

A Coup of Owls
Autumn 2026



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Cover Image – Hearthplace by Chandreyee Chakraborty

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Cover Design – A Coup of Owls

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Foreword

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Safety by Elliott Donaldson

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A person questions the cost of the bargain they made with the unknown being who protects them.

Elliott Donaldson (they/he) is a nonbinary writer and mental health therapist living in Salt Lake City. In their free time, they enjoy reading (while cuddling their cats), walking, and weightlifting. He founded a horror book club at a local queer bookstore in 2022, and loves getting to talk about his favorite genre every month. They have previously performed poetry at and adjudicated for the *Queer Spectra Arts Festival*. Elliott's fiction has appeared in the anthology *Sinister Systems*.

Second Rise by Emily Mercurio

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Lucia as she struggles under the weight of her marriage and her responsibilities as a woman, before she enters the doors of the convent dedicated to a mysterious goddess.

Born to parents in the entertainment industry, Emily grew up in ballet studios and theatres, moving frequently around Sydney and Melbourne. Having worked in many different industries and careers, Emily is now focusing on her health while enjoying her creative pursuits just for the joy and whimsy they bring to her life. A nerd at heart, Emily spends her time playing tabletop RPG's and writing cottagecore horror stories.

Follow her journey here: www.emilymercurio.com

When Myth Becomes Flesh by Esha Aamir

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When Zyren, a Virelian officer, discovers a stranded human in his city, he must decide whether the strange alien before him is a threat or someone worth protecting.

Esha Aamir is a fiction writer drawn to stories where emotion, imagination, and the uncanny quietly intertwine. They enjoy exploring themes of identity, memory, and the hidden corners of ordinary lives through speculative and literary fiction. Their work aims to leave readers with questions that linger long after the final page.

Connect with them at Instagram @eshaaamirrr

Dust and the Returned by Subham Rai

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When the Harmattan wind carries Tolu's dead grandmother back to their Lagos kitchen eleven months after her burial, she has not returned for her own unfinished business but for theirs.

Subham Rai is a writer from Kolkata, India. His fiction and poetry have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *Macrame Literary Journal*, Cohesion Press, Zoetic Press, Bindweed Magazine, Graveside Press, Horror Tree, Hollow Oak Press, and *Consequence Forum*, with more work forthcoming.

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Marsupial Moons & Fuzzy Frogs by Pat Saunders

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Will a marsupial moon + a fuzzy frog = the girl of her dreams?

Pat Saunders is from Perth, Western Australia. A recent winner of *Gotham's Stories Everywhere* contest, her short fiction features in *The Heart Will Find A Way*, *Voices of the South*, *witcraft 24*, *Yah! all queer*, *London Great Cities Vol. 2*, *First Strike* and *Ratbag Lit*. A runner-up in the 2024 *Sejong International Sijo Competition*, her poetry appears in *Catchment: Poetry of Place*, *Verge*, *redrosethorns*, *Paris Great Cities Vol. 1*, *Fifteen Vol. 24*, *Waffle Fried*, *Tales from the Unknown*, *TrashLight Press* and *Dialogues Vol 10*.

Foreword

I grew up with ghosts. I may have mentioned this before. The stories in this issue made me think of them.

There were two ghosts in the house I grew up in. One was on the top floor, and one was in the basement. I don't know if they interacted or knew of each other. Perhaps. The one on the top floor would, every now and again, slam doors in the middle of the night. The last time I was in that house, it threw a glass candle holder onto the floor. The one in the basement, meanwhile, was more intriguing than shocking, with a definite mimic feel about it. My mother once swore I had followed her down to the laundry room, only to find me sitting on the kitchen counter chatting with my brother when she came upstairs. The basement spectre would also make us feel unwelcome. Be It wanted us to clear out and go elsewhere. If we did, all would be well; when we didn't, it just made us feel increasingly uneasy until we had no choice but to leave the room.

I wonder what the new family living there think of the ghosts. I wonder what the ghosts think of them.

Many of the stories in this issue feature ghosts or otherworldly influences, and something underlying their common theme stood out to me: the need to connect with the past or find something out about the future. In ancient Greek magic, the main use of necromancy (the raising of the dead) was to get the dead to tell you what happens in the future. Once you are dead, after all, you know all the answers. The idea that the vestiges of our past could be (often rudely and always forlornly) disturbed from their afterlife and asked about the future they never got to live was one I always found fascinating. Is the future what we would ask our dead about if they appeared in our kitchens late at night? Or would we ask them what they wish they had done differently, what mistakes we should try to avoid, whether we are the type of person we want to be?

If I could speak to my dead, what would I say? I think I would ask them if they forgave me for not being there enough when they were alive. We are always filled with regret once the living become the dead; we wish we had seen them more, asked them more questions, told them more, listened more. So while the obvious moral is *carpe diem*, I also put it to you that it's important to allow ourselves to be haunted by memory every now and again. To conjure up our dead in the middle of the night and have a conversation with them. When you walk by something that instantly reminds you of someone (for me, maple syrup is a real

conjurer of my grandma), let the memory be with you for a moment. Let the sound, smell or sight sit with you.

Our intrepid leader recently lost a beloved pet, and I hope he can still remember the sound of little paws on a floor or a soft but insistent meow. The dead are always with us; they surround us, they live within and outside of us. They are in every random thought, every perfect blue-sky day, every slightly melancholic rainy afternoon and every flutter of autumn leaves. So with this issue, I invite you all, dear readers and authors, to take a moment to look up through the branches of the forest at the pale moonlight and remember. Allow those ghosts to whisper the secrets of the future to you between the solemn hoots of the owls.

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Safety

by Elliott Donaldson

Content Warnings: Psychosis, disordered eating, manipulation.

Not your thing? Skip to page 10 for the next story.

His voice had no volume but split through my sleep like a scream.

‘Wakey wakey, little baby.’

I started getting up, fumbling because I hadn’t slept enough for days.

He yanked me to my feet in a rush. It hurt, but that didn’t matter because everything hurt. Aches settling into my bones like cold.

He pulled me to the closet. I waited, like I was supposed to. My hand reached, of its own accord, toward a blue flannel.

‘Wear this over the yellow crop top with your black jeans.’

As I pulled on the clothes, my hands ran over jutting bones. He hadn’t been letting me eat much. Said there were so many things I had to purge from my body. All these icky things that humans eat. All those medications I used to take.

‘Those chemicals get stored in fat. You have to get rid of it to get rid of them.’

I was nearly used to it, constant hunger just another type of pain.

‘Now, let me look at you.’

I turned to the mirror.

‘Perfect.’ I tried not to see, but since he used my eyes to look, I couldn’t avoid the image.

Sharp cheeks. Sunken eyes.

A stereotype of illness.

‘Let’s go, we have places to be.’

‘I can’t—’ I said it aloud, then covered my mouth.

‘That’s right, hush. Have to practice for when we’re in public. What if people see you talking to yourself and take me away from you?’

I wouldn’t survive it.

‘You wouldn’t survive it.’

I ignored the dizziness that had led to my objection in the first place. He pulled me along again, my steps a march (one-two, one-two).

Out the door. Down the street.

I heard him talking to the others who are always with me, following me, waiting to eat me alive if he lets them. I couldn’t understand their words – it was as though they were in an adjacent room, talking in whispers.

But they were laughing. He was laughing.

‘Stop! Please.’ I said it aloud. We all glanced around. No one was there to hear me.

‘I’ll do what I want.’ His voice was harsh, a version I was familiar with, much as I wanted to pretend it didn’t exist.

He paused, softening. ‘I have to play along, or they won’t let me have you. They’ll hurt you.’

‘*You* hurt me.’

A quick scan of my body – hunger, exhaustion, dehydration. I couldn’t find a single pleasant sensation to focus on.

He sighed but then perked up. ‘Look.’ He nodded to a flower, a rose, that someone had left on a bench we were walking past.

‘That’s for you.’ He sent me an image of him blowing a kiss.

He often left me things. A flower. Balloons. My favourite song on the radio. Things he shouldn’t have been able to control.

*

I thought back to the first night I met him. I had been awake for two days, unable to calm my racing thoughts or escape the voices in my head telling me to disappear. To die.

‘I can save you from all of this.’

His arrival had paused all the other voices. As though they were deferring to something more powerful than them. I sobbed in response to the break from the cacophony.

He continued, ‘I’ll give you everything. All you need to do is let me in’—a long pause—‘and give me everything.’

‘A deal with the devil.’ My teeth chattered as I spoke.

It wasn’t a question.

He chuckled. ‘Do I seem like a devil?’

As though it mattered to me, desperate as I was, if he did.
It wasn't a choice.

*

I stopped my march and sat on the bench.

‘What are you doing?’

I ignored him and the voices in the background chiming in with their displeasure. I pushed my feet firmly into the ground. I picked up the flower. Smelled it.

‘We have places to be.’

I ignored him. He continued to threaten.

I brought my gaze to the sky. Noticed the clouds. The soft trill of birds in a nearby tree.

Noticed the things in the world he was keeping me from.

‘What if you’re not real?’

It wasn't a question.

But (still) I wait for a reply.

Second Rise

by Emily Mercurio

Content Warnings: Violence, domestic abuse, body horror, religious themes

Not your thing? Skip to page 28 for the next story.

And behold, on the forty-third year of my earthly course, a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain. I saw a crowd of women, brighter than the sun, all wonderfully adorned with gold and gems, and they shined like the dawn, and they uttered their own individual mysteries.

- from In the Green by Grace Maclean

*

Lucia baked bread. It was such a familiar chore that she could do it with her eyes closed, with one hand trapped behind her back, with her mind drifting to other worlds and realities, ones where bread was baked for her and delivered to her, spread with thick, salted butter and fed to her mouthful by mouthful, like a child.

She placed the jar of levain on the shelf; the living blob of wild yeast that she had brought with her from home, that had been fed and fermented over the years to become the rich, flavourful bread starter it was now. Her hands stretched the dough and folded it over on itself as her eyes took in the crowd outside her window. It was the Festival of Birth in Marwa del Pieche – a festival never seen by Lucia, who had arrived just seven months earlier. The festival was as strange and unfamiliar as the town itself, filled with noise and laughter, with a people so spirited you could almost call them childish. A far cry from the rural town of her upbringing, filled with tight-lipped neighbours and judgemental stares. But then, her home had been watched by the Saint of Accretion, who seemed to barely tolerate his charges, while Marwa del Pieche was under the protection of the Great Mother, loving and adoring.

The parade was moving past her window now, the costumed townspeople – dressed like Lozzurios, the childish, comedic touring performers – throwing dyed rice over the dancers, tumblers and children who marched down the street. Lucia felt a pull, a yearning to

be a part of the joy. Her husband was out there somewhere, revelling in the gift that was the Festival of Birth. But the gift was not for her, a foreigner, a wife, a woman who must always bake the bread, keep others fed and pretend she has no need for joy.

Part of her bristled at the foolishness of the people out there, abandoning their daily duties for a moment of indulgent entertainment. The other part of her knew these to be her mother's judgements, not her own, absorbed and parroted back from years of hearing her every mean remark. Which part was stronger within her? The duty or the desperation?

The wet dough felt like slime in her fingers, and she pushed the bowl away from herself, momentarily disgusted. This festival only happened once a year, and surely her husband would be glad she had participated in the local culture, tried to assimilate somewhat. Before she could have a second thought, she strode out the front door and joined the throng.

She pushed through the crowd until she could see the parade marching through the street and paused, a still figure in a mass of moving bodies. She tried to soak up the joy around her like her mother's orange cake soaked up sweetened rum. Perhaps if she willed it hard enough, this moment of communal excitement and giddiness would sweeten her days to come. *Please sustain me*, she prayed. *Remain in my heart as long as possible and fortify me against my own bitterness.*

The tumbling performers and giggling children had all moved on further up the street and now, slowly rolling along the cobblestones, was a large, flat wagon, low to the ground and without rails or walls. Walking ahead of the wagon were three women – the Metzellas – all dressed in the same golden tunics, with long hems that dragged along the floor behind them. Their heads were draped in veils of white lace that trailed down their backs, golden circlets surrounding the crowns of their heads. Their faces were visible, and all wore beatific smiles as they walked the parade, nodding to the crowd. Their hands, raised in devotion to the Mother, were adorned with gems of the like Lucia had never seen. Gold, rubies, emeralds; a rainbow of riches and beauty.

The wagon behind them held ten figures, kneeling in two lines of five that faced out towards the people. The figures were draped in red silk, covering them from head to toe. Golden circlets topped their heads also, which were bowed low in prayer or humility. These were the Metzas, the maidens of the Great Mother, the most devoted to Her and the most blessed by Her. Lucia had heard the few acquaintances she had made so far speak about the Metzas in hushed, reverent tones. There was a jealousy, almost, but also a distance. While most everyone would want the blessed life of a Metza, not many were willing to sacrifice what was needed to become one.

The Metzellas leading the wagon made soft, jingling noises as they walked closer, the gems and jewels on their hands only a fraction of the gold that adorned their bodies underneath their tunics.

Briefly, Lucia's eyes locked with the Metzella leading the group – a slim-faced woman with thumb smears of golden pigment striped across her smooth skin. A thrum of energy reverberated through Lucia's body as their eyes locked. The woman's smile faltered as she scanned Lucia's face, no doubt cataloguing the greens, yellows and purples of the fading and fresh bruises along her jawline and under her left eye.

Lucia's face flushed, but she did not look away. *See me*, she challenged, *for the broken woman I am, and turn away as they all do*. But the Metzella did not turn away. Her eyes communicated some deep understanding and sympathy, a moment of connection that pierced through Lucia's defiant bitterness. Lucia blinked, furious at the emotion welling up inside her, and then the Metzella was gone, and the parade was marching on, leaving Lucia feeling naked, seen, understood but not judged.

*

Lucia's wedding day had been a violent clash of old and new. Her parents, austere and sombre in their familiar way, had, as they put it, endured the challenge of the ceremony with a detachment that the Saint of Accretion himself would have been proud of.

Her soon-to-be husband, so vibrant and boisterous, had spent most of the day trying to wheedle some enjoyment out of Lucia's family while Lucia watched from the kitchen (after all, there was bread to be baked and chickens to be roasted, and who better to do the labour than the woman who would soon be responsible for the care of a man, and – Saint bless her womb – the children?). So, Lucia watched as she kneaded the dough. Watched her husband grow more and more agitated as Lucia's family stiffly sat through his jokes and songs.

'You have a backwards way of doing things here, Lucia,' Giorno had said that evening once the ceremony had concluded and the guests were sitting down to eat. He grabbed one of the loaves she had so carefully baked and tore off a chunk. 'No one knows how to enjoy the moment.'

Lucia's eyes followed the bread as he dipped it in the olive oil and vinegar, the tips of his fingers touching the surface. He turned to her, his voice light and teasing but his eyes darkening. 'Weddings are joyous. You only get one, and you should milk it for all the joy it's worth. Great Mother knows, we don't get much joy as life goes on.'

Lucia had studied him, still tentative and unsure how to speak to this man with whom she was to share her life. She had known him before the wedding day but only as the cousin to her neighbour who came to visit every few years. He had always been kind, perhaps a tad too comfortable with flirtingly teasing her. But she had barely held a conversation with him before the day he asked her father for her hand. Of course, her father had agreed, ready to be rid of the burden of a daughter still in the home, and Lucia had not objected. She knew the time had come to find a husband, and in a sense, she was eager for the escape from her mother that it would offer her. But that had all been theory, an idea in the mind of what a husband may be like.

In the wake of the ceremony, she had sat next to him, smelled his sweat, felt the heat of his hand on her waist, watched the way he chewed his food messily and spoke with it all pushed into his cheek, impatient to get his thoughts out before swallowing. He was a real man, here next to her and to be next to her for the rest of her life. There was a fluttering sickness in her stomach. She could not tell if it was the natural nervousness of such change or the preternatural dread of sensing something is wrong.

He had glanced back at her, then reached out and squeezed her hand in his, his oily fingers sliding across her palm. He flashed a brief smile. ‘You look beautiful,’ he had said before slipping his hand away and turning to the guest on his other side.

Lucia wiped her hand on her skirt, trying to ignore the cold relief she’d felt when he stopped touching her.

She watched as he ripped off another chunk of bread and tossed it to the birds.

*

Lucia was lying on the ground beside the bed, listening to the dwindling sounds of celebration on the street. The candles were low, the room still – a stark contrast to the brightness and jubilation of the celebration she had witnessed that afternoon.

She had slid off the silk sheets when Giorno slammed his way out of the house and pressed herself between the wall and the bed, unsure why she was there at all. She pictured herself getting up, cleaning the mess Giorno had made in his anger, cleaning her body of the mess he had made with his lust and frustration, but she did not move.

Her hands held her sides, and she could feel her belly rising and falling with each breath. It felt oddly comforting, like she was cradling some small animal, feeling its lungs expand and contract, feeling the warmth of its helpless body.

But her next thought was one of self-hatred, as it often was. Her fingers dug into her flesh, the flesh that was too cold and unfeeling, that made Giorno feel unloved and undesired. He didn't understand her, but then, she could not blame him; she didn't understand herself. She had waited for years to be free of that home, to not have to follow the Saint of Accretion, to not have to grip herself so tightly or be so careful with her thoughts and feelings. And now she was free, in a city of joyful people, with a husband so full of energy and life and spirit, who just wanted her to try a bit harder, to be a bit more open and joyful herself, and she couldn't do it. And he had begun to hate her for it.

He would have gone to be with a friend, to drink and smoke and talk about how difficult women are. The festival was still in full swing, with parties in homes across the city. And when he returned home, he would expect her to be warm and loving. If she could give that to him, he would be smiling, joking, the rakish neighbour who had made her laugh. But one hesitation from Lucia, one unconvincing touch, and the good humour would be swept away, replaced by a stormy moodiness that seemed to be untouchable and irreversible. It would grow and grow until the injustice of her coldness was too much and his emotions became too much to bear.

The part that sickened Lucia the most was the comfort she had to provide him while he mistreated her. Consoling his tears of guilt for the roughness with which he handled her, reassuring him that she loved him while he used her body. He needed her to be everything – wife, whore, mother – and she needed him to... What did she need him to be?

Gone, a small voice in her said. *I don't need him at all.*

She stood as if in a dream, without plan or thought, and stepped through the broken porcelain shards of the dinner plates as she made her way again to the front door. She only briefly glanced at the now shattered jar of levain on the ground, the living yeast, her fermented child, slowly spreading across the floor.

*

When Lucia was ten, she made her vow at the feet of the Saint of Accretion. The chips in the stone pavers had dug uncomfortably into her knees, her parents' hands on either shoulder pressing her down, somehow aware of her discomfort and warning her not to shift.

Her vow was not special, not unique; she was one of many who followed the Saint of Accretion, and all were equal in the simplicity of their promise of diligence, silence, humility. Each word was spoken by her parents and repeated by Lucia to the stone feet of the saint. *I*

will do my duties with diligence. I will endure my sufferings with silence. I will obey my elders and my betters with humility.

This vow had marked the end of Lucia's childhood. She knew the importance of the vow, and in the moment that she spoke the words, she felt a sense of reverence and self-fulfilment. Her life was greater than childish pursuits now, her responsibilities more immense. She felt grown.

If she could go back to that time and speak wise words to her younger self, the older Lucia would warn her of what was to come. She would slap the ignorant self-importance from that childish face. They would cry together, mourning the early death of childhood, and she would try to prepare her younger self for the high price that stoic endurance demands. But young Lucia knew nothing beyond her small world and had only trust in the path ahead of her.

From that day, her mother was harsher with her. 'As a woman, your role is to provide care, do you understand?' she had said that afternoon as she instructed Lucia in the kitchen. 'As the oldest, you now share the burden of caring for the younger children with me. And for your father. They need to be fed, kept happy, the house kept clean for them. The younger children must be disciplined – Saint knows they need it.'

Lucia listened, wide-eyed and uncertain. Her mother would never say it out loud, but Lucia sensed a relief in her words. This womanly burden was now shared, her mother was no longer alone in her duties, and she was relishing it.

Having crossed the threshold from child to woman, Lucia no longer received any childish comforts or care. No one cooked for her or cleaned her clothing or tolerated her tears and pains. Her many brothers and sisters could see this shift in her role, and they had pushed and teased and tried to break any boundary they could. She was not their playmate anymore, and if ever she lapsed in her duties of discipline and care, her father was there to beat her with the wooden spoon or send her to stand in the hot sun until her legs gave way. And when she would turn to her mother for comfort after these beatings, her mother would look down on her with an unspoken disappointment and turn away.

Every morning, she had baked the bread for the family, sometimes snatching the brief moments of peace in the early morning hours, when she would sit and watch the dough as it doubled. Morning after morning, the bread would rise and the children were raised, each one following the path that Lucia had trodden to early adulthood. Baked to Saint Accretion perfection, solid, crusted over and hollow on the inside.

*

The streets were dark. Lucia was still learning the twisting avenues that made up Marwa del Pieche; she had not had much need to explore, with her home being close to the market and no friends to visit. Navigating at night was no easier. Giorno would not let her leave the home after dark, saying, ‘Some pervert would snatch you from me in an instant, you are too beautiful to wander the streets,’ as he kissed her neck and gripped her wrist too tightly.

There were brief moments like this where Lucia would feel a flicker of something – desire? – as his hands roamed across her, but it would soon flit away, leaving her empty, having started something she could not finish. She had never truly desired men in that way; she had thought it would awaken once she was married, but it seemed to have done the opposite – fled even further away from her until she could hardly even keep up the charade, not knowing what it was she should be doing, what noises she should be making, what to give him except her mute acceptance.

The sounds of laughter and music drifted from home after home as Lucia walked steadily on, in the kind of haze that only comes from burying how you truly feel so deep it is no longer in reach. One of those houses held her husband, and she prayed – this time to the Great Mother – that he would not see her through a window.

She stopped. She had reached the convent. She blinked as she took the building in, feeling a surge of shame at her childishness, and nearly turned to return home. If her mother could see her now, she would spit at the fearful and wavering woman her daughter had grown to become.

‘Sister?’

A gentle voice, like a clear bell, came through the convent gate. Lucia flinched. A Metzella was looking curiously at her from the steps of the convent, a few feet away from the gate.

‘Sister, are you all right?’

Something about the warmth in her voice melted something in Lucia, who was amazed to feel tears prickling in her eyes. She had not cried in years.

‘I...’ she faltered.

‘Oh, my dear,’ said the Metzella, coming closer to the gate and seeing the warring emotions across Lucia’s face. ‘Come inside, please. It looks like you need someone to talk to.’ She slid the large bolt free and opened the gate, smiling gently.

‘Can I...?’ Again, the Metzella seemed to understand without Lucia needing to finish the sentence.

‘All women are welcome at the Mother’s hearth,’ she said, and her warm hand rested lightly on Lucia’s shoulder, guiding her in. ‘Especially on this day.’

*

Lucia sat at a large wooden table in the kitchen of the convent. It was a grand room, grander even than the home Giorno had furnished richly and proudly. Tapestries and artwork hung on every wall, ornate lamps and candelabras lit the room in a warm and inviting glow, and the table itself was draped with a brocade table runner woven through with golden thread.

Lucia’s arrival had drawn two more Metzellas, and Lucia – with some embarrassment at this attention – realised these were the three women who had led the Metzels in the parade earlier in the day. They still wore their golden tunics, but they had replaced their fine lace veils with simple white epimandylions. They sat around the table, all holding mugs of mulled wine, rich with spices.

Lucia couldn’t find her voice. She filled the silence with small sips, her free hand balled tightly into a fist.

‘Drink, drink,’ said another Metzella – the one who had looked so knowingly at her during the parade. ‘Soothe your soul. Let us fill the silence. Daughter Maufia, can you bring something to eat?’

‘I believe I know of you,’ said the clear-voiced woman – Daughter Maufia – as she gathered some bowls and ladled a thick, creamy mixture into each. ‘Lucia, yes? Giorno’s new wife? Daughter Pitelle mentioned she saw you at the parade.’

Daughter Pitelle’s eyes pierced into Lucia, not glancing down at the bowls placed in front of them. ‘The Great Mother pointed you out to me Herself,’ she said, her voice calm and soft.

Lucia broke from her gaze and picked up her spoon, stirring the steaming contents of her bowl.

‘It’s rice pudding,’ said Daughter Maufia. ‘Made by our beautiful Daughter Pia.’ She gestured to the third Metzella, who lowered her eyes in acknowledgement. She was beautiful and younger than the other two. When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper and deeper than expected. ‘Sister Lucia, please, tell us why you have come to us.’

Lucia swallowed the sweet dessert down as emotion rose up in her throat. She stared down at the table. ‘I couldn’t stay in that house,’ she began, falteringly. ‘I couldn’t bear...’

‘You don’t need to say the words, sister,’ Daughter Pitelle said as Lucia fell back into silence. ‘I can see the pain written all over you.’

Lucia bristled, the thought of being so transparent stoking the coals of the deep self-hatred that smouldered within her. She looked up at the faces of these three women, all gazing at her with a kind, sorrowful patience, and she couldn’t stand it. She was too *seen*. Her face flushed, she pushed her chair back from the table.

‘I’ve been foolish.’ The words fell from her mouth with a jittery tension, her voice harsher than intended. ‘And weak. It is just the usual troubles of marriage. Nothing I should be bothering you with.’ She stood, avoiding the eyes of the women, forcing a brittle smile. ‘Thank you for your kindness.’

Silence followed her as she turned away from the table to leave. What would her mother say at this display of weakness? She shook her hands as if to shoo away the thought, but her movement was stopped by a hand closing around her own. A warm, solid hand, gripping tightly. Lucia stopped and looked back at Daughter Pitelle, whose face creased with sympathy.

‘What—?’

Daughter Pitelle’s other hand rose up to Lucia’s cheek, brushing away a stray, escaped tear. ‘Oh Lucia,’ she said, softly. ‘So full of sorrow with nowhere to put it.’ She patted Lucia’s cheek tenderly, then stroked her hair.

Dumbstruck, Lucia stood and accepted the overfamiliar touch of this woman, furious at herself as the tears began to flow.

‘Cry, child.’ Daughter Pitelle pulled her in close, her arms encircling Lucia’s stiff body, gently patting her back. ‘We are here.’

And the stony wall of resolve collapsed within her. Lucia was crying now, sobbing like she had not since she was young. Perhaps in a way she had never actually been allowed to, even as a child. Daughter Maufia and Daughter Pia patted her back and stroked her hair, and she let herself melt into Daughter Pitelle’s arms. No one told her to bear her pain with stoic silence, no one told her to stop behaving so dramatically, no one coldly turned their back, unwilling to see her suffering. They held her and murmured comforting words and let her cry, the way a loving mother should.

*

Lucia did not leave the convent the next morning, nor in the days that followed. After that first night when she had been settled into a warm bed by these women, given a warm mug of milk and left to sleep, her breath hitching like an exhausted, newly calmed infant, she felt a deep and undeniable need for more of their warmth.

She had woken to her room lit by the early morning sunlight and had seen a single daffodil placed on the nightstand next to the bed. The gesture touched her deeply. That someone would care enough to prepare these things for her in the early hours of the dawn set off a sad sort of ache in her heart. She was being taken care of, and she could not walk away from that. Not after years of it being withheld.

Each morning that followed had seen Lucia more renewed. The cheerful conversations with the Metzellas over breakfast as they drank sweetened chocolate in milk, the easy companionship as she followed them in their daily rituals, the inexhaustible empathy they had for her life, all were a drug to Lucia. She felt held by them in a way that allowed her to let go of the iron grip she'd had around her heart since the day of her vows. She had stopped fearing even Giorno and his retribution.

'No men can enter here,' Daughter Pitelle had said on that first morning, when Lucia could not stop glancing out the windows of the convent for fear of Giorno storming down the entry path. 'These walls are protected by the Great Mother. She would never allow the anger of a man to taint the halls.' Daughter Pitelle had rested a hand softly on Lucia's shoulder. 'You are safe here. If you like, we can send him a message to let him know you have sought sanctuary here.'

Lucia pictured Giorno returning to their home, the mess he had made still there, no woman to clean up after him. 'No. He can figure it out himself.'

Daughter Pitelle's eyes had sparkled at this. With pride? Lucia couldn't tell but had basked in it, nonetheless.

She stayed by Daughter Pitelle's side mostly. Daughter Pia had a mischievous quality, and Lucia enjoyed chatting with her as they cooked together in the kitchen. Daughter Maufia was warm, and Lucia felt at peace in the silences they shared as they sewed together. But she found herself seeking out Daughter Pitelle the most, never understanding the expression 'under her wing' more than when walking side by side with her down the hallways of the convent. Daughter Pitelle showed her the art that hung on every wall, the jewelled lamps, the tapestries, and Lucia was struck by the beauty of the place, a far cry from the sparse stone walls of the church of the Saint of Accretion.

‘The Great Mother loves beauty,’ said Daughter Pitelle as they walked one evening through the halls, lighting the lamps. ‘Beauty is divine, life is divine, so why shouldn’t the two mix?’

‘I’ve never seen such riches,’ said Lucia, her fingers gently trailing along a vast tapestry.

‘Ah, yes, well.’ Daughter Pitelle gave a cheerful shrug. ‘We have certainly been blessed. This city takes great care of us. As does Mother.’

‘You must never want to leave,’ said Lucia.

‘Most of us do not leave,’ Daughter Pitelle said as she turned a corner. ‘The Metzas’—she gestured to the door at the end of the hallway—‘they are secluded, completely in the arms of the Mother.’

Lucia followed her down the hallway, peering into rooms as she passed: an office with tall bookshelves and a stately looking desk; a sitting room with a silver tea set laid out on a gilded table; a prayer room with red cushions scattered on the floor, red silks draped across the ceiling and over a marble statue of a woman, two carved babies cradled at her breasts.

The hallway ended with a double door painted with a golden sun. There was a thin viewing window cut from the door, filled with iron lattice. Daughter Pitelle turned to Lucia and gestured for her to come get a closer look.

The room beyond was dim, large as a ballroom at least, with ceilings so high she could not see from this vantage point. The heavy scent of incense wafting from within. Lucia felt a flutter in her belly as she saw the lines of women seated on each side of the room, kneeling on tiered steps and all facing inward. Each woman was draped in white silk, their heads bowed in prayer. This was where the Metzas prayed. Walking among them, swinging smoking thuribles back and forth, were the Metzellas, Daughters Maufia and Pia. Lucia could hear a low humming, a female voice or perhaps many female voices, droning an ascending pattern of notes, then descending, then a moment of silence before repeating. It was like an audible breath, a musical expression of the rise and fall of one’s own chest, familiar and haunting.

‘These are the women who have made vows to the Mother,’ Daughter Pitelle murmured, gazing over Lucia’s shoulder. ‘They live their life in Her hands. There is no better place to be.’

‘What do they... do?’ Lucia couldn’t keep the tinge of disbelief out of her voice.

Daughter Pitelle laughed softly. ‘A life of prayer does not sound interesting to you?’

‘No, it’s just—’

‘No, no, you’re quite right. It does seem dull from where we stand. But you have not spoken to the Great Mother or felt Her care. Imagine how it felt as a babe, swaddled and warm and in your mother’s arms. No knowledge of the greater world and its sins, no need to try to solve the petty problems of men. Simply love and peace.’

Lucia could imagine it but only just and only because of the care she had received in these few days in the convent. She wondered if she had been held much as a babe at all. She had grown up watching her younger siblings be left crying in their cribs for hours until they eventually fell silent in a kind of shocked disbelief that no care had come.

‘Why didn’t you become a Metza?’ Lucia asked after a moment’s silence.

‘Someone must tend the convent; someone must preach to the people.’ Daughter Pitelle sighed. ‘Different duties fall to different people, as you well know.’ She smiled gently. ‘When Daughter Pia is older and perhaps a new Metzella joins us, I will be able to be with the Metzas in Mother’s arms.’

She turned away from the door, leading Lucia back down the hallway towards the prayer room. ‘Would you like to speak with Her?’

‘Her?’

Daughter Pitelle gestured to the cushioned floor of the prayer room. ‘The Great Mother. She would like to get to know you.’

*

Lucia sat alone in the prayer room, a thick slice of bread resting on a plate in front of her.

‘Eat the bread,’ Daughter Pitelle urged before she left the room. ‘It connects us to Her.’

Lucia tore off the crust of the bread, savouring the warmth and flavour. Did people feel connected to her when eating the bread she baked? Of course not; her labour was invisible to them, the bread just appearing as expected.

She sat in silence, finishing the bread, picking up the crumbs with the end of her finger until the plate was clean. Should she pray? Ask the Great Mother for guidance?

The room lurched. Lucia felt herself choke on a crumb. Then the room was still again, as if nothing had happened. Perhaps that had been it, that single lurch in her stomach and the room spinning. The Great Mother had briefly connected with her and heard her prayer. She shifted back onto her toes to stand up.

Then she was struck, like a great bell. She felt the jolt zap through her brain, as if originating from somewhere behind her eyes. The room lurched once more, and she was flat on her back, staring up at the red silks draping the ceiling. But she was not Lucia on the ground; she was the babe in the arms of the statue, gazing up at the Mother. And the Mother smiled at her, the marble of Her cheeks dimpling, Her stony eyes somehow loving.

Another thunderclap in Lucia's mind. The red silks surrounded her, swayed around her, moving with a rhythmic heartbeat. Lucia floated within them, buoyed by something warm and thick, like drifting down below the surface of a milk bath. Darkness, brief pulses of light through the silks, a muffled female voice singing a series of low notes, humming. With every pulse, every beat of light, she felt heat move through her body. There was a cord tethered to her belly, thick and ropey, and she had a deep knowledge that she was safe with this cord around her.

Another thunderclap. She was pulling on the cord, dragging herself through the silks out into the light again, screaming and crying at the cold and the vastness of the space beyond the silks. And there she was once more, looking at the Mother through the eyes of the marble babe.

The Mother's marble face was moving as if now made of swirls of white and grey ink, spilling onto the surface of a pool of water. Her mouth drifted as the swirls rippled and pooled, pulling up into a soft smile. She was humming, swaying, rocking Lucia in Her arms. Her white eyes glowed, Her hair and veil tendrilling around Her.

Oh, my Lucia. The words echoed in Lucia's mind, a slightly muffled and shifting sound, like She was speaking from behind a closed door. *Hush, hush, hush, my sweet girl. You are safe in my arms.* Her voice was like a lullaby, flitting through a melody that sounded achingly familiar.

A bright pulse of light burst from Her eyes, and Lucia was on the ground, seated on a pillow. The Great Mother sat before her, still rippling like liquid marble, the red silks blowing about Her, hiding Her except for brief, thrilling glimpses.

Lucia could not speak. It was as if she had forgotten how. She saw only the Mother, felt only the pull of the cord that was once again tethered to her belly and held in Mother's hands. She was a child again, and the Mother was the anchor that held her to the world. Without Her, Lucia felt she would drift away into nothingness.

This is something you have not felt for a long time. Her voice was inhuman, or more human than possible, like a thousand voices all speaking the same words at once. *This comfort. This is how you should have felt with your own mother.* A sudden coldness trickled

over Lucia, and in her next blink, she was drifting through the dark, the Mother a distant red haze, the cord cut. Her soul screamed; her heart broke.

She didn't know how to be your mother. The red haze spread until it reached Lucia's drifting body, suffusing her with warmth and tenderness, relief like nothing she had ever felt. The Great Mother was whispering in her ear, pulling the red haze over her as if tucking her into bed. *But you have found me now. And you have sweetness in you still.*

She kissed her forehead, her cheeks, her hands and rocked her gently back down towards the ground. Lucia was laid on a pillow, sleep suddenly pulling at her. She blinked as the red silks buffeted across the Mother, the ink swirls of Her face and body diffusing into the air.

Lucia yearned to go with Her, and the yearning devoured her until it was all she was and ever could be. And then, with a final thunderclap jolt, Lucia was simply kneeling on the cushion in the prayer room, the marble figure just a statue once more.

*

'It is too soon.' Daughter Maufia worriedly picked at her nails, pointedly looking to Daughter Pitelle. 'She has only just felt the Mother; she is not ready for what is to come.'

Daughter Pitelle shared an uneasy look with Daughter Maufia, one that Lucia could not decipher.

'That is never for us to decide,' she said, with a finality that made Daughter Maufia sit back with a sigh.

'I swear to you, I am not making this choice lightly,' said Lucia. She had waited until dinner to tell the Metzellas her decision. 'I understand it seems sudden...' Her words failed her. It *was* sudden. It was reckless, surely. It was insanity to make such a vow. But the yearning since her encounter with the Mother had been like a broken bone, a wrongness that must simply be put right. 'I realised today that I have been deprived of something my entire life. And now I know what that is, it is all I want, it is all I need.' She could hear the petulance, the selfishness in her words, but she didn't care any longer. She didn't want to care for anyone, be responsible for anyone, sacrifice any more of herself in order to be a dutiful daughter or wife or, one day – and at this thought, she felt a shudder – a mother. She wanted what she'd never had: she wanted to be loved and cared for and nurtured with nothing expected in return. 'What I felt today – how could I choose anything else?'

She searched the faces in front of her. Daughter Pia listened attentively, her eyes holding an understanding and trying to hide a concern. Daughter Maufia fidgeted uncomfortably, looking almost afraid but resigned. Daughter Pitelle gazed steadily, seeming, as always, to hear what Lucia struggled to say.

‘The Mother connected with you. She saw your sweetness.’ At this, Pitelle looked in turn at Maufia and Pia. ‘We will have a new Metza.’

*

Lucia was given bread to eat and a small glass of green liquor that had a bitter taste.

‘This is part of the ceremony,’ said Daughter Pia. She winced in sympathy as Lucia gagged from the taste. ‘It will help you sleep too.’

The liquor burned in Lucia’s chest as she doused her candle and curled up in her bed. She held on tightly to the fading feelings of her afternoon prayer: the warmth, the safety, the comfort. Sleep took her quickly, the liquor making her drowsy and heavy. She dreamt briefly of the pulsing light, of the swirls of the Great Mother’s smile drifting into screams and laughter and finally to sweet and tender smiles.

‘Daughter Lucia.’ A voice startled her awake. She tried to blink the heaviness from her eyes but could only manage to peer blearily at the figures at the door. The Metzellas, all holding lanterns, all wearing the same ceremonial dress from the festival parade.

‘What time is it?’ Lucia mumbled thickly, her tongue feeling numb and heavy. ‘Is something wrong?’

Daughter Pitelle ignored her question. ‘Are you still sure of your decision? You wish to be a Metza?’

Her voice was sterner than Lucia had heard it before. She tried to drag herself to sit, but her elbow collapsed under her. ‘I am,’ she said, struggling to gain some control over her leaden body.

‘Then it is time.’ Daughter Pitelle moved to Lucia and gently lifted her up. ‘You will feel strange. It is the sedative we gave you.’

‘Sedative?’

Daughter Pitelle was hoisting her out of the bed, Daughter Maufia now hurrying over to assist. Lucia questioned for a moment if this was a dream. There was a strangeness in the scene. The Metzellas bustled about her with energy, bringing out clothing and pinning her hair, but there was a nervousness to them all, a slight trepidation. If she could clear the fog

from her mind, she could try to understand the glances they were exchanging or pick up the quiet whispers as they dressed her in red silks, but it felt as if her thoughts were trying to wade through sludge. The room was lurching underneath her feet, her brain teetering on the edge of sleep, unwilling or unable to stay present.

A large red silk was draped over her, and she felt something heavy being placed on the crown of her head. The golden circlet. She was in full Metza regalia now, but it felt like a costume.

‘Come, come.’ Daughter Pia took Lucia’s hand and squeezed it. ‘Walk with us.’

Daughter Maufia took her other hand, and the three of them followed Daughter Pitelle out of the room and down the long hallways towards the double doors that separated the Metzas from the world. Daughter Maufia kept up a steady stream of words as they walked, squeezing her hand tightly in rhythmic pulses. ‘Lucia, I am so glad we had you with us these few days. You will be so happy in the arms of the Great Mother, but we will miss you.’

‘Miss me?’ Lucia stumbled, and Maufia gripped her arm. ‘I will be here, won’t I? You will come and pray with me?’

Daughter Maufia did not reply. Her hand was damp with sweat.

‘Blessed Mother,’ Daughter Pia murmured at Lucia’s other side, ‘take Lucia into your care. Let her be happy with you. Make her transition peaceful, ease her fear and her pain, hold her in your arms and be nourished by her sweetness.’

A cold chill was creeping into Lucia’s stomach. She could barely see through the veil, just the shadowed figure of Daughter Pitelle walking ahead. *Ease her fear and her pain...* Daughter Pia’s prayer felt wrong, something felt wrong, but she could not grasp at it.

They reached the doors, and Daughter Pitelle turned. She lifted Lucia’s veil, and Lucia saw that she had tears running down her cheeks. ‘I still do not know you, not truly, but I am proud of you.’ She stroked Lucia’s cheek. ‘The Mother chose you, and we are glad for you.’

‘You do not seem glad,’ Lucia said, her words slurred. She lifted a hand to wipe away a tear from Daughter Pitelle’s chin, but Maufia and Pia held her hands fast.

‘Listen, child.’ Daughter Pitelle seemed to gather herself, wiped away her own tears and straightened her back. ‘We are not meant to look upon gods. They are too much for our minds. They appear to us in visions and prayer but in a way that we can understand. You are about to see the true form of the Great Mother. And it will frighten you.’

Lucia thought of the marble woman, the drifting ink blots of her face. The tender smile.

Daughter Pitelle gripped her chin suddenly, her eyes ablaze with a determined fervour Lucia had not seen before. ‘The mortal soul struggles when it sees a god’s true form, do you understand? You must fight that. There is beauty in horror, there is beauty in rot, in death, in things that humans find ugly or frightening. It is true beauty, and I hope that you see it.’

Her grip softened, and she tenderly lifted the veil over Lucia’s face once more. A red haze filtered the sharpness of the world; the double doors now opened by Daughter Pitelle looked like a void. Candles flickered within, and as Pia and Maufia slowly led her through the doors, Lucia could make out the shapes of the Metzias – her sisters now – all in prayer. They must have been woken for this midnight ceremony. That low harmonic drone filled the space, and the resonance filled her mind.

The Metzias led her to the centre of the chamber, where she had seen them diffusing incense while the Metzias prayed. The room was larger than she had thought, with a vaulted ceiling. In her brief glance up, Lucia thought she could see a large, hulking shape spread out across the beams, but the red blur made it difficult to make out.

A whispered voice, Daughter Pitelle’s, sent tingles down her neck. ‘Kneel and pray.’ She knelt, more from her legs giving way beneath her than from conscious thought.

She realised she was now alone in the centre of the chamber. The Metzias had returned to the doorway and had joined the droning song. Time was moving in reeling jumps; she could not keep up.

She turned to look at the Metzias in rows on either side of her. They were still as statues. Was she meant to acknowledge them? Would they acknowledge her? She could not see their faces through their veils from this far. She wondered if they were glad to have a new sister. Or maybe they would barely notice, so caught up in their connection with the Mother, so cradled and safe in her arms that they cared not for the world beyond. But surely, they ate and slept and spoke to each other when prayer was done. Surely.

LUCIA.

Like an electric zap from her spine to the crown of her skull, the voice of the Mother seemed to fill her veins and her lungs.

LOOK UPON ME.

Trancelike, she lifted the veil and looked up.

A shape loomed in the beams, a distorted and clinging shape spread across the ceiling and down the walls, the middle of it drooping down like it was about to drip down onto her. It was like mucous; it was like dough; it was like *yeast*, bubbling and spidering across the surfaces. A scream rose in her throat, and then—

The thunderclap. The jolt. Lucia was struck dumb as a single thick, fermented glob fell into her open mouth. And oh, the joy of it. She was held again, she was comforted again, but this time, she was suspended in the stringy tendrils of it. It was wrapping around her and warming her, rocking her gently and humming to her. This was the Mother; this was the womb.

When she opened her eyes again, she was kneeling next to the row of Metzas. With the veil no longer obscuring her view, she could see the Metzas' faces: husk-like, corpses long drained of life, eyes milky and skeletal hands folded in prayer. Thin lips turned up into beatific smiles. In their bellies, fibrous, fleshy cords that connected back up to the glorious Mother.

Lucia felt somewhere that she should be frightened, that this was a horrible thing to see, that something was not right. But that part was so far away now, so forgotten. That was her wound, her mother wound, long unhealed and forever doubting and questioning. She did not need that part now.

She felt a sharpness at her own belly, a piercing of the skin, but the pain was dull, no worse than slipping with the kitchen knife and nicking a finger. The ropey tendril was burrowing in, pushing aside skin and organs and finding its way to something vital. Lucia welcomed it. She could see it for what it really was – the red cord from the prayer, the umbilical cord connecting her to her true Mother, keeping her safe and well forever.

She felt something moving from within her, up that cord. Some old part of her, some of her sweetness she had managed to keep safe all these years despite the pain and neglect and expectations. And she smiled as she felt it move from her to the Mother. *Take it*, she thought. *I saved it for you.*

You will get much more in return. The Mother's voice was like a bell, ringing clarity into Lucia's clouded mind. *Come into my arms, let me care for you.*

She lowered her veil once more and folded her hands in prayer as she felt herself weave into the Mother, the red mist enveloping her, her own heart falling into rhythm with the steady *pulse, pulse, pulse* of the Mother's heart.

When Myth Becomes Flesh

by Esha Aamir

Content Warnings: Violence, prejudice.

Not your thing? Skip to page 40 for the next story.

The twin suns of Virelia dipped behind the fractured towers, casting long geometric shadows across the lower districts.

Zyren moved through them without sound.

His armour-cloth lay close to his frame, layered and unadorned, its faint glyphwork dormant beneath the fading light. Authority did not require spectacle. The high collar framed his face; the sleeves concealed his four-fingered hands until motion required otherwise.

A flicker of movement interrupted the rhythm of patrol.

He stopped.

In the narrow break between two collapsed structures, a figure crouched behind broken masonry.

Not Virelian.

His gaze adjusted, recalibrated.

Humanoid structure. Incorrect symmetry. Dermal tone unstable – environmental adaptation already in progress. Pale hair streaked with particulate ash. Posture misaligned, as if gravity here negotiated differently with her bones.

Human.

She had not seen her reflection; that much was clear.

The passersby had dismissed her as a peripheral anomaly. Zyren did not.

Her eyes opened. They locked onto his. Fear registered immediately. Not concealed. Not moderated. It rose to the surface without discipline.

‘Remain where you are,’ he said. His voice carried no volume, only precision.

She tightened her grip on the satchel in her lap. The fabric was worn, foreign. So was she.

He stepped closer. ‘How did you enter this sector?’

She swallowed. Her lips parted, then closed again. Moisture gathered at the lower

edge of her eyes.

Zyren stilled.

The fluid breached containment and tracked down her face in transparent lines.

He had studied humans. He understood the mechanism in theory. The reality was inefficient.

‘I didn’t mean to,’ she said. Her voice fractured around the words. ‘I don’t know how I got here. I was trying to trace a signal. It had been showing up on my radio for weeks. I thought it was interference, but it kept repeating the same pattern.’

She hesitated.

‘Last night, I finally followed it. I was sitting in my room with the receiver when the signal changed. The lights went out. My window was still there, but everything outside it looked wrong. The next thing I remember, I was falling through... something.’ Her voice thinned. ‘And then I landed here. I didn’t choose this.’

The droplets continued. He watched them with clinical focus. ‘Are you human,’ he asked, ‘or an imitation constructed to resemble one?’

She hesitated only briefly. ‘Human.’

The word settled between them like a verdict.

Before he could respond, the locket at his throat pulsed – sharp, singular, deliberate. Alert.

His posture shifted instantly. ‘Inside,’ he said. ‘Behind that structure. Do not speak.’

She faltered. His gaze hardened. ‘Now.’

That was enough. She moved.

Zyren tapped the locket. Light unfolded into form. Swona materialised with controlled elegance, her amaranth silk falling in deliberate folds. The crystal beading along the fabric refracted the dying sunlight into cold scatterings across the alley.

‘You deviated from the route,’ she said. ‘Surveillance flagged irregular movement in your sector.’

‘Negative,’ Zyren replied. ‘Sector stable.’

Her eyes searched his expression. She had known him for centuries. ‘The grid remains active.’

‘System error.’

A pause.

Then, carefully, she told him, ‘Do not forget tonight’s assembly with the chief.’

‘I won’t.’

The projection dissolved. Silence returned. Zyren waited a measured interval before turning. ‘You may come out.’

She emerged slowly. Her eyes were rimmed in red. She wiped her face with the back of her hand as though embarrassed by the evidence.

‘I have obligations,’ he said. ‘You are not being surrendered. Not yet.’

Her breathing steadied slightly.

He guided her through the secondary corridors of the district until they reached his residence. From the exterior, it presented as seamless glaucous glass, opaque and unyielding. At his touch, the surface separated.

Inside, the ceiling did not exist. Above them stretched a Byzantium sky – an engineered expanse calibrated to mimic depth without weather. Suspended luminants drifted like restrained constellations. Chandeliers hovered at varying elevations, gravity selectively applied.

She stared upward.

‘It is night,’ Zyren said.

Her gaze dropped immediately.

‘Do not attempt to leave,’ he continued. ‘The exterior environment will not accommodate you safely. Remain seated. Interfere with nothing.’ He paused. ‘When I return, you will explain how a human crossed into Virelia without detection.’

He left before she could answer.

Zyren's boots struck the corridor floor in even intervals. Behind him, the door to his residence had already sealed. He did not look back; there was no reason to.

Three steps later, he stopped.

It was not thought, not exactly. It was something lower than thought, some old current running beneath the language centres of his mind. The part of him that had evolved in a world with different predators and different debts. A doubt with no shape yet.

He turned his wrist over and tapped twice against the inside of it, just below where the pulse point would be if he were human. The skin there lit faintly blue, and a thin lattice of light unfolded upward, hanging in the air in front of him like a pane of rain-streaked glass.

The residence bloomed into view room by room.

He found her sitting still, where he had left her, knees drawn to her chest, arms wrapped around her shins like she was holding herself together by hand. Alone.

Alone beneath a constructed sky, the human sat motionless – small against the architecture of a world that did not want her.

Zyren stood in the corridor a moment longer than he meant to.

He closed his hand; the projector guttered and folded back into his skin, and he walked on anyway, slower than before.

*

The chamber sealed as Zyren entered.

Dark alloy. No seams. No echo.

At the apex of the triangular table sat the chief. Motionless. Millennia had carved authority into his stillness. He did not need to raise his voice to command a world.

He lifted his gaze. ‘You are late.’

Zyren inclined his head. ‘My delay was unavoidable. I accept responsibility.’

A pause. Measured. Then:

‘Every era believes itself secure,’ the chief said. Light fractured along the table’s edge. ‘And every era is proven wrong. Not by enemies. By the stories it allows to survive.’ His gaze moved across the assembled group. ‘You know the agenda.’

Humans.

Zyren felt it like a fissure beneath stone. His posture tightened, corrected.

Across the table, Swona noticed.

‘The citizens are uneasy,’ the chief continued. ‘Since the last strike, fear has taken root. They search for meaning.’

A beat.

‘They have chosen an old myth.’

Humans.

Zyren kept his gaze forward. His fingers curled once against the arm of his chair.

Swona’s eyes lingered.

‘We will not allow instability,’ the chief said. ‘The public will be reminded that humans are extinct.’ A sharper beat. ‘They do not exist in this universe.’ Silence. ‘What does not exist cannot threaten us.’

Extinct. Do not exist. Zyren saw—

Trembling hands.

Salt water on alien air.

Four fingers. A thumb. Hidden beneath his roof.

The chief rose. ‘I expect honesty. I expect discipline. Order depends on certainty.’

The meeting ended. Chairs retracted. Projections dissolved. Footsteps faded.

Zyren remained, alone at the table.

Humans do not exist.

And yet—

A girl waited beneath a manufactured sky.

For the first time in centuries, Commander Zyren did not question the enemy. He questioned the narrative. And he did not know which one he was sworn to protect.

The chamber door sealed behind Zyren with a soft compression of air. He remained in the corridor longer than necessary. When he finally moved, he saw her at the far end of the hallway; Swona waiting there was not a coincidence.

She approached him.

‘You were unsettled,’ she observed.

‘I was attentive,’ he replied.

Her gaze did not waver. ‘Humans,’ she said softly. ‘Do you believe extinction can be declared into truth?’

He let his eyes shift – vermilion igniting, controlled but unmistakable.

She stepped back immediately. ‘I withdraw the question.’ She left without further provocation.

Zyren stood alone. For the first time in centuries, obedience felt heavier than armour.

*

Inside Zyren’s residence, the human, Aizal, had folded herself into the far corner of the couch, as though a smaller shape meant a smaller danger.

The artificial sky dimmed incrementally overhead.

A voice broke the stillness. ‘Exploration is inefficient when unauthorised.’

She turned.

The creature hovering near the upper airspace absorbed light rather than reflected it. Its wings were joined differently than any Earth anatomy. Its eyes were fixed and assessing.

She screamed.

She ran.

The architecture unfolded seamlessly around her, corridors shifting as though aware of pursuit. She turned sharply – and collided with something immovable.

Zyren.

Her fists struck uselessly against his chest as panic overrode language.

‘Enough.’ His voice did not rise. It cut.

She froze.

‘You are safe,’ he said. ‘Cease movement.’

Behind him, the dark-winged figure descended. ‘Designation: Onyx,’ it said.

‘Companion class. Bound to commander by authority.’

Aizal stared. ‘Creature?’

Onyx’s tone sharpened. ‘Incorrect classification.’

Zyren gave it a look, and Onyx withdrew without argument.

‘Sit,’ Zyren instructed.

She obeyed.

‘What is your name?’

‘Aizal.’

He repeated it once, committing it to memory. ‘Now explain how you entered this world.’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I woke up here. I didn’t choose—’

He cut her off. ‘Cross-world transition requires breach, technology or intent. Which did you employ?’

‘None.’

Her breathing destabilised again. Tears gathered without restraint.

He exhaled. ‘Not again.’

He stepped closer, studying the fluid with renewed scrutiny. ‘What is the purpose of this secretion?’

She blinked at him. ‘You don’t know what tears are?’

‘My species does not externalise distress.’

‘They’re... biological,’ she said carefully. ‘Water and salt. We produce them when we feel too much.’

‘Too much?’

‘When emotion exceeds containment.’

He considered that. ‘You leak to signal instability.’

‘No,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘We leak to connect. When someone sees you cry, they understand you’re hurting. It invites comfort. It reminds us we aren’t alone.’

The idea seemed to recalibrate something behind his eyes. ‘Your species institutionalises vulnerability.’

She almost laughed through the tears. 'We just call it being alive.'

Silence expanded between them.

'Your emotional architecture,' he said quietly, 'would destabilise Virelia.'

She swallowed. 'Maybe,' she said. 'Or maybe it would change it.'

He did not respond. But he did not dismiss the possibility either.

They were still facing one another when the alarms began.

*

The sound rose from beneath the city – low at first, then sharpening into a frequency that tremored through the glass architecture. Warning glyphs ignited along the walls, cycling through urgent spectrums.

Zyren did not hesitate. The locket at his throat flared again but, this time, in multiple hues, layered and unstable.

'Inside,' he said.

Aizal was already moving. She sealed herself into the inner chamber. The lock engaged with a soft tonal confirmation.

Zyren tapped the locket. Light unfolded into bodies.

Swona materialised first, tension visible even in the precision of her posture. Vin appeared beside her, composed but alert. Three others phased in, forming a loose perimeter.

'Surveillance confirms a human life-sign within this sector,' one of them said.

Zyren's expression did not change.

'Source?'

'The city grid.'

Swona stepped forward. 'Before public registration. We contain it now.'

'Contain,' Zyren repeated. 'Clarify.'

'We terminate,' she said.

No hesitation. The word settled.

Zyren's gaze shifted to her. It did not rise in volume. It hardened. 'You will not act without the chief.'

'We already have authorisation,' Swona replied.

'He prefers prevention.'

Silence stretched.

'If a human were present,' Zyren said evenly, 'I would have detected it.'

Vin nodded once. 'If you sensed nothing, the reading may be an error.'

'Systems do not invent biological signatures,' Swona said.

'They malfunction,' Zyren answered.

The projections flickered.

Vin exhaled lightly. 'We recalibrate. No escalation.'

They began to withdraw—

A sound. Soft. Contained. From the inner room.

Stillness felt like an impact.

Swona's head turned. 'You reside alone.'

'Onyx... it might be Onyx,' Zyren said immediately.

The front partition separated.

'I am present,' Onyx announced, gliding inward.

Silence tightened.

Vin's gaze shifted to the sealed chamber door. 'If the companion was outside,' he said carefully, 'then who caused the sound inside?'

Swona's certainty solidified. 'The grid was correct.'

'For caution,' Vin added, 'we verify.'

They moved toward the inner chamber.

Zyren stepped into their path. 'There is no necessity.'

Swona stopped inches from him. 'Necessity is determined by risk, not preference. What if there's a human presence inside?'

Before he could respond—

'Human?' Onyx said. Its wings adjusted fractionally. 'The biological anomaly inside corresponds with the one Zyren escorted here in the previous cycle.'

The temperature in the room seemed to drop.

Zyren's head turned slowly towards Onyx. His eyes ignited vermilion.

'Clarify,' Swona said.

Onyx did not perceive danger. 'The girl.'

No one moved.

Vin's posture changed first. Subtle. Defensive.

'You brought a human into your residence,' Swona said. Not accusation. Statement.

Zyren held her gaze.

Behind him, the sealed door. Behind that, a species declared extinct.

'You compromised containment,' Swona continued. 'During active instability.'

Zyren did not step aside. For the first time in centuries, obedience and conviction occupied the same space – and refused to reconcile.

‘Open the door,’ Swona said. Respect remained in her tone – thinner now – but she did not wait for permission. She pressed her palm against the seal.

Locked.

She turned.

‘Commander,’ she said evenly, ‘for procedural clarity, instruct the occupant to disengage the barrier.’

Occupant. The word carried no accusation. It did not need one.

Zyren stood very still.

Then he moved.

He crossed the distance and placed his hand lightly against the door. ‘Aizal,’ he said. ‘Open it.’

A pause.

The seal disengaged. The door parted. She stepped into the light.

She had wiped her face. Her breathing was controlled by force rather than calm. Her gaze moved from one figure to another, comprehension dawning too late.

No one spoke. Then they saw her hands: four fingers. And a thumb. Asymmetry. Wrong architecture.

Weapons unfolded with mechanical unanimity. Energy arcs stabilised at lethal threshold.

Aizal did not understand the gesture, but she understood the intent.

Swona did not look at the human. She looked at Zyren. ‘You harboured a human within secured territory,’ she said.

No raised voice. No drama.

Fact.

Zyren moved. He placed himself between Aizal and the converging weapons. ‘She is not hostile.’

‘She is human.’

The distinction was sufficient.

Vin’s silence was heavier than Swona’s words. Trust, recalibrating.

Swona lifted her wrist. The alert glyph ignited. Direct channel.

Zyren let his eyes flare. ‘Rescind it,’ he said.

‘It is already transmitted.’

Vin exhaled sharply. 'Swona—'

'This exceeds internal discretion,' she replied.

The room settled into a waiting stillness.

Aizal stood behind Zyren, close enough that he could feel the tremor in her breathing. For centuries, his duty had been simple: contain threats. Preserve order. Obey. Now, the definition of threat stood behind him. And order stood in front. For the first time, Zyren understood that neutrality was no longer available to him.

The air changed. Light condensed at the centre of the chamber. The chief stepped forward from it as though the room had formed around him, and every weapon lowered.

His gaze moved first to Zyren, then to the human behind him. Then back again.

'So,' he said. No accusation. No surprise.

Zyren inclined his head.

'You concealed a human life-form,' the chief continued. 'Within secured territory.'

'Yes.'

No elaboration. The silence expanded.

The chief shifted his attention to Aizal. She did not understand the hierarchy, but she understood power. She did not step forward. She did not step back.

'Name,' he said.

'Aizal,' she whispered.

He studied her hands. Her breathing. The residual salt lines at the corners of her eyes.

'Humans were declared extinct.' He paused, looked at Aizal and continued, 'They are not.'

The admission did not ripple through the room. It solidified it.

Swona's posture shifted, nearly imperceptible. Vin did not move at all.

The chief looked at Zyren again. 'You knew this.'

'Yes.'

'And you chose concealment.'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

It was not a demand. It was evaluation.

Zyren did not turn around. 'She destabilises nothing,' he said. 'She arrived without a weapon, without intent, without understanding. Her presence is not an invasion.'

'She is proof,' the chief replied. 'Proof that our certainty was constructed.' A faint pause. 'The citizens do not fear humans,' he continued. 'They fear the return of

unpredictability. They fear a fracture in the narrative. Order depends on shared belief.'

Zyren held his ground. 'Then the belief is flawed.'

The words settled heavily. Weapons did not rise, but the room tightened.

The chief regarded him for a long moment. 'You have served without deviation for centuries,' he said. 'Today you deviate.'

'Yes.'

'Not for power.'

'No.'

'Not for rebellion.'

'No.'

'For what, then?'

Zyren answered without hesitation. 'For accuracy.'

Silence.

Aizal's breath trembled against Zyren's back.

The chief stepped closer – not threatening. Measuring. 'You understand,' he said quietly, 'that if humans are acknowledged, fear will surge. Borders will harden. Factions will form. Violence will justify itself.'

'Yes.'

'And you are prepared to absorb that consequence.'

Zyren did not look away. 'Yes.'

The chief's gaze shifted once more to Aizal. 'Do you intend harm?'

She shook her head. 'No.'

'Can you prove it?'

'I... I don't know how.'

Honest.

The chief nodded once, almost imperceptibly. Then he turned to the others. 'The extinction narrative is obsolete.' The words landed heavier than any weapon. 'Revision will occur gradually. Public destabilisation is unacceptable. This human will remain under controlled observation.'

Swona's voice was steady. 'Under whose authority?'

The chief's eyes returned to Zyren and did not leave. 'His.'

The room went still. Zyren did not react, but something in his posture shifted – subtle, irreversible.

'You will be accountable,' the chief said. 'If she becomes a threat, the failure is

yours.'

'Yes.'

The chief looked at Aizal one final time. 'Humans externalise grief,' he said. 'Contain it.'

Then he stepped backwards. Light reclaimed him.

The chamber exhaled. Weapons were withdrawn. Swona did not speak. Vin gave Zyren a long, unreadable look before turning away. One by one, they left. Silence remained.

Behind Zyren, Aizal finally exhaled fully. Zyren did not move for several seconds. Order had not shattered. It had shifted.

He turned to her. 'You are no longer hidden,' he said.

It was not comfort. It was a warning.

Beyond the glass walls of Virelia, the twin suns continued their descent, unaware that an extinction had just been revised.

Dust and the Returned

by Subham Rai

Content Warnings: Death of a family member (grandmother, non-graphic), grief, brief reference to a coming-out experience.

Not your thing? Skip to page 46 for the next story.

The Harmattan came in the third week of October, as it always did, and with it came the red dust that coated every surface by morning and the dry air that cracked your lips before you finished your first coffee and the amber the sky turned between four and six when only people with nowhere to be were awake to see it. I was awake. I had been awake since two.

I was on the balcony with my third cigarette when I noticed the dust on the railing had drifted in the wrong direction. Not toward the north, where the wind came from. Away from it. I looked at this for a moment and went inside.

The kitchen light was on.

I had not left the kitchen light on.

I know this because I have a considered relationship with electricity bills and because the last thing I do before going to the balcony is stand at the counter and drink water in the dark. I find the darkness steady. I had drunk the water. I had stood in the dark. I had not touched the switch.

The smell reached me before I reached the kitchen. Cloves first, then beneath that, the alkaline sharpness of Qbì soap, which is a smell that belongs to one person in the world, and that person had been dead for eight months. I know what grief does to the body, the way it manufactures a voice in the market and makes you turn, the way it holds a silhouette in a doorway long enough to be convincing. I stood in the narrow hallway and reminded myself of this.

Then I walked into the kitchen.

My grandmother sat at the table with her hands flat on the surface and her back straight, with the discipline of a woman who had decided early that the world would not see her fold. The kitchen light caught the dust on her shoulders, a thin, red layer of it, and the dust was not falling. Shoulders are not flat surfaces. Fabric is not glass. Dust does not hold its

position on a living person's shoulder as though placed there deliberately, as though it intends to stay.

She looked at me.

Then she said, in Yoruba, that I was thin.

I was, in fact, thin. She was not wrong. She was also not alive, and we looked at each other across the kitchen, and the refrigerator cycled on with its usual complaint, and outside, the city was doing its four-in-the-morning routine, which is not silence but the held breath of ten million people.

I sat down. One moment, I was standing in the doorway, and the next, I was in the chair across from her with my cigarette still burning between my fingers, the ash grown long enough that it should have fallen. It had not.

She was watching me do what I always did under her watch, which was compress myself. She had a way of looking at a person that made every neglected corner visible.

She asked if I had been eating properly.

I said yes.

She received this the way she always received my reassurances, with a silence long enough to communicate that she had heard both what I said and what I had not said and was filing both away.

She looked at the flat then. Not at me but at the space around me: the dishes on the draining board, the dead plant I had not thrown out, visible through the balcony door, the three shirts hanging off the wardrobe handle in the bedroom, in the exact position of clothes belonging to someone who has left quickly or has been left behind. I watched her take inventory. She had always assessed spaces the way a seamstress assesses fabric, not for decoration but to understand what she was working with.

She asked if the area was safe.

I said safe enough.

She asked about the plant.

I said I kept meaning to throw it out.

She said nothing, which meant she understood I was not going to throw it out.

Then she said, "How is Rotimi?"

I want to tell you I responded to this calmly. I did not. I went still in the way the body goes still when it encounters something the mind is not equipped to process. Not the outward stillness that looks like composure. The interior kind, where everything continues but quieter, the way a generator drops to half-power when the main supply cuts.

My grandmother had never been to this flat. She'd died in February at the General Hospital in Surulere, in a bed beside a window that looked onto a wall. I had been there, and I had held her hand. She had never seen Lagos Island. She had never met Rotimi. She could not have known his name.

She was looking at me with the patience that was never entirely kind and never entirely unkind.

I said, "He left."

She said, "I know."

She said it the way you say a thing you have known for some time: not as new information but as confirmation of a fact already settled into its permanent position. Then she looked at the shirts in the bedroom doorway, which were not Rotimi's shirts but mine, shirts I had moved to the wardrobe handle four months ago because the inside of the wardrobe had become a place where his absence concentrated. She looked at them and said nothing, and her silence said more than anything she could have put into words.

Outside, the wind found the gap under the balcony door and moved through the kitchen, and the dust on her shoulders shifted. Not falling. Redistributing, as though something beneath the fabric had adjusted its position. The shift lasted less than a second. I watched it happen. Neither of us mentioned it.

She asked when I had last made *ègúsí* soup.

I said not recently.

She said, "You should make it."

The soup was not about the soup. We both knew this. This was how we had always spoken, the real thing carried inside something domestic and manageable, delivered not as instruction but as the obvious answer to a problem that had not yet been named.

While she looked at the window, at the amber sky, at whatever exists on the other side of an amber Lagos sky at four in the morning, I went somewhere else.

This happens to me in the presence of grief I have not finished processing. My body stays in the room and conducts itself appropriately. I have learned not to fight it.

Her hands on a Sunday in 2001, making *èfọ* *riro*. I was nine and sitting on the kitchen counter, which she had told me not to do, and she was telling me not to do it again while her hands worked over the pot at the speed they always worked, not stirring exactly, more like conducting, the spoon following instructions her hands already knew. The kitchen smelled of palm oil and the stockfish soaked since the night before and the clean green smell of *èfọ* leaves. I sat on the counter and watched and thought, without the words for it yet: this is what

safety smells like.

Her hands on my shoulders in the sitting room, the afternoon I was nineteen and had come to tell her. I had rehearsed for four months in different combinations of Yoruba and English, and when I sat across from her, I forgot every version and said it plainly, the way you say something when you have exhausted all your careful arrangements. There was a silence. I had expected the silence. What I had not prepared for was its character. It was not the silence of anger. It was not the silence of incomprehension. It was the silence of a woman rearranging a room she thought she knew, making space for furniture that had always been there but that she was only now seeing. Her hands stayed in her lap through the silence. Then they came to my shoulders. She held them there for a moment. Then she stood and went to the kitchen, and later, she called from the other room, facing the stove, not me, and said something in Yoruba that means, roughly, that God does not make mistakes. I have been reading those words two ways for fifteen years. Both readings were true at once. She was a woman who loved me and a woman whose framework for the world did not have a place for me in it and who was doing, the whole time, the work of making one.

Her hands in the hospital, the last week. She weighed almost nothing by then, and yet, when she took my hand, the grip was stronger than it had any right to be, as though the hands had decided to hold their strength even as everything else conceded. I did not say the thing I had meant to say. I held her hand and watched the wall the window looked onto and told myself I would say it on the next visit. There was no next visit.

She was still looking at the window. Outside, the city was beginning its pre-dawn sounds: the first okadas, a generator starting somewhere below, Lagos preparing to be itself again.

I came back to the kitchen.

I had been building toward the question since I sat down, assembling it the way you assemble a sentence in a language you know but do not speak fluently. In the end I said it plainly, the way she had always taught me to say the things that mattered.

"Mama Bunmi. Why are you here?"

She looked at me for a long time. Not evasively. She had never been evasive and found evasion a waste of both parties' time. She was deciding where to begin.

She said, "You have not been eating."

I said, "That is not an answer."

She said, "It is the first part of one."

This was also how she spoke, the real answer assembled from smaller truths, each

necessary, none sufficient alone. I waited. The refrigerator worked. The city continued its preparation.

She said the flat smelled of someone managing rather than living. She said there was a difference between the two and that I had always been poor at recognising when I had crossed from one into the other. She said she had watched me do this before, after university, after the job that ended badly, after my father's brother's wedding when what was said at that table calcified rather than cleared, and that each time I had waited too long to tell anyone and the waiting made it harder.

I said, "How long have you been watching?"

She looked at me the way she looked at me when I was nine and asked a question she considered beside the point.

She said, "Rotimi was not right for you."

I said, "You did not know him."

She said, "I know you."

Without emphasis. Not a declaration. A statement of fact that did not expect to be contested. She had known me for thirty-four years, known me before I had the words for what I was, through the nineteen versions of myself I had moved through before arriving at this one. She had always known which of my certainties were real and which had been constructed out of necessity.

Rotimi had left four months ago. He sent a message at seven in the morning, careful, fair, containing nothing arguable, and I read it at my desk and put my phone face-down and continued with the temperature logs because there was nothing else to do. He collected his things while I was out. He sent another message that night, kinder than the first, and I read it forty-three times. I did not tell anyone because telling requires a word, and the word requires you to have acknowledged, internally, that there was something present enough to be lost.

Mama Bunmi looked at the shirts on the wardrobe handle.

She said, "Put them back inside the wardrobe."

I said nothing.

She said, "Or throw them out. But stop leaving them where you can see them."

Outside, the wind changed. A brief reversal, the Harmattan pulling back rather than forward. The dust on her shoulders moved in two directions at once, which is not something dust does, and I watched it and felt the fear that had been in the room since I walked in. Not the sharp kind that requires action. The older kind that lives underneath love and has lived there so long you stop distinguishing between the two.

I was afraid. I was glad she was here.

She said, "Make the ègúsí. Tomorrow. Not because you are hungry. Because you are still alive, and alive people cook."

She said it without ceremony, as though the only question was whether I was paying attention.

The sky outside began to change.

Not light yet, not for another hour, but the amber giving way to something less amber, the darkness thinning the way Lagos darkness thins around five in the morning, the night beginning to release its hold.

Mama Bunmi began to lose definition at the edges.

Her hands on the table were still her hands. Her back was still straight. But the place where her shoulder met the air had become uncertain, and I understood that the Harmattan had carried her here and was now withdrawing northward, back across the desert, taking with it what it had brought.

I did not try to hold her. Over thirty-four years, I had learned the difference between what she would permit and what she would not, and her face told me that reaching across the table fell into the second category. She was leaving the way she had always done everything: on her own terms, without making more of it than was required.

I said her name first. Then I said the thing I had not said at the hospital, the thing I had been carrying for eight months in the place in the body where unfinished business settles. I said it in Yoruba, which was the language she preferred for the things that mattered.

What I said is not yours to know.

The kitchen was bathed in grey morning light. The chair she had been sitting in faced the window again, toward the city, and I did not remember it moving, but it had moved.

The smell of cloves was fading into something I did not try to name.

I got out the dried ègúsí from the shelf. I put water on to boil. The gas ring caught with the sound it always makes, which is not a beautiful sound but a real one.

At the base of the balcony door, the dust shifted. A few grains, moving briefly against the wind.

Then it settled.

Marsupial Moons & Fuzzy Frogs

by Pat Saunders

Content Warnings: None.

Not your thing? Then you have come to the end, until next time...

I am such a smitten kitten. There, I've said it.

Here's the thing. I sooooo want to ask Ali out. For coffee, tea or her favourite beverage, a 'Fuzzy Frog.'

Bit of a weird name, I know. Contradictory. Frogs, I imagine to be more slippery and slimy than furry or 'fuzzy.' Therein lies the advertising genius, I suppose. Somewhere, some snotty-nosed, pinstripe-suited ad exec no doubt made a packet from the one and only kernel of truly imaginative, creative, innovative thought they had in their entire six-month career. A remarkable legacy to leave the world.

For those unacquainted with frog drinks, a 'Fuzzy Frog' is essentially a fancy chocolate thick-shake created by dropping a chocolate frog into a blender of milk and ice cream. Pulverise said chocolate frog in blender, and voilà, a Fuzzy Frog! According to Ali, nothing comes close to its chocolatey deliciousness... Just add ice.

I know what you're thinking. 'Just do it, you idiot. What's the problem?' Anyone should be able to simply march up to anyone else and ask them to lunch. In theory... In practice, I'm not the sort of person to go around asking random people out. I barely go out myself.

Not that Ali's random. She's gorgeous. She's kind. And smart. And her eyes light up when she smiles. Her cheeks lift and blossom, creating the cutest little crinkle above her nose.

Not that I've noticed much.

A single smile from Ali keeps me going for days. When she's around, I bring out my best material, desperate to elicit a chuckle. When she giggle-snorts, her hand flies to her face, desperate to shove the noise back down.

Every time, it makes me love her more. Or whatever.

So we'd grab coffee first, then progress to an afternoon out. A day trip, even.

The zoo would be perfect. She loves animals. Adores her two labs.

It would be the sort of day where the sun's golden rays don't just warm us, they invigorate us, tickling our skin pink. We'd meander, side by side, me trying not to stare too obviously at the way her bag bounces against her bum. Below our feet, carefully curated walkways stretch, edged with lush vegetation cocooning us from the outside world. The fresh spring air is ripe with possibility.

I pick a daffodil that's sprouted in the strip of lawn alongside our path, and she lets me place it carefully behind her ear. My fingers hover a smidge too long next to her cheek.

The African Savannah grabs our attention from the get-go. The baby giraffe on her wobbly, spindly legs. Mum reaching her neck to the highest branches, gathering leaves, proffering them to her offspring, who snatches hungrily. Tigers sprawl, lounging beneath the cool, shady canopy, exhibiting what can only be described as utter indifference to anything and everything going on around them. I keep sensing how close my hand is to Ali's on the guard rail. If I were only to shift my pinky a millimetre...

We're startled by meerkats popping up from behind carefully positioned 'fallen' logs. Looking left. Right. Swivelling back to face us. Elephants lumbering towards zookeepers bearing tasty treats, their tails, trunks and giant feet moving in an almost hypnotic syncopation.

We wander through the butterfly house, eyes wide, mouths closed, necks craned upwards as a rainbow of delicate wings flutter about us. They land on our noses. We laugh, pointing at each other, reaching for our phones, desperate to get the shot before they take flight. My caption would read: *You're the one that I want, you there with that cute little butterfly on your nose! You've never looked as gorgeous as you do now with an emerald-green moth-like thing millimetres from your nostril!*

We're standing closer than we need to, gazing at the shaggy, gangly limbed orangutans swinging, carefree, through the sky, depositing cardboard boxes clumsily onto each other's heads. Thwack! Thwack! Or sometimes, onto their own. Thwack! *Had enough of zoo visitors gawking at you all day? A disintegrating cardboard box is just the ticket!*

We tap the glass at the otter enclosure, even though it's strictly forbidden – signs up everywhere you look – watching them duck-dive, squirting from one side of the window to the other, ignoring our childlike faces. At some point, the otters' antics lull, and my attention drifts to Ali's reflection in the window beside me, her blue eyes bright, her smile wide. And there's that crinkle. I resist the temptation to reach my thumb out and smooth its wrinkle. Or brush my lips across it. Either/or...

The brown bear's dragging his heavy, saturated blanket of fur out of his bathing pool. Taking a few steps, clocking us looking, making sure his audience is settled, poised – phones at the ready – then, in a sudden flurry, shaking half the pool from his coat. We grab at each other's phones after, both of us all handsy, laughing, heads together, pointing at each other's shots. Fake arguing over whose is the best, whose pic shows the shower of water stretching from bear into air in the most visually stunning, photographic way.

Lunch in the courtyard next to the aviary, squawks, screeches, tweets and less easily defined bird noises forming the background track. The sun's glorious. We start feeling sleepy after our burgers and chips. The shrill laughter of children and their clumsy, scuffing footsteps echo around us, but we barely hear them because all's right with the world.

There's an eyelash moment. There isn't really – I just say there's one so she'll let me touch her cheek. When I do, her skin blushes a gorgeous shade of crimson. My eyes are transfixed by hers as I fumble the imaginary lash. There's a moment of awkwardness when my eyes don't leave hers, the eyelash forgotten. When nothing other than me and her exists. *It's you. You're it. You're my one.*

My hand on her arm. Does touching someone's arm count as feeling them up? I can't explain it. I can't move. It's like my fingers are superglued to her firm, shapely (oh, so shapely) bicep. And when she alters her stance, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, her arm stretching slightly, her bicep flexes... and ooooh baby, parts of me deep inside light up like a Christmas tree with the most elaborate, ostentatious display imaginable. The parts that aren't lit too often. Or never at all.

In the nocturnal house, in the blackness, with barely a night light to guide our feet, just the odd scratching of leaves and dirt and the flutter of feathers, she's behind me. Her breath's on my neck. Those lovely, muscular arms enclose mine like butterfly wings, her fingers finding mine and gripping them, tight. Her breasts nudge my shoulder blades; my legs turn to jelly. I lean into her, head tilting. Her hands on my hips. Waist. Our bodies plumb against each other. I wait, holding my breath. I can't get closer like I want to. I turn my head, hoping to capture the same oxygen she's breathing. Her hands stretch across my belly, bringing me somehow closer to her, causing my legs to buckle and stumble back, fitting neatly between hers. Her head next to mine. My arm reaching back around her, clenching her ass. Her hands grasp my breasts. My nipples harden in an instant. She squeezes.

Heavy footsteps.

We spring apart.

A moonbeam shines in.

A security guard enters, flicks his flashlight across the floor, raising it slightly when it catches our legs, illuminating us side by side, a now-respectable distance apart.

Startled bunnies, backs to the headlight, we're motionless.

Silence.

Palms clammy. Nipples deflated. Feet rooted to the spot.

In my periphery, Ali's absentmindedly fiddling with her fingers and thumbs.

I swear we've both stopped breathing.

The spotlight on us, I suddenly feel like busting out a few Fred Astaire moves to that 'Moondance' song.

Instead, I will my legs to work and edge closer to Ali, pointing to a particular rock in the quoll enclosure, subtly nudging her, hoping she'll play along. Angling closer to me, she follows my lead, leaning across, following my finger. Nodding intently, as if the rock were holding the answer to life, the universe and everything. Bless her and her cute little crinkle!

Mr Security Guard pauses, his flashlight beam on us huddled against the caged enclosure, then trundles out of our section into the next exhibit.

Back in black, heads together, the whites of our eyes salute his retreating footfalls.

A timid scraping breaks the silence, and we turn, as one, back to the enclosure where large eyes, pointy ears and a tiny pink nose poke out from behind our rock.

The quoll stops.

Looks directly at us.

Scarpers back to where she came from.

We break into girly giggles, playfully whacking each other in the arm, urgently whispering, 'Stop it! Stop it! You'll scare the quoll! You'll scare the quoll!'

Which makes us laugh even harder. Even louder. Our arms flailing around our vibrating bodies, tangling in each other in the most delicious way.

I step toward the exit, find her hand, sinking my fingers into its warmth. I don't let go, even when daylight finds us and we've left our new favourite marsupial behind.

'Agh-em!'

Ali's throat clearing jolts me back. Missy's singing about scars as the scent of fresh coffee beans and warm cinnamon scrolls tickle my nostrils. *Wait. Crap. How long has Ali been standing there?*

Her head tilts expectantly.

Why is she standing there?

Tilts to the other side.

Say something, for god's sake!

‘Hi!’

‘Hi yourself! You were miles away.’ She slides into the chair opposite, dumping her bag at her feet. ‘Mind if I join you?’

‘Not at all.’ I hurriedly close my biology textbook, shoving it to one side. ‘Be my guest.’ I gesture elaborately, my hands, with a mind of their own all of a sudden, doing a little dance for some reason, waving towards her chair. *Settle it down, please! And stop acting like an idiot!*

‘Fuzzy Frog!’ A waitress appears with Ali’s order, cutting short my Marcel Marceau impression. Ali grins sheepishly. My eyeroll’s heard across town.

‘That,’ I quip to the waitress, pointing at Ali, ‘would be for the twelve-year-old!’

The waitress pops the large, brown, frothy drink down in front of ‘the child,’ along with a napkin and paper straw. ‘Enjoy,’ she smirks, flouncing away to no doubt serve adults drinking adult beverages.

Ali pokes the straw into her Fuzzy Frog. I empty a sugar into my flat white. We sip our beverages. Well, *I* sip whilst Ali loudly sucks, fighting the resistance created by milk, ice cream and pulverised chocolate frog siphoned through a centimetre-wide straw. I fight the urge to pull a face as cold, sickening-sweet caffeine flows down my throat (forgot the first sugar satchel I’d deposited before drifting off!).

A labrador laps, metronomic, from a doggy bowl outside, her long tongue hypnotic.

Ali glances at me. Looks like she’s about to say something. Continues sucking Fuzzy Frog. Fiddles with her napkin.

‘Zchtkgup...’

Her Fuzzy Frog appears to have developed a rather large fur ball, wedged partway up her biodegradable straw.

She stops sucking, carefully removes the straw from the frothy choc top and puts the other end to her rose-petal-pink lips. Brow furrowed in deep concentration, she sucks the chocolatey end of the straw. Without success.

After a couple of futile attempts, she admits defeat, placing the clogged apparatus to one side, then raising the tumbler, finishing it in one swift scull.

‘Can’t take you anywhere,’ I deadpan.

Beaming triumphantly from behind a dark, thick chocolate moustache, she clunks the tumbler onto the table.

Her hands recover the napkin. Continue fiddling.

Her mo's adorable.

Her eyes lift from the napkin, hands still. Studies me.

'I think...' Her eyes don't blink. 'I...' Hands are back at the napkin. '...would...'

She's still staring.

Seriously, how is she doing this non-blinking Stepford Wives thing?

'...very much...'

My eyes are drawn to her chocolate-moustached lips.

'...like to...'

Is this some weird-ass medical condition I'm not aware of?

'...kiss you.'

Her Fuzzy Frog tastes divine on my lips.