

FUROR POETICUS CATHY HUANG

"I'm sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message?"
Pinning his phone between his shoulder and ear, Emile scrambles through hefty stacks of paper. The address, the address, the address... The voice on the other end turns to white noise. Until one sound jolts him to attention.

"Hello?"

"Ah— yes," Emile switches the phone to his other shoulder. "Terribly sorry. Would you mind repeating that message?"

He hears a thinly veiled sigh.

"Tell Vitalia that I simply will not go without seeing her soon!" she exclaims, her voice sharp in the phone. "What daughter goes entire months without speaking to her mother?"

"I'm terribly sorry on her behalf, ma'am—"

"On her behalf! She can't even apologize to me herself!"

"—I'll be sure to let her know you called."

Another huffed sigh. Emile studies the contents of a paper, searching for the address of that day's meeting.

"What an ungrateful child," says Mrs. Riva. "Our phones, they communicate like magic. It takes one finger— only one! — to text or call, and still she refuses. She's grown up spoiled with all this technology and never thinks to use it."

"I'll pass on your message as soon as I can," Emile assures her, and suddenly the papers slip from his hands, falling in a white flurry onto the kitchen floor. A mumbled swear escapes him and as he drops to his knees, he hears Mrs. Riva's offense.

"Excuse me?"

His phone gives off a two-toned beep, signaling an incoming call, and gives him all the reason to hang up. He once more apologizes to Mrs. Riva and assures her once more he will be informing Vitalia on the importance of family communication.

"If she doesn't, I'm boarding a plane to California next week—"

Quickly Emile switches the call and holds it up to his ear as he searches for the paper once again. What was the name of the building? He wonders as he recites off the phone greeting.

The voice on the other end is disappointingly familiar.

"This is Irma on behalf of the Solavir Fashion Company, calling from the meeting in the Edward Mercer Building."

That! That's what it's called!

"Oh— yes, yes, hello," Emile says, jumping to his feet. He takes a moment to find his words, and stammers out the rest.

"We are just getting ready to head over there right now."

"I would sure hope that's the case, Mr. Halridge," says Irma. Beyond her, he can hear chattering sounds and loud synth pop music playing. "Vitalia's been rather inconsiderate lately, hasn't she? We haven't seen her for the past two meetings."

"Terribly sorry."

"It's now or never, Mr. Halridge," Irma says. "If she doesn't show today, her work is all but useless to us."

"We understand," says Emile, dropping the stack of papers onto the kitchen table. He leans onto the surface and drags his fingers through his hair. "Miss Riva has her work prepared, and we will be there as soon as we can."

"Fashionably late, I presume?" Irma asks.

Emile chuckles, the sound taut and nervous.

"Fashionably late," he says, then hangs up. The phone is shoved into his back pocket before he collects the papers in his hand. Vitalia's glass kitchen table may as well served as an office desk for him; his file dividers and loose papers scatter everywhere, circling around a flower vase centered in the middle— though its flora has long since wilted into drooping remnants of petals.

"Vitalia!" he calls throughout the house. He knows she can hear him. She simply will not listen. "Vitalia, we have to go!"

He knows where to find her, always. When she moved into her grand Hollywood home, the basement was to be the least frequented room, and now it's become more of her bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom with each passing day. Plastic binder in hand, Emile stomps over to the basement door.

Outside the closed door, a pile of crumpled papers sit abandoned. Emile kicks them aside, then pushes the door open and makes his way downstairs into the basement. The lights aren't on, but it's never dark.

He's being too loud as he clammers through the halls, and he knows Vitalia and her tree hate it. But Emile doesn't quite care right now, and lets his feet stomp against the concrete floor. The rumbling and vibrations of the furnaces can't compete with the incessant hum hitting his ears. That sound alone already begins to drive him more mad than he already feels.

Vitalia is curled up on the loveseat she had brought down, facing away from him. She holds a pencil between her fingertips and a sketchbook in her lap, though she isn't using either, and merely stares ahead. Everything and everyone in this basement is illuminated in a pale green light, radiating from the central point of the basement—the tree.

He tries not to look at it. Not out of fear, but because he simply can't stand it. Instead, Emile looks at her.

"Vitalia, we have to go," he says.

Her pencil spins between her fingers, like clockwork gears in a machine. She never reacts positively when she is interrupted, especially when he's being so direct about it.

"Go where?" she asks.

"To work," Emile says. "To your job."

Vitalia doesn't look at him yet, but the tree does.

Its branches twist in his direction, and the green light fades away into darkness, leaving only the dim lamp for visibility. The tree doesn't like him much—and it is only called a tree from the way it starts from twisted dark roots, digging through the basement floor, and extends up into a soft trunk. But nothing else is of this earth; its wood is soft, almost flesh-like, and crusty shell-like ornaments dangle from thin brown sticks. It moves as though living, with branches shifting in the air, trunk rising and falling as though breathing.

The low hum turns into a hiss, like water sizzling on a hot pan. Still, Emile is not deterred.

Only now does Vitalia look back at him. Though the tree's green light has faded, the luminescence still flickers in her eyes, if only for a moment.

"The meeting?" Vitalia asks. Emile nods, and to this, she sighs. On slow-moving legs, she rises from her seat, teetering as though unused to her own weight; he almost feels the need to run and help her up. With gently curled fingers, Vitalia reaches for the tree, but does not touch it. Perhaps she's still too afraid, or perhaps she knows better.

"What color is this to you?" she asks him. Emile stares at her, head lowered, before begrudgingly turning his gaze upon the tree.

It changes from day to day, hour to hour, moment to moment, and never to simple hues. There is no red or green, only impressions and amalgamations. Emile considers the trunk and its leaves, and for a moment, cannot see any color; his eyes cannot recognize what they perceive. Then, it comes together—a burnt shade, looking like scarlet bruises; a dazzling yellow muddled in the wooden grooves; a glimmer of cyan rippling

throughout it, like the shadow of a fish moving through water. Only its leaves stay unmoving, in their dried up beige, as though already dead.

Emile looks back at her, and in the most monotone voice he can muster:

"A lot of them."

Vitalia laughs—it's a good sound to hear, a sign she hasn't completely lost her mind. She leans forward a bit, a hand covering her mouth as though the action hit her like a blow.

"I think it'd look lovely on a dress," she says. "To cinch the waist... come look at this, Emile." She places her sketchbook in the crook of her elbow, and when he approaches, he can see the pages have completely filled up with drawings.

Vitalia Riva has never been interested in the mundane. That is what distinguished her from the other designers—she was not just innovative, but imaginative. They call her work dark fantasy, but the two of them have always considered it to be an unholy realism. Her designs indicate as much. Nothing is symmetrical or angular; all shapes are organic and imperfect. The clothes she designs look less like attire, and more like living beings in their own right.

She points to one: a gown drawn in graphite, with a corset around the waist, drawn with a swirling vortex of a design mirroring the pattern on the tree's trunk. Its fabric twists at the end in tendril-like shapes. Emile glances up from the page, to the tree before them, and finds the patterns nearly identical.

"What do you think?" Vitalia asks, tilting her head at him.

"It's nice," he says. Then she walks away from him, and back towards the tree.

She looks like a thrall, in the way she offers the sketchbook to the tree, showing it her designs. Vitalia points to the gown, looking up into the leaves as she does so.

In fluid motions, the tree curls one of its roots upwards, like an octopus's tentacle, and a low hum rumbles from its leaves. Emile flinches at the sound; Vitalia does not. Its root curls backwards against its trunk, and only then does Emile realize how sharp it is, when the tree scrapes the bark off its own trunk. A piece of its flesh comes off in an iridescent slab, falling to the basement floor.

In its wound, Emile sees something extraordinary: a glimmer of something new, as shifting and incomprehensible as the color of its trunk. Another world, it seems. Like a heartbeat, the tree's insides pulse.

Then, quickly and fluidly, the surrounding wood melts over the hole and reforms itself. Color returns; the swirling vortex continues on.

Vitalia kneels down and picks up the slab of wood between her hands. She tests its weight, holding it up to the tree's light. With a smile, she looks back at the tree.

“Thank you,” she says to it, then looks to Emile. “We’re late, aren’t we?”

He nods, and Vitalia shrugs, unbothered. She returns her attention to the slab of wood; its colors have stopped moving throughout the wood, and now exist frozen in a its twisting shape.

“The company keeps asking me about material,” she says. “They say I have wonderful ideas but no means of execution.”

What a haunting smile she wears. Vitalia looks at the world with such ambition; even in the incomprehensible, she finds a use.

Emile sighs. He can’t stop her, and so he merely walks over and holds the door open.

“Let’s go.”

They leave together in haste, Emile moreso. Vitalia makes no effort to dress herself up, merely packing the tree bark into his briefcase, throwing on a pair of sunglasses, and wrapping a pink shawl around her shoulders. The sunlight seems to bother her. Vitalia all but scampers to the car, with a scowl on her face the entire time she’s exposed to the air.

As they drive together into the Hollywood streets, Emile finds himself glancing in her direction. It’s been weeks now since he’s seen her outside the house, and in the daylight, he can see just how she’s changed. The structure of her face seems harsher now, as though her cheeks have caved and her bones cast shadows upon her skin. Her hair has always been meant for California sunlight, bright and blonde— now it seems devoid of all color. She leans her cheek against her hand, looking out onto the sidewalk streets. He suspects, however, that she’s hardly seeing anything.

A chorus of shrill honks jolts him out of thought, and Emile drives off through the intersection. The car they drive leaves no question about its owner, in a shiny gold that looks tacky, even here. Pop music plays loudly from her bluetooth speakers.

“You need to call your mother,” Emile tells her.

“My mother?” Vitalia asks. “She’s been calling?”

“Yes,” Emile says through gritted teeth. “She’s been calling.”

He doesn’t try to talk anymore, as he drives off to the Edward Mercer Building. It’s just a piece of the industrial cluster, one building standing together with dozens of its kind to create the urban landscape of Hollywood. Emile drives around for much too long, searching for a parking spot that he’s certain doesn’t exist, and by the time he pulls in, a headache has already cut its way into his head.

Vitalia grabs the briefcase before Emile can. He can feel the presence of the tree within the black zipped bag— but perhaps he’s just going mad, too.

She knows the Edward Mercer Building well, leading him through endless hallways that seem to repeat over and over again. People smile at her, and though it’s hard, she seems to smile back, too. It shouldn’t surprise Emile as much as it does; before the tree, this was her world. Perhaps it still

matters to her, even if it’s only an afterthought.

As expected, they’ve interrupted the meeting. But Vitalia doesn’t seem to care, unafraid of the disruption she causes as she saunters into the room. Emile slinks in after her, keeping to the walls and corners and making no eye contact with the people who sit around the table. They make no secret of their surprise and delight, some even rising from their seats to greet her.

“Oh, Vitalia— we haven’t seen you in weeks!” says a purple-haired woman in a glitzy business suit.

Vitalia plops herself into the empty seat they’ve kept for her. Her sunglasses remain over her eyes.

“What were we talking about?” she asks. The woman’s expression falters slightly, before hesitantly moving on with the meeting. Their chatter becomes one of business and fashion trends, words that he can easily tune out. Emile ends up browsing his phone to check emails and the news; his attention is only piqued after hearing a collective gasp from the meeting room. When he glances up, Vitalia has something in her hands. A feeling of dread comes over him, only sooner than the putrid stench that demands the room’s collective disgust.

“Vitalia, what are you doing?” asks an older woman.

“Eating,” she says.

“Eating what?”

In her hands, Vitalia holds a fruit-like morsel, with the same dead-looking beige as the tree’s leaves. She peels it easily, like a banana, and reveals bright red flesh, leaking with juice. She bites into it like an apple, to a chorus of disgust from her colleagues.

“What is that?” one of them asks. Vitalia wipes the corner of her lips.

“Exotic.”

The response is one of nervous chuckling, before the topic is dropped and the meeting continues on. Emile rubs his temples. He’s better off ignoring it. There’s nothing he can do, anyway.

He continues his idle browsing. When the room again goes silent, he looks up to see the wooden slab displayed in the center of the table. In the fluorescent office lights, it has never looked so mundane. The range of its colors seem unrealized; he can even recognize the shades upon first glance— red, brown, purple. It looks like a piece of shiny driftwood, when it’s detached from its host. But what seems unimpressive to him now, the others find extraordinary. A profound silence falls upon the meeting room as they look upon the wooden slab. Vitalia’s sunglasses block her eyes, but her head cants towards each and every face, as though gauging their reactions. It’s the most attention she’s offered anyone in weeks.

“Did you make this?” asks a bald man with diamond earrings.

“I did.”

“Out of what?” the purple-haired woman says.

“Wood.”

“And you want to use this for the dress?” asks another.

“Absolutely,” Vitalia says. “It’s a material that goes unused in modern fashion. And look at it. Try and tell me it isn’t magnificent.”

They don’t.

After the meeting, and on the way to the car, Emile and Vitalia find themselves rushing away. Cameras flash in their direction, as fickle annoyances, but Emile’s even more bothered by the people behind their metal devices. Vitalia’s oddities are well-known in the tabloids, and when the subject isn’t about her, it’s about them.

Even Vitalia looks bothered. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes glare at the crowds.

Mrs. Riva calls again that night.

“Have you told her to contact me?” her voice demands on the other end of the phone. Emile stands in front of the stove, stirring a bowl of noodles with one hand and replying to an email with the other. His phone on speaker sits on the countertop.

“I have,” he says, his annoyance more apparent than he’d hoped.

“Then why hasn’t she called?” Mrs. Riva asks. “Go tell her now.”

Emile sighs. After the meeting, Vitalia disappeared into the basement and hasn’t come out since.

“She’s busy,” he says— and what an anthem that’s become these days.

He continues to assure and persuade Mrs. Riva that soon, soon, she will get a call from her daughter. By the time she’s worn herself out from talking, dinner is ready.

“If she doesn’t call you by this weekend, I will fly you in myself. I swear,” Emile tells her. “Perhaps you can talk some sense into her.” Mrs. Riva seems to accept that, for she finally hangs up.

The udon noodles are ladled into a large ceramic bowl, paired with a fork, and brought to the basement. There, Vitalia sits in the velvet loveseat with her sketchbook upon her legs and a pencil to her lips.

“Call your mother,” he tells her, setting the noodle bowl down on an end table.

“Emile.”

She gestures with her pen, directing his attention to the tree.

Begrudgingly, he looks.

“Oh.”

He’s never seen the tree go white before.

Like alabaster or marble, the tree trunk has brightened and desaturated into pure white, with no shades of anything more. Its crusted ornaments seem paler than ever.

It doesn’t move. It doesn’t look at him or hiss. Emile notices how quiet the room has become.

“Is it alive, still?” Emile asks.

“Yes,” says Vitalia, and he can’t tell if that answer makes him happy or

not.

“How do you know?”

“Look.”

Beneath the tree’s bark, he can still see that flicker of cyan, or purple, swimming under the surface— but it’s languid and stuttery. Vitalia’s never looked more distressed; her thin brows knit together in worry, and her sketchbook lays blank.

“Do you think it needs more space?” she asks, looking up at the basement ceiling. “We can demolish the living room floor. I don’t need it, and the tree needs to grow.”

“It doesn’t need to grow more.”

“Sustenance, then? I don’t know what it’s supposed to eat, Emile.”

“It doesn’t,” he says, and pushes the noodle bowl towards her. “But you do.”

“I already ate,” Vitalia says. He crinkles his nose.

“Come on, Vita,” he chides. “Get out of the basement, eat some dinner, get some work done.”

“You can go now. Leave me alone.”

“Vita.”

“Don’t you have work to do?”

“You’re being a piece of work.”

Vitalia frowns, leaning back into her seat indignantly. She looks down at the bowl of noodles.

Before he can stop her, she seizes the bowl of noodles and flings it at the ground. With a loud shatter, ceramic pieces fly all over the ground, muddled with noodles and pieces of beef. Emile groans.

“Come on, what are you—”

He isn’t prepared for the roar that he hears.

Deafening, it is, and able to make Emile stumble off-balance. At once, he looks to the tree— and the sight is more horrific than the sound could ever be.

“See, Emile?” Vitalia says. “See, it’s hungry!”

The dead-looking leaves had split open. Flesh peels apart from one another, wrinkling at the sides.

Like eyelids.

Hundreds of veiny eyes stare ahead at Emile, but only for a moment. Quickly, collectively, they move down to the shattered bowl of noodles. The tree’s roots rip out from the ground and descend upon the remnants, curling around every piece. A maw opens in its trunk, where the ceramic, noodles, and meat is shoved into without distinction. From within the tree comes a sound like something being shattered, again and again.

Emile feels terror seize through his bones, paralyzing his movements. He can only watch as the tree comes alive, more alive than it had ever been, more savage and monstrous than he can perceive.

"It's not a tree," Vitalia says. "It's something else. Have you seen those bugs that look like twigs? Or caterpillars that look like leaves? They hide in plants and blend in with their environment, to fool predators."

The thing settles again, moving its roots back into place and spreading out its branches. He sees now— the roots are not roots, but limbs. Those branches don't have leaves; they have eyes.

"Can you imagine it, Emile? If this is a camouflage, imagine what its forest must look like."

He can't. He won't.

"Think of its predators," Vitalia says. Is that awe in her voice?

The tree hasn't gotten its color back. But beyond the white flesh, he can see a flicker of something moving beneath its bark, more fluidly this time. More alive.

"Everything I give to it isn't enough," she laments. "Meat. Art. Ideas. It's frustrating. I need to know what it needs."

A terrible headache flares in Emile's skull. He pinches the bridge of his nose and groans.

"You need to get back to work," he says. "Answer your emails. Call your mother. Go on lunch meetings."

She scoffs at him.

"What did I hire you for?" she asks.

"Not this."

"Then go," Vitalia says with a dismissive wave of her hand. "Go back upstairs. Leave me alone."

Emile is more than happy to, even if anger punctuates every footstep he takes on the staircase. He needs sleep, he needs a vacation, he needs something else. But as always, he finds himself in the guest bedroom, working. Perhaps he's typing too furiously. Perhaps when the phone rings, he answers with too harsh of a voice.

From his window, there is nothing but a dark sky and city lights. It makes the flash of a camera, somewhere in the backyard, that much more noticeable.

Emile glares out the window, his fingers tightening around his pen. His phone buzzes on the table, vibrating around in circles.

I'm sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message? I'm sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message? I'm sorry, Miss Riva is currently preoccupied. Can I take a message?

It's only nine o'clock, but Emile feels exhausted. He stares out the window, into the dark sky and the city lights beneath it. His ear is hurting from all the time it's spent pressed against a phone.

"—an interview," says the journalist on the other end of the phone. "For a new fashion magazine. We'd love to have Miss Riva's voice in our—"

"When?" Emile asks.

A silence ensues, and Emile is about to hang up the phone when he

continues.

"Er— whenever Miss Riva's schedule allows it," he says. Emile looks at the clock.

"What about now?"

More silence.

"Now?" the journalist asks.

"That's what I said," Emile replies, leaning back onto his desk. "She has time now. It's the only time she has for the next two weeks."

"Oh," he says. "Well, perhaps, I could make the trip myself..."

"She has two hours to spare," Emile says. "If you want the interview, come now. Do you need the address?"

"Well, I— okay, then!"

The exchange of information occurs over the span of half a minute. Emile doesn't even remember the name, and doesn't care to. He merely hangs up the phone, and with at least an hour to wait, he chooses to lay down across the couch.

As Emile kicks his feet up and closes his eyes, he still finds himself unable to relax. His shoulders tense, his brow knits together, and despite the quiet, he can still hear the buzz of a phone and the hum of a tree.

That tree finds its way to worm into his thoughts. He thinks of the wooden slab that Vitalia had left for the company. They'd intended to use it for fashion, but he can't help but wonder about the consequences.

It's too soon when the doorbell chimes. Emile opens his eyes, and with a heavy sigh, picks himself off the couch. When he opens the front door, he finds a scraggly-looking journalist, with reddish hair as bright as his flustered face. His black jeans and shirt hang loosely upon him.

"Hello, Mr. Halridge," says the journalist with a taut smile. "I— thank you, for letting me visit on such short notice."

"Time is of the essence," Emile replies, with a flippant wave of his hand. He invites the journalist inside and locks the door behind them. "Did you prepare questions?"

He asks the question only to get the journalist talking. He doesn't care, in fact, and only pretends to listen as he walks him through Vitalia's home.

"Has she been... alright, lately?" asks the journalist. Emile shrugs.

"Just caught up in work."

If the journalist realized that Emile was leading him to the basement, he didn't try to run.

"Vitalia's made her studio here," Emile says, as they walk down the stairs. "This is where she's most inspired."

Only then does Emile see the quizzical expression in the journalist's eyes. But it's much too late now; they've both walked into the tree's domain. Pale light washes upon their faces as they approach.

The tree is still ghastly white, with crooked branches and a soft fleshy trunk. But now it can hiss when Emile approaches with the journalist. Vitalia

sits up in her loveseat, and regards the stranger with a glare in her eyes.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“My God...” whispers the journalist. “What... is this?”

Emile looks at the tree. Its eyes are closed, but surely, surely, it knows.

He’s angrier than he thought he was, when he shoves the journalist in the direction of the tree. With a yelp, the man stumbles, and Emile kicks him closer.

The tree is quick, limbs tearing up from the ground and snatching the journalist’s abdomen as soon as he is close enough. It seizes him, roots digging so deep and so sharply that no blood is spilled. Then, it does not look like a tree. As its trunk splits horizontally, into a maw, it has never looked so carnal. Emile sees the shifting void of darkness within it, and its light, pulsing like a heartbeat. The back of its throat seems to be a new universe, and one that the photographer is thrust into, head-first, screams muffled from within the tree bark.

When it chomps down, the screams stop. His flailing legs go limp, and the tree pushes the remainder of the journalist’s body deeper into its jaws. As the body disappears, color returns to the tree’s trunk, in shades of turquoise and orange, pulsing and blinking from within, like light shadows going off inside its bark.

Emile throws his hands up in the air.

“There!” he exclaims. “There! See, that’s all it takes, Vitalia!”

She looks ahead, with widened, bewildered eyes. Vitalia isn’t afraid; she has never been afraid in all the time that they’ve cultivated this beast. But there is something that makes her hesitant, as she hovers her pencil over the sketchbook, but doesn’t — and can’t — capture anything.

The journalist is long gone, and when Emile looks back at the tree, it considers him. Eagerly. Waiting for more, wanting for more.

The exhilaration leaves him like a deep breath. Emile’s headache pinches at him again, and he rubs his temples.

“Call your mother,” he growls, before storming out of the basement.