

Husk

Zhen was rooted to the Earth, her body glued to the bed by a force far stronger than gravity, while the world outside the four walls of her dilapidated apartment hummed and fluttered like a bee hive, honeycombed with concrete, steel and history.

But she was oblivious to all of it. Too entrapped by her very own history that festered inside these four walls but it didn't hum or flutter, instead it enveloped her like a layer of freezing cold water that coated her entire body, numbing her from the outside, while drowning her on the inside.

Her history would never be documented for the eyes of others but it was chronicled into the very foundations of her soul with a chisel forged by inescapable trauma.

A trauma that was still very much alive inside her, nearly as fresh in her memory as the moment she suffered it. Her mind replaying every little detail on a seemingly endless cycle that distorted any concept of the passage of time, as it dilated and condensed in her very own prison of torturous, crippling anxiety.

The television played in the background, offering the only source of illumination in the room as talking heads, blurred from view, told her to stay inside. Constantly reinforcing that danger laid ever constant outside the boundaries of her home. But she couldn't even summon the strength of will to leave if she wanted to. Besides it was within these very walls that the ordeal that mentally obliterated her was conceived.

But there was an avenue of escape from all of it, a refuge from the fear that coated both sides of the walls of her home. It lay beside her in the centre of her vision. Her very own path to heaven, wrapped and sealed tightly in a small piece of foil. But it was also the key that unlocked the hell that haunted her, it was the key that unlocked her to him.

A shivering sweat broke out of every pore of her skin as she recoiled at a fresh memory. An experience that smashed through the barrier she viewed it from, cutting her deep as she clutched at the ruined shards of who she once was.

She felt physically sick as her hand passively traced over the goosebumps, a bumpy layer over skin that was now no longer hers. She wanted to wash the revolting sensation away but she knew it was a fruitless effort. It wouldn't matter if she peeled the very flesh from her bones, she would still feel him coating her body, like a demon residing in her that needed to be exorcised.

She could do it, she could cleanse herself of him. She could send that heavenly fire flowing through her and escape to a blissful oblivion, if only for a short while.

Zhen pulled back the curtain of greasy black hair that clung to her face and reached for the empty syringe.

But as her fingers graced the hollow plastic, a face flashed in her mind, smiling lovingly at her. It was her mother's face, blessing her with the briefest of respites from the overbearing shadow of self loathing that she had draped over herself.

But before she could even savour the heat of that light, it was gone, taking her once again down that obscured path that led to where she lay now. Broken and truly alone.

She stared once more at the bane of her life, to most it would simply appear as nothing more than paraphernalia, but to her it was a dragon that she had danced with years ago and its abuseful nature had nearly killed her.

The scars and needle marks on her skin healed but the wounds her family bore festered deep. Her mother stood beside her throughout it all and fought that dragon alongside her, through oceans of tears, swamps of filth and years of heartache.

Zhen's mother was the hero that saved her from herself and now more than ever she needed her here. She was the only one who could save her from the hurt and the indescribable desire she felt to intake the dragon's ruinous fire and burn away all this accursed feeling.

Her face unconsciously grimaced, if her mother saw her here now she wouldn't embrace her, she would be beyond ashamed. Her face would be looking down on her, contorted in scorn and disgust.

“You’re nothing but a whore.” Her mother’s voice echoed from memory.
“Without me you would’ve died in an alleyway, covered in filth and disgrace.”

Those words did indeed come from the mouth of the woman who had loved Zhen, even at her lowest and darkest. But those words were really formed by the sickness that possessed her, that cruel ailment that robbed Zhen of her angel.

At first it started slowly but by the time the diagnosis was made the sickness took hold of her mother fast. Flourishing into a corrupted weed that began to fight her for control of who she really was. The woman who was a beacon of light and love soon became over the course of a few months a bitter, vindictive witch, prone to paranoia and hallucinations.

Soon after, the woman who had been Zhen’s world slipped away into something unrecognisable before her very eyes. A husk, a shadow and at times an absolute monster.

As her condition exacerbated, Zhen slowly grew to fear her mother and her sudden outbursts but what was perhaps far worse was that nearer the end, she realised she actually began to despise her. Such thoughts only served to further weigh her down as they walked hand in hand with an overwhelming sense of shame.

Yet despite all of her loving efforts she soon came to terms that things could never have gone on like that and inevitably it all reached its breaking point. Her mother lost herself and the war of attrition against the sickness, then all that was left was that aimless, bitter monster that now claimed ownership of her mind and body.

Zhen shivered at the memory, the malice etched on her mother’s face as the thing that possessed her wrapped her malnourished hands around her neck and choked her with a grip that held no hesitation or regret.

But what truly tore Zhen apart that day was the look in her mother’s eyes as the orderlies dragged her away. That look of shock and shame as the sickness released its grip on her mother, cruelly just for long enough to soak up the damage it had made her do to her baby girl.

Zhen was thrust back into the present by a scream of terror from the streets below her apartment. The eerie, alarming sound gave her already shivering body a deep chill and it wasn't because of the faint breeze travelling through the window. The sound echoed through the streets but it was answered by no one. In fact the entire street was eerily silent.

Her attention was briefly distracted from the needle beside her to the television. The plastic, perfectly groomed faces of news anchors relayed the day's numbers, those who had gone missing in the past twenty four hours.

'The pandemic of the missing.' That was what they called it. People were just disappearing in greater and greater numbers throughout the city. It wouldn't matter what channel she switched to, it ruled the network. Nothing else mattered.

One could ignore it and switch the constant feed of panic and despair off but then all they would be left with was that aching lonely silence. Wandering outside without a worthwhile reason was a breach of curfew which risked a financial penalty that would be instantly deducted from the perpetrator's state bank account.

Alas Zhen couldn't face the outside world even if she wanted to and she didn't dare face switching the screen off, she couldn't bear the silence; that masquerade of quiet and its heinous white noise that bored past her eardrums, directly into her fragile psyche with needle sized drills.

A loud knock at her door caused her to leap out of the bed in the space of a heartbeat as her own pounded inside of her chest. Her shivers turned into an uncontrollable trembling as she sneaked to cower by her bedroom door. Staring fearfully at the peephole and the cone of light that flickered through it into the darkened living room, that awful homely slice of hell that made her sick inside.

"Zhen Lao!" An authoritative male voice called out. "We are conducting the daily census. You have fifteen seconds to come to the door and respond, otherwise we'll be forced to make entry!"

This was a new development and Zhen partly doubted if it was true for a second, despite the fact it had been announced on the news a day before. But

she was preoccupied at the time of its announcement; busy numbed into non-existence by the downward spiral into her very own pit of sorrow.

“Ten.” The man behind the door said sternly. Zhen wasn’t even aware that five seconds had already passed and she fearfully made her way to the door, being as silent on her bare feet as she possibly could.

She subtly moved her face closer to the door and peeked through the small glass. The light that beamed through made her squint, its brightness gently burning her retina as it adjusted to a spectrum of light that it had not been subjected to in days.

As her pupil constricted she saw eyes that had been weathered by years of living on a short temper. The rest of his face however was obscured by a surgical mask, hiding his features and the image of his humanity. She could feel his impatience through the door like a choking aura as fear turned her legs to lead.

There was another figure beside him but whoever they were, they were standing outside the range of the peephole. Zhen could only assume this other person looked and acted very much the same as the man that caused her breath to be trapped in her lungs. Too afraid to exhale in the event he somehow heard it.

“Five seconds Miss Lao.” The avatar of authority said aloud. His eyes flashed up to the peephole and unknowingly met her’s.

Instantly she took a step backwards, her arms numbed with apprehension as her shaking fingers hovered over the lock, the digits quivering with anxiety and the overwhelming need to flee.

They wouldn’t break the door down, she knew they’d have access to a master key card for the entire block. The authorities always had a way to access private residences. It was a callback to the days before the UPP exodus; back when the Ministry of Space Security used to drag people from their homes in the middle of the night, sometimes for something so little as a dissenting word against the government.

She heard him take a step towards the door. “Last warning Miss Lao.”

Zhen inhaled a swift, panicked breath and unlocked the door with a loud click.

She pulled the door open at a snail's pace but only partially, just enough to be able to peek her head through the gap.

"First of all Miss Lao, we'd prefer that you answer more quickly tomorrow. We have an important task to undertake and your compliance is necessary."

Instantly this stranger made her feel even more uneasy and she loathed him for it. She could tell he was enjoying this, he was enamoured by this fraction of power granted to him by the state. It massaged his demented sense of self importance.

The fear that coated her face and emanated from her entire body mattered naught to him. If anything it made him seem to enjoy this encounter all the more.

"I'm sorry." Zhen said meekly, her eyes hovered at his chest, never daring to look up to meet his own. If there was ever a definition of a prey stance, she was it.

"Yes, of course you are," He said dismissively. "As you have been made aware, we are conducting a city-wide population census, in light of these recent disappearances. We shall be visiting you each day as a check and to deliver your allocated food parcel. There's no need to be concerned with missing us, so long as you adhere to curfew."

Zhen nodded in response, still hesitant to look directly at him. An aching long second passed.

"Miss Lao, open the door further. I find that your behaviour warrants an in depth check."

That made her look into his eyes finally. Her worry clearly showed as she shook her head. "No, I'm the only resident at this address. There's no one else here."

"You misunderstand Miss Lao." He replied. "It's not your apartment I want to check. It is you." His hand was now pressed onto the door, slowly applying weight to it, an action which she reciprocated.

“Please.” She pleaded quietly as she stopped him from opening the door further. “Just leave me alone.”

“I’m afraid I will not do that.” He said, continuing to push his weight.

In a rush of what feeble strength she could muster she forced her entire body into the door. Shutting it as she scrambled for the locking switch and as she found it that satisfying click sounded.

Zhen stepped back from the door, her breath coming in short, tremoring bursts as she stared at the closed portal into her broken domain.

The two men still weren't leaving and her heart froze as she saw the light on the door's lock flicker from a glowing red to a resonant green as the lock audibly deactivated with a dooming click.

The door opened and the amber light from outside burned into the living room, illuminating the tarnished and sullied state of her neglected home. The two men were completely unrecognisable in that moment as the light shone past their dark and imposing silhouettes, driving that sickening fear into her heart again.

She felt naked and impossibly vulnerable in that moment as they confidently took a step inside. She was dressed in only a thin strapped top and pants, garments which were soiled and filthy from days worth of sweat and her stomach curdled as she felt their eyes upon her.

“This will be much easier if you comply Miss Lao.” The man now turned intruder said calmly, but she swore she could hear a smile in those words as she felt his eyes ogling her.

Driven by instinct and fear she turned and ran but on her first few strides and in her blind panic she stumbled over something discarded on the floor and tumbled onto the long couch situated in the middle of the room.

She felt the skin on her back rub across the fabric of the couch and instantly she was returned to that horrific memory from days past. From before this pandemic of the missing, before she was locked inside her very own prison. Confined with her very worst thoughts and memories.

Twisted and torn from the pain of her mother's commitment, she sought solace in the company of a friend; Jiang. And to her relief he arrived quickly to be that much needed shoulder to wail and weep her sorrows upon.

She remembered burrowing her head into him as she screamed at the cruelty of the world and after what seemed like an age she brought her tear-streaked face up and looked into his eyes, ashamed of how she must've looked to him.

"I'm sorry. I must look like an absolute mess." She confessed to which he replied with a heartwarming smile, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Don't kid yourself, you're more beautiful than you'll ever realise." Jiang said but she dismissed his comment as nothing more than a reassurance.

Zhen laughed, sniffing away her tears as she took a drink of the wine he had brought. "Bet you say that to all of your girlfriends."

"Only you." He said it so assuredly that it was impossible not to notice this time.

"C'mon Jiang, I don't have the energy for this tonight." Zhen tucked her hair behind her ears as she continued to delicately wipe the tears from her face.

"Don't have the energy for what?" He said defensively.

"You know what I mean." She snapped. "I've just had to have my mother put in a mental hospital and you pick tonight to finally pluck up the courage to make a move on me."

"Look I'm not trying to make a move on anybody. You're the one who called me here, I was just trying to make you feel better."

Zhen took another mouthful of wine. "Look I'm sorry, I don't even have the energy to fucking argue. Just tell me you brought some stuff to smoke. This wine is doing nothing to take the edge off."

“Yeah I did.” Jiang reached into his rucksack. “I pre-rolled some before I came over.” At which point he produced a handmade joint, filtered with a short piece of rolled up card, the paper tightened at the tip so nothing fell out.

He handed it to her, along with an old-fashioned zippo lighter. She looked at him questioningly.

“This stuff isn’t strong is it?” She asked hesitantly.

“No.” Wang laughed. “I made sure to pick out a real light but a mellow one for you. Just as you asked for, just enough to take the edge off with.”

“Thank you Jiang. Really.” Zhen pulled out an ashtray from underneath the coffee table and sat it on the arm of the couch as she relaxed and stretched out beside him.

“I really needed this after today.” She breathed out a heavy sigh of relief.

“So what are you going to do now? Now that she’s been committed.” Jiang asked slowly, almost delicately.

Zhen sighed and subtly shrugged her shoulders. “In all honesty I don’t know, I guess I’m just going to have to take it day by day and see what comes.”

“Look I know I’m leaving town soon but I want you to know that if you need me, all you need to do is call and I’ll get a flight back here. You’ll have to pay for the flight of course but I’ll pay you back with the pleasure of my company.” Jiang sniggered as he continued to fumble in his bag.

Zhen laughed reassuringly but the laugh slowly morphed into another bout of tears and sobs and Jiang took the opportunity to put his arm around her shoulders and bring her close.

“Is it wrong that a part of me is so fucking relieved now that she is in there?” She asked.

“No.” Jiang responded. “It’s completely understandable, your mother’s health wasn’t just bringing her down, it was bringing you down too, you didn’t see it but I did.”

“I just...” She paused. “I didn’t feel like I had any other choice.” She sobbed as she reached forward to grab the lighter she left on the table, inadvertently escaping Jiang’s embrace. “But she never abandoned me when I was at my worst. She could’ve dumped me at some shitty rehab clinic and just washed her hands of me, but she didn’t. Now look at what I’ve done to her.” She pinched her nose as she leaned downward and choked back more tears.

She felt Wang’s hand rub her back tenderly, occasionally coming close to the small of her back, just at the base of her spine. She was too absorbed in her regret to truly notice the subtle intrusion.

“Because you didn’t, you couldn’t have gone on like that any longer.” Jiang continued the gentle gesture before reaching down to hand Zhen back the joint that fell from her hand onto the floor. “But there was a way back from what you went through. With mental health,” He paused. “There’s really no way back sometimes.”

“I know.” Zhen laid back on the couch and finally lit the joint. Taking in a deep draw of the drugs inside before slowly exhaling as warm, soothing tingles travelled from her chest down her limbs, all the way to her fingers and toes.

“But part of me felt like I had to keep on going, no matter what.” She confessed while she tried to hand the joint back to Jiang but he declined.

“You have a couple more, I’ve been dying for a piss since I came in.” Wang said as he lifted himself off the couch and wandered to the bathroom.

“Nice bit of TMI there Jiang. Thanks for that.” Zhen said before taking one more puff before she rested the joint inside the ashtray where it quickly burned out as a thin, smoky haze hovered over her relaxed body.

She was no stranger to the subtle highs which certain strains of cannabis provided. As such the slow quickening of her heartbeat didn’t cause alarm of anxiety and she just continued to lie there as she absorbed the warm sea glowing around her world.

Neither was she concerned about the little electric sparks that travelled like oiled serpents throughout her tense and tired muscles, causing her body to relax and ooze further into the seat she lay back in.

Her head felt airy and free of tension as she mentally tossed and turned through the negativity that weighed her present mind down. Lazily treading water through the sea of stress and worry with ease and calm as she began to process it all and try to come to the conclusion that there was some form of reason behind it all.

Her mouth felt like it was filled with wads of cotton and her tongue was as dry as an arid desert. As such she made the effort to lean up and reach for the wine glass but found that her body didn't quite respond at first.

That gave her a slight rise of alarm and once more she tried to move her limbs but nothing happened. Her heart rate, which was already slightly accelerated, began to develop into a thundering gallop that pounded through her chest, up to her neck and inside her ears.

She couldn't move her head to the side and found then that her sight was slowly becoming affected as soft, blurry clouds encircled her vision, then suddenly her head began to feel numb and cold, almost like her brain was slowly being frozen.

Her breathing started to elevate as she felt herself fall into a bottomless pit of panic. She tried desperately to summon the effort to call out to Jiang for help but all that followed was silence. The noise from the streets outside was suddenly mute as she silently screamed internally for only her to hear.

Hope fluttered in her racing heart as Jiang appeared in the corner of her blurred vision. He looked down at her and smiled as he leaned over to move the ashtray onto the table.

He spoke but the words were unrecognisable, frighteningly though she clearly saw the lack of concern on his face at her failure to reply to him. He tucked her hair behind her ears and tenderly cupped his hands around her face. She was entirely paralysed but his touch flared alive the nerve endings around her cheeks.

It wasn't a pleasant feeling however, it was stark, alarming and entirely sickening. Her whole body railed at her to retreat, to somehow sink further into her couch, anything to get away from this situation, anything to get away from him.

If he could see the storm of panic and torment in her eyes, Jiang never showed it as he lowered her body to lie on the full length of the couch.

Her eyes were locked to the roof of her living room. Unable to look down as he slowly undressed her and with every inch of skin that was unveiled dread smothered her whole being.

His heavy, desire-laden breathing haunted her as he looked over her nakedness, she was defenceless, unable to even weep in shame as she felt his hands move all over every curve of her body. Unable to die as he entered her, again and again as she lay there, immobile and trapped in a timeless, inescapable torture.

The impossibly long hours of that condemning experience flooded freshly into Zhen's memory as her back struck the cushions and she sank into the furniture while the two intruders raced to tower over her.

The one who spoke at the door swiftly enwrapped her wrists with his large, rough hands as he held her down. She fought it but it was a weak, futile effort and it showed as he overpowered her easily. Swinging his leg over her waist as he straddled her and held her down. Ignorant to her weak, pathetic cries, or the tears of desperation pouring from her wild, haunted eyes.

"Stay still!" He grunted as his colleague stood over her, the bulky device he held now hovering over her chest. He kept it still over her for a few seconds until it audibly beeped.

"She's clean." His colleague said.

"Right." Her government issued abuser said as he climbed off her, his hand pressing on her breast as he removed himself and stood looking down on her, his eyes swimming in anger. "Tomorrow Miss Lao you will comply with our requests."

"Let's go." He said to his colleague and they left her apartment, tossing something into the living room before walking away, leaving the door open ajar in their wake.

“Did you cop a feel on your way off her just there?” She heard his colleague ask him as they left.

“Gotta be some perks to this job.” He sniggered loudly as they made their way down the hall.

Once a few seconds had passed they could be heard knocking on the next door and instantly Zhen sprang from the couch and ran to close the door. Her body slammed it shut as she collapsed against it. Sinking into something close to a foetal position as she openly wept, still terrified they would return and easily invade her home again.

Her world shrunk until it was only within the boundaries of her arms which were tightly clasped around her head, shaking involuntarily. This was her existence now, a constant state of terror with the prospect of safety being a complete impossibility. Oh how she longed for someone to hold and protect her, someone like her mother.

The experience and its trembling aftermath exhausted her and yet she feared that her towering anxiety would never allow her to sleep ever again. But after an hour as her tears ran dry and her throat grated and burned from her cries, her pained bloodshot eyes finally closed and she rested in a heaping, dirtied mess of anguish.

And for the next few hours the talking heads loomed above her, seemingly staring into her resident hell as they casually conversed about hundreds of families mourning a missing loved one. Entirely content in their misplaced sense that everything was going to be perfectly alright.

And of course they were content, it mattered not that things heinous and inhuman were stirring underneath the city streets. Entities that were making entire neighbourhoods disappear. It was the next big feast for the media and as long as they remembered to cut to commercial and thank their sponsors, they were having a hell of a time.

The day's sun drifted slowly into the distance as the shadow of night darkened the view from outside the single small window in Zhen's apartment. And the muted sounds of the cityscape dissipated into the fearful, empty silence as Shanghai held its breath for another night.

Zhen awoke with a gasp among the dreadful silence, her eyes snapped open wide but her body remained unmoving as she peeked through at her surroundings from behind the shield of her arms.

It wasn't the typical behaviour of a healthy human, it was more akin to the way a prey animal interacts with its environment when it believes it is surrounded by predators.

Her body quivered with the chill that breathed into her apartment from the open window, the thin curtain blowing inwards as it formed around the ghostly shape of the cold air invading from the outside.

She rubbed the crusted sleep from her raw eyes as she raised herself up on aching, malnourished limbs. Tenderly handling her bruised wrists where her recent invader held her down, the thin limbs were a sheen of dark purple visible even in the weak light provided by the television.

Her heart sank at the knowledge that he'd be gracing her door once again come tomorrow and every day after that for as long as this situation lasted. She couldn't do it, she couldn't survive being so cruelly brought back to that nightmare on a daily appointment.

She swallowed hard as she remembered the smell of his hot breath prickling against her sweat-laden skin. Holding her down, forcing her to relive that paralysed torment with a cruel, crystal clear clarity.

She moved through to the bathroom to relieve herself and halted as she caught sight of someone she didn't recognise in the mirror. She had to take a step forward and peer closer, disbelieving this wretched thing that her soul inhabited.

She still remembered herself as the vision she once was, knowing full well she had the looks that turned heads on the street and in those early days she had used it to her advantage, back when she fleetingly danced with the dragon and it was still disputable who took the lead in that dance.

Those same looks inadvertently caught the attention of someone she never saw coming. Someone who for the briefest of times gave Zhen the happiest days of her life.

In that time their courtship shone like the fierce, glowing light of a forest fire, but as quickly as the fire reached the peak of its strength it was destined to burn out and die.

And die it did, in the most painful of fashions with no hope of revival.

She remembered staring at another mirror, smiling at him through it as he stood behind her. Zealously believing as their glowing smiles shone through the misted glass that the happiness she felt in that moment was too true to fade, too bright to submit into nothingness.

Then Zhen remembered as she leaned over his still body. Screeching and wailing for someone, for anyone to help as her tears fell onto his still form. Praying for help and damning herself as she scooped foam and vomit out of his mouth, anything so he'd breath again, anything so he'd fill her world with that smile again.

But it was not to be and when help did eventually come they only found her weeping over his cold, rigid body. The syringe still inserted into his arm, weakly oozing over his cold, pale skin whatever poison that didn't enter his bloodstream.

Zhen looked away from that memory and gazed back at the shadow of what she had become. It had only been a few days but it was what she saw behind her own eyes that disheartened her. There was nothing there, she was nothing more than an empty shell, a husk; achingly empty from her fill of suffering.

There was no future past this, at least not one that she could bear and she knew it, there were too many cracks to try and glue back together. Even if she somehow managed to make it past this she knew if she fell once more she'd shatter and she'd be so far gone she may well have been her mother.

She tilted her head to the side and saw her bed behind her and the syringe positioned on the sheet. Suddenly a cold sheen washed over her body and she knew then and there what she'd do.

But she wouldn't be found the next day looking the way she did and she wouldn't have her last dance wearing the scent of any lustful bastard on her skin.

She turned the faucet on the bath and while it filled she entered the living room with an anxious heart for what would be the final time.

For the first few moments she stood at the threshold and stared at the scene of her violation, fighting the invisible barrier that held her at bay from entering. Her throat tightened as her breath caught in her chest but with a harsh, shuddering sigh her feet moved forward into the hostile space.

She collected the discarded clothes on the floor with shaking, nervous hands, the garments he stripped from her that night. Even holding them threatened to re-release those memories anew and as such she disposed of them swiftly with a tear-stricken anger. She stifled the urge to vomit as she handled her underwear before thrusting it into the waste disposal unit.

Soon afterward the bath was ready and she discarded the stinking clothes that had adorned her body since the morning after that dreaded night. Even now she felt unsettling chills run down her skin as the hot, humid air met her naked body. Ignorant to the initial pain as she plunged herself down into the perfumed, roasting depths and felt the sweat and grime wash away as the scalding water briefly purified her of the filth that haunted her soul.

A moment of almost unbearable peace followed as she closed her eyes and allowed the silence to focus her senses on the sensation of the water completely enveloping her. Loud bangs could be heard from somewhere in the building but Zhen dismissed them almost immediately as she was too occupied in trying to harvest the briefest of pleasures from this final torment-free experience.

The outside world could burn for all she cared at that point, evident by her ignorance of the panicked screams that came through the window from the streets outside. She was however entirely unaware as she submerged her head beneath the water of the other noises coming from the street, emerging from things entirely inhuman and yet equally capable of inflicting the trauma she now made peace with escaping from.

She removed herself from the bath and after drying herself dressed in comfortable sleepwear, making a conscious effort to stay her eyes from the mirror.

She poured herself a sizable glass of the Japanese whiskey she had kept for a special occasion and downed it in its entirety as she gazed down at the syringe and the rest of the kit lying on her bed sheets.

The amber liquid bled fire down her throat deep into the centre of her hollow chest as she exhaled a heavy sigh and prepared her key to the heavens.

The kit wasn't hers of course, that thing she once called friend had left his bag as he escaped in the early morning in fear and shame, before she regained control of her body.

That morning, stricken with disgust and pain she tossed the bag against the wall upon finding the heroin inside and the needle kit alongside it. Damning him further for ripping her sense of self away and leaving the key to her own hell in his wake.

But in some twisted, crippled way she was thankful for it now. She knew she didn't have the strength to meet her end any other way, she'd tried them all before and cowered away when she stood at the precipice.

But not this time.

She was quick and efficient, and with well practised hands from far too many encounters she took a piece of paper and placed the tiny rock in the centre, crushing it into tiny fragments with the underside of the cooking spoon. After which point she folded the paper into a funnel with the drug still inside and poured it into the spoon.

She didn't bother measuring it, she knew where she was going with this.

After preparing some boiled water she filled the spoon which caused the water to turn into a murky, dark brown. But that wouldn't be enough to optimise what she had, adding a pinch of acidifier into the spoon which would help further dissolve the heroin.

Then she took the zippo lighter, the same one that she used to light the joint that night and held it under the spoon, watching intently as the liquid bubbled and the particulates inside began to further dissolve into that perfect poison.

She was conscious of the fact that it genuinely sounded like someone was getting murdered outside in the street but she was too busy, too focused to shift herself and investigate the nuisance.

Finally for an added touch she stirred the brown liquid briefly before tearing a filter out of a cigarette and ripping off a piece big enough to fit aptly into the spoon.

Then she took the syringe and pressed the needle into the now sodden filter, extracting as much of the mixture as she could while the filter prevented any insoluble particles from passing through into the syringe reservoir.

She aimed the needle point to the roof and stared into the mixture inside with an expert eye as her fingernail tapped against the plastic. Sending what few air bubbles that resided inside upwards while she slowly pressed the plunger and evacuated them until a drop of the mixture dripped from the tip.

Everything was ready, now it was time for Zhen to make the final preparations for this chemical union.

She unconsciously clenched and unclenched her left fist rapidly, tensing and relaxing the muscles in an effort to encourage the veins to rise to the surface of her skin.

Then she fastened the rubber cord around the bicep of the same arm and held the knot tightly with her clenched teeth, pulling her head slightly back as her eyes remained focused on the injection site.

There. It pulsed rhythmically on the soft side of her elbow. She lightly rested the needle point against the skin above the vein that was destined for this blasphemous offering. The hand that held the needle trembled subtly despite Zhen's best attempts to stay her hand.

A chill ran across every inch of her skin as an ugly hybrid of fear and excitement quivered underneath the goosebumps of her flesh. The world fell still in that moment bar her beating heart, which threatened to run away from her. All the while her eyes held a stony gaze on the sharp needle point, a mere ounce of pressure away from sinking into her skin.

The voice of her mother screamed at her to turn from this fatal path, to toss aside this instrument of self destruction and flush all traces of its existence into oblivion.

But that voice was nothing but an echo in the grand chasm of loneliness that enveloped Zhen. An isolating expanse so vast that the thought of encountering another face, let alone a friendly one was a definite impossibility. That same feeling materialised by way of a cold draft that whistled through the open window. Enshrouding her bare shoulders and exacerbating the trembling that began to rule her hands.

The voice of her mother then faded into silence, Zhen couldn't bear to survive through this any longer on nothing more than a memory of something that could never exist again. She desired nothing more than to be anywhere away from here, away from herself and the key to such a paradise was only a push away.

And just like that the plunger sank downward with so little effort applied that Zhen barely registered she'd actually gone through with it. That was until she felt that hot glow swim up the veins in her arm.

It washed over her like the gentle, warm tide of a summer's evening. Lifting her damaged body up onto the caressing surface and floating her weightlessly further into this never ending sea of tranquillity as she peacefully began to chase the heartwarming sunset down towards the horizon.

Her body sank into the mattress as her mind fell into her own peaceful oblivion. Her chest heaved up and down as her body fought to stay alive against an unbeatable foe as she made sure that she had stacked the odds in her favour. She wanted to remain in that most liberating of dreams until the last little shreds of electrical signals travelling through her brain withered out of existence.

But she did not have the luxury of such a fate, as a devil stalked the halls outside her home, seeking a victim for an ungodly purpose.

Zhen was pulled from that blissful, final reverie by an almighty crashing sound that boomed from the living room. But she was powerless to escape, rooted to her final resting place as she was. She could only gasp in alarm as her breath was stolen from her and her heart froze into ice.

She opened her eyes and stared up at the roof, but she recognised none of it. Her eyes were greeted by a miasma, a collage of beautiful colours constantly swirling and intertwining as she fought for the strength to raise her head upwards in a feeble attempt to see her latest intruder.

Seemingly out with her control she rolled onto her side to face the door to the living room. That once beautiful dance of colours now turned into a hostile, quaking nausea as the world beneath her twisted and heaved with no rhythm and menace held her soul from her final peace.

She didn't feel herself being sick, but she could tell, from the awful, terrifying sounds of her choking and gagging as her body fruitlessly attempted to eject the toxins that were setting all the neurons in her brain ablaze.

It was then, when she was most lost amongst that unstoppable ride of sensory chaos that she heard it, her guest, her newest invader.

At first all she could hear was its wet, raspy breaths as it inhaled the very same air she did. Then came the heavy set steps, drawing ever closer with an unnatural rhythm to the door she was facing. It stomped towards her room with a fearless confidence until it stood right outside the door, just out of her blurred view.

As deeply intoxicated as she was, along with fighting back the oncoming overdose, her senses still struggled in every attempt to focus on the oncoming danger. But her instincts weren't dulled to the presence of death as its shadow darkened her door.

It appeared as a looming, ominous entity at first, a shadow darkening her door. Patiently waiting and watching her with an inquisitive, eyeless gaze, observing her in a dooming, conquering silence. A few achingly long moments later the dark figure then ducked slowly under the door frame before it rose to its full height, nearly rubbing off her ceiling, its presence seemingly spilling outward to every corner of the room, isolating her in further more from the world in a cage formed from infinite nothingness.

That glowing heat that radiated through her veins before now turned into shards of ice that slowly, inch by inch sunk deep into the vestiges of her failing heart. She instinctively knew that this invading being was death and that it was

capable of cruelty far beyond the extreme boundaries of despair she had already encountered throughout her life.

It approached her bedside tentatively and with every patient step Zhen felt the existence that she was so desperate to escape shrink further and further until all that was left was the demonic silhouette of this towering, all powerful shadow.

She broke into another bout of vomiting and while her throat turned to flame with pitiful, weak retches she felt its hot, steaming breath cloud over her face and fill her choking airways with a foul odour akin to rotting meat.

She was dying but it couldn't come quick enough, with what consciousness remained she damned her heart for still hammering in her chest and her lungs for still drawing breath. She begged for them to fail, begged for her to fall into the eternal, blissful abyss of nonexistence.

But her long desired date with death would be delayed. Her body was still fighting the drugs long after her soul was far beyond its tolerance threshold. And her vision cruelly returned to a state close to clarity for a brief time.

And the sight that greeted her eyes scarred what was left of her, more than what any drug could have done or what any amount of human cruelty could ever hope to inflict.

It hovered a mere few inches from her face as its fetid breath kissed against her dry lips, the stench was exhaled forcefully from behind soaking, translucent silicone lips.

It pulled back those thin veils of unnatural skin to reveal two rows of glistening teeth forged from polished steel. They were so perfectly symmetrical that they surely belonged to something more machine than flesh. Drawing the full attention of everything left within her as she gazed into the very jaws of oblivion.

But machines didn't hungrily drool like a carnivore staring down upon its next meal, trapped and defenceless. Long, thick tendrils of viscous saliva dripped and dangled from those menacing teeth that could surely only be a heartbeat away from sinking into the soft flesh of her weakened body.

The strands of saliva fell like long, oily tears to splatter against the floor, watering down the small puddle of bile that was still dripping from Zhen's open mouth as they both stared into one another in a moment of demented intimacy.

Her eyes ceased to blink as they held onto those teeth while this eyeless devil continued to silently stare into what remained of her defeated soul. She was struggling for breath as her body continued to fight on determinedly. Adrenaline had now begun to filter its way around her bloodstream, holding back the worst of the mind-numbing effects of the heroin.

Her body was actually struggling by any means to keep her rooted in this impossibly hellish reality. What remnants of her consciousness that still survived up until this point had surmised that she was well and truly cursed.

Once again she was completely helpless, naked in her vulnerability and at the mercy of a threat she could never have imagined or prepared herself for.

She had done everything she could to ensure her departure from this cruel world. Now all that was left was to beg for her broken heart to finally give in or beg for the unimaginable horror at her bedside to pass her into the darkness swiftly and painlessly.

Zhen should have known better however, the gift of mercy was something that had not graced her grasp in many, many years. Her destiny, it seemed, was to suffer and then when that suffering became truly unbearable, she was to suffer evermore.

Something rigid and as hard as steel slowly slither its way up the sodden bedsheets at her back, delicately tracing something sharp across the skin just above her bare spine.

Her eyes, still locked onto that heinous smile, watched on in absolute terror as those murderous jaws opened wide. Inside that cavernous maw resided what could only be described as a piston tipped with even more teeth. A tongue designed for penetrating and devouring.

It emerged outward at a painfully slow speed, almost cautiously, like it was afraid of its own power, afraid to hammer that weapon deep inside her. She begged inwardly that it would.

At the same time Zhen felt unnaturally long, bony fingers slowly enwrap themselves around her chest. Its grip was so powerful and tight that it halted her chest from expanding, stopping her from breathing.

Finally it uttered a sound, a blood-curdling hiss so full of cruelty and malice that surely the whole world could hear it. The sound overwhelmed her with a wall of noise so powerful that she failed to notice the invader effortlessly lift her defeated body from the bed until she was already being carried out of her apartment.

She did feel its grip around her chest grow ever tighter, to the point where it was close to breaking her ribs. As her body was slowly deprived of oxygen, shadows began to close in around the borders of her vision until all was darkness and the pain dissipated into nothingness.

She was finally at peace, or so she thought.

In the blackness she could feel those slender arms hold her almost protectively, like her love had done all those years ago. Without thinking she nuzzled her head into his chest, but it wasn't his. Where there was once muscle, all that she felt against her face was the bony ridges of exposed ribs and his beautiful scent was in reality the foul stench of dead, decadent flesh.

She remembered in the recesses of her mind where she was and the horror that carried her as its pounding steps resonated through its torso to her cheek, it was running.

She heard terrified screams echo all around her in the darkness, muted like she was submerged underwater.

She groggily opened her eyes just long enough to look ahead and see the face of the government brute who had groped her that day. He was screaming at the top of his lungs as she inadvertently sped down the corridor towards him.

Then she got close, close enough to see the fear fill his dilated pupils, close enough to see the tears of helplessness water the whites of his eyes. Just like the tears she had produced when she was helpless at the mercy of his power.

But she was merely a spectator in all of this, evidenced by the dark, inhuman hand that stretched out in the centre of her vision. It was poised directly over the man's head as she closed in. Then after a monstrous hiss sounded beside her head the fingers of that demonic hand lunged forward.

Before she passed out once again she saw the dragon's fingers punch effortlessly through the man's skull with multiple audible crunches. Then in a single, fluid motion the creature carrying her yanked its hand upwards, tearing out the front half of his head. Leaving what remained of his skull as a shattered vessel housing the broken remains of his face that weren't streaked across the ceiling of the corridor.

She wanted to squeal in horror and disgust at the sight but no noise left her body. The only thing that escaped her was her consciousness as the darkness settled in once more.

All sense of time evaded her as she opened her eyes once more, only to be greeted by the poorly lit city streets below her apartment. Her abductor raced through the darkened pathways with her now slung under one of its arms.

Ahead of her Zhen could see more of these terrifying entities, bearing their own screaming human captives. The beast at the head of this death march turned a corner and the rest followed at speed.

They had entered a dank alley that reeked of expelled human waste as noxious clouds of steam rose up into the shadow-drenched corridor from the open drains that pockmarked the pavement.

Zhen and her abductor were positioned near the back of the group and yet the creatures in front of her along with their fearful bounty seemingly began to disappear into the darkness ahead.

But as more and more disappeared Zhen soon discovered that their absence was not so mystical. She saw the creature directly ahead of her drop its human uncaringly onto the ground like a slab of meat. She was sure she could hear a rib break as the blood-smeared woman squealed out in pain.

The woman wept and begged as the creature took a grip of her thin ankle and with a sudden, bone-breaking jerk, it began to drag her towards a torn open drain cover.

The desperate stranger locked onto Zhen's fleeting, near delirious eyes, she tried desperately to grasp at anything to halt her. But all that was left for her fingers to latch onto was the flat, rough surface of the shit-stained concrete. She was so manic in her effort to escape that she began clawing at the pavement, but all this did was tear her nails off her fingers as she screamed on, her mind so filled with terror that it numbed her to the worst of the pain.

Then her captor did the impossible, despite being well over seven feet tall it somehow slithered and squeezed its way into the open storm drain, an opening that was barely wide enough to fit around Zhen's shoulders. It continued down inside until only an arm remained, which dragged its victim to follow it inside the impossibly tight space.

Zhen watched in shock as enough bones were broken until this meatsack of a human being was pliable enough to sink into the drain and disappear.

As soon as the entrance was clear Zhen also felt that sickening pull of gravity. She hit the ground hard on her left arm which caused an all consuming flare of pain to travel up to her shoulder and neck as she yelled out to no one in the silent alleyway.

She was next for the crushing passageway into the underworld and before she could plead or cry out any further she was already being dragged towards the darkness.

At first it was her knees, facing downward as she was, the creature forced her legs to bend at unnatural angles at the joints, causing tendons and ligaments to be pulled and snapped until she was waist deep into the drain. And mercilessly it continued to jerk and pull her down aggressively.

Thankfully for her that level of indescribable pain was enough for the shock to set in and she passed out before she could experience the rest. As her shoulders and arms were crushed and broken as she was wedged down into the abyss.

Zhen's body finally began to surrender, she was finally dying.

Once deep inside the underground she opened her eyes once but it was more an involuntary action of her damaged brain rather than a willing effort by

herself to wake up. Her brain registered the sight that met her eyes but if her soul saw it, it wouldn't have been able to comprehend it. Such a sight only belonged in the dangerous imaginings of what could be interpreted as hell, an image that didn't belong on this plain of existence.

Illuminated by a faint and unseen light the dark tunnel she was being dragged down was constructed not by bricks and mortar but by men, women and children.

Dozens of lost, agonised eyes stared down upon her from the walls and roof above her, faces paled from terror and death stared agape as she journeyed underneath them. Their bodies were plastered to every surface possible by thick strands of a moist, glassy substance. It however didn't fully restrain them as a seemingly infinite amount of broken and disfigured arms reached out to her. As if the waning, failing light of her life was nectar for their doomed souls.

And these ghouls were not silent, they called out to her, haunting notes from a choir of the damned were formed by dozens of voices of all ages as they wailed and moaned wordlessly. It was an unholy sound that echoed deep through the sewer network, an exhalation of unceasing torment that seemed to never end, immortalising itself in every ear it graced.

Zhen was further dragged through several similar tunnels, all bearing the city's missing, a hoard of lives that grew exponentially with each passing night. And now Zhen was one of them, on tomorrow's news she would be added onto the daily figures, a life that spanned decades reduced to nothing more than a statistic.

Not that it mattered now, her body was circling the drain and her soul was more than ready to depart her broken shell and finally escape.

"Zhen. Help me." Her mother's voice faintly echoed to her in that sinking, black oblivion.

"Mother?" Zhen said aloud into that most expansive and yet private of places, the last call before the boat travelled to the other side.

But she was denied that journey and yanked back into the world by a solid punch to the gut that drove the air from her lungs. Forcing them to draw in once more the foul, dank air that encircled her in this impossibly damned

place. Halting death's hand mere moments before it extinguished the light of her life amongst this darkest of realms.

Instantly she began convulsing as a cold, liquid electricity trembled through her chest. Weakened as she was, her head sagged down to see that something sharp had penetrated her abdomen, it was the slender black tail of her beastly abductor, its barb digging only just deep enough to reach beneath the skin.

She felt something foreign pour inside her, a substance both cold and hot, itching and stabbing as it wasted no time in racing through her entire body. Wriggling inside her veins like thousands of tiny worms that drank their way through her bloodstream before tearing outward and venturing deeper into other areas of her ravaged body.

Her heart stopped and started numerous times as the unknown poison travelled through and took control over every facet of her insides, making her slip in and out of life.

Closing her eyes with every death, she was thrust into a seat opposite her restrained mother, they were situated in the meeting hall of the facility where her mother had been committed to.

A dozen unused tables encircled them in the expansive empty room as Zhen was forced to lock eyes with the malevolent sickness that possessed the body of her angel.

"Mom?" Zhen asked as she looked down at her own body, she was dressed in plain, white clothes similar to her mother. Her body was absent of the grievous injuries that she had just begged to escape from.

"You are not my daughter." Her mother said scornfully as her face swiftly lined with anger. "No child would ever put their mother who bore them in such a place."

"I had no choice Mom." Zhen's eyes welled up with guilty tears, she swiftly rubbed them away only to see that her hands were now coated with a black liquid. It dripped down from her face to mar the blindingly white fabric of her leggings. She looked up again to her mother with panic screaming out of her widened eyes.

“You have to get me out of here.” Her mother leaned close as she whispered, looking all around as if she was afraid they were being monitored. “They’re putting things in my food, they think I can’t tell but I know it. They’re trying to poison me.”

Zhen didn’t have a chance to respond. An almighty pain struck her deep within her chest and the room disappeared in a flash to be replaced with the underground hellscape she was trapped in as her heart jump-started back into a pained and discordant rhythm.

Mercilessly her senses returned to her in full as the virulent invader forced all remaining traces of the heroin out of her system by any means necessary. She threw up in her mouth as a thin stream of black liquid seeped through her closed lips, while at the same time the liquid also bled out from the tear ducts in her eyes and every other orifice in her body.

She tried to blink away the worst of it and that's when she fully saw the creature kneeling beneath her. The expelled poison splattered against the beast’s smooth, elongated head. Only then, as she recognised and remembered how she came to be here did her body recall and come to terms with the grievous damage it had suffered. And it spared no time in flooding her brain with the previously withheld agony.

She whimpered out to no one as the creature worked diligently to cover her broken legs with that same steaming black paste that coated the bodies of all around her.

She tried to reach out with her arms to stop it from pressing down onto her legs but they too failed to move at first. It was only with great effort and gritted teeth that Zhen managed to summon the strength to raise both arms to greet her eyes.

Both limbs were broken and disfigured with one of the bones of her left arm protruding out just below her elbow, the jagged edges of the damaged bone clearly contrasting against the grime-smearred skin it had escaped from.

She whimpered ceaselessly as the beast below her slowly raised its head upwards, its sinister toothy gaze staring up at her while it grasped both her arms and pinned them to her flanks. It worked swiftly and roughly, just like it

had with her legs, ignorant to the screeching noises emanating from its prisoner.

Zhen's eyes snapped to every corner of her range of vision in an effort to seek someone to call out to for aid, for someone to hear her screams. But it was a futile exercise, the only people that reciprocated her gaze were similarly bound and there was no comfort to be sought from those sorrowful eyes. They only served as glassy reflections of her own living nightmare.

Her weeping eyes soon grew weary from shock and exhaustion set in yet again, the beast that had incarcerated her had since disappeared into the shadows where it watched her and waited for its work to bear fruit.

Rest would never greet her as she opened her eyes to greet the thing that was her mother once more. Still her face wore that perfectly fitting mask of cruel hatred, the dark circles around her eyes serving to accentuate that unnerving look she bore into her daughter.

"You know, it ruined me carrying you, you leached every bit of life from me. I often wondered why I didn't just get rid of you." Her gaze never faltered once and neither did her indifferent tone as she plainly spoke those words to her own and only child.

Her head began to twitch and jerk to the side as she continued. "Bearing you ended me, ended me of who I was and who I wanted to be."

Zhen sat there, absorbing the wall of verbal hatred in silence, all the while those same black tears continued to fall from her weary, bloodshot eyes, coating the front of her clothes in a sodden curtain of sorrowful oil.

"I never asked to be born." Her voice shuddered as she forced the words out.

"No you didn't, but you screamed and screamed until I wished you never were. Night after night no matter how much I did, you wailed and cried until I could hear nothing else in my life." Her voice slowly increased in volume.

"You were the reason he left us, you know?" She said as the hate in her eyes grew more and more, stabbing ever deeper into Zhen's broken heart. "You were such a difficult child and we hated you for it."

“This isn’t you Mom.” Zhen said weakly, she tried to stand up from the seat in a vain attempt to halt this thing inhabiting the shell of her mother from speaking any further but she couldn’t move. She looked down to see her arms and legs were bound to the chair by glistening black resin.

“How do you know who I am, you have always been so busy with yourself to know.”

The walls of the meeting hall began to change and shrink, the flat surfaces boiling as the white walls turned to black and morphed into the subterranean cathedral of horrors her body resided in.

Zhen came to after some time, weakly attempting to open her eyes but it was a fight just to try and pry the lids open, they felt gummed together.

Something felt wrong inside her, very wrong, deep in the pit of her abdomen. But the sensation wasn’t isolated to just there, her whole body felt alien, like it was no longer her own, that she was simply an imprisoned spectator in this recycled shell.

Searing heat bloomed underneath her skin, surfacing through every pore in her ruined body. A fever unlike any she had ever experienced before as sweat showered down from her flesh in waves, almost like the tissue was being melted off her bones.

Then she sensed something moving below, deep inside her body, manipulating it in impossible ways that she was entirely unable to control. It was subtle at first, like a faint quiver. Then it moved again.

A lungful of air threw itself out her mouth in a roar of pain as a loud crack could be heard coming from within her lower body. Her heart jumped into an earth shattering beat that thundered inside her ears as she willingly tried to brace herself against the mere memory of the pain as it dissipated.

It came back with a vengeance a few seconds later and it wasn’t a singular instance, her very hip bones were dislodging and breaking away from her legs and lower spine. An unnatural movement that was completely outwith her control.

The pain was beyond anything her senses could hope to convey and her mind fled her body as it surrendered itself to the foreign entity that now manipulated every piece of her body like some sick puppet master.

It used her very own muscles against her, shifting her round hip bones downwards, millimetre by millimetre, tearing nerves and tissue on their path until both bones were situated horizontally at the base of her pelvis, inadvertently cutting off all blood flow to her destroyed legs.

The entire manoeuvre took just under an hour and Zhen's body sagged heavily against the hive wall. Her consciousness had long slipped into a necessary dormancy but whatever it was that held the reins of her body forced her heart to keep on beating no matter what.

The hive resin her back rested against wasn't entirely inert or lifeless either, over the course of hours small appendages needled and burrowed into the skin of her back like the roots of a corrupted plant. Penetrating and wriggling through the curtains of muscle tissue that shielded her spine, expanding and multiplying.

Some strands clutched and enwrapped themselves around the vertebrae of her spinal column and what remained of her nervous system interconnecting it with the hive structure and the bioelectric network that coursed through it.

While others burrowed into her heart and circulatory system, tainting her blood with more foreign poison that kept her heart beating long after it should've withered and died.

Ordinarily a human would have long since died after experiencing such colossal levels of trauma and damage. Such an intensive ritual was typically only reserved for the dead and yet Zhen's intoxicated state fooled the beast into thinking she had departed from this world.

As such she was now neither living nor dead but simply existing. Existing in a semi dormant state as the rest of her organs dissolved inside her body to create fertile soil, nestled into the cradle of her misshapen new womb to house something horrific.

All around her others suffered similarly ill fates as they were brutally cultivated in this hellish birthing ward. The wailing screams of newborns that sounded

were from the blood drenched serpents as they murdered their way into life, baptised by the blood of their parent by rape.

There were no happy, relieved voices of parents as they gazed down adoringly at their new progeny, every birth here was followed by a long, aching silence as something heinous could be heard slithering out the ruined human remains of its former shell.

Zhen was forced in front of her mother again and her vicious tongue for all things hateful. Yet she was ignorant to the spit-laden tirade, she was too busy reeling from the pain churning deep inside her, burrowing and twisting in the recesses of her womb.

“Please.” She cried out weakly. “Please just make it end. Make it stop! Let me die!” She wailed, her plea echoing around the empty room to fall on deaf ears.

“I always wanted a grandchild.” Her mother said calmly as the last vestige of agonised breath left Zhen’s lungs.

That triggered Zhen to meet her eyes once more. Something had changed, that overbearing aura of animosity that emanated from her monster had receded to almost nothing, and there was a hint of something in those dark eyes now.

“Mom. Please, help me. Why can’t it end? Why can’t I just die?” She said through gritted teeth.

“It isn’t time yet my little lily. Just a bit longer. You should know this by now, you’re my daughter, and as much as we both deny it, we love nothing more than to punish ourselves.”

More and more cries of pain sounded off in rapid succession which triggered what remained of Zhen to awaken into the nightmare. She wasn’t truly all there however, the numerous failures of her heart had taken their toll as brain damage due to lack of blood flow set in. What was left of her was the more primal, basic aspects of her, lacking in reason, feeling and memories.

She gazed nonchalantly at the others surrounding her as they died. Watching as they begged for the suffering to stop, for anyone to come to their aid. She’d seen it all before, she’d done it all before.

She observed countless births over the course of some time, as well as the new arrivals, screaming like there was still some chance of a future here.

Sodden hair clung to her face as it fell in handfuls from her scalp and on numerous occasions she gagged and choked as teeth fell out of her gums and passed into her airway. But soon enough the choking stopped, it stopped because her breathing had stopped completely and yet still her eyes remained open to this hell.

The agony was a constant flow now but she no longer had the lungs left to scream, the muscles of her jaw hung loosened as they too began to dissolve and melt into the ever filling cauldron of her body's own making.

Even the soft tissue that controlled her eyelids had ceased to be and the luxury of her mother's monster was taken from her. She was now a constant witness to her oblivion and the end of those around her.

But just as her vision began to blur an offering was unwittingly presented to her. The black dragon that had now become her caretaker could be seen plastering a fresh victim directly ahead of her.

Even as her mind began to boil and melt inside her skull she still recognised that face, that mask of ugly desire that grunted and panted over her in what seemed like an eternity ago.

It was Jiang.

"Zhen? Is that you? Oh my god what have they done to you?" Jiang's fear-laden voice gasped out before the dragon broke and moulded him against the wall.

'What had they done to her?' The last fragments of her dying brain wondered. She hadn't the capacity anymore to bear anger but she bore her response to him in her abused, reshaped womb.

Skeletal fingers quivered and wriggled in the base of the leathery sack that was slowly enveloping what remained of her. And before her eyes melted out of existence she saw the dragon turn to bring its salivating jaws a breath away from her face.

It looked like it was almost smiling as clawed hands cupped what remained of her head and her face slowly melted like a burning candle between its black, clawed fingers and as the light of her life extinguished her suffering was finally no more.

Jiang looked on in agonised horror as the woman who had haunted him for so long melted away into nothing. His weary eyes were locked onto the sight of that beautiful face as it changed and disintegrated into something as ugly as he made her feel.

After an eternity all that was left of his twisted, broken love was an egg. Inside it contained the prodigy of his sin and unknowingly and unwittingly the fruit of his loins. It eventually flowered and what emerged longed for him, just as he had longed for her.

It reciprocated the love he wanted, it paralysed, suffocated and invaded him, planting deep inside him something ugly and foreign. It was a false, meagre sense of justice, since the pain of bearing this thing was nothing compared to what she endured and yet in the end, vengeance found a way.

Zhen's eyes opened to be greeted by the sight of a beautiful forest clearing, facing onto a gentle river. Her ears were no longer subjected to the constant tones of the despairing and dying but the tranquil sounds of birdsong.

"This place always calmed you down, even at the worst times." Zhen's mother spoke beside her. They were both sitting on an ornately crafted bench, watching the ceaseless, soothing water of the river pass them by.

"I know, I just wished it was real." Zhen said.

Even after the detox, when her grief and her anxieties threatened to overwhelm her, her mother would bring her to the wellness centre and they would sit in front of the same holo-wall and watch this tranquil illusion for hours on end.

"It is now my little lily. Look around you." Her mother smiled.

Zhen turned her head, expecting to see nurses and people at the end of their rope, congregating here in a vain effort to make it through to the next sunrise. But they were alone and her eyes were greeted by the wilds of the forest and all its peaceful wonders.

“This, this can’t be.” Zhen stuttered. She felt her mother’s hand curl around her own and with it the annihilation of that poisonous loneliness that had filled her for so long.

“Come with me sweetheart.” Her mother said with a soul-healing smile.

Zhen noticed that on the bank of the river was a wooden boat. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere away from ourselves my darling girl, somewhere better.”

Moments later both mother and daughter walked hand in hand to the boat and held each other as they drifted down that most tranquil of rivers. To somewhere beyond all imagination, beyond all suffering, unanchored from that seed of darkness we all harbour inside ourselves.