

Darkside Knocking

*"The greatest cruelty is our casual
blindness to the despair of others."*

-J. Michael Straczynski

A'pral liked streets paved in calcite because they were smoother against her tentacles. She slithered over the slippery stone, radiant with heat from the sun, and drank in the familiar bustle of luncheon time along the boulevard. The scent of the rush-water river blew in from behind the trees.

She purred with contentedness, following the thoroughfare's curve past a contemplation area replete with florentina flowers. The world glowed with lilac sunlight, and A'pral ran the tip of her hook idly over the center of her carapace. It was so peaceful here she was tempted to slither over to one of the large stone bowls for a rest, but it wouldn't do to dawdle. J'ral was easy going, but even he might grow annoyed if her tardiness was excessive.

In no time, she was traversing the path leading to his long-time dwelling. It was larger than most homes in the province, round as an overturned cup, and made of good, black clay scooped from the nearby river. Trees like jagged spikes lined the path on either side, and A'pral enjoyed how they shivered in the breeze as she galumphed past them. The auto-gate recognized her and swung open at once, just in time for J'ral's thoughts to drift up to greet her.

"In the solarium, Beloved."

Smiling at the sheer audacity of such laziness, she made the familiar journey through his sloping halls.

"What's this?" she thought to him. "Too tired to meet one's guests at the entry? What would your mother say?"

“Pish. We’ve been friends far too long for that. You’re practically family. Please, help yourself to some refreshment, and while you’re at it, be a dear, and bring me a sapati, won’t you? I’ve a powerful thirst.”

A’pral flicked her tail in indignation, but swung the hook of her claw in counter measure so he would know her reprimand was only a tease.

“Incorrigible. Worse every time I see you.”

“Wouldn’t you be bored if I wasn’t?”

Once she’d settled down in the bowl next to his, sapati gently smoking in one of her tentacles, she brought up the real reason for her visit. “Have you given any more thought to my proposal?” she thought.

“Yes, and I still fail to see what your students would want with a washed up old dauber like me.”

“Stop it,” she chided him. “You’re the artist in residence for the Office of the Progenitor. And you’ve been commissioned by the chancellor of three separate provinces. *And—*”

He tried to protest and she rolled over him, as she’d known she would have to.

“*And* you’re a singularly engaging and interesting individual, whom they’d be lucky to learn from.”

“Dearest...”

He stopped immediately and she knew she had him.

He reclined in his bowl, brushing his hook through the sleek, waxed tips of his drooping moustaches. “They’re anthropology students, not artists,” he thought. “I know pigments and glaze. Nothing of science or cataloging or any of that orderly nonsense which is anathema to an unfettered soul like me.”

“Anathema, my thoraxular vent. You can give them perspectives on art and culture that I never could. You’re perfect. And besides, they’re higher learning students, they’re used to

engaging the broader applications of their field.”

“You’re so annoying when you’re undeterred.” He blew out a thin stream of air, looking askance at her from the quivering tips of his eye stalks. “Though, where I’ll find the time now that I’ve added to my collection, I don’t know.”

“Oh?” she thought, generous now that she’d won. “A curio?”

Despite his protestations to the contrary, it was anthropology that had brought them together. They had met in their first year of higher learning, at an illicit auction in a space port wares-room. They’d bid to the death over a phosphorescent carving of a multi tentacled female deity. J’ral because the glow tantalized his burgeoning artistic sensibilities and A’pral because it reminded her of the Ras Mag’rit, the first fetish ever discovered on her planet. Rancorous as that meeting had been, it opened a door to a lifelong friendship.

“I should be so lucky. This is something rather more work intensive. And more interesting.”

He heaved himself up from his sprawl, setting his sapati on the low table beside his resting bowl, and disappeared down the sloping hallway. He was gone for a long time.

A’pral was just about to go in search of him, when she heard him ascending the hallway. He quivered in excitement, tentacles rolled together to protect the item within. He set it on the table before them.

Revealed was a creature of great peculiarity, fishbelly pale, its head covered in a mop of microfilaments like a furfly. She could see it was quadrupedal, each limb ending in a fleshy splash that looked to A’pral like the buds of stunted tentacles. It was small enough to fit into a drinking glass, but its exact dimensions were hard to determine because of how it crouched. A strip of medical tape wound around it’s center.

“Is it hurt?” A’pral asked.

“The covering is completely superfluous. I leave it alone because it pouts when I take it off. See?”

His hook came down and gently tugged the strip away and indeed the creature began protesting at once, reaching its malformed limbs upwards and opening wide its seed sized mouth. The creature elongated its tiny body, reaching to the fullest of its miniscule height, before hunkering down once again paltry eyeballs staring at nothing. Its teeth glinted wet like specks of crystal.

“How can you stand to look at it? It’s so...bald and squishy. It looks like an external testicle.”

J’ral laughed, deep rumbling barks from the meat under his carapace. The creature stopped reaching and hunkered to the floor. A reek came up from it.

“Phew!” A’pral waved hook and tentacle to clear the air. “Does it do that often?”

“Sometimes,” thought J’ral. “It has very pungent hormones.” He laughed again. He’d always taken abnormal delight in shocking others.

“I’m almost afraid to ask. Wherever did you find such a thing?” she thought.

One of his eyestalks turned toward her, sly. He ran his tongue along his jagged incisors and thought with a most haughty and condescending air, “Best not to know when the knowing would vex one.”

It was obvious that J’ral was desperate to be asked, so A’pral, being mildly perverse herself, thought, “Best not to know, then.” And settled into her seat with definite finality. That stumped him alright.

While he sputtered, the little thing began crawling, scooting along the table. J’ral put a tentacle along the edge to prevent it from tumbling over. It touched the tentacle with its foreleg then rose on its hind parts, following along the tentacle's length.

“I swear this thing is suicidal. Always getting stuck behind furniture and falling off seats.”

“Maybe you should return it.”

“Not an option. My contact’s sales only move one way, I’m afraid, ” he thought.

A’pral blew a blast of air from her mouth, fluttering the ends of her moustache. “The company you keep.”

His eye stalks danced. He loved transgressing, but loved being chided for it even more. She suspected it was the main reason he continued to make rash and outlandish decisions like purchasing an unpapered, non-native animal as a trophy.

“Aren’t you a little old to be doing irresponsible things like buying illegal items in a back alley import market?”

“Poppycock.” he thought, settling back into his scooped stone seat with supreme satisfaction. “I’m entirely responsible. The marketeer promised it had been given the full complement of tests prior to auction. Everything from cognition to virology.”

“And?”

“It’s warm blooded, mostly male, consciousnessless, and one of a kind.”

“Well don’t come crying to me if the administrators fine you for purchasing untaxed goods,” she thought, taking a slurping sip of her sapati.

He clicked his hook against his carapace, delighted by her admonishments. The creature had given up trying to find the boundaries of the table. It curled up like a burning piece of paper and didn’t move again.

The symposium had been a success. As she’d known he would, J’ral had inflamed the students desire to learn. He’d preened about the small stage, barely sitting in his bowl in favor of

clumping here and there on the tip tops of his tentacles. Between his anecdotes and the Q and A, his didaction had fathered a hundred new student projects. It was nearly three weeks later, and A'pral was finally seeing him again to celebrate their triumph.

She let herself in and found him in the kitchen slurping the midday meal off a dark, stone dish.

“Hungry?” he thought. “I have enough for two.”

“Thank you,” she thought, retrieving a dish and portioning out some of the thick, green noodles boiling merrily in their pot.

“How’s your new pet?” It wasn’t necessarily the first thing she wanted to communicate, but the small square of gauze on the counter had pushed the question tumbling out.

“Oh, it's fine. Really settling in now. Wanna hold it?”

J'ral returned a few moments later with the creature and deposited it on the flat of A'pral’s most mobile tentacle. The animal looked diminished.

“What do you feed it?” she asked, stroking the very tip of a tentacle down the infinitesimal bumps of its spine.

“It’s the most unimaginable nightmare. Right now, I’m trying grubs. A healer friend of mine has a myna,” he thought, sending along a picture of the healer and her pet. “They’re quadrupedal too, and have just the two eyes, so I hoped their diets would be similar.” He paused momentarily to suck up a long string of noodles. “But my little lovie ran from them when they started moving and of course, they’re poisonous almost immediately after death, so.” He sighed. “It eats Jah’halal fruit well enough, but then it shits everywhere.”

A'pral turned the body gently over. The creature’s head swayed, back and forth, seeking without comprehension.

“And it gets lost all the time,” he continued. “It wanders away and then I’ll find it digging in some corner like a burrowing cricket.”

“Poor thing,” she thought.

“Poor me,” thought J’ral. “Taking care of it has turned out to be a real hardship.”

“If only someone could have advised you against taking on the care and feeding of an alien wild animal,” A’pral thought, laughing at him. She picked up the square of medical tape and placed it over the creature.

It responded at once, grabbing the ends of the fabric and pulling them around itself. The oscillation of its head increased in speed and rotation.

Intrigued, A’pral placed it on the counter ignoring J’ral’s chatter until he slithered away, disgusted by her inattention.

The creature seemed to breathe in great sucks of air, its little mouth puckering open and flopping shut repeatedly. She bent an eye stalk level with the table and watched it up close. Its forelegs stretched out. Its mouth flapped. Finally, it fell shuddering to all fours.

She tried to telegraph her movement, but the trembling thing still jumped when she touched it. She stroked it gently, with her smallest and softest tentacle and its little back bent to her ministrations, head buried in its forelegs. Slowly, deliberately it brought the limb closest to her down twice, then laid there in silence for a while. There were three tiny taps. A pause. Then five. Then seven.

As if in a dream, A’pral repeated the sequence, hook knocking against the counter top. Two, three, five, seven.

The creature’s head jerked towards her. It swayed with the totality of its entire body and touched out the sequence again, adding eleven.

She answered. Two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen.

It shambled upright, top legs outstretched as it stumbled toward her, shuddering, mouth agape. It flinched as it reached her curved, bone hook, but when she touched it with a tentacle, it clung to her.

“J’ral!” Her summons flew to his mind, more urgent need than polished thought.

“Goodness, Beloved. What is it?” he thought, flowing through the entry fast as his tentacles could carry him.

“J’ral.” Her mind spun. “I think this creature is sentient.” She held the little thing cradled in her tentacles.

He laughed. “Impossible. It was screened before I purchased it, remember?”

“But did you see the dealer do it?”

“No, but I’m confident he did,” J’ral thought.

“It knows the sequence of prime numbers. It must have an understanding of mathematics,” she thought.

All twelve of his eyes boggled at her. “How? Without consciousness, how could it possibly understand concepts that complicated?”

“But it – just look.” She sent him what had just transpired, the escalating sequence of primes.

To her chagrin, he laughed. “My Dear! Oh, how you frightened me! That’s what has you all in a twist? It jerks all the time with no rhyme or reason. Who knows what causes it.”

He looked sure of himself. She’d never persuade him. The only course was to meet him in kind with bullish assurance. “I want to check it for sentience. Now.”

“A’pral!” he thought appalled. “How inconvenient you are! It would take me ages to find my translator. For the love of the sun, I haven’t used it since higher learning.”

“Find it.” She turned her back on him. “I’m serious J’ral. I sacrificed a dig at the ruins at Quem’M Atem to support you when Jel stopped taking your messages. Get searching.”

He stumped away, sending her epithets and curses and he slithered away, but A’pral had no capacity to worry over him. With more care than she ever had before, she sent forth a mental message.

“Greetings,” she thought.

There was no response. No quickening in the creature, no gentle waves of thought, and certainly no return message.

She thought to it again. “My name is A’pral.”

It made no reaction; thought nothing in return.

She was still at it, when J’ral returned with the UT. They hooked it to the power stream, and A’pral carefully scanned the creature. Nothing. Even so, she placed the cranial node on her head, between her forwardmost eyestalks and thought again, “Greetings.”

Nothing.

“There. You see?” J’ral thought.

“Wait,” Turning her attention once more to the creature she thought, “My name is A’pral. Do you have a name?”

Nothing.

She adjusted the frequency and tried again. Again. Again. But always, there was nothing. The creature was demonstrably unaware that anyone was thinking to it. And there was no evidence it could communicate back.

“I want to take him to a healer for testing.”

“Whyever for? If it doesn’t register on the UT, it can’t think. The youngest child knows this.”

“Maybe it thinks on a frequency we can’t interpret.”

“For love of the virtues, A’pral the universal translator is *universal*. It computes trillions of brain wave frequencies. You’re acting insane.”

Rage built behind A’pral’s carapace. “I know what I saw! Has it ever done something like this before?”

“How should I know? I told you it never stops wiggling around and getting into trouble. I can’t pay attention to it every second of every day.”

A’pral barrelled on. “And it’s skinny. Why haven’t you taken it to a healer?”

“Surely you mean a veterinarian? What will I say when they ask for its license?”

“Do you play with it? Do you take it out? Did it ever cross your self-centered little mind that maybe it was trying to communicate?”

He swelled like a wave. “Not that this is remotely your business, but the damn thing used to have full run of the house until it started getting stuck. I have no choice but to keep it in the waste room for its own safety. I’ve been turning myself inside out trying to make it happy!”

“But do you interact with it or leave it alone all day?”

“How dare you come here and interrogate me. You’re always clicking your hook about my life and how I do things. Always pushing me to do what you want, like mentoring your plodding students. I paid for it, it’s mine, and if I want to grind the damn thing to paste in the waste disposal it’s no business of yours!”

“Fine! I’m leaving. And I’m taking it with me, since you obviously don’t care.”

“Absolutely not!” He exploded to his full height in front of her, tentacles arching over his back. “It’s mine, give it here.”

Who knew what damage any significant jostling could do to the tiny slip of skin cradled in her tentacle. Besides was she really going to confront her oldest friend with physical force? Eyestalks trembling, she tried to deposit the creature into his outstretched tentacles. It clung and had to be peeled away. She told herself its sightless eyes were not looking for her.

The next day she sat at the computer terminal with purpose, but immediately found herself at a loss. Where should she start? There were quadrillions of animals and beings in the database. What did she have to go off of? Mostly bald, possibly bipedal, single penis. Likes to be stroked but only with tentacles.

“I don’t often see you in the zoology lab,” Kal, the adjunct zoology professor, thought as he slithered through the entry.

“Hello,” A’pral thought back, distracted.

He sidled up to her, nervously stroking his moustache into place. “Anything I can help with?”

“Not unless you can find the origins of an animal no one’s ever seen before.”

“As a matter of fact, I’d be delighted.” He clipped his hook on one of the mobile bowls and dragged it closer. “What are we looking for?”

She told him everything, except what might implicate J’ral. Fight or not, he was still her friend.

“It has big eyes?” he asked.

“Yes, at least in proportion to its face.”

“But it’s blind?”

“I think so. It stares but doesn’t see. And doesn’t react to movement unless it’s touched.”

“Maybe this animal has adapted to see a spectrum of light different from what’s created by the sun? Visible light occupies only one end of the spectrum but it extends far beyond what we can perceive with our naked eyes. Perhaps this animal is functionally blind here.”

“Yes!” A’pral enthused, instantly certain he was right. “I think you’re onto something.”

Encouraged, he continued. “And, it could explain why the animal prefers certain stimuli like the fabric bandages. Perhaps the ambient temperature of its native environment is much warmer or the bandages resemble its species’ nesting materials.”

“But where does it belong?” She pushed back violently from the terminal. “I need to find if it’s sentient, and I can’t reasonably do that without more information about its home.”

"I assume you tried the universal translator?"

She sighed. “No response. But it knew the sequence of primes. That has to mean something.”

His hook tapped on the desk as he thought. “I wonder if my associate at the Omni Institute of Higher Learning could help you.” He straightened from where he’d been slouching. “I’ll reach out to her and ask that she contact you. Her institute has the best exobiology department on the continent. For now, let me set you up with some equipment.”

“Thank you, Kal!” she thought, throwing her tentacles around him so forcefully their carapaces clicked together.

His tail lashed the air, tentacles wavering like trees in a high wind. “It’s nothing really.”

The auto-gate did not open like usual, forcing her to demand entry with the ingress request signal. J’ral opened the entry a fraction, draping himself across the chasm with a snide air.

“Something you want? Come to insult my ancestors instead of my virtues this time? Perhaps you’re here to confess you never liked my art?”

“Don’t be petty, J’ral.” At his wounded expression, she relented. Even if he would never admit it, their argument must have cut deep for him to act this way. “I love you.” She thought at last. “You know I do.”

He turned his head away but all of his eyestalks stayed on her.

“I was worried about him. You know how I get. Had to bring every injured myna in the neighborhood back home when I was a child.” She moved up the path until she finally stood at the lowest level of the entry ramp. She held up a basket. “I brought some sapati from that bottlery you like.”

He slid inside with barely a backward glance. “I suppose you better come in, then.”

He retrieved the creature and placed it in the glass terrarium A’pral had brought. The container had one corner for water and food and one for waste, and the floor was lined with soft cloth for resting and sleeping and wrapping in.

It was skinnier than ever, limp and cold. A’pral covered it with a piece of cloth and it tugged to find its boundaries, cocooning itself in the fabric.

J’ral touched it gently with his hook but the thing crawled deeper into its nest to escape the petting.

“I don’t think it likes that very much,” A’pral thought sadly.

She placed a tippi berry on its feeding plate.

It seemed to smell the food, crawling over to sweep its arms over the berry’s entire circumference. It tried to push an appendage in and pry out a morsel, but was too weak.

A’pral bisected the berry with the tip of her hook and tapped the plate.

The creature pitched forward onto a slippery, red surface and ate a few bites before laying down, seemingly exhausted.

“I brought something else from the institute,” she thought as she set a box of bulbs on the table.

A’pral carefully screwed in a lightbulb into the aperture near the feeding plate and turned on the power stream. The creature did not react, although it twisted one side of its head toward her tentacle as it worked.

It didn't have a reaction to infrared light, nor the next frequency nor the next. She was fast losing hope as she changed out bulbs. Suddenly the creature jolted as if electrified and clapped its misshapen appendages over its face.

“What's happening?!” J'ral thought urgently.

She turned off the bulb, but that seemed to distress the creature further. It crawled under the device clawing at the glass wall with its head thrown back, sightless eyes staring up towards the empty bulb. Its mouth stretched wider than she'd ever seen. Taking a chance she turned the light on again. The creature hid its face, but its tortured movement finally stopped.

They waited for a long time.

At last it moved off its belly, scanning as it often had before, only slower. It stood on its back legs, walked a few steps towards the water dish, but sat down almost immediately. It crawled the rest of the way.

A'pral moved an eye stalk level with the glass. For the first time, their eyes connected. He reared back far as his prone position would allow, covering his face with dead-white forearms. Slowly, he lowered them.

She could see something in his eyes, something belligerent and focused burning out of his face like a conflagration. “Ancestors forgive me,” she thought. How terrible, the isolation of a sentient mind.

Softly, so softly, she tapped three times on the enclosure wall. He tapped back, three almost miniscule slams of his fist where he lay fragile and hollow as a shed skin. Weak as he was he glared at her, fearless, and bared his sand grain teeth.

“J'ral,” she turned an eyestalk to face him. “I'm going to take this creature home with me. I'm going to investigate his natural environment and recreate it as best I can. When I find his home, I'm returning him there. Alright?”

“Alright.”

A message waited at her work station the next day. A'pral played it tentacles trembling. He'd seemed pleased with his new enclosure and even more pleased to look around as she'd carried him back to her dwelling, one careful slip at a time. Hopefully this missive was good news.

Greetings from Instructor Lel'alal from the Omni institute.

Your little friend sounds intriguing, I'd be happy to evaluate him. As I'm sure Kal's told you, we have many avenues to explore: kinetic forms, pheromones, vibration patterns... The list goes on. I can meet you as early as tomorrow if that is amenable.

“Yes!” she thought to no one, rattling a hook against the terminal in triumph.

A'pral sped through the work day, dropping her bags at the door and racing to the kitchen to cut up some fruit for her guest. How she wished they could communicate. How she wished she could tell him not to fear, that one day he would be home again under the warmth of his own stars. He sat wrapped in fabric, motionless under the bald, hanging light. He was unreactive to her presence, though he was no longer blind.

She touched him gently to wake him and found him stiff as a figurine, his last lonely moment preserved in the rigid angles of a tiny, tortured body given out at last. A sob forced its way out of her. She nestled him under the fabric in his living area and sank to the floor.

Spirit never truly died. Consciousness was the only eternal, even consciousness too rare to be translated by machines. She hoped the spark that had animated him was even now flying

onward to the life that waited beyond this one. She hoped that whatever he had been, he was finally home.