Spooky grave, cute ghost, would summon again
by mollyringwraith

Rating: T
Summary: Lonely witch Lan Zhan visits an old gravesite in the forest and meets a ghost who's much more alluring than he expected. But how do you date someone on the other side of the veil?
Pairing: Lan Zhan/Wei Ying
Tags: Modern AU with magic, mild blood, mild angst, angst with a happy ending, getting together, strangers to lovers, witches, witchcraft, ghosts, ghost hunters, Seattle, Washington State setting, ghost stories, kissing, unusual dates, sharing a bed
Length: 13,160 words
Complete

Note for beginning:
No AI was used for the writing of this story. I wrote every word myself. In fact, given Anthropic scraped lots of my published books without my consent (as well as the books of lots of other people) to train their AI, it's accurate to say AI uses me to write. But never vice-versa.

Orange and yellow leaves, each the size of Lan Zhan's hand, swirled down from the big-leaf maples as he walked through the woods. Their crisp, sweet fragrance mingled with the damp decay smell of the forest floor. Moss and rotting bark and fungi, all cycling into soil. A familiar and comforting smell—the smell of his job.

Or at least it used to be. Now, he supposed, it was just the smell of going outside, jobless.

He'd normally be at work at this hour—nine thirty a.m. on a Tuesday—but with nothing better to do today, he was indulging his inner goth by seeking a grave.

People called it the grave of the Shanghai warlock. Lan Zhan had never been to it, though it was within an hour's drive of his house in Seattle. Up in the foothills, in the middle of what was now a state forest, there used to be farmland and a few houses, back in the late 1800s and early 1900s. All of the buildings were long gone now, overgrown by the woods. But if you could find your way through the vegetation, one structure remained: a grave.

Lan Zhan had read about it on one of the only internet forums he trusted for reliable magic information, a subreddit about cursed or haunted items and places. The post was by Xiao Xingchen, a man well-known in the witch community for traveling to such sites, along with his partner Song Lan, and giving them proper and respectful investigations.

No one knew the true name of the person buried here, Xiao Xingchen wrote, though he and Song Lan had done their best to find out. Some things were simply lost to the historic record. But local legend said the grave contained a Chinese man who had supplied magical herbs to people, and who had eventually become regarded as dangerous. Accordingly, someone had killed him. If this was the case, Xiao Xingchen added, the murder had never been prosecuted—that *would* have been in the county's historic record.

The grave had a headstone, set flat into the earth, but it had been made of an inferior concrete, and any inscription on it had been worn away to illegibility long ago. Xiao Xingchen had included photos in his post: the cracked, mottled stone, with the moss picked off to show its blankness.

In lieu of a name, locals had taken to calling this person “the Shanghai warlock.” Xiao Xingchen prudently added that he also found no historical record of an immigrant coming from Shanghai specifically, to live in this region at that time, so it was not possible to know how accurate the moniker was. For that matter, there was no proof the person was Chinese at all, nor a man, nor a witch. (“Warlock” wasn’t a term much in use anymore. The magical community tended to agree that if you worked witchcraft, you were a witch; no need for gendered terms.)

To clear the moss and take photos of the gravestone, Xiao Xingchen had had to reach between the iron bars of the grave’s most prominent and chilling feature: the cage. The whole gravesite was encased by an iron cage laid over it, about a foot high, fitted like a box lid over the grave, as if pinning it to the ground.

The legend said that the cage, being iron, would keep the warlock from rising from the dead. Xiao Xingchen dutifully reported that he and his partner found no spell upon the cage that would indicate any actual spirit suppression, but naturally people may have *believed* the cage could do such a thing and had built it for that reason.

He also reported the rest of the legend:

If you wanted to summon the Shanghai warlock, for guidance about some problem in your life, you were to bring chrysanthemums to the grave as an offering, lay your hands on the iron cage, and ask him to speak. You might then hear a wail in the wind, in the form of a word or sentence that could hint at what you needed. Or some item might drop out of the trees overhead, as a sign.

If you skipped the flowers, however, or showed disrespect in any way, misfortune would begin plaguing you three days later. People reported car crashes, trees falling on their house, sudden illnesses, unexplained bruises

and cuts—things like that. And the unnerving events would, supposedly, not stop until you returned to the grave to make proper offerings.

Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan, being bona fide witches, did of course bring chrysanthemums, and respectfully introduced themselves, and then did their best to summon the ghost of the person buried here. The results:

The air went still, and all the birds and insects and other forest sounds went silent. The pair asked the ghost if he had been murdered, and nothing in particular happened. They asked if the ghost had been a user of magic. After a half-minute of charged silence, Xiao Xingchen saw a foggy figure in white walk past, between trees. It was just a flash of a vision, out of the corner of his eye. Song Lan did not see it, but when he turned to look, a glimmer on the ground caught his attention. A small, clear glass bottle, empty, with a label with faded writing. *Sleep cure*, it appeared to say. It had not been there before—they had cleared the region around the grave and picked up all the bits of ordinary trash they'd found.

They had asked if the ghost had any message for them. Song Lan reported hearing someone say, as if whispering right behind him, "Look out for the rabbits."

Xiao Xingchen hadn't heard words at all, but at that moment, he did see the figure in white move again, in one more flash of apparition.

When they returned to where they'd parked their car, at the edge of the forest, Song Lan knelt and looked underneath it. A baby bunny was sheltering there. He shooed it away gently, sending it out of harm's way.

Song Lan further reported that, while he had had insomnia on their travels lately, he slept quite well that night, and the next several nights, with the "Sleep cure" bottle sitting in the room. It was quite possible, Xiao

Xingchen's post surmised, that the person in the grave had at least been a skilled herbalist, or pharmacist.

Lan Zhan felt comforted by the idea of a ghost who protected rabbits and helped witches sleep better. So here he was.

He carried a handful of white and russet-orange chrysanthemums, picked from his own garden that morning. In truth he gave little credence to the urban-legend details—Xiao Xingchen admitted that the exact offering probably didn't matter too much, as long as it was sincerely respectful. But it was autumn, Lan Zhan's chrysanthemums were in bloom, and he did respect traditions, if not urban legends.

He'd gotten about three-quarters of a mile into the forest, along the trail. Somewhere around here, according to the post's directions, he should see a tall, skinny dead tree with burn marks—a casualty of lightning. Granted, Xiao Xingchen's post was from six years ago, so the dead tree might have fallen over by now, or become obscured by the undergrowth—

Ah, there. It still stood, pale as a sliver of bone, streaked with charred black.

Lan Zhan turned to his left, searching for the path to the grave, which supposedly branched off around here. It took a good five minutes of pushing aside salal and salmonberry branches, but he found it. It was barely a path anymore, just a slightly wider space between plants. Seemingly the Shanghai warlock hadn't had many visitors in the last year or two.

Lan Zhan waded through the chest-high bushes, pushing branches aside and ducking under them, careful not to break any.

His hiking boot clanged against rigid metal before he was expecting it.

Half-concealed by arching ferns and blackberry vines, there it lay. An iron cage, rusty bars crisscrossing, sinister and out of place in these thriving woods.

His heart thumped faster. He set the chrysanthemums on a fern and began to clear the vines and moss from the grave.

“My name is Lan Zhan,” he said aloud as he unthreaded a fern frond from the bars of the cage. “I’m sorry your grave hasn’t been tended in a while. I’ll clean it up for you.”

Whenever he touched the bars, he felt a shiver of magic. *Something* was here, or else some witch had enspelled the site. Xiao Xingchen said he and Song Lan had not done so, but in the ensuing six years, someone else might have.

Lan Zhan’s pockets were stuffed with protective wards—packets of herbs, stones, bones, summer-solstice-sun-charged water in a sample-size bottle. He had a good deal of innate power, and he practiced magic daily, and nothing in Xiao Xingchen’s report had suggested the gravesite contained anything to be afraid of. Still, that presence of magic was intriguing. If he managed to summon the ghost, he’d ask about it.

“I’ve brought chrysanthemums for you,” he said. “And green tea from China. Once I get these blackberries cleared, I’ll—ow.”

The blackberry vines fought back, as blackberry vines do. A thorn had pierced his thumb. He withdrew his hand, twisted his mouth at the puncture wound, and wiped away the blood with his other hand. Nothing unusual nor magical in this occurrence. Invasive Himalayan blackberries were the scourge of every yard and forest in the Pacific Northwest.

Everyone got scratched by them, many times per year, if they came anywhere near a natural area.

He used his boot to yank loose the rest of the vine, which cleared most of the cage to his view. The headstone under it, at the top end of the gravesite, was just as shown in the photographs: a crumbling rectangle of concrete, topped with moss, no lettering left on it. The rest of the ground under the cage was just ground—leaf litter and fir needles, decaying in seasonal layers.

And somewhere under there, presumably, lay the remains of a human.

Lan Zhan set the chrysanthemums on top of the bars. Took out the water bottle he'd filled with green tea and poured it through the cage, onto the ground. "These are for you." He set aside the bottle. "I hope you might consider speaking to me."

He sank to his knees and laid his hands on the iron bars.

The forest around him vanished, like a whiteboard illustration someone had wiped off in one swipe.

The cage and flowers and headstone were gone too. He felt yanked off balance, and light blinded him.

He blinked a few times. The light settled down to a wash of sunshine. He was still kneeling, but now beneath him were wooden boards instead of forest floor. Water lapped nearby—a lake or a pond, full of lotus flowers. A wood structure stood over him, with poles and benches and a roof with upward-curving tips at its outer corners.

It was beautiful, and it was very much not a forest in Washington state in October.

Sitting on the end of the pier, in black shorts and a loose black T-shirt, bare legs dangling in the water, was an equally beautiful man.

The man was already gazing at him. He had large brown eyes and lustrous black hair, unbound and falling to his shoulders, and the type of graceful profile and full lips people wrote songs about. He was probably near Lan Zhan's age (thirty-one). The man grinned then, and his smile was a dazzling thing that also had to be added to Lan Zhan's stunned inventory of attractive features.

"Hello!" the man said. "What brings you here? Troublesome spirits at your house or place of work? Seeking my sister's soup recipe?"

Lan Zhan had seen, heard, and/or spoken with ghosts before. Just six or seven in his life so far, but enough to know how they usually worked. Sometimes he'd summoned them, and other times he'd stumbled upon them by merely hanging out in haunted places.

None of them had ever been so vivid and welcoming. None of them had ever offered soup recipes, either, needless to say.

It took him several seconds to answer. "I…came seeking you. I want to know more about you."

The man swung his legs out of the water and up onto the boards, splashing footprints onto the wood. "Did you! Well, that's understandable. I'm fascinating."

Everything looked so *real* about him. Although—there was a fuzziness around the edges of the scene, a tendency for details to appear, disappear, or change. This was therefore some type of magical space, he guessed, not a real-world location he had teleported to. (If portals were

involved, *then* he was in trouble. Those were extremely rare, not to mention dangerous.)

“Is this a sanctuary you created?” Lan Zhan asked. “To receive those who come to seek you?”

“This?” The man lifted his eyes to the roof. “Kind of. It’s a place I often think of when people say ‘visualize your happy place,’ you know? So it’s the one I set up.”

“Where was it? Your happy place. China?”

“Nah. This garden was made to *look* like China, but technically it’s in California. At my family’s house.”

“So you came from California to Washington. At some point.” That could explain the difficulty Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan had had in tracing the person’s origins.

“Yep. I was born down there. Then came up here to study, and decided to stay. The rainy gloom suits those of us with ghost-related jobs, you know?” He grinned again.

Lan Zhan had so many questions. He figured it was best to begin with those concerning his own safety. “So—this is a magical illusion we’re in? Not the spirit world?”

If he was in the spirit world, that was also dangerous. The living generally did not go there and come back unharmed, if they came back at all. Getting there was tricky in the first place. He doubted he could’ve just *stumbled* into it.

Unless he had died. Which would've had to be a quick death, considering he'd never even realized he was wounded.

"I don't *think* it's the spirit world," the man mused. "I've dived into that a few times, but yeah, I wouldn't recommend it if you don't have to. Given it's Lotus Pier, I figure it's just a holding area I made. A little fold in space, in the living world."

Reassured, Lan Zhan turned his hands over in front of himself, examining his own body. Magical illusion spaces were much more common than portals, at least among those with sufficient practice. "If I were dead, I would probably not have so much dirt on me." He pressed below the thorn wound on his thumb, squeezing up another tiny bead of blood. "I wouldn't have a body. Or blood."

Ah.

He groaned and dropped his hands to his lap. "I touched the cage with my blood. Naturally it activated a spell." For a witch with immense innate power, like himself, one's own fresh blood was about as potent a magical ingredient as you could deploy. If anyone else's magic *had* enspelled that grave, smearing the bars with his blood would be the way to activate it.

Surely the biggest rookie error he had ever made in his life. Unbelievable. Being unemployed must be damaging his cognitive functioning.

"What cage?" the man asked.

"Oh." Lan Zhan settled himself into a more comfortable seat, legs crisscrossed, and rested his hands on his knees. "The one over your grave. Do you know why it was put there?"

“My grave?” The man’s eyes widened, though his features still spoke of amusement more than shock. “Am I dead? Oh, that would be pretty funny actually. I wonder how long I’ve been dead?”

Lan Zhan took a breath in and out, grateful that this person seemed to take the notion in stride. Some ghosts were decidedly *not* all right about being dead. “I was hoping to ask you that. Along with your name.”

“I’m Wei Ying, lovely to meet you.” He tapped his bare feet, alternating them back and forth, as if waving hello with his toes. “As for when I died—if I died—*how* I died—hmm, truly no idea on all of that. What an interesting twist.”

“I’m Lan Zhan. I wish I could help you with those answers, but your headstone is worn away. No one seems to know anything about you.”

“A grave with a worn-away headstone and an iron cage over it…” Wei Ying squinted at the sunlight glittering on the water. “That does sound familiar. Yeah. Huh.”

His speech patterns were so modern. As was his longish hairstyle, cut in casual layers. His clothes too—although if the T-shirt and shorts were sleepwear or undergarments, they could plausibly go back to the early-to-mid-twentieth century. “From the way you speak and dress,” Lan Zhan observed, “you don’t seem like someone who died more than a century ago. Although I suppose it’s possible it was more recent. The forest does grow quickly here.”

“A century ago. Do I remember anything from a century ago?” Wei Ying screwed up his eyes, then shrugged. “No idea! What about lately, what can I remember? Where have I been? Oh! I was over in Port Townsend, at a hotel with a lot of hauntings. That was…hmm, last month maybe?”

“You wander the living world? Do you do this often?”

“Sure, yeah. And I do see ghosts a lot—kind of my job and all that—but the living…wait, they see me, right? Wouldn’t that be wild if I was like the ghosts in *The Sixth Sense*? ‘They don’t know they’re dead.’” He laughed.

So he also could quote late-twentieth-century movies. This was all quite strange.

“Perhaps…you’re picking up modern ways, and references,” Lan Zhan surmised, “by wandering the living world so much.”

“Oh, that could be! Kinda rare with ghosts, but maybe I’m special.”

“You say seeing ghosts is your job?”

“Yeah—I’m a ghost hunter. Ghost banisher, if needed. I put stuff online and shit.” Wei Ying leaned back on his hands, relaxing on the pier boards. “Or at least, I *think* I do. Used to, before I died? Anyway. I’ve always been a witch, and contacting the dead seems to be my strong point, so—use what you’re given, you know? Even if it creeps out your family.”

If he made online content, that likely put his life at a particularly recent era. Lan Zhan decided it would be rude, though, to keep pressing, to pinpoint how and why he died, and in any case, the more extraordinary feature was how clear and sustained this apparition was. Normally he was lucky to see a ghost for one full minute, or hear one complete sentence or feel one single cold breeze across his face, before the apparition was over.

“It is an interesting specialty,” Lan Zhan said. “My strength is in tending to plants and animals.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely one! Did you get a job in that?”

He lowered his face. “I…did. But lost it recently. Budget cuts, loss of grants and clients. It was an environmental consulting firm, and I used to be able to come out to sites—often forests like this one…” He gestured upward before remembering the forest wasn’t actually visible at the moment. “I’d assist with the health of organisms that were struggling. Endangered species in particular.”

“That’s super important.” Wei Ying scowled. “Why would they fire you? Fuck budget cuts. Gods.”

Lan Zhan smiled, gratified at the outrage. “I volunteered to quit, technically. It isn’t a large firm, and we had a meeting about the financial crisis, and…rather than see any of my coworkers lose their jobs, I insisted on leaving. Some of them have families to support, or are struggling financially for other reasons, and I’m…comfortable enough. So.”

“Shit. That was so noble of you. You don’t have kids, then?” Wei Ying sounded more sad than angry now.

Lan Zhan shook his head. “I’m not married either. Or supporting anyone. My family in the area is just my brother and uncle, and we have enough money. I can afford to not work for a while. I just didn’t realize…how aimless it would make me feel.”

“Ah.” Wei Ying settled his back against a wooden pole and stretched his legs out. They came near enough that Lan Zhan could have touched them, which made him wonder fleetingly if he *could* touch Wei Ying. It varied, with ghosts. Then Wei Ying added, “I totally get that. I need to be throwing myself into some project, or some interest, or I become *such* a miserable bitch.”

Lan Zhan smiled again. Wei Ying amused him, along with exuding charisma at remarkable levels—especially for someone no longer alive. His manner must have eased Lan Zhan's usual social restraint, because Lan Zhan felt bold enough to say, "I suppose it's also that I'm lonely. Work allowed me to talk to others, on topics we had in common. Now I don't have that. I'm not even dating anyone either. The last few times I've tried have gone horribly."

Wei Ying's eyes brightened. "Oh? Tell me! I love horrible date stories."

So Lan Zhan explained. His last three dates were all found via a dating app, very much against his own better judgment, but his brother had insisted he try it and "stick with it." They weren't truly *horrible*, just dreary mismatches. A tech bro, a gym bro, and a flamboyant nightclubber. Oddly, the last one was a little better than the first two, but still not really his speed.

"Hmm," Wei Ying said after hearing him out. "So what *is* it you look for in a man? No, wait, let me see if I can read you right. I know we just met, but let me try." He tilted his head, studying Lan Zhan with a playful smile that made Lan Zhan burn—a heat that was both a shy blush and a strange longing.

"You want someone who can do magic, on at least the same level as you," Wei Ying began.

Lan Zhan nodded. "Ideally." All three of his dates had been non-witches, which had been part of the mismatch. That said, true witches were rare, so he couldn't be so picky.

"We get to be ideal here. That's the exercise. Okay, and you also of course want him to be handsome. In good shape, but not like a gym bro or

someone who's always thinking about fashion labels—not obsessed with their own appearance."

"That sounds fair. Yes."

"And you want someone who listens to you. Someone you're comfortable talking to. Which doesn't always come easy to you."

A bit astounded that Wei Ying had read him so well, Lan Zhan said nothing for a moment, then, "Yes. Exactly."

"Maybe even someone who'd do weird things with you like go find an abandoned grave in a forest."

Lan Zhan bowed his head. How was this ghost, of all creatures, making him smile so much? "That would be pleasant as well."

"Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. If we weren't on opposite sides of the veil, *I* would date you. But I bet you wouldn't say yes to that." Wei Ying's eyes twinkled when Lan Zhan dared look up.

"I suppose it can only be a hypothetical question," Lan Zhan admitted. "But. I think I would say yes."

Wei Ying placed a hand over his heart. "Oh! How you flatter this witchy disaster." He swung one leg sideways, so his bare foot tapped Lan Zhan's knee.

Lan Zhan actually *felt* it. A light touch, like a nudge through a pillow. He focused on that foot, taking in the details: its large size, its toenails, a few black hairs at the base of the big toe, a gracefully slim ankle. Nothing pale or dead about any of it particularly. "Hm. Can I touch you?" he asked—in a scientifically curious way, not a date way.

Wei Ying chuckled and answered, “I don’t know, *can* you?” He scooted closer, stretching out a hand.

Lan Zhan reached forward.

Their hands clasped. For a moment it felt entirely real, like shaking hands with any ordinary person. Then the feel of Wei Ying’s skin became…cloudier, less steady. Like trying to hold on to mist in the shape of a hand.

“Dammit.” Wei Ying’s eyebrows pulled together. “I could *almost* feel you. What if…”

Then he flickered into transparency. And vanished.

Lan Zhan surged forward, on hands and knees, calling, “Wei Ying”—then the pier and the sunshine and the lotus flowers disappeared too.

He was on his knees in the forest, stretched forward over the iron cage, reaching out into empty air. Bewildered, he checked his phone to see how long he’d been in there. It had been around half an hour—about what it had felt like.

With a huff of frustration, he took hold of the bars and focused all his power on them. “Wei Ying. Please let me back in. Please come talk to me.”

Nothing happened. Just that same tingle of magic, a preexisting spell, which this time took him nowhere.

He stabbed his fingertip with a blackberry thorn and tried again with fresh blood. Still nothing.

He spent another hour at the grave, trying all the spells he could think of. He pierced five different fingertips with thorns. Nothing worked.

He stood staring at the grave, his fingers throbbing and dirty, a despairing burn in his chest. Finally he vowed, “I’ll return tomorrow,” and left.

On his way to the car he did see one rabbit on the trail, an Eastern cottontail darting into the bushes. He chose to take that as a promising sign.

The rest of his day and evening, at home, he scoured the internet. He tried searching on both “Wei Ying” and “Ying Wei,” since English-speaking record-keepers might have registered it the second way. In both cases, though, he found no likely-looking death records in the county where the forest was located, nor in any of the adjacent counties. Just a lot of names that had either “Ying” or “Wei” in them but not both. He tried looking for birth records in California with those names, but without knowing *where* in California to search, or in what decade (let alone what year), he again turned up a vast list of partially similar but ultimately wrong names.

And even though he knew better when it came to web searches on the paranormal, he went ahead and tried “Wei Ying ghost hunter,” and *still* didn’t find any websites or articles that looked relevant.

He turned to the grave of the Shanghai warlock as his next search term. But his research on it the other day, before going out to the forest, had already zeroed in on the best source—i.e., Xiao Xingchen’s Reddit report. There were a few “haunted sites in Washington” type of pages that gave the grave a mention, but none of them gave any details that Xiao Xingchen hadn’t covered, and in any case, most of them appeared to be written by people who didn’t actually know what they were talking about.

A couple of the search results were YouTube videos, generically titled things like “Visiting the Shanghai warlock’s grave in Washington State,” but Lan Zhan did not bother with those. He despised YouTube. Having seen too many videos made by people who were entirely wrong about how magic worked, or how to play guqin, or how to care for certain plants, he had decided a few years back that the entire platform was fraudulent. (The same went for any other all-video platform, such as TikTok.)

His brother had chided him a few times about this belief, telling him that there were actually lots of reputable YouTube creators. But his brother had also insisted that online dating was a good idea, and he had been glaringly wrong about that, so Lan Zhan stuck to his convictions. His life was simpler without adding video platforms to it.

Besides, from the neglected, overgrown look of the grave, no one had been out there in a while. He doubted there was much that any recent online post could tell him, beyond what Xiao Xingchen had already written.

Which unfortunately left him nowhere.

But—he would return tomorrow and try again. Benefit of being unemployed, he supposed. Loads of free time.

Why he was so determined to go back was a question that nagged at him. Yesterday he’d gotten the clearest and longest spirit apparition of his life. Why be greedy and try for more?

Well, clearly Wei Ying had a lot to say, which meant he still had messages to impart to the living. Lan Zhan should make sure he had a chance to do so. That was the honorable thing to do, when a ghost deigned to speak with you.

As for the fact that this ghost was more attractive, and more pleasing to talk to, than anyone Lan Zhan had ever dated—he tried not to think about that. It was an irrelevant detail.

Wei Ying's ghost, he was somewhat disappointed to learn, had apparently not followed him home to disturb him in the middle of the night. No cold fingers on his face woke him at two a.m., nor did he hear any mysterious voices murmuring in his bedroom. Still, he slept fitfully, half expecting such occurrences (hoping for them, even?), and by the time dawn broke, he had already risen, showered, and eaten breakfast, and was headed out the door to his car.

(He could, of course, have gone out at night, which some hardcore ghost-seekers always did. But, for one thing, the time of day usually didn't matter, and those people were just trying to heighten the spookiness effect by going out in the dark. Usually they were making *videos*—and enough said about those. For another thing, bears and cougars lived in these forests, and one's likelihood of encountering them increased at night. Lan Zhan would rather not shed *that* much blood in this quest, thank you. And for a third thing, he preferred to be asleep in the middle of the night, like a civilized person.)

He arrived earlier at the grave than the day before—about eight thirty on a chilly, gray morning. Fog drifted eerily among the trees. Ravens croaked, high above in the branches. The grave looked disturbing in the gloomy light, with the vines all freshly pulled away to expose the cage, yesterday's chrysanthemums wilted over the bars. One could not ask for a more appropriate Halloween atmosphere.

After whispering a prayer to all the friendliest afterlife gods to assist him, Lan Zhan tossed aside the old flowers and placed a fresh bouquet of chrysanthemums on the cage. He poured the green tea onto the grave. Then he took out the Swiss Army knife he'd brought, extracted its tiny

blade, and poked himself on the thumb. It was less likely to give him an infection than a thorn growing in the wild, and he figured the blood was the important factor, not the sharp object itself. But he would soon find out if it made a difference.

He knelt, said, “Wei Ying, I’d like to see you again, please,” and grasped the bars, curling his bleeding thumb firmly against the iron.

Flash.

The sunlight streamed across him, so bright he had to squint. The sound of water surrounded him, lapping against pilings.

“Hey, it’s you! You’re back.”

Lan Zhan’s vision adjusted, and there was Wei Ying, beaming at him. Today he was standing, still barefoot and wearing a black T-shirt and shorts.

Lan Zhan rose to his feet too, his heart tumbling over itself in unexpected joy. Wei Ying was tall, about his own height. “Yes. It’s me,” Lan Zhan said. Wei Ying was holding a handful of Sharpies and a heavily packed book bag. Lan Zhan glanced at the items quizzically. “You have these because…?”

“Huh?” Wei Ying frowned at the markers and the pack, then laughed. “Oh. I think just now I was somewhere else, trying to…make sure I didn’t oversleep and miss a class? Or a job? Or something?” He shrugged and tossed the items into the water. They got swallowed up with barely a splash. “Doesn’t matter. I’d rather be here!”

Lan Zhan wandered to the edge of the pier to look into the water. Carp swam there—hundreds of them, orange and white and silver and red—but

he saw no sign of either the markers or the backpack. Well, it was a magical illusion. None of it was really here. As he watched, half of the fish turned into lotuses, part of their bodies elongating into a stem, another part opening out into a bud or a leaf.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Wei Ying sauntered up next to him. “I like to add those surreal touches.”

“It is pretty.” Lan Zhan turned to face him. “You were somewhere else, when I summoned you?”

“I guess so. Yeah—I was back on campus, where I studied. U-Dub.”

University of Washington, in Seattle. Lan Zhan nodded. “I live near there. So, you were roaming the living world? Going to audit a lecture?”

“Seemed like it. See, now I’m second-guessing everything! Was I really interacting with other people, or did I just think I was? Was I, in truth, an invisible ghost? You’ve got me wondering, with what you said last time.” Wei Ying leaned on a pillar and folded his arms.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, not at all. I kept thinking about you yesterday. Wondering what this…” Wei Ying flapped his hand between them. “…was all about. It was so vivid, our conversation.”

“It was. I kept thinking of it too. So when others summon you, it isn’t usually like this?”

“No indeed, my friend. I can’t recall it going like this before.” Wei Ying examined him, head tilted. “What made you come seek me out again?”

“I suppose how unusual the situation was. It intrigued me.”

“You didn’t have another boring date instead? I was the next best thing?”

Wei Ying was clearly teasing. But Lan Zhan blurted out, all too honestly, “You’re much more interesting than my dates were. It’s rare for me, to talk to someone and then want to see them again the very next day. Ordinarily I need a few days off, to recover.”

Wei Ying laughed again, eyes widening in delight. “I’m honored. What did you want to talk about, then, Lan Zhan?”

He remembered Lan Zhan’s name. That was encouraging. Lan Zhan leaned his back against another wooden pole, mirroring Wei Ying’s posture. “I want to know more about who you are. And whether you have any messages that need to be sent, in my world.”

“Mm, right, that is often the case with ghosts, isn’t it?” Wei Ying twisted his mouth to one side as he thought. “I don’t know. I usually tell people exactly what needs to be said. I suppose, if anything…it would be that I’m sorry, to some folks I’ve known, for being a little *too* honest. I can be harsh when I’m stressed.”

Lan Zhan glanced around at the structure—Wei Ying’s “happy place,” from his youth. “Your family?” he guessed.

“Yeah. My sister and brother—actually they’re my cousins, but I grew up with them, so I’ve called them sister and brother as long as I can remember. My aunt and uncle too. Who I did *not* ever call ‘Mom and Dad.’ I made things hard for them. Having a necromancer in the family can be rough. Although, look, I only did actual necromancy a *few* times before realizing it was way more trouble than it was worth.”

Lan Zhan shivered. Necromancy was indeed several giant steps beyond merely summoning spirits. Also impressive, as a power. “I’m sure you had a good reason,” he said.

Wei Ying winced. “Well. The first time, I was just screwing around in a cemetery and seeing if I *could*. Which, it turned out, I could. So that was not cool.”

“How old were you?”

“Sixteen. Prime age for being fucking irresponsible.”

“Though also remarkable, to be able to do it at that age.”

“Yeah, it, uh…” Wei Ying turned his head, watching the fish. The sun on the water sent lovely flickers of light across his face. “It sent me onto a whole new course of study. And I usually didn’t like my witchcraft teachers, and made up my own spells, and…you can imagine the drama.”

Lan Zhan could imagine, and could also begin to see how the locals might have felt like putting an iron cage over his grave after he died. “But you say you only did it a few times?”

Wei Ying nodded. “Law enforcement heard about me, and had me come see a recent murder victim, in the morgue. I revived the person for a bit, asked some questions, learned who killed them. Did that a couple of times for the cops, with other victims. Absolutely hated it—listen, necromancy is a *terrible* thing to do to your own body, it takes so much power, not to mention literal blood. And eventually I figured out, oh, I don’t have to revive the actual freaking corpse. I could just summon the ghost and ask them that way. It’s *so* much easier.”

Lan Zhan felt a bit sick at this tale, regardless of how breezily it was told. “They had you do that as a teenager?”

“Yeah—all of that was in my late teens. I turned to strictly ghost hunting when I was twenty. Been doing that, how old am I now? Thirty-one, so. Uh. Eleven years?”

So, at least in this apparition, Wei Ying was indeed the same age as Lan Zhan. How old he’d been when he died might be a different question, but Lan Zhan opted against inviting any more gruesome stories at the moment. Besides, he suspected it would make him too sad, hearing how Wei Ying had died. He wanted to put that off a little longer. “Sounds like ghost hunting made you happier,” he said instead.

“Oh, for sure. Some of them are absolute beasts, don’t get me wrong—I *know* I’ve gotten a few white hairs from the jump-scares those bastards have given me—but on the whole it’s a good time. Meet a lot of fascinating people, living and dead. Although…as you said regarding your dates, I find *you* more fascinating than any of them.” Wei Ying made eye contact, giving his lower lip a brief, playful bite in a manner Lan Zhan found astoundingly appealing.

“Ridiculous,” Lan Zhan returned, with a bit of a sputter. “I’m not fascinating.”

“Au contraire. You’re an accomplished ghost hunter yourself, apparently. Right?”

“I would not say ‘accomplished.’ I’ve encountered six or seven, in my life.”

“But how often do you specifically go looking for them?”

“Not often,” Lan Zhan admitted. “I have free time lately, and this grave intrigued me, so. Here I am.”

“Hmm. You say your specialty is mainly in healing plants and animals?”

“Yes. My brother and uncle are the same. It runs in the family. But we also all have the ability to summon spirits, at least to a degree.”

“Ah, because both healing and ghosts deal with the spirit of a creature—the soul, if you will.”

Lan Zhan nodded, pleased to talk to someone who understood magic. “That’s how it feels, yes.”

“Aww, Lan Zhan. So your soul called to mine! Are we soulmates?” Wei Ying pushed off from the pole and strolled closer.

“Shameless,” Lan Zhan muttered, but he felt himself blushing, and he seemed unable to look away from Wei Ying’s eyes.

Wei Ying grinned and poked Lan Zhan’s arm. It was a quick enough touch that it felt real. “Evidently we’re a bit star-crossed if we *are* soulmates.”

“Mm,” Lan Zhan agreed. He glanced across the pond, where the surrounding trees blurred into a watercolor washout. “I can’t make illusions this large and complex. Only small ones. You have quite the variety of magical talents.”

“Eh, I dabble. Here, I wonder if I could change the scenery?” Wei Ying spread his hands toward the water. “I can kinda feel the shape of it, though I’m not properly *here*, so…I don’t think this’ll last, but I bet if I just…”

A crackle of magic prickled across Lan Zhan's skin. The sunshine winked out into near-darkness. The pier vanished. He was standing on pale, speckled rock, and before them, instead of the lotus pond, an expanse of silhouetted mountain peaks rambled across the horizon. The last of the sunset tinted the sky in bands of pink, purple, and midnight blue. Above their heads, the stars shone, so numerous and so bright that it looked like sparkling sugar had been spilled across the heavens.

Lan Zhan caught his breath. "This is beautiful."

"Turned out nice, didn't it? This is the Sierra Nevada. Up near Tahoe."

"Another of your happy places?"

"Yeah, I guess. My siblings and I went camping up here in summer a few times. Just the three of us. Those were usually pretty good vacations."

He sounded softer now, and Lan Zhan's heart twinged. There was no escaping the inherent sadness of a ghost revisiting their cherished memories.

He might as well serve as a respectful listener, and accompany Wei Ying on these reminiscences. Perhaps that was his purpose here.

"Where else?" Lan Zhan asked. "If you were to pick another place to show me."

"Ah. Well, let's see…"

Effortlessly, or so it appeared, Wei Ying transformed their surroundings to a few more places, chatting about each: his favorite café-slash-record-store in New York City (where he had once spent a few weeks, doing some ghost-hunting commissions around the boroughs); the interior of a

beautiful old theatre in Oregon (haunted, of course, but harmlessly so); a greenhouse full of cacti, sunny and cozy inside while snow lay three inches thick outside the glass walls.

“Is this—the Volunteer Park Conservatory?” Lan Zhan asked.

“It is! I didn’t even have to tell you. But of course, you live in Seattle. U District, you said?”

“I actually live nearer to Capitol Hill than the U District.” Lan Zhan nodded to the thriving succulents beside him. “I come here frequently. I enjoy the plants.”

“Shoot, I need to go here more often. Maybe I’ll run into you.”

It dealt a stab to Lan Zhan’s heart, sharp as a cactus spine. “Worth a try,” he said, though of course this could not be. *They* could not be. It was monstrously unfair.

Nonetheless, he stayed. Didn’t even try to seek a way to leave this shared illusion. And when Wei Ying asked, “Okay, what about your happy places? What should I try to create?”, Lan Zhan pondered it and came up with ideas.

“I would choose this conservatory too, but the other end of it. The bromeliad wing.”

Wei Ying laughed. “Oh, now we’re nitpicking which *part* of the conservatory is best?”

“I enjoy all of it,” Lan Zhan amended. “I’m just especially fond of bromeliads.”

“Oh my god, that’s one of the nerdiest things anyone has ever said. You are so cute. All right, let’s see. I think I remember…”

And while Lan Zhan basked in the confusing compliment of being “so cute” along with “one of the nerdiest,” Wei Ying put together a reasonably good, if indistinct here and there, facsimile of the bromeliad house, dripping with tropical leaves and flowers.

Lan Zhan asked for Trinity College Library in Dublin next, which he had visited once. Wei Ying had never been there, so Lan Zhan described it to him as best he could, and watched in wonder as Wei Ying shaped the air into a version of the library. “Hmm, I think this looks more like Suzzallo,” Wei Ying said, referencing the grandiose library at University of Washington.

“Close enough,” Lan Zhan said.

He asked if Wei Ying had ever been to Butchart Gardens in Victoria, B.C., and Wei Ying had, so he created a glorious technicolor flower garden on a hillside, with a staircase winding up it, and fir trees looming tall in the background. They sat together on a bench he had included, and gazed at the tranquil scenery.

“You aren’t real, though, are you,” Wei Ying said. He sounded sad.

Lan Zhan looked at him, aching at the knowledge that he surely couldn’t stay here much longer. “I’m real. It’s just that we’re…on opposite sides of the veil. As you put it.”

Wei Ying sighed and took Lan Zhan’s hand. If Lan Zhan didn’t overthink it, it felt like holding a living person’s hand. He gently stroked his thumb against Wei Ying’s.

“*Are* you real?” Wei Ying asked, gazing down at Lan Zhan’s hand. “Then how do I find you?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure how it works, for you. It seems perhaps I have to come find *you*.” Which involved driving an hour out of the city, hiking half an hour into the forest, and bleeding on a spooky abandoned grave. But Lan Zhan was already beginning to view all of that as a negligible price of admission.

“I’m glad you did.” Wei Ying gave him a tentative smile. “Was this a better date than the horrible ones?”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan instantly said, even though neither of them had defined it as a date until just now.

Wei Ying swiveled to face him. The bench was still there, but the flower garden was disintegrating, dripping away in smears of color, turning back into the lotus pond and pier. “I need to figure out how to find you. I need to know this whole thing isn’t just—my brain making up fantasies.”

Lan Zhan smiled a little. “I doubt I would be anyone’s fantasy.”

“Excuse me, sir, you are *exactly* what my brain would invent as my fantasy.” Wei Ying’s smile turned roguish for a moment. Then he cupped the side of Lan Zhan’s face, slowly, as if Lan Zhan were a butterfly that might take flight if startled. Lan Zhan felt a glimmer of heat, a light press against his cheek. “I’m scared that it’s true, what you said,” Wei Ying said, staring into Lan Zhan’s eyes. “That I’m dead. Or—about to die, maybe. What if you’re a spirit sent to fetch me?”

Lan Zhan’s heart thudded. He should not be pining for a ghost *this badly*. “I’m just a person. I swear. A witch who can sometimes talk to…people like you.”

“But I’m just a person too,” Wei Ying implored. “Why have you shown up to—to tell me about my *grave*? And why are you so nice? Why does this feel like a *date*?”

Lan Zhan would have needed at least another five minutes to answer all of that. And he didn’t have that kind of time. Wei Ying was fading, going transparent again.

“Because—no, please, stay—” Lan Zhan grabbed at him with both hands.

But Wei Ying disappeared completely, along with the pier, and Lan Zhan was once again sitting in the forest by himself, on damp leaf litter, beside an old grave.

“Fuck,” he spat through clenched teeth.

He tried again to revive the illusion, drawing new drops of blood from his bruised fingertips. It failed, over and over.

He stalked away. The whole drive home, he mulled over today’s new information. The scenes Wei Ying had created all looked modern to his eye—there were no obvious historic hallmarks on any of them. But then, Wei Ying hadn’t included things like vehicles or other humans, so Lan Zhan couldn’t judge by car vintage or clothing styles. The Volunteer Park Conservatory had been there for something like a hundred years. Probably so had Butchart Gardens and Suzzallo Library. Anyway, Wei Ying, as a ghost, could be roaming the modern world enough to know its current state.

But ghosts usually were more stuck—not only in their haunted spot, but in their time period, their original style of dress and speech. Lan Zhan was nagged by the disturbing possibility that this ghost did not belong to the

grave of the Shanghai warlock. Wei Ying might be the ghost of someone who had died much more recently.

Lan Zhan's day once again got consumed by web research.

As far as official reports could tell him, nobody had gone missing nor been found dead in that particular state forest anytime in the last forty years. An online registry of unsolved missing-persons cases for the entire nation also didn't have Wei Ying listed (nor Ying Wei).

Lan Zhan was too unhappy, and too shaken, to eat more than a bit of soup and some herbal tea for his dinner. Sleep did not come easily. All he could do was lie there listing questions in his mind that he needed to ask Wei Ying, if he ever saw him again.

And if he never did see him again? What if the spirit world had decided it was time to pull Wei Ying properly away to whatever his afterlife was meant to be, beyond the reach of even the most skilled witches?

The next morning, exhausted and fuzzy-headed, he returned to the gravesite. Placed the fresh chrysanthemums. Dumped the green tea. Stabbed his fingertip and dropped to his knees to grab the bars. "Wei Ying, please," he begged.

The sunlit pier—thank all the gods—bloomed into existence.

Wei Ying paced into his field of vision. "Thank *fuck*, there you are. All right, stand up, we need to talk."

Lan Zhan stood, so relieved to see Wei Ying's beautiful face again that he couldn't speak for a few seconds. Even though that face was all stern eyebrows and tight lips at the moment. "We do," Lan Zhan agreed. "I have to ask you some questions."

“Yeah? Well, I have to ask *you* some questions.” Wei Ying jabbed him on the shoulder—a touch slightly harder than any of their feathery bits of contact had been so far. “Go over it again for me. How is that you keep bringing me here?”

Lan Zhan drew a deep breath. “I visited your gravesite, and summoned you. A blackberry thorn made my thumb bleed, and I suspect my blood activated the magic.”

“My gravesite,” Wei Ying repeated.

“Well—*a* gravesite. I can’t prove it’s yours. I’m beginning to think it isn’t. That maybe you’re…someone else.”

Hands on hips, Wei Ying paced back and forth in front of him. “Okay, whose gravesite did you *think* it was? You said it was in a forest, by itself, with no name on the headstone, and a cage over it?”

“Yes. Up in the foothills, east of Seattle, in a state forest. People call it the grave of the Shanghai warlock—though there’s no evidence that the person was from Shanghai, or…”

Wei Ying closed his eyes, splaying his fingers over his brow. “*Oh*. The grave of the Shanghai warlock. Right. Okay. I remember now.”

“You remember?”

“I have been there, yes. But it’s not my grave. It had already been a grave for a long time by the time I checked it out.” He opened his eyes and squinted at Lan Zhan. “So why do you keep dragging me back here?”

“I’m…very confused. I don’t know. Wei Ying, I’m so sorry, but I need to ask you…how did you die?”

Distress crossed Wei Ying’s face. “See—you’re freaking me out. You keep telling me I’m dead. I don’t think I am, but what if you’re—I don’t know, what if you’re from the future, warning me I’m about to die? I do not fucking appreciate this, okay? *What are you trying to tell me?*”

“I swear I don’t know.” Lan Zhan reached for him, but halted his hands halfway there, remembering that Wei Ying usually vanished when they started to touch each other in more lingering ways. “I thought—I assumed—you’re a ghost, because who else would appear when I activated a spell on a grave? But…”

“But—” Wei Ying pointed at Lan Zhan’s face. “What if *you* are a ghost? See, this is what I’ve been thinking.”

And while a horrifying chill flashed through Lan Zhan’s whole body, Wei Ying continued, pacing around him:

“I’m a ghost hunter. I find them easily. Sometimes they come find me. What if it’s *you* who doesn’t know he’s dead?”

“No.” The word emerged as a whimper. Lan Zhan cleared his throat, though the chill was only continuing to spread throughout him. “I couldn’t be. I…I have a body, I eat and sleep and drive and bleed…”

“You tell me you have a body that bleeds and all that, but how am I supposed to know that’s true, when we’re in here?” Wei Ying swept his arm around. “And I’m pretty sure I *am* actually alive, having thought about it a *lot* over these past couple days. Thanks to you.”

“Oh, gods.” Lan Zhan wobbled, and dropped again to his knees. “Maybe…I got in a car accident? And was killed instantly, and…have just been wandering, not realizing…” Prickling sensations crawled down his limbs. His vision blurred. “My brother. He’ll…he’ll be heartbroken…”

“Lan Zhan.” Wei Ying’s voice sounded soft. Lan Zhan blinked, looking up to find Wei Ying kneeling in front of him, an expression of the most compassionate sorrow on his face. “I’m sorry. I’m just panicking, I didn’t mean… I should’ve been more tactful. Look—I don’t know if *I’m* right either. Let’s—let’s try to find out what we’re dealing with here, okay?”

Lan Zhan sucked in a shaking breath and nodded. Would he have breath, if he were dead? Well, nothing else made sense lately, so why not?

“In here…” Wei Ying shook his head. “I can’t think straight. We have to try to meet in real life, waking life. Okay?”

Lan Zhan nodded. “Okay,” he whispered.

“Can you meet me,” Wei Ying said, separating the words so they were slow and clear, “today at three p.m., at Olympic Sculpture Park?”

“Yes.” Lan Zhan swallowed against his dry throat, grasping at this straw, this wisp of a plan. “Three. Sculpture park.”

“At the stairs that lead down to the fountain, on the waterfront. You know where that is?”

“I do. Yes.”

“Don’t forget,” Wei Ying insisted, and bracketed Lan Zhan’s face in both hands. “Please, Lan Zhan. I need to know who you are.”

“I won’t forget.” Lan Zhan gazed into his dark eyes. “I need to know you too.”

Wei Ying smiled wistfully. “I’ve loved talking to you. Really and truly. Okay? You’re extremely handsome, and interesting, and…that’s why it upsets me, not understanding what’s going on.”

“I feel the same. I’ve—I want to keep seeing you.”

“Good.” Wei Ying’s gaze traveled over his face. “So, uh. I never kiss ghosts, ordinarily. But in case this is the last time I see you…”

Lan Zhan nodded, quickly, and leaned forward.

Their mouths met, dreamy and almost-real, a warm press. Lan Zhan sensed firm teeth behind soft lips. He lifted a hand, savored the feeling of sinking his fingers into Wei Ying’s long hair for just a second—

And then toppled forward through the air and thudded his ribs against the unforgiving cold iron bars of the cage.

He folded his arms on top of it, rested his head there, and took shuddering breaths. Tears leaked from his closed eyelids and soaked into his coat sleeves.

Either Wei Ying was dead, or he himself was, and either situation was a tragedy.

Eventually he stood, blew his nose on a tissue from his pocket, and texted his brother, as a test.

How did the cake turn out? he wrote, because his brother had texted the other day about planning to try an ambitious-looking cake recipe. Which

didn’t seem like the kind of message a ghost would receive, nor the kind of message a grieving brother would send, but who knew what convincing scenes the afterlife might conjure up?

His brother answered, *Not bad! Frosting was a little thin but still yummy. I’ll bring you some!*

Lan Zhan thanked him, put his phone away, and chose to believe for the time being, until proven otherwise, that he was alive.

Most importantly, he had to return to Seattle and get to the Olympic Sculpture Park by three o’clock. Nothing in the world was more crucial than that meeting.

If Wei Ying showed. If Wei Ying *could* show.

He sped back to the city. It was not even noon when he got home. He showered, changed into date clothes (ironed trousers and one of his more attractive cable-knit sweaters), forced himself to eat a bit of lunch (would a ghost do *that?*), and paced around, going increasingly insane, until one thirty.

Then he put on a scarf and coat, left his house, and caught a bus to the downtown Seattle waterfront.

He arrived a full hour early, speed-walking until he reached the fountain at the foot of the sculpture park. In the chilly, sea-scented air blowing in from Puget Sound, he stood with his hands in his pockets, staring blankly at the two statues inside the fountain. They reached toward each other, never touching, while around them the water spurted and fell, over and over.

The sun occasionally emerged between clouds, and it warmed his shoulders in the moments when the wind died down. He still felt cold and

clammy. Basic nerves, or a symptom of being dead? What existential questions he faced, this week.

“Lan Zhan?” a familiar voice said, wobbly and uncertain.

He turned his head swiftly, his heart in his throat.

Wei Ying walked toward him. He looked different, dressed properly for outdoors, in jeans and sneakers and a black pea coat. His hair was in a loose ponytail, bits of it whipping around his jaw in the wind. The sunbeams and shadows lay crisply on him exactly as they did for everyone else walking by—none of the diffused misty quality of the lotus pier. He was gorgeous. He was clear and solid. He was alive.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan rasped.

Wei Ying stopped in front of him. Ran his gaze over Lan Zhan from head to toe, eyebrows furrowed. “You…are definitely not a ghost. And I’ve seen enough of them to know.”

Lan Zhan exhaled, muscles relaxing all over him. “Oh, thank god. And…you don’t seem to be, either.”

“Pfft.” Wei Ying puffed the sound through his teeth in derision, and punched Lan Zhan on the arm. It wasn’t a painful punch, but it was far more solid, more flesh-and-blood, than any of their touches in the illusion space. “*Yeah*. I know I’m not.” Then he looked Lan Zhan straight in the eyes and *glared*. “Let’s start over. Hi. Who the hell are you and why are you invading my dreams?”

Lan Zhan’s mouth fell slightly open. All he could do was stare in return.

“Dreams?” he finally said.

* * *

At first they stayed by the fountain, having a tense near-argument that surely sounded extremely bizarre to anyone passing by.

“You experienced our meetings as *dreams*?” Lan Zhan said.

“Yes! Weird-ass, vivid dreams! With this—” Wei Ying flapped his hand at Lan Zhan. “—hot guy telling me I’m *dead*, what the fuck—”

“You entertained the notion. You seemed to agree.”

“Because it was a dream! People can show up in your dreams and be like, ‘Did you know you are actually a crocodile?’, and you go, ‘Am I? Huh, okay, that would explain some stuff.’ But then I woke up and thought about it, and after you showed up two nights in a row, with that same vividness and that same message of ‘Hey, so, about your grave,’ I started getting seriously freaked out.”

“But it…” Lan Zhan paused, thinking back. “It was eight thirty in the morning. For me at least.”

Wei Ying rolled his eyes. “Yes, Lan Zhan. Some of us are night owls, and prefer to stay up late, and are thus still asleep at eight thirty in the morning.”

“Oh. So—when you disappeared each time, that was when you woke up?”

“I expect so, yeah. I always woke up straight out of those scenes. Baffled as fuck.”

“And that’s why it didn’t work, for me to summon you again. Each morning, I tried to go back into the illusion, and I couldn’t. Because you were awake.”

Wei Ying tilted his head, and his tone softened. “You tried to go back in?”

“Lots of times.” Sheepishly, Lan Zhan displayed his hands—all his fingertips marked with thorn stabs and tiny knife cuts.

Wei Ying sucked in his breath and captured Lan Zhan’s hands, gently stroking his fingers. “Lan Zhan. Fuck. Please don’t do this to yourself again.”

“Presumably now I don’t have to.”

Their eyes met. Wei Ying smiled wearily and let go of Lan Zhan’s hands. “Come on. Let’s walk.”

As they climbed the stairs toward the rest of the park, Wei Ying said, “Then you weren’t targeting me and my dreams specifically? You aren’t a superfan or anything? That was another theory I had.”

“Superfan of whom?”

“Of me. My channel.” Wei Ying glanced at him, took in his undoubtedly confused face, and laughed a little. “Okay, apparently not. My ghost-hunting videos—I have a YouTube channel. On there I’m Wei Wuxian, aka the Yiling Patriarch.”

“Oh. No, I never watch YouTube.” They reached the top of the stairs, and Lan Zhan frowned at him. “I could have found you if I’d just searched YouTube?”

“Yeah. You dork.” They wandered aside, toward the tinted transparent wall with cloud designs all over it. “Although you would’ve had to know about the ‘Wuxian’ part to search properly, so, maybe not.”

“I did try to search for you on other sites. Historic records, articles. I didn’t turn up anything for ‘Wei Ying.’ I suppose now I see why.”

“I searched on you too. Nothing relevant for ‘Lan Zhan’ that I could find. You must keep a low online profile.”

“Mm.” Lan Zhan glanced up at the cloud-wall sculpture. “I do, but also I’m usually listed as Lan Wangji. My formal name. Friends and family call me Lan Zhan.”

“Ah. We made ourselves unsearchable to each other. That’s on both of us, then.” Wei Ying looked down through the tinted wall as a train trundled by underneath them. After it passed, he added, “I even have a video about the grave of the Shanghai warlock. I went out there about a year ago to check it out.”

“So…” Lan Zhan studied him, aching at how beautiful, how *touchable*, he was in the flesh. “That was your spell, on the cage?”

“Must’ve been.” They meandered up the path. “I did rouse the ghost of the guy buried there. He was not from Shanghai—kind of racist of people to just slap ‘Shanghai’ on anyone Chinese, right? He was from some little town way out in Sichuan. Got put to work on the railroads, ended up somehow surviving that, and retired in a little farmhouse. Grew and sold produce. He seemed to know a bit of witchery from the old country, and his herbs did help people heal—that part of the legend was true.”

“Was he murdered, in the end?” Lan Zhan asked.

They turned into the mini aspen grove. “Nah. Died of a flu or something, when he was old. Just a nice lonely guy who wanted to help people. He didn’t know why the cage was put over his grave, but he guessed it was his neighbor, a kindly old woman, who arranged that, to keep any racist jerks from desecrating it.”

“So it was to protect him. Not to protect the living from him.”

“Honestly, cages like that nearly always are. Though I know it doesn’t make for nearly as good a ghost story.”

Lan Zhan looked up at the aspen leaves, all turned yellow now, like a thousand fluttering gold coins. “Then he *was* a ghost at the site. You saw him, and so did Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan.”

“Oh yeah, I follow them too! They do great work. Yes—he was hanging out there still, when I visited a year ago. But he said he wanted to move on, so…we said goodbye. He isn’t there anymore.” Wei Ying stopped, reaching out to touch an aspen’s white bark. “I put a spell on the cage to protect the grave, to honor him. If people tried anything disrespectful, they’d get a sudden compulsion to be elsewhere, and they’d skedaddle.”

“But that isn’t what the spell did to me,” Lan Zhan said.

“No, it sure didn’t.” Wei Ying glanced at him with a lopsided grin. “Because I designed it for regular hoodlums, not crazy-powerful witches who were gonna put their *blood* on it. There was no reason to design it for *that*.”

“So I accidentally caused the magic to do something unpredictable?”

“It would seem so.” Wei Ying slid his hands into his coat pockets and tipped back and forth on his heels, eyeing Lan Zhan. “It somehow grabbed

the creator of the spell—namely, me—and yanked me over there. But only when I was available in dream-and-illusion-space. Thus only when I was asleep. Probably also would've worked if I happened to be deep in meditation at that time, but that's a state I'm rarely in."

"And…why the pier with the lotus pond?"

"Ah, Lotus Pier. It's like I told you—it's sort of my default happy place. Deep in my psyche, imprinted in my childhood. My brain probably filled that in automatically, created that vision as a spell, with almost no effort."

"Your powers are astonishing," Lan Zhan said.

With a smirk, Wei Ying swung around to wander back toward the main path. "Says the witch who has thrown me for a bigger loop than anyone I've ever met. And you did that without even trying."

"It was an unnerving experience for us both."

They approached the big red sculpture called "The Eagle"—though to Lan Zhan it had always looked like some type of lily blossom.

"I'm so sorry for saying you were a ghost, this morning," Wei Ying said meekly. "It was one of the main theories I had, but…obviously I was wrong, and I know it upset you."

"I can't blame you for thinking it. It makes sense, considering your job."

"You looked so distraught," Wei Ying lamented. "I hate myself when I think of that."

“Please don’t.” After a second of hesitation, Lan Zhan hooked his hand into Wei Ying’s elbow as they walked. “We’re both alive,” Lan Zhan added. “It was all a misunderstanding.”

Wei Ying folded his other arm across himself to grasp Lan Zhan’s hand and hold him there, snug. “A fortuitous misunderstanding, as it turns out. Best surprise ever.”

“Though I’m sorry for disturbing your dreams and worrying you, as well.”

“Not your fault. I clearly need to have a closer look at some of the spells I’ve left lying around in the world.” Wei Ying chuckled. “And, um. I should add…I was a bit too forward, probably. In the dreams. Flirting with you, and kissing you…I mean, it was a dream, and in dreams I do things I wouldn’t normally do, or at least would normally get a lot more consent for, but that doesn’t…”

“It’s all right. You’ll note I was awake, and I participated willingly.”

Wei Ying grinned, his gaze cast down to the trail in adorable shyness. “Ah, you were just taking pity on what you assumed to be a lonely ghost.”

Realizing an entire other set of questions he hadn’t yet considered, Lan Zhan let his grip loosen. “I suppose you’re already seeing someone. Or…not gay, or not interested…”

Wei Ying snorted and tugged Lan Zhan close again by the arm. “Single, bi, *very* interested in you, which I assumed was obvious. And let me tell you, it’s inconvenient, when you think the guy showing up in your dreams, the most gorgeous and fascinating person you’ve met in ages, is *dead*.”

“I have some experience with how that feels, yes,” Lan Zhan said dryly.

Wei Ying laughed, the sound lightweight and joyous—at last—and picked up his pace. “I’m hungry. I was too stressed to eat much this morning, and now I’m starving. Are you hungry? Should we find a café? You pick. I’ll eat anything.”

Lan Zhan picked an Asian-fusion restaurant and ordered vegetarian dumplings. Wei Ying ordered pork wontons with a chili sauce so spicy the fumes made Lan Zhan’s eyes water from across the table. They lingered there a good hour, talking all the while.

Wei Ying explained he’d been orphaned as a small child, and that most of his family lived in the Bay Area. “My aunt still makes a stink-face about my being a professional ghost hunter, but she doesn’t mind the boxes of handmade talismans I mail down there every so often. They turn a pretty profit for the shop.”

Lan Zhan asked more about the magic-supply shop run by the Jiangs, and shared details about the healing charms he and his family made for plants, animals, and people.

Wei Ying lauded the restaurant’s coffee—he had ordered a cup—and invited Lan Zhan to try a sip. Though Lan Zhan almost never drank coffee, he obliged, and admitted he could see the allure of the robust blend. He then offered Wei Ying a taste of the green tea he had ordered, which was also particularly good. Wei Ying sipped it, and praised the subtle snap of ginger in the aftertaste.

Drinking from each other’s cups, Lan Zhan couldn’t help thinking, surely signaled a mutual willingness to kiss. Judging from the way Wei Ying held his gaze as he handed the teacup back, Lan Zhan suspected he was thinking the same thing.

After dinner, they strolled the less-crowded, eerier levels of Pike Place Market. “Oh, this place is totally haunted,” Wei Ying agreed when Lan Zhan asked about the ghost stories associated with the site. “Several different spirits. But the Market wants it that way, so they only had me verify it and make sure none were dangerous. No banishing.”

“Better marketing, to be able to claim it’s verified-haunted,” Lan Zhan noted.

“You get it.” Wei Ying pivoted in the old wooden hallway, next to a neon sign that tinted him hot pink, and examined Lan Zhan with a smile. “Lan Zhan, would you, by any chance, want to try working with me? I’m good at summoning ghosts, getting answers from them, sending them into the great beyond if need be. But I’m *not* good at healing the traumatized people, animals, trees, and so on, that get left in the aftermath of hauntings sometimes. I can recommend random witches who do that stuff, but—you’re super powerful. I bet you’re better than any of them. And…I want to have an excuse to see you more. And you’d get a commission on each gig, and people pay well!” He rushed into that last part, as if embarrassed about admitting he wanted to see Lan Zhan more.

Lan Zhan was already imagining the spells he would use, the charms he would design. He felt light, energized. “Yes. I’ll try it, at least.”

Wei Ying bit his lip, smiling, in that same fetching way he had done in one of the illusions. “Good. Here, gimme your phone. Why have we not exchanged contact info yet? Fuck’s sake.”

They wandered up from the waterfront, toward the building in Belltown that housed Wei Ying’s apartment. The daylight was fading, the sky orange and salmon-pink between the clouds. At his building’s front door, standing close to Lan Zhan and gazing into his eyes, Wei Ying said, “I’ll text you first thing tomorrow.”

“First thing is, what, eleven a.m. for you?”

Wei Ying snorted a laugh, tapping his shoe against Lan Zhan’s. “I’ll make it ten, just because you’re special.”

They both moved forward and hugged, holding each other for a long span of seconds. Wei Ying murmured a relaxed sound against Lan Zhan’s neck. He smelled *so good*. Ten a.m. tomorrow was not soon enough.

Lan Zhan turned his face and kissed Wei Ying’s lips. Wei Ying sank into it with another pleased sound—a more longing sound this time—and it was warmer, richer, more delicious, in every way better than trying to kiss him in dream-space.

Wei Ying rested his forehead on Lan Zhan’s. “I’m so glad about today,” he said, low. “Everything. Just. So glad.”

“I am too,” Lan Zhan whispered.

Wei Ying went up to his room. Lan Zhan drifted blissfully to a bus stop and returned home.

He had just changed into pajamas and was brushing his teeth, a few hours later, when Wei Ying texted, *Not gonna lie, I’m a little spooked about going to sleep tonight. Even knowing it was all a ridiculous misunderstanding.*

Lan Zhan pondered his answer for maybe thirty seconds before responding, *Do you want to sleep here? So that we can be reassured of one another’s existence?*

I swear I was not angling for a booty call! 🤣 Wei Ying answered.

Lan Zhan smiled. *We don't have to do anything. Just sleep. So that neither of us are spooked.*

I will admit I absolutely cannot stop thinking about you, Wei Ying wrote, and something aching and exuberant bloomed in Lan Zhan's heart.

Come over, he typed, and sent his address.

In less than an hour, Wei Ying's shoes were sitting by Lan Zhan's front door, Wei Ying's backpack with his toothbrush and change of clothes leaned against Lan Zhan's bedroom wall, and Wei Ying was crawling into Lan Zhan's spacious bed beside him.

Sitting up in bed and reading a book, Lan Zhan smiled at the T-shirt and shorts Wei Ying wore. His hair was loose, swinging around his shoulders. "That's more like how you looked in the illusion space," Lan Zhan said.

"Ha. Yeah. This is what I wear to bed. Guess I wasn't creative enough to change that part of the illusion." Wei Ying wriggled down under the covers, yawning. He set a hand on Lan Zhan's arm. "I honestly am exhausted, and am probably just going to fall asleep," he said. "But it helps so much, knowing you're here. And you're real. Thank you."

Lan Zhan put his book on the nightstand, switched off the lamp, and shifted closer, lying down. "I haven't slept well either, the last couple of nights." He draped his arm over Wei Ying. "Even without any disturbing dreams."

"I bet." Wei Ying's voice was slow and sleepy. "Though your bed is insanely comfy."

"I'm finding it more comfortable tonight myself."

Wei Ying snuggled in tighter. “Tonight I looked back at my notes and videos about my visit to the Chinese man’s grave. Turns out it was exactly one year ago Tuesday that I went there.”

“Tuesday? That was the first day I went there. Huh. That’s…an interesting coincidence.”

“Right? Also, there was one thing I’d totally forgotten. Remember how Xiao Xingchen said they found an old bottle, at the site? It said ‘sleep cure,’ and it actually seemed to work, even though it was empty?”

“Yes.”

“Back when I released the ghost, I got a bottle too. It just fell out of the trees and landed at my feet. Clear, empty, looked kind of ancient. The label just said…‘Love.’”

Lan Zhan turned his head, letting his lips rest on Wei Ying’s loose, warm hair. “Did it.”

“Yeah.” Wei Ying chuckled again. “At the time, I thought, ‘Thanks, bro, but I doubt this’ll do much for me and my crappy love life.’ And it didn’t, or so it seemed. I forgot all about it. But as it happens, exactly a year later, at that gravesite…”

Lan Zhan kissed his head. “Even if it’s only a coincidence, it’s a beautiful one.”

“I know we just met and everything,” Wei Ying added. “I’m not saying—I mean, I’m not dropping the L word on you this very night, just—”

“It was part of the story. I understand. I don’t mind.”

“Good. Didn’t want to scare you or anything.”

Lan Zhan smiled. “Hardly the scariest thing to have happened this week.”

Wei Ying laughed, sounding subdued and half-asleep. He burrowed in until his face met Lan Zhan’s neck, which he kissed. “Goodnight. Stay out of my dreams, you maniac.”

“Mm. Can’t make me.”

Warm air puffed across Lan Zhan’s neck from Wei Ying’s laughter. Then his breathing settled into steadiness.

Lan Zhan thought, *I will stay awake. I will protect you. I will be ready, in case you have a nightmare and need reassurance.*

But he evidently broke every one of those vows, because after a string of mundane, forgettable, regular-nonsense dreams of his own, he opened his eyes to daylight. And to Wei Ying conked out in his bed, half his face squashed against the pillow, radiating warmth.

Lan Zhan gazed at him a while, watching all the future days of his calendar, which had looked so empty just a few days ago, open up with fabulous new possibilities.

It was not quite eight a.m.—late for Lan Zhan to rise, though apparently still too early for Wei Ying. He stole out of bed, brushed his teeth, made himself a cup of green tea. Around nine he returned to bed and, careful not to disturb Wei Ying, settled himself in a sitting position against propped-up pillows. He picked up his book and read awhile.

Finally Wei Ying stirred, pulled in a brisk breath, and stretched. He blinked at Lan Zhan, then beamed. “Hi.”

“Good morning. Did anyone invade your dreams?”

“Hmm, not like before. But I *was* dreaming about you.” His sleepy, husky morning voice seemed to carry an implication. Before Lan Zhan could ask for details, Wei Ying yawned and got out of bed. “Are you free today? You could come with me on a job. I’m scoping out a haunted house in Olympia that’s giving the residents trouble.”

Lan Zhan set down his book. “I would love to come along.”

Wei Ying made a pleased sound and wandered toward the bathroom.

“Wei Ying.”

He turned. “Hm?”

“What were we doing in your dream?”

Wei Ying’s eyes took on a wicked glint. “Let me go brush my teeth. Then how about I come back and show you.”

And Lan Zhan’s mind instantly opened out into even more possibilities for his day. All of them entirely welcome.

Note for end:

Cages over graves, also known as mortsafes, were usually built not to keep the dead from rising, but to protect the grave from being robbed—an especially prevalent problem for a while in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the UK. See for example this article.

The only known mortsafes in the US are near Catawissa, Pennsylvania, not in the Pacific Northwest. But of course such sinister-looking features lend themselves well to legends about witches, vampires, or other supernaturally powerful folk being buried there. Episode 182 of the podcast Back on the Broomstick covers some of these stories, and listening to that was my original spark of inspiration for this story. I then conflated the idea with the real-life ghost town of Franklin, Washington, which I have visited—an abandoned coal-mining town, complete with cemetery, now mostly overgrown by the forest. Super interesting and creepy. Worth a visit if you're in the area.

Also, a tip of the hat to the novel *If We Never End* by Laura Taylor Namey, which contributed a bit of inspiration to the ghost-romance-with-a-twist structure of this fic.