

Zoo

There was something strange about this guest.

At first, Regan thought it was his face. Glassy and ageless, like most guests before him. But the fluorescence of the small Meet & Greet room was vigilant, and in the small spaces where other guests carried dewey ease - the tuck at the corner of the eyes, ticking at the edge of the lips - this man hid something else.

“She maintains a body mass index below seventeen through a carefully restricted diet.” Keeper Pat continued his lecture as he stepped behind Regan's wheelchair, pulling her out from the table in the room's center so the guest could get a better view. “This means we are able to get a near complete view of a human skeleton. Regan, show the guest your ribcage.”

“I don't want to see her ribcage.” The guest leveled his hands against the table. His eyes found the corner of the room, where cracked tile met the peeling grout. He had not yet looked her in the face.

Strange, indeed. But she couldn't place it.

“Why doesn't she eat?” the guest demanded, his hands startling the table. It coughed metallic chill back into the air conditioning air.

And Regan realized what it was. He seemed angry.

“This is what makes Regan different from the other specimen in our collection,” Keeper Pat said.

“She doesn't want to. Regan finds food revolting, just as she does her body. She chooses extreme denial as a form of self-mutilation.”

He never got this part right, but it wasn't Regan's prerogative to correct him. Meet & Greet's were more for spectacle than education. And she was fixated now by the guest's eyes. They burned.

"Do they let you eat?" the guest demanded.

Regan sunk into the back of her wheelchair under the force of his voice and those eyes, now unflinchingly trained upon her. This felt like a borderline question, a possible breach of contract if the response was not carefully delivered. She looked away, stared into the powder blue wall that matched her johnny..

"I'm talking to you, Regan," the guest said.

Pat stepped into her line of sight and dashed his chin to the guest with a severe look. Regan turned back.

"They let me eat as much or as little as I want," she said. "Like Keeper Pat said, I just don't want to."

"You'd rather stay here than eat?" The guest leaned back in his chair. The air sharpened.

This man was truly angry. It was impossible, and yet, Regan began to see what she missed at first. The smoothness in his face was not preternatural at all, there were slight divets on his left cheek, acne scars, perhaps. A faint scar trailed down the inside of his left wrist. Healthy, but not dosed.

"Yes," she replied. "I feel safe here."

The guest laughed at this as Keeper Pat jumped in to explain that safety of the specimens was paramount at Mercy Sanctuary, and to enumerate the many ways they were cared for.

“How are your parents?” The guest spoke over Pat. Regan saw a wince of irritation in the Keeper - the man loved nothing more than the sound of his own voice.

“They are quite well. They visit all the time.” Regan had a ready response, as some of the more bleeding-hearted guests frequently inquired about external attachments. It made them feel better to know that specimens got visitors like in the old days, and balloons and cards and stuffies to go with. It made them more likely to come again.

“If you’d like, I can bring out our Bulimic,” Keeper Pat suggested. “She has many of the same characteristics as Regan here, but she’s a more entertaining example.”

The guest stood up so abruptly that the steel chair clattered to the ground. He opened his palms, as if trying to support the space between them. “Nothing?” He demanded Regan’s acknowledgement.

Regan searched his face, an act that was, as was anything in this room, no more than performance. Guests often tried to make personal connections.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

The guest was searching her as well. Again, his face unseated something, and Regan felt her breath catch. It was perverse to pity a guest, yet he demanded it now, coming to her first with anger, now with sorrow. “I’ve tried to tell you,” he said.

“It’s time to go.” Keeper Pat appeared behind the guest. He was not permitted to touch them, but he knew how close he needed to get to alarm even the smoothest of dosed brains. “Now.”

The guest looked at Regan once more before making his leave; she caught his gaze and dropped it immediately, watching her feet as the heavy metal door hissed closed.

