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Julia Yi

Loyola Marymount University, jyi14@lion.lmu.edu

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The Masked Ones

by

Julia Yi

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Loyola Marymount University

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Julia Yi

The Masked Ones

When she'd wake in the dark and the cold of the night, she'd reach out to her left. She'd feel for the smooth leather holster, grab the weighted metal handle and flick the safety off. Most of the time, she would just stare at it. Other times, she would keep flicking the safety back on but only to flick it back off again. Sometimes, and just sometimes, she would rest the barrel on her lips and close her eyes. She'd breath. Breath. Breath. Breath.

She awoke in the morning. The sun wasn't fully up. Only enough to give her surroundings a dark blue tint. She grabbed her half empty canteen and drank only enough to quench the dryness from her lips. She had to go soon.

Her backpack, stuffed with supplies, hung from her frame while her hips were accompanied by her companion and a medium sized hatchet. She wasn't very menacing to the eye: 5'3" and 123 pounds; most people would be able to overpower her, but her companion at the hip stopped most from trying. The hatchet was there for when some would try. She'd rather save her last round. Besides, a gunshot could attract unwanted attention. It was better to be alone. You couldn't trust anyone nowadays.

She walked down the quiet road of the gated neighborhood she passed. It was a large neighborhood. Too large for her to loot every house but large enough to ensure her confidence of finding supplies. She had enough food and water for a week and a half, but she never failed to take the opportunity to keep looking. She had to survive. She had to make it home.

She rifled through the cupboards of the house. She did her best to ignore the pale crystalized dust that clung to everything in the small living room. The remains of the shattered. The house she came upon seemed to already be looted and torn apart for scraps and useful parts, but she always checked. There was always something that was missed. Water. No. Candy Bars. No. Canned goods. No. Nothing. Strangely, there was nothing. The house was already looted. That much for a fact, but there was *always* something left. Looters only have so much room in their sacks, they couldn't take everything with them. She closed the cupboards with a sigh. She would have to check elsewhere. If this house was totally stripped of supplies, most likely the very house next to it will have treasures.

She heard a creak in the floorboards above her. Someone was here. The creaking became more frequent. They were making their way down the stairs. She had to hide. She made her way under the large dining table. The table cloth that reached the floor would cover her from view. By the time she let the cloth fall behind her, she could hear the steps walk into the kitchen. The steps were soft. It wasn't a large being; she would be able to take him out if he noticed her. The steps made their way around the kitchen. It was looking for her. It walked out into the living room. It was her chance.

She silently lifted the cloth to take a peak. It was nowhere to be seen. She stepped lightly out from under the table. She had to be quick, but the only door she saw was out through the living room; the front door had lost its door knob, it would be easy to open. The back entrance, the way she came in, made too much noise. The creaking door would let it know she was here. She grabbed her hatchet from her side and raised it up. She was ready if it came after her. She peeked around the corner to the living room. It wasn't there, but she could see the faint footprints

of a small human. It trailed around, making its way behind the sofa chairs and next to the coat closet but with no sign of her, it moved on to an open hallway that led to some bedrooms.

She quickly made her way through the dust and to the door.

“Wait!”

Before the Shattering, they were called The Witnesses of Sa’Naru. They were a religious group that formed after a meteor landed in Asarganj, India. Many called them a silly cult, but their influence grew past the boundaries of Asia. Soon, there were small groups of Witnesses across the world. They preached about a being, the Sa’Naru, who could turn anything to crystal with a single touch. This being was supposed to give good fortune and long life to all of its followers. It would protect them from illness and enhance their strength. However, like anything too good to be true, the Sa’Naru required sacrifices.

The Witnesses would steal the cattle from local farmers and hide them away to their gathering place. They had no established building for their worship, but they made use of secluded places as far as mountain caves or as close as quiet alleyways in the cities. The remains of the cattle were never found; all that was left of their gathering was a faint pale dust. It would cover the entirety of the area that the Witnesses made use of. A few passersby would say they heard the painful moans of the cattle as the Witnesses sliced open the throats. They say one of the Witnesses would shove their hand through the open throats and dig in to the heart only to rip it out. Yet, by the time investigators arrived to the gathering place, there would be no blood, no footprints, no physical or chemical sign of there ever being a gathering. The only thing left at the site, was the pale crystalized dust.

“So... where are you from?”

“Be quiet.”

“Why?”

“There could be others near. Not everyone you run into is going to be friendly.”

“You’re the first I’ve run into in about 4 months. I don’t think I’ll see anyone else.”

“Just be quiet.”

The Boy walked silently next to her. He had found her while she tried to escape. She had her hatchet up, even when she saw him. The Boy could not have been past the age of 9, but she still kept her weapon up as if he was a tiger that cornered a mouse.

“Please don’t leave,” he said. “I have food. I haven’t seen anyone in such a long time.”

She kept her hatchet up and remained silent.

“Just wait here, I’ll bring some food down!”

The boy had made his way toward the stairs that led up, but by the time he moved away, she was on him. She had grabbed his arm behind his back and stuck the blade up to his throat.

“Please. I just want to help.”

The Boy let a tear drop from his eyes. He had to show her that he could be trusted.

“I’ll take you to where I put all the food. Just please, don’t hurt me.”

She loosened the blade from his neck, not to let him go, but to let him walk. He led her up the stairs and into the master bedroom. There, in a corner, were cans of food and bottled water. It was enough to last for months, but she only needed enough for a week. She released the boy in the connecting bathroom, but she closed the door on him.

“Stay there, if you come out while I’m still here, I’ll kill you.”

The Boy sniffled and released a forced sob.

“Please, I just want to help. I haven’t seen anybody in so long.”

She ignored his pleading. She had to grab what she could and go. She heard the bathroom door creak open and she had her hatchet ready to strike but she stopped. There he was, just standing and crying there. She remained still. Only the cries of the Boy filled the room. He sobbed and huffed.

“Can you shut up?”

The Boy stood stunned. Most people would have sympathy for him. But not her. She still held her hatchet. He had to keep trying though.

“Please. Can I go with you? I’m scared.”

She ignored him and stuffed her pack with the supplies in front of her. She zipped her pack up and slung it on her shoulders. When she made her way to the door, the Boy ran up and hugged her leg. She would have to drag him out with her.

“The fuck? Let go!”

“Please!! I don’t want to be alone!”

He cried and cried, but his sobs stopped the moment he heard a small click. She stood above him with her companion at his head.

“Let go. Now.”

He released her. She made her way down the stairs and to the front door. He slowly followed behind her but stopped at the foot of the stairs. Before she opened the front door, she looked at him. It felt like hours to the boy. Was she just going to leave him there? A small child? Had she really lost her humanity? She let out a deep sigh.

“Do you have a backpack?”

The Boy mumbled a “yea.”

“Go get it and pack your stuff. You can come with me for a little bit. But don’t be a hassle. I won’t hesitate to drop your ass off if you become a nuisance.”

So there they were. A Boy who could barely carry the weight of his filled back pack following a lone wanderer.

The Shattering occurred on the 17th of May. Scientists had already predicted a large solar flare. One so bright that it would be seen and felt from Earth. It was said to be completely harmless though. There were crowds of people all ready to witness this scientific phenomena. They would set up picnics and tents in the parks; it was a fun get together in the neighborhood; it was a reason to step outside and smell the fresh air. People had their sunglasses ready for the flares, but their attention was directed elsewhere.

Groups of dark figures surrounded them. They wore masks of white porcelain and cloaks of ebony wool. They walked slowly around the crowds of people, enclosing them to one tight bundle. Their masks frightened everyone, they looked like carnivorous birds. It covered everything but their lips and nose but had a large beak that protruded out. These types of masks were worn before, but only during the Black Plague. These masks were worn by the individuals who would ship off the ill to their deaths. The dark figures lifted their arms, as if they were reaching towards the sun, and they chanted.

Sa’Naru exal miyal. Sa’Naru exal tiisfuri. Sa’Naru exal andoral. Sa’Naru exal in maruud.

Sa’Naru the Power. Sa’Naru the Beauty. Sa’Naru the Bright. Sa’Naru the one who Shatters.

The sun flares pulsed through the air with great intensity. The heat boiled the blood of the crowds to stone. Their skin dropped from their bones in crystalized chunks. Many tried to run, but the quick movements of their now brittle bones made their legs shatter into pieces.

The air was filled with beautiful crystals that day. The dark figures inhaled the masterpiece of their God.

It’s been a week since the Boy started to travel with her. He was a talkative one. Would never shut up, but for once she didn’t feel so alone. She still kept her distance though. It wasn’t good to make connections in these times.

It had started to rain, so they made camp in a small gas station they passed by. It was small, cold, and dingy, but it kept a roof over their head. They sat in silence, each taking their

own corner but close enough to keep an eye on each other. The Boy stared off into the clear glass door, staring at the slow moving rain drops that glided down the panes.

“Do you remember when it used to be normal?”

The Boy looked towards the woman. Her eyes fixated on the emerald rain drops.

“Huh?”

“The rain. It used to be...normal.”

The Boy shook his head.

“Sad. It’s only been, what? A year? And you already forgot how real rain looks. Were you like, stuck in a room all your life?”

The Boy just shook his head. He didn’t know how to respond. No one ever asked him questions. Usually the people he followed would just coo over him. Pretend as if he didn’t know any better.

“Why won’t you tell me your name?” the Boy asked, tilting his head to the side and looking at her.

“Because I don’t trust you.”

“But I’m just a kid.”

“So?”

The Boy didn’t know how to respond. He had to get this over. Quickly.

He swung his arm over his shoulder, itching his shoulder blade. His fingers brushed up against a small bump that was implanted months ago.

The Witnesses of Sa’Naru needed a more powerful source of energy. The crystal dust they created from the cattle wasn’t enough for them. They needed more. They were hungry for more. The week before the Shattering, a voice from the heavens called to them. A message. They would enter paradise soon. They donned cloaks and white porcelain masks. They were ready. They were immune to their God’s wrath. They were the deliverers of Sa’Naru’s words. They were his eyes. His voice. They were his body.

However, they did not imagine others, non-witnesses, would survive. They were immune to their God. They had to be eradicated.

They were his blade. They were his law. They were his judgment.

She awoke. There was movement outside. A car door swung closed.

“Shit. Wake up.”

She turned to grab the Boy, but he was gone. She shook her head in frustration. She had to leave. Now. She grabbed her pack and quickly made her way to the back door. She had to leave quietly, there would be no way for her to run if they had a car.

She camouflaged with the dark night as she silently ran towards the open field that was near. She had to get to the trees. As she saw lights travel after her, she went on her belly and hid in the tall grass of the field. The light innocently traveled over her. She could make it she thought as she crawled closer to the trees.

A gun shot rang through the sky.

Blood gushed out of her thigh as she cried out. Her hands clung to her stained jeans. She had to keep going. When she tried to crawl forward, she was stopped by dark cloaked figures.

The Boy stood above her, one hand readied on a pistol, the other hand holding the hand of death.

“Good boy.”

The hunched figure grabbed the girl by her hair. His other skeletal hand grabbing her neck. His masked face looked at her blankly but she could see his mouth water. A fresh sacrifice. The Boy just giggled as he skipped back towards the other dark figures that stood waiting.

“Are you ready? Sa’Naru’s judgment has not forgotten you.”

“Fuck you.”

She spat at the beaked face but the figure only chuckled. His hand released her hair and covered her eyes. Darkness filled her view and her breath cut off.

Sa’Naru exal miyal. Sa’Naru exal tiisfuri. Sa’Naru exal andoral. Sa’Naru exal in maruud.