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JOHN CHU

BEYOND
THE VEIL

Beyond the EI

JOHN CHU

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This is how Connor renders a pot sticker in paper: He crinkles and crumples a circle of white construction paper until it is soft and pliable. The circle is large enough that a tangled ball of shredded paper fits inside with enough room for a generous lip. And it needs to be generous because, unlike dough, paper doesn't stretch. The ball doesn't have the heft of a mix of jiucai and ground pork, but it will still push out against the paper once it is folded. He rings the paper with glue, not water as he would have with a circle of hot-water dough. Carefully, he folds the paper over and presses down on the edges to form a lip around the semicircle. Glue seeps out, which he dabs away with a small towel. This obviously never happens with water on hot-water dough. Fold by fold, he crimps the lip so that the semicircle is now a plump crescent. With hot-water dough, folds would just stick together, but this is paper. The folds accordion, and he dabs each with a droplet of glue then presses them all flat. The work is meticulous. When he's done, the body isn't the right sort of plump and it doesn't dimple in the right way. The technique, though, is sound. It takes minutes to make each pot sticker. He makes three.

This is what Connor does with three pot stickers made of paper: He stuffs them into a cracked mug. The match hisses when he strikes it against the matchbook cover. It bursts into flame and, when it touches the pot stickers, the flames spread. Golden tendrils reach up, covered by wisps of smoke. The pot stickers blacken and shrivel into the mug. Unlike the first seven times Connor has done this, he's remembered to open a window and take the battery out of the smoke detector. A piercing beep does not slice his ears. The faint haze in the kitchen clears.

It's not that Connor believes his mom will actually get the dumplings or even that his mom is out there somewhere waiting for burnt offerings. The

economy of the afterlife if it existed would have to be pretty screwed up, with people burning paper representations of money and planes and cell phones. Still, he wants to show her he's learned how to shape a dumpling, even if he still hasn't figured out the exact filling his mom made.

* * *

The band singer's voice is this slinky, sinuous thing, a voluptuous baritone that nestles around every word he sings. It's almost enough to distract Connor from the singer's broad shoulders and the graceful taper to his waist. Those could just be gifts from the singer's elegantly tailored suit, but Connor has also seen him with the jacket off, bowtie unraveled, collar unbuttoned, and sleeves rolled up. If anything, the suit hides the singer so Connor can pay attention to the song. Connor knows the handsome band singer's name, Nick, but he's better off thinking of him as the handsome band singer.

To the customers in the restaurant, the handsome man crooning jazz standards and the piano and bass backing him are just set dressing. Nick could be declaiming Wagner or heavy metal and only one who'd notice would be Connor. Everything on the singer's tiny stage is just a backdrop to the real show, the food.

Meals are prepared at the table. Diners in exquisitely tailored dinner jackets and impeccably fitted gowns sit at small round tables. Servers dressed in crisp white shirts and pleated black trousers fulfill their every whim. At one table, a diner's steak, already patted dry, its flavors already adjusted, sits uncooked on a plate. White streaks of fat alternate with dark red streaks of muscle. The server passes her hand slowly over the steak. It transforms from raw to medium-rare. Clear juice seeps out and is reabsorbed at the server's command. Another slow wave of her hand and the steak is seared on both sides. At other tables, teams of servers work together to transform and plate ingredients in a strict timeline lest a foam collapse or an ice melt before it can be savored.

* * *

Connor is back of house, prepping. Servers sweep in and out. They place orders and carry away plates loaded with the prepped materials they will

transform before their diners' eyes. The band singer's song is a sinuous thread weaving through the thud of knives, the whir of motors, and the staccato bursts of servers' calls and preppers' responses.

A pile of carrots sits at his prep station. It doesn't even take a glance for him to know how each carrot will taste. One by one, he takes each carrot and adjusts it to its bliss point, that place where it is the most like itself. He crisps its texture, adjusts its color, and intensifies its flavor. Some days, rather than hitting the bliss point, his job is to layer in the bite of pepper or the decadent unctuousness of foie gras. Today, though, all he has to do is make them all the perfect carrots everyone desires but no one can grow. That's not anywhere near the limit of his abilities. If you leave the trade and then return, though, you start back at the bottom. Leaving to take care of your catatonic mother may be laudable, but also irrelevant. So, instead of working out on the floor, what he does for now is rewind time. Stopping time is impossible. All things fall away from their bliss points as they inevitably decay and rot.

The maître d' strolls up to him as he is chopping, replenishing the mise en place, making it fresher than fresh. She's never back here. Connor can feel her gaze bear down on him, but she waits until his knife no longer blurs before she says anything.

"You've been requested, Connor. Get into your service uniform."

"Can they do that?" Connor turns to catch the sous chef's gaze. She nods back at him. "And with no notice?"

"Well, you're overqualified for back of house. And if they pay enough..." The maître d's wry smile tells him all he needs to know. "You understand tonight's menu."

It's not a question, but Connor still rolls his eyes. He has been preparing this menu literally all night. Besides, with a couple exceptions, this restaurant isn't that ambitious. And no one orders the ambitious items.

"Good." She pats Connor on the back. "Go get changed."

The customer sits at the most sought-after table in the restaurant. It's in a private but spotlighted corner. Noise-canceling hardware embedded in the walls puts the customer in her own private world. Whoever serves her, though, is performing for the entire room. Servers draw straws to avoid this table. Sitting at this table with no advance notice must have cost quite a bit to

soothe the ego of whoever originally reserved it.

Connor is now dressed in his crisp black-and-whites. As he crosses toward his customer, the band singer starts into Bernstein's setting of the Ferlinghetti poem, "The Pennycandystore Beyond the El." A jazzy piece of atonality, this is less crooning for atmosphere than the band singer flashing his expensive conservatory training. The band singer's eyes sparkle as his gaze meets Connor's. A smile spreads across the band singer's face. Connor can't help but think the band singer is singing just for him. It's a fantasy he knows he should bury, but he can't.

The fantasy shatters when he sees who has requested him. His sister sits at the table alone, her back to the corner, browsing the menu.

Somewhere, right now, a garage door is rattling open and a young boy perks up because it means his big sister has to stop beating him. Their parents cook—not craft—the sweet and fried stuff Americans expect when they think "Chinese food." Americans expect "Chinese food" cooked by the Chinese to be cheap, so his parents run the restaurant without employees to help them and they work twelve-hour days. Their children go off to school before they wake and are ready for sleep by the time they come home. Sometimes, they are too late and the young boy has already fallen asleep. There are many weeks where the boy sees his parents only on the weekends. His parents have no choice but to leave it to his sister to raise him by herself. This is a lot to lay on a thirteen-year-old girl. None of her friends have to raise their kid brothers. If she thinks having her kid brother dumped on her full-time is unfair—even if it does not justify beating him—she has a point. The rattling garage door means their parents are practically home. His sister never hits him when their parents are at home.

* * *

When Connor was that boy, perking up just made his sister angrier maybe because it meant he'd get away it. He still has no idea what "it" was. Changing the channel on the TV, not changing the channel on the TV, pouring a glass of soda for himself but not also for her, pouring a glass of soda for himself and also for her: all got him beaten. Telling their parents what she was doing really got him beaten. She never left any bruises, though,

and their parents never believed their angel could ever lay a hand on him. Then again, that was also what they needed to believe.

Connor's gut roils as he approaches the table. His sister has pulled any number of stunts on him, and this could be yet another one. He has always gotten the impression that her stunts fill some need in her that he can't understand. Her best—or worst—stunt to date was to fire Mom's part-time healthcare assistant once Connor had agreed to move back and take care of Mom part-time. It would have looked bad to the relatives back in Taiwan, his sister insisted, for someone outside of the family to take care of Mom. He couldn't afford to hire an assistant by himself and his father—Connor knows people his age with grandparents who are older than his father—could barely take care of himself. So, Connor ended up taking care of Mom full-time instead. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't relieved when she finally did die, even if being relieved makes him a monster.

The urn with Mom's ashes has been sitting on the mantel of his sister's fireplace for months now. That it's taken his sister this long to show up is downright sporting. She might really just be here for dinner. That flicker of hope is completely unwarranted, but he can't help himself.

"Prue." Connor stands in front the table. For her, he's careful to iron all inflection out of his voice.

"I need you to renounce your citizenship." She says this as casually as someone who liked him might say hello.

And hope dies again. Connor, though, does not miss a beat. He is a food-crafting machine.

The request for her order falls smoothly from his mouth. She orders the most outrageous thing on the menu, the scale-accurate model of the Chrysler Building. It's only there to make everything else look reasonable and affordable. He is aghast, but he merely nods and smiles. His heels click, his body pivots, and he's gone to the kitchen to gather the ingredients before he realizes he's even moved.

The raw materials that will become the Chrysler Building fill both tiers of his cart. Inertia gives it a mind of its own as he steers it around the tables in the dining room. The maître d' stops him.

"Sure you want to do this by yourself? I hear the staff here is top notch."

The maître d's gaze flicks over to the handsome band singer. "Besides, you already have his attention. Showboating isn't going to make him notice you more."

The Chrysler Building normally takes five servers and three table bussers to pull off. Conner isn't building it by himself to prove anything to the handsome band singer, not that he's against showing off to him. In the moment of reflection before he responds, he realizes he's not even doing this to prove anything to himself. If the customer were anyone but his sister, he might have put a crew together and put up with their help.

"No, I can do it." He wants to push on, but the maître d' reaches for his arm.

"Obviously, but that's not the question." Her smile is warm and still something Connor's not used to. "Do you *want* to do this by yourself? There's a crew of trustworthy servers and table bussers who'll help you in any way you ask."

"I don't think that's the question, either." Connor pushes on and, this time, the maître d' lets go.

Prue smirks when she sees the cart. Something tightens inside Connor, but he forces her expression to pass right through him.

The Chrysler Building is a deconstructed paella composed of discrete floors that become ever lighter and more delicate as they approach the building's crystalline spire. Garlic and saffron perfume the air as he prepares all the layers from the grouper at the bottom to the clear tomato distillate at the top at once. Various proteins transform from raw to poached as a deft gesture of his hand lifts them off their plates. At a glance, a pot of water begins to simmer and the water is infused with flavors from fish bones and shrimp shells. Within minutes, the water is transformed into savory stock. Grains of rice swirl about an invisible center. They swell and congeal as they absorb the stock that he makes rain down on them. Meanwhile, with another deft gesture, tomatoes dissolve then evaporate. Their clear condensate drips into a gelatin that Connor has crafted in the meantime.

Sweat trickles in tiny beads down Connor's face and back. The building's foundation, impeccably poached grouper glued into a slab, quivers on a gold-edged plate. As he lowers the next layer, Prue slides documents onto the

table.

“Durable power of attorney.” Prue offers Connor a pen. “Sign it.”

For a moment, Connor’s torso stiffens, his back ramrod straight. His rib cage shrinks but doesn’t expand again. Whatever’s inside twists. Asking him to renounce his citizenship was just a bit of anchoring, then. It’s the same trick the restaurant pulls when they put the Chrysler Building on the menu. Prue might want Connor to renounce his citizenship, but signing a durable power of attorney sounds so much more reasonable in comparison. Not that letting Prue act on his behalf in legal matters is a good idea. She still hasn’t told him what this is about. Then again, he also hasn’t asked.

He just keeps on multitasking. Everything has to happen at just the right moment or else some emulsion will fail to set properly or some foam will collapse. This is why it takes a team to build the Chrysler Building, or would if he weren’t so intent on proving himself to the uncaring audience. Prue sets her pen on the document. As he continues to craft, she just sits there, her arms folded across her chest, waiting.

He falls behind, of course. Not even when he was at his best could he maintain a stack at its bliss point, stabilize a foam, and place a slab of emulsion on an increasingly precarious stack of them at the same time. The foams are stiffer than they ought to be. The transparent flakes of flavored rice emulsion are rough and coarse rather than straight-edged and delicate. He sets them in rows to create the spire with as much precision as he has time for. The rows, one overlapped on top of another, are almost the narrowing concentric arcs they should be. The triangular flakes don’t always point at the tangent of the curve like they should. The effect is not that Art Deco sense of utter craftsmanship. When one is just trying to prevent the building from sagging or, worse, toppling over, one makes trade-offs.

The spire floats just above the top layer of gel. With deft hand gestures, he guides it onto the clear tomato-saffron distillate. As he does, Prue grasps at the durable power of attorney. The papers skid across the table before she catches them. The Chrysler Building wobbles.

“Look, this is just so I can tell the probate court that you want your third of the estate to go to Dad. I know you don’t want it to go to me.” She rolls her eyes. “If you don’t trust me, get a lawyer to draft something that says the

same thing.”

It takes effort to steady his breath. He is a rubber band being wound tighter and tighter. Prue hasn't so much as messaged him since the funeral, much less mentioned Mom or probate. Connor saw Mom's will once, but it must have been lost if probate matters. If they had the will, they'd just execute it. Also, some of Mom's "estate"—their parents aren't not exactly rich—must be in Taiwan. Grudgingly, Connor has to admit that having a Taiwanese citizen—to the extent that that's even a thing—take care of Taiwan probate might be easier. That doesn't mean having Connor renounce his US citizenship and repatriate to Taiwan makes any sense. Giving his own share to Dad does, though. If anyone had bothered to ask Connor what he wanted, that's what he would have told them. As best as he can remember, it's also what Mom wanted in her will.

Connor sets the spire in place. The building hardly sags at all.

“Sure.” His voice is as smooth and level as any layer of emulsion in the building he's just constructed. “I'll mail it to you.”

“Excellent. Let's settle up.” She pushes back in her chair. “Check, please.”

The rubber band snaps in two. It whirs as it unwinds. Its ragged ends flail where no one can see them. They slice the air, whistling with each strike. Their energy is spent in an instant and they lie limp in an unruly tangle.

“Very good.” He nods, all inflection ironed out of his voice.

With a click of his heels, he pivots to retrieve her check. His sister does not leave a tip.

* * *

Connor sits slumped on a bench in the restaurant's locker room. He's half-dressed. His pants are unbelted and unzipped. His shirt hangs unbuttoned off his torso. Elbows braced against his knees prop up his body as he stares at nothing. Any number of servers and table bussers have asked him whether he's okay as they changed out of their uniforms and back into street clothes. Connor merely croaks that he's fine, his gaze still aimed at some point beyond the row of lockers he faces. They all look at him, their eyebrows rise, and they sigh before carrying on with their own lives.

He's still sitting there like that when the handsome band singer shows up. Nick is half out of his shirt when he notices Connor. The shirt hangs off his body by one sleeve.

"Don't tell me you're fine, Connor." Nick crouches in front of him.

"Oh. Hi, Nick." Connor looks up for a moment, then breaks eye contact. "Congratulations. Now that you've passed the audition, are you leaving us?"

"Oh, that. It's just the district audition. I still have the regional and, if I'm lucky, the national after that." Nick shrugs. "I'm sorry some customer didn't even touch your work."

"Not some customer. My sister." Connor is too tired to resist any longer, so he lets the handsome band singer fill his gaze.

For all the width across his thick back and the way his chest and arms pop, Nick isn't built like some statue of Hercules. He's soft enough to read as human rather than demigod. His mouth opens and closes a few times before he finally speaks again.

"So, that's your sister." His gaze narrows, his lips purse, and distaste spreads across his face. "Am I supposed to slap you now?"

"What?"

"You told me once that if you ever let your sister railroad you into anything again, I should slap you."

"Oh, right." He actually had said that. They chat in the locker room surprisingly often. "No, I really do want my share of my mom's assets to go to my dad. It's what she would have wanted. I just need to get a document from a lawyer to that effect that will hold up in court."

Connor rolls his eyes at Nick's skeptical gaze. The handsome band singer has heard too many stories about Prue. Granted, Connor was the one who told him all of them.

"Can you afford the consulting fee?" Nick stands and finally pulls off his shirt. "I can spot you the money. Pay it back when you can."

"No. I got it." Connor yawns. "They're letting me pull extra shifts here."

Nick's gaze does not get any less skeptical. He goes back to his locker and pulls on a T-shirt. It manages to be both baggy and revealing on his body. Only now does it occur to Connor that he should change out of his uniform, too.

“Want a ride home?” Nick pulls on a pair of jeans. “You look like you’re going to fall asleep on the bus again.”

Back in civilian clothes, Connor shuts his locker. Now that Nick is fully dressed, looking at him doesn’t feel nearly as illicit. Nick, for his part, has chatted with Connor in every possible state of undress including naked. Illicit may not be how looking at Nick is supposed to feel.

“No, I’ll be fine.”

It’s cold out, and that’ll keep Connor alert enough to get on the bus. Sometimes, he gets lucky and he wakes up in time for his stop. Other times, well, he’s never not made it home.

Nick frowns again. He pulls on a thick coat. It ought to obscure the taper from his shoulders to his waist. It doesn’t.

“Look, if you ever want a ride—”

“I’ll ask.” And, after an awkward pause, he adds, “Thanks.”

“Well, safe travels, Connor.”

Nick slams his locker shut and leaves. His walk is jaunty, stepping in time to a sea shanty only he can hear. Connor collapses back onto the bench, but then forces himself back up and puts on his coat. It’s freezing out, and the bus waits for no man.

* * *

The lawyer that the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office recommended to Connor is three bus transfers away. It takes Connor several hours to get to her office. He shivers off the snow then hands the receptionist a check. The consulting fee has to be paid in advance.

The lawyer’s office is cozy and warm. A large desk sits between them. The lawyer is way more ambitious than he is. She leans forward, asking him to come back with documentation about his family and Mom’s assets. When it becomes clear that he can’t afford any more than this visit, she scribbles out something that her office will make presentable for him to give to his sister. Her reluctant expression and audible sigh screams “against my better judgement.” Maybe it’s just pity, but he’s not proud.

Shifts at the restaurant come and go. If Connor wants to chop vegetables and adjust the texture and flavor of meat for hours at a stretch, his fellow

servers are happy to give up those shifts. There are a couple rough weeks where Nick is gone, preparing for and, ultimately, winning his regional auditions. More than once, Connor's not sure how he's gotten home.

The time Connor doesn't spend at the restaurant, he spends in his own kitchen, a thin strip of linoleum flooring at one edge of his tiny apartment. Mom's pot stickers won't recreate themselves. The extra shifts at work now pay for flour, pork, vegetables, and spices. He figured out the hot-water dough a while ago. As winter thaws into spring, he is still puzzling out the filling.

The dough rests in a bowl covered by a damp cloth. In another bowl, he mixes pork, scallions, ginger, soy sauce, and sesame oil by hand. A savory, salty meatiness with a slight jab of heat fills his mouth as the mixture squishes between his fingers. He frowns. The flavor is still not what he remembers. He tamps down the fire from the scallions as he works the ingredients together. In retrospect, he should have stuck with jiucai.

He rolls out the dough into a long snake. One by one, he rounds the small clumps he breaks off between his palms. Forming the tiny balls of dough used to be his job when he was too young to pay attention to how his mom made the filling. Just like he's doing now, his mom would roll out each ball into a circle, put in a dollop of filling, then crimp the circle into a dumpling. When he's done, several dozen of them form a neat grid on the floured table.

He crafts rather than steams then fries the dumplings. No one wanted Connor to spend the years training to be a food crafter. Well, except for Connor, but no one cared what he thought. Since he is a food crafter, though, there's no point to not taking advantage of that. Whatever made Mom's pot stickers Mom's has nothing to do with a bamboo steamer or frying pan.

The dumplings bobble into the air. They plump with steam and are seared so that they all have crunchy, slightly oily, and savory crusts. Unlike anyone using a steamer and a frying pan, he can hit the bliss point exactly every time.

He slides a plate beneath them, then lets them fall. Juices dribble down his chin when he tries one. It's fine, perfectly cooked even, but it's no more than that. It doesn't taste like Mom's. They never do. He can diddle with the flavors. Hell, if he put his mind to it, he could make the dumplings taste like a crisp, tart apple tinged with cinnamon and cardamom. What he can't do, at

least not yet, is make them taste like the ones he remembers, the ones his mom made when he was fourteen when she wouldn't show him what to do no matter how much he begged.

He pulls a journal out a drawer. The cover is tattered, and variegated pages paint swirls along the edges formed when the pages stack as the journal is shut. A bookmark sticks out the top. Each page has the flavor of a batch of dumplings he has made. This way, he never tries the same dumplings twice. He opens it by the bookmark to a blank white page. He scrawls today's date on it, then infuses it with the flavor of this batch. Streaks of green flow down the yellowing page.

The journal goes back into the drawer. The dumplings go into a resealable plastic container. They've become surprisingly popular at the restaurant's staff meals. Connor, however, can't make himself eat them.

* * *

The maître d' hands Connor a notebook that has "Mom's recipes" written in his sister's precise handwriting on the cover. Connor's hands shake so much, the notebook vibrates. His heart pounds. The notebook is probably not what it looks like but, as always, he can't help hoping. He pushes past her and several startled servers, and nearly crashes into a table busser as he sprints out of the dining room.

Customers in their elegant dinner jackets and evening dresses wait in the restaurant's lobby. They sit on overstuffed sofas and chat as they wait for their tables. Connor manages to halt his run just as he reaches them. He catches sight of Prue just as she pulls on the door to leave.

"What is this?" Connor is standing next to the maître d's stand, holding the notebook out at her.

Prue turns around. She rolls her eyes and purses her lips.

"What does it look like?" Her head shakes in disbelief. "I *thought* you'd thank me."

Her tone is sharper than any knife. Connor is convinced Prue doesn't have any other way to speak. That said, the sharpest knives make the cleanest cuts. You barely feel them. They slide rather than tear through the flesh.

"So everything went okay with probate?" He clutches the notebook to his

side. “My share of stuff went to Dad?”

“Oh, that.” She turns around and pulls open the door. “I got Dad to give his share to me. I’m in a better position to deal with it.”

She is out the door before Connor can collect himself. He just stands there watching the door close. The customers do an admirable job of chatting with each other and waiting as though Connor and Prue were not talking at each other from across the lobby.

“Are you all right?” The maître d’s voice takes Connor by surprise. “Take the night off. It’s not like you haven’t earned one, or ten.”

He turns to the maître d’, now back at her stand. A forced smile breaks his face.

“No, I’ll be fine.” He holds up a hand, as if to press her away. “I just need to get back to work.”

He rushes back into the dining room before she has a chance to respond. The rest of his shift is a blur. Customers are served. Water is transformed into seasoned beef stock then into a powder that is sprinkled on top of an emulsion of onion and gruyere that sits on top of parmesan-coated cracker. Veal shanks become their braised, tender selves and are infused with the flavors of tomatoes, rosemary, and bay leaf. Foams that taste of apple and cranberries float over a bed of puff pastry. Food seems to craft itself.

It hasn’t, because, after the shift ends, he is sweat-soaked, stripped to the waist, and collapsed on the bench in the locker room. The noise of slammed locker doors, zipped zippers, and chatty servers surrounds him. People ask him whether he’s okay as they pass by, and he tells them he’ll be fine in a minute. When he sits up, the locker room is empty. He takes the notebook his sister gave him out of his locker.

His heart starts to pound and his hands shake as he opens the notebook. The hope that bubbles in him makes him queasy. Years of searching and experimenting could be over in an instant because of help from, of all people, his sister. It’s not impossible Mom told Prue her recipes. Prue was the one Mom expected to be interested in cooking. It’s not impossible that Prue would write them down. Writing them down for Connor is a bit of a stretch. Passing Mom’s recipes down, though, would make her look good to their relatives.

When he reads the first recipe, the bubble of hope growing inside him bursts. He riffles through the notebook. The pages rustle past. Spare text in his sister's airy hand is spread across each page. It's a definitely notebook of recipes, just not their mom's.

He snaps the book shut, expecting to dash it against the lockers. Anger is supposed to shudder through him. Instead, he laughs.

His arms squeeze the notebook to his chest. His laughter is a hand saw ripping through wood. Air leaves his lungs before it's had a chance to enter and tears fill his eyes.

He stops only when he realizes he's no longer alone. At some point, the handsome band singer, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, entered the locker room. Connor snaps straight, seated on the bench, the final laugh choked in his throat.

Nick's gaze sweeps across Connor. It stops at Connor's tear-filled eyes.

"What did your sister do to you this time?" Nick's gaze is gentle, as though he actually wants to know. "Would you like a hug?"

Connor smiles as he wipes the tears from his eyes. He shows Nick the notebook.

"What she gave me is absolutely not a notebook of Mom's recipes." Connor sets the notebook on the bench. "You know how you can look at a piece of music and know how it will sound?"

"Oh, you can look at a recipe and know how it will taste." Nick sits next to Connor on the bench. He pats Connor's knee. "I'm sorry, Connor."

"No, it's fine. It's weirdly well meaning, actually. Anyone else—well, maybe not anyone else *here*, but anyone else—might believe these are my mom's recipes and stop trying to recreate them." Connor shrugs. "That's just the way my sister is. She's never going to change."

Connor starts laughing again. It's more gentle this time. He's hunched over, and his shoulders start pumping up and down.

"What's so funny?" Nick picks up the notebook and starts thumbing through it.

"Mom's dead. Probate's settled. If I don't want to, I don't have to deal with Prue anymore." Connor forces the next words out. "And I don't want to. Does that make me a monster?"

“Then don’t deal with her anymore.” The smile on his face is kind, not cruel. “It doesn’t make you a monster.”

“Um, Nick.” Getting these next words out is like summiting a mountain. “Can I have a ride home? I don’t—”

“Sure. Any time. It’s my pleasure.”

* * *

Connor doesn’t invite Nick into his apartment. He wants to, and Nick even looks a little disappointed when Connor doesn’t and just says goodbye instead. The apartment, though, is a mess. Besides, there’s something Connor wants to do tonight, and he needs to do it alone.

Nick’s car disappears down the street. It’s an odd thing, such a big man in such a small car. When Connor first saw it, he wondered how Nick would fold himself into the driver’s seat. Maybe he’ll ask for another ride sometime. Take another crack at figuring that out.

His kitchen is the one neat area in his apartment. His training is too ingrained in him for the kitchen to be anything but pristine. All the surfaces have been wiped down. Everything is in its place.

He opens a window. It’s spring, and the breeze that drifts in is not freezing. The battery pops out of the smoke detector with a practiced ease. He places a stockpot on the floor and puts into it: his dumpling journal, the notebook his sister gave him, and a lit match.

Journal pages char, curl up, and slowly become ash. The scent of steaming dumplings perfume the air. The smell is not the one he remembers from when he was a kid, but it still reminds him of watching his mom cook. She’d roll out tiny balls of dough, fill them, and crimp them so quickly, he never had a chance to work out how to make the dumplings for himself. She always refused to show him, saying she’d always be around to make them for him.

She, of course, will never make them for anyone ever again, and he needs to stop trying to recreate them. Prue, much as he hates to admit it, has a point. That doesn’t mean he won’t say goodbye to her, too.

The notebook pages catch fire. The burning paper smokes. Black rings eat away at each page. Grey wisps stretch up, tangling with one another as they

go. A thread of bitter weaves itself into the tapestry of flavors.

Connor sits in front of the fire. Flames lick the sides of the stockpot. Individual tendrils dart up. The fire is a hungry creature licking its prey. The paper curls and shrinks with faint crinkles and crackles. Slowly, he breathes in the fragrant and the bitter as he watches his memories render into ash.

END

About the Author

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ELIZABETH BEAR

DERIVING LIFE

Deriving Life

ELIZABETH BEAR

illustration by

MARY HAASDYK

TOR·COM 

Man and animals are in reality vehicles and conduits of food, tombs of animals, hostels of Death, coverings that consume, deriving life by the death of others.

—Leonardo da Vinci

Sometime later; maybe tomorrow

My name is Marq Tames, I'm a mathematician, and I'm planning suicide.

Until today, I wasn't *planning*. You couldn't say I was *planning*. Because I know perfectly well that it would be the grossest of irresponsibility to plan my exit ... at least until Tamar didn't need me anymore.

You don't do that to people you love.

You don't do that to people who love you.

Now

"Stop taking your oxy," Tamar says, skeletal hand on my wrist. There's not much left of them. Their skin crackles against the back of my fingers when I touch their cheek. Their limbs are withered, but their torso is drum-taut, swollen-seeming. I don't look. Death—and especially transitional death—is so much prettier in the dramas.

"Fuck that," I answer.

"Just stop taking the damn bonding hormones." Their papery cheek is wet. "I can't stand to see you in this much pain, Marq. Even Atticus can't help me with it."

"Do you think it wouldn't hurt me worse *not* to be here?"

Tamar doesn't answer. Their eyelids droop across bruised sockets.

I'm exhausting them.

“Do you think this didn’t hurt people before? Before we could contract for pair-bond maintenance? How do you think people did it then? Do you think losing a spouse was *easier*?”

Tamar closes their eyes completely.

And no, of course, no, they do not think that. They’d just never paused to think about it at all. We all forget that people in the past were really just like us. We want to forget it. It makes it easier to live with the knowledge of how much suffering they endured.

They endured it because they had no choice.

Tamar avoiding thinking about that is the same as Tamar thinking that I should go away. Stop taking my drugs. Maybe file for divorce. Tamar wants to think there’s a way this could hurt me less. They’re thinking of me, really.

I’ve already stopped taking the oxy. I haven’t told Tamar. It helps them to think there’s something more I could do. That I’m just being stubborn. That I’m in charge of this pain.

That I have a choice.

I wish I were in charge. I wish, I *wish* I had a choice. But I don’t need bonding hormones to love Tamar.

I knew how this ended when I signed the contract.

I’m still here.

“Is this what you want?” Tamar asks me. One clawlike hand sweeps the length of the body that used to be so lithe, so strong.

“I just want every second of you I can get,” I say. “I’ll have to do without soon enough.”

Tamar squints at me. I don’t think I’m fooling them, but they’re not going to call me on it.

Not right now. Maybe not ever.

Maybe they’d rather not know for sure.

But the thing is, I don’t want to keep doing this without them. Especially with, well, the other stuff that’s going on.

* * *

I knew Tamar’s deal before we got involved. It was all in the disclosures. I knew there were limits on our time together.

But you tell yourself, going in, that it'll be fine. That fifteen years is better than no years and hey, the course might be slow; you might get twenty. Twenty-two. How many relationships actually last twenty-two years?

And there are benefits to being the spouse of someone like Tamar, just as there are benefits to having a Tenant.

Something is better than nothing. Love is better than loneliness. And it's not like anybody gets a guarantee.

So you tell yourself that you can go into this guarded. Not invest fully, because you know there's a time limit. And that it might even be better because of that, because it can't be a trap for a lifetime.

There's life after, you tell yourself.

So much life.

Except then after comes, and you discover that maybe the Mythic After Time isn't what you wanted at all. You just want now to keep going forever.

But now won't do that. Or rather, it will. But the now you want to keep is not the now you get. The now you get is a river, sweeping the now you wanted eternally back toward the horizon disappearing behind you.

* * *

Evangeline doesn't sit behind her desk for our sessions. In fact, her desk is pushed up against the wall in her office, and she usually turns her chair around and sits down in it facing me, her back to the darkened monitor. I'm usually over on the other side of the room, next to a little square table with a lamp.

Evangeline's my transition specialist. She's a gynandromorph—from environmental toxicity, rather than by choice—and she likes archaic pronouns and I try to respect that.

I'm legally mandated to see her for at least a year before I make my final decision. It's been eighteen months, because I started visiting her a little before Tamar went into hospice. So I could make my decision tomorrow.

If I thought Evangeline would sign off on it yet. Which she won't.

Today she isn't happy. I can tell because she keeps fidgeting with her wedding rings, although her face is smooth and affectless.

She's unhappy because I just said something she didn't like.

What I'd said was, "If you change who you are so that someone will love you, and you're happy afterward, is that so terrible?"

Transition specialists aren't supposed to let you know when you've rattled their cages, but her disapproval is strong enough that even if she doesn't demonstrate it, I can taste it. I wonder if there are disapproval pheromones.

"Well," she says, "it seems like you have a lot of choices to consider, Marq. Have you come up with a strategy for assessing them?"

I didn't answer.

She didn't frown. She's too good at her job to frown.

She waited ninety seconds for me to answer before she added, "You know, you do have a right to be happy without sacrificing yourself."

Maybe it was supposed to hit me like an epiphany. But epiphanies have been thin on the ground for me recently.

"The right, maybe," I answered. "But do I have the *ability*?"

"You'll have to answer that," she said, after another ninety seconds.

"Yeah," I said. "That's the problem in a nutshell, right there, isn't it?"

* * *

Robin, my non-spouse partner, picks me up in the parking lot, and *they're* not happy with me either.

Opening salvo: "You need to drop this thing, Marq."

"This thing?"

Robin waves at the two-story brick façade of the clinic.

"Becoming a Host?"

They nod. Hands on the steering wheel as legally mandated, but I'm glad the car is handling the driving. Robin's knuckles are paler brown than the surrounding flesh, their face drawn in determination. "You can't do this."

"Tamar did."

"Tamar is dying because of it."

"Do you think I don't know that? I'm fifty-six years old, Robin. Another twenty-five years or so in guaranteed good health seems pretty attractive right now."

Robin sighs. "It's maybe twenty years of good health if you're lucky, and

you know it. You always walk out of that office spoiling for a fight.”

I think about that. It might be true. “That might be true.”

We drive in silence for a while. We have a dinner date tonight, and Robin brings me home to the bungalow Tamar and I used to share. My bungalow now. I’ll inherit the marital property, though not Tamar’s Host benefits. It’s okay. Once they’re gone, I’ll have my own.

Or Robin and Tamar will win, and I’ll go back to work. The house is paid for anyway. It’s a gorgeous little Craftsman, relocated up here to the 51st parallel from Florida before the subtropics became uninhabitable. And before Florida sank beneath the waves. It got so it was cheaper to move houses than build them for a while, especially with the population migrations at the end of the twenty-first century and the carbon-abatement enforcement. Can you imagine a planet full of assholes who used to just ... cut down trees?

Tamar liked it—Tamar *likes* it—because that same big melt that put our house where it is also gave us the Tenants. Or—more precisely—gave them back.

Robin parks, and we walk up the drive past late-summer black-eyed Susans and overblown roses that need deadheading. I let us in, and we walk into the kitchen. Robin’s brought a bottle of white wine and the makings for a salad with chickpeas and pistachios. I rest on a stool while they cook, moving around my kitchen like they spend several nights a week there—which they do.

Tamar approved heartily of me bringing home a gourmet cook. My eyes sting for a moment, with memory. I bury my face in my wine glass until I feel like I can talk again.

“I could keep a part of Tamar with me if I do this. You know that. I could get a scion of Atticus, and have a little bit of Tamar with me forever.”

“Or you could let go,” Robin says. “Move on.”

“Live here alone.” If I had a scion, I wouldn’t be *alone*.

“It’s a nice house,” Robin says. “You have a long life ahead of you.” They slide a plate in front of me, assembled so effortlessly it seems like a few waves of the hand have created a masterpiece of design. “Being alone isn’t so bad. Nobody moves your stuff.”

Robin likes living alone. Robin likes having a couple of lovers and their

own place where they spend most nights by themselves. *Robin* doesn't get that other than Tamar—and, I suppose, Atticus—I have been alone my whole life, emotionally if not physically, and the specter of having to go back to that, having to return to that loneliness after seventeen years of relief, of belonging, of having a *place* ...

I can't.

I can't. But I just have to. Because I don't have a choice.

I poke my food with my fork. "The future I wanted was the one with Tamar."

Everything about the salad is perfect and perfectly dressed. Robin did the chickpeas themselves; these never saw the inside of a can. Their buttery texture converts to sand in my mouth when I try to eat one.

"And you had it." Robin picks up their own plate and hooks a stool around with one foot, joining me informally at the counter. "Paid in full, one future. I'm not saying you don't get to grieve. Of course you do. But the world isn't ending, Marq. Soon, once you get beyond the grief, you will have to look for a new future. Futures chain together, one after the other. You don't just sing one song or write one book and then decide never to create anything again."

"Some people do exactly that, though. What about Harper Lee?"

Robin blows on a chickpea as if it were hot. "No feeling is final. No emotion is irrevocable."

"Some choices are."

"Yes," Robin says. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Seventeen years, two months, and three days ago

"Caring for a patient consumes your life," this beautiful person I'd just met was saying.

I was thirty-nine years old and single. Their name was ... their name is Tamar.

I studied them for a minute, then sighed. "I feel like you're trying to tell me something," I admitted. "But I need a few more verbs and nouns."

"Sorry," Tamar said. "I'm not trying to beat around the bush. I'm

committed to being honest with potential partners, but I also tend to scare people off when I tell them the truth.”

“If I’m scared off, I’ll still pay for your drink.”

“Deal,” they said. And drained it. “So here’s the thing. I’m a zombie. A podling. A puppethead.”

“Oh,” I said. I studied their complexion for signs of illness and saw nothing except the satin gleam of flawless skin. “I’m not a bigot. I don’t ... like those words.”

Tamar watched me. They waved for another drink.

“You have acquired metastatic sarcoma.”

“I have a Tenant, yes.”

“I’ve never spoken with somebody...” I finish my own drink, because now I can’t find the nouns. Or verbs.

“Maybe you have,” Tamar said. “And you just haven’t known it.”

Tamar’s new drink appeared. They said, “I chose this path because I grew up in a house where I was a caretaker for somebody who was dying. A parent. And I have a chronic illness, and I never want to put anyone else in that position. No one will ever be trapped because of me.”

They took a long pull of their drink and smiled apologetically. “My life expectancy wasn’t that great to begin with.”

“Look,” I said. “I like you. And it’s your life, your choice. Obviously.”

“Makes it hard to date,” they said resignedly. “Even today, everybody wants a shot at a life partner.”

“Nothing is certain,” I said.

“Death and global warming,” they replied.

“I would probably have let my parent die, in your place,” I admitted. One good confession deserved another. “They were *awful*. So. I come with some baggage and some land mines, too.”

Now

“I’ve done so many things for you,” Tamar says. “This thing—”

“*Dying*.” Still dodging the nouns. Still dodging the verbs.

“Yes.” Their face is waxy. At least they’re not in any pain. Atticus

wouldn't let them be in pain. "*Dying* is a thing I need to do for myself. On my own terms. You need to let it be mine, Marq."

I sit and look at my hands. I look at my wedding ring. It has a piece of dinosaur bone in it. So does Tamar's, the one they can't wear anymore because their hands are both too bony and too swollen.

"You're *healthy*, Marq." Tamar says.

I know. I know how lucky I am. How few people at my age, in this world we made, are as lucky as I am. How amazing that this gift of health was wasted on somebody as busted as me.

What if Tamar had been healthy? What if Tamar were outliving me? Tamar *deserved* to live, and Tamar deserved to be happy.

I was just taking up space somebody lovable could have been using. The air I was breathing, the carbon for my food ... those could have benefited somebody else.

"You make me worthy of being loved." I take a breath. "You make me want to make myself worthy of you."

"You were always lovable, Marq." Their hand moves softly against mine.

"I don't know how to be me without you," I say.

"I can't handle that for you right now," Tamar says. "I have to die."

"I keep thinking I can ... figure this out. Solve it somehow."

"You can't derive people the way you derive functions, Marq."

I laugh, shakily. I can't do this. I have to do this.

"You said when we met that you never wanted to be a burden on somebody else." As soon as it's out I know it was a mistake. Tamar's already gaunt, taut face draws so tight over the bones that hair-fine parallel lines crease the skin, like a mask of the muscle fibers and ligaments beneath.

Tamar closes their eyes. "Marq. I know how hard it is for you to feel worthy. But right now ... if you can't let this one thing be about me, you need to be someplace else."

"Tamar, I'm sorry—"

"Go away," Tamar says.

"Love," I say.

"Go away," they say. "Go away, I don't love you anymore, I can't stand to watch somebody I love go through what you're going through. Marq, just

go away. Let me do this alone.”

“Love,” I say.

“Don’t call me that.” Eyes still closed, they turn their face away.

Sixteen years, eight months, and fifteen days ago

I took Tamar to the gorge.

I’d never taken anybody to the gorge before. It’s my favorite place in the world, and one of the things I love about it is that it’s so private and inaccessible. If you love something, and it’s a secret, and you tell two people, and they love it, and they tell two people ... well, pretty soon it’s all over the net and it’s not private anymore.

We sat on the bridge over the waterfall—I think it must have been somebody’s Eagle Scout project, and so long ago that nobody maintains the trail up to it anymore. It was a cable suspension job, and it swayed gently when we lowered ourselves to the slats.

The waterfall was so far below that we could hear each other speak in normal tones, and the spray couldn’t even drift up to jewel in Tamar’s hair.

There were rainbows, though, shifting when you turned your head, and I turned my head a lot, because I was staring at Tamar and pretending I wasn’t staring at Tamar.

Tamar was looking at their hands.

“I used to come up here as a kid,” I said. “To get away.”

“How on earth did you ever find it?” They kicked their feet like a happy child.

“It was less overgrown then.” My hands were still sticky from cutting through the invasive bittersweet to get here. I was glad I’d remembered to throw the machete I used for yard work in the trunk. And to tell Tamar to wear stout boots.

“Where did you live?”

I pointed back over my shoulder. “That way. The house is gone now, thank God.”

“Burned down?”

“No, they took it apart to make ... something. I didn’t care. I was long

gone by then.” Tamar already knew I’d left at eighteen and never looked back. “This was the closest thing I had to a home.”

“How long do you think this has been here?”

I shrugged. “Since the Big Melt? It will probably be here forever now. At least until the next Ice Age.”

I saw the corner of Tamar’s smile out of the corner of my eye. “You’re showing me your home?”

The idea brought me short I kicked my own feet in turn. “I guess I am.”

We looked at rainbows for a little while, until a cloud went over the sun.

“You were sexy with that machete,” Tamar said, and looked up from their folded hands into my eyes.

We both reeked of tick spray.

And they kissed me anyway.

Now

I go home.

I sit on the couch we picked out together. There’s music playing, because I don’t seem to have the energy to turn it off. My feet are cold. I should go and get socks.

Part of the problem is not having anywhere to be. I shouldn’t have taken that family medical leave. Except if I hadn’t, what use exactly would I be to my students and the college right now?

Fifteen minutes later, my feet are even colder. I still haven’t found the wherewithal to go and get the socks. My phone beeps with a message and I think maybe I should look at it.

Ten minutes later, it beeps again. I pick it up without thinking and glance at the notifications.

I drop the phone.

Marq, this is Tamar’s Tenant, Atticus.

We need to talk.

I fumble it back up again. The messages are still there. Still burning at me while the day grows dim. The ground and the sky outside seem to blur into each other.

I've spoken with Atticus before. We were in-laws, after a fashion. But not recently. Recently ... I've been avoiding it. Avoiding even thinking about it.

Avoiding even acknowledging its existence.

Because it's the thing that is killing my spouse.

I get up. I put socks on. I start a pot of tea, and though I usually drink it plain, today I put milk and sugar in.

I need to answer this text. Maybe Atticus can help me. Help me explain to Tamar.

Maybe Atticus can help me with my transition specialist.

But when I slide my finger across the screen, a tremendous anxiety fills me. I type and delete, type and delete.

Nothing is right. Nothing is what I mean to say.

I think about what I'm going to text back to Atticus for so long that I do not text it back at all. It's not so much that I talk myself out of it; it's just that I'm exhausted and profoundly sad and can't find much motivation for anything, and despite the tea and sugar I transition seamlessly from lying on the sectional staring at the popcorn texture of the ceiling to a deep sleep punctuated by paranoid nightmares that are never quite bad enough to wake me completely.

Sunrise finds me still on the sofa, eyes crusty and neck aching. Texts still unanswered, and now it feels like too much time has gone by, even though I tell myself I do want to talk to Atticus. Other than me, it's the being in the world who loves Tamar most, at least theoretically. I'm just anxious because I'm so sad. Because the situation is so fraught.

Because I'm furious with Atticus for taking Tamar away from me, even though I know that's not reasonable at all. But since when are brains and feelings reasonable?

And it's dying along with Tamar, although I'm sure it has cells in stasis for eventual reproduction. I know that Atticus has at least two offspring already, because I've met them and their Hosts occasionally.

That should comfort me a little, shouldn't it? That some bit of Tamar is immortal, and will carry on in those Tenants, and their offspring on down the line? And maybe, if I am convincing enough, in me.

I think of my own parent's blood in me, of my failure to reproduce. Isn't

it funny how we phrase that? *Failed to reproduce*. I didn't fail. I actively tried not to. It was a conscious choice.

Childhood is a miserable state of affairs, and I wouldn't wish it on anybody I loved.

I gave up trying to win my parent's affection long before they died. I gave up trying to be seen or recognized.

I settled for just not fighting anymore.

Sixteen years, eight months, and sixteen days ago

I reached over in the darkness and stroked Tamar's hair. It had a wonderful texture, springy in its loose curls. Coarse but soft.

"You're thinking, Marq," they said.

"I'm always thinking."

I heard the smile in Tamar's voice as they rolled to face me. "It's not good for you if you can't turn it off once in a while, you know. What were you thinking about?"

"You ... Atticus."

"Sure. There's a lot to think about." They didn't sound upset.

"Do you remember?"

A huff of thoughtful breath. A warm hand on my side. "Remember?"

"All of Atticus's other lives?"

Tamar made a thoughtful noise. "That's a common misconception, I guess. Atticus itself didn't have other lives. It's a clone of those older Tenants, so in a sense—a cellular sense—the same individual. The Tenants only bud when they choose to, which is why those first Hosts were so unlucky. The Tenants knew infecting them without consent was unethical."

"But the alternative was to let their species die." I thought about that. What I would do. If it were the entire human race on the line.

Tamar said, "I can assure you, one of the reasons the Tenants work so hard for us is that they have a tremendous complex of guilt about that, and still aren't sure they made the right decision."

Who could be? Let your species die, or consume another sentient being without its consent?

What would *anyone* do?

Tamar said, “And it’s true that we do share experiences. It can’t perceive the world outside my body without me, after all—the same way I can perceive my interior self much better through its senses. And it has—there’s some memory transferred. More if you use a big sample of the parent Tenant to engender the offspring. Though that’s harder on the Host.”

“So it—you—don’t remember being a Neanderthal.”

More than a huff of laughter this time; an outright peal. “Not exactly. It can share some memories with me that are very old. I have a sense of the Tenants’ history.”

It had been before I was born: The lead paleoanthropologist and two others working on several intact *Homo neanderthalensis* cadavers that had been discovered in a melting glacier had all developed the same kind of slow-growing cancer. That had been weird enough, though by then we knew about contagious forms of cancer—in humans, in wolves, in Tasmanian devils.

It got weirder when the cancers had begun, the researchers said, to talk to them.

Which probably would have been dismissed as crackpottery, except the cancer also cured that one paleobotanist’s diabetes, and suddenly they all seemed to have a lot of really good, coherent ideas about how that particular Neanderthal culture operated.

What a weird, archaic word, *glacier*.

I said, “It just seems weird that I’m in bed with somebody I’ve never met.”

As I said it I realized how foolish it was. Anytime you’re in bed with somebody, you’re in bed with everybody who came before you—everybody who hurt them, healed them, shaped them. All those ghosts are in the room.

Tamar’s Tenant was just a little less vaporous than most.

A rustle of sliding fabric as Tamar sat upright. “Do you want to?”

Now

“I’m sorry, Mx. Tames, but you’re not on the visitor list anymore.”

“But Tamar—”

“Mx. Sadiq specifically asked that you not be admitted, Mx. Tames.” The nurse frowns at me, their attractive brown eyes crinkling kindly at the corners.

I stare. I feel like somebody has just thrust a bayonet through me from behind. Like my diaphragm has been skewered, is spasming around an impalement, and nothing—not breath nor words—will come out until someone drags it free.

The bayonet twists and I get half a breath. “But they’re my spouse—”

“They named you specifically,” the nurse says again. They glance sideways. In a lowered voice, dripping with unexpected sympathy, they say, “I’m so sorry. I know it doesn’t make it easier for you, but sometimes ... sometimes, toward the end, people just want to be alone. It can be exhausting to witness the pain and fear of loved ones. Do you have other family members you could contact? It’s not my place to offer advice, of course—”

I waved their politeness away with one hand. “You have more experience with this sort of thing than I ... than I ... thank...”

The sobs spill over until they are nearly howls. I bend over with my hands on my knees, doubled in pain. Gasping. Sobbing. I try to stand upright and wobble, catching my shoulder on the wall. Then someone has dragged a chair over behind me and the nurse is guiding me gently into it, producing a box of Kleenex, squeezing my shoulder to ground me.

Surprisingly professional, all of it.

Well, this is an oncology ward. I guess they have some practice.

“Mx. Tames,” the nurse says when I’ve slowed down and I’m gasping a little. “Is there another family member we can call? I don’t think you ought to go home alone right now.”

* * *

One of the things that drew me to Tamar was their joy. They were always so happy. I mean, not offensively happy—not inappropriately happy or chirpy or obnoxiously cheerful. Just happy. Serene. Joyful.

It was infectious.

Literally.

Tamar’s relationship with Atticus gave them purpose, and that was part of

it. It also gave them a financial cushion such that they could do whatever they wanted in life—pursue art, for example. Travel. (And take me with them.) Early on, the Tenants had bargained with a certain number of elderly, dying billionaires; another decade or so of pain-free, healthier life ... in each case, for a portion of their immense fortune.

And then there were the cutting edge types, the science-sensation seekers who asked to get infected because it was a new thing. An experience nobody else had. Or because they were getting old, their best and most creative years behind them.

As a mathematician in their fifties, I can appreciate the strength of that motivation, let me tell you.

Some of those new Hosts were brilliant. One was Jules Herbin, who with the help of their Tenant, Maitreyi, went on to found Moth.me.

Herbin was not the only Host who built a business empire.

The Tenants had had a hundred years to increase those fortunes. The Tenants, as a collective—and their Hosts, by extension!—did not lack for money. Sure, there were still fringe extremists who insisted that the Tenants were an alien shadow government controlling human society and that they needed to be eradicated, but there hadn't been a lynching in my lifetime. In North America, anyway.

And there are still fringe extremists who insist the earth is flat. The Tenants have brought us a lot of benefits, and they insist on strict consent.

For Tamar, those benefits included being able to be pain-free and energetic, which is not a small thing when, like Tamar, you've been born with an autoimmune disorder that makes you tired and sore all the time.

And Atticus used its control over Tamar's endocrine system to make them truly, generously happy. Contented. Happy in ways that perhaps evolution did not prepare people for, when we were born into and shaped by generations of need and striving.

Atticus helped Tamar maintain boundaries, make good life choices, and determine the course of their life. It supported them in every conceivable way. In return, Tamar provided Atticus with living space, food, and the use of their body for a period every day while Tamar was otherwise sleeping. *That* took a little getting used to. But Tamar explained it to me as being similar to

dolphins—half their brain sleeps while the other half drives.

The Tenants really are good for people.

It's just that they also consume us. No judgment on them; we consume other living things to survive, and they do it far more ethically than we do. They only take volunteers. They make the volunteers go through an extensive long-term psychological vetting process.

And they take very good care of us while they metastasize through our bodies, consuming and crowding out every major organ system. They want us to live as long as possible, of course, because the life span of the Tenant is delineated by the life span of the Host. And yes, when they metastasize into a new Host, they take some elements of their old personality and intellect along with them—and some elements of the personality and identity of every previous Host, too. And they often combine metastatic cells from two or more Tenants to create a combined individual and make sure experiences and knowledge are shared throughout their tribe.

They've been a blessing for the aged and terminally ill. And even for those who are chronically ill, like Tamar, and choose a better quality of life for a shorter time over a longer time on earth replete with much more pain and incapacity.

A lot of people with intractable depression have signed up for Tenancy. Because they just want to know what it's like to be happy. Happy, and a little blind, I guess. It turns out that people with depression are more likely to be realistic about all sorts of things than those with "normal" neurochemistry.

Depression is realism.

The Tenants offer, among other things, an escape from that. They offer safety and well-being and not having to take reality too seriously. They offer the possibility that whatever you're feeling right now isn't as good as it gets.

They can change you for real. They can make you happy.

My reality, right now, is that the love of my life is dying, and doesn't want to talk to me.

Sixteen years, eight months, and fifteen days ago

Atticus, it turned out, talks most easily by texting. Or typing. It could take

direct control of Tamar’s voice—with their permission—but all three of us thought that would be weird. And would probably make me feel like the whole puppethead thing was more valid than I knew it to be. So we opened a chat, and Tamar and I sat on opposite sides of the room, and had one conversation out loud while Atticus and I had a totally different one via our keyboards.

It wasn’t a very deep conversation. Maybe I had expected it to be revelatory? But it was like ... talking to a friend of a friend with whom you don’t have much in common.

We struggled to connect, and it was a relief when the conversation ended.

Now

There are protestors as I come into the clinic. They call to me. I resolutely turn my eyes away, but I can’t stop my ears. One weeps openly, begging me not to go in. One holds a sign that says: *CHRIST COMFORTS THE AFFLICTED NOT THE INFECTED*. There’re all the usual suspects: *DOWN WITH PUPPETMASTERS. THE MIND CONTROL IS NOT SO SECRET ANYMORE*.

Another has a sign that says *GIVE ME BACK MY CHILD*.

I wish I hadn’t seen that one.

* * *

“There’s a part of me,” I tell Evangeline, “that is angry that Tamar doesn’t love me enough to ... to stay, I guess. I know they *can’t* stay; I know the decision was made long ago.”

“Do you feel like they’re choosing Atticus over you?”

“It sent me a text.”

Evangeline makes one of those noncommittal therapist noises. “How did that make you feel?”

“I want to talk to it.”

“You haven’t?”

I open my mouth to make an excuse. To say something plausible about respecting Tamar’s agency. Giving them the space they asked for. I think

about. I settle back in my chair.

Do I want a Tenant if I have to lie to get one?

I say, "I'm angry with it. I want to ignore that it exists."

"Sometimes," Evangeline says, "when we want something, we want it the same way children do. Without regard for whether it's possible or not. Impossibility doesn't make the wanting go away."

"You're saying that this is a form of denial."

"I'm saying that people don't change who they are, at base, for other people—not healthily. People, instead, learn to accommodate their differences. While still maintaining healthy boundaries and senses of self."

"By that definition, the Tenants are not people. We take them on; they make us happy. Give us purpose. Resolve our existential angst."

"Devour us from the inside out."

I laugh. "What doesn't?"

* * *

This time, Robin comes inside for me instead of waiting to pick me up outside. That makes me nervous, honestly. Robin is not an overly solicitous human being. Maybe they noticed the protestors and didn't want me to have to walk past them alone?

That hope sustains me until we're in the car together, side by side, and Robin says the four worst words in the English language. "We need to talk."

"Okay," I say, in flat hopelessness.

"I can't do this anymore," Robin says. "It isn't working out for me."

You'd think after the third or fourth bayonet they'd stop hurting so much, going in. They'd have an established path.

Not so.

* * *

So now I'm single. Nobody, it turns out, can handle the depth of what I'm feeling about losing Tamar. Not Tamar, not Robin.

Not me.

Evangeline can, though. Evangeline can because of proper professional

distance. Because she's not invested.

Because the only person putting the weight of their emotional needs on the relationship is me.

* * *

From the edge of the brocade armchair, I speak between the fingers I've lowered my face into. "This is a way for me to be with them forever."

"I can see how it would feel that way to you," Evangeline answers.

"I need someone to tell me that I am more than merely tolerated. I need to be valued," I say.

"You're valuable to them. To the Tenants."

"You begin to understand," I say. "Maybe I shouldn't need this. But I can't survive these feelings without help. It's not just that I want to be with Tamar. It's that I need to not be in so much pain."

She nods. I'm already on six kinds of pills. Are they helping? They are not helping.

I'm already trying to change myself so somebody will love me better.

So that *I* will love me better.

Evangeline says, "We need what we need. Judging ourselves doesn't change it. Sometimes a hug and a cookie right now mean more than a grand gesture at some indeterminate point in the future."

"What if we make an irrevocable decision to get that hug and that cookie?"

Evangeline lifts her shoulders, lets them fall. "My job is to make sure that you're making an educated decision about the costs and benefits of the cookie. Not to tell you how much you should be willing to pay for it."

* * *

I pace the house. I rattle pots in the kitchen but don't cook anything. I take an extra anxiety pill.

When it's kicked in, I pull out my phone and text Atticus with trembling hands. *Sorry about the delay. I needed to get my head on straighter.*

I understand. This is hard on all of us.

You have to make Tamar talk to me!

Tamar doesn't want you to do this. I have to honor their wishes.

Even after they're dead?

Especially after they're dead.

I can't do this alone.

We love you, the cancer says. We will always love you.

Tell Tamar I stopped taking the oxy, I type, desperate. Tell them I did what they asked. Tell them to please just let me come say goodbye.

* * *

I'm talking to the bloated mass that disfigures Tamar's strong, lithe body. It isn't them.

Except it is them.

And Atticus is dying, too, and *Atticus* is taking the time out to comfort somebody it's leaving behind. It's funny, because we never had a lot to say to each other in life. Maybe that was denial on my part as much as anything. But now, it is Tamar.

The only part of them that will still talk to me.

And I want it to be me as well.

I will tell them, Atticus types. I will tell them when they wake.

* * *

They that are not busy being born are busy dying.

What's the value of an individual? What is the impact of their choices? What is our responsibility for the impact of our choices on others? What is our responsibility to deal with our own feelings?

We're responsible for what we consume, right? And the repercussions of that consumption, too. If the Big Melt taught us anything, as a species, it taught us the relentless ethics of accountability.

So from a certain point of view, the Tenants owe me.

* * *

We love you.

* * *

Tamar is gone. The call came in the morning. The Tenants will be handling the arrangements, in accordance with Tamar's wishes.

Atticus, of course, is also gone.

I don't know if Tamar woke up after I talked to Atticus. I don't know if Atticus got a chance to tell them.

The house belongs to me now.

I should find some energy to clean it.

* * *

To Evangeline, I say, "What if you knew that if you changed yourself—let someone else change you, I suppose—you would be loved and valuable?"

"I'd say you are lovable and valuable the way you are. Changing yourself to be what someone else wants won't heal you, Marq."

I shake my head. "I'd say that people do it all the time. And without the guarantee the Tenants offer. Boob job, guitar lessons, fix your teeth, dye your hair, try to make a pile of money, answer a penis enlargement ad, lose weight, gain weight, lift weights, run a fucking marathon. They fix themselves and expect it will win them love."

"Or they find love and expect it to fix them," Evangeline offers gently. "Or sometimes they give love, and expect it to fix the beloved. If love doesn't fix you, it's not true love, is that what you're suggesting?"

"No. That only works if you're one of *them*."

She laughs. She has a good laugh, throaty and peeling but still somehow light.

"I had true love," I say more slowly. "It didn't fix me. But it made me lovable for the first time."

"You were always lovable. Maybe Tamar helped you feel it?"

"When you grow up being told over and over that you're unlovable, and then somebody perfect and joyous loves you ... it changes the way you feel about yourself."

"It's healing?" she suggests.

"It made me happy for a while."

"Did it?"

"So happy," I say.

She nibbles on the cap of her pen. She still uses old-fashioned notebooks.
“And now?”

“I can never go back,” I tell her. “I can only go forward from here.”

* * *

Robin still picks me up after my sessions. They said they still cared about me. Still wanted to be friends. They expressed concern about when I’m coming back to the university and whether they would like me to facilitate the bereavement leave.

They’re in HR; that’s how we met in the first place.

I want to shove their superciliousness down their throat. But I also do not want to be alone. Especially today, when we are going to the funeral.

Without Robin, I think I would be. Alone. Completely.

I don’t have a lot of the kind of friends you can rely on for emotional support. Maybe that’s one reason I leaned so hard on Tamar. I didn’t have enough outside supports. And I’ve eroded the ones I did have by being so broken about Tamar dying.

Don’t I get to be broken about this? The worst thing that’s ever happened to me?

When we’re in the car, though, Robin turns to me and says, “I need to confess to something.”

I don’t respond. I just sit, stunned already, waiting for the next blow.

“Marq?”

From a million miles away, I manage to raise and wave a hand. *Continue.*

“I wrote to the Tenant’s candidate review board about you. I suggested that you were recently bereaved and they should consider your application in that light.”

I can’t actually believe it. I turn slowly and blink at them.

“You what?”

“It’s for your own good—”

I stomp right over their words. “You know what’s for my own good? Respecting my fucking autonomy.”

“Even if it gets you killed?”

“It’s my life to spend as I please, isn’t it?”

Silence.

I open the car door. The motor stops humming—a safety cutoff. We hadn't started rolling yet, which is the only reason the door *will* open.

“If it meant I wouldn't go, would you come back to me?”

That asshole turns their face aside.

“Right,” I say. “I'll find my own way home, I guess. Don't worry about coming to the funeral.”

* * *

It's a lovely service. I wear black. I sit in the front row. I used an autocar to get here. I don't turn around to see if Robin showed up. I stand in the receiving line with Tamar's siblings and the people who are Hosting Atticus's closest friends. Robin *is* there. They don't come up to me. Nobody makes me talk very much.

I drink too much wine. Tamar's older sib puts me in an autocar and the autocar brings me home.

I can't face our bedroom. The Tenants made sure the hospital bed was removed weeks ago, when Tamar went into hospice and we knew they were not coming home. So there's nothing in our sunny bedroom except our own bedroom furniture.

I can't face it alone.

I put the box with Tamar's ashes on the floor beside the door, and I lie down on the sofa we picked out together, and I cry until the alcohol takes me away.

Tomorrow, which is now today

It's still dark out when I wake up on the couch. Alone. I fell asleep so early that I've already slept eleven hours. I'm so rested I'm not even hungover. No point in trying to sleep more, although I want to seek that peace so fiercely the desire aches inside me.

There are other paths to peace.

I stand up, and suddenly standing is easy. I'm light; I'm full of energy. Awareness.

Purpose.

I pick up my phone by reflex. I don't need it.

There's a message light blinking on the curve.

A blue light.

Tamar's favorite color. The color I used especially for them.

I've never been big on denial. But standing there in the dark, in the empty house, I have a moment when I think—*This was all a nightmare, it was all a terrible dream.* My hand shakes and a spike of pure blinding hope is the bayonet that transfixes me this time.

Hope may be the thing with feathers. It is also the cruelest pain of all.

Tamar's ashes are still there in the beautiful little salvaged-wood box by the door.

The hope is gone before it has finished deceiving me. Gone so fast I haven't yet finished inhaling to gasp in relief when my diaphragm cramps and seizes and I cannot breathe at all.

I should put the phone down. I should walk out the door and follow the plan I woke up with. The plan that filled me with joy and relief. I shouldn't care what Tamar has to say to me now when they didn't care what I needed to say to them then.

I put my right thumb on the reader and the phone recognizes my pheromones.

Marq, I love you.

I'm sorry I had to go and I'm sorry I had to go alone.

You were the best thing that happened to me, along with Atticus. You were my heart. You always talked about my joy, and how you loved it. But I never seemed able to make you understand that you were the source of so much of that joy.

I know you will miss me.

I know it's not fair I had to go first.

But it comforts me to know you'll still be here, that somebody will remember me for a while. Somebody who saw me for myself, and not just through the lens of Atticus.

I lied when I said I didn't love you anymore, and it was a terrible, cruel thing to do. I felt awful and I did an awful thing. I do love you. I am so sorry that we needed different things.

I am so sorry I sent you away.

Atticus is arranging things so that this will be sent after we're gone. I'm sorry for that, too, but it hurts too much to say goodbye.

Do something for me, beloved?

Don't make any hasty choices right now. If you can, forgive me for leaving you and being selfish about how I did it. Live a long time and be well.

*Love (at least until the next Ice Age),
Tamar*

I stare at the phone, ebullience flattened. Hasty choices? Did Tamar know I was applying for a Tenant? Had Atticus found out somehow?

Or had they anticipated my other plan?

I had a plan and it was a good plan—no. Dammit, concrete nouns and concrete verbs, especially now.

I had been going to commit suicide. And now, Tamar—with this last unfair request.

Forgive them.

Forgive them.

Had they forgiven me?

Fuck, maybe I can forgive them on the way down.

* * *

The hike up to the gorge is easier in autumn. The vines have dropped their leaves and I can see to push them aside and find the path beyond. The earth underfoot is rocky and red, mossy where it isn't compacted. I kick through leaves wet with a recent rain. I am wearing the wrong shoes.

I am still wearing my funeral shoes.

It is gray morning at the bottom of the trail. Birds are rousing, calling, singing their counterpoints and harmonies. Dawn breaks rose and gray along the horizon and my feet hurt from sliding inside the dress shoes by the time I reach the bridge. I pause by its footing, catching my breath, leaning one hand on the weathered post. The cables are extruded and still seem strong. A few of the slats have come loose, and I imagine them tumbling into the curling water and rocks far below.

The water sings from behind a veil of morning mist. I can't see the creek down there, but I feel its presence in the vibration of the bridge, and I sense the long fall it would take to get there. The bridge rocks under my weight as I step out. I could swear I feel the cables stretching under my weight.

How long since I've been here?

Too long.

Well, that neglect is being remedied now.

I achieve the middle of the bridge, careful in my slippery, thoughtless shoes. The sky is definitely golden at the east edge now, and the pink fades higher. I turn toward the waterfall. I wondered if there will be rainbows today.

I unzip my jacket and bring out the box I'd tucked inside it when I left the house, the box of Tamar's—and Atticus's—mortal remains.

I clear my throat and try to find the right thing to say, knowing I don't have to say anything. Knowing I am talking to myself.

"I wanted to keep you forever, you know. I don't want to think about this—about you—becoming something that happened to me once. I don't want to be a person who doesn't know how to love themselves again. And then I thought, maybe if I made myself like you, I would love myself the way I loved you. And Robin's not going to let me do that either, I guess ...

"And you would be unhappy with me anyway, if I did."

I sniffle, and then I get mad at myself for self-pity.

Then I laugh at myself, because I am talking to a box full of cremains, with a little plaque on the front, while standing on a rickety vintage homebrew suspension bridge over the arch of a forgotten waterfall. Yeah, there's a lot here to pity, all right.

"So I don't know what to do, Tamar. I don't know who to be without you. I don't know if I exist outside of your perception of me. I *liked* the me I saw you seeing. I never *liked* myself before. And now you're gone. So who am I?

"And okay, maybe that's unfair to put on somebody. But I did, and you're stuck with it now."

I sniffle again.

"You asked me to do something for you. Something hard. God am I glad nobody is here to see this. But I guess this is a thing I have, a thing I am that's nobody else's. This place here."

The sunrise is gaining on the birdsong. Pretty soon it will be bright enough for flying, and they won't have so much to cheep about because they'll be busy getting on with their day.

In the end, everything falls away.

Whatever else I have to say is just stalling.

I say, “Welcome home, Atticus. Welcome home, Tamar.”

I kiss the box.

I hold it close to my chest for a moment, steeling myself. And then fast, without thinking about it, I shove my arms out straight in front of me, over the cable, over the plunge.

I let go.

Tamar falls fast.

I don’t see where they land, and I don’t hear a splash.

The damn shoes are even worse on the way back down.

* * *

There’s no wireless service until you’re halfway down the mountain. I’ve actually forgotten that I brought the damn phone with me. I jump six inches on sore feet when it pings.

I resist the urge to look at it until I get back to the sharecar. The morning is mine and the birds are still singing. I cry a lot on the way down and trip over things in my funeral shoes. I swear I’m throwing these things away when I get home.

I’d parked the little soap box of a vehicle where it could get a charge when the sun was up. I walk over the small, grassy, ignored parking lot and lean my rump against the warm resin of its fender. The phone screen is easier to read once I shade it with my head.

The ping is a priority email, which makes me feel exactly the way priority emails and four a.m. phone calls always do.

It says:

Congratulations!

Dear Mx. Marq Tames,

On the advice of your transition specialist, you have been selected for expedited compassionate entrance into the Tenancy program, if you so desire. Of course, such entrance is entirely voluntary, and your consent is revocable until such time as the Tenancy is initiated.

Benefits of the program for you include ...

... and then there was a lot of legalese.

Huh.

Evangeline came through.

I guess she and Robin were both doing what they thought was best for me. Funny how none of us seem to have a consistent idea of what that is.

I don't read the legalese. I start to laugh.

I can't stop.

I unlock the car. I toss the phone on the floor and lock it again. Then I walk away on sore feet, alternately chuckling to myself and sniffing tears.

I pick a flatter trail this time, and half a mile along it I start wondering about a complicated function I was working on before I went on leave, and whether that one student got their financial aid sorted out.

No matter what choice you make, you're going to regret it sometime. But maybe not permanently. And it wasn't like I had to decide right now. I had the day off. Nobody was looking for me.

It was going to be a hot one. And I still had some walking to do.

About the Author



Elizabeth Bear shares a birthday with Frodo and Bilbo Baggins. This, coupled with a tendency to read the dictionary as a child, doomed her early to penury, intransigence, friendlessness, and the writing of speculative fiction. She was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and grew up in central Connecticut with the exception of two years (which she was too young to remember very well) spent in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom, in the last house with electricity before the Canadian border. She's a second-generation Swede, a third-generation Ukrainian, and a third-generation Transylvanian, with some Irish, English, Scots, Cherokee, and German thrown in for leavening. Elizabeth Bear is her real name, but not all of it. Her dogs outweigh her, and she is much beset by her cats. Bear was the recipient of the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2005. She has won two Hugo Awards for her short fiction, a Sturgeon Award, and the Locus Award for Best First Novel. She is the author of the acclaimed Eternal Sky series, the

Edda of Burdens series, and coauthor (with Sarah Monette) of the Iskryne series. Bear lives in Brookfield, Massachusetts. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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MIMI MONDAL

HIS FOOTSTEPS, THROUGH DARKNESS AND LIGHT



His Footsteps, Through Darkness and Light

MIMI MONDAL

illustration by

KASHMIRA SARODE

TOR·COM 

I am not a fighter. I am a trapeze master.

At the Majestic Oriental Circus, which had been my home for two years, I had climbed the ropes deft and fast, till I was the leader of a team of about fifteen aerial performers. It was in my genes.

There were others rewards, too, of the circus life. It had brought me into the grace of Shehzad Marid. A trapeze master has no lack of duties, training and overseeing his team, but I continued to perform with Shehzad in his grand stage illusion show—"Alladdin and His Magic Lamp." I took great pride in my own trapeze act, and the team that I trained from scratch, but I have to admit that "Alladin" was the crowds' favorite.

None of the credit for that popularity was owed to me. I am a genius at the ropes overhead, flinging myself from grip to grip so gracefully you would believe I could fly; but on earth, up close, I am a man entirely devoid of charm. Before I joined the circus, I did not even speak a language that could be understood in polite society. Even now, I fumble for the right word at the right moment; I occasionally slip into an accent that makes the city people sneer.

But as Alladin, all I had to do was to put on a pair of satin pants and a skullcap, and parrot a series of memorized lines. I had never met an Arab street urchin, nor had an inkling what all the words meant, but neither had anyone in the audience. I bellowed, "Ya Allah!" and "Shukr hai!" and "Dafa ho ja, shaitaan!" at my cues. The girl who trained the parakeets doubled as the princess in a shiny ghagra and choli, adorned with tawdry sequins. Johuree, our proprietor and ringmaster, completed the cast as the villainous Zafar, dressed in a moth-eaten velvet cloak.

It was an almost ridiculous performance, but it turned into the most renowned act of the Majestic Oriental Circus, all at the touch of Shehzad Marid. As the three of us hemmed and hawed through our scripted gibberish,

the jinni would emerge from his lamp in clouds of curling smoke. Illuminated by our cheap stage lights, the clouds would take the shape of a magnificent palace, the gaping maw of a cave, raging armies on horseback that crashed into the audience until our entire circus tent would erupt with gasps, applause, and cries of horror and disbelief. A small child could hold open his palm and receive a dancing horee, crafted immaculately of ice as the clouds condensed. Then they billowed up again—into monsters never heard of; swooping rocs; clerics whose voices soared in prayer across minarets that pierced the sky above a faraway, mythical city; hundreds of jinn, and back to the only one. It was a show unlike anything offered by any rival circus company in our land.

I was assigned to this act four months after I joined the Majestic Oriental Circus—a naïve, illiterate, village young man who had been given a job by Dayaram, the former trapeze master, almost out of pity. It turned out that I climbed better than anyone else on the team, but I had never seen a circus before, could hardly follow the shimmering line between illusion and truth. Before I took over, Johuree would play both Alladin and Zafar, disappearing behind the clouds and reappearing in changed costume with a lightness of foot you would not expect from a fat, middle-aged man like him. But then, no one at the Majestic Oriental Circus was merely what met the eye. The circus life is not for the mundane.

Johuree had been happy to delegate Alladin to me. An agile young man was more suited to the role than himself, he had said with a wink in front of the entire company. I nodded along, though both of us knew that was just the cover. A circus troupe had no dearth of agile young men. No—we both knew it was because I was the only other person at the Majestic Oriental Circus that Shehzad Marid had entrusted with his lamp.

I was a hack Alladin, awkward and bombarding, nothing like my fluid, almost lyrical performance on the trapeze ropes. It made the entire act of “Alladin and His Magic Lamp” come across as gaudy, over-the-top. That was just the effect Johuree was going for.

We were a traveling circus, never spending more than a week or two in the same city, town, or village fair. So the day Johuree declared that we would travel to Thripuram to perform at the wedding of the raja’s daughter,

we packed up our tents and bags and set out on the journey.

★ ★ ★

There is little power left in the hands of the rajas of yore, but you wouldn't think so if you were at the palace of the Thripuram raja on the day we arrived. Accustomed though we were to the illusory palaces of Arabia that Shehzad conjured up three shows a day, our entire troupe gazed awestruck at the vibrantly painted temples, spires, courtly residences, and finally, looming over them all, resplendent in its intricate balconies and mythological frescos adorning the walls, pillars, and steps—the palace itself.

The palace grounds teemed with musicians, poets, storytellers, snake charmers, tawaifs, nautankis—entertainers from all over the land. Those traditional artists had been assigned living quarters inside the buildings. A circus was a foreign entertainment—our troupe an unrestrained mingling of men and women of indistinct lineage, sharing space with monkeys, elephants, birds, tigers. Though we had been invited to perform on the night of the wedding, we were allowed to sleep only in our own trucks and tents. We set them up within the palace grounds, under the sky.

The grounds were thrumming with activity as we rolled into our spots. The hot afternoon air was cloying with the aroma of outdoor cooking, for all the poor people of the city were to eat two meals at the raja's generosity every day of the festivities. There were two queues of revelers waiting to be fed—one for Brahmins, another for the infidels and the untouchables—winding as long as the eye could see. Wedding guests wandered within the premises, trailed by servants holding umbrellas, fans, and jugs of water. Massive electricity generators growled along the palace walls, powering thousands of lanterns and strings of light. It was a spectacle more modern and grandiose than anything Shehzad could pull up from the myths of a distant past.

If the circus was a novelty to the raja's palace, it was no less a novelty to us—our entire troupe was comprised of people who had grown up poor. We dealt in glitter and illusion, but all our clothes were cheap synthetics and sequins, often threadbare and sewn together in places; our jewelry made of

glass, tinfoil, and paint. We had never seen so many varieties of silk, so many diamonds, rubies, and emeralds casually glittering under daylight as the royal guests wandered by. At lunch, my trapeze team would not stop eating until I threatened them with immediate unemployment if any of them disgraced me at the night's performance.

As the busy day waned toward sunset, conch shells were sounded, and there was instant silence within the palace grounds. A procession of young women emerged from the doorway of the palace, led by a priest. Each of them carried a holy tray of prayer offerings.

The women were indescribably beautiful, more so in their dazzling, elegant attire, reminding me of the sculptures of apsaras—heavenly dancers—that I had only seen before on temple walls. These women were not dressed like the wives or daughters of the royalty, yet they were too demure, too distant from us. They did not speak with, or even look at, any of the other performers, who stepped back to make way for them to pass.

“Devadasis,” whispered a girl from my trapeze team, her voice nearly choking in awe.

“What are they?” I whispered back. I was completely ignorant of the customs of royalty, but even Shehzad, who was less so, stared uncomprehendingly at these women.

“I have never seen one of them before,” the girl explained under her breath, never once taking her eyes off the fascinating trail. “You never see a devadasi—no commoner does, except on occasions like this. Devadasis are holy courtesans, bequeathed at birth to the patron deity of a kingdom, maintained by its king. They are trained as dancers, but not like any of us. They will never perform before a commoner, or in exchange for money. Their dance is an act of worship. They are divine.” The girl's words swung gently between envy and faith. “The devadasis will now go to the town's main temple to seek blessings for the raja's daughter. Offer themselves up in performance. The wedding can only take place after the kuldevi—the patron goddess of the kingdom—has bestowed her blessings.”

“No one told me there was anything supernatural in this town,” I said, intrigued. Two years ago I would have laughed at any mention of such things, but enough time at the Majestic Oriental Circus opens the mind to all kinds of

possibilities.

The girl laughed. “Who said anything was supernatural? Everything’s a joke to you, Binu’da. I meant *real* divine, like priests are divine. Devadasis commune with the gods. They are born into holiness. They don’t do tricks with sleight of hand and offstage machinery. That’s what people come to *us* for.”

I stared again—the face of the young woman at the head of the procession was so flawless and serene that I could almost believe in her divinity. Priests were born into the Brahmin caste, and I had met enough Brahmins in my life to know that not all of them were priests, or even had a shred of spirituality in them. Usually they were arrogant and corrupt, frankly quite despicable people to know. But the gaze of this woman was clear and resolute, fixed at the vermilion sky toward the temple where she was headed. Her step was graceful, undoubtedly perfected through the lifelong dance-worship to which she was devoted. No creature could be further removed from the giggling girls in my circus, whose brittle poise disappeared as soon as they stepped behind the stage.

Afterward, we returned to our tents to prepare for our show, which was to be the opening performance of the wedding celebrations. We were not there to watch the devadasis return.



The show went off smoothly. My boys and girls could hardly keep their eyes off the ornate ceiling of the raja’s court as they swung and swerved across it, but none of them faltered at their act. “Alladin and His Magic Lamp” was a roaring success with the royal wedding guests. Shehzad was stoic through all of it—he had seen his share of palace interiors in his time. The raja came down from his throne to shake our hands after the show, but we were never introduced to the princess, who had watched our performance from a latticed balcony above. No common entertainer was permitted to speak with the royal bride, even if they performed at her wedding.

“Really, Binu, stop staring at that balcony and shut your mouth,” Shehzad snapped at me as our troupe filed out of the royal court. “You make yourself

look like a fool.”

“Hey, Alladin is meant to be really popular with the princesses, right?” I teased him. I was still decked out in the satin-pants-and-skullcap attire. “But this pathetic Alladin can’t even catch a glimpse of a real princess. What good is having a faithful jinni at your command if he cannot even introduce you to a princess?”

“Princesses look just like other women,” Shehzad sneered. “And this one is getting married already, so you’re out of luck. You’ve met the raja. His daughter probably would have the same, uh, *generous* nose. Hopefully not also the generous moustache.”

We guffawed, eyes shining into each other’s for a fleeting moment. Then I said, “But you saw all those devadasis. Think about it. If mere women of the court can look like that, the princess must be—”

“The princess is not one of those women,” Shehzad said, making a sharp turn away from the direction of the lavish dining arrangements.

“You will not dine with us?”

“Since when did I eat the same food as you people, Binu?”

“But you always come along and make the pretense,” I said, surprised at the brusqueness that I did not entirely feel I deserved.

“That’s when we dine with the rest of our circus troupe, to make sure that no one suspects otherwise,” he replied. “There are too many people at this place. Too much going on. No one will miss Shehzad Marid.”

“I will.”

“I must retire to the lamp,” he said, as if shaking off the hurt in my voice. “These festivities will continue late into the night, and our troupe begins to pack up at dawn. If I slip away now, I can steal a few hours of respite.”

I always carried the lamp in our trunk of clothes, scrubby enough to look like a circus prop. The actual prop was a cheaper but shinier replica, tossed around on the stage between Alladin and Zafar. No human hand but mine had touched the real lamp in the past two years, and with nothing but gratitude. Nothing but love.

Nothing but that inchoate sensation of wistfulness that congealed in my chest on the nights that I lay awake in our tent, gazing at the lamp on my bedside after Shehzad had receded into it. If I picked it up, it would be cold,

weightless—a thing forged centuries ago in a distant land; a curiosity, but not an especially valuable one in itself. It was a common household object, Shehzad once told me; street vendors in Arabia sold great quantities of them to this day. With regular use, it would have lasted about five or six years.

But this lamp had survived centuries, traveled hundreds of miles from its homeland, passed from hand to bloody, victorious hand. My callused trapeze-artist hands could barely contain it. Another century or two will blow over any trace of my fingers from its surface, as perhaps from the spirit it enclosed.

From the stories people tell, even those in our own hack show, the lamp sounds like a prison. The listener imagines himself being suffocated, neck twisted, limbs folded at painful angles, squeezed into a box too small to contain his body and left there to wait for decades. But the listener of the tale is human—imprisoned already in his withering flesh and bone, the measured years that are given to him. The human mind can barely fathom the bond between its own body and soul. What would it grasp of the relationship between a jinni and his lamp? What could I—hardly a philosopher, never having read a book, barely literate enough to scribble my own name—grasp of it?

In our two years of friendship, I had learned every detail of Shehzad Marid's humanity. There was no man, or woman, that I knew better. I could read each of his smiles, each raised eyebrow, each cryptic comment for exactly what it was. But I had also learned that his humanity was mere performance. He was relieved to shed it, as I was to remove my circus costumes and makeup. Shehzad Marid's greatest gift to me was the knowledge that I would never truly know the core of his existence, and not merely because I was unread.

And perform he did, never cracking, never missing a beat, longer than any of us at the circus. No one but Johuree knew, or suspected, anything about Shehzad's true nature. Even when he manifested in "Alladin and His Magic Lamp," weaving his way through wonders that no human could pull off, it was carefully designed to look like a triumph of stagecraft. Because I loved him, because I would never understand him at any greater depth than that, all I could do was to give him a break from the act when he asked.

“Wake me up if you need something,” he told me before he left, adding, “but do spare me if it has more to do with princesses. You need to find yourself a different jinni for that.”

I smiled, squeezed his hand, and let him go. Where would I—Trapeze Master Binu of the Majestic Oriental Circus—find a different jinni, and why would I ever want another?



It was past midnight when the members of the troupe retreated to our tents. Within the palace, the tawaifs were still dancing for the last sleepless revelers, but the palace grounds were now empty, for the common revelers had long since departed. Getting into my bed, I pressed a finger against the cold metal of Shehzad’s lamp, but did not drag it. I needed my rest as much as he needed his.

I must have barely drifted into blissful slumber when I woke up again at a hushed commotion from the trapeze artists’ tents. It was the second hour of the night, still too dark to see without a light. A couple of girls came running to our tent.

“It’s a woman from the palace, Binu’da!” they informed me. “Says she wants to have a word with you.”

I couldn’t recall talking much with any woman at the palace. Who would come looking for me in the dead of the night? I turned up the wick of my oil lamp and stepped out, sure that whoever it was must have mistaken me for someone else.

The woman in question was dressed in a simple sari, her long hair flowing over her back. I was startled to recognize the head devadasi of the Thripuram raja’s palace—the woman whose face had launched me into a thousand speculations earlier that day. With the expensive drapes and jewelry removed, she looked no older than sixteen or seventeen.

Seeing her now, the first emotion that hit me was panic. Even speaking to this girl could probably get me punished by the raja. “How did you come here?” I blurted out. “Has anyone seen you?”

“I told my maids that I wanted to pet the tigers,” the girl said, and

shrugged nonchalantly. “No one in this palace had ever seen a tiger before. And I am known to be willful.”

“The tigers have been sedated for the night—” I started to say, but she cut me off.

“The tigers can wait. I want you to let me sneak into your circus and escape this wretched palace.”

“What?!”

“I have been dancing for fifteen years now, ever since I learned to walk,” said the girl. “There’s no trick any of your girls can perform that I can’t pick up in just a few days. I will be the best performer you’ve ever had.”

“But you are a devadasi!” I peered in astonishment at the wide-eyed, long-lashed face that was no less attractive for its bareness. “You live at the palace; you have more luxuries than any of us can imagine. You commune with the gods! Why would someone like you want to stoop to the circus?”

“And what does communing with the gods generally entail, do you think?”

I had to admit I didn’t know.

“I live at the palace, but I am not a princess. None of my clothing or jewelry belongs to me. I don’t actually have a single possession that cannot be taken away with a command from the raja. I do not employ my maids—they maintain my household but also keep an eye on me, report my activities to the raja. Tell me why the raja spends so much money keeping women like me?”

“Because you commune...?” My own words sounded ridiculous to me.

“That’s what it says in the scriptures, doesn’t it?” said the girl. “The priest communes with the gods with his mind, and the devadasi communes with her body. I wouldn’t know—I was never taught to read the scriptures. I’m illiterate as they come. Reading is not a devadasi’s function. Though I could tell you all you ever wished to know about dance, about communing with higher powers with my body. Make a man of you too, if you wish.” She gave me a saucy smile, but it felt more dangerous than inviting.

“If you don’t like this life, why don’t you go back to your family? Why fling yourself at a group of strangers like this?” I asked.

“Because you’re the only strangers at this wedding who would take me,”

said the girl. “You’re an odd bunch. You don’t belong to any traditional system. There are all sorts of performers in your group—surely you can find some use for a devadasi? No one else has any need for me. Devadasis don’t belong to families. We are bequeathed to the gods—we cannot be possessed by men, be that father or husband. My mother was also a devadasi, as was grandmother before her.”

“But some man must have fathered you, seeing as you’re just as human as I am,” I said. “His is the house where you should go, even if you don’t like them, or they you.”

“The raja? But I already live at his house!” The girl startled me with a mirthless laugh. “Of course, I don’t count as the raja’s daughter, because a daughter can only be born of a man and a woman. Devadasis aren’t women; we are offerings made to the patron goddess, entitled to be consumed by the maker of the offering once we have been touched by the goddess. I am not even an illicit child, merely a blessing received by my mother in the performance of her role, more property added to the coffers of the raja who owned her. I am cleverer, more beautiful, more talented than the princess whose wedding you graced with your performance, but she is the princess, and I am property. I am less than even the common free woman in the street.”

I’ll be honest—I had never heard anything like that. Not that I ever understood the elaborate social intricacies of the upper classes, but I always knew that I did not trust them, and her story just seemed to confirm my mistrust. If what this girl was saying was true, I could not possibly tell her to go back to the raja’s palace. But it was also impossible to imagine her at the circus—with her delicate step, her sheltered view of life, those smooth white hands that had probably never done a day’s work.

I told her so.

“The circus is no life for a lady like you. You have only seen us in performance. You cannot begin to imagine the sweat, heat, dust, filth, and flies on the road; sleeping huddled in tents; washing with animals in public ponds; the tasteless slop that we eat; the insecurity and physical labor that make up most of our days. I doubt you have the grit to survive it.”

“If that is so,” said the girl, “I will part ways with your circus once you deliver me to the nearest city. I have heard that our traditional dance is being

made secular in the cities, that there are dancers who are well respected in the community without belonging to any king or any temple. They give performances for the public, teach classes, save their own money, and can also marry and have children if they wish. If I make it to the city, I will find ways to survive. All I need is safe passage out of here.”

Something about this girl had touched my heart the very first time I saw her at the head of the holy procession. I didn’t wish to call it infatuation, but Shehzad had noticed it too—it was what made him testy enough to retreat into his lamp. True, if she hadn’t come to me, I would never have sought her out, but I would also have gone on believing that she lived a life just as ethereal as her face, devoted to worship and virtue that more common people like myself could not afford.

“Don’t think I don’t intend to compensate you for your assistance,” the girl said, giving me a smile of such well-honed coyness that it made my heart do an inadvertent leap. “I had no money to bring, but once you take me to the city, I promise to make you memories that you will cherish for the rest of your life.”

“There’s no need for any of that,” I said, recoiling at the insinuation. I looked up at the sky—there were still a couple of hours before we were scheduled to leave. By the time the rest of the palace started waking up from the previous night’s revelries, the Majestic Oriental Circus would be well on its way.

“Go to one of the girls’ tents and get some sleep,” I told our new stowaway. “We have a long day’s journey ahead.”

★ ★ ★

The sky was clear, a deep rouge spreading over the eastern horizon when the Majestic Oriental Circus began its preparations to leave the Thripuram raja’s palace. Half-asleep, disheveled performers emerged from their tents, which were then unmounted and loaded onto trucks. The birds and animals clamored to be fed before they were secured. At my instruction, the young devadasi had changed into clothes from the other girls of the troupe and blended in with them, just in case anyone from the palace was keeping watch

as we filed out. I went to have a word with Johuree.

“The Majestic Oriental Circus has always been a refuge to outcasts and runaways,” he began, and I nodded. “But this woman is beholden to powers beyond ourselves.”

The diamond in Johuree’s false left eye pierced me with a red glint from the rising sun. “By giving her shelter, you have taken on charges that are yours alone.”

“If any trouble comes of this girl, I promise to step up to it,” I told my trusted employer and friend. “She will be fed and clothed out of my salary. I will protect and instruct her, and make sure she finds lodgings in the city when we get there. The circus will not have to bear any responsibility for my decision.”

Shehzad was not pleased when he emerged.

“I have never seen a bigger fool than you,” he grumbled, skulking around the gathered props and trunks that were the farthest from the newest member of our troupe. “A pretty girl comes simpering with a sob story, and suddenly Trapeze Master Binu is the gallant savior we all lacked. Why do you think she did not go to any other guest at the wedding? Why not appeal to Johuree directly, if she wanted to join the circus? She came to you because she had noticed you stare at her earlier like a mesmerized child. She knew you wouldn’t be able to say no.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said, trying to rest a hand on his arm, trying to pull him into a reluctant embrace. There was no use trying to disguise my thoughts from Shehzad. “But that does not prove that she’s wrong in trying to escape, or that the people who would decline to help her are correct. I am doing the right thing here, Shehzad, even if it’s not the most practical thing to do.”

“I have served warrior after warrior, as far back as I can remember,” he said. “A few of them were unkind masters, but others were loving and respectful, though they still owned me. There are worse lives than that of a glorified slave.”

“But now you are free. Wouldn’t you say you prefer the change of circumstances?”

“No one is ever free, least of all a jinni. Only the nature of the master

changes,” Shehzad replied curtly before turning to walk away. “If I am free now, it’s because my master wishes me so. My next master may be worse, as may that girl’s or any other’s.”

I stared at his receding back, the taut, defiant muscles that I longed to knead with my palms, to remind him that I had never been his master. But that would have to wait for another time, far away from this palace with its loathsome practices.



The skies began to grow ominously dark as soon as our trucks rolled out of the palace gates. Clouds rumbled. Tree branches cracked overhead. Waves of dust rose on the distant horizon. Within the town of Thripuram, as we passed, the few early risers hurried to return inside; doors and windows were noisily shut. It was a storm as unseasonal as any in this part of the land.

The trucks were the closest we had to homes, in fair or rough weather, so we trudged on until we were on the dirt roads that led out of the town, and could simply go no farther. Unrestrained by any more houses, the winds came pounding at our canvas walls like solid boulders. The trucks swayed like they were wooden toys for children, not hundreds of tons of machine on wheels. Inside, our animals screamed and rattled against their cages. Dust clouds covered the sky, obscuring the sun. Our drivers could no longer see the road. Dust, razor-sharp and unforgiving, filled the eyes and nostrils of anyone who tried to look outside.

Usually, a heavy rain comes lashing quick on the trail of a dust storm, calming the winds and weighing down the dust into mud, but it had been an hour since this dust had risen, and there was still not a drop of moisture.

As I sat in the first of our trucks, a massive trumpeting from the truck behind us told me that the elephants had broken free, and another tearing, heart-wrenching wail followed as one of them was blown away by the winds. In all my thirty years of life, I have never heard anything like it.

The third truck, carrying the clowns, fire-eaters, and my own trapeze team, soon turned to its side with a sickening lurch. From my own truck I could hear none of their voices, although in my guts I could feel them crying,

praying to their respective gods, groaning as they scrambled in blindness, bones trampled and crunched. The girl whom we had rescued from the palace was among them too. Perhaps Shehzad was right—if we all died in this freak apocalypse this morning, I would have proved to be a worse master than the raja, not only to her but to everyone else in my care.

I am a man who has left his own forest deities far behind in his past, so there was no greater power to whom I could kneel. In any case, if all these other pious people’s prayers were going unheard, how might I—faithless of heart—sway any god to my favor?

A heavy figure swayed its way through the truck and dropped heavily, purposefully next to me. It was Johuree.

“Trapeze Master Binu, you promised to bear responsibility,” he whispered into my ear. Each of his words fell like the gong of a temple bell, cutting through the mayhem outside my brain.

“What—this dust storm?!” I was stunned by his suggestion. “You think *I* have something to do with this?”

“I did warn you that the girl you rescued was beholden to powers beyond ourselves.”

“I thought—I thought you meant the Thripuram raja and his administration!”

Johuree said nothing, just stared at me with his cold eyes, both living and stone. Nothing was enough.

“I don’t know how to ... I don’t know who—”

The crashes and screams returned, closing in on my senses like water over the head of a drowning man. So I rose to my feet, staggering from wall to wall as the floor of the truck churned beneath me and dropped myself into the dust-filled darkness.

★ ★ ★

There was nothing, absolutely nothing to see. My eyes, ears, and mouth were assaulted by dust as soon as I hit the ground. Dust scraped against my bare legs beneath my dhoti like a thousand razor blades. In less than a second, every inch of my skin felt like it was being flayed. I could feel the blood

trickle down my arms, legs, chest; I could feel my face growing muddy with blood.

Coughing, choking, spitting, I called out into the nothingness, “Here I am: Trapeze Master Binu. I think it is me you want.” I spat out more dust. “Spare the rest of the circus. They took no part in my decision to rescue the girl.”

I waited, struggling to breathe. Feeling foolish.

Then a voice came, responding to my cry. I do not know why I remember it as a female voice, because it did not even sound human. It came from the wind, molding and resonating as a blend of dust and words.

“I am the kuldevi of the kingdom of Thripuram,” she said. “Stupid human, filthy, untouchable low-caste whom no god will deign to claim for his own, did you think you could run away with my property and pay nothing for your crime?”

Her insults did not perturb me—I have heard them and worse from people, and expected no better from their gods—but the words still made my blood boil.

“No man or woman is anyone’s property!” I spluttered through the dust that clogged my mouth. “Not the Thripuram raja’s, not even yours. I don’t care if you are human or goddess. You are not *my* goddess, as you well know.”

The thick, blowing dust rippled with laughter. I could feel it dance on my skin as the grains freshly scoured the bleeding surface.

“A free man, are you?” More words formed. “A man who acknowledges no master, and surely no charge? Then when the men, women, and animals of this party of fools die, as they will within the next hour, their deaths will not be on your conscience.”

I wanted to scream back that their deaths should be on the conscience of this vengeful goddess, but I did not even know if the gods possessed consciences; besides ... just the thought of their deaths deflated the righteous rage in my heart. My strange but upright boss who had employed me when no one else would, my colleagues and friends who received me as one of their own, the young boys and girls whom I hand-picked and trained for my trapeze team—none of whom I had consulted before I brought down this mayhem upon them. I was a free man till my last breath, but none of them

should have to bear the consequences of my freedom.

“Take my life. Let them go,” I pleaded.

Another gust of laughter, another whiplash of dust across my body.

“And why would I be sated with one mortal life when I came here prepared to take fifty, including the life of that traitorous whore who dares to defy being beholden to me?”

I did not know what else would sate her. I am a poor man with hardly any treasures. I had kept aside a few rupees from my salary for the past two years, hoping to return to my mother and buy a house when I finally had enough. I could not imagine my modest savings would buy the lives of the Majestic Oriental Circus from the kuldevi of Thripuram.

The goddess seemed to read my thoughts.

“It is heartening to see you realize the utter triviality of your existence, Trapeze Master Binu,” she spoke “Your puny mortal life and its possessions are every bit as worthless to me as you think. But there is one thing you own, much more valuable than your life, for which I will let your entire circus go, even that filthy whore and yourself.”

I waited, dry tongue scraping the dust that now formed a crust on the roof of my mouth, wondering what she meant.

“Give me the jinni.”

The bottom of my stomach dropped.

“The jinni is not mine to give,” I murmured.

“It is the only possession of yours that interests me,” said the kuldevi. “Jinn are rare in this part of the world. I have never seen one before, yet I felt its presence and desired it as soon as it crossed into my dominion. But I cannot take it by force, for the laws that bind the jinni to its human master are forged in a distant land over an oath to a different god, far beyond my powers to bend. Give me the jinni of your own free will, and you and all your company will live.”

I shut my eyes, which were suddenly muddy and stinging with the tears that had that rushed into them. My heartbeat was slow, irregular. If it were only about me, I would have gladly died at this moment in this dust storm conjured by a wrathful goddess whom I did not worship. And then there was an arm around my waist, holding me upright again, there was a hand wiping

dust, blood, and tears from my eyes. It was Shehzad Marid—ever loving, ever loyal, always on my side in my hour of need.

“I know you did not call for me,” he whispered in my ear, “but a jinni can summon himself into action when his master is in grievous danger. Your body and mind can take no more of this, Binu—mortals are not made for extended interaction with the divine. Let me go with the goddess, but before that, let me take you back to the truck to be among your people. It will not faze me; I have known worse. Give me your command, and I will obey.”

I clasped his hand in mine through the dust and the blood, trying to absorb the warmth of his fingers like a man clutching at straws as he drowns.

“I ... am ... not ... your ... master.”

“We will continue that debate another day,” he laughed, but the laughter fell more like a wounded howl on my ear. “I am sure your path will bring you to Thripuram again. I hope I have a kind master by then, one who will not object to me sitting and chatting awhile with an old friend.”

And suddenly, I had an idea.

“Kuldevi of Thripuram,” I called out again, summoning the strength that was dripping away from me. “I know you cannot possess Shehzad yourself, so you must give his ownership to one of your human worshippers. If that man turns rogue, or if he dies before passing on the ownership to another worshipper, Shehzad will forever be lost to you. He may turn vengeful, and you have never seen the vengeance of a jinni whose master is dead—there is no precedent in your land for anything like it. Your land will be laid barren; you will be left without worshippers.”

I pulled myself up with Shehzad’s arms. “Instead, let me come with him. Both of us will serve you for exactly the length of half of my remaining life. He is loyal to me; and you have seen inside my heart—I am a man of my word. When that period is over, we will leave, and no harm will come to you or your worshippers.”

More silence, more storm, and then words again. “Half of your remaining life is hardly seven years,” sneered the goddess.

That was less than I would have hoped for, but I had no tears to spare. An early death was better than spending long years of my youth in the captivity of the kuldevi of Thripuram, better than dying this minute, never holding

Shehzad in my gaze again. My life was a blink in the eternity that Shehzad would have to spend with other masters—what could change between us in a few years, more or less?

“But you speak the truth,” said the goddess. “This jinni of yours will not come with me willingly, or reveal to me any of its secrets. None of my priests is acquainted with its true nature—they know nothing but children’s stories and misleading spectacles like the one you put up with your circus. Despicable as you may find me, foolish, arrogant man, I do bear responsibility for the well-being of my worshippers. I resent your paltry offer of seven years, but I will accept it. Come to my temple in Thripuram before sunset and devote yourselves by ritual.”

“Binu, why—?” Shehzad started to protest, but I squeezed his hand and said, “Shh,” as the winds began to dissolve around us.

There was no further interruption from the goddess. In the emerging sunshine we stood holding each other, surrounded by the debris of the beloved circus that had been our family and life.

* * *

The first person I went looking for was the rescued young devadasi. She was injured, terrified, but—like the other members of the circus—had heard nothing of our encounter with the kuldevi of Thripuram. I let it stay that way. No one else had to bear the burden of my choices, or my guilt.

In our last hours, Shehzad was kinder to the girl, mending a fractured wrist with underhanded magic, giving her advice on how to survive in the city all by herself. I saw them smiling together, head to head, and I could feel the sun’s rays warming my battered bones. “Savithri is quite an extraordinary woman, really,” Shehzad came back to inform me, “brave, level-headed, no airs about herself. I can see why you were taken by her. I have no doubt she will do very well in the city, maybe even become famous.”

Savithri—I rolled the name around on my tongue, realizing that in all this time, it had never occurred to me to ask.

“Shehzad...” I started to say, pulling him aside.

“No.” He placed a thin, immortal finger to my raw lip. I would have cried

then, I would have dropped to his feet and asked for forgiveness, but I was afraid that he would cry too, and I had taken enough devastation for a day.

Johuree agreed to take charge of Savithri in my stead until the circus reached the city, and make sure she was well settled and safe before they left. Johuree had heard nothing of our bargain with the goddess either, but of course I had to tell him.

“I will find you once you are released of your bond,” he told me, pressing a bag of money that I had done nothing to earn into my hands. “Doors will always be open for both of you at the Majestic Oriental Circus”—he smiled ruefully, gazing at the rubble that surrounded us—“or whatever is left of it.”

“I promised I would let no harm come to the circus,” I said, turning my eyes to the ground. “I failed to keep my promise.”

“Say no more of it!” he said.

“If I may ask for one more favor—?” I hesitated.

“Of course, my man.”

“I left my old mother in the city in the east where you took me in. We only had each other in the world, but once I was signed on to the circus I did not even wait to go home and take my leave of her. I was young and thoughtless then—a wayward son who only worried and disappointed her. I imagined I would come back soon and give her a big surprise, but the circus kept traveling; I did not even notice how two years went by. Now that I know that I won’t see my mother for a long time—”

“I will look her up when I return to the city in the east, tell her you are alive, and remind her that her son is loyal and brave, if not always the most practical,” Johuree said. “And if there is any way I can help your mother, I will do my best.”

“Thank you, Johuree saab,” I replied, overwhelmed. “There is nothing more I desire from the world.”

And that was how we walked into our exile—man and jinni, never master and slave but equals in friendship and love. I was no longer a free man, and I don’t know if I had ever been, but if I must pick a master for half—no, *all*—of my remaining life, I know there would have been no better choice than Shehzad Marid. For that day and the rest of my foreshortened mortal existence, I would follow his footsteps through darkness and light, and that

would suffice.

About the Author

[Mimi Mondal](#) is a Dalit woman who writes about politics and history, occasionally camouflaged as fiction. Her first anthology, *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler*, was longlisted for the Locus Awards 2018. Mimi holds three masters' degrees for no reason but pure joy. She lives in New York, tweets from [@Miminality](#), doesn't very often hang out at <https://mimimondal.com/>, and always enjoys the company of monsters. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



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CIRCUS GIRL,

THE HUNTER,

AND

MIRROR BOY

JY YANG

Circus Girl, The Hunter, and Mirror Boy

JY YANG

illustration by

ASHLEY MACKENZIE

TOR·COM 

THE CIRCUS GIRL

I was twenty-six when I started seeing Mirror Boy again. He showed up without warning on a Monday, as I stood over the sink scrubbing sleep from my eyes and stale whiskey from my mouth. It's one of my favorite simple pleasures: the cold metallic tang of water, the clean bitter smell of soap. I straightened up for my towel, and there was his ugly mug in the mirror instead of mine. I dropped the towel. "Fuck!"

Mirror Boy had not changed in a decade. He was still gaunt and hollow-eyed and in bad need of a haircut. Patches of discoloration bloomed under the brown of his skin. "Hello, Lynette," he whispered in his crushed-paper voice.

"No," I said, and walked right out of the bathroom, my face still dripping wet.

"Did something happen?" asked my roommate, Shane, as I stomped into the kitchen, wiping myself dry on the cotton of my nightgown sleeve. "I heard you shouting." She stood unwashed and uncombed over the counter, a ladle in one hand and curious concern etched on her thin features. Coffee sub-boiled on the stove and the smell of fried egg lingered.

"I cut myself shaving," I said. In my chest my heartbeat with the rhythm of a rail carriage, passing by.

"Ooooookay," she said, and went back to spooning bean goop onto plates. Shane was an angel, used to the oceanic swing of my moods. She put up with far too much from me.

A dresser cabinet stood by the main door, marking the transition between the kitchen and living areas. Its top was choked with detritus: keyholders, loose coins, half-curdled tins of lip balm. On it sat an oval mirror, framed by a mosaic of recycled bottle glass. I went up to it, not straight on, but

cautiously and sideways—as though flanking an enemy—and leaned until it caught my reflection. I prayed it would show my untamable curls and the eyebags I knew and loathed.

“I need to talk to you,” Mirror Boy said.

“Fuck off,” I said, to which Shane went, “Uh, what?”

“Nothing.” I shuffled away from the mirror and flounced down next to the dining table, trying not to breathe too harshly. After ten years spread over the tumult of late adolescence and early adulthood, I had thoroughly convinced myself that my year with Mirror Boy was all made up, an artifact of a traumatized mind. A coping mechanism. But I was better now. The broken girl I used to be had grown up into a functional adult. Why had he come back?

The boiling kettle whistled as Shane thumped breakfast in front of me, gelatinous and greasy. She poured the steaming sub into two oversized enamel mugs. “Here,” she said. “You look like you could use an extra helping.”

We ate. Or at least, Shane ate, while I mixed bean and egg into a brownish slurry on my plate. All was quiet except for the chittering of the newsprinter, spooling its thin scroll onto the dining table. When it stopped, Shane tore off the printout and scanned its fuss-less, tiny text. “Great squid. There’s been another murder.”

“Murder?” I said, not really processing the words.

“Yes. In Darlingfort. Probably that same serial killer that’s been going around.” She turned the chit towards me. “Here, look. Seem like anyone you know?”

I squinted at the victim’s picture, monochrome and pixelated, only slightly larger than a toenail. It looked vaguely like a man, possibly brown-haired, maybe thirty, probably white. I shrugged.

Shane’s expression softened. “You used to live in Darlingfort, didn’t you?”

“That was a long time back.” When I used to be a circus girl. When I last had Mirror Boy as my reflection. I shifted uneasily in my chair. The glare of the mirror on the dresser had a weight to it, as though the kid was trying to claw his way out. “Listen, I’d better get going.”

“What, to work?” Shane looked at the kitchen clock. “Is the salon even open?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, pushing my chair back.

“You haven’t eaten anything.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Shane’s worry peaked. “Hey. Is something wrong?”

“I’m fine,” I said. It was a lie, and it sounded like a lie.

I had to stand by the dresser while I put on my boots. “Why are you avoiding me?” Mirror Boy asked from his corner. “You know I’m here.”

“Shut up,” I hissed, soft enough to keep it from Shane. “Shut up shut up shut up.”

It was clear outside, the air as crisp as winters ever get anymore. A soft breeze teased hair and fabrics. I took the midlevel network, high enough above the water the reflections wouldn’t bother me. Back in Darlingfort the canals were sludge, so I never had this problem.

Back in Darlingfort, my relationship with Mirror Boy was different.

Once upon a time I was a circus girl, just like my mother. Once upon a time I had an apple-cheeked face and an easy, gap-toothed smile. Once upon a time I used to throw knives and juggle and spin fire.

Then my mother died when I was fourteen, and I was like a dinghy cast out into an icy ocean. The other women in the circus tried to protect me as much as they could, but I eventually found out what people were willing to do to young girls when they no longer had the protection of a lion tamer.

There was an escape artist, Alfous: almost forty, with a slow-growing belly and a grease-slicked moustache. He tried to hold himself up as a gentleman around me, but I tried not to be around him at all. Until one day the desire burst from him like a swollen river, turbulent and inescapable. He chased me down in the damp of night when the others had gone out to get drunk, and pinned me against the knifeboard.

But I was stronger than I looked, and I kicked and screamed and cracked a cheekbone with my heel. So he clubbed me over the head, slapped me in chains, and threw me in the water tank. I woke with my lungs burning and a wall of green murk crushing me. I thought I was going to die, until I saw that there was a boy in the water. He looked my age, with dark eyes and dark hair

and skin yellow as the moon. “You can do it,” he said. I didn’t know him, but seeing I wasn’t alone calmed my panic. It was then I found out how far I could bend my elbows, and how easy it was, with my thin wrists, to slip from the vise of the chains. I got my hands free, I got out of the tank, and I survived.

I survived, and a week later Alfous mysteriously disappeared. No notes left behind, nor any evidence. The rumor around the circus was that he’d been sent to feed Kraken, hungry in the sludgy deep. If anyone suspected the scrawny girl with the purpling across her forehead might have been involved, they said nothing. I volunteered to be the new escape artist, because it turns out I had a natural talent for it. I was sixteen.

Anyway, that’s how I met Mirror Boy. When I climbed out of that tank, furious and dripping and bruised in the head, I found that my reflection had disappeared entirely. In its place was the boy who had been in the water with me. Every mirror or glass pane I looked at was graced by his presence, narrow and morose and slightly misshapen. I bled from the palms stealing a shard of factory window for my room, and in that sacred space where no one else was allowed—or no one else dared to go—I spent hours with Mirror Boy. I would sit by the cold glass in the afternoons, in between rehearsals and the start of the night’s performances, and I would let spill all the petty grievances of the day. Who had looked at me the wrong way, who had wounded me with cutting words. Mirror Boy never said much. He listened and told me I was right, or that he agreed with me. And I needed that. As time went on I started talking about my hopes for the future, about how I wanted to leave the circus and leave Darlingfort before it broke me like it broke everyone else. And he would just smile and nod and say he believed I could do it.

Some days, I missed knowing what my face looked like. Some days, I was glad I didn’t have to.

But I got older, and I got out of the circus. Escaping was my forte, after all, and I found I could bend my mind and will as easily as I could my body. People were willing to pay a lot of money to spend nights with me. I saved that money and used it to find a new and better place to live. To buy a new name and history. I got out of Darlingfort. Slowly—or perhaps all at once, I

don't remember anymore— Mirror Boy left me. I got my reflection back. I became a whole person again.

Until now.

The salon wasn't open, and it wouldn't be open until eleven. On the edge of posh Helbride, it was party to a stream of older women, powdered and primped, who delicately sashayed in from rooflevel with all the confidence I wished I was born with. They came to get their hair done and their faces done and their nails done while they filled the air with stories of their expensive vacations and expensive heliships and expensive children. They had names and, arguably, personalities, and I recognized most of the regulars by sight, but I could not tell them apart. As a lowly beauty technician, I hadn't been given the salon keys, but the toilets in the building weren't locked. They were fancy and empty, appointed in gilt and upholstery and soft underlighting.

Mirror Boy was waiting for me there, pacing between columns of dark marble in the looking-glass toilet, the one that had a copy of him and didn't have a copy of me. "I want my reflection back," I told him.

It wasn't that I didn't want to see him. Honestly, I'd missed him, and I hadn't realized how much until now. His familiar shape and hunch sent ambient warmth through odd corners of my chest. At one point in my life, his existence—just for me, and me alone—had brought great comfort. But the truth was, I no longer needed him. And I didn't want to go back to being that child who did.

Mirror Boy glanced sideways at me and continued pacing. "It's not important."

"Excuse me," I said. "I think it's fucking important."

"No," he said. "You're in danger."

He looked a little different from what I remembered. He was skittish, fingers twisting over knuckles, shoulders tight and drawn. Like a prey animal. It gave me pause, because I'd never seen him this tense before. And he was so young. O Formless Deep, he was so young. "What kind of danger?"

"There's a man, a hunter. He's killed all of my refuges. You're the last one."

"I don't understand."

He stopped pacing and stared, eyes intense and frightened. “Those murders in Darlingfort. He killed them all. They died the same way, slit by the same knife.”

He was right about that, at least according to the news. The weapon link was how the police knew they had a serial killer on their hands. But they couldn’t figure out his MO, his motivations. All seven victims were of different ages, different genders, and different backgrounds. They didn’t know one another. Nothing linked them except that they all lived in Darlingfort, in coffin-rooms smaller than a whale’s heart. So they said the killer was a sadist, picking off random targets in the neighborhood because they were poor and nobody cared.

“You’re the last of my refuges,” Mirror Boy repeated. “When the hunter kills you, I’ll be dead too.”

“What does that mean? Are you tied to me? Are you like some kind of cancer?” It was the easiest comparison in reach, plucking down the name of Mother’s disease.

“Yes. A cancer. That’s a good way of putting it.” Mirror Boy rubbed his bony hands together. “I’m a cancer. You were ... my first. Site of metastasis, I mean.”

A shiver passed through me at the way he said it. “I’m trying to understand. Who is this man? Why is he coming after you?”

“I’m unnatural,” Mirror Boy said. “I’m dangerous.”

“You weren’t dangerous to me,” I said cautiously. Did this unnamed killer know something I didn’t? Mirror Boy did nothing to me except take my reflection, which I cared nothing for at that point in time. And then he gave it back. “It’s because you’re a spirit, isn’t it?”

Some people have problems with spirits; they can’t accept they’re part of the world we live in now. It’s mostly a particular sort of people, because when you’re poor and desperate, sometimes spirits are the only ones who can help you. Or will help you, for that matter.

I’ve never been afraid of spirits. My mother, when she was alive, used to put me on her knee and tell me that my father was one. A boy with lips like coral and skin like ice, who smelled of ocean and evanesced from her bed in the light of the next morning, never to be seen again. I never found out if

she'd just made it up: she didn't like it when I asked around the circus. After she died I took her story and folded it into the fiber of my being, like all the half-truths I had assimilated over the years. I'm good at taking stories at face value.

"Did you choose me because my father was a spirit?" I asked Mirror Boy.

"It doesn't matter now," he said. "The man who hunts me has found you. You have to run. He'll kill you."

I thought of Alfous's hot breath on my neck. "Run, how?" And where could I run to? Back to Darlingfort, where everyone else had died? I didn't want to run. I wanted to fight. "There's got to be something I can do."

Mirror Boy pushed the flat of his palms against the barrier of the glass. "You have to run. Run and hide, the way you did when you left the circus. Become someone else so he can't find you again. He won't stop, and you can't stop him, and you can't get rid of me."

"I got rid of you once," I said, bristling at this litany of negatives.

He looked sad. "But you didn't."

I wasn't planning to leave this life that I'd built purely on some intangible warning from a boy who was half a dream. I liked what I had now: the mindless, fuss-free job; a roommate who was reasonably clean and had no drunk boyfriends to bring over; the little pockets of weird I'd found in the neighborhood, places where I didn't feel quite out of place. For the first time in my life I could see myself continuing down this path towards the future, gray in my hair, a box flat to call a home, a collection of books, half a dozen cats. A tidy and quiet picture that brought me little jolts of pleasure when I thought of it.

At nine-thirty I went up to the salon, passing a man in a gray leather jacket smoking in one of the turrets, tossing something pear-shaped up and down in one hand. I frowned, because it was a no-smoking building and whatever he had rolled smelled vile, but I said nothing, because I avoid talking to strange men when I can. His face, hidden in shadow, was turned away from me.

Our manager, Jinnie, was already in, sprawled in the receptionist's chair with a beat-up book. Our shifts started at ten, but she always arrived ahead of time to unlock the doors. She looked surprised to see me. "Well, someone's

early.”

I put on my most harried face. “Jinnie, I’m sorry but I’ve got to beg off for today. I know it’s late notice, but something’s come up that I’ve really got to take care of.”

Jinnie’s expression slid from suspicion to displeasure at a documentable speed. “You know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t serious,” I said.

She flipped through the bookings chart. “I suppose Sheela can cover for you,” she said, with enough weight on each word to let me know this was a favor she intended to call in later.

“Thanks, Jinnie. I owe you. Sorry again.”

I went down to the waterlevel to see if I could flag a gondola at this hour. There happened to be one moored right in front of the building, with a boatman who looked about fourteen. “How much to Hogskar?” I asked. He returned a number that was extortionate, but I wanted some time to think, so I paid it and climbed in.

The water smelled clean. Our gondola slid between the long shadows of buildings, snake-smooth and steady. Here I could see almost all the way to groundlevel: the old shop fronts and their big glass windows rippling in the boat-wake; caressing fingers of kelp; the small dark shoals of fish. The water’s surface was too disturbed to show me Mirror Boy, but it was calming nonetheless.

As I straightened up I happened to catch a glimpse over my shoulder, and my heart dropped, a sudden lurch. I thought I’d seen the man in the gray jacket behind us in a second boat.

I didn’t dare turn around. “Are we being followed?” I asked the boatman.

He looked puzzled. “No, ma’am.”

Maybe I had just imagined it. Too nervous to check again, I settled for watching the white faces of buildings glide past. Windows polished as silver posted distortions of the gondola over their glass-warp. There I was, hands clasped over my lap, with Mirror Boy by my side.

I startled and turned on instinct. Of course Mirror Boy wasn’t there. Of course I was alone on the ramshackle passenger bench of the gondola. I pulled my coat tighter around myself. We were too far away to talk, in any case.

I remembered now. This was how I lost him. First I started seeing both our images together: intermittently, then all the time. Later it started being just me sometimes, with a yawning emptiness where he was supposed to be. There then came a point where he stopped appearing for good, but by that time I was aggressively hunting for a lease and a fifty-six-hour workweek, and didn't have the space to find out where he went.

I thought of the late afternoons spent laid out on my bed—an old gym mat taped to the floor—with him curled naked by my side, a weightless, ephemeral comma. There, but not there. I'd touch myself while he hovered over me in the reflection, imagining it was his fingers I felt sliding over my flesh. Later I filched a dildo from an acrobat's room and watched him in the gloss of my stolen window as he matched the thrust of his hips with my movements. With my head turned to one side, I could imagine that the translucent figures I saw, rapturous in their copulation, reflected the reality I was in.

The gondola slowed at a cross-junction and stopped for the lights. I leaned over the boat's edge as the water calmed and Mirror Boy came into focus. "I wanted you to be real," I told him.

"I know."

I brushed my fingers against his cheek, and his face wavered and broke apart in the ripples. When I sat back I realized the boatman was staring at me. "You sure you alright?"

"Yeah," I said, not looking him in the eye. I stared at the chipped corner of a building instead, spotty with water damage. My cheeks burned with a mixture of embarrassment and anxiety.

* * *

Hogskar was home to one of the pockets of weird I'd curated. I directed the boatman to a flat-roofed apartment block, where a couple of floors above the water lived a witch who ran a manabonanza out of her home. As the gondola bumped against the barnacle crust along the walls, I thanked him and climbed the stairs through something that used to be a window and was now a front door.

This building, like mine, used to have a functional elevator nestled in the

winding central stairwell, and it lay drowned at ground level. As I peered into its bronze cage and its flooded depths, a warning prickle ghosted over the back of my neck.

“Be careful,” Mirror Boy said.

I ran up a flight of steps on instinct. Crouched in the cover between windows, I leaned until I could just see outside.

The man in the gray jacket sat in a slim boat with an outboard motor, parked against the border of masonry across the canal. I watched as he fished something out of his pocket, lit it, and put it in his mouth. From this distance he looked startlingly like Mirror Boy, all grown up, with a ragged beard and hair that had last seen scissors years ago.

Fuck. I went back to the rusted bars of the elevator cage. The dark surface of the water was now a floor away. “Who is he?” I demanded of the distant, floating spirit.

Mirror Boy just looked sadly at me.

Now all fluttery with adrenaline, I loped upstairs and pressed the buzzer under bunting that read, in faded red, *CHRISSAS MANABONANZA*. Bundles of shells and fishbone and cartilage festooned the doorway with great cheer, and the protective beak of a colossal squid hung over the premises. A pair of heartbeats passed before Chrissa’s voice crackled over the intercom. “We’re closed, come back at three!”

“It’s Lynette.”

“Circus Girl! Hey! What are you doing? Don’t you have work? Just a mo.”

I imagined Chrissa tumbling off whatever surface she had perched on and clattering through the layers of her house and shop. The door flew open to her wide-eyed smile and stream of chatter. “You’re just in time. I’m working on something new, it’s so great, you’re going to love it.” She clicked off the multiple locks across the folding aluminum gate. “It’s like, a clockwork heart, and I think I’ve almost got the formulation right this time.”

“Chrissa,” I said. “Chrissa, I need your help.”

“Oh. That sounds serious. Come on in.”

The moment I crossed the threshold an alarm sounded: a single, shrill, vibrating note. I froze. That sound meant *fire*, it meant *death*, it meant *run*,

for all is lost.

“Shit,” Chrissa said. “What the hell?” She grabbed me by the arm and stiffly pushed me into an alcove by the door, cluttered with shoeboxes and the mummified carcasses of old umbrellas. “Did you get infected?”

The alarm continued its devouring scream. Chrissa tiptoed and thumbed off its controls, fixed under the fuse box. “Sorry. It’s a recycled school bell—it’s pretty fucking loud.” She turned back to me. “What’s going on? Did you get haunted?”

I leaned against the cold ledge of the alcove’s hatch, lined with red brick. “I don’t know. It’s worse than that, I think.”

Chrissa clicked her tongue. “Okay. Hang tight. Let me get my stuff.”

I stood in the dark of the alcove, inhaling layers of dust into a chest already tight with emotion. Chrissa hummed as she rifled through overflowing cabinets, her straw-bright hair drawn into a high, messy bun. She came back with a lacquered box and an armful of clear plastic drinking glasses. “Here,” she said, leaning across the hatch, “give me some fluid. Spit, blood, whatever.” She handed me a dusty shot glass.

I spit several times while she set up, decanting squid-ink tinctures into the glasses, a rainbow of eldritch chemistry. “Thank you,” she said, taking the shot glass from me. She dipped a clutch of cocktail sticks into the spit, then dropped one into each glass.

“Hmm,” she said, as the tinctures turned color, effervesced, or remained inert. “Okay. It looks like you’ve got a wraith. That’s ... not great. When did you pick it up?”

So that’s how I learned Mirror Boy had a classification, a precedence, an observed set of characteristics. “Ten years ago. I was sixteen. But he left. He’s just only come back now.”

“Ten years? No, that means the wraith didn’t leave, it just went dormant. I’ve heard that it happens. That’s probably why the wards didn’t pick it up before.” She pushed off the alcove hatch. “Anyway, you’re not at end stage yet, and wraiths aren’t super-infectious. I might be able to contain it. We’ll see. The important part is, you’re still *you*. Come on.”

“Chrissa,” I said, “the wraith’s not the problem.”

She paused. “Oh?”

“There’s a murderer after me. I think he’s downstairs, waiting across the canal.”

“A murderer?”

“He’s killed all of Mirror Boy’s— my wraith’s other refuges. I don’t know what that means, but there’s been a string of murders in Darlingfort—”

“Hang on a minute. Describe this guy. You said he’s downstairs?”

“I think it’s him. He’s about my height, skinny, stringy brown hair down to here. This gross, patchy beard...”

Chrissa’s eyes were slits. “Gray leather jacket?”

“That’s him. You know him?”

“Shit.” She blew air between her lips and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, he came to get his scry adjusted. Fucksquid, I didn’t know he was after you.”

“He’s killed seven people,” I exclaimed. “Why did you help him?”

“Honey. Do you *know* what wraiths do? You— wait.” She blew out a breath as a modicum of understanding hit. “You don’t want to get rid of this wraith, do you?”

I couldn’t say yes. I couldn’t say no. I said, instead: “I want to know what’s going on. And I want this creep to stop following me.”

Chrissa narrowed her eyes again. “How would you describe your relationship with this wraith?”

This time, I really hesitated. “Intimate.” As Chrissa’s eyebrows shot upwards I said, “I was sixteen! He was a boy, I was a girl, I—”

“Did you love him?”

“No! I don’t know. Look, it’s been ten years. I just don’t want to die like the others. Please, there’s got to be something we can do.”

“Honey...” She rubbed my arm apologetically. “Come on. Let’s see what we’ve got on our hands.”

With a bucket of squid ink, wet and pungent, Chrissa inscribed a charm circle on the floor, a standing mirror at its heart. As she worked, she explained: “Wraiths are a bit weird. They’re in between, not fully spirits, but more than raw energy. They’re sort of, leftover life-force that goes hunting for hosts. Parasites, basically.” She straightened up and went to put the ink bucket away. “The problem with wraiths is that A, they take over their hosts and do crazy shit, and B, they can also jump hosts. So they spread. There are

hunters who specialize in taking them out before they become a real problem. The more hosts, the harder to kill.”

“You said they’re not infectious.”

“I said they’re not *super*-infectious. There are conditions for becoming a host.” She beckoned at me to step into the circle. “Come on. I want to see this mirror boy of yours.”

I looked at the lines and glyphs spread across the floor. “Is it going to hurt him? I don’t want to hurt him.”

“Oh, *honey*.” Chrissa shook her head. “It won’t hurt him. It’s for *me* to see him and talk to him. If he wants to talk.”

I gingerly tiptoed into the circle, careful not to disturb the still-wet lines. Mirror Boy stood in front of me, fully clad in a shabby red t-shirt and jeans. I’d never seen him like this, and it sent a trill of sadness and betrayal through me.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He was just a child, scuffing the toe of one beat-up shoe against the heel of the other.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this?”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated.

Chrissa knelt and chanted softly over the charm circle, invoking Kraken, invoking Leviathan. “Neither spine nor ribcage, neither collarbones nor hips, the eyes that see in the watery dark, the mouths that open in the deep.” Her handiwork slid from glistening black to iridescent silver, and the lines sang as they came to life, each circular glyph ringing a different note. The chorus of bell tones raised my flesh in tingling waves.

“Alright,” Chrissa said, matter-of-factly. She stood and struck gray dust from her hands as the charm circle hummed. “Let’s see what we got.”

She stepped in, looked into the mirror, and melted. “Oh, *honey*. Look at him. He’s just a *baby*.”

“Yeah,” I said, mouth dry. He was a baby. I’d been a baby back then, too. Neither of us knew what we were doing, flailing through this world.

Chrissa and her marshmallow heart were already gone. I should have known this would happen. Her voice was bright and airy like she was talking to a small, soft animal. “Hello. What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one.” He looked to me for reassurance. “She calls me

Mirror Boy.”

“I want to know about you. Tell me about yourself.”

Mirror Boy stared blankly. Undaunted, Chrissa asked in the singsong manner she reserved for young children, “How would you describe yourself?”

“I am what I am,” he said. “I live through others. I’ve had eight different hosts. Lynette was my first, a long time ago. And then she asked me to leave, so I found others. I don’t think she remembers this.”

“I remember,” I said, stung by his accusation. “And I never asked you to leave.”

Chrissa quietly patted my hand, as if to say, *not now*. “Tell me about your other hosts. How come you have so many?”

“I found pathways to other people. But they didn’t always want me around. So I left them too.”

“Seven other hosts over ten years?”

He nodded. “The shortest time I spent with one was three days. But—” he hitched his shoulders up and drew in a shaky breath like he needed air— “the hunter killed her too. Why? She didn’t know who I was. She thought I was a bad dream.”

“Hunters have to be thorough,” Chrissa said. I choked audibly at that, and she explained, “It’s like an illness. You have to get rid of everything that’s infected.”

“Like an extermination,” I said tonelessly. I wanted to vomit.

Chrissa’s lips pursed. She looked more upset than I ever remembered, and that helped with nothing. She turned back to Mirror Boy as I blinked back burning in my eyes. “How about the host you were with the longest?”

“My last host,” he said. I noticed how much more tired he looked. “Her name was Nur Elisha. She lived alone in Darlingfort. I was with her for seven years. She thought I was her long-lost grandson.”

I swallowed. Words could not describe the ugly feelings welling up in me now. “Did the hunter kill her too?”

“He killed her first. And found the others, one by one. Every one I fled to, he killed.”

Nur Elisha, Nur Elisha. I replayed the name in my head, trying to tease

out if and when I saw her in the news. But an elderly woman dying alone in the sewer slums wasn't important. And wouldn't be until the third or fourth person killed the same way.

"I'm going to ask you a question. Please answer it honestly." Chrissa's manner towards Mirror Boy was still gentle as a shepherd's, but I'd never seen her this somber, and that frightened me more than anything else. I was standing chest-high in a sea of uncertainty. It was a sick old feeling. It was a familiar old feeling. "Why didn't you take any of your hosts over?"

"Because I didn't want to," he said. "I know I'm *supposed* to. I can feel that call. But I—" He stopped, struggling for words. He had never been the most talkative, my Mirror Boy. "I just wanted to watch. What would I do with their lives?"

"What, indeed," Chrissa muttered to herself. To Mirror Boy she asked: "Do you know who your hunter is?"

"No."

"Hmm." Chrissa had gone uncharacteristically quiet. She told me, "You stay right here," and vanished into the upper loft.

With Chrissa gone, Mirror Boy leaned as far as the glass would allow him and hissed: "She *can't* help us. Nobody can break what links us. Either you run, or—" He exhaled, and the glass went misty on the inside.

"Or what?"

"Or she finds a way to kill me without touching you."

"No."

"It's the only way—"

"No." I slapped my hand against the glass and he flinched back from it. "Stop saying these things. I don't want you dead. And I never asked you to leave. Why would you say that?"

He moved away from the glass. "You didn't have to say it. I could tell. You were trying to build a life that had no space for me in it. You wanted a normal life. So I let you be normal."

"That's not true," I insisted. I had been maybe a bit relieved to get my reflection back—to know that it would be my face I saw when I looked in a mirror—but I wasn't *glad*. It was just—it was more *convenient*. Because then I didn't have to worry about explaining him to other people. Or the fact that I

couldn't see to put on lip gloss. It was just slightly easier.

But I'd rather have had him. I believed that.

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be normal," Mirror Boy said.

Chrissa came back downstairs, waving a small velvet box that probably safekept someone's wedding ring in its previous life. "Luckily for us," she said, "our hunter-murderer is a bit of a dumbass. I'm guessing an amateur. I asked him for a bunch of things as payment for fixing his scry, including a lock of hair." She tapped the ring box. "Pro tip: Never give a witch anything that used to be part of you. No matter what the reason."

"What are you going to do?" I asked. I imagined the curses she could lay upon him on my behalf. She could solve all our problems instantly.

But of course Chrissa wasn't that kind of witch. "I'm going to find out who he is."

Her desk yielded a sliver of workspace and she got busy, tuning us out of her consciousness. I folded myself to the floor and leaned my head against the cool glass. I wasn't sure what time it was anymore. I thought: *I need to tell Shane I'm not coming back tonight. It's my turn to cook dinner.*

I closed my eyes. Mirror Boy began to talk. "At the start, I was going to take you over," he said. "It's true that is the nature of wraiths. But you, you wanted to live so badly. You burned with so much desire that it frightened me. I didn't think I could put out that flame. So I stayed and I watched you. And over time I realized I didn't have to do what my nature demanded of me. So I didn't."

"You're not like the other wraiths," I whispered.

"I suppose I'm not."

"What do we really know about wraiths, anyway?" Chrissa said. She was grinding some kind of rock into fine powder in a tiny handheld mortar. "Jack shit. All our current spiritual knowledge is like, a grand total of twenty years old. We make it up as we go along. I bet that in ten years, Mirror Boy, you're going to be the case study people cite when talking about wraiths."

I thought about life ten years in the future and a blanket of exhaustion fell over me. I still had the gauntlet of the next ten days to go through. The next ten hours.

Mirror Boy leaned against me, shoulder to shoulder, the glass a thin and

unbreakable barrier between our worlds. “Are you happy?” he whispered. “Is this the life that you wanted?”

“Heavy questions, kid,” Chrissa warned from her perch.

I didn’t know how to answer him. “It’s not a bad life,” I said. “It’s a bit dull. But it’s my life.”

“It sounds nice,” he said, and he sounded like he meant it more than I did.

I looked up at Chrissa, framed by the stacks of her grimoires, a figure of pure concentration, and was struck by envy, bone-deep. Chrissa looked like someone who was exactly where she was meant to be. Here was a person who hadn’t just fallen into the grooves of her life like a yellow coat of autumn leaves, but was growing bright and verdant from deep soil that suited her. And she was just sitting there, filled with innocent purpose, with no idea how lucky she was. I wished I had the same kind of untrammled joy in my life as Chrissa did. I felt almost guilty I didn’t.

“I’m a pretender,” I said, knowing Mirror Boy was listening. “When I stop to think about my life I get the sense that I’m just borrowing someone else’s. So I don’t.” I shrugged. It was hard to put these sentiments into words. “Like I have all this stuff in my past I can’t talk about. I don’t know.” The events of the past few hours were finally catching up, like a tidal wave about to smother me. “I’m sorry I snapped when you came back. Because it’s like ... I was being reminded that I’m only a pretender. Pretending to have this life that isn’t mine.”

“Your life is your life,” Chrissa said sharply, and when I looked up she was glaring at me over the rims of the bifocals she wore to do near-vision work. “Don’t say shit like that. People deserve to have nice things.”

“A borrowed life is better than none,” said Mirror Boy.

I pressed my fingertips to his against the cool glass and felt a smile pushing through my gloom. “I’m not going to argue with you.”

Exhaustion overtook me then, and I must have fallen asleep at some point, because I woke to Chrissa gripping me by the shoulders, her face inches from mine. “Did you ever drown?”

I blinked away half-ghosts and dream-fragments. “Yes, once.” I didn’t want to tell her about Alfous, about his cruel fingers or the little red tip of his tongue, or the way the blood bloomed across his neck when I cut it.

“Was this when you met the kid?”

“How did you know?”

“Come have a look.”

She sauntered to her desk, where a battle-scarred laptop sat whirring. I didn't want to leave the safety of the charm circle, so I stayed put. Chrissa pointed to the screen. “I worked out your hunter's name, and I scrubbed the web for it. Look. There we are. There's your mirror boy.”

The screen was too far for me to read. I tried to swallow my disbelief. “Mirror Boy's the hunter?”

“Kraken's sake, no. Mirror boy drowned ten years ago. Here it is, in the news. The hunter's his twin. There's your motivation sorted out. He's going after his brother's wraith. I told you: an amateur.”

“I don't have an older brother,” Mirror Boy said. He sounded confused. “I don't remember him.”

“Of course you don't. You're not a spirit. Just loose energy from when someone died before their time, given shape and direction. How do you find your hosts, kid?”

Mirror Boy licked his lips. “In the water, on the verge of passing.”

“There, see? You're following the path of that boy's death.”

“But I'm not him,” Mirror Boy said. “I don't know him. I'm not—”

“Doesn't matter.” Chrissa clicked the laptop shut. “Look, obviously this guy is serious. Amateur hunters like him do it because they're fanatics. You can't reason with them. I know this too well.” She sighed and tangled her hands in her hair. “And there's no known way to separate a wraith from its host. Once you infect a person, it's permanent. No take-backsies.” She started pacing in a tiny circle, which she only did when she was frustrated. “That's why hunters kill hosts. It's cruel, but it's better than letting the wraith spread, because most wraiths are legit nightmares. I don't say that lightly. I've had to clean up before. When wraiths possess people, they turn into psychopaths. Like flesh-dungeon, cannibal-horror psychopaths.”

“But he's not like that,” I said. “You know he's not like that. He's not.”

“I know. He ... loves you. I think that's the difference.” She looked between the two of us, helpless. “Honey, I'm sorry. This is out of my depth. I'm out of ideas. I don't know what to do.”

“That’s not good enough. We have to do something.” I looked at Mirror Boy, trapped in his bubble of a world. I’d spent the last ten years scraping this life I had together, but he couldn’t leave the glass-bound existence he was chained to. So maybe my life wasn’t perfect, maybe it was dull and not a hundred percent what I would have hoped for. But it was *mine*. And it was more than he had. It wasn’t fair. He deserved better. *We* deserved better.

“We have to do something,” I repeated.

THE HUNTER

Leviathan forgive me. I stand here in Your eternal sight, a sinner beyond redemption, my hands stained as Kraken’s ink and my heart cold and dead as Kraken’s eyes. Ten years ago the greater part of my soul drowned in the water with my brother. It was my fault that those men mistook him for me, and a stain upon my being that I was not there to stop it from happening. But it will be over soon. Tonight, or tomorrow, or sometime this week, I will kill the last of his hosts, and then it will be done. This job will be done, and I can fade away.

The girl has corralled herself in the building where the witch lives. I don’t know if they’re friends, but the scry lies heavy and dormant in my hand. Something protects her and hides her from my sight. The knife weighs my belt down, waiting and patient. It has tasted the blood of seven, and it wants more. I detest it. I detest its heft, its hunger. I regret the day I had it forged. But it’s too late. If I stop now, at this one last step I need to end this wraith, then all the death that came before will be for nothing.

In the old days this would be easier. You’d dig up the grave, salt the bones, then burn them. But the sea is my brother’s grave, and it has thickened his bones with salt, and no fire shall ever touch them.

It was Leviathan who guided me. It was They who sent Bastian to me. Sweet Bastian, with his soft cheeks and honeyed lips. He spoke of the year his reflection showed someone else, dark haired and dark eyed, skin warm as almond husks. He said: “At first, I thought you were him. You look exactly alike.” I told him about my dead twin, the drowned boy, and between our tellings the events that had followed my brother’s death became clear. By

then I had spent years in penance, knees pressed to the cold temple floors, hot blood dripping into sacrificial chalices, praying for my sins to be cleansed by the stringent purity of saltwater. For the mercy of Leviathan to pass through me and leave me bleached and bare. That night, I knew that I was beyond the redemption of even the Great Finned One, but They had blessed me still with a chance to atone for the life I had led.

From there everything unraveled: the nights combing through the mausoleums of old libraries, the days spent pulling secrets out of witches and priests. And then the knowledge, and then the knife, and then the first of the blood. The old woman who lived alone in a coffin box, among stacks of decaying photographs and the flat faces of mirrors.

Until then, I didn't think I could do it. Until the moment the knife punctured her chest I believed I would fail on the path Leviathan had set me upon. But the old woman died and I was baptized in her blood, reborn as Leviathan's blade. Great Leviathan, I am Your will and Your flesh in the realm of mortals, doing Your bidding as I may. I stain myself in Your name. I condemn myself so that I may bring peace to Your domain.

Yesterday it was Bastian's turn. The smell of his blood lingers on my collar where his hands touched it, his questing fingers tightening, then losing their grip. I dread the thought of washing my shirt. It's all I have left of him.

The scry comes to life, the coral glowing with bioluminescence. The urchin-spike needle spins. The girl has emerged from her den of safety.

Soon it will be over.

By the time I park the boat and enter the building, her footsteps are echoing on the steps several floors above me. I take my shoes off. Barefoot and silent, I slip upwards, the knife ready in my hand.

The girl comes to a stop at midlevel, leaning by the gangway to the next building. She's slender and fashionable, an ocean of curls resting on her shoulders. In another time, I might have offered her something else: a drink, a taste of salt. Her shaking hands fumble with a lighter and cigarette. In the end, it's our vices that will lead to our downfall. I creep up from behind.

Soon it will be over.

Something creaks. She turns, catches sight of me, and recoils in fear. I spring forward, but she is already fleeing down the gangway into the waiting

night.

I give chase. The girl shines like a deer in the woods, a memory from the time I was too small to know speech. She vanishes into the shelter of the next building, which exists as a dismal wreck, boarded-up and empty even of squatters. The midlevel floor, formerly a studio or warehouse, challenges me with a maze of metal cabinets, heaving with rotting boxes and bloated white tins.

The girl slips between the cabinets, her breathing harsh. I trip over a metal rod jutting between two shelves and land palm-first in the dust. As I scramble to get up I hear a deep crash, then another. A chorus of deadly groans—metallic, ringing. The girl. She's pushed a shelf over and now they're all coming down, an army of avenging dominoes.

The floor doesn't hold. Eaten through with mold and termites, it ruptures under the weight of the falling shelves. Wood and metal plunge towards the waiting water, meeting their doom with dull sounds. I barely escape the devouring chasm in time. I watch a whole cabinet tip to its death, its insides spilling like butchered intestines.

A skittering sound to my left. It's the girl, leaping over rubble and ruin. I realize I've dropped the knife and it's nowhere to be found.

The girl has it. She's run to the far end of the room, and the knife glints in a shard of moonlight as she holds it up. I speak to the wraith of my brother who resides in her: "Are you going to do it for me, Vincent?" I ask. "Will you end your own life? End this torment?"

"I'm not him," she says, in a voice high and clear as a songbird's. "I'm not your dead brother. No one is." She cuts into her palm; blood runs over her wrist and down her elbow. "Look. I bleed red. I'm human."

I shake my head. None of the other hosts bled wraith-black either. Sometimes the literature is wrong. But now the girl has put obstacles between us. She is clever; I have to be careful.

"Look," she says. "You seem like a nice man. It doesn't have to be like this. We could be friends. I want to be your friend. Don't you want to know your brother?"

Her eyes are luminous, the way I remember deer eyes reflected the light. The shape of her legs shows under her shift, and I imagine the warmth

between them and the soft places I can sink into. I imagine taking her down by the neck and having her right here, on the dying floorboards of a dying building. I imagine killing her as she comes, my brother's wraith spilling like black vomit from her lips.

A shiver passes through me, and I know at once that this is Kraken's corruption. Kraken with Its tentacles that turn flesh to temptation and minds to ruin. Kraken who lives to frustrate the will of Leviathan. No. I cannot be fooled. I will not be thwarted.

I seize a metal rod from the ground, its end a series of ragged points. The knife is only a tool; anything will work as well. "Don't try to trick me, you witch."

The girl runs.

By Leviathan's grace I cross the room without falling through. The girl has vanished up the concrete stairwell with roof access, but that's a mistake. This building is too short to connect to rooflevel, so she'll be trapped. I burst through the door to find her standing at the roof edge, staring across the blank space of the canal, elbows tight to her waist.

"There's nowhere to run," I say, as the door claps shut behind me. "You might as well give up. It'll be easier on both of us."

"I don't want to die," she says.

"I know. I'm sorry." And I mean it. She is lovely, and I am truly sorry that she has to die. "But to live, a wraith needs a body to inhabit."

She looks over her shoulder at me. "I know," she says sadly.

Then she spins on her heel, her arm thrown out. Something strikes me hard and I go crashing against the door. The knife's handle protrudes from my chest. As I watch fluid trickle down my jacket my knees lose coherence, as though their tendons have been cut. I see. The girl *is* clever, and I have allowed her to trick me. This is the end. My metal rod clatters to the ground.

The girl canters over and pulls the knife from my heart, and the blood it held back spills over my shirt. "Once upon a time, I used to be a circus girl," she says. "Once upon a time, I used to throw knives and juggle and spin fire."

The girl's eyes glitter in the moonlight as though they were a distant conflagration. A forest burning. "He's taken you," I say. The taste of hot copper fills my mouth.

“No,” she says. “He’s never taken me. He doesn’t follow his nature. He chose not to. That’s why I decided to save him.” She squats over me. “To live, a wraith needs a body to inhabit. You understand, don’t you?”

I do, and yet I do not. The world is fading around me. In this half-twilight my brother stands behind the circus girl. It’s been so long since I’ve seen him, I’ve forgotten what he looks like. He’s so beautiful. We used to be so beautiful. I had forgotten.

I flick my gaze back to the circus girl, trying to understand before my time on this watery earth runs out. “You’ll ... take care of him?”

“No, hunter,” she says. “He’ll take care of you.” She runs her fingers softly through my hair. “A borrowed life is better than none.”

A borrowed life is better than none. Is that something I used to say? Or my brother? Maybe it was our mother, long dead and gone. My memories swim into one another and I lose them to the dark. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter anymore.

Forgive me, Leviathan. I know not if I have failed You, only that I have tried my best. I am light as a child floating on the surface of a clear blue sea. O Great Finned One, take me into Your infinite depths, away from this salt-bitten world. I see brother’s face one last time, framed over the circus girl’s shoulder. He is smiling.

MIRROR BOY

I smell the sea on the air. It’s a smell I don’t remember, because I remember nothing. But a month from now, or maybe a year later, I will look back on this day and I will.

I feel the sun upon the skin of the man who used to be my brother. It’s warm. It’s pleasant. It could burn me, if it wasn’t winter. It is my skin now, and I belong to it, as it belongs to me.

I hear the sounds of life around me. So many notes I can hardly believe it, after so long spent hearing only one voice at a time. There’s the arguments of sea birds, the wash of water against walls, the song of boat motors, and the soft humming of someone experiencing happiness.

I see Circus Girl perched on the roof edge, her ankles freely dangling, her

hair soft and loose. The tune she hums is one her mother used to sing her to sleep with. I realize I am seeing for the first time the shape of her back, the geography of her spine.

I taste grit in my mouth, clay and ashes and bone. Chrissa tells me it will take a few days for it to go away. A few days for my heart to settle into its new home.

I want to tell Circus Girl how grateful I am. For hosting me. For teaching me about life. For saving me when I needed it. I want to tell her how terrified I am, now that I have been given all this, and I can do anything I want with it. I want to tell her about this happiness I feel, how new and delightful it is to me.

Instead I say, "I think I'm hungry. Let's go downstairs and eat."

END

About the Author



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JY YANG is the author of *The Black Tides of Heaven* and *The Red Threads of Fortune*. They are also a lapsed journalist, a former practicing scientist, and a master of hermitry. A queer, non-binary, postcolonial intersectional feminist, they have over two dozen pieces of short fiction published. They live in Singapore where they work as a science communicator, and have a MA in creative writing from the University of East Anglia. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).





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ARTICULATED RESTRAINT

MARY
ROBINETTE
KOWAL

Articulated Restraint

MARY ROBINETTE KOWAL

illustration by

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TOR·COM 

MOON COLONY EXPANDS TO 100 COLONISTS

Sep. 26, 1960 (AP) — The International Aerospace Coalition announced today that the lunar colony, established last year, is ready to expand to hold 100 colonists. This is the next step in preparing to colonize Mars, although many still question the necessity of such an endeavor...

Six thirty in the morning was a brutal time to start work even without a sprained ankle. Ruby Donaldson tried to tell herself that being sore and exhausted was good practice as an astronaut. Limping up to the third floor of the Neutral Buoyancy Lab, she gave thanks that no one else was in the stairwell so she could lean against the metal rail. It was hard enough balancing work and life without people questioning her choices.

All she wanted was to do the NBL training run and then collapse in bed, but somehow she'd agreed to another lindy-hop dance rehearsal tonight. It was just hard to disappoint a friend that you'd been dancing in competitions with since before the Meteor struck, and she didn't have that many pieces of Before left in her life.

At least, the benefit of being a doctor was that she could diagnose and treat her own injuries. She didn't have to risk getting grounded if she admitted to a flight surgeon that she'd twisted her ankle practicing a Charleston Flip. All they would have done was exactly what she did. Ice. Wrap. Analgesic.

As she came out on the pool level, the smell of chlorine met Ruby at the door. The massive football field-sized pool hummed with activity as dozens of divers and suit techs prepped for the run.

Wait— There were too many people here.

And there were *four* EVA suits on the bright yellow donning stands by the pool. There should only be two, because her run had been scheduled with

just one other astronaut. All she and Eugene were supposed to be doing was a simulated spacewalk to work out the procedure for attaching cameras to the outside of the station.

Across the pool, Jason Tsao turned from where he was talking with one of the astronauts who had done a run yesterday and shouldn't even be at the NBL today. His tie was undone and his cuffs were rolled up past his elbows. She had never seen the test conductor look even marginally ruffled.

What the hell was wrong?

He beckoned her over with his sheaf of papers. "Ruby, morning. Change of plans, as I'm sure you probably expected."

She had missed something—a message left with her roommate, a briefing update, something—and whatever it was did not look good. She snapped into the sort of focus she felt in the operating room. "What sort of change?"

Jason's shoulders tightened. "Sorry. I assumed you had seen the news."

"I— I was out last night." She had been dancing as if *Before* still existed.

He took a slow breath. "No one is dead. A ship returning from the moon had a retrorocket misfire while docking with *Lunetta* yesterday evening."

"Oh God." Scores of people worked on the *Lunetta* orbiting platform. People she knew. And Eugene Lindholm, her partner for today's run—his wife would have been on the lunar rocket. Ruby played bridge with Myrtle and Eugene. She turned, looking for the tall black man among the people working by the pool. He was at the stainless steel bench, running through his checklist with tight, controlled motions. No one was dead, but if the Meteor had taught the world anything, death wasn't the worst thing that could happen to someone. "How bad?"

Jason glanced up as if he could see past the tall roof of the NBL to the space station. "The pilot of the lunar rocket could see coming in that they had a problem, so *Lunetta*'s hangar crew evacuated and the rocket's hull is intact. We're incredibly lucky."

Ruby wiped her hand over her face, still stunned. They needed the station as a transfer point to get people off Earth. Damage to it would throw the space program back years. At least the four EVA suits made sense now. "And so we're working on coming up with a repair procedure today?"

Shaking his head, Jason handed her the paperwork for the day's run,

which was the only thing that seemed normal. “We’re using the NBL to figure out the rescue and recovery plan. The impact warped the airlock and coupling mechanism, so the rocket is locked to the station and the airlock is jammed. We’ve got a team up on the station working on getting it open but want all possible solutions, because the people on the lunar rocket don’t have EVA suits.”

Ruby sucked in a breath that suddenly felt like a luxury. She knew the margins on consumables for the moon run. They’d been trapped since yesterday evening, so had already been on the ship longer than the IAC budgeted for, even with redundancies. “How much air and—”

“We have sixteen hours to figure out how to get them out.”

★ ★ ★

The Lower Torso Assembly, aka space pants, lay on a cloth pad, ready for her. Astronauts did not, in fact, put their pants on like everyone else. It took two trained professionals and an astronaut wiggling across the floor to squirm into the LTA’s tight legs. Around the pool, three other astronauts were getting ready to do the same awkward floor dance. Eugene sat on the other side of the donning stand from her, his brown skin ashen above the white mesh of his Liquid Cooling and Ventilation Garment, but he’d insisted that he was okay to do the run.

She’d do right by him and Myrtle. Ruby sat on her rump in her own mesh LCVG, with its lines of tubing wrapping around her body and no modesty. She grabbed the hard aluminum ring at the waist and slid her feet into the top of the legs.

And knew she had a problem.

A different problem than the fact that a score of her friends and colleagues were trapped in a tin can 254 miles above her. The tacky rubber that lined the suit grabbed hold of the fabric of her cooling garment. Ruby’s ankle twinged with a warning. She evaluated it. A mild sprain. She could work through that. It was swollen, but not enough to make the suit not fit. It would just be ... uncomfortable. Ruby shoved her feet into the tight layers of rubber, and pain radiated white lines to her knee, sending flashes across her

vision.

Ruby stopped, holding the suit and her breath for a moment. All right. The sprain was worse than she thought.

At best, it would eat twelve of the sixteen hours to swap her out for another crew member. Almost everything about the EVA suits was customizable and swapped around to fit the crew members who were using them. The tech suit staff must have worked all night to reset the two other suits for this development run. Dev runs were hard enough when mission control had enough time to build a procedure. Today there would be more winging it than anyone would like.

And if she couldn't suit up? Since she was the shortest member of the astronaut corps, they couldn't just plunk someone else into her suit. If they could have, they would have put in someone other than "the pint-sized Astronette" for this run. She'd been an astronaut for two years, with only one moon trip under her belt. Sure, she'd been top of her class, because at her height being the best had been her only option, but if they could have gotten a *real* astronaut like Elma York in here, they would have.

Heck, the only astronauts they could add on this short a notice had just finished a run yesterday so their suits were already customized. Those two had to be exhausted after six hours fighting suits pressurized to 4.3 psi under thirty feet of water, but Paul Charvet and Serge Broom had shown up with faces as grim and determined as everyone else's.

The suit tech on her right glanced at her. "Everything okay?"

This was going to hurt, but once she was in, the simulated spacewalk wouldn't use her feet. Much. She just had to get into the suit.

"Yep. Just getting my toes lined up." Gritting her teeth, Ruby tried to keep her face placid as she worked her foot through the leg of the suit. The swelling in her ankle made it feel as if the rubber bladder was grabbing her deliberately. Flares shot up from the protesting muscles as if warning her to back away. She tried to breathe through the pain, and kept wriggling past the folds of fabric and rubber while the two techs braced the legs.

A fishhook seemed to embed itself in between the talus and tibia bones of her ankle and dug in deeper as she worked her foot down through the leg. The moment when her foot popped into the boot at the end made her gasp

with relief.

She couldn't speak so she gave a thumbs-up and held out her hands for the men to help hoist her to her feet. Thank God standard procedure meant that they braced her because she wasn't putting any weight on her right foot until she had to. All she needed to do now was walk five feet, wiggle into the hard torso of the EVA suit where it hung suspended on the donning stand, and that would be the last time she'd have to put significant weight on her ankle until the run was finished.

At least that was one good thing about her lindy-hop training—she knew how to smile through pain. Under the best of conditions, you were sore at the end of an NBL run. This was just different pain.

It also helped that everyone expected astronauts to grimace as they forced themselves into the hard upper torso assembly. But once inside the HUT assembly, she could let the donning stand support her weight and lean against the frame while the suit techs put the rest of the suit on. It wasn't that it was comfortable, because the o-ring joints at the shoulders of the suit pushed her arms forward a little and dug into her armpits, but at least the donning stand took her weight.

As much as she wanted to tell everyone to hurry, the old aphorism “slow is fast” applied here, too. They wouldn't help the crew on the station who would have to do the actual spacewalk if they started making mistakes by rushing.

They'd done things right this morning, taking the time to do the pre-run briefing so everyone knew what their jobs were. Broadly, their job was to work out safe procedures in the relatively benign environment of a 6.3-million-gallon pool of water so that when her colleagues in orbit went into the lethal environment of space, they didn't have to take any unnecessary chances.

Specifically, she and Eugene were going to see if a life raft was possible while EV3 and 4 attempted a maneuver to see if it was possible to run air and power to the lunar rocket. To buy time. Ultimately, if they couldn't get the hatch open, the rocket's crew would still need a life raft to transfer safely inside the station.

So Ruby forced herself to relax, conserving energy for the run itself,

while the techs checked the cooling system and slid her “Snoopy” cap on so she would have comms in her suit. The helmet followed after that and slid a barrier between her and the world.

This was what things would sound like for the folks trapped in the ship. Even without a breach, they’d have their emergency pressure suits on, which would protect them from a vacuum but not the temperature extremes outside the ship. All their communication would be filtered by comms, which were distancing and intimate all at the same time.

In her ears, the comforting litany of mission control almost made it sound like people weren’t in danger.

And then the litany broke. “We can’t get a good seal on EV1.”

Eugene’s voice followed from where he stood behind her on the donning stand. “It’s probably just a gauge.”

“You know we can’t risk that.”

Ruby opened her eyes. There was nothing she could do, strapped to the donning stand, but if they couldn’t seal Eugene’s suit it would take on water in the pool. Myrtle was up there. “Eugene— There will be three of us in the pool. They can add you as soon as they get a good seal.”

His breath hissed in her ears, but she could hear his fighter pilot training. He was heartbreakingly calm when he spoke. “Copy.”

Jason’s voice joined the mix. “We’ll start the run with EV2, 3, and 4 and add him as soon as you get a good seal.”

With Myrtle up there, it had to be killing him to be pulled at this point.

“Eugene?”

“Yeah, Ruby.”

“I’ve got this.”

His breath caught for just a second. “Copy. I’ll be with you on comm until they get me in the pool.”

As she glanced at the clock on the wall, her stomach twisted. Fourteen hours remaining for the crew on the lunar rocket.

★ ★ ★

Underwater, everything was blue. The big cylinders that made up the mockup

Lunetta were punctured with even round holes to allow water to flow through. Cables snarled in ungainly swirls around the outside of the mock space station and the water pushed against Ruby's suit, creating a resistance that she didn't experience in space. Around her, support divers floated with bubbles drifting up from them, ready to help her compensate for the drag of water.

And she needed help. This was her third attempt to attach a spare expansion module of *Lunetta* to the aft end of the lunar rocket. In theory, with an oxygen pack and a CO₂ scrubber, it would serve as a sort of "life raft" for the crew inside the ship. Assuming she could find a path to get it there without getting snarled in cables.

"All right, EV2..." Eugene's voice was steady on the comm, as if he were in the pool with her. "Look for handrail 1175."

She had no idea where handrail 1175 was on the lunar rocket. If she'd stayed in last night, instead of going to the rehearsal, then she would have gotten Jason Tsao's phone call and been able to prep for the change of plans. Or to at least familiarize herself with the lunar rocket in more detail. Grimacing, Ruby peered around the ship.

"Can you give me a big picture of where that is?" She hated to ask for help navigating but the distortions from her helmet and the water made reading numbers a little dicey. Myrtle was not going to die because Ruby had gone to a dance practice last night.

"Oh sorry. We'd need you to go to just aft of the starboard external payload facility." Eugene's voice was steady as he guided her in, because he'd done his homework. "Past the grapple fixture, down the gap-spanner ... It should be sandwiched between two WIFs."

When she'd started with the IAC, the jargon had been daunting. Now it wasn't much different from "over the river and through the woods." She hauled herself forward, looking through the distortion that her helmet caused in the water. Behind her, the tether for the "life raft" trailed through the water.

A pair of support divers steadied it to compensate for Eugene's absence. In the real spacewalk, another astronaut would be back there with tethers to hold it steady while she moved forward. If EV3 and 4 weren't tied up trying

to simulate running air and power to the rocket, they might have helped. But it was on her and a faux EV1.

Finally, she found the handrail label sandwiched, as advertised, between two of the sockets that peppered the rocket's skin. "Got it." Ruby secured her safety tether, making sure that the black lines on the latch lined up. "EV2's anchor tether hook is on handrail 1175. Slider locked, black on black."

She secured a local tether as well, trying to stabilize herself in relation to the rocket. Once she was steady, she snapped the crewlock bag onto the handrail so that it was ready for her.

The final tether was the long one that trailed back to the life raft. "Transferring life raft tether to handrail 1175."

"Suggestion." Eugene's voice cut in. "Use the aft starboard stanchion. Otherwise, the tether might trap your safety line when you pull the life raft forward."

"Good note." Ruby kept her voice relaxed as his. She should have spotted that. Carefully, she unhooked the life raft tether from her suit and transferred it to the stanchion. Turning carefully, she worked back along the length of the ship to face the life raft. Pretending that Eugene was in the pool, she said, "Life raft tether secured. New path looks good. Ready to leapfrog the life raft forward."

"Copy, EV2. Releasing RET and moving toward you." He wasn't. A diver was mimicking his actions in ways that they would never do in a real dev run. But this was the best they could do. The suit techs still couldn't get a good seal on his suit.

Hand over hand, she pulled the bulky rubber toward her, just as if Eugene were really on the other side of it to guide it down the length of the rocket. The action caused her to drift a little away from the handrail, until her tethers stopped her, just as they were designed to do. In space it would be more pronounced. "They might consider two local tethers to control drift."

"Good note." Jason's voice was calm and cool in her ears. "Thank you, EV2."

As the life raft drifted to her, Ruby felt a flush of triumph. With one stiff glove, she reached out to stop it next to her. "I have the life raft." With her free hand, she secured a retractable equipment tether to the bracket on the

side of the life raft's grapple mechanism and unspooled the tether to snap it into place on the space ship. On the other side, the diver mimicked her.

"EV2 ... We'll need you to place all the tethers to make sure that the positions are achievable in a suit." Jason sounded almost apologetic.

"Copy." The plan was to place four tethers to stabilize the life raft and then cinch it down to contact the side of the lunar rocket and engage the grapple mechanism. It made sense that they would need someone in an EVA suit, with its limited range of movement, to place all four. Looking down, she couldn't even see the bottom tether. All things considered, she'd start with the hard one first while she still had some energy. "Working on the nadir tether attachment first."

Ruby released the local tether, leaving her safety tether in place, and worked her way down to the bottom of the handrail. At the bottom end, she tried to snag the tether hook but the body position was bad. She had to twist her arm in ways that the suit really wouldn't let her. The suits really didn't want you to raise your arms over your head. Being upside down might work though ... Grabbing the handrail, she rotated so that she hung head-down in the water. Better.

Kind of. The suits were neutrally buoyant, but inside them, she was dealing with 1-G. As blood pooled in Ruby's head, she figured that at least her ankle was elevated.

Over the comm, Jason said, "Looks like you're heads-down, we'll do a check at five minutes and pull you at ten."

"Copy."

The life raft had drifted down in the pool so the grapple mechanism was masking the anchor point on the lunar rocket. Maybe she should have done the top tether first. Ruby tried pushing the life raft up in the pool, but the water resistance and gravity pushed down on it. In space, this would be easy, but in the NBL her muscles burned.

"Five minutes, EV2."

"I'm fine." Standard procedure be damned. Her sinuses were full and her head pounded from being upside down, but she could manage the discomfort. The body position was better for placing the tether, but the tube itself was fighting her in ways that it wouldn't in space.

Ruby was so used to not complaining, because she was short. Because she was a woman. Anything she said would be seen as a failure on her part. But the resistance was an NBLism and not a problem the actual spacewalker would face, and people's lives were on the line. Ruby sighed as quietly as she could on a live mic. "I could use a diver assist to support the tube."

Like magic, one of the three support divers following her floated up and guided the end of the bag so that it floated in the water more or less the way it would in space. She stretched her arm toward the newly revealed anchor point, fingers aching as she fought the pressurized suit.

"That's ten minutes, EV2."

"Almost there." The motion made her rotate a little. Damn it. She should have put the additional local tether in place to control her own motion. Grimacing, she tried to snap the tether hook in place and just missed. It slipped out of her clumsy grasp and floated away from her in the water. She held her curses inside.

"Divers, set EV2 upright."

Biting down on the inside of her cheek, Ruby tried to relax when the divers gently pulled her back and rotated her upright so the blood could drain from her head. As they did, she slipped inside her suit and suddenly all of her weight was on her feet. Ruby closed her eyes, breathing through her teeth.

"Anything wrong, Ruby?" Jason Tsao's voice snapped her eyes open.

"Nope." In front of her, the support diver in charge of filming had his camera aimed at her face. Ruby smiled at him, so that everyone in the mission control room would be able to see that she was fine. They wouldn't pull her out of the pool, not with lives on the line, but they would sure as heck note any struggles for future missions. "Just thinking through next steps. I'm ready to start up again when you are."

★ ★ ★

On attempt number four, Ruby had figured out a process that got the tube lined up, but still wrestled with snugging the life raft up against the ship enough to get a good seal. The grapple mechanism had been designed to be activated by pressure from docking. Attempting to exert that pressure

manually was ... challenging.

Biting the inside of her lip, Ruby fumbled with the thick straps while holding on to a handrail with one hand. Her own tethers stabilized her a little, but not enough.

Eugene crackled onto the comm. “Do you think an APFR would give you better leverage?”

Articulated Portable Foot Restraint. She stopped what she was doing and stared at the ship. The handrail she was using was between two sockets built into the skin of the lunar shuttle. She’d been using the solution as just a navigation point. All she had to do was use one of those two sockets to attach a foot restraint and free both hands.

And she’d been avoiding using a foot restraint because she’d been unconsciously avoiding pain. To get her feet into the APFR, she’d have to twist her ankle in and out of the restraint. Normally the MC trusted the astronaut on decisions like that during a dev run, to figure out what worked best for them. Ruby had been screwing things up because she’d gone dancing.

“Good call.” The silver lining to the number of runs they’d done was that she knew where the nearest APFR was stored. She’d passed by it at least twice during this run, which made it all the worse that she hadn’t thought of it. “Translating back over the river and through the woods.”

“If you’re reversing course, shouldn’t that be through the woods and over the river?”

“Pretty sure there are woods on both sides of the river.” Ruby pulled herself hand over hand to the port sensor array, which was, thankfully, within reach of her safety tether. Even so, fighting the water resistance made her arms burn with effort. In the back of her head, time ticked away. “I could have collected this on my previous pass, which would buy some time.”

Jason Tsao responded. “Good note, EV2. I’ll pass that up to station.”

He didn’t say “if this works” but the question hung in the water with her. Ruby attached a Retractable Equipment Tether to the foot restraint. Once the RET was secure, she pulled the foot restraint off the WIF by turning the collar and depressing the “petals” at the base of the post. The bayonet slid out of the socket. It was a ridiculous thing to feel triumph about, but at the

moment she would take even small victories.

Turning to reverse course, Ruby swung her body through the water so that her feet trailed behind her. The water resistance grabbed her feet and seemed to slowly twist her ankle. Ruby locked her jaw and breathed through her nose. This was an acceptable level of pain but the translation back to the work site seemed twice as long. She didn't have the energy for banter.

When she got back to the handrail, she snapped her local tether back into place. "Slider locked, black on black."

Closing her stiff fingers around the foot restraint, she plugged its bayonet into the nearest socket. The litany of locking things in place continued. "Collar locked, black on black." She wrapped her hands round the APFR to make sure it was seated correctly. "Good twist and pull test"

"Copy EV2."

Ruby retrieved the RET and restowed it. The last thing she needed was to get snarled in something she'd forgotten to put away.

Adjusting her tethers to allow her to "stand up" perpendicular to the lunar rocket, Ruby put her feet next to the foot restraint. She slid the toes of her left foot under the restraint and twisted her foot to slide the heel ridge into the restraining slot.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she slid her right foot under the restraint and twisted it. It felt as if her boot was filled with broken glass. It wasn't. She was pretty sure she wasn't doing permanent damage to the ankle. Slowing down recovery time, yes, but even if it was permanent damage, at the end of the day it just meant she wouldn't be able to dance.

But she'd still be able to play bridge with Myrtle and Eugene.

Ruby reached for the tether and yanked on it with both hands. Something in her ankle went *pfft* and snapped.

A small cry escaped. Ruby bit down hard. She would live, and so would the people on that ship if she had anything to say about it. Grimacing, she hauled on the tether until the tube snuggled up against the mockup station and the grapple clicked into place.

Tears streaked across her cheeks, and for once the 1-G was a benefit because the moisture didn't build up in watery balls over her eyes. Ruby nodded for the camera. "Thanks, Eugene. The answer is APFR. With that, I

can pitch back. I can grab the bag. Anchor it. I can maneuver my body and not have to pitch or roll with the handrail. Sorry it took so long to work out.” Her ankle throbbed with each beat of her heart. “What’s next?”

She hung in the water, listening to the sound of her own fans. Around her, support divers slowly turned the water with their fins while they all waited. Her ankle consumed the rest of her attention.

The line crackled as Jason came back on the line. “Let’s get you out of the pool.”

“I’m fine to continue.”

“Thank you, but we’re transmitting this part of the procedure up to *Lunetta*. We’ll let Paul and Serge dev the process of getting the tube back to the other end of the ship. It’s comparatively straightforward.”

“It’s not a problem.”

“Ruby.” Eugene’s voice cut in. “I’ve played bridge with you. I know your tells.”

She opened her mouth, staring at the camera in front of her. “Right. See you topside.”

Her support divers swam up around her and pulled her away from the ship. In space, right now, someone on *Lunetta* was suiting up to go out and do this as a real spacewalk, not as a development run in a pool. Or heck, maybe they were all ready to go and had just been waiting for a viable solution.

All the mistakes that Ruby had made were ones that the real rescue team wouldn’t have to. The pool was hard. Space would kill you.

Ruby let herself go limp in her suit, watching the bubbles of her support divers stream past like flecks of snow. In her ears, the conversation with the other team continued as they kept working to try to mate an umbilical to the lunar rocket. She realized that she had no idea how long she’d been down.

When the divers got her attached to the donning stand and the crane hauled her above the pool, Eugene was waiting poolside. He still wore his Snoopy cap, with the comm unit in place so he could stay in the loop. His lower lip had a raw spot as if he’d been biting it constantly while she was under the water.

He could hear her if she spoke, but she waited until her suit was

depressurized and her suit tech had her helmet off. She flexed her hands against the ache in the joints and met Eugene's gaze as the tech pulled her Snoopy cap off.

Eugene took his own off and stepped forward. "I'm sorry I didn't tell them to pull you earlier."

"That was the right choice." She shifted her weight to her left foot as her tech released the hard aluminum ring connecting her pants to the suit. "How long do they have?"

"Six hours." He glanced across the room at the clock on the wall. "It's enough."

Ruby nodded and squirmed down, with a tech on either side to catch her. It was standard practice, but Eugene stepping forward, hands out, wasn't. For the first time since she'd gone under, Ruby put weight on her right foot. Her head was still in the suit and the fiberglass interior seemed to light up like a meteor striking the Earth.

Hands caught her and the next thing she knew, she was seated in a chair, still blinking back tears. Swallowing, Ruby shook her head. "I'm fine—GAH!" The sound ripped out of her as the techs tried to pull the spacesuit pants down. Her ankle was so swollen that it caught in the boot.

Gripping the side of the chair, she panted until the spots faded from her vision.

The nearest suit tech toggled on his mic. "We need medical for EV2."

She winced, but calling a medic was inevitable. "Not urgent. I aggravated a previous injury, that's all."

"Aggravated?" Eugene shook his head. "You're going to aggravate me if you keep lying."

"I'm not— Okay. I am. I've likely torn a ligament in my ankle. But y'all are going to pull these goddamn pants off of me because if the medic gets here first, she's going to try cutting it off."

The tech looked up, appalled. "Oh hell, no."

"Right?" Ruby stuck out her hurt leg. "You are Go for removal."

He looked up at Eugene, who grimaced and then nodded. Eugene stepped behind her and braced Ruby with his hands on her shoulders. Putting a hand on either side of the boot, the tech hauled back. Ruby managed not to scream,

but if Eugene weren't bracing her, she probably would have fallen out of the chair.

Beneath the mesh of her cooling garment, her ankle was swollen to twice the size it should be. Eugene whistled. "Aggravated a previous injury?"

"Sprained it last night." Her entire leg was pulsing in hot and cold waves around the burning core of her ankle. It was past a sprain now, but Ruby tried to keep her voice military calm. "But ... not really a choice, was there?"

"Thank you." He squeezed her shoulder.

She didn't deserve thanks. If she'd done her homework on other ships. If she'd not been avoiding using her foot. If she'd just had her priorities straight—hell, if Eugene had been in the pool, he'd have figured this out faster than she did. She'd been trying to fit too many things into her life and had come within a hairsbreadth of failing at all of them. Failing her dance partner was disappointing. Failing the IAC could have been fatal.

Ruby let her breath out slowly as the medic came barreling around the end of the pool. "Make a phone call for me? I have a rehearsal I need to cancel."

And after that, Ruby was going to go home, curl up in bed, and study every manual she could get her hands on. No one was going to come this close to dying on her watch ever again.

She didn't have that many pieces of Before left, but keeping them didn't mean keeping them in the same way and shape. Lindy-hop could go back to being just a social thing. But where she belonged in life After the Meteor, was here.

Here, she made a difference. Sprained ankle and all.

About the Author



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OLD MEDIA

ANNALEE NEWITZ

Old Media

ANNALEE NEWITZ

illustration by

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TOR·COM 

August 2, 2145

They were in the back room making out. What else were they supposed to do on a slow afternoon when nobody came into the store? Michael had taken his goggles off and John was kissing the soft skin of his eyelids while simultaneously groping for some kind of access point into Michael's extremely tight pants.

Out front, Bella was reading the music feeds in her goggles and not even remotely pretending to ignore them.

"You sound like rutting *moosen!*" She'd taken to using a fake plural form of "moose" for her own whimsical reasons. "Don't get any fluids on the goddamn merchandise!"

For some reason, John could not stop laughing at the moose plural joke. Every time he caught his breath, another fit of giggling would rob him of it, until at last he sank dizzily to his knees. He steadied himself by hooking fingers into Michael's waistband and looking up at his friend, also laughing, amused by John's amusement.

Michael was studying paleontology at the University of Saskatchewan, and had been trying to grow authentic dinosaur feathers on his head for weeks. Thick red and white down stuck out of his pale blond hair on flexible quills, perfectly framing his wide blue eyes and the short puff of his beard. John thought the full effect made him look almost comically Western, like an English barbarian from the old anime feeds he liked to watch.

But it was also kind of sexy. And here he was, right in the perfect spot to unlock the grippers holding Michael's tight pants in place. Even when Bella started making extremely realistic moose noises, John was undeterred in his quest to make Michael tremble with more than laughter.

Afterward they both slid to the floor, resting their slightly damp backs

against the wall. A languid sense of goodwill spread from John's extremities upward to his brain. He liked it back here beyond the Employees Only sign, staring at the dusty, half-biodegraded boxes of recent arrivals. Bella bought most of her merchandise from estate sales and warehouses on the prairies, but a lot came from customers in Saskatoon too. Tuesdays and Thursdays were buyer days, and there was always a boisterous line of what seemed to John a completely random assortment of people: aging hipsters with party clothes from the '20s; college students wanting to trade armor for shreds or vice versa; grandmothers with unbelievable treasures like the ash pleather 2090s boots he was wearing right now; and people from far up north who'd heard the kids were obsessed with old all-weathers and wanted to make a few credits while their families loaded up on supplies at the farm co-op.

It made John think of times before he was born, long before his shit life, or at least the shitty parts of his relatively okay life. Last year at this time ... he didn't want to think about it. Every night he told himself he was safe now, gone legit with a name and a franchise. Nobody owned him anymore. He stared harder at a box overflowing with self-repairing scarves from indeterminate time periods. Maybe they were made yesterday. Maybe sixty years ago.

Michael was nuzzling his neck, dinofuzz tickling John's ear. He tugged John's collar down to get a better angle and made a murmuring noise when he saw the brand.

"I like your sexy scar. What do these numbers mean? Zed-nine-one-four-three-zed?"

John pulled away and felt every muscle in his body stiffen. The familiar numbness oozed down his neck into his torso, killing contentment as it spread.

"It's nothing. Just from when I was young and stupid."

"Is it a special date or something?"

"That was my identification number when I was a slave, sweetie. Didn't you know?" John made his tone so sarcastic that Michael snorted out a chuckle. Sometimes the truth, told right, was the best lie.

Beyond the door, John heard the sound of customers—a big group, their voices merging into a wave of indistinct, excited sounds. Probably party

shopping. Bella might need help. He stood up abruptly and left Michael lounging among piles of textiles that proved the world had existed long before John was in it.

August 3, 2145

Until this past year, John never had access control over his own room. He and the other boys lived in the indenture school dormitory, and bedtime was when the supervisor wiped his hand over the lock and let them in. If he let them in. Sometimes there was a just-in-time job on a batch of engines, and they worked for twenty-four hours straight. He still sometimes felt an ache in his fingers from doing post-production on each part as it came out of the extruder in the icy 3-D printer room. Still, when they were back in the dorms, John usually figured out how to escape again. He wanted access to the public net, and there was one particular admin who had a weakness for brown boys from down south. John spent a lot of nights writing in the admin's cramped cubicle, mostly naked, focusing intently on comments in his journal feed so he could tune out his benefactor's creepy gaze.

But now he was here, sharing an apartment in Saskatoon with the only person on Earth who knew his old names: Threezed and Slaveboy. When he met Med last year, he confessed that he'd been writing a journal on Memeland under the name Slaveboy. It turned out she was a fan. He'd never actually met one of his followers in person, and decided impulsively that they would be friends forever. It turned out to be the best decision he'd ever made in his roughly twenty years on Earth.

The door clicked open as he arrived and whistled its "hello" tune. He and Med were supremely lazy about programming the place beyond the basics, so he kicked the wall to turn on the lights and start the kitchen. The warm indoor air smelled faintly of fish sauce and frying garlic from somewhere else in the building.

Maybe one day he'd get tired of the contours of this apartment with its minimal furnishings. But it was hard to imagine ever getting enough of its safe shape, the kitchen booting up alongside him and a slice of his bed visible beyond a mostly closed curtain. It was only when he was alone like this, in complete silence, that John allowed himself to believe he was still alive. The

quiet was like one of those silver emergency blankets he'd seen in twentieth-century American movies. It was the way the fantastically kind police wrapped you up after they'd rescued everybody from the monsters, the fire, the tidal waves, the buildings falling from space, the evil robots, the shadow animals, and the ghosts of every dead person wronged by the living.

A memory invaded him, unbidden, like a hiccup of pain.

Last year, he'd found sanctuary in Saskatoon. John's new master wasn't like the other ones, at least in some ways. She was a scientist, and she was working on some kind of secret project with Med. He didn't understand everything about what they were doing, but he knew they were trying to help people who'd gotten addicted to corporate pharma. After the project went live, his master went into hiding. She left him behind with Med—but not before buying him a franchise that granted him full rights in the city. That night, he kept activating the readout from his chip on the mobile's login screen: *Enfranchised*. The English word morphed in his mind as he tried to feel its reality. *Enfranchised, enchanted, ineluctable, incredulous ...*

Maybe the warm feeling in his back was actually a lack of feeling. A lack of fear. He had a vivid recollection of how the lab smelled in that moment of unburdening, a mixture of crushed grass and coffee.

That's when Med sat up rigidly, hands flat on the lab bench. She turned to him, her eyes blank. "Get out of here, now!" And then she stood, grabbed him with a shocking strength, and dragged him to the back exit. "Go!"

He glanced back to see what Med had sensed wirelessly: agents arriving, the ones who'd been chasing his old master. A man and a huge, armored bot from the property police. He turned back just once before he fled, and thought he saw Med transform into an avenging angel. Only she was better than an angel. She was real, made of carbon alloy and flesh, not feathers and faith. She'd saved him. Possibly she'd even saved the world.

* * *

John breathed shallowly, trying to make himself as soundless as the room. Nobody could hear him. He was safe. It wasn't like last time; the agents were long gone. He held his breath for five serene seconds before the Yummy Pan made an irritated noise and he knew he should start making dinner.

He was scooping protein-flecked porridge into a bowl when Med opened the door. She looked like a textbook example of the absent-minded professor, blond hair perfectly pinned back and lab coat perfectly rumpled.

“How nice that you’re eating tissue from extinct amphibians.” Med could identify almost anything by smell, though she rarely mentioned it around humans. It made them too self-conscious, especially when they realized her abilities extended to smelling where they had been—and sometimes even their emotional states.

Still, for all her robot superpowers, Med couldn’t really master the art of sarcasm. Partly that was because she wasn’t a very sarcastic person, and partly because John always did something silly to undermine her deadpan cool.

“I love fake frog.” He took an exaggeratedly large bite. “Mmmm, the taste of synthetic biology.” He posed with the spoon and bowl next to his face, like the preternaturally cheerful kid in the ads for Yummy Pan. For some reason, it never failed to make Med grin. Her goofy expression hovered briefly over his memory of that long-ago divine fury, and John had to pull himself back sharply from giving a name to what she made him feel.

August 4, 2145

The library’s Media Experience Lab was the result of some big grant the university got back in the 2120s, and it hadn’t been updated since. The signs were all done in those old animated fonts that switched back and forth between puffy rainbow letters and classical serif typefaces. Foam chairs, once luxuriously padded and tricked out with knobs for adjusting everything to ergonomic perfection, were mashed into submission, stuck in awkward positions that only worked for really tall people or really short ones who wanted to sit bolt upright. Somebody had made the streaming cubicles out of fake recycled materials, so you could watch twenty-first century immersives while surrounded by biofibers imitating plastic imitating wood. John thought the saddest part of the whole retro setup—but also possibly the most adorable—was the dusty Innerfire cube, installed when everybody thought full-body experience implants were right around the corner. In all his months coming here, he had never seen anyone go inside.

John slid into his favorite booth next to the back wall. He could watch everyone coming in while also keeping an eye on his monitor, currently streaming a century-old comedy anime called *Ouran High School Host Club*. He liked the story, about a girl named Haruhi pretending to be a boy, learning all the bizarre things boys do to make themselves seem more attractive. Haruhi was so charming in her suit and tie that all the girls requested “him” at the host club. She had no choice but to keep up the charade, because she was a poor scholarship student at an elite high school, and she owed the other hosts money. John swept a few of the episodes onto his mobile, stashing them to show Med later as yet another example of weird human culture.

After two quarters auditing classes, John was going to matriculate as a freshman. It still didn't feel real. The city franchise got you more than he ever imagined he'd have, back when he was slaved to the factory. Free education, free medical, free net connection, and freedom to live and work anywhere in the Saskatoon metropolitan area. A new implant that broadcast his new identity: John Chen, normal free boy from an exurb called Lucky Lake. No indenture record. No record at all, other than a secure enclave bioprocessor that verified his identity to the city co-op.

Out of the blankness of his digital past he'd made an entire imaginary history for himself, in case anyone asked. Homeschooled, he would say. Mostly worked on agricultural bot repair, keeping the sensors, planters, and harvesters updated with the latest patches and hardware tweaks. At twenty-one, he was older than average for a student, but he fit the profile of a farm kid whose family needed a little extra time to raise the credits for his Saskatoon franchise.

So far, nobody had questioned this story. In fact, the most awkward moment he'd had was when Michael wondered about the brand that contained his slave name: Threezed, for the last two numbers in the sequence.

John should have gotten the scars smoothed out a long time ago. But he wasn't ready to lose the familiar sting of seeing those numbers in the mirror when everything else was so different. Nothing had been normal for three years, after the factory sent the whole indenture class across the Pacific. Supposedly they had maintenance positions waiting for them on the Vancouver docks. The motors they'd been assembling back in the Nine Cities

Delta were used in all kinds of industrial bots, so it made sense. But when they arrived, it turned out the contracts had fallen through in a way that only made sense to bureaucrats. John and his classmates were confiscated by the Free Trade Zone Port Authority, then confiscated again by Vancouver's child welfare agency. In practice, this meant they spent a few months sleeping in familiar-looking dormitories where they tried to perfect their northern Free Trade Zone English accents.

For probably the fiftieth time, one of the hosts in *Ouran High School Host Club* was reminding Haruhi that she was low class. She'd brought instant coffee to their elite party, and the rich kids were physically repulsed. They'd never had anything but whole beans ground by indentured servants. John loved the exaggerated faces they made, their features growing bulbous and abstract as they squealed in dismay. Haruhi shrugged it off, but John thought the audience was supposed to understand that her feelings were hurt too.

A new librarian came in and sat behind the help desk. Her presence activated a sign overhead in that absurdly morphing font: "Yes, I'm an actual human! Ask me anything!" John imagined what Med would say to that. Just a little anti-bot sentiment, brought to you by some designer in the 2120s. Not the librarian's fault. John noticed that she had two thick black braids and her eyes were slightly distorted by a pair of goggles made to look like twenty-first century glasses. Something about her looked familiar. Maybe she'd been in one of his classes?

He kept watching the stream in his cubicle until it was almost closing time.

"Do you want to check that out?" The librarian peeked over the top of his cubicle. "I have to start shutting the workstations down." Then she glanced at him again. "Weren't you in Social Media History with me?"

"Yeah. What did you think of that class?"

"I loved it. I'm actually doing a research project with that professor about anti-robot representations in the late twenty-first century. So much video from that time was basically anti-automation propaganda, designed to make humans fear bots. It's so weird to look back on all this old media and see how it's still affecting us now."

"Like that sign." He pointed over her desk.

“Exactly!” She grinned.

He liked the way she described struggles in the past as if they were still happening, unfolding at some layer of reality just beyond conscious perception. They started talking about what classes they’d be taking next term.

He was about to escalate into flirtation when a man raced into the library, out of breath. He ignored John and put a hand on the librarian’s arm. “Can you find me some videos of people playing games in the twentieth century? I really need them for tomorrow.”

She stiffened and pulled back from his touch. “Do you have a catalog number?”

After he’d made a big show of sighing and pulling out his mobile and searching, the student flicked a number to her tablet.

The librarian walked back to her desk to look up the videos and the man leaned heavily on John’s cubicle, still catching his breath. Finally, he seemed to notice that he wasn’t alone in the universe.

“Oh, hi, sorry to interrupt.” His voice betrayed no hint of apology.

“No worries.” John started to pack up.

The man looked at him more closely, his pale blue eyes like flecks of aluminum-doped glass. “Where you from?”

“Farm outside Lucky Lake.”

The man gave a big-throated laugh that vacuumed geniality out of the air. “No. I mean, where are you from *originally*?”

It was a menacing question. John grabbed some videos with a cupping gesture, dumped them onto his mobile, and left without a word.

* * *

When he’d first arrived in the Zone, people were constantly asking him where he was from. John and his classmates tried to explain, but nobody could hear anything after the words “Asian Union.” Their words bounced off an invisible, soundproof barrier of sympathy and disgust. Worried-looking officials kept telling the boys that it was illegal for children to be indentured. They never should have found themselves in this situation, sold by their school into contract at the docks. They could rest assured that Vancouver

would sponsor them into foster care, with limited franchises that would allow them to work for the city. The Zone would never mistreat them the way the Asian Union had.

Then a caseworker “discovered” that they were over 18. John thought that was pretty amazing detective work, considering that none of the kids actually knew how old they were, and all their identity records were missing. Still, it was probably close enough, give or take a couple of years. Now it was obvious what Vancouver should do with them. They were shipped down to Vegas for auction. Profits would go to pay off the debt of some corporate entity whose name John would never know.

* * *

He was definitely going to convince Med to watch *Ouran High School Host Club* when she got back from the lab. Bots never slept, so she was pretty much always up for binge watching on their apartment projection wall.

After he kicked the lights on, John saved the videos to their home server with a tossing motion and collapsed on the springy sofa that dominated the room. He couldn’t decide whether to activate the Yummy Pan or spark some 420 or run around screaming. That guy in the library had really pissed him off—not so much as an individual, but as the representative of an entire genre of dickbags who had never once been asked to produce an origin story for someone else’s amusement. It reminded him uncomfortably of Michael’s questions the other day. Obviously Michael had asked out of friendly curiosity, but the sentiment was the same. Where you come from is who you are.

The chime of the door interrupted his increasingly tight rage spiral. Med flopped on the sofa next to him and sighed. “That was a very long day of department meetings.”

Med had been begging the administration for money to cover an update to the lab’s protein library. John sat up to face her. “Did you get that funding you needed?”

“Ugh. No. They don’t understand why we need new protein data when we already have a library from five years ago. Plus some bullshit from the dean about how I should make the students discover new folds themselves, and not

just copy from a database like a bot would.” Med rolled her eyes but John knew she was genuinely upset. The dean never missed a chance to make insulting comments about bots around Med. She was the only bot professor at the university, and the dean liked to remind her where she came from. Or maybe where she didn’t.

“Well, I have some good distraction for you.” John flicked the air and the wall opposite them displayed a menu of recent downloads. “It’s this crazy anime from the 2000s about an indentured student who has to earn her way out of contract by pretending to be a hot boy at a café for high school girls. You *have* to watch it. It’s so incredibly weird.”

“You’re lucky that the media library gets more useful the more out-of-date it gets.”

“That’s not exactly true. But yeah, I know what you mean.” He decided not to tell her about the librarian sign. “Want to watch the first episode?”

Fifteen minutes in, and he could tell Med was feeling better. He watched her watch the screen, smiling faintly, her hand resting on the charger in the sofa arm. He wondered whether she was smiling for his benefit or if she really thought it was funny. Then he started obsessing about whether the subtitles really did justice to what was happening. Were they missing something? Maybe Med could help.

“Could you learn Japanese if you wanted to? Like just download it or something? Then we’d know if these subs were good.”

“It’s not like I would instantly know Japanese. I could get all the rules and vocabulary—enough to do a really basic translation. But I’d still have to learn how to use it. And some things just can’t be translated with words at all.” She gestured at the wall and the action froze on an image of light bulbs turning on. “Look at that. What does that mean? You only know from context that those light bulbs represent members of the host club, and each time one of them turns on it’s the guy figuring out that Haruhi is a girl. I couldn’t ever figure that out from a translation program.”

John thought about that as the action started again and Haruhi tried on the fancy school uniform that made her look like a beautiful boy. There was a lot of confused swooning.

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After three more episodes, John paused the action for a bathroom break. When he got back, Med was flipping through movies on the server idly. An urgent message blinked at the corner of the projection: “Streaming to unknown device.” That meant Med was streaming previews straight to her mind. The humans who made the streamer hadn’t thought about how robots might use their machines, so Med remained an “unknown device” on the network.

“How’s job going?” Med divided her attention between John and whatever she was previewing.

“Pretty good. I keep hooking up with Michael, but he’s starting to annoy me.”

“I can’t even keep track of your hookups. Which one is Michael, again?”

“Dinosaur hair guy.”

“Oh yeah!” Med stopped streaming and took her hand off the charging pad. “He sounded nice?”

“He’s nice but he’s just ... I dunno. He asks too many boring questions.”

“Like what?”

John tried to come up with a good way to explain it. “He asked about my brand. Which—why would you ask somebody about that after fucking them? So rude.”

Med didn’t pick up on his sarcasm, or she chose to ignore it. “I can see why he might be curious. Why do you keep it if you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Why do you tell people that you’re a bot if you don’t want them to make snotty comments about it?” His voice rose in anger he hadn’t intended to express.

“You know why. Because fuck those fuckers.” Delivered utterly without sarcasm. John had to laugh. She put a hand on his arm, and he felt an unexpected, shocking surge of love for her. Her skin felt just as soft and warm as a human’s, but beneath the biological tissues were metal actuators and processors. He liked knowing that she wasn’t human all the way through. Looking into her face, he never flashed back to the faces of his masters.

Yet he was still terrified. She was going to disappear. He’d wake up from

this dream of student life in Saskatoon to find himself adrift with that psycho who bought him in Vegas, starving in the cargo hold of a boat whose engines were always on the verge of death. Tied up if he refused to go quietly to his master's bedroom. Or maybe he'd awaken to discover that Med hadn't made it out of the lab alive after shoving him out the door.

He needed to banish those thoughts. His skin was prickling. Med still had her hand on his arm, and a badass snarky look on her face.

"Med, why don't you ever hook up with anybody?"

The bot shrugged. "I haven't installed any programs related to sexual desire."

"Why not?"

"Just not interested. A lot of my siblings installed them, and they seem happy. But it never caught my attention."

"So you could install them now and start wanting to have sex?" John was fascinated.

Med looked a little annoyed. "As I said before about learning Japanese, it's not like a bot can just instantly know something or feel something. You have to interact to get context."

This was starting to sound kind of sexy. John wrapped his hand around Med's arm, so that they gently gripped each other's wrists. "You should do it. We should do it."

"I just said I wasn't interested."

"How can you know you're not interested if you've never tried it?"

She removed her hand and scooted back a few centimeters. "Can you explain why you don't like that series *Evolution's Dark Road* but you do like *Ouran High School Host Club*? It's a matter of taste. Sexual desire just isn't my taste. It doesn't mean I don't love you."

"You love me?" John's heart was pounding all of a sudden, in a way that was both amazing and terrifying.

"I wasn't planning on blurting it out like that, but yes. Yes."

He thought he was going to cry, and then he thought maybe he wasn't going to be able to stop himself from kissing her. "I'm pretty sure I love you too."

Illuminated by dim, white light from the text menu on the wall, they

looked like artificial versions of themselves. John crumpled his hands into fists and jammed them against his thighs uncomfortably. He wasn't sure what to do next.

“So you can be in love but you don't want to try having sex?”

She chuckled. “I'm not a media history major, but even I have watched enough media to know that love and sex aren't the same thing.”

Of course that was true, and he'd had plenty of sex that didn't involve love. But how could she be feeling the same way he was, if she didn't want to grab him hard and throw him down and just ... take him? A feeling this strong had to be translated into something physical. It begged for literalization.

“I just don't understand. Do you mean the kind of love you would have for a brother? Or for a super good friend?”

“I do love my siblings, but this is not that kind of love. I mean, I can't be sure it's *exactly* the same thing you would call love, but it's a feeling of...” She paused for a moment and went still, as if she were streaming data. Then she spoke slowly. “It's like there's some part of you that fits perfectly inside my consciousness. It's a feeling that goes beyond trust or friendship. Some kind of emotional infrastructure. Even if I were to isolate every single utility and program I use to think about you, I don't think I could explain all the ways you occupy my mind. It's ... an emergent and ongoing process. Does that make sense?”

John wiped his eyes and looked at her openly, following the lines of her neck and cheeks, the perfect lab-grown pink of her lips. But she'd given him permission to look beyond that.

“Is there something we could do together ... something you've always wanted to do with somebody who loves you? Not sex, obviously, but something like that? Or not like that? I don't know...” He trailed off and Med looked bemused. “Please don't say watch videos.” They both laughed.

Med put a hand on top of one of his fists, and he laced his fingers into hers.

“Actually there is something.”

“Holding hands?”

“No, although that's nice too.” She let out a nervous titter. “I've always

wanted to try sleeping.” She dropped her eyes and shifted uncomfortably, as if she’d just revealed some secret, transgressive kink.

“I didn’t know you could sleep.”

“I mean, I can go into sleep mode, or I can shut down. I can crash. There are a lot of sleep levels, but you’re not really supposed to go into them unless it’s an emergency or you need maintenance.”

“Why aren’t you supposed to do it?”

“Well sometimes it can damage memory to crash unexpectedly, but honestly I think the sleep taboo is mostly about security. Humans might steal a sleeping bot.”

John understood that fear all the way down to the most inaccessible parts of his consciousness. “Nobody can get you here. Not in our apartment. It’s completely safe.” His words came out hot and intense, the same way they sounded in his mind.

“Do you want to try it?”

He said yes and let her lead him to the bedroom.

They lay down on their sides facing each other, giggling as they found comfortable positions in the awkwardly small space. “Okay, so I’m going to try. I should wake up in four hours so I can get to work in the morning. Are you ready?”

She looked so beautiful that John thought his heart would crack open like the space eggs in a kaiju movie, full of lava and lightning and life forms that had never walked the Earth. He took one of her hands. “I’m ready.”

Her eyes closed, and she shuddered slightly. Then her hand relaxed in his. He listened to her breathe. He looked at the shape of her skin over the carbon alloy of her bones. He wondered if she was dreaming. He thought of all the questions he wanted to ask her about everything. He almost started to cry again when he remembered what they’d been through last year, after they’d escaped. After they’d almost died. If he were ever going to talk about all that shit, Med would be the only person he’d want listening.

Watching her sleep for a while made him sleepy too. She never shifted around or made noises like a human, and it was deeply comforting.

John rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. He was still kind of horny, partly from the emotional overload with Med, and partly just from life. At

least he was working in the shop tomorrow, so there would definitely be an interlude or two with Michael in the back room. Also, maybe he would ask out that librarian from his Social Media History class. He wasn't sure he could love anyone else, but there were definitely a lot of people he liked in a sexual way. That wasn't a bad thing.

As he drifted off, his thoughts began to buzz pleasantly with half-feelings and fragments of the day's noise. Just before he joined Med in full sleep mode, he saw a flickering image of Haruhi in her host boy clothes, the subject of a desire that existed only in the lacy cracks that form at the edge of what we're taught is acceptable. Even after a century of storage on media devices whose sophistication far outstripped the technologies that hosted her birth, she was still radiating beauty into the world.

About the Author



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Annalee Newitz is an American journalist, editor, and author of both fiction and nonfiction. She is the recipient of a Knight Science Journalism Fellowship from MIT, and has written for *Popular Science*, *Wired*, and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. She also founded the science fiction website *io9* and served as Editor-in-Chief from 2008–2015, and subsequently edited *Gizmodo*. As of 2016, she is Tech Culture Editor at the technology site *Ars Technica*. *Autonomous* is Annalee’s first novel. You can sign up for email updates [here](#).



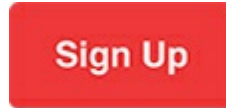


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