

My brother opened the door to his convertible, his arm still covered in healing burn scars. Seagulls cried out in the distance, white against gray clouds, heavy with a just-passed storm. California poppies, *eschscholzia californica*, had wandered from their superblooms and now blossomed along the sidewalk, golden petals pretending to be the children of a sunrise.

He checked his phone. "You ready?"

We looked like two brothers going to the beach in the summer evening, him in his open jacket with the swagger of a young man who'd just graduated college, and me, dressed the same and looking like I had just entered college. An incision ran down my exposed chest – ugly, purple. I knew someone might call it horrible, but I wanted to feel the wind.

But what was another human's opinion, anyway? We had reincarnated so many times that these forms were just ephemeral, but why did I keep hiding the scar with my arm? Past lives, past scars, I'd worn those fine, but why this one?

I looked at the glass hanging from my neck, the one from my first life. The hexagonal prism, capped by hexagonal pyramids, were still unmarred, but all I could see were reflections of the violet sunset on the sea, like the eyes of my lost, split among so many faces. Deep inside was the scrap of paper I had written on just a few weeks ago for him, with the words I couldn't say.

I sighed. "I don't want to be, but after all this time..."

My brother laughed. "Been a long journey, huh, Tang?"

I sighed. There had been three of us once. Me, Tang. My brother, Marananta.

And the third, he was gone. His name was Ninh, and the glass was his gift to me all those lives ago.

“Well,” Marananta said, putting the keys in the ignition, “let’s get going then. We’ve done all we can for the world, so let the humans have the fancy toys we’ve made for them over our lives.” He yawned as the engine roared to life. “I think I’ll miss this toy, though.”

I stood still. “I don’t know if I want to go back.”

But I found myself plodding into shotgun and shutting the door, thinking back to those days so long ago. “It’s funny. When Ninh invited us, I thought we’d just do this important thing together, but when we died that first time at the leak...”

A lump grew in my throat. “I think I fell in love with him.”

Our creators, Archive, found a memory leak that was consuming the world. We would descend down like a ragtag group of engineers with a leaking dam, using our lives as mortar and our knowledge of this world as bricks to plug it.

Our first life was on the shores of China. I went west, Marananta went north, Ninh went south, and that was how we first heard of what humans called reincarnation. It wasn’t like ours – they wanted to end their reincarnation, we were duty-bound to reincarnate – but there was something about their beliefs that all three of us took names from and learned from them.

I loved their devotion to knowing. The monk I followed, Xuanzang, had gone all the way to India for the original Buddhist texts, then spent his life translating it.

Marananta loved journeys. He kept appearing for a few days at a time in different caravans, never staying for long until we were all old and bedridden.

Ninh loved something. No one thing. Maybe it was everything: the aroma of incense, the monks’ altruism, the careful designs of temples that he spent hours telling me of, which I knew but never felt like I understood as he did.

But one summer day, when we had all settled down and when it was but days before we would inevitably march to our doom to seal the leak, we had talked.

He'd picked up a purple piece of crystal glass, something that he'd been making in his job as a glassblower and alchemist. "There's something special about dying, Tang."

"Something?"

"Yes, something. Er, for you." He'd handed the glass to me, smiling as I took it. "But anyway, I saw and heard and felt it in the funerals. It's something that Archive will never kn—"

The feeling of the car thrusting back with a stop shocked me back to reality, followed by a rip on the gas that flung me back. My brother careened into a left turn, wind ripping through us.

"Jesus, slow down!"

He laughed. "Mom and dad are gonna miss us, huh?"

"Well, I never—"

One of our neighbor's cars grinded to a stop next to us, but Maranta only flashed an apologetic smile as he slowed to a neighborhood-speed 25 miles-per-hour.

I sat back in my chair, eyes shut and panting. "Marananta, just because we reincarnate doesn't mean you should keep driving like a madman." When I opened my eyes, I only saw the violet skies. Calm washed over me, like Ninh was still there.

"Being so close to death just reminds me of how much we haven't seen yet."

"Like what?" Maranta's voice had softened – his way of saying sorry.

"Lot of films. Maybe some plays."

"Didn't you watch enough with Ninh?"

“Well, there’s more. There’s always more. Every play is different, especially Shakespeare’s when the audience got involved, and I’d like to tell him about them...” I stopped, curling up in the leather.

Right, I wouldn’t be able to tell him about them. He’d thrown himself away to seal the leak, and that hadn’t been Archive’s plan.

Only, I didn’t really know why we had to protect this world. What did Ninh mean when he said this world was “interesting?” That it had something Archive would never know, and that he wanted to know something like that?

“Marananta, why didn’t Ninh tell us there was another way? And why’d he do it by himself?”

“Because you loved him, and you would have stopped him.” He turned onto the main roads.

“But what he told me, about feeling, about having to die, that all of that was more than any knowledge we could get for the leak, and yet he threw just himself in, didn’t he? I don’t get it.” But I did get it.

The leak was at the center of the world. Most of our trips there were when we were all near-death— conveniently at around the same times. We’d simply disappear one day, leaving a will and saying we were off to solve our calling.

Still, Ninh would always cry leaving the humans he had loved in his life, and it was always me who’d have to remind us of what we were here to do and pull him off after a half-minute of early mourning.

He’d promise them the same thing every time:

“I’ll be back.”

And he'd hug whoever it was too long, but he'd always leave behind a will too detailed to suggest survival.

We'd get to the leak, I'd set the crystal glass at the entrance, and then we'd dissolve ourselves in the leak. Only the faintest memories would remain, and then Archive would reincarnate us, and somehow, the glass would come back to us.

We passed by one of the streets passing to our high school. I held the glass up, staring at how light danced on the reflective surface. "That was only a few weeks ago, huh?"

That was when Archive found out the leak was growing exponentially, but Ninh and I had just graduated. That was all the time we had to tell our families in person, show them all our gadgetry and magic so they'd believe us, and the last thing Ninh did was hug and sob them.

I let him. I let him do it for one minute. Two. Three.

The incision at my chest burned as I thought of that memory, of the way I couldn't explain why I felt so devastated that time.

I couldn't pull him off then. I just tapped his shoulder, he wiped his tears, and we went out the door, his hand wandering to mine as I caught it, thinking nothing of it. We were boys marching to our deaths, like the two great wars a century ago, where all three of us found our lives cut short, twice, with only a pittance of knowledge to send to the leak.

As we always did, into the sea we went, towards the core of the world, where it resided.

When we got there, Marananta burned himself away on stabilization duty, leaving Ninh and me to get there. I remembered the trusting smile he gave me, but I knew that he was only trying to hide his sadness.

And what he said: "Love this world for me, Tang."

When we got close, a stray piece of the leak's unreality had carved my chest out from the world. Hadn't I seen it coming? I had time to react. I was trained for it, supposed to put up with that pain, and yet, at that moment, I couldn't, and Ninh...

But he didn't have to throw himself away for it.

I looked away from the violet skies and breathed deeply, like the fumes of the cars would be a distracting pain, but I could only smell the citrus air freshener that Ninh had bought – some useless thing he bought because he thought it would look pretty on the car. And it did.

My brother didn't respond, but I could see him watching me through the rear-view mirror as he drove. It wasn't that he didn't know what to say. I'd lived enough lives to know that I'd talk, he'd listen silently, and I'd talk my way out of it.

"Do you think if we'd gone together, or if I hadn't been hit, that..." The car roared as it surged onto the thoroughfare. The breeze blasted past me, and I thought I felt Ninh next to me.

"That what?"

I leaned back, staring up at the violet skies like his eyes. "Maybe we'd have gone together? Maybe then it'd be half-and-half, or something."

"And if you did, you'd have been stuck in the limbo he's stuck in now." He kept his voice soft, but I could feel the car's turning tighten as he gripped the wheel.

"But at least he wouldn't be alo–"

"You wouldn't have even been alive to comfort hi– Jesus!" He slammed on the brakes, tossing me headfirst into the chair even with the seatbelt. I stayed face-into the chair, not wanting to hear Marananta. "Ugh, too close– but you know what Archive said, that there's no bringing him back, that he's gone, and I miss him too, Tang. We both do, and it's okay to feel that. And you

should.” The car inched forward in the stop-and-go traffic. “And if you had gone in, too...” He looked away from me. “All the knowing in the world won’t bring him back.”

I pulled my head out. “You don’t miss him like I do, Tang.”

“I know I don’t. You spent hours watching movies together. Just what were you talking about? I never understood that.”

I sighed, picking at a loose string in the car’s upholstery. “Well, I was always thinking about technique. Some films got really elaborate. Or production. Like *Barry Lyndon*. Year after, there was an article on photographing it, and they were talking about using something-something Zeiss still-camera lenses from NASA.” I stretched one arm up, remembering the life just before, making films and documentaries with Ninh.

“Didn’t you hate that film?”

“It was boring.” I laughed. Most of *Barry Lyndon* had stunning photography, but who’d watch a film for that? “I just liked it for the production and because Ninh was also into Kubric and his films are so detailed. Made them good to sacrifice for the leak, but Ninh preferred *2001*.”

Above us, a faint moon watched us. “He found it awe-inspiring. He could never make me feel how he felt, but I remember the first time we saw it: he was just sitting there, stuck to his chair, tears coming out of his eyes, while I was wondering how Kubrick did everything. It’s funny, I had to pinch him to wake him up that time. He was just that mesmerized. Used his entire allowance and a bit of mine to see it again.”

Marananta laughed. “All of our parents were pissed that month.”

I closed my eyes, thinking of Ninh’s face, how it was always so quick to emote, to change, like he wanted me to know that he *felt*. “I think he just really loved this world.”

Lines and lines of asphalt, of cars, of street lights stretched before us as Marananta crept through the crowded streets. At our right were hedges, bushes, houses, all alike, and these gave way to open fields of sagebrushes, rushes, birds-of-paradise, poppies wavering in the wind, a tide of dry greens and browns commanded by the wind. Beyond us lay the violet sky and Pacific, caressing the beach as rays of sun glittered over it.

In some past life, Ninh had made dozens of landscapes as the Americans went west. He had always found something to make beautiful. These cars, these streets, maybe they weren't, but Ninh would always find something.

At the same time as that, though, I'd been a botanist. *Artemisia californica*, *juncus patens*, *strelitzia reginae*, *eschscholzia californica*. In some past life, I'd tried saying Latin plant names to Ninh while talking about a superbloom.

We were sitting in his study at Temblor Range. I remembered his laugh and what he'd said: "We never reincarnated in Rome, Tang. Latin's nonsense to me, so take me there, instead. I'll show you how to really know a flower."

I'd gestured for him to follow, but he'd taken my hand instead.

There were so many things I had known, but he had never cared to know. He had always wanted to see, to write about or film or paint it, to find something that Archive would never know.

"Why didn't I tell him?" I looked at Marananta. "Was I just too stupid? Too afraid?"

"Tang, don't insult yourself. You did all that you could." As he spoke, he pulled into the beachside parking lot. In the distance, a cliff next to the sea had millions of bright orange wildflowers blooming – a gift of the rain.

Memories came back of Ninh and me in a field of flowers like that, when we were about fourteen. Just four years ago.



I'd been at his side. "Don't you feel kind of bad about killing flowers by picking them?"

A laugh, as always. "Well, Archive has to know about life and death, too, right? Besides, I'll put them in a vase for you. You'd like that." He had leaned in close. "Wouldn't you?"

The hot California sun embraced me as I clutched my crystal in the here and now. "But what I did was stupid, wasn't it? I mean, humans talk a lot about how ephemeral things are, like that superbloom over there, but I don't think I realized what they meant until after he closed the rift."

Maranta sighed. "We reincarnate constantly. Of course we never realized it until it really, really happened." He opened his door, then walked over to my side. "Now come on, to the sea." He looked back, blinking slowly. His eyes gleamed. "And we'll be off from this wild place. Maybe Archive will let us retire here or something."

I looked away from him, at the empty rear view mirror, at the empty car's empty seats.

"What do you think death feels like, Marananta? The one that so many humans fear, where you just cease?"

He shrugged. "I'd bet even Archive would never know."

He opened the door. "They don't think of endings or conclusions— they just think of knowing and learning, and that never has an end. Only a break."

"Death?" I stared at the violet crystal glass. "Do you think Ninh...?"

A drop of water fell onto the glass.

I wiped my eyes.

"Tang." My brother's voice was soft. "Tang, I think this is the first time I've ever seen you cry past the age of twelve."

I looked towards the sea, my throat crackling as I held the glass tight to my burning chest, the last memory of our time in this world. “Can’t I mourn him, Maranta?”

.“That’s the thing, Tang. You never tried. It was always ‘what should I have done.’” He sighed, following my gaze. “You and him, it was always like that. You knew, he felt, and I’m happy that you can finally feel something, you know?”

“It was our duty to learn,” I murmured.

“But he was always there with you. Playing with you. Entertaining. Talking. Weaving stories. Making it matter so it’s not just some numbers or chemicals or techniques you can scribble down in some encyclopedia, not just knowledge. He made it into an experience.”

I got up, stepping past Marananta, over the asphalt, over the sand, feeling its warmth as I held the glass up to the horizon. In so many past lives, in so many trios, the sea was the last sight we had seen of the world before we found our way to the leak.

But I had forgotten most of those lives’ knowledge. All that remained were the memories of Ninh and me.

Of someone who loved the world.

A voice came from near us. “Hey!”

It was a girl running towards a bonfire where her friends were, sticker-adorned cooler in hand. I was close enough that I could hear pieces of the conversation she was having with another guy. “This is it, huh?” She opened the cooler and took out two beers, popping both open.

“Don’t say that.” He took his beer and tapped the glass with hers. “We’ll find each other again. We’ve done it before, haven’t we?”

One of the guys with them, his black hair streaked with blonde, scattered some sort of powder in the bonfire, then ignited it. A brilliant orange flared up. The girl smiled. “Now where’d you get that?”

“Oh, don’t ask that, just watch the fire!”

I turned away, smiling. It was a pretty fire.

Ninh had pulled me into gatherings like that, and they seemed like the kind of people he’d like, but I’d always be wondering why Ninh did that, why he was always talking, always wandering, especially when all these people weren’t like us. Still, he always seemed so fascinated with them and their lives that I couldn’t help but follow, pointless as it seemed.

But with Ninh, was it ever about the task Archive gave us?

He learned, sure, but it always felt like that was just incidental, while I focused on our duty. But those first words... what was it that Archive would never know?

I found myself walking towards the violet sunset and sea, glass in hand. It felt warm. Marananta was at my side.

The glass was Ninh’s. Each life, it’d find its way to him first, then to me, and he’d always laugh as he gave it to me, leaning in close.

“For you.”

But if I were to return to Archive... I wouldn’t need it anymore, would I?

Sand turned cool as it neared the lapping waves, and soon enough, my ankles were soaked in the fresh ocean.

“You know,” I said, looking at the horizon. “There was a story Ninh liked. About someone who gave up everything so their beloved could get away, and how messages in bottles would grant wishes. So, she threw a bottle out to sea. Stupid, cheesy things like that.”

I grabbed the glass, smiling as my vision blurred. Inside, I could still see the paper, written hastily, kept inside by glass glue. The fantasy of it had been simple: our next life, he'd have given it to me, and I'd have imagined the simple letter inside was his.

“I love you.”

But now there was no him, but this world, it was his. Not in the ownership way. I may have known so much about it, but it had been Ninh who had loved it. Cared about it. And he never was its master, but he deserved to call it his world.

I kneeled down and dangled the glass in the sea by one finger, watching as it fluttered back and forth.

I looked back at Marananta, then shut my eyes, leaving just me. Just me and the jute twine on my finger, sliding, sliding, sliding, until it became a little thread dangling on the edge of my fingernail. The waves cried as they touched the crystal and wondered where Ninh was, and I felt the crystal spinning as the waves turned it round and round.

My finger curled up, and I felt the twine slip away.