

SOFYA DERKACH

CLOSER ENCOUNTERS

“Look,” she said, stopping in the driveway. “I’ve been gone—a while. I don’t know how my family will react to this. Any of this. Or you.”

Faint music and shouting came from inside, combining into the singular din I’d been hearing for quite some time.

I looked at her, uncomprehending. “If their responses are inadequate, I can always—”

“No,” she said quickly. “Not that. Anything but that.”

I shrugged. She looked me up and down.

“Straighten your tie.”

I made the necessary adjustment.

“Alright,” she said. “Ok. We can do this. I can do this.”

“Rina,” I said softly, mouth forming oddly over the syllables. “I am here with you. This cannot be worse than anything we have faced before. We brought flowers.”

She made a face. “You still don’t do contractions well, do you?”

“Open the damn door,” I said.

She laughed and finally breached the distance separating us from the door. Stopped. Double checked her purse, her tools, her eyeliner, and then pressed the buzzer. A shrill ring rose above the music and a slurred voice called, “I’ll get it!” from somewhere beyond.

One of Rina’s family members opened the door. From the photos I’d seen, it had to be her mother. Older, yes, more intoxicated, yes. But undeniably the same woman. It struck me how truly old those photos had been. Gone was the artificially fluffed mane, gone were the shoulder pads, the eyeshadow. Her hair was short now, tucked behind her ears and she wore a rather sensible dress, which I appreciated.

Still, all of that caught my eye only after I managed to properly take in the astonishment, excitement, relief, and hope that flitted across her face

the instant she saw Rina. I realized seeing her was almost like seeing Rina herself in a few decades. I wondered what would change for her.

"Oh, my darling," the woman breathed, and set aside her glass.

"Mom," said Rina, and fell, more than stepped, into her mother's embrace.

"Where have you been? We've been worried sick! I didn't think you'd even show up!" babbled the woman. Vaguely, I recalled her name being Susan.

"Same day, same place, every year," said Rina, "How could I forget?"

Her mother laughed wetly and stepped back, arms still clasped on Rina's shoulders, taking a good look at her. Her face slowly fell as she catalogued the scars, the marks, the odd accessories. How Rina looked older than she had any right to be. Apparently at a loss for words, her mother looked up. And that's when she saw me.

I've never been too good at reading emotions on Rina and wasn't terribly surprised that this translated to her mother, too. However, I found the confusion, shock, and then dawning terror quite recognizable.

"Honey," she said, "Who—Who is that?"

Rina stepped back, out of her mother's reach, to put a hand on my shoulder. "Mother," she said, steeling herself. "This is my partner, Jazz. It's a long story, but I promise, they're good people."

"Jazz," her mother said faintly. "People."

I approximated a smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Jazz, I'm Susan," she said, extending her hand towards me.

"Susan," I said, tasting the syllables. Delicately, I shook her hand. "It is a pleasure. I have heard a lot about you."

"You have," said Susan, and it wasn't quite a question. "Well, come in, come in. Uh. Do you drink?"

"Blood," I said in a perfect monotone.

Rina snorted. Her mother; however, didn't appreciate the attempt at humor.

"It's a joke, Mom," Rina said. "They drink and eat what we do. It's no big deal."

With that, she pushed her way inside. I ducked in after her.

"No big deal," mouthed Susan.

I held the flowers out in her direction. "I believe you will like these."

One of the blooms opened its mouth and yawned.

"Lovely," said Susan, and carefully placed the bouquet onto the nearest elevated surface.

I made a genuine expression of contentment, which only seemed to confuse her more, and followed Rina down the short hallway and into the main room of the house. In all appearances, this had been the source of the noise from before. A bunch of folk (all human) crowded together, laughing and drinking and eating and creating a general ruckus. Rina entered first, and someone noticed her and gave a shout. Within seconds, she was surrounded by a gaggle of family members, touching and prodding and asking a million questions. Then, they noticed me.

It was odd. Usually, it was I that people noticed first and Rina the one left out. Then, the comments always came. She was too small, shaped too oddly. Where was she even from? Was she contraband? She always shouted equally rude things back. Now, I realized how brave she'd been in those moments. With everyone staring at me, I found I could barely move, let alone speak.

"The first person to call the police, or anyone else for that matter, gets it," said Rina ominously. From experience, I knew she wasn't joking.

This was met with mute incomprehension and a rising sense of fear.

"Folks," said Susan, wriggling past me. "This is—Jazz."

"What's that short for?" someone hollered.

It wasn't short for anything. I just liked the music—one of the first things Rina had shown me—so much that it had somehow led to a nickname and stuck. That was back before I could speak her language, or she mine, and translators were rather unreliable. In truth, it wasn't even close to my real name. That wasn't information I usually divulged; it generally wasn't anything that anyone but my closest family members were supposed to know. But Rina loved these people and they had asked. So I answered.

“Yeah, I can’t pronounce that,” said the speaker. Then, belatedly, “Sorry I can try, but—”

“No worries,” I said. “What is that you are drinking?”

“Oh, uh,” said the person, as if noticing the drink in his hand for the first time. “A lemonade? Sparkling?”

It was a shade of pink I hadn’t often seen. I liked that.

“And where can a sentient being get one of those?”

He grinned and with that, the proverbial ice seemed to be broken.

The relatives crowded around me, too. Rina pulled me close, held my hand, tried to redirect the questions in a way that sounded natural. She had always been good with words, and I found this doubly true when she spoke her own language, no translations muddying her crisp words. It was good to watch.

The speaker from before approached with another lemonade and stared at me for a second, as if trying to decide which hand to shove the drink into. I helped him out by taking it myself, for which he looked immensely relieved.

The glass was shockingly cold and clouded from condensation. Beads of moisture swelled and rolled down its side, seeping into my skin. The liquid itself was satisfyingly pink. Not too vibrant, not too pale, but still somehow soft. Tiny bubbles zinged up to the surface, hissing and popping almost inaudibly. It was delightful.

“Thank you,” I said.

“No prob. I’m Dan, Annie’s boyfriend.”

“It is nice to meet you. I am Jazz.”

That was the last thing I said for a while, and eventually, the questions died down. Or rather, the family managed to separate Rina from me and whisk her away into the kitchen, where I suspected she was being interrogated separately. No one else seemed to want to approach me and Dan was nowhere in sight, so I edged towards the wall, away from the crowd. All the furniture in the room seemed to be crowded against the dimly patterned wallpaper, and I tried desperately to figure out which ones were chairs and which ones were tables. They looked so oddly similar. Eventually, I gave up. The only thing I could narrow down, from memory, was the sofa, and there was already someone sitting there.

Still, the person in question looked relatively harmless, small, and frail. White hair, a lined face, spotted skin, all of which suggested old age. That seemed safe. I sat down on the opposite edge of the sofa.

The person fixed me with a scrutinizing eye.

"Who're you?"

"I am Jazz."

This was greeted with narrowed eyes. "I haven't seen you before."

"I am here with Rina."

"Oh. That's alright then. I'm Catherine, but you can call me Grandma."

"Grandma."

"That's right, sweetie."

I nodded and took a sip of my lemonade. It buzzed through my mouth, tickling my taste buds.

Grandma seemed to lose interest in me and let her gaze wander around the room. After she'd had her fill of watching the socializing, she looked away from me, at the wall, on which hung a rather abstract depiction of an animal, presumably a mammal, frozen mid-jump in some sort of field. It was all rather crude. The colors were uncomfortably bright, straight out of the tube, but muddied around the edges where the painter had not waited for them to dry. I tried to figure out the artistic merit of it, let alone why it was displayed so prominently, but failed. Then, I saw the scrawl of Rina's name in the corner. Odd. I had not known her to draw. Grandma started turning her head, eyes darting lazily across the room. Quite suddenly, she saw me again.

"Who're you?" she asked.

"Grandma, I am Jazz," I said.

"Oh, are you one of my grandchildren?"

"No, I am here with Rina, Grandma."

"Well, I'm glad you're not one of my grandchildren," she said. "Lord have mercy on whatever poor girl popped you out."

"Grandma, I hatched from an egg."

Her eyes narrowed again. "Are you a communist?"

“A what?”

“A communist.”

I still wasn't sure what that was, whether being one was good or bad. I had about a fifty percent chance of being right.

“Yes,” I said, with absolutely no conviction.

She gasped. “Well I'll never.”

That wasn't good. I'd heard the phrase numerous times from Rina, and it had never been positive.

“Excuse me,” I said, and walked away.

I moved awkwardly around the perimeter of the room until I reached a rudimentary glass door that led to the outside. Everyone tried to act like they weren't watching me do so. Grateful for the escape, I slid the door open just the tiniest bit and squeezed through.

Outside was cool, with a light breeze raking through the grass. The entire space seemed entirely untended, almost wild in its overgrown state. I could see fairly clearly, though there wasn't much light here. The star this planet orbited was no longer visible, but its moon reflected the star's light rather prettily.

I heard something move nearby, straightened up, and took another sip of my lemonade. Zing. It was important to appear casual. Then, I saw the thing and dropped all pretenses. It was large, almost half of Rina's height, and dark, with pointed ears, bright eyes, and sharp teeth.

It let out a soft wuff and stepped closer.

I froze.

It wasn't human, I knew that much. The sheer number of animals on this planet ran through my mind and I felt a little nauseous.

It gave another wuff and sniffed at my legs. Not finding my smell repellent, it stuck out its long tongue and licked my pant leg, spreading wet saliva all over it. Briefly terrified that it might be corrosive, I made to push it away but stopped. Just in case. A few seconds proved it wasn't. I downed the rest of my lemonade to give me time to think.

A dog.

It was a dog. Of course it was a dog.

I crouched down next to it. It seemed to grin.

“Good dog,” I said cautiously.

It seemed very excited at the concept of that and licked my face, not bothered that the texture and composition of it was off. I set down my glass, still thinking. Another lick. Experimentally, I rubbed its head. It seemed to like that and I continued doing so. Its fur, though short, was soft and warm under my fingertips. Pleasant.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed when I heard the door behind me slide open.

“Hey, dude,” said someone. The speaker from before. With the lemonade. Dan.

I turned my head around to look at him. He stared at me with abject horror and swore under his breath.

“They uh, sent me out here to make sure you weren't, like, eating the dog or anything.”

“The dog is quite all right,” I assured him, standing up and turning my body to align it with my head.

“Cool,” he said. “Cool cool cool. Then you won't mind me standing out here for the next—” he checked his phone, “—three hours. You're lucky you came late, buddy. I've been here since this morning.”

“I advocated for arriving earlier,” I said. “But Rina insisted we delay. She almost did not want to come. However, we were in the area and it was difficult to refuse politely.”

Dan's eyes seemed to bulge out of his head. “No way, dude. You wanted to come?”

“It is important to meet your significant other's family if you think the relationship will last in the long term.” Or it was for me. Rina seemed to hold no such opinions. It didn't bother me. There was no chance of an offspring, no complications either one of us needed to be aware of. Still. It was nice.

The human sighed. “That's what Annie said. Except it sounded more threatening coming from her.”

“Annie is Rina's—sister?”

“Cousin.”

"Ah, cousin."

Dan produced a packet of something out of his pocket and opened it, revealing it to be full of white cylindrical sticks with some sort of plant filling.

"Mind if I smoke?"

I blinked, uncomprehending. He took that as a yes and dug another container (small and made of plastic and metal, filled with a fluid) out of his pocket. Nonchalantly, he put the stick in his mouth, flicked the wheel on the smaller container, producing a small flame, and lit the end of the stick.

"We all thought Rina was dead, you know," he said suddenly, looking at me with something that could be nervousness. "I mean, she disappeared all of a sudden, and then the local news of alien abductions, total cover up for a murder, Annie said. But her social media was still active. She still liked posts. Shared links. But messages? No response."

"You know her well?" I asked. I remembered hearing about him vaguely, but no concrete details came to mind.

"Eh," he said. "Well enough. I've been dating Annie for five years."

"Well, as one of your great prophets says, perhaps you should 'put a ring on it.'"

"Oh my god," said Dan, sounding mortified. "Oh my god. I'm getting lectured by an alien. What's in these?"

"In what?"

"My cigarettes," he said. "You guys smoke up there?"

"My people do not," I said.

Dan looked at me closely. I could see that somewhere in there, he was fighting a battle with himself, and losing fast. "Oh, what the hell. Want to try it?"

As always, my curiosity won out. "Yes."

He handed over the stick. I took a shallow lungful of smoke. I wasn't sure what effect it was supposed to have on humans, but it didn't seem like anything special to me. I handed it back.

"So how'd you and Rina meet?" he asked, taking the cigarette. "Did you. Um. Abduct her?"

"I did not remove her from your planet," I said. "I did, however, acquire the ship that took her. I was going to bring her back sooner but we ran into some—issues."

"Oh my g—Are you a space cop?"

"No."

"A space pirate?"

"No."

"What are you?!"

"I create more appealing depictions of reality for the public to consume."

"I don't even know what that means."

I tried a smile.

Dan inhaled even more smoke, and handed the stick to me again. Politely, I brought it to my lips, but did not inhale. He didn't seem to notice.

"You look—sort of human," he said.

"So do you."

He laughed. "Well, I guess there's no accounting for taste among the women in this family. Us boyfriends have to stick together, huh?"

I passed the stick back. "Us what?"

"Us boyfriends? Us boys?"

"Dan, I am not a boy."

"Oh man. Sorry. I thought—You don't look like—I guess I always expected alien girls—"

"I am not sure any of your classifications will fit me," I said. "It would be easier to explain in my own language, but it would take too long for you to learn it."

"So you're not using one of those—translators? Fish in your head? Microbes?"

We had something like that, but they were useful only for rudimentary things, not a deep understanding. Plus, I didn't want to give him the wrong idea.

"I learned your language, Dan," I said. "So I could properly communicate with Rina. And with you."

"You're—You're speaking English?"

"Indeed, Dan."

"Awesome!"

I turned away from the house to stare at the sky, in the direction I'd come from. "Your fellow family members do not think so."

He shrugged, inhaled, came to stand next to me, and passed the cigarette. "I guess I always believed there was something out there. You being that something isn't much of a stretch. Plus I'm a little—"

He didn't specify what he was exactly, and I didn't press, just handed the cigarette over to him after a perfunctory breath.

"Anyways," he said. "As long as you don't tell Granny Cathy you're a communist, you should be good."

I froze.

He interpreted the movement correctly. "Oh no."

"In my defense, I do not know what that means."

Dan shook his head. "Wow. Well. Maybe she'll forget all about it."

I nodded. Dan stared at the cigarette in his hand, now less than half of the stick. Maybe the breaths I'd taken were deeper than I had thought. I had little concept of human lung capacity.

"I probably shouldn't be smoking. You wanna finish this off, my dude?" he asked.

I took the cigarette stub from his hand and popped it in my mouth. Chewed. Swallowed.

Dan stared at me. "Why—Why would—Why—"

"Is that not what you meant?"

At that moment, the glass door slid open.

"Is Dan giving you any trouble?"

Something inside me fluttered at the sound of Rina's voice. I turned to see her standing in the doorway, looking skeptically at my new acquaintance.

"Me? Giving this guy trouble?" said Dan, sounding slightly hysterical. "Dude just ate a cigarette!"

"I swear to God, Daniel, if you get them hooked on those things—"

"He will not," I assured her.

"Well," she said. "Good. Now get inside, both of you. The family wants to have a sit down."

She held out her hand and I reached out and took it. She pulled me in.

"Just like last time," she said, smiling.

"Last time involved an ice cliff," I reminded her.

"So, just like last time."

"And the time before."

"And the time before."

She stretched up and pressed a kiss to my cheek.

"Y'all are disgusting," said Dan. "Just get inside. And keep—them—away from Grandma. They told her they're a communist."

Rina groaned. "Sorry I didn't warn you. I didn't think she'd be alive for this one. Now come on. Uncle Baley wants to ask you about alien medicine."

Panic gripped my entire being.

"I know, I know," Rina said. "You majored in art. Don't worry. We'll muddle through."

With that, she dragged me back inside. Dan followed. Somehow, the faces that greeted me now were not as hostile as they had been before. Whatever magic Rina had spun with her words had worked and all of them seemed at least willing to try to understand.

"It's a communist!"

Almost all of them.

Susan pushed another glass of lemonade apologetically into my hand and I closed my fingers around it gratefully. The cold of it seeped into my skin.

Someone asked a question. I responded. They laughed. The lights shone brightly. The crude painting on the wall, which I just now realized must have been a child's depiction of the animal outside, seemed to stare encouragingly at me. Rina squeezed my hand.