

EVERY VERSION OF YOU

Grace Chan



Part I

The Crumbling World

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The sky's all wrong tonight. Oversaturated blue, it pixelates at the horizon into streaky seawater, and is hole-punched by the sun sinking towards its bloated reflection. The tide beats against the shore. *One, two, three* up the sand. *One, two, three, four* – leaving a sine wave of foam.

Tao-Yi sits with her legs folded beneath her, rotating a nearly empty beer bottle in her hands. Long shadows drip from the sandstone formations around her. In this tucked-away cove, shielded by ruddy cliffs, she can't see the others, but she can hear them laughing and shouting as they gather driftwood for a bonfire.

She has let Navin drag her here, a little out of obligation, but mostly out of habit. It's just what happens every New Year's Eve – Zach throws a party. It would feel wrong to miss it.

The bottle stays ice-cold against her palms, impervious to her body heat. She lifts the rim to her lips. The last gulp slices down her throat. The ocean ruffles like a silk skirt in a breeze, creased and opaque. She waits for the gust to roll into shore, to lift tendrils of hair from her neck, but it never comes – the air in Gaia is as stale as a subway tunnel.

A rustle of sand grass heralds Navin's approach. He's almost a stranger – tall and lean in his short-sleeved shirt and khaki pants, black fringe falling choppily across his brow, a vulnerable smile. He holds out another bottle of beer.

'It tastes like shit,' she says, shaking her head.

'It's better than last year's.'

She manages a smile, thinking of Zach's experimental brew.

‘Come back,’ he insists, touching his fingers to her hairline. ‘Help us start the fire.’

Tao-Yi lets him pull her to her feet. She follows him out of the cove, skirting a cluster of boulders, and back along the shore. His shirt hangs loose on his frame, catching the bottom corners of his shoulder blades. She wants to touch those out-turned brackets, to assure herself of their realness.

Between the dunes and the sea, the others have filled a shallow pit with driftwood. There are a dozen or so capstone-educated twenty-somethings like herself and Navin, all sharp glances and witty repartee. Gen Virtual. They’re the lucky generation – born into motion, soaked with potential, cresting a wave of change.

Zach moves through the group easily, the others drawn to him like mosquitoes to shallow water. In an orange T-shirt and a knee-length sarong, he looks especially boyish. He leans over the driftwood, a lit match extended like a conductor’s baton between long brown fingers. The others whoop as flames blossom. There are no second attempts, if you follow the formula.

Tao-Yi summons her live interface. In the corner of her vision, a countdown glimmers neon: *9:00pm, 31 December 2087. 3 hours to go!* A steady scroll of status updates overlays the beach scenery. Mostly snips, four-second video fragments dissolving as soon as she absorbs them into her attention: friends dancing at open-air concerts, go-karting under electronic fireworks, clinking stim shots to a backdrop of pounding beats.

Evelyn is walking over to her. Tao-Yi wills away the countdown and the snips. Tonight, her petite friend looks a little different. Although she’s wearing a pastel dress from her typical wardrobe, her dark brown hair is arranged in braids and her cheeks are decorated with gothic decals. It’s endearing, like a puppy trying to be edgy.

Evelyn bumps her hip against Tao-Yi’s. ‘Are you flash?’

‘I’m fine. Why?’

‘You just seem quiet.’

Tao-Yi wraps her hands around her elbows, feeling the symmetrical indentations behind the bony joints. ‘Yeah, I’m just a bit spent. Busy day at work.’

‘Oh yeah. Of course. You’re a hot shot *Authenticity* Consultant now.’ Evelyn drags the syllables out and chuckles.

The title still sounds weird to Tao-Yi’s ears, even though she’s been at her job for half a year. She’s still getting her head around moving from a marketing gig, manipulating people into buying more stuff, to a place like Tru U, guiding lost souls back towards their true selves.

‘People are just obsessed with their avatars. They want to make sure they look as unique as everyone else, you know.’

‘Usoo, Tao-Yi, don’t pretend to be a cynic. I know you’re really a softie underneath,’ Evelyn says. ‘Give it a few more months, and you’ll be spreading feel-good virus like your boss. What’s his name again? Andy? Gary?’

‘Griffin. Not even close.’

‘That’s right. You know what he said to me at that party you dragged me to last month? Wide eyes, straight face. *You need to find your path.*’

‘Oh, yeah. He spouts that about ten times a day. My brain just filters him out now.’

‘I told him I use Google Maps. He didn’t even crack a smile!’

Tao-Yi laughs. ‘He’s good at his job, though. Come in for an appointment?’

‘No thanks – you lot can stay away from my virtual bits.’

Tao-Yi laughs again and turns towards the fire. Evelyn’s gaze wanders to Zach and stays there. The bonfire’s glow warms his tanned complexion, illuminating his gleaming black eyes and expressive mouth.

For a while, Tao-Yi watches Evelyn watching him. Then she slips away.

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About twenty paces from the bonfire, Tao-Yi finds a spot facing the water and sinks down onto the sand. On the horizon, the sun's bleeding magenta into the ocean. A white speck has appeared at the zenith of the sky: the night's first star. Slowly, more stars emerge, sprinkled evenly across the black in no constellations, and then a full moon, snow-white and perfectly round, suddenly there without any clear moment of becoming. She tips her head back, giddy and adrift. She can't remember the last time she saw a real star.

She brings up the virtual interface and opens her address book. Her mother's visage sits at the top of her favourites list: soft and unsmiling mouth, face perpetually angled to one side. Tao-Yi composes a brief message.

Ma. Happy New Year. I hope you're doing something nice to celebrate?

She zings it off, and waits for the tick indicating a successful transmission.

Navin sits down next to her, propping his wrists on his knees. 'Trying to run away from the party again?'

Tao-Yi disappears the message – sent, but unopened – and tries to smile at him. The inconstant light plays across his sharp nose and high cheekbones. She feels balanced now, the bonfire warming her on one side, Navin's shoulder holding her on the other.

'Just needed some downtime, my cyborg.'

'Want another drink?'

'Sure. Anything but beer.'

He unfolds and goes to the box next to the bonfire, which is stocked with drinks and mochi and ice cream. Someone has started a projection of a football match; Navin is pulled into the hubbub. The others are heckling Zach for placing a bad bet. When the banter intensifies, Evelyn loops her arm around Zach's neck and whispers something in his ear. His head tips back in laughter, his collar-length hair mingling with hers. They break away from the group

and race down to the ocean, catching the moonlight like twin sails, disappearing into a spray of water.

The sand is liquid against the soles of Tao-Yi's feet. She wriggles her fingers into it, grabs a silky handful, holds it to her nose. She smells nothing, or maybe talcum powder. Somewhere in the pit of her memory, she knows of beaches soggy with saltwater and bird shit, gritty with broken shells, where sulphur and iodine fumes rise pungent from mounds of rotting seaweed.

Navin returns with two cans of mixed whisky.

'It's almost midnight,' he says. 'That was fast.'

'The night, or the year?'

'Both.' He sits back down and clinks his can against hers. 'What's wrong?'

Tao-Yi can't quite meet his earnest gaze. 'Nothing.'

'You used to love the beach.'

'This isn't the beach.'

Navin's lips flatten into an em dash.

'Sorry,' she adds.

'You'd rather to go to a plastic-littered dump and splash around in acid water?'

Tao-Yi pops the tab of her can. The surf roars inside her eardrums, like a bad soundtrack played distorted and fuzzy and out of sync. Everything heaves down on her: the rhythmic tide, the silky sand, the perfect bonfire, the sky dusted with stars like half-carat diamonds.

She takes a sip of whisky and nearly gags at the sourness.

Nausea surges from her belly. She sets down the can and lurches to her feet. Navin says something, but she doesn't hear it. She stumbles away.

Tiny leaves scratch her bare legs as she stalks along the shore. She weaves between boulders, sinking ankle-deep into powder, swallowed by glorious darkness. Before long, she reaches the secluded cove. Is Navin following her? She pushes on, not looking back.

Another wave of nausea punches her in the gut. Sometimes there are glitches, but this doesn't feel like a glitch.

Moonlight paints the world in monochrome. Black water laps against grey sand. Before the next surge of nausea can pummel her, she runs into the sea – plunging right in without thinking, the water rapidly taking her, to the knees, to the groin. The initial cold knocks the air out of her lungs. Then, within the space of a few breaths, the shock is gone. The water's embrace is almost warm. The nausea's gone, too.

She strides out further, gasping disjointed breaths, even though that doesn't matter. Nothing matters – not her soaked clothes flapping about her body, not the water clasping her to the neck. The ocean floor leaves her feet. If she goes much further, she'll probably smack into a blank zone.

She manages to swivel around so that she's looking back towards the shore, treading water. The bonfire's a small bauble of orange light. She can just make out the shapes of people capering around the flames. The full moon soars above shadowy cliffs. Further along the coast, there's another bauble. Another bonfire; another New Year's Eve party. She squints. Which one is her party? Has she swum out at a diagonal, perhaps, and spun around, disorientated?

A scream claws at her throat, but she wrestles it down. She can no longer feel her body. Only the weight of the water dragging at her clothes, her hair, reminds her of her contours. After a few shuddering breaths, the panic thins out.

'Gaia,' she thought-speaks. 'Log me out.'

A pleasant voice resonates from all directions. 'Please confirm that you would like to log out of Gaia, Tao-Yi Ling.'

'Confirm log out.'

The moon vanishes. The stars blink out. The cliffs dissolve like pillars of salt. Where water pressed against every inch of her skin,

there's suddenly nothing, not even a puff of air.

Just before she disappears too, Tao-Yi hears a glad shout from the beach, voices raised in harmony: 'Happy New Year!'

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Her bones thicken. She drops, punching through layers of sand and earth, through the foundations of Gaia. Static roars in her ears. The smell of burning metal floods her nose. Her skin itches all over.

Everything fades.

When her senses return, she's drowning in blue. Dulux Sea Note, selected with Navin from a wall of blues at an online lifestyle improvement service when they first moved in. Her eyes lock on a pink-sprinkled cartoon doughnut holding a banner: DONUT WORRY BE HAPPY. A sticker on the ceiling.

An anchor.

She's lying in a vat of goo, only her face and her toes poking above the surface. Although the Neugel is warm, she's cold to the core. Her rubbery shell has forgotten what movement is. A moment later, the pins and needles sear through every inch of her body. Moaning, she grips the edges of the Neupod and pulls herself into a sitting position.

The Neugel peels away from her skin, tiptoeing down her back, reshaping itself into something like water. Then, it sucks itself loudly down a hole in the bottom of the vat, taking with it a microscopic party of nutrients and excrement.

Soapy water gushes from the perimeter of the Neupod and washes over her, followed by a cascade of clear water and a long blast of heated air. Finally, two fluffy robotic arms unfold and wipe her body dry with tender strokes.

This is Tao-Yi's favourite moment of each day: the liminal space just after waking from Gaia, her mind returning to itself, her limbs coming back into being.

‘Welcome back, Tao-Yi,’ says Sunny, the apartment AI.

One side of the Neupod retracts to let her slide down. There are two pods in the room. In the other lies Navin, cocooned in neuroconductive goo and green luminescence, his lips loose and parted half an inch.

She studies him. His head is as bald as a bowling ball, like hers. They shave meticulously, skimming every last hair off their scalps with laser blades. The Neugel needs a smooth interface to transmit electrical impulses to and from the brain. Suboptimal conduction can cause nausea, lagging, freezing, and drop-outs.

A frizzy beard decorates Navin’s jaw from ear to ear, cloaking his mouth. His complexion is wan, cheeks hollowed by illness. His body sags across the width of the Neupod. The paunch of stomach, glistening with gel, presses against the pod’s side.

The sight of him evokes a rush of love and sorrow.

She recalls his cautious sweetness, just moments before: his boyish eagerness to bring her drinks and make her comfortable, his tentative hope that she might be happy. Then, his bitterness at her displeasure.

He didn’t follow her. They’re skin to skin, but he’s a world away, toasting the turn of the year on a dark beach with perfect sand and a perfect tide.