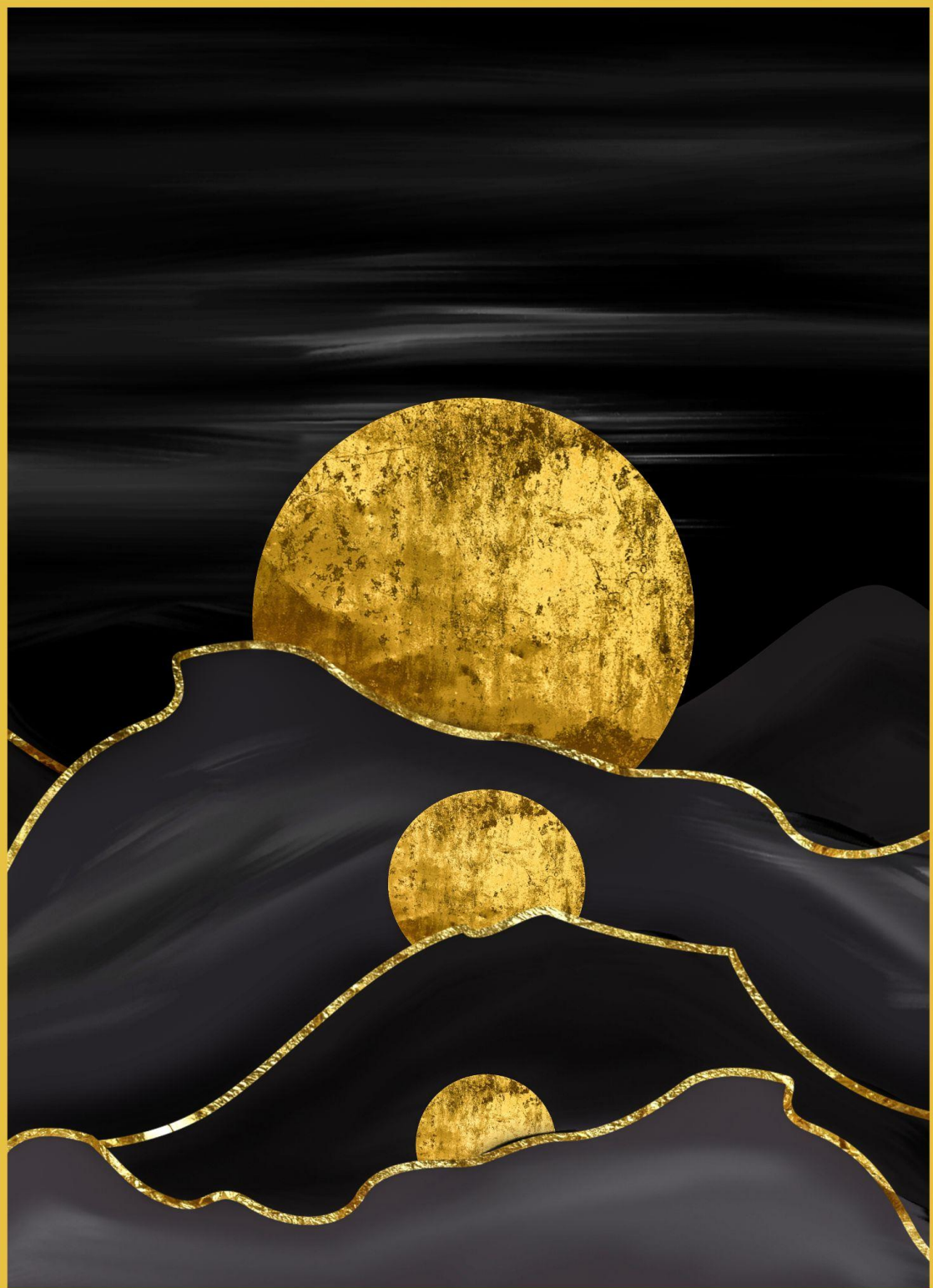


A COUP OF OWLS



Issue 6

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Foreword **Page 4**

Daddy by Ali Seay **Page 6**

Annie's daddy is hungry.

For the last 15+ years, Ali Seay has written professionally under a pen name. Now she's shaken off her disguise to write as herself in the genre she loves the most. Ali lives in Baltimore with her family. Her greatest desire is to own a vintage Airstream and hit the road. She is the author of *Go Down Hard* (Grindhouse Press) and *To Offer Her Pleasure* (Weirdpunk Books). Visit aliseay.com for more information. You can find Ali on Twitter [@AliSeay11](https://twitter.com/AliSeay11).

Little Warrior by Andrea Teare **Page 8**

Little proves herself as a hunter by killing the last of the prey animals.

Andrea Teare is a fiction writer from Australia who enjoys writing horror, and all things speculative. Her work has appeared in various anthologies, and online at Breach! magazine and Antipodean Sci-Fi. Andrea's short story 'Seaweed' was shortlisted for an Aurealis award in 2019. More about Andrea can be found at her website andreateare.com.au. You can find Andrea on Twitter [@andreateare1](https://twitter.com/andreateare1).

A Harrowing Tale of the Author's Plight by Reese Hogan **Page 11**

Dragon hunter Quinn meets a girl who ignites feelings they've never had before.

Reese Hogan is a nonbinary transmasc science fiction author from New Mexico. He has published three novels, and the latest, *Shrouded Loyalties* from Angry Robot, was a Best SFF of August 2019 pick by both Amazon and Barnes & Noble. His short fiction has been published in *The Decameron Project* and *Clockwork, Curses, and Coal*, an anthology of steampunk fairy tale retellings. In addition to writing fiction, Reese is a content writer for the Writing Mastery Academy at writingmastery.com. You can find Reese on Twitter [@ReeseHogan1](https://twitter.com/ReeseHogan1).

After a Black Moon by Eve Morton **Page 29**

Former soldier Chris reflects on his life in a rehabilitation centre and the man he met there.

Eve Morton is a writer living in Ontario, Canada. She teaches university and college classes on media studies, academic writing, and genre literature, among other topics. Her latest book is *The Serenity Nearby*, released in 2022 by Sapphire Books. Find more info on authormorton.wordpress.com.

My Father's Robot by Toshiya Kamei **Page 41**

The narrator inherits his father's robot, which projects scenes from his life at random times.

Toshiya Kamei writes short fiction.

Foreword -

To say the forest has been full of song this issue is an understatement – it's more like a cacophony of voices clamouring to be heard. How lucky we are to hear them! Choosing the stories for this issue has been tough, and we love that; we don't like it when it's easy. Our forest has been filled with such a variety of voices, such whimsical darkness that we are grinning maniacally at all of you. Readers – you have so much to enjoy!

The stories in this issue got me thinking about one of my favourite subjects – mythical beasts. Dragons, for one, have always been an absolute favourite of mine; in fact, I'm reading a book about them at the moment. Did you know they would often fall asleep in the hollow space between the roots of old trees? If you cut one down, you might disturb the slumbering beast... and dragons do not wake up well as a general rule (something I can relate to!). Still, I love the idea of chopping down a tree and finding a dragon. The unexpected is always welcome in stories (and in life); it's what makes them so engaging.

I especially love dragons because they knew how to stand out better than most. They were big, fire-breathing, bad-in-the-morning non-conformists known to be solitary creatures, feared and misunderstood by the mortals they hunted. They were also depicted in different ways in different cultures: in the west, they were often lizard-like; in the east, they were aquatic or snake-like. Other depictions show them as more like lions or really big dogs. Yet, when we look at them, we unerringly know what they are. A dragon is always recognisable as a dragon. Granted, the fire breathing is a clue, but it's their presence, magic, and unmistakable otherness that make them iconic.

The stories in this issue resonated with us for a few reasons. They all deal with nonconformity, gender, and journeys both inward and outward, and they all offer to transport us somewhere else when we need to escape our lives for just a moment. Maybe you want to avoid the monster in your own home, the one that crunches bones and loves the taste of flesh. Or you once were the hunter and are now the hunted. Maybe you went searching for a dragon and ended up finding way more than you bargained for. Or your journey might be inward after your outside has changed, and you need a moment (or two or three) to catch up to your new physicality. Or perhaps your journey is through grief, loss and memory, letting go through unexpected means. Whatever your need for escape, our cover's gleaming golden moons, rising above the darkness, will transport you to the other, the fantastical. After all, nighttime is often when the magic happens, even more so under three golden moons.

One of the many reasons we started this anthology was to hear from and about those voices that stand away from the mainstream, dragon-like. The message I want to leave you with is no matter how you might feel, how you might not fit in, or how outside of ‘normal’ you may be, remember the dragons. Be like the dragons. Embrace your otherness. After all, that’s where the power lies. That’s where the magic vibrates. So, as you traverse through our forest, watch out for the larger trees with spacious, gnarled roots. There might be a dragon in there already. And if not, feel free to make yourself at home...

Rhiannon Wood, Editor in Chief

Daddy

by Ali Seay

Content Warnings: Child harm.

Not your thing? Skip to page 8 for the next story.

She's seen Daddy eat two children. It had been months apart, but Annie had the bad luck of witnessing both from her treehouse in the woods. Daddy hunted at the back of their property. The woods stretched out to many neighbourhoods. There were always kids wandering around.

Her father had turned into something not her father. Something with large jaws and a dark hunger. Something that salivated and consumed.

From her perch, she'd heard him mutter, 'Not Annie. Never Annie...'

Once, at bedtime, she'd told her mother. Mommy laughed, of course. 'What a crazy dream!'

'But it wasn't.'

'Oh honey, it was. Just a dream.'

She'd told her best friend Tim. 'How many drugs are you doing?'

'None. I'm only ten.'

'Well, you have to be doing something.'

'It's true,' she'd said on the verge of tears.

Outside, cold wind licked the eaves of the house, howling like a hungry thing. Streetlight twinkled off the enormous icicles that hung outside her window.

The blizzard had come on silent feet in the middle of the night. A sudden snowy surprise. It drowned the neighbourhood in nearly two feet of frigid whiteness. They were cut off.

No school! Snow days! She should be so happy. All the other kids were. And yet, she was afraid.

Her father hadn't feasted in a while.

Her ears strained. All she could hear was wind and her ears ringing. Then there came the creak of her parents' bedroom door. Next, a shuffling walk down the hall toward her.

She listened hard and heard him mumbling.

'Where's Annie? Need Annie...'

Little Warrior

by Andrea Teare

Content Warnings: Hunting.

Not your thing? Skip to page 11 for the next story.

Little leaned precariously to the right, remaining in her saddle only by sheer willpower and the strength of legs trained to hold tight no matter what. The ribalt let out a bellow, stumbling heavily as the ground changed beneath them, the dryness becoming marshy, filled with divots and crumbly hollows as the riverbank loomed.

The ribalt had been clever, Little thought, but not clever enough. If she'd been in its place, she'd have hidden within the endless tree-lined creek beds on the far side of the plain. Plenty of escape routes, and they all looked the same. She could evade the hunt for weeks in there. But that was why she was the warrior, and the ribalt was prey. The thrill of the hunt ran through her, and she urged her horse to go faster, neck outstretched, hooves thundering.

The air rippled, thickened, and Little let the finality of it all wash over her. The last time. She couldn't really comprehend it; hunting ribalt was what they did. At least, since the rabbits had run out. The ribalt bellowed again, regaining her attention, and she stretched out, ready to topple the majestic beast, the last of its kind. The last of any kind. The whiff of fear, of defiance until the bitter end, charged her up, and she struck the last blow for the whole tribe.

All too soon, it was done. The beast lay dead, and the village prepared for the last feast. Little, seated at the gathering's position of honour, wore a garland of hay blooms and enjoyed a cup of the zealously guarded mitra-flower wine. Her mother leaned towards her, and they touched foreheads in the traditional greeting.

The realisation that, from this day forth, they would feast only on what they harvested from the plains hit her with a solid blow to her chest. What would she do now the hunt was gone? Work in the plains? Turn her horse loose and hang up her bow forever?

Little's pain at the loss overwhelmed her, and she opened her eyes. Her mother's familiar face stared back, ashen, like the light had leached from her features and she had been replaced by a statue.

'Why don't you go and get cleaned up while we have the council gathering?' her mother said.

'Aw Mum, I've finally made my hunt. Isn't it time I started sitting in on the council as well?' She was Little, not only because her age was less, but she was also the smallest. She'd taken so long to prove herself. Surely, now, it was time.

Her mother shook her head, and in the distance near the council hut, she saw her father and the elders standing split-legged, arms crossed. Little changed her tack and stumbled away to rinse the hunt from her, to cleanse herself from her old life and prepare for her new.

After night fell, the great spitted animal was carried to the table, and the village fell to, slicing pieces from the beast, filling their plates and their bellies. Little hummed happily to herself, her flowers falling over one eye as she bent her head to finish her meal.

At the far end of the table, her father and the elders raised their glasses.

'Little. My littlest warrior. I'm so glad you finally got to finish your hunt,' her father said, his voice gravelly and far from his usual authoritative self. Little set down her glass, rose to her feet, and tried to ignore her mother's choked sob.

'Here's to changing times and all moving on together.' Little held her goblet high before drinking deeply. She set it down again, wondering why nobody at the table met her eye, why they weren't running around in congratulatory glee.

Her father cleared his throat, tried to speak, failed and sat down again. Beside him, Myro, the council leader and the most proven warrior amongst them, stood, muscles bulging, shoulders thrown back and proud. His face never faltered as he alone made eye contact with her and began to speak.

'As we are gathered, so let it be spoken. In the council following our last hunt, it was determined that we cannot stop. The hunt is in our blood, we can no sooner stop it than stop breathing or existing.'

Little's heart began to beat a little faster. This was far from the usual speech. Her mother's hand reached out, intertwined itself with hers, salty, damp and uncomfortable.

'As of this night, the hunt must go on. We need a newer, greater challenge. A creature that has never before been successfully captured.'

Little's heart began to pound. Blood roared in her ears. A new hunt! Only this afternoon, she had believed every creature that could run or hide or be hunted was extinct.

'We do not take this decision lightly,' Myro continued, 'and we hope that in time we will find something else.' He put down his own goblet and gestured sharply at two of the younger able-bodied warriors who had slipped quietly down to flank Little.

'We need a prey that can outwit us and run for weeks, even months. Something that will challenge us, push us to the limit, and provide the hunt we need while we search for something new.' Myro sat down heavily, slapped a final piece of the ribalt into his mouth and chewed noisily.

Hair stood up on the back of Little's arms, and she pushed back from the table, directly into the arms of her captors.

'So, we unanimously decided to allow the littlest of us, also one of the wilier, to have a head start, to find their way and leave us no sign as to where they were.'

Little's father couldn't meet her eyes as she was dragged from the table and given the reins to her horse and a package of supplies.

'Good luck, little warrior,' he said. 'May we find the next hunt before we find you.'

A Harrowing Tale of the Author's Plight

by Reese Hogan

Content Warnings: None.

Not your thing? Skip to page 29 for the next story.

Belonging is a tenuous concept at the best of times. It's been a long time since Quinn Bellweather has even tried. If Quinn belongs to anything, it's to the smell of the pounding rain in the deepest dark of the storm or the feel of a bramble stuck fast in one's flesh the second before the blood comes. Which is why Quinn feels deep inside that the smell and taste at the edge of the world is made for them and them alone; an invitation with its own perilous—

'Before the blood comes?' says a voice. *'Is that what I just read there?'*

Quinn slams the journal shut, only now registering the smell of sandalwood perfume alongside the scent of rain through the diner's open window. Once again, Quinn has failed to remain cognizant of their surroundings, and this stranger's unwanted attention is the bitter price of that failure.

The stranger slides uninvited into the seat across from them. Quinn takes a moment to plant The Smile on their face before looking up. They don't think of it as fake; they think of it as an outside presentation of an inward intention that doesn't always happen to be true. The person across from them smiles back easily, lips painted a lavender blue reminiscent of sunset's last kiss and eyes as green as a wind-whipped prairie in the throes of a forming twister. This person has curves and high cheekbones with a roguish flush and dark curls with bronze highlights that reflect the establishment's electric lights. It's a face for a book... maybe even a memoir.

Quinn's fingers twitch against the vellum cover of their journal. *'And you are?'* they say mildly.

The corners of those pale blue lips turn down. *'Oh, I didn't realize you were a...'*

But Quinn holds up a hand before the stranger slides them into some binary gender that'll set off feelings they don't need right now and offers a simple shake of the head.

‘Right,’ the stranger says. ‘I’m Coraline Huff. *Miss Coraline Huff.*’

That last is added hurriedly, as if she realizes the importance of offering her own gender, which Quinn appreciates more than they’ll admit. Quinn relaxes, at least insofar as one can the same night they’re planning to rob a dragon.

Coraline props her chin on her palm. ‘Tell me more about “the smell of the rain in the deepest dark of the storm,” O mysterious stranger. I do love hearing from a good author on a *savage* night like this.’

‘I’m not an author,’ says Quinn. They leave the *yet* unspoken. For now.

‘Oh, come on. I *know* I saw the word “dragon” in there,’ Coraline says, gesturing at their journal.

‘You do know there’s a dragon living in the seaside cliffs just outside your town, right?’ says Quinn. ‘And that it hunts on the full moon?’

Coraline’s eyebrows raise in surprise. Her gaze flickers to Quinn’s journal, then to the storm outside, and lastly to Quinn’s long black coat and short black fingernails. Her lips quirk, as if she’s trying to hold back a smile. ‘Let me guess. You’re here to hunt for this so-called dragon.’

Quinn lets out a long-suffering sigh at the word ‘hunt,’ which they’ve never felt fully encompasses the myriad depths of their undertakings.

‘Hey,’ Coraline says as if struck by a thought. ‘Any chance you’re being paid for it? Because between you and me, that sounds like a better gig than flipping burgers here.’

Quinn looks at her incredulously. ‘It’s not a *gig*,’ they say, their jaw tightening.

‘Shame,’ says Coraline. ‘I’d take just about anything right now.’ She glances toward the counter in resignation.

Quinn notices with a start that the diner has emptied. The red-and-yellow tables beneath the golden arches adorning the wall have been wiped and dried, and the late-night servers in paper hats are cleaning up behind the counters of the establishment. It’s not a night for staying in well-lit places and drawing attention, and Coraline is proof that ‘drawing attention’ is exactly what Quinn has done.

They stand abruptly, crumpling the wax casing from their evening meal and depositing it in a nearby bin. Then they pick up the journal and slip it into an inside pocket of their long coat. They feel Coraline’s eyes on them, appraising the sweep of the coat’s hem over the thin chains across Quinn’s black boots. A slight smile tugs at her lips.

‘A majestic coat for dragon-hunting,’ she says in a husky voice, ‘or mayhap walking the cliffs beneath a lightning-lit sky, yearning for some long lost love to return on the wings of the coming dawn.’

Quinn stares at her, faintly aware that she’s either mocking them or flirting with them. But they have no idea which one. Unless there’s a chance she *is* like Quinn, deep down, and this stab at poetry is her way of...

‘But that’s pretty dramatic eyeliner to wear just for hunting dragons, isn’t it?’ Coraline adds.

Quinn huffs, their momentary curiosity extinguished like a snuffed candle. They turn on their heel and head for the door, pulled by the wish for the wind whipping over the sea and the full moon behind the black clouds. Their journal presses against their ribcage, primed and ready to immortalize the coming hour. There’s no room in that book for lavender-blue lips or eyes the colour of a prairie storm anyhow. This adventure belongs to Quinn and Quinn alone, just as Quinn belongs to the tacit anticipation of facing one’s inevitable demise.

‘Yo, there’s nothing back there but the dumpst—’ one of the staff members yells out right before the door slams behind Quinn. Quinn spins, dark hair plastered to their face by the pouring rain, but the door has already locked behind them. No one returns to open it.

*

Sheets of rain catch the town’s neon lights, sending a kaleidoscope of colour scattering through the night on every individual drop. The seaside village is a rainbow burning with life, rich with the scents of wet soil and sea salt and the heady savouriness of cooking meat. It is also, unfortunately, rich with the lingering smell of garbage that Quinn hasn’t been able to dispel ever since using the dumpster to climb over the barbed wire atop the alley’s enclosing wall. There’s now a tear in the sleeve of Quinn’s black coat. They try not to look at it, but it flashes at the corner of their vision as they walk, as bright as any of the city’s lights.

Quinn knows the dragon is a myth to most, so they’re not sure why Coraline’s words stick like a sharpened barb in their side. Perhaps Quinn was hoping that here, at the outer edge of the world, they would run into someone who could connect with them on a deeper level – someone who could understand the emotions that drive them, almost self-destructively, to the purpose they were truly meant for. Someone who grasped the pull of an intoxication powerful enough to lead one over the lip of a seaside cliff in search of a dragon’s lair that will redefine their entire future.

To be fair... Quinn hadn't anticipated the storm. But to wait for the next full moon is neither within their limitation of patience nor desire. The full moon has been an integral part of planning this book all along. Besides. What is adventure, after all, if not the fraction of a hair that separates one from the lip of the eternal abyss?

The bright colours of the neon lights coalesce into a more definitive red and blue strobe that lasts only a second before cutting out. Quinn turns their head, shivering as rivulets of cold water creep beneath their collar. It is, of course, one of the town's myriad constables-on-patrol, drawn in by the void of colour that separates the rain.

The window nearest Quinn rolls down, and an officer, male-presenting, leans across the empty seat. 'Can I give you a ride somewhere out of the rain, friend?'

Quinn hunches into the collar of their coat. 'My destiny does not align with hospitality tonight,' they answer.

'What was that?'

Quinn raises their voice. 'I *said*, my *destiny* does not align with *hospitality!*'

The officer's brow furrows. Quinn continues on their way, wet coat slapping at their ankles. The vehicle creeps after them and stops again, just a few feet ahead of where Quinn walks. Quinn slows, bracing for the officer to swing the door open and haul them in.

'Can I at least offer you an umbrella?' calls the unseen officer.

To accept gifts, Quinn knows, is to indebt yourself in ways you may never fully realize. Quinn speeds their pace and walks past the vehicle, tossing their hair from their face with a flick of the head. Irritatingly, their long bangs stick fast across their brow. Quinn's jaw clenches as another shiver racks their body. They stop abruptly and turn, glaring at the umbrella now being held out from the open door. It's blue. Blue enough, perhaps, to look black when it's wet. Quinn steps back and takes it, feeling soiled for this brief show of weakness. The officer smiles and leaves them, no further questions asked.

Quinn opens the umbrella. They'll only use it until they reach the edge of the city, they decide. Who can fault one for wanting to keep the harsh glare of streetlights from their eyes on a night like this?

But by the time Quinn has left the city's border and struck out across the open terrain toward the sea, the storm has worsened. The rain drives beneath the umbrella, lashing Quinn's face like the strokes of a whip. Quinn squelches through ankle-deep mud, struggles to keep their long coat from tangling in their legs, continually shoves their soaked hair from their eyes, and tries desperately to come up with a better word for 'squelches' for when this scene goes in the book. The thought that the journal within their coat is no better protected

than the rest of their body is a pain even sharper than the memory of Coraline's knowing eyes and mischievous smile.

Quinn wonders, quite without warning, whether lavender-blue lips would taste more like honeysuckle or fresh peppermint.

The wind snaps the umbrella inside out. Quinn pins it to their body, trying to wrestle it back into shape, but the metal ribs are done for. The rain is suddenly hot in the corners of Quinn's eyes. They wonder as they stare out at the darkness, just for a moment, *what the hell am I doing?* It's a brief moment of insanity, trapped quickly beneath their determination to rise above what they once were. This is Quinn's domain. The rich scent of the loam beneath their feet and the lightning flashing in every direction and the sound of ocean waves beating the jagged rocks beneath the cliff that approaches by the second. If Quinn belongs anywhere – anywhere at all – it's here.

A vehicle passes on its way out of the city, splashing a wave of water from the street over Quinn's entire body. Quinn glares as it slows and stops, its red brake lights bright enough to hurt their eyes. A second later, a window rolls down, and a voice yells:

'Hey! Dragon Hunter!'

Quinn groans aloud.

'You know that was a *joke* about keening at the cliffs for your long-lost love, right?'

Coraline shouts over the pounding rain.

'Begone!' Quinn calls.

'Do you even know where you're going?' she says.

'I know exactly where I'm going!' Quinn snaps.

'How?'

'A tome called *A Tragic Tale of the Dragon's Last Stand*.'

There's a pause. 'You're fucking with me, right?'

'I know exactly where to find the dragon's lair,' Quinn says. 'You don't need to worry; I have no intention of slaying your village's monster. But it hunts on the night of the full moon, leaving its lair empty long enough to retrieve a treasure from its trove.'

Coraline pokes her head through her open window, squinting through the rain. 'Did you say treasure?'

'I did,' Quinn admits.

'You said there was no chance of getting money out of this!' Coraline says accusingly.

'That's not what I said,' Quinn points out. 'I said it wasn't a job. And it isn't.'

'But it *is*. Because you're a treasure hunter!'

‘What?’ Quinn splutters. ‘No. No! I intend to *write* about it. As an author.’

Coraline studies them, a look of incredulity crossing her face. ‘*If* you were to find treasure, O dragon hunter, then wouldn’t you be rich without the extra step of writing about it?’

A storm cloud to rival the ones in the sky crosses Quinn’s face. ‘It’s not about *being* rich, Miss Coraline. It’s about *how* I get rich. Cashing in a piece of bawdy treasure has no beauty in it. No tale of overcoming greater odds—’

Quinn trails off as they realize Coraline is laughing. Darkness above, she’s laughing so hard in there it drowns out the words Quinn was so earnestly sharing. Quinn grinds their teeth, remembering – again – why belonging has always been so far from their grasp. If Quinn belongs to anything, it’s to the rejection of public perception and the torturous path toward achieving one’s distant dreams.

Quinn starts walking again. Coraline finally stops laughing long enough to yell after them by the time they’re passing her hood.

‘Look, I’m sorry. It’s just... it’s dangerous out there. You can’t write your book if you slip and fall in the sea.’

‘How very considerate,’ Quinn says without slowing.

‘Hey! Wait a second, will you?’

Oh, for all that’s holy. Now Coraline’s following them, creeping her vehicle alongside to match their pace.

‘Get in,’ she says. ‘At least let me drive you.’

‘I will not,’ says Quinn.

‘It’s freezing out here!’

‘I am not bothered by the cold.’

‘The leather of your fine coat isn’t made to get wet.’

‘It’s a little late to concern myself with that now,’ Quinn fires back.

‘The words you were writing in your journal will bleed until you can’t read them,’ she says.

Quinn’s hand goes to their ribs, feeling the hard shape of the journal beneath their coat. Though they don’t say it aloud, they rather appreciate Coraline’s turn of phrase there. There may be hope for her yet.

‘I thought about that,’ they admit.

‘Please get in.’

‘How much longer to get to the cliffs?’ Quinn asks.

Coraline hesitates. ‘I know of a walking path,’ she says after a moment. ‘It goes down the side of the cliff. Fenced in. Much safer. Do you think you could promise to look for this dragon’s lair from that walking path since you’re so hellbent on going tonight?’

Quinn’s gaze shoots to her in disbelief. A *walking path*? How would that look in their book? *Rain fell in torrential curtains onto the angry sea below as I approached the ancient dragon’s lair, my hand wrapped tight around the guardrail with its comfortable no-slip grips...*

They flinch, a full-body jerk that travels through every limb like an electric shock. A loud crash of thunder accentuates the movement.

‘Promise me,’ says Coraline again.

Quinn stares at her – at the dark curls surrounding her face, those prairie-storm eyes boring into theirs, and that enticing lipstick they can’t seem to get out of their head – and they say something they have absolutely no intention of saying and would snatch from the air as fast as one of those lightning bolts if they could.

‘Would you like to come?’

Her eyebrows raise, but to Quinn’s relief, she doesn’t laugh again. ‘You offering to share that treasure, then?’

‘The treasure is nothing more than a shackle that will forever tie your fate to society’s expectations,’ says Quinn. ‘But sure. If that’s your thing.’

Her eyes narrow. ‘Then what exactly do you call writing your...’ But she trails off, her hand raised in surrender. ‘You know what, never mind. If there’s a chance of treasure here – even if it’s a damn slim one – then who am I to throw it away? God knows I could use it. Sure. I’ll come. Get in.’

There comes a time in every adventure when one is forced to make a choice: to continue hacking their way through insurmountable odds, through cold and wind and upward battles determined to bring one to their knees... or to take the held-out hand and ease that journey just a little, just enough to make one stronger in anticipation of the next hurdle.

Quinn tucks the broken umbrella beneath their arm and turns west again. ‘I’ll meet you at the cliffs,’ they say, then head off into the darkness, letting the storm embrace them like a lover.

*

The walkway Coraline mentioned is no simple guardrail. It snakes down the side of the steep cliff with a wall of wide steel mesh on one side and the cliffside itself on the other. The openings in the steel wires are big enough that when lightning flashes, the churning ocean is starkly visible below, raging up the side of the cliff like a monster from the deep. The huge swells smash against the rocks, making the ocean appear deeper and fuller for fractions of a moment until it recedes again, exposing the crumbling stone at the base. Quinn stares down into the ocean's surges and experiences vertigo, unlike anything they've felt before. They can imagine tipping into that never-ending sea, swallowed whole, shoved deep, deep beneath the surface into a world somehow bigger than the sky above.

'Dragon Hunter!' Coraline screams in Quinn's ear.

Quinn yells aloud, and their boot skids on the slippery mud coating the wet rock. They barely catch themselves by grabbing onto the cliff side of the walkway.

'That's the third time I've called you,' Coraline says. She's wearing a green plastic poncho with the hood pulled up. She looks much dryer than Quinn feels.

'It's Quinn,' Quinn gasps out.

'Quinn?'

'Yeah. Not "Dragon Hunter."'

'Okay. Quinn. What direction is this cave of yours supposed to be?'

'South,' Quinn whispers, prying a shaky hand from the cliff long enough to point to their right. Fortunately, it's the same direction the walkway is heading.

Coraline takes their outstretched hand in hers. 'You're not gonna fall,' she says. 'But don't touch the metal, okay? Lightning storm and all.'

Quinn nods, finally loosening the grip of their other hand just enough to turn their feet down the walkway. They still have the officer's umbrella pinned between their arm and body and have no plans of relaxing their muscles enough to get it out any time soon. Lightning flashes again, and that monstrous ocean is visible once more, immense swells as far as the eye can see.

'I belong to the perilous plight of uncertainty,' Quinn mutters beneath their breath. 'I belong to the pull of the abyss, where a single cut of the blade could bring me either safety or insanity...'

Coraline looks at them over her shoulder, and Quinn lets the words die.

'Did you come here by yourself?' Coraline asks.

Quinn tears their eyes from the sea. 'I had no intention of tying my fate to another's,' they say.

She looks at them sceptically. ‘You didn’t come here on some sort of dare, did you? Some sort of... I don’t know... initiation thing?’

‘I did not,’ says Quinn.

‘So this is really *you*? You go around wearing that, climbing down cliffs, seeking out dragons, writing books...’

‘As opposed to what?’ says Quinn. ‘Drinking coffee, working a job, exercising?’

‘Like those aren’t valid things?’ Coraline says with a laugh.

‘They’re perfectly valid,’ says Quinn. ‘But they’re no more valid than what I do.’

Coraline considers this. ‘Fair enough.’

‘I do like coffee, though,’ Quinn says after a moment.

‘Well, thank God for that—’

‘With absinthe.’

Coraline starts to laugh, then falters at Quinn’s quizzical look. After a moment, the corner of Quinn’s lip tweaks up, somewhat against their will. Coraline turns forward again. But her grip around Quinn’s hand remains comfortingly tight.

Quinn looks up at the cloud-blackened night sky, strobing with vicious streaks of lightning, and feels the rain pounding like ice crystals upon their cheeks. It slicks their long straight bangs back from their face. It feels like atonement. Or destiny. A last stand at the edge of the world—

Holy shadows of midnight. Quinn stops and shakes Coraline’s hand from theirs as a particularly vibrant slash of lightning illuminates an opening about twenty feet above, cut into the rough face of the rock. They swipe a hand over their eyes, barely even noticing the smudge of smeared eyeliner across their palm.

‘That’s it,’ they say.

Coraline turns back. Her eyes track Quinn’s gaze upward until she, too, sees the fissure in the rock.

‘Oh. Right,’ she says. ‘That used to be some sort of spelunking rock-climbing attraction, about, I don’t know... fifty, sixty years ago? But then someone fell, and the place was shut down.’

‘No one climbs up there now?’

‘I think it was boarded up. Didn’t want to encourage anyone.’

Quinn had planned to lower their body over the cliff in the deepest dark of the storm and creep, wraith-like, into the protection of this breath-taking haven cut into the side of the world. A dragon somewhere at their back, the wrath of nature’s fury playing out

panoramically before them. So why, when faced with this moment in person, does it fail to produce the same surge of excitement? Is it fear? Quinn isn't afraid of heights; they're a seasoned enough rock-climber, after all, and have spent many an epic moment atop the sheer rubbery faces of climbing gyms, leagues above the safety of the cushioned mats below.

It's just that those cushioned mats are a sight different when they're made of silty water hundreds of feet deep, reshaping the look of Quinn's potential fall with every surge...

Quinn might have turned around, in some other life. But Coraline's presence at their side bolsters them; the memory of her laughter, her prairie-green eyes and possibly peppermint-flavoured lips, and the burning paralysis of the thoughts that will play through her head if Quinn backs down now.

Quinn turns to her. 'Well-met, fair Coraline, but I fear this is where our paths div—'

'You fool,' she interrupts. 'You're not thinking of climbing that, are you?'

'True quests cannot be abandoned on a mere whim,' Quinn says.

'What? Cut the bullshit already!'

But Quinn tucks the broken umbrella in their coat and hauls themselves up the side of the cliff, steadfastly refusing to allow their mind to dwell on anything other than the slippery handholds before them.

It's exhilarating. For a second. And then – *Dear God, what am I doing?* – those cursed thoughts intrude again, like lightning to the brain. Lightning. Lightning flashing all around them, capable of hitting Quinn with one good strike and sending them to kingdom come.

Shit shit shit shit—

But somehow, Quinn doesn't stop moving, even during the deluge of panicked thoughts. They haul themselves up – *wraith-like* – into a jagged, mud-coated indentation in the rock – *a breath-taking haven* – covered in wet litter and the shells of crabs and molluscs. Quinn crawls farther in on all fours, their legs and arms shaking from the adrenaline of the short climb. One of the fine silver chains on Quinn's buckled boot snags on an outcrop and snaps. Quinn's head jerks back when they feel the tug. The next flicker of lightning shows an unsightly gash where the chain was torn from the leather. Something tightens in Quinn's chest. It took them quite a while to save up for these boots.

It seems like only a second before Coraline is there, cupping Quinn's face in her hand. Her voice is alarmed. 'Are you okay? You're crying, did you hurt yourself?'

Quinn's jaw clenches. 'I'm not crying,' they say, then somewhat contradict the point by gesturing at the broken boot.

‘You hurt your foot?’ Coraline says.

‘No, I—’ Quinn falters, stopping the words just in time. ‘Yes. Yes, I fear I did.’

‘Can you walk?’

‘No amount of pain can keep me down, Miss Coraline. I will push through it.’ Quinn struggles to their feet. ‘You shouldn’t have followed me.’

‘Remember. You’re giving me the treasure.’ Coraline points toward the back of the cave. ‘But you see what I mean. Boarded up.’

It is indeed. But Quinn pulls out the broken umbrella and approaches the boards nailed across the entrance, then uses the pointed metal end to pry at the slats. There is something brutally satisfying about using this gift from an officer of the law to break into this forbidden domain and something even more satisfying about knowing they’re as protected as they’ll ever be, doing this during a storm when no one in their right mind will climb down and catch them in the act.

‘Are we gonna talk about the fact that this dragon of yours would have trouble hunting on the full moon with these boards blocking its way every time?’ Coraline says.

Quinn pauses, the umbrella’s tip frozen like a lever behind a particularly stubborn board. ‘We are not,’ they finally say.

Coraline sighs. ‘Well, I guess I’ve come this far,’ she says and joins Quinn in yanking at the boards.

The two of them finally pry a hole large enough to fit through. Pitch blackness greets them on the other side. Quinn has come prepared for this. The only problem is the hours they spent learning to spark wood into a burning torch are useless when the detritus is soaked as thoroughly as they are. Coraline watches them try to strike the damp wood together for several agonizing minutes before finally producing a small flashlight from beneath her poncho.

‘That was inspired,’ she says as she passes it over.

‘Shut up,’ Quinn mutters.

They squeeze through the aperture, Quinn in the lead. Dead silence greets them. Even the noise of the storm seems muffled in here, and Quinn feels some of their anticipation returning. They know for a fact they *will* find something here; they’ve been led here by fate, every step of the way, from the tome that was left unshelved at their local library to the Frequent Flyer discount that just happened to scroll across their screen two days after they checked the airline listings.

The bare whisper of a path leads downward, barely navigable between the sharp jutting rocks of the cave floor. The ceiling is low enough that Quinn can touch it with an outstretched hand. Graffiti mars the rocks around them, visible as slashes of elaborately gothic letters and crudely drawn genitalia in the sporadic circle of Coraline's flashlight. A clap of thunder follows them in, echoing from the close walls. Quinn wants to hold Coraline's hand again, but with the broken umbrella in one hand and the light in the other, they don't see how to do it without making it weird.

Quinn and Coraline descend farther. The sound of the ocean dulls even more, and the utter isolation of the place fully sinks in. The passage snakes downward, closer to where Quinn knows those massive waves beat against this very rock. The thought of being beneath the raging ocean's surface is one Quinn doesn't care to dwell on. The light shakes slightly in their hand. Their wet clothes have chilled them to the bone, and the damp and cold of the cave only make it worse.

If Quinn belongs anywhere, it's deep in the heart of... of an ocean-battered tomb, surrounded by the smells of fish and mildew, under hundreds of thousands of pounds of stone, beneath the pummeling of a storm that could at any moment pour through that single opening like—

There's a loud screech in the cave before them. Quinn startles violently, dropping the umbrella and spinning to shield Coraline. They cup the back of her head and crush them both against the nearest wall, their heart pounding. The flashlight falls from Quinn's hand and sends splashes of light dancing erratically for a moment before disappearing entirely.

'It's a bat. It's just a bat!' says Coraline.

Her lips are so close that Quinn feels the puffs of air on their mouth when she speaks.

Quinn lets out a shaky breath. 'I—I was fully cognizant of that. But thank you.'

Coraline doesn't show any signs of pushing them away, but Quinn steps quickly back anyway, terrified suddenly of what Coraline is thinking... but, in all honesty, terrified of their own thoughts as well.

The thing is, Quinn has never kissed a girl. Before Quinn realised they didn't fully belong on either side of the gender binary, they'd exclusively been interested in guys. Whether that meant they were gay, or straight, or what exactly is a question that's nagged at Quinn for longer than they can remember. As if by figuring out *exactly* what label matched, they would know *exactly* what they were. But it didn't matter. Quinn *knew* what they were, long before straight or gay ceased to fit into their image of themselves. But it doesn't change the fact that this attraction is new or that it sets off those mental questions again in a slightly

panic-inducing flutter somewhere deep in their stomach. Like a need they didn't know they had.

It's been a long time since Quinn has even tried to belong...

They're glad for the absence of light to hide whatever expression is on their face. But this journey can't be continued in darkness. Quinn kneels, crawling until they finally see the faint light they dropped, just beneath an overhang of rock. They sweep it up, along with the broken umbrella they dropped.

'Quinn?' says Coraline.

'I'm right here, Miss Coraline. I found our light.'

'Thanks for... you know,' Coraline says. 'Leaping to my rescue like that.'

'I do not leap,' says Quinn stiffly.

'You and I both know that was a leap,' says Coraline.

Quinn starts to answer, but their words are cut off by laughter again. Their mouth twists. 'Coraline, I swear, if you cannot stop laughing at me—'

'Be quiet, Quinn,' she breaks in. 'That's not me.'

Quinn freezes. No... no, she's right, it's not her at all. It's several voices, in different resonances, echoing from somewhere down the cave.

Coraline jerks her head toward the graffiti they passed on their way in. 'It's probably just teenagers, like us,' she whispers.

Quinn glares at her because 'teenager' is *never* a word Quinn has used to describe herself; even the sixteen months ago that it would have technically been accurate, Quinn was nothing like whoever Coraline is comparing them to now.

She must have caught the look because she lets out a snort. 'Yeah, yeah, I know, *I've never been a teenager, Miss Coraline, how dare you.* Next, you'll bring up how you travelled here on your own, so how could you be, right?'

'Well, my parents did help with the plane ticket,' says Quinn. Their mouth snaps shut a second too late; why in the world did they see fit to share *that*?

'What?' Coraline says. 'You mean they're actually helping with your *dragon hunting*—'

'With my *career*,' Quinn interrupts in a low growl. 'As a *writer*.'

Coraline laughs. 'I can picture the T-shirt you'll give them now. *I went hunting for dragons, but all I found was this lousy gang of cave punks.*'

'That's not teenagers down there,' Quinn breaks in.

She frowns, caught off-guard. 'What?'

‘There were no gaps in those boards large enough for entry.’

‘Yeah, but...’ Coraline falters. ‘But there must’ve been. Maybe near the bottom, something *just* big enough to squeeze through.’

Quinn glances back, unconvinced. An erratic racing has started up in their heart – a thrumming beat telling them they’re on the brink of something here.

‘Wait,’ says Coraline. ‘You’re not *seriously* attributing that laughter to somehow being your dragon, are you?’

‘Dragons are crafty creatures, wiser and cleverer than anyone knows,’ says Quinn. ‘One should never assume that such a creature can’t use humans’ own assumptions against them.’

Coraline’s eyes widen in the dim glow of the light. ‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Anything,’ Quinn answers.

‘Where do you come up with this shit?’

Quinn huffs, trying not to think of all the other things they were hoping that question would be. ‘I don’t expect you to understand,’ they say. ‘You haven’t lived on the fringes of society for year after painful year the way I have.’

‘Wow. I can’t even begin to tell you how backwards that—Hey! Wait! Where are you going?’

Quinn looks back from the boulder they’ve just rounded, another dozen feet down. ‘I’m investigating.’

‘You’re not leaving me,’ she says.

‘What? No.’ Quinn is genuinely confused. ‘You’re coming, right?’

‘To go hang out with those teenagers? No, thanks. I’ve got better things to do.’

Quinn struggles to find words. ‘But it’s not... we won’t... that’s not what we’ll find, Coraline.’

‘How could you possibly know that?’

‘I just do. I know it in my heart. The world brought me here for a reason.’

After a moment, Coraline lets out the most exasperated sigh Quinn has ever heard. ‘If you end up dissolving into a hundred ravens wearing that coat,’ she mutters, ‘it would almost be a relief at this point.’

Quinn’s eyebrows raise as she gets down to their level. She eyes them suspiciously.

‘What’s that look for?’

‘Nothing,’ Quinn says. ‘It’s just... it’s a stunning image. That’s all.’

She shoves their shoulder, half-playful and half-irritated, and Quinn turns back to the passage. They continue down. And somehow – Quinn doesn't know how but doesn't dare question it – Coraline's hand is wrapped in their own this time.

There's one thing Quinn is forced to acknowledge: the dragon has not gone out hunting on the full moon. The lair was supposed to be empty this fated night, but everything, from the boarded-off entrance to the definite presence of something deep in this cave, points to the fact that the treasure will be guarded by a very possessive owner. The passage creeps lower and lower, becoming steeper as they go. How many dozen feet are they below the ocean's raging waves now? Quinn's heart pounds in their ears. Occasionally, the sound of laughter reaches them again, but it's too intermittent to make anything out. Quinn pauses and passes Coraline's flashlight back to her, then pulls the broken umbrella from their coat.

They picture happening upon the dragon, all eight-inch long teeth and baseball-sized eyes and spikes running down its back like a mohawk. They picture themselves brandishing the umbrella, pointed side out, while Coraline blinds it with the flame of her light—

'Give me that,' says Coraline, snatching the umbrella from them. 'You're gonna hurt yourself.'

Quinn would argue, but one of the broken metal ribs has somehow stabbed their palm, and it smarts something fierce.

'I hear the ocean again,' says Coraline.

A chill goes through Quinn. It's true. Down below them – maybe not even that far down – there's the definite sound of waves breaking against rock.

'There must be some undercut in the cliff where the water comes in,' she says. 'Quinn... we shouldn't be down here.'

Quinn shivers in their wet clothes. But at that moment, they hear the laughter again, just above the noise of the surf. Quinn can almost... *almost*... hear snatches of words in there, too. Something that sounds like '*Not in this lifetime, bro.*'

Quinn bites their bottom lip. Seventh level of hell. Coraline was right. It'll be nothing but drunken teenagers down here, and Quinn will have to admit they were wrong. That there's no dragon, no treasure, no epic tale to rocket them to their dream of being a famous author, no *future* here at all. They make their way farther down anyway, jaw clenched tight in anticipation of the embarrassment, their nose twitching as it catches a whiff of cigarette smoke along with the fishy smell of the encroaching sea.

Quinn almost stumbles on something and stops short. Coraline grabs their arm to steady them. Quinn squints down in the erratic lighting and sees...

It's a tail. And dear God, not just any tail. It's scaly and green and shimmery and easily as big around as Quinn's waist. Quinn meets Coraline's eyes and sees her expression is as shocked as their own. Slowly, Quinn kneels, running their hand along the length of the otherworldly appendage without quite touching it. They whisper a silent prayer of thanks that the world has delivered this to them and that they won't look like a fool in front of Coraline after all—

Something rears up and smacks Quinn's hand away so violently that they reel backward. Their coat tangles in their legs and sends them crashing to the jagged ground.

'Whaddaya think you're doin', puttin' your hand there?' a gruff voice says. 'Fuck off!'

Quinn is still staring into the shadows, mouth agape, when Coraline shines her light in to illuminate the passage ahead of them. It's a sizable chamber, at least fifty feet wide, with a tall ceiling hanging with stalactites and a floor that's literally nothing but the raging sea coming in from the west. If Quinn hadn't been stopped by the tail crossing the passage, they would have easily walked off the ledge and right into the ocean.

But it's the people lounging around and *in* the water that really draw the eye. People just like Quinn and Coraline... except that their torsos end in thick fishtails.

'Holy shit, Quinn!' Coraline says, her voice coming out in a squeak. 'You discovered mermaids!'

The chamber has gone silent but for the crash of the ocean. At least seven pairs of eyes are pinned on Quinn and Coraline, glaring as if they interrupted a particularly intimate party. Which, to be fair... Quinn's gaze darts from the hairy mermaid still splayed across the passage, coolly watching Quinn through a cloud of cigarette smoke, to another mermaid – topless, female-presenting – who has a bottle of what Quinn can only assume is liquor in an honest-to-God *paper bag*. Someone across the chamber lets out a belch.

Quinn pulls themselves up from the ground, still staring. 'No,' they say faintly. 'No, no, no, no, no. You were supposed to be... I heard there was a dragon...'

The mermaid in front raises an eyebrow, then flashes a grin at the others. 'Ha! Classic Ernie!'

The others let out a cascade of whoops and hollers. They drink, as if Quinn has introduced some sort of chugging contest. Quinn's hand finds Coraline's again as the raucous cheering continues. One of the mermaids across the chamber tips and falls into the water, which starts up a whole new round of cheers.

'Mermaids!' Coraline whispers again, still in shock.

‘Mermaids,’ repeats Quinn, their lip twisting. They try to imagine this scene in their book – *the majestic dragon I’d hunted for months turns out to be, much to my utter delight, a gang of rowdy and drunken mermaids...* Quinn’s jaw tightens because the word *delight* isn’t fitting in well there. Not well at all.

Quinn steps forward, hands out in pleading frustration. ‘There was supposed to be a *dragon*,’ they say again through clenched teeth. ‘And a *treasure*. And I was supposed to—’ They flail their arms, hoping that these beings will parse their meaning and somehow, *magically*, step up to the plate and be what Quinn needs them to be.

Heads jerk toward them as if the mermaids had forgotten they were there.

‘Treasure?’ one of them says.

‘Y-Yeah,’ Quinn says. ‘You see, I... I’m writing a book—’

‘Humans!’ someone interrupts, and the laughter breaks out all over again.

‘Here!’ one calls. ‘Here’s your damn treasure. Now stop leering and scam!’

Something flies through the air and thwacks Quinn across the chest. Quinn barely catches it – it’s some sort of soft-bound book – but they don’t have time to look at it before Coraline is pulling them back up the cave passage, away from the jeering mermaids. She guides them, hurrying over the jagged rock, and doesn’t stop until the sound of laughter is far behind them and the cold silence of the cave has enveloped them once more.

Quinn’s thoughts are in tatters; the beating heart of the storm that was supposed to hold their salvation and destiny has betrayed them in a way they never imagined. They sink down onto an overturned boulder, looking for the first time at the ‘treasure’ the mermaids threw at them before they ran. Naked breasts and fishtails and hands sliding in between...

Quinn drops the magazine, their face burning red hot.

‘Porn,’ they say in a strangled voice. ‘They gave me. Mermaid. Porn.’

Coraline kneels and picks it up. ‘How do you think they’d even go about printing something like this underwater?’

‘I don’t *know*, Coraline.’

She hops up on the boulder beside them, flipping casually through the magazine. ‘It’s not *so* bad, right?’ she says. ‘You did exactly what you set out to do. You went on an adventure, found a mythical creature, got a treasure...’

Quinn feels like crying. ‘I can’t write about this!’ they say, gesturing at the magazine.

‘What, this isn’t the treasure that’s been in our hearts all along?’ Coraline says distractedly, turning the magazine sideways.

‘I will *kill* you,’ Quinn says darkly.

‘Look. I shouldn’t say anything, but...’ Coraline sighs and lowers the magazine. ‘All that *I’ll never belong* stuff you were writing in your journal. Don’t you feel like maybe...’

Quinn turns toward her, frowning. ‘Maybe what?’

Coraline grimaces. ‘That maybe belonging means *not* following a well-laid path. Like your plans for your book. Like your journey here. Like your...’

Quinn studies Coraline’s green eyes, locked on their own, and feels their heart rate pick up. ‘Like my attractions,’ they whisper.

‘What? What about them?’

‘I’ve never... I mean, I don’t know if I’m... I haven’t figured out what I...’

Coraline’s brow furrows. ‘Quinn,’ she says slowly. ‘Are you saying you want to kiss me?’

‘Yes,’ says Quinn, their voice hoarse. ‘I... I do believe that’s what I’m saying.’

‘Then what the hell are you going on about?’ Coraline grabs the front of Quinn’s long coat and pulls them forward. Her lips close over theirs.

Quinn’s thoughts are lost in a sudden dizzying plunge from all sensibility. All Quinn knows is that this wasn’t the book they’d been planning to write. Their book didn’t have mermaids, it didn’t have a love interest, it didn’t have... oh God... lips that taste not of honeysuckle or peppermint, but sea salt and rain, and the gentle flicker of a tongue. It didn’t have a main character who wasn’t exactly straight and wasn’t exactly gay and wasn’t exactly sure whether the girl kissing them was doing it because she liked them or because she’d just been looking at porn.

But Quinn suddenly wonders: why? Why are they even searching for a label for this? Can’t this be enough? Whatever Quinn is, this moment here doesn’t change their *self* at all. Quinn likes Coraline. A lot. And they’ve been thinking about her since the moment they laid eyes on her. That’s really all there is to it.

Belonging is a tenuous concept at the best of times. But that doesn’t make it unattainable. Quinn can belong to the smell of the pounding rain in the deepest dark of the storm... but they can also belong to the vibrant thrill of uncertainty, or to the spontaneous kiss of a beautiful stranger, or – perhaps most of all – to the newfound freedom of knowing who they truly are, without feeling the need to define it.

Maybe... just maybe... Quinn will end up writing that book after all.

After a Black Moon

by Even Morton

Content Warnings: Dysphoria, violence, drug use, implied sex work, bigotry.

Not your thing? Skip to page 41 for the next story.

Potter was waiting for a Black Moon. So was I.

I met him in the mess hall of the recovery station, both of us leaving our half-finished breakfast trays on the turnstile. The workers eyed us both in disgust. We booked it to the med centre before the lingering gazes could get us down.

Potter, whose first name was Michael, hummed the entire time he was in line. He bounced on the balls of his white tennis shoes, his arms and legs seemingly too bony for the uniform we both wore. He was an addict, clearly. The med centre, his agitation, and the disgust in the workers' eyes were easy enough to figure out. It was only when I got a look at his face straight-on and saw the pink lines around the patrician nose that I knew his fix was for sugar. Or 'Big Sug' as it was called on the street.

It's not the sugar you're thinking about. But Potter hummed the 1960s song by the Archies, now a century old, as if it was. He was agitated, stressed out with his need for the replicated cylinder he would inhale and feel better, but he found his situation funny.

I was still working on finding humour in my own.

'Michael Potter,' the nurse called behind a thick Plexiglas wall. Though her protection was hermetically sealed, she wore a mask.

'Present!' Potter said, pronouncing it as if it were French. 'And accounted for.'

She didn't smile. Didn't matter that the mask was there. The mirth was absent in her grey-dead eyes. She didn't even watch, like she should have, as Potter unscrewed the cap and inhaled the replicated Big Sug.

'Thank you, milady.' His pace slowed as he walked over to a bench. I stepped up before she could complete my name.

'Jackson, Chris—'

‘Hi.’ I extended my palm. I begged her, without hope, to not announce what I was taking.

‘Testosterone,’ she said with a furrowed brow. ‘Oh. One of us has to administer it.’

‘No, I got it. I know where to put it in.’

‘But it’s a needle. You could use it on someone else. Hold on.’ She pressed a button on her command centre, and a door to the med centre opened. Someone else in a nurse’s uniform, this one a man, came out. I let out a low breath between my teeth. I felt the air click between my front teeth, spaced out since I was twelve, and then the empty space where my bottom left incisor should have been. My balls were not the only thing I lost in the blast.

‘Over here.’ The nurse gestured to a room with a metal cage over the viewer. The padded room. One of many in the recovery ward. I wanted to shudder, to argue, to react in some way – but I just followed him. I wanted the testosterone in me about as much as Potter wanted his Big Sug. I could understand addiction, not because I was an addict. Not really. But the brain is an organ as much as the heart, and we can empathize through it when nothing else is there.

‘Lie down,’ the nurse said when I entered the room.

I tried to forget the indignity. These shots needed to go in through fleshy skin, but that could be the thigh – not always the ass cheek. Yet that was what so many doctors and nurses selected. When I was in the hospital, most of my legs were burned. I’d needed skin grafts, transfers, and lots of blood. The only space on me to shoot in the hormones was my ass. I’d looked away, on too much morphine to care. But I was healthy now, walking, ambling around with a slight limp. My balls were gone, but I could still urinate. My brain contained the same memories of masculinity: wet dreams at night, the first time I entered a woman, and then a man, during the war. Shaving, the scent of Old Spice (or knockoff brands they let you have in space), and the feel of my rougher skin. It was all there in my brain, except that when I was wholly healed, I could also feel those parts leaving. Fading. I hadn’t understood why until the doctor came in and shot me through with testosterone again.

Missing balls meant missing chemicals. And it meant that my head was not quite my head anymore. I was not quite the me who I knew myself to be.

‘Roll over,’ the nurse told me. I was only wearing boxers, too tight.

‘You don’t need to put it in my ass,’ I said. ‘The thigh works.’

He hesitated. Surely he was used to working with junkies. My voice was thin and urgent, like a junkie’s. But this wasn’t Big Sug or Snortin’ Sam or anything pedestrian from Earth. This was just testosterone. I’d seen some trans women and trans men in the recovery

bay, and I'd known from the newspaper reports that they were the most prominent clients in the Black Moon program. Everyone needed a chance to start over. Everyone needed a new place to begin. If not in physical space, then at least in time. We all needed time to ourselves.

But I was not an addict, nor a trans person. I was barely a man without this drug.

'Whatever,' I finally said. I displayed my ass. I closed my eyes. I waited for my brain to come back online.

When I stepped out of the padded room, Potter was the only one around. The rest of the med cases had gone off to the day room or outside for a walk, though the atmosphere was hard on ravaged lungs. Potter leaned forward on his knees, a mysterious smile on his face. His nose was still pink from the years of Big Sug he surely had behind him. His nose would probably be that way for some time.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Christopher,' I said. 'Call me Jackson, though. I prefer surnames.'

'I get it. That because you get called the other name first a lot? Even though we're not supposed to do that anymore.' Potter made a dismissive sigh. 'I think it's neat, having two names. I'd want to use them both.'

'I only have the one.'

Potter tilted his head.

'I'm not trans,' I said. 'Just a lot of bad luck in the war.'

'Hey.' Potter's bright eyes beamed. He patted the seat next to him. 'Come and sit. Join the club.'

And because there was nothing else to do, nothing until we could both leave and truly start over, that was what I did.

*

Potter had grown up in a slum on one of the early colonized planets. His mother hadn't stuck around long, but her sister raised him. He never knew his father; his cousin Mick stole electronics and got them all in trouble with the police; all the typical stuff that happens to people who are forgotten. Big Sug was obvious in his story, yet it didn't make an appearance until much further along in his life.

'I was a disciplined kid,' he said, laughing. 'Hard to fathom, right?'

He ran a hand across his five o'clock shadow. I felt my own skin become rougher. The testosterone injection only came once every two weeks, but I needed it at about the nine-day mark. And it took one day to kick in. It never seemed like enough.

I was really envious, I understand now, as I listened to Potter speak. His voice was deep and low. My voice was too, and it would not change because vocal cords getting thicker in puberty was irreversible. Even if I didn't have balls.

I nodded and encouraged him to continue. For a while, I pretended I was looking into a mirror.

The military came after high school. One teacher noticed his precision with the books, his penchant for design, and suggested he become an architect. Being a poor kid, though, it was not an option. 'My mom had come back by then. I needed to not be around her. If I had known about the Black Moon system back then, maybe I could have started over sooner.'

'It didn't get introduced until you were about twenty-five, if I'm guessing your age correctly. You seem to be three years younger than me.'

'Yeah, that's about right. I'm a Pisces, you know. With a Pisces moon.' He laughed. Anything related to the moon was hysterical to him. I wondered if it was a side effect of the replicated drug but didn't ask.

So Potter had gone to the military. He was a good soldier. He was able to design some things there, too. Nothing too fancy, more like redesigning the hull's furniture and maybe a couple safety houses on distant lands. Nothing too much or too important.

'So what changed?' I asked. He'd grown silent. A worker from the recovery program had been pacing the halls and was lingering by us. I figured this was the point that Big Sug had been introduced, and he didn't want to be overheard.

'You know,' Potter said with a shrug. 'What always happens? What happened to you?'

'I was in a battle. Got burned real bad. Nothing to it.'

'So they gave you morphine, stuff to take away the pain?' When I nodded, he went on. 'Same with me. I mean, we were in a battle. A lot of us got injured, and in the med bay, I got some good stuff. The pain went away. You know, it's all warm like. It reminded me of the one time I went swimming. And then like zero gravity in space. But more warm, like I said. So swimming.'

I nodded. We were whispering as we talked now because that worker was still looking at us. We were not allowed to talk about drugs. But we were just talking about glory.

'So you, your, you know,' Potter said as he eyed my crotch. 'In that battle?'

‘Yep. And you...’ I eyed his crotch in reciprocation. When I saw he was hard, I thought nothing of it. Only envy, once again.

‘I got better. But I still wanted to swim, you know?’

I was still looking at his erection through his clothing. He noticed and slid a hand over his cock, covering it with his palm. I had no idea if it was in shame, as a way to hide, or a way to keep it going. I didn’t have a chance to find out.

‘Hey,’ the worker finally said. ‘It’s almost lunch. You two better get going. You won’t get any meds until tomorrow.’

‘Two weeks,’ I corrected him. I stood and walked ahead but waited for Potter at the door to the cafeteria.

‘Two weeks!’ he said, shaking his head. ‘That’s a goddamn lifetime.’

‘I know,’ I said. Though it was impossible, I swore I heard my own voice crack.

*

We ate almost all our meals together for the next month. Nothing changed in the day-to-day since everything was utterly regimented at the recovery centre, but during long talks and even some walks through the harsh atmosphere, I got to know Potter. I didn’t even see his pink nose anymore. I began to relish his agitated two-step pattern on the dusty tile floor every day before he got his treatment.

We were, in the language of the program, just trying to recover what self we had. ‘And then,’ Potter would proclaim in a dramatic fashion after his inhalation, ‘we can begin our Black Moon plan!’

‘Whenever that may be,’ I’d often echo.

‘Yes,’ he’d repeat. ‘Whenever that may be.’

In spite of qualifying for the program well in advance of being sent to the recovery facility, we both had no idea when our turn would come. There had been interview after interview, application after application, and background checks galore to get us here. I could not imagine more steps. But each time one of us – sometimes we’d go alone, sometimes we’d go in pairs – asked about our Black Moon plan at the front desk, we were told we still needed to recover.

‘Only when we can see a viable return on investment do we give you your Black Moon reboot,’ the front desk woman said behind Plexiglas.

‘Return on investment?’ I asked. ‘We’re human beings, not commodities.’

‘Yes. But you’re asking for time to recharge and have another life. A second chance. We have to make sure you can integrate back into the world again. Especially since you were once kicked out.’

I wanted to argue that I was not kicked out. I merely fell out. After recovering from my war wounds, I didn’t want to live without a dick. Petty, I know. There is so much more to gender and identity and all that other fun stuff. Trust me, I know and was told several times by several different people. They’re right, I’m wrong, etc. But it was still too hard to live without something that I had known all my life. Even if I could adjust to the scars, the body changes, and the dreams of phantom dicks at night, my brain was still longing for what it knew. I was losing my memory, my sense of self, without testosterone running through me.

So I tried to end it. A couple times. They were, as you might say, cries for help.

They were, as I saw, no different from Potter’s penchant for Big Sug. After he’d been caught in the military with the drug, he’d been discharged. He’d been a street person for a while, blacking out regularly and waking up in different locations, sometimes different planets. His nose had become pink then. That only happened in the advanced stage of the illness.

‘Before then, it had just been fairy dust for the fairies,’ he told me one day. ‘I didn’t mind that, really. Who cared if I was a fairy? It wasn’t like it was a lie. And I did those things, you know, so I could get the drugs. I did it enough that it didn’t matter. But the nose... when it was pink, I knew it was bad.’

I nodded, understanding it all. ‘That’s like day ten out of the fourteen before I can get my next injection.’

‘Brutal.’

‘Yeah.’

‘You can do a lot of desperate things in those four days.’

‘I know.’ I changed the subject. ‘So, how did you get to the program here?’

Potter got a distant look in his eye. Now he changed the subject. We went for a walk instead, no longer wanting to bond over words. We played a game in the dayroom. Then it was time to get in line again, both of us, so we could get our meds.

‘Jackson, Christopher,’ the woman called. I walked up, and she pretended not to recognize me. She studied my chart and then let out a breath. ‘Oh, it’s topical now.’

‘My testosterone?’

‘Yes. You can administer it yourself. But you’ll have to come back every day now.’

I didn't answer. I was too excited as she slid a soft packet of blue gel to me. I ripped it open and put it on the soft skin and faint, dark hair of my arm. It tingled. It hit my bloodstream. I felt it go through me, eventually reaching my brain, and washing me in what I always wanted, what I had known was me straight through.

'How is it?' Potter asked, eyeing the packs and my sudden elation.

'You're right,' I told him. 'It is like swimming.'

*

Getting our meds together day in and day out made us grow stronger. So did watching those who had arrived for the recovery program with us leave without us, and others who had come after us too. We seemed to be the only ones still stuck in the in-between place, still being dictated to as recovery patients when, for the first time in a long time, I had begun to feel better.

When I was called into a meeting, alone, three days after I began my topical treatment, I panicked. I thought they were taking it away. I thought I was going to be called an addict and never get what I wanted, what I needed, ever again. Life with Potter had simply become too good, so of course, it was going to end.

I was sort of right.

'You're going home,' the doctor told me. She sat behind a large oak desk with an even larger smile.

'Am I?'

'Well, you'll start your official Black Moon period. You will have thirty-two months to live your new life without your prior life expectations catching up to you. Of course, that clock has technically already started – since our patients here do not need to attend to their worldly issues while in recovery – but the time stamp will officially start once you leave these doors. After that Black Moon period passes, you will get jury duty notices again. Among other such technical details.'

Child support, alimony, the things in my life I'd left behind. Yeah, okay. I could handle that. I just wanted to get out of here. 'Am I going alone?'

'For now,' she said. She seemed to sense I was hinting at Potter. She changed the subject. 'But we need to decide what sort of life you'd like to lead.'

‘Oh. Well. What are my options? I know I can’t exactly be military anymore, but I don’t mind military services. A desk job.’ I shrugged. ‘Certainly better than waiting around here.’

‘Sure. Occupation is no problem, and we have your current skill set. But what would you like your name to be?’

‘My name?’

‘Yes. I’ve been told you prefer to go by your surname. We can change your first if you’d like. Have it better match your new personality.’

‘I... I’m afraid I don’t know exactly what you mean. Is it recommended I change my name?’ When she was quiet, I added, ‘I still feel like the same person. You know, more or less.’

‘Well, that’s good. I know not every trans person does—’

‘I’m not trans,’ I interrupted her. ‘I just had an accident.’

‘Right. Of course.’ She looked at her files. She looked back at me. I wished she would have been as bold as Potter was sometimes and just looked for my penis, hanging there, without anything else to support it. ‘Well, you could transition if you wish. Maybe it will be easier.’

‘Easier than what? I have testosterone treatment. I can get that on the outside, correct?’

‘Yes—’

‘Then I see no problem.’

She narrowed her gaze. I had a feeling I was arguing away my freedom, but I didn’t care. She tapped a pen against my file, made a note, and then spoke. ‘There is a vast community of people who could support you, too, when you go back to your life. I’m afraid I should have started this meeting that way. It is highly recommended patients who are discharged have a community, a family to return to.’

‘I have a wife and a daughter. We’re divorced, and she lives in a different area, but—’

‘That’s good. Blood family is always good. But they know the before-you. What about the current you? You need to find somewhere to belong and fit in where you can utilize all that you’ve learned here. Or else we worry that your previous behaviour will return, and—’

‘You will get a bad return on investment?’ I asked. She did not respond. I thought of the dumb classes they sometimes made us attend here, about job skills and budgeting. Basic stuff I already knew, and that Potter knew too, but not everyone did. I tried to give her the

benefit of the doubt. ‘Don’t worry, I have learned a lot here. And if I mess up on the outside, I won’t give this place a bad review. It’s my fault, you know, if I waste this second chance.’

‘Yes, it will be. But we still want to give you the best advantage. That’s the only reason I mentioned names.’

‘I just want to go home.’

‘Where is home again?’

I was quiet a long time. I thought of my old apartment but knew it would be long since rented out to someone else. ‘I just want to go.’

‘We will see. It’s in the works.’ She closed my file. I extended my hand to shake hers, and – only after looking at my palm with trepidation – she returned the shake. Her skin was cold.

I found Potter in the dayroom. He was playing cards with a new arrival. His eyes brightened when he saw me. ‘Hey, you. What’s going on?’

‘I might be going home soon,’ I said. He tried to clap me on the back in joy. I stepped away. ‘But I don’t know.’

Potter’s face seemed to crack in that moment. A flash of disappointment. Something passed between us that I could not name or identify. Shame? Malice? Or something more like kinship lost? He took a step back from me as well.

‘Want to play?’ Potter suggested seconds later, no trace of our former conversations in his voice. ‘Martha’s really good. Pretty sure she was a loan shark back in the day.’

‘Shh.’ Martha smiled. She had a pink nose, too.

‘I’m okay,’ I said. ‘I think I’m going to bed.’

*

I left two days later. I did not say goodbye to Potter. We both had breakfast with Martha in the cafeteria and then all stood in line to get our meds. I had told Potter I was leaving that morning over eggs, but he’d changed the topic. He moved kinetically, as always, dancing his dopamine dance until he could right the world again. He was first in line. Then Martha. Then me.

After I rubbed in the testosterone, I noticed Dr Flannigan, the woman I’d spoken to about community, in the doorway. She held a package for me, plus the keys to the attendant vehicle – my ride out of here. I nodded to her but went immediately to Potter.

‘I’m going,’ I said.

He smiled at me. Put a hand on my cheek. And then kissed me on the mouth. It was a rush, a sudden change between us. But it was also obvious, natural. It wasn't even romance, I don't think. It was just the way he wanted to say goodbye. His nose brushed mine, and when I pulled away, I expected it to be pink. I tried to see my reflection on the Plexiglas window for the med centre, on a metal doorknob, but there was nothing.

'Take care of yourself,' Potter told me. 'I'll see you when I see you.'

I left with Dr Flannigan. The kiss was still hot on my mouth. I expected her to ask about it. But she just gave me my new military assignment, my new apartment keys and gestured to the package where there was a list of military groups I could join for my community outreach.

'If you do want a change,' she said, just before it was time for me to get into the vehicle.

'I know where to go,' I completed for her.

I looked down at the watch they had given me with my takeaway package. It had the date, time, and location for the new planet I was heading to, but in the small corner was also a countdown of when my Black Moon period would be over and all of my real life, the one that I'd left behind, would come rushing back.

*

The thirty-two months passed. I moved on with my life. Made a couple really good friends in my military office, started seeing a woman at the bridge club I'd ended up joining. She was about ten years older than me but never had kids, so I felt as if we were the same age. She moved in with me just as the countdown on my watch ran out.

I actually relished paying my first alimony check in years. Then my wife got married, and that stopped. My kid graduated high school. She stayed for a weekend and met Jenny. They got along. Some bad debts also caught up with me, but I'd been saving like my care package recommended, and I made them go away.

I even got called to jury duty nine months in. I figured that was the extent of what I'd need to attend to. Jenny and I got married. She got pregnant, though she was in her early forties, and we celebrated a new life in our small little world. The child was not mine biologically, of course. But from an anonymous donor. And it would be mine in spirit.

Jenny was six months when I saw Potter again. He was standing on a street corner just outside Jenny's prenatal clinic. I was going to meet her for lunch, and we were going to talk

about what colour to paint the baby's room. Gender aside, we were both leaning towards a soft maroon, almost orange-pink colour because that was the way the sky sometimes looked in the morning when we both got up for work.

But when I saw Potter again, his nose still pink, I lost all thrill at paint samples. I lost all thrill for the life I had now, the community I had now, where everyone knew I had missing pieces, but everyone pretended it didn't matter. Where everyone pretended that the strange period in the recovery centre was obsolete. Non-existent.

'Hey,' Potter said when he noticed me. His eyes trailed up and down my body. 'How are you doing?'

'Good.' I shifted on the sidewalk. 'I'm married.'

'Good for you.'

'And having a baby soon,' I added.

'They can do that tech now?'

'Old tech,' I said. He nodded. He understood. And it felt good to be understood in that way again, to not be entirely forgotten.

Potter's gaze flickered to behind me. I noticed a man in a black car, sleek, and clearly strolling around for business. For people like Potter. I couldn't tell, nor did I truly want to, if this was a deal for Big Sug or for sex. Or both. Or something else harder. His body had gotten thinner, and his hair was limp as if it needed a wash. I wanted to tell him to come to my apartment and shower. I wanted to kiss him again.

But when he met my gaze, I looked away.

'It's hard,' he said. It was simple but understandable.

'Did you not find a community?' I asked, though it felt feeble.

'This is a community, in a way,' he said. The car behind him honked his horn. He let out a sigh. 'I guess the Black Moons only work for some. Luck of the draw, you know. Don't worry about me. I'll be okay.'

I said nothing else. I looked at the clinic even as he walked by me. I heard the car door slam and then drive away. I felt the chill of the space between our bodies and wished that we had done something more. I wished we had been released at the same time, so we could have had one another.

But then again, I supposed we still would have had to face one another like this – as broken men trying to wedge parts of ourselves that no longer fit back into a world that was only kind enough to give us one start over, but nothing else, not even instructions on how to deal with the time that still passed when everyone told us we were not ready. But we had

been ready, at least, for each other. Even with a second start together, that time we lost in recovery would always catch up to us, like he had caught up to me.

I supposed this was neither good nor bad. It was just as the Black Moons always were: a period of time when there were more new moons in a season, and as such, it was a chance to start again without people seeing the worst parts of us, even those we desperately wanted them to.

‘Hi,’ Jenny said when she saw me. She came out of the clinic, the wind tousling her long hair. ‘Are you okay? You look—’

‘I’m fine. I just want to go home,’ I said, even though I wasn’t sure where that was.

My Father's Robot

by Toshiya Kamei

Content Warnings: Death.

Not your thing? Then this is the end.

My father changed his will shortly before his death, leaving all his property to some stranger he'd recently met. Prior to this, the seeds of distrust grew between us for a reason that still eludes me, and we were estranged. His abrupt death robbed us of a final chance to patch things up. I wonder what came between us, what altered his attitude toward me. Besides unresolved resentment, the only thing he bequeathed me was his out-of-date, malfunctioning robot, not much else.

In the living room, my father's robot squeaks and beams a holographic video into open air. In it, I'm a smiling toddler on a swing in a nondescript grey park. The air hardly stirs. Overhead, the cicadas buzz incessantly. The sunlight bounces off the faded jungle gym as it heats the ground. *Hang on, son!* my father's younger self shouts and pushes my swing. His resemblance to my current self startles me. In the video, I tense up before letting myself go, and my swing flies higher and higher.

My wife comes in and sits beside me on the couch. She softly places her hand on my shoulder as if to comfort me. I take her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. Suddenly, the robot whirls out of the living room.

'What were you watching?'

'Scenes from Dad's life. As if a camera was a constant presence. Somehow, these recordings got loaded into the robot. I can't get rid of it,' I whisper when I'm sure the robot is out of earshot. 'It's the only keepsake he left me.'

'It's okay, honey.' She caresses my hair.

Before I was born, the robot came into my parents' lives as a housewarming gift from a family friend. It was constantly present throughout my childhood. One of my earliest memories involves playing hide-and-seek with it. After I left home for college, I didn't give the robot much thought. When my stepmother died decades later, it kept my father company.

He thought it was more useful than a dog. The robot cooked him three meals a day and accompanied him during his daily strolls in the botanical garden nearby. In the evening, my father played chess with it.

Now, at random times, the robot projects random scenes from my father's life. Now that he's gone, it's the keeper of his memory and nothing more. It serves no other purpose.

The robot whirls back. It shakes, and another feed begins. My father, older than he was in the previous video, paces around the living room of the house I grew up in. In one corner of the room, the piano no one touches is enshrined with accumulated trinkets. Pictures of frozen smiles. Sun-faded postcards. A crooked quilt. A tilting lamp shade. Memories pile up like dust motes on top of a cabinet. He raises his voice and yells at someone out of view. I can't make out his words. A woman's cry pierces the air. It's my mother. The voice fades, and the picture goes black. A dead silence settles over them.

My wife and I gaze at each other. Her eyes darken, horror stirring in their depths.

'It's not like him. He never acted like that.'

'Do we know for sure what we're watching is real?' she asks, frowning. 'How reliable is it?'

I look at her then, see the concern clouding her eyes, but I can't answer. My head is jumbled. Fractured. My wife kisses between my brows, over my cheeks, down to my lips, but I can't respond in any human way. We share breath for a moment, eyes shut against the world, but all I know is my mother's scream. I shiver.

'Maybe,' my wife says, voice soft, 'you should be content with your memories of him.'

'I don't know.' I cover my face with my hands. My wife rubs my shoulders to comfort me.

In the afternoon, I drive to the park alone. The swings are still there. Rust hugs the links. Dead leaves skitter across the cracked blacktop. I step out, and the sound of the car door shutting behind me momentarily breaks the empty silence draping over the park. No birds sing. No children laugh. I recall my father's fury. My mother's cry still grips my heart. Then the silence. A seed of doubt sprouts in my gut. No, her death was an accident. Everyone said it was. I shake my head to drive away the thought.

The small seat of the nearest swing squeaks from my touch. A single raindrop falls from the clear, cloudless sky. Two drops, then three, then four. Drops fall on the metal surface before disappearing. When the world blurs too much, I finally wipe my eyes.

Night falls. We go to bed.

‘Honey, I’ll get rid of it,’ I whisper to my wife lying next to me. ‘The first thing in the morning.’

‘Okay.’

I roll over and kiss my wife goodnight.

In the morning, I go downstairs and around to the foyer. A breeze blows through my hair, and I watch the flowers in the vase atop the cabinet sway. Out of reflex, my eyes dart to the front door. It’s ajar.

‘I thought I locked it last night.’

I step inside the living room, and I notice the robot is gone.