

The Black Flower

"I don't have time for this!"

Not now, not in your condition. Sweat drips down your forehead. Tendons tighten across your fist as you cock your arm. Your knuckles peel.

"I like you better when you drink, Pualani." Tobias MacKenzie leers, wiping the blood from his nose.

"You know what, MacKenzie? I like you better when I drink, too." Your fist slams into his forehead. Withering pain cascades through your fingers. His head hurts worse, but he won't know that until he wakes up. "And I don't like you."

"Maria, was that really necessary?" Jim sardonically calls, cutting through your temporary reverie.

"Yes."

You glare as you give MacKenzie's unconscious body a final kick. In a moment of vindictive rage, you pour the last of your rum and coke on his head. In five minutes, you'll regret that, when your wallet feels that five dollars.

The Four Corners Pub stands as a favorite haunt for senior cadets, who play fast and loose with regulations. Only the second week of class and she's packed. Tales of the latest exploits and gossip punctuated by jokes heard a thousand times before, fill the air. Warm bodies cram every booth and much of the standing room.

All but one booth. One table sits empty, third on the left from the entrance. No one has sat there in two years, thirty-five weeks, two hours, twenty-seven minutes, and—you check the clock—fifteen seconds. Emma, Debbie, and Mary died there. They died first, yes, but only the first.

Two months, three days, thirty-nine minutes after the convocation of the class of 2027, news of the Hei Hua broke. The deadliest disease discovered. You were a freshman. On that day, over seventy thousand people became infected. More died. That day, the first snowfall of the year fell.

Now, three years later, not a single person lives untouched. Everyone has the strand, no one escapes, and no cure exists. Even here, in the wilderness, your blood teems, infected. Of your original class of two hundred and eleven, only one hundred and forty-nine remain. Everyone has lost family, lost close friends.

Emma, Debbie, Mary, Walter, Simon... The list goes on.

No one speaks the names of the dead. The superstition goes that that keeps their spirits from moving on. Still, every night, you recite the names of your dead classmates in your head. A small tribute, but what else can you offer? So little in the face of such overwhelming numbers.

The clock blinks 2243. Eric and Margaret are late, as usual. They don't mean to stand you up; time probably slipped their minds. Of course, they'll apologize—sincere but forgotten the next time. If next time graces you.

"So," Jim starts lazily, "any particular reason you picked a fight with MacKenzie, tonight?"

"I didn't like the way he looked at me."

"He always looks at you that way." Jim cocks an eyebrow suspiciously. "When are you going to tell me what you're really thinking? When I'm ready?"

"God, no!" You look up, startled. "No, no, no." A smile forces its way to the corner of your mouth. "When I'm ready."

He has a point. How many minutes have passed? What numbers count the time Eric and Margaret have missed? No. Not tonight. No thinking tonight.

"You want a drink, Jim?"

"Thanks, but I can't drink." Same as always. "And, you don't smile." Same as always.

"What do you think about these days?"

"The falling snow. Something wondrous exists—when you think about it, really, when a fresh, white blanket sown together by icy stitches flutters softly to the ground. A beautiful and innocent blanket keeps the world, hiding the dirty and dilapidated beneath."

"You're drunk."

"Little bit, yeah." You take a gulp of your drink. "Every dream I ever have; they're always the same. The waters edge, the pyres, and falling snow."

The first time, the snow hadn't smelled quite right. A sickly black hue stitched on a quilt of patchwork clouds wrapped a moonless sky. Out well beyond curfew, I ran the path to the lake with Jim close in my shadow. The usual calm of waves lapping at the shore fell deafeningly absent. Instead, sickly sloshing sunk against the shore.

The lifeless light of the moon dawned over the gently rolled hills revealing the lake as host to a mass grave for the villagers upstream; the gentle rise and fall not water but corpses, densely packed corpses.

Dinner argued a convincing appeal and won, ejecting itself on the frozen dirt.

In the distance, the Hudson Highlands burned.

Presently, the moon's glow reveals a veil of clouds just thin enough to let the stars peek through. Bitter cold rattles against the windows, seeping through the cracks. The heat from the hearth borders on oppressive. With the trodden wood floors and support beams, this place might

as well be a sauna; stagnant air hangs humid from puddles. The scented smoke of cheap cigars simmers, lingering only moments before vanishing into the atmosphere.

Who brought matches that night at the beach? You're pretty drunk, so you can't remember. Maybe you each did.

Fire. Fire burns everything away. I thought a mass grave the easiest way to dispose of so many bodies—certainly much easier than digging graves. Four pyres—tributes to ancient gods—blinked into existence, crackling in the night; the warmth did little to warm me.

Ancient gods. Fitting. When God abandons you, who remains but those you abandoned? Fire represents rebirth, passion, cleansing, the end of all things and the beginning of everything else. I pray to Kanaloa to watch these souls pass, as he would watch for me when my time came.

A deep breath shuddered through you. Something soft and wet tickled my nose. Closing my eyes, I lifted my head. White freckles slid down my cheeks; snow had come.

No snow this year, though. Not yet.

Tracing your fingers across the worn carvings on the table, you admire the silky smooth texture, worn from years of use. They remind you the Four Corners existed long before you and shall exist long after you. Somehow, you find mortality comforting; especially considering you don't know how much longer you'll live.

The entrance door slams ajar. Instinctively looking over, you see Margaret and Eric enter.

"You're late." You grumble half-heartedly as they take their seats. "Curfew starts at 0000. That means you've one hour, five minutes to drink more than most people in a week."

Margaret eyes you. Eric laughs.

"Good to see you, too." He looks at the nightly specials, trying to figure out what to order. "So, have you kept busy?"

"I beat up MacKenzie—" You jab a thumb at MacKenzie's body, propped out of the way by the bar.

"Again?" Margaret rolls her eyes.

"Well, it was that or..."

Eric places a hand over your lips.

"Maria, we don't speak the names of the dead. It disturbs their souls, preventing them from passing on."

"That does agree with what I've been told, yes." You believe the stories.

Desperate for anything else to discuss, you look into your empty mug. "Shots?"

"Kamikazes." Eric grins.

An hour later, with the last drinks paid for, silence has captured the bar. The jukebox cranks out one last tune but you can't hear the lyrics.

You raise your glass. "To friends not here."

"To friends not here..." The room murmurs in assent.

Spare change litters the tables. You stare into your empty mug and slowly stand. Tossing your scarf around your neck, you offer MacKenzie a wistful smile as his friends help him stagger out the door.

A light cloud field blankets the moon, just enough to let you know snow's coming. The street lamps flicker as a soft breeze penetrates their glass coffins and teases their flames. Under the first lamp, Eric and Margaret huddle together, shivering.

"Why did you wait?"

"We're friends." Margaret speaks as if those words explain everything. To her, they probably do.

Like Jim, you would not have chosen Eric and Margaret for friends. Eric always laughed; boisterous and friendly, he keeps trying to get you to smile. Margaret always had a book; deeply observant and scientific, she had explained the Hei Hua to you. Despite your lack of comprehension, she'd just sighed and patiently continued on.

Some events, however, forged friendships, without the consent of those involved. Mass funerals and death rites made that list.

I met Margaret and Eric that night. Together, we worked in mostly silence. Only Jim had spoken—a prayer. He'd gone to seminary school. Occasionally, we warmed ourselves at one another's fire. No one spoke. We didn't need words. We all knew, this was the end of our world. We just wanted to stay awake long enough to see it.

"When was the last time you slept?" Margaret peers at you.

"Only lesser mortals require sleep," you announce boastfully.

In truth, you can barely keep your eyes open, let alone stand.

"Off to bed with you." Eric prances about.

Shrugging him off, you turn for the forest trail. "I have something to do first."

Margaret grabs you by the wrist. Is she checking your pulse? "Don't push yourself. I can't believe they let you off campus in your condition."

You push your hands in your pockets. "Strange, isn't it?"

Margaret doesn't know, but she suspects. Eric... you don't have the heart to tell him. Maybe Margaret will tell him later.

"Visiting him?"

Margaret releases your wrist.

"Something like that, yeah."

Eric starts after you, mouth open in argument.

"Let her go."

Margaret quietly pulls Eric's arm. He looks after you balefully, yet plaintive. He wants to say something; she walks him off, whispering softly in his ear. Congratulations then—for them both—they manage to never look back.

Why do they let you go? Is that what friend's do? Maybe, you think. Maybe you've made a mistake.

Shivering a path through the woods you've walked too many times before, you head for a bluff looking out over the river. Near water, roots barely holding into the sandy shore, a conifer rises up. Gnarled branches reach out. Scars carved by sword slashes scorch its ancient bark. A memorial to those killed by the Hei Hua. Moonlight shines on the bark, the deep glossy greens a stark contrast against the earthy red and pale scoring.

Your arm tingles. Sensation slowly leaches from the tips of your fingers as they fall numb. Every attempt at moving your arm burns. The void in sensation burns more than any pains you have ever felt before. Instinctively, your hand recoils from touch.

Stars disappear on the horizon beneath the encroaching storm. Your vision blurs, cutting out intermittently, before darkness takes you.

Regaining consciousness, sweat drenches your clothes, but you don't mind, you're not cold. Every limb burns as you move, screaming for oxygen but you don't care.

Snow trickles down your face like tears; the first snowfall of the year.

A typical New England winter has about twenty-five snowy days, accumulating approximately one point five meters; that's about .06 meters per snowfall. Assuming no wind resistance, a snowflake reaches terminal velocity at just over one point five meters per second.

Not exactly racing along there. Each snowflake, in turn, reaches just over one millimeter in diameter.

Long story short—you cut the math off—that means about one billion snowflakes per snowfall, plus or minus a twenty or thirty million, give or take air currents.

You always had a gift for numbers.

Still, wrapping your mind around something so massive isn't easy. See, you remember some of Margaret's lecture. Some survive, but for every survivor, ten die. The projections only get worse, exponentially worse. Analysis indicates the Hei Hua has only reached its half-life; final fatality projections show a high, nine billion count. Five corpses for every snowflake. A population of eleven billion reduced to just under one-tenth, in just under a decade.

One in nine billion. Just a number. Just your entire life.

So many lost, so many more to lose.

Wonderful feeling, standing in a graveyard, past curfew, and not drunk. Not drunk and severely wishing you were. Funny, you clearly remember getting pissed at the bar.

Kneeling before the tree, you offer a prayer.

"Dear lord, send me an angel—fallen from the heavens—for my sins. Count the feathers as they fall, fluttering to the ground. One for every fallen friend, one for every family buried, one for me when my time has come. Tend the fires, add the tinder, guide their souls on one last passage. Straight as any warriors spear, guard them till they reach your shore. Tell my family 'have patience.' I will join them soon enough, when my life is through and over."

Silence fills the world as the water eats my words.

"One point two five meters a second..." Jim sits on the tree limb above your head.

"Assuming wind resistance."

You can't help but smile. "Not exactly a cherry blossom."

"Not. Not really." His lifeless eyes catch the reflection of the snow. "What are you thinking about?"

"Why Hei Hua?" A self-pitying question. Almost.

"From the Mandarin, meaning dark flower. Prions form a flower pattern on the central nervous system, which reveal themselves as dark purple on scans. The purple flower that kills: Hei Hua."

You shake your head in disbelief. "The end wasn't supposed to be like this. The end was supposed to be sirens at oh six hundred, calling us from our racks. Instead, it's this..."

You pull back your coat sleeve, revealing small purple blotches forming on the skin. The final stages.

"Do you believe in God?" asks Jim.

"I didn't." The snow stains red where you fell.

"That prayer, though..."

"Habit. Hope."

"You chose to believe in the finality of life?"

"I chose to believe this life stands for more than a test run; our lives count for something. Yours did."

"And I have to believe death represents only the beginning of our journey." Jim joins you next to the shore. With no wind, the waters sleep like glass. "Otherwise, what do I have after this? I can't believe all that remains is to fade away into nothing, forgotten."

"Being forgotten is the only peace you'll ever find." Stars falling gently to earth alight on your outstretched hand. "I don't mind trying to survive; living should have just been a little easier, though. That little bit makes all the difference."

"You always had a temper." Jim rubs his cheek, remembering. "From the suburbs of Honolulu, a genius level repeat offender who couldn't stop fighting." Why does he always tell this story? "You lost your father in a drive-by. Your mother worked to make ends meet, never home. Too smart to work, too angry to care."

Too scared to fail.

He understands. You both lived your lives moment to moment, even before the Hei Hua. Recklessness mistaken for cockiness, fear mistaken for rage; half the time, you had no idea what to do and the other half you just wanted to burn the world.

"Hey, Jim..."

He has the same eyes as you: empty.

Everyone has friends, those they respect. But, your best friends, the ones closest to you, you consider them your betters. Best friends you don't keep secrets from, because the things you don't say—names, stories—they already know.

"You never came to class on time, always ready with an excuse. Your homework piling up." Laugh bubbles from your lips. "You had other dreams, other aspirations."

Where you fell, snow has quietly blanketed.

"I'm glad we became friends."

Turning, your fingers trace the notches knifed into the tree bark.

"My mother said, 'when you hear the voices of the dead, beware. You're too close to them.'"

You lean against the tree. Dawn will break soon.

"Last year, I begged you not to leave. I wasn't ready."

Grey eases across the overcast sky. The dawn comes.

"Now, I think I am."

In the distance, the church tower shudders deeply in the chilled frost of morning, shattering the illusion of peace. Bell chimes and the first snowfall. Someone died this night.

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Maria Paulani stepped off the bus. The academies courtyard didn't look like she had imagined. Unlike all those television shows, these walls sat worn and scuffed, ancient and forever. The courtyard felt special though, like she had come home.

Peeking through the clouds, the lazy colors of sunrise bathed the quiet valley in a soothing, ethereal glow.

Turning the corner, she collided with someone, crashing to the floor. The name badge read: Quartermain, Jim.

Bristling, she brushed herself off and stood, waiting for an apology. None came. Quartermain looked rather plain. In fact, any way she thought about him, he appeared unremarkable. Yet, her instincts shouted: *punch him!*

His eyes though, bothered her. Empty, lifeless, and, yet, simultaneously full of rage and fire. How did you explain that to someone—having a chip on your shoulder the size of the Horse Head nebula and not caring? Their eyes met, immediately leading to blows. Finally pulled apart, she could only match his glare, content with bloodying his nose. She would never get along with him.

Two months later, the first snow fell.