

Sam

As a child, Sam can see beauty in everything.

She can spend an hour admiring the spiral of a snail's shell. Each morning, she and her stuffed animal, Rabbit, say hello to the buttery yellow dandelions growing between the cracks in the sidewalk. At night, the streetlamps form pools of silver on the ground. She runs her hands across the metal bars striping their apartment door and feels the music of them humming through her fingers. The crack on the bedroom ceiling is in the shape of a star. And when her mother makes curtains for the windows out of old bedsheets, Sam watches in awe, admires the handsewn flowers dancing in the wind as if the fabric itself is a meadow.

To her, their apartment is big. It has a tidy bathroom and working lights, a bedroom she gets to share with her mother, a carpet where she stages stories between Rabbit and a set of plastic horses, a kitchen that can turn out hot meals, and a refrigerator that her mother somehow manages to keep perpetually stocked. Her mother cooks late at night, making braised beef rolls and fluffy buns and eggs scrambled with tomatoes, transforming leftovers into fried rice, packaging portions of food into the freezer for the week. No one can stretch out a dollar like her mother. A five-pound sack of flour costs the same as a loaf of bread and can make noodles and scallion pancakes for weeks. Ground chicken can go farther when combined with eggs and cabbage and wrapped into dumplings by the pound. Watermelon rinds can be pickled, softened, and stir-fried. Freezing portions of stew made with chuck steak bought on Mondays—the Manager's Special packages that are about to expire—can save you thirty dollars a month. Seventy-five cents can get an entire bag of squash from their Mexican neighbor's backyard garden.

Sam loves falling asleep with the smell of good food filling their home. She loves how talented her mother is at everything she does. Sometimes she feels like her heart will burst from these thousands of small joys in her world, and every day, she looks forward to each of them because they are all she's ever known, because this is what a perfect life looks like.

So, when Sam first learns about alchemy, she sees only what it should be: a beautiful thing, an endless possibility.