

CHAPTER 1 • THE WORST FIRST DATE

积非成是 Trad. 積非成是- Jí fēi chéng shì – This chéng yǔ, or “Chinese proverb,” more accurately a Chinese idiom, translates as “a wrong repeated (actively) becomes right.” Obviously, it means that if you repeat a lie enough, it becomes “the truth.” And here in Illium, a lot of people have an interesting relationship with the truth. In this day and age, you can’t exactly go around giving out your actual birth date if you were walking the earth before the reign of Genghis Khan. I only know of two people with that precise excuse. I’m sure there are probably a couple more, but I’m not in the right circles to regularly encounter truths of that quality.

— From the Very Personal Journals of FYG

AS FAR AS bad first dates went, this was one for the records, and it wasn’t even the poor guy’s fault. I grinned ruefully at him from against the wall, my face pressed hard enough into the brick that I could feel the mealy little indentations deepening in the skin of my cheek.

We had only just met up outside a downtown coffee shop, the warm autumn sunshine casting a golden glow on the morning.

“Stop resisting!” the officer snapped, even though I was holding very still, my hands at my sides. I wasn’t trying to talk my way out of it like Dad. I wasn’t screaming in anyone’s face like Mother. Those tactics would not work well for me, not now.

“I’m not resisting,” I said, trying to keep my voice even as I locked eyes with Freddy – I think that’s what his name was. He was cute: big brown eyes with long lashes, wide cheekbones, dreadlocks pulled back in a neat ponytail. He fumbled with his phone, holding it up to film. “Am I actually being arrested? Do you have a warrant?”

“Shut up, Giles!” the other officer said, the one with the gun pointed at me. So they knew me and they weren’t even going to try with my first name. It was better that they didn’t mutilate the Chinese. I went by “Claire” these days, at least with my English-speaking friends. These cops clearly were not my friends.

“Don’t know why they let people like you in, since you don’t know how to act,” the cop behind me hissed.

I gritted my teeth. “I was born h—”

“I don’t care!” he snapped, having trouble cuffing me, despite my lack of resistance. It would have been comedic if there wasn’t a loaded gun pointed at my head.

“What are your names and badge numbers?” Freddy asked, clearing his throat.

“We aren’t required to answer that.” The cop with the gun smiled insincerely at him. “You seem like a nice guy. We’re arresting her on suspicion of *another* murder. We’re doing you a favor. You don’t want to get involved with this kind of crazy.”

Freddy flinched, his eyes darting to my face, expecting me to loudly protest that I hadn’t killed anyone.

“It was self-defense, a couple years ago,” I sighed, because he could just google it.

Freddy looked away.

“Oh no, we’re not talking about that.” The cop behind me laughed darkly as he clicked the handcuffs locked. “This morning—”

“I’d appreciate your names, please,” Freddy repeated.

“I’m Officer Ryan and that’s Officer Hartford,” the cop with the gun said, slowly holstering the weapon. “And I think you should leave before we find a reason to question you. How long have you known her? Do you really think she’s worth the trouble?” He flashed poor Freddy a mean smile.

“My lawyer’s name is Blake Canaris—”

“Shut up, Giles!” Hartford growled, dragging me toward the patrol car.

“You should stay out of this,” Ryan said. “You don’t know what this woman is capable of.”

“Call Canaris! Sorry about this!” I shouted as Hartford shoved me into the back of the patrol car. “Thanks!”

Ryan took a moment to say something to Freddy, something that made the other man back away. Then the cops hopped in, faces irritatingly smug as they both glanced back at me. Ryan was probably my age, mid-twenties,

blonde, in shape, more enthusiastic than intelligent. Hartford was older, in his late forties, red-headed, in a sort of round-ish shape, and watching me with a nasty grin.

"So what am I being accused of?" I asked.

"Shut up," Hartford snapped.

"Because I didn't do it and you know it."

"I know you're cocky because you think that boy is going to call your fancy lawyer, but you're in for a surprise," Ryan said, watching me in the rearview mirror.

"Maybe you did me a favor, then," I said with an extra bright smile. "Can't date anyone who doesn't know how to protect an individual's civil liberties."

"I said shut up!" Hartford shouted, slapping his palm against the cage.

My smile widened, mostly because I could not just shut my mouth, especially in high-pressure situations. Surface thoughts and inappropriate revelations just came out in a sputtering stream of pure verbal diarrhea. "I'm expressing my gratitude for a favor. And that coffee shop? Their lattes are meh anyway. Did you know that every sixteen ounces of coconut milk contains at least two ground-up crab claws? Not little crabs, mind you, but those giant bone-crushing coconut crabs that look like evil Pokemon—"

Honestly, a person absolutely should shut up when arrested so they could not incriminate themselves or give law enforcement any material to use against them, no matter how hypothetical. I was a nervous talker, but I knew how to weaponize it, and I happened to be spiteful, so I kept up a meaningless stream of babble about coffee drinks and other nonsensical trivia that I made up in the moment. Because something was very wrong. Obviously, this "arrest for another murder" was bullshit. But they weren't even trying to do things the right way. No Miranda reading. No warrant. Threatening Freddy. Not even trying to press me for an alibi.

By the time we reached the station, Hartford was shouting profanities at me and Ryan cowered at the wheel.

I expected the usual trip to intake, where someone might recognize me, and that would solve the problem. But instead they hustled in a side entrance and down the stairs, to a very familiar location.

My ears popped as we descended. I shuddered as I passed through the icy cold wards, a high-pitched hum settling in the back of my skull.

The Special Investigations Unit looked hilariously low-tech, and it was: six desks arranged in two rows, surrounded by retro beige metal filing cabinets. Each desk had an actual rotary phone, no computers in sight. There was even an ancient overhead projector set on a metal cart in the corner. The lieutenant's office door was shut, blinds closed. To my surprise, no one else was down here.

"Hurry up." Ryan shoved me, looking around nervously.

Hartford stood in front of the heavy vault door that led to the SIU lockup.

Shit.

I stumbled into Detective Minuet's desk, purposefully knocking over her pens and paperwork. She would notice, and in my gut I knew that these guys weren't supposed to be down here. "Oh no, how clumsy of me! It's so hard to balance with my hands behind my back!"

"Goddamnit!" Ryan went down to pick up the mess. I considered knocking over some of the twisted pieces of glass that decorated her desk, but I didn't know what breaking those would do and I was scared to find out.

My phone was still in my pocket. They would confiscate it on discovery. Stretching my arms, I wiggled it loose, dropped it in Detective Mwanje's chair, and then pushed the chair in. At the very least, he would return my phone without frying it.

Hartford finally got the door open. "Stop fucking around!" he snarled.

Ryan hastily climbed to his feet and yanked me over to the door.

Hartford led the way down a narrow corridor to another heavy metal door. I couldn't see what he was doing.

Ryan shoved me against the wall and patted me down, his hands roaming below my waist and between my thighs, his fingers lingering where they had no business being. Rage flared inside my chest, but I bit my tongue, knowing that my protests would only encourage him. He seemed like that kind of power-tripping douchebag. I glanced up accusingly at the camera in the corner, hoping that it actually worked.

"Where's your phone?" he asked as he pulled my keys out of my jacket pocket.

"Fell out at the coffee shop," I said tightly.

"Really?" Ryan yanked hard on my ponytail.

"Doesn't matter," Hartford said with an ugly laugh. "You won't be needing it in here."

We entered the holding area. There were five chambers arranged in a circle—no bars, only glass divider walls and stone exteriors. There were no windows, no other exits. These were the special holding cells, and only two were occupied.

Everyone stopped.

In the nearest chamber on the right was a tall Caucasian man with an overgrown blonde crew cut. He sat on a composite slab bench and looked up when we came in. He had a single moss-green eye; the left one was just gone, a web of jagged pink scar tissue covering the socket.

In the cell to the left of the door were four figures pressed against the glass. They were bipedal and human-sized, but that was where the resemblance to a person stopped. Under the harsh lighting their skins were mottled and maroon, their bellies distended on skeletal bodies with shreds of clothing attached. Their faces were no longer identifiable: eyes filmed over, cheeks sloughing off, wide jaws filled with enormous serrated teeth. They snarled, clawing at the glass.

I took a step backward.

Ryan gripped my arm. "What's he doing here? I thought it was supposed to be clear—"

"Doesn't matter," Hartford said, though his eyes shifted nervously. He went to open the cell containing the Revenants.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I said through clenched teeth, kind of hoping he would, because I would get the satisfaction of seeing his face eaten off, right before I died horribly.

"Oh, are you scared of a couple meth heads?" Ryan laughed. "That's not our problem."

It was obvious Ryan couldn't see through the glamour, but Hartford's hands shook as he tried to grasp the door handle, sweat dripping down his doughy forehead.

Even as he started to reach forward, the Revenants screamed in unison and slammed against the glass, blue runes lighting up.

"Fuck!" Hartford wobbled backward.

"You want me to—"

"Forget it. Throw her in there with him. She can piss him off," Hartford said, mustering a weak sneer. He fumbled with the handle—concentric brass rings that folded into a niche in the door. "You stay back!" His voice wavered as he opened it.

Ryan hastily uncuffed me and shoved me inside. The door clanged shut behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Ryan opening the vault door while Hartford lingered in front of the Revenant cell. He reached out, touching something to the glass, and the undead started screeching louder. Then he headed toward the exit, as fast as his stubby legs would carry him.

I looked back at my cellmate, who was still sitting on the gray bench, much...bigger up close than I expected.

My cellmate was a giant, nearly seven feet tall, and wearing gray pants and a thin white tank top stretched almost transparent across his broad chest. There were more claw-mark scars on his cheeks and neck, disappearing under his shirt. Several intricate tattoos covered his muscled arms, and the rest of him looked pretty solid too. Staring was rude, but a quick glance at his ink told me that he wasn't with any of the local white-power gangs. That was a minor relief, like finding an umbrella in a hurricane. The battle scars made his age difficult to guess. He looked anywhere in his late twenties to mid-forties, but appearances, like certain cops, could not be trusted in Illium.

He watched me stoically, making no move to get up nor any threatening gestures. The green of his eye was a bluer tone than mine, a splash of brilliant color on an otherwise severe palette.

I brushed my bangs out of my face, nodded at him, and then sat down on the other side of the bench, well aware that if he decided to do...anything, there wasn't much I could do to stop him.

That was terrifying, but not as much as the idea of being thrown into the other cell.

I took a deep breath, turning my attention to my surroundings. I was familiar with these cells from the outside: eight by ten, the dividing walls were a crystalline polymer, with sigils etched along the borders. I could read English and Simplified Mandarin and had a passing familiarity with other scripts, but I didn't recognize half of the writing. Given the fonts, the structure, and the patterns, there were multiple languages in play, but I couldn't seem to identify most of them. So I guess there were real-life consequences to sleeping through my historical orthography class. But in my defense, I was tired.

I wasn't tired now. Adrenaline fixed that. And being nervous made me want to talk. The difference from earlier was that I did not want to annoy my cell. It wasn't just how he looked; if he was in this kind of cell, he wasn't a mundane human.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, touching the inside pocket of my jacket. Because that bastard Ryan was so busy groping my ass that he overlooked the protein bar in my pocket. "And do you know what kind of Revenants those are?" Because there were several variants of the restless, corporeal, and uncontrollably hungry undead. Unlike some forms of the undead, Revenants didn't retain the sentience or the personalities they had in life. Fortunately, they weren't popping out of graveyards every night. Here, on average, the incidents occurred quarterly. It was easier to set them all on fire, toss the cremains in a purification tank, and call it a night, than it was to get them to hold still for taxonomic identification: ghuls, craqueuhhes, vrykolakas, vetalas, jiāng shī. There were records of all of them and more within the city.

The man turned that raptor-like gaze on me, his expression hard. It was not a friendly expression, but he remained seated. "There are too many aberrant mutations in this city," he said, his voice deep and rough.

"Oh good, I would have felt bad if you said, 'obviously those are langsuvar, don't you know anything?'"

"Those are obviously not langsuvar, manananggal, or the like," he said, speaking slowly and pronouncing the words with great care. There was a rustiness to his voice, like maybe he wasn't used to carrying on conversations, or maybe his throat was just dry. There were no sinks or toilets in the cell, just a drain in the floor. "Not enough hair left, no identifiable gender—that branch of undead presents as female, and the ones in front of us have full bodies—no levitation or exposed viscera."

I looked at the things, then back at my cell. He was right, and he had not tried to murder me yet. Both were good signs. "I do appreciate how nicely you said, 'obviously those are not langsuvar, don't you know anything?'" It was very diplomatic. Hi, I'm Claire," I said and extended one hand.

There was a long pause. He stared at me, giving me a once-over that was less "checking me out" and more "assessing me as a potential threat or liability." Then he cleared his throat.

"Dreyson." His arms stayed at his sides.

"First name, last name, alias?" I asked, trying to keep my tone cheerful as I slowly lowered my hand.

"Dreyson," he repeated, an edge in his voice.

Just Dreyson then, easy enough. I nodded.

"Look—" he began.

And I did, just as the front glass panel of the Revenants' cell shattered and they burst out, shrieking. In seconds, they were pounding on the walls of our cell, their decomposing faces pressed to the glass as they searched for a way inside.