think on the night's events without touching off a nervous breakdown. Chuckling embarrassedly, she buried her head in one hand, thinking of how foolish she had been for fooling around with that handsome young man. *You're an idiot, aren't you Lin? An unhappy idiot.* She was only human, caught up in a moment of vulnerable passion, but more was expected of her. She had to be better than that. Loyalty had always been a virtue as far as Lina was concerned; never before had she cheated, not on William nor any of her previous boyfriends, until that night. *Who am I kidding?*

When she arrived back to her own address, she sat down on the cold curb. The hard surface was uncomfortable and chilling, but she didn't care; anything was better than being inside that house. *How can I face him? Stupid girl!* The stickiness still present in her underwear made the guilt even worse. *Stupid, stupid, stupid!*

That was when she heard gentle steady footsteps approaching from her left. She didn't have to look to know who it was. The young man she always saw jogging around the neighborhood was out for an evening stroll. Her heart began beating faster, and suddenly, all thoughts of William and her night's escapades fled from her mind. When the attractive figure walked past her, she took the leap; she didn't know why.

"Those things'll kill ya," she said to him, somewhat nonchalantly.

He turned around and replied, "Excuse me?" in a deep yet youthful voice.

"That's what you were thinking, wasn't it? Cigarettes will kill me."

"Actually,"—a genuine smile spread across his face, captivating her—"I was thinking that everyone needs their alone time. Cigarettes or not."

"Oh, silly me. I just figured you for the healthy type, since you're always jogging out here every other night. Don't think I didn't notice."

“I suppose—I try to stay somewhat in shape. Our bodies are the one thing we’re stuck with in this life after all. Might as well maintain upkeep.”

Their eyes met when she looked up at him and an unfamiliar connection shot through her. His smirk and somewhat prying eyes sent butterflies fluttering in her stomach. There was never a jolt with William. Was it so wrong? *It's time to decide, Lin.*

EPILOGUE

The tall, grey-skinned demon stood in Lina's yard, watching as the two humans interacted. As always, it observed in silence and secrecy, despite their not being able to hear or see it regardless. It had brought this little union to pass when it influenced Lina to unknowingly take off her wedding band while she was driving in downtown, as well as when it sat atop the dumpster in the alley and watched the lustful humans writhe and moan; after a few moments observing, it had stepped off the trash bin and placed its hand on that of the young man's, guiding it to her loins. Even the simplest tasks of pushing someone in the human realm to remove a ring or touch another person was a struggle. However, an unheard whisper in her ear, a slight mental nudge towards what it knew she wanted, and what followed was the eye of a young man and her will, her doing.

It hoped that it had not made a mistake in ushering in the introduction of the two curious beings. Over the decades, it had spent much time influencing its protégé's young mind, helping to groom him for what it hoped would be greatness.

The demon stepped closer to the pair, taking in their mannerisms and body language, studying their every move and utterance. Its young ward smiled at the attractive woman as they

discussed the color of her vehicle. His reaction was genuine, sincere, as was hers. *There is something more here.* Over the eons, it had watched countless beings of countless species live, die, love, hate, kill or be killed. But every now and then, it would come across a being that would cause it to pause and take a second glance. This man was one such creature. And the woman he now seemed to have taken an interest in might play a very important part in the much larger story.

To be continued...

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