

## Corvid-19

by

Yuun of York

“Wahad.”

“Yes, Tissa?”

“How long before a person starves?”

They’d come on the wind in the month of June, or so Tissa thought old Tamenye had said. She was sometimes difficult to make out over the feeds. She’d also claimed to have been assisting in the lab on Genesis Day.

Wahad grunted in his fashion, struggling with some half-open canned good by the neglected plants and paying her little mind. “Eventually.” he said after a spell.

“But how *long*?”

He nearly answered her, but managed to nick himself, and with a cry danced scowling into the corridor. Tissa kicked the offending tin. It landed under the great arched window box where she people-watched in the long, lazy afternoon. She perched herself near the nook where she scratched her running tally into the wood—four in four hours, a record—and scanned the crevices between the boards for her next mark, a vigil scored loudly by Wahad’s impained crooning. She registered a fleeting sense of pleasure, and thought herself perverse when it had passed.

She scanned every window ledge in the alley for signs of life. Some of the houses were independent structures, moderately affluent and far from the city center. Any of them—all of them—could be holding another hungry family, uncertain and alone. If she could but see.

“What are the others doing, Wahad?” she’d ask.

“Their duty.” he’d grumble.

Anyone at all. It wasn’t natural, just the two of them. Wahad was getting irritable, and she sick with disquiet.

An alarm sounded in the distance of Beyt-Meri. That could be anything, she thought. A car battery melting in the sun.

“Are people very afraid of crows, Wahad?”

“Is that a joke?”

“I mean generally. I mean to say, is it something like seeing one’s shadow?”

Tissa peered over at the broken paneling and shattered glass of the house adjacent. Feathers and a few bodies embedded into the facade served as evidence of an earlier assault.

“More dead at the neighbors’.”

“Disgusting creatures.”

“But can they truly be evil?” she said, too softly for Wahad to hear, who she knew would seize on any excuse to boil over with ideology and instinct. He’d pump it out of himself, like ballast.

Then he would scoff at her notion that perhaps there was once some sort of coexistence between men and birds. And he would remind her that he was the eldest and birds were different now, as people are different now—but perhaps not so different as she remembered. If she remembered. A conversation they had had a dozen times before.

“Disgusting creatures.” he would say.

And she would shudder at the pride he took in telling her how wretched was the world. As if his ministrations were saving her a lifetime of disabuse rather than stroking his own anxious tendencies.

And then she would remember even Tamenye had said this would not so soon be over. ‘A war right and good and true; they only had to see it through.’ went the propaganda. Then she would relent, and retire, and lose her appetite a while. Perhaps that much was a blessing.

Tissa thought about the emptied Dahiye, and the images she’d taken from the feeds. The shouting, and gunfire. The air saturated with dusty earth and smoke, billowing up and up until it sat fungus-like over the city, and both color and direction had become meaningless attributes in a world turned upside down.

Today the sun shone through the alley and the earth was undisturbed. It seemed to her hunger and boredom were their old enemies now. She wondered which they might succumb to first.

“Look, go and check the feeds, if you feel like being useful.” said Wahad with obvious mordancy, for she had been there and back many times that day. He couldn’t

guess that as much as she was drawn in, she was always half-frightened at what she would find. She felt she inevitably came away more, and less, than she was.

The call to prayers drew her attention. Tissa was sure she had not heard it that morning. She hopped up and pressed her face to her bit of glass, as if it were her only portal unto the world. Only a little girl's room stared back at her. Elsewhere she'd spied a few mats laid rolled up against balconies, long untended.

"That window you love so much has got to go eventually."

"I know."

"This is how we'll survive, you know. It's reasonable."

"I know."

It did always come back to that; but she thought it a cruel irony that precisely when one's life was at stake, one's actions were so often far from reasonable.

"Wahad."

"You'll not ask me *that* again."

"How do you know what I'm going to ask you?"

"You're going to ask—" Wahad spoke only between blows on the planks across the patio gate "—what precipitated the war—" another whack "—again."

"The feeds don't tell me everything."

"I shouldn't think they'd know."

"There was some sort of lab. They were changing animals, looking for vaccines. Wahad, what is 'rapid metaencephalization'?"

"It doesn't matter. I expect someone fucked up, at some point."

“Tamenye would know. Perhaps—”

“They’re still fucking up. They haven’t got a clue.”

“But don’t you care how it happened?”

“No. For the last time, *no*. It happened! That’s enough. Now we all have to do our part. That is *all* we have to do!”

Tissa knocked her head against the boarded window; tragically neither seemed in danger of breaking.

Wahad softened his voice. “What did you learn last time?” From him, it was almost an apology.

“Things are progressing faster in Germany.”

“That’s their business. See what you can do with this plank. I’ve shown you how...”

“Whereas here we’re looking at another five weeks before ‘phase two’.”

“Sorry I asked.”

“They’ve really handled this badly, haven’t they, brother?”

“Fine, I’ll finish it myself.”

“You’re not the only one affected, you know!” she cried, giving him his distance. “It’s not a normal situation!”

Wahad was not going to speak to her again. She paced the length of the corridor until at last she pulled away from him. Even that hurt.

The first two feeds she found were no longer live. She tried one higher up and managed to get a signal. A certain serenity overcame her. She grasped it firmly and dug in with both feet.

The jolt that coursed through her tiny body was vaguely pleasurable, like the touch of linen, but it was nothing compared to what followed. Tissa trawled the network linearly until she found familiar faces. They were remote, but this stretching-out was all she cherished these days. It was something felt even more intensely, of course, when someone was looking back.

“Tissa, my soldier? Is that you?”

“*Shu’l wadee*, grandmother.”

She heard Tamenye’s distorted words echo inside her, and she basked in her mind for as long as she could.

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“Wahad, you idiot!”

Her brother had made no discernable progress; the boards barricading the house still taunted him from every angle. He pretended not to hear her.

She bit his ear. But once Wahad had set his mind to something, he could never give it up. He vainly banged against the center board again and again, letting drops of blood paint the welcome mat where they fell.

“This is the *wrong* house!” said Tissa finally.

He at last turned to her in disbelief. “You got through?”

She nodded. “*Shera’ Six*.”

“Yeah. Blue facade, medium armor. Swingset in the back-”

“This is *Shera*’ Two.”

“Who’s assignment are we—?”

“*Shera*’ Two was cleared last night. Hence the mess next door, a good battle, by all accounts.”

“Well.” If he had more to say, the words did not come, even after he had caught his breath.

“Should we over there, then?”

“Eventually.” Wahad kicked the door one last time, with half a heart, like it were an enemy that had in defeating him been initiated into friendship.

A backfire brought them both to attention. It presaged a jalopy which rounded the bend and sped fast and frantic down the alley. For a few seconds Tissa and Wahad watched it scattering trash and fallen birds as so much debris in its wake. It smashed into a parked sedan and began to back up.

Without hesitation, they spread their wings and pursued.

Tissa felt her mind fall away from her and her heart take command of her soul. She was conscious of other enclaves rising from their deployments to investigate. Soon hundreds of her brethren leapt from the feeds which lattice-like weaved the sleepy suburb together and joined in the chase. It was a shared purpose that eclipsed all others, the purpose of a murder.

The cascade of a thousand beating wings rolled into her ears and shot white-hot rage down her spine, and beneath her beak she smiled as the sky blackened with the shapes of family.