

## TCOF excerpt

Tap tap tap.

“Shetani.” The boy had no plans to roll out of bed. “Shetani.” Tap tap tap. “We’ve been here a long time Shetani. We’re gonna be here forever Shetani.” They were jittery, strong so that the window sounded hollow and cheap. “The people are happy Shetani. The people are not happy Shetani. I see you in the forest why are you in the forest there are no paths in the forest Shetani.” The voice was unfamiliar but from what he heard it had to be Isola. “People are happy on the paths you’re not happy in the forest Shetani. Why are you in the forest Shetani?” But not even Isola was this persistent, and it was hard imagining him saying these things.

‘If they didn’t enjoy walking the paths then why lay them? And on Rozan they’d be holding a drink so why squeeze the berries?’ Tap tap tap.

“Gimme a bone you owe me a bone Shetani. Gimme a bone you’ve been in the forest too much you owe a bone gimme a bone Shetani.” Tap tap tap tap. Isola would have told the boy to always have one on hand for moments like this. His father knew going into the forest was as natural to him as anything to anyone.

‘It can only throw them from so far. The best thing would be to make it owe you a bone then you can walk up and take it whenever you want.’

It did a lot for Shetani. It eased him, it painted a picture of what the town was, what the forest was, and it gave him free reign. He thought he understood. Isola was very rarely wrong. But even having heard it, absorbed it, over the years there was always a feeling he couldn’t shake, playing in his sleep. It wasn’t a positive feeling, nor a negative one, nor an idea he was managing to manifest.

“You owe me a bone Shetani. Shetani. Shetani.” The tapping didn’t stop. Whoever was trying to get his attention would be lucky to not get it. At least now he could tell through his squints that the star hadn’t risen and he knew who it was. It sounded like Michael, and thinking harder a few earlier calls sounded like Gloried. Nevertheless, Shetani hoped it wasn’t important- he definitely couldn’t recall anything of note in the fog developing in his head.

He was drunk, like he’d been a lot as of late. The taps finally broke his patience and he rose from his office chair, swinging around so that his garments twirled behind. He expected to see Clara, it certainly sounded like her, yet there was nothing outside. The regular view met him; the right quarter the beginning of the forest, the top half of the remainder the beach, the bottom the darker shaded hills.

As he looked around the more empty the scene was until he heard another tap, glancing towards the top corner of the giant panes to see a small black bird poking at him with its beak. Of course, it couldn't get in, though Ordost didn't think it looked willing to give up. "Ordost," it said, causing him to step and nearly trip over his robe. Falling back against the table, his glass shook and wobbled then took a tumble, liquor soaking the wood for a brief instant before Ordost was rubbing his hand on a dry table again whilst regaining his wits. The bird hit the glass over and over, harder each time. "Ordost." With the next tap Ordost froze in place noticing the cracks beginning to form in his window. It seemed happy, jumping into the air and flapping its wings a few times before landing and continuing.

Once another crack came or an existing one was hammered into, it flapped its wings some more. The pattern went on. "Shetani." How it could speak like that he didn't know. It was impossible to take his eyes or ears off of it, the sounds eased him into a trance. As he struggled to compute what was happening he noticed that with each cycle the bird's wings reached wider and wider until it landed in his windowsill and couldn't fit in the frame. A last tap and Shetani could see the pane that he could touch from his side was being scratched into, a tap too far. With a small push he opened his window, the bird springing back before realizing it had been given entry.

Ordost didn't appreciate the mimicry, the scores that would reroute the perfect rays of starlight that hit him everyday. As he stretched out his finger to let it rest it dashed to the left, right, up, unsure about the man below who on the last attempt feigned a ledge. Taking it in his hands, he examined the bird that tried fighting out of his grasp, rotating it in front of him to figure out how it spoke as others, how it knew to speak to him. All it said was, "Ordost," louder each time for each time he tightened his grip in frustration. "ORDOST!"

Raising it up to his eyes, for the briefest fraction of a second his stimuli bubbled so that he squeezed and the bird exploded in his clutches. Feathers that flew up from the burst didn't come back down and the gore stained his open window, garments, desk. The entire stage was still and stained with blood as if flicked on by a brush. The myopia was obliquitous, jarring when he placed the bird beside the moons and realized its red rolled back eyes couldn't do anything but mirror their stellar dotting. Ordost knew he had made a mistake. The dirty rocks in the sky blinked and he stood in the pitch black, nervous and shaking. They took the sounds with them as well, he couldn't hear his breath or his motions but even in the closed space he had what he needed to know he was helpless.

He heard the flutters, chirping even. When the moons came back there were only two of them, high in the sky shining only on what they cared for. In its eyes it stood, and in those eyes

it stood, and in those eyes it stood, a nesting black bird that when Shetani mustered the courage to come out and meet from behind the wall spread its wings so that the town was its roost. From where he was he could jump out of his room and slide down the talons protruding from below its sitting rump. They were black just like the feathers, like the legs. Every part of it was black but for the eyes and above the neck, a long neck that shrunk into its lower collar of fur to get a peek into the boy's room. It was a hose of red, on top of it a bare bloody head that looked like it had been digging through people like him all its life, however long that was, the little hair it did have smoothly matted down by remains. This was a different bird. The bird from earlier glided around it, and there were more of them, but this bird, even disregarding size, was nothing like he'd seen. It didn't speak either. The rest had stopped. He was only briefly opposite then the moons went dark.

He panicked from the disappearance of all his senses. It was not an experience he could fathom, twisting him in ways that someone who exists could never describe. Everything in his body rushed to one spot trying to turn as dense as possible so that the boy could not contain it. If he tried to flee, everything inside him would be left behind and drop to the floor where it would be collected. He heard an abrupt thud and the sticking of flesh on glass, the subsequent peeling, the creaking of the window and the floorboards as it was obvious the bird had decided to come in. No way could it fit. The claws couldn't open any window unless they smashed it in. Somehow he felt he should be familiar with the feeling, someone entering his room, yet he wasn't. A blast of light hit him, the moons opening once more. There was no room, no walls, only the window stretching to the heavens, before it the bird. Both rocks fit in their entirety, all to be seen. Free of craters, ridges or valleys, the thing he saw was the bird standing in its eyes, and in those eyes it stood, and in those eyes it stood, moving onto him like they were attracted. The orbs that were just fat flashes harnessed bulged like they belonged to a morbidly obese being in the margins of worry and anger and sorrow. No entity was to be seen but when it got close enough he could feel that space between him and the feathers. They brushed him and pricked him, prompting a scurry back which didn't help because it just moved closer. The tips broke through his space. Light didn't shine on them but there were holes forming in his belly, torso, legs. They impaled his eyes, when he screamed they stabbed his tongue, his neck was punctured and stretched like mesh until the final hanging fibers tore on their own and through the holes of a rotten lotus pod forcing him to bathe his head in the light shone the pipping sickle beaks of whatever crept in through the window and cornered the boy so he couldn't escape.

"You think he's coming out?" Gloried whispered.

"He's a deep sleeper, you know?"

“Ugh,” she sighed. “He’d better be ready.”

“We’ll all be ready. Don’t be so worried.”