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Opening extract from

The Hunt

Written by

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For Ching-Lee

THE HUNT

By

Andrew Xia Fukuda

There used to be more of us. I'm certain of this. Not enough to fill a sports stadium or even a movie theater, but certainly more than what's left today. Truth is, I don't think there's any of us left. Except me. It's what happens when you're a delicacy. When you're craved. You go extinct.

Eleven years ago, one was discovered in my school. A kindergarten student, on her first day. She was devoured almost immediately. What was she thinking? Maybe the sudden (and it's always sudden) loneliness at home drove her to school under some misbegotten idea that she'd find companionship. The teacher announced nap time, and the little tyke was left standing alone on the floor clutching her teddy bear as her classmates leaped feet-first toward the ceiling. At that point, it was over for her. Over. She might as well have taken out her fake fangs and prostrated herself for the inevitable feasting. Her classmates stared down wide-eyed from above: *Hello, what have we here?* She started to cry, they tell me, bawl her eyes out. The teacher was the first to get to her.

After kindergarten, when you're free and clear of naps, *that's* when you show up at school. Although you can still get caught by surprise. One time, my swimming coach was so enraged by the team's lethargic performance at a school meet, he forced all of us take a nap in the changing room. He was only making a point, of course, but that point near did me in. By the way, swimming is fine, but don't do any other sport if you can help it. Because sweat is a dead giveaway. Sweat is what happens when we get hot; water droplets leak out like a baby drooling. I know, gross. Everyone else remains cool, clean, dry. Me? I'm a leaky faucet. So forget about cross-country, forget about tennis, forget about even competitive chess. But swimming is fine, because it hides the sweat.

That's just one of the rules. There're many others, all of them indoctrinated into me by my father from the time I was born. Never smile or laugh or giggle, never cry or get teary-eyed. At all times, carry a bland, stoic expression; the only emotions that ever crack the surface of people's faces are heper-cravings and romantic-lust, and I am obviously to have nothing to do with either. Never forget to apply butter liberally all over your body when venturing out in the daytime. Because in a world like this, it's a tough task, explaining a sunburn, or even a suntan. So many other rules, enough to fill a notebook, not that I ever felt inclined to write them down. Being caught with a "rulebook" would be just as damning as a sunburn.

Besides, my father reminded me of the rules every day. As the sun was going down, over breakfast, he'd go over a few of the many rules. Like: don't make friends; don't inadvertently fall asleep in class (boring classes and long bus rides were especially dangerous); don't clear your throat; don't ace your exams, even though they insult your intelligence; Don't let your good looks get the better of you; no matter how the girls might throw their hearts and bodies at you, never give in to that temptation. Because you must always remember that your looks are a curse, not a blessing. Never forget that. He'd say all this while giving my nails a quick once-over, making sure that they weren't chipped or scratched. The rules are now so ingrained in me, they're unbendable as the rules of nature. I've never been tempted to break any of them.

Except one. When I first started taking the horse-drawn school bus, my father forbade me from looking back at him to wave goodbye. Because people never do that. That was a hard rule for me, initially. For the first few days of school, as I stepped onto the bus, it took everything in me to freeze myself, to not look back and wave goodbye. It was like a reflex, an insuppressible cough. I was just a kid back then, too, which made it doubly hard.

I broke that rule only one time, seven years ago. It was the day after my father staggered into the house, his clothes disheveled as if he'd been in a tussle, his neck punctured. He'd gotten careless, just a momentary lapse, and now he had two clear incisions in his neck. Sweat poured down his face, staining his shirt. You could see he already knew. A frenzied look in his eyes, panic running up his arms as he gripped me tight. "You're alone now, my son," he said through clenched teeth, spasms starting to ripple across his chest. Minutes later, when he started to shiver, his face shockingly cold to the touch, he stood up. He rushed out the door into the dawn light. I locked the door as he'd instructed me to do and ran to my room. I stuffed my face into the pillow and screamed and screamed. I knew what he was doing at that very moment: running, as far away from the house before he transformed and the rays of sunlight became like waterfalls of acid burning through his hair, his muscles, his bones, his kidney, lungs, heart.

The next day, as the school bus pulled up in front of my house, steam gushing from the horses' wide and wet nostrils, I broke the rule. I couldn't help myself: I turned around as I stepped onto the bus. But by then, it didn't matter. The driveway was empty in the dark birth of night. My father was not there. Not then or ever again.

My father was right. I became alone that day. We were once a family of four, but that was a long time ago. Then it was just my father and me, and it was enough. I missed my mother and sister but I was too young to form any real attachments with them. They are vague shapes in my memory. Sometimes, though, even now, I hear the voice of a woman singing and it always catches me off-guard. I hear it and I think: *mother had a really pretty voice*. My father, though. He missed them terribly. I never saw him cry, not even after we had to burn all the photos and notebooks. But I'd wake up in the middle of the day and find him staring out the unshuttered window, a beam of sunshine plunging down on his heavy face, his broad shoulders shaking.

My father had prepared me to be alone. He knew that day would eventually come, although I think deep down he believed it was he who would be the last one left, not me. He spent years drilling the rules into me so I knew them better than my own self. Even now, as I get ready for school at dusk, that laborious process of washing, filing my nails, shaving my arms and legs (and recently, even a few chest hairs), rubbing ointment (to mask the odor), polishing my fake fangs, I hear his voice in my head, going over the rules.

Like today. Just as I'm slipping on my socks, I hear his voice. The usual warnings: don't go to sleepovers, don't hum or whistle. But then I hear this rule he'd say maybe just once or twice a year. He said it so infrequently, maybe it wasn't a rule but something else, like a life motto. *Never forget who you are*. I never knew why my father would say that. Because it's like saying, don't forget water is wet, the sun is bright, snow is cold. It's redundant. There's no way I could ever forget who I am. I'm reminded every moment of every day. Every time I shave my legs or hold in a sneeze or stifle a laugh or pretend to flinch at a slip of stray light, I am reminded of who I am.

A fake person.

The Heper Lottery

Because I turned 17 this year, I'm no longer mandated to ride the school bus. I walk now, gladly. The horses – dark gargantuan brutes that came into favor long ago for their game-finding ability but which are now consigned to pulling carriages and buses - can detect my unique odor. More than once, they've swung their noses in my direction, singling me out, their nostrils gaping wide, like a wet, silent scream. I much prefer the solitude of walking under the darkening dusk sky.

I leave home early, as I do every night. By the time I walk through the front gates, students and teachers are already streaming in on horseback and carriages, grey shapes in a murky blackness.

It is cloudy tonight, and especially dark. *Dark* is this term my father used to describe the nighttime, when things get covered over in blackness. Darkness makes me squint, which is one reason why it's so dangerous. Everyone else squints only when eating something sour or smelling something putrid. Nobody ever squints just because it's dark; it's a dead give-away, so I never let so much as a crease cross my brow. In every class, I sit near the mercurial lamps which emit the barest suggestion of light (most people prefer gray-dark over pitch-black). That cuts down on the risk of an inadvertent squint. People hate those seats near the lamps – too much glare – so I can always find a seat by one.

I also hate getting called on in class. I've survived by blending in, deflecting attention. Getting called on in class puts the spotlight solely on me. Like this morning, when I get called on by the teacher in Trig class. He calls on students more than anyone else which is why I detest the man. He also has the puniest handwriting ever, and his faint scribbles on the board are near impossible to see in the grey-dark.

"Well, H6? What do you think?"

H6 is my designation. I'm in row H, seat 6: thus my designation. My designation changes depending on where I am. In my social studies class, for example, I'm known as D4. "Mind if I pass on this one?" I say.

He stares blankly at me. "Actually, I do. This is the second time in a week you've done this."

I look at the blackboard. "It's got me stumped." I resist trying to make out the numbers on the blackboard, afraid I might accidentally squint.

He closes his eyelids lightly. "No, no, I won't accept that. I know you can do it. You always ace the exams. You can do this equation in your sleep."

Students are now turning to look at me. Only a few, but enough to make me nervous. Including the person in front of me, Ashley June. Her designation in this class is actually G6, but in my mind, I've always called her *Ashley June*. From the first time I saw her, years ago, that designation has stuck.

She turns around, looks at me with her opulent green eyes. They seem comprehending, as if she's at last caught on: that I've often gazed longingly from behind at her lush auburn hair (the magnificent, dazzling color!), wistfully recalling their silky feel in my hands so many moons ago. She holds my gaze, surprise lighting in them when I don't flick my eyes away the way I've been doing for years now. Ever since I sensed her interest in me, ever since I felt a pull in my own heart tugging towards her.

"H6?" The teacher starts tapping the chalk on the board. "Give it a shot, come on now."

"I really don't know."

"What's gotten into you? This is basic stuff for you." He peers at me. I'm one of the smarter students in school, and he knows that. Truth is, I could easily be the top student if I wanted to – grades come that easily to me, I don't even have to study – but I deliberately dumb down. There'd too much attention at the top. "Look here. Let's work together on this. Just read the question first."

Suddenly the situation has intensified. But nothing to panic over. Yet.

"Guess my brain's not quite awake yet."

"But just read the question. That's all." His voice now with an edge of sternness.

Suddenly I don't like this at all. He's beginning to take it personally.

More eyes start to peer back at me.

Out of nervousness, I begin to clear my throat. Then catch myself. Just in time. People never clear their throats. I breathe in, forcing myself to slow down time. I resist the urge to wipe my upper lip where I suspect small beads of sweat are starting to form.

"Do I need to ask you again?"

In front of me, Ashley June is staring more intently at me. For a moment, I wonder if she's staring at my upper lip. Does she see a slight glisten of sweat there? Did I miss shaving a hair? Then she puts up an arm, a long slender pale arm like a swan's neck arising out of the water.

"I think I know," she says, and gets up from her seat. She takes the chalk from the teacher who is taken aback by her forthrightness. Students don't usually approach the board uninvited. But then, again, this is Ashley June who pretty much gets by with whatever she wants. She gazes up at the equation, then writes with a quick flourish in large letters and numbers. Moments later, she's done and adds her own check mark and an "A+" at the end. Dusting off her hands, she sits back down. Some of the students start scratching their wrists, as does the teacher. "That was pretty funny," he says, "I like that." He scratches his wrist faster, demonstrably, and more students join him. I hear the *rasp rasp rasp* of nails scratching against wrists.

I join them, scratching my wrists with my long nails, hating it. Because my wrists are defective. They don't itch when I find something humorous. My natural instinct is to smile - smiling is this thing I do by widening my mouth and exposing my teeth - and not scratch my wrist. I have sensitive nerve-endings there, not a funny bone.

A message on the PA system suddenly sounds on the loudspeakers. Instantly, everyone stops scratching and sits up. The voice is robotic, man-female, authoritative.

"An important announcement," it blares. "Tonight, in just three hours at 2 a.m., there will be a nation-wide Declaration made by the Ruler. All citizens are required to participate. Accordingly, all classes held at that time will be canceled. Teachers, students, and all administrative staff will gather in the assembly hall to watch the live broadcast from our beloved Ruler."

And that's it. After the sign-off chimes, nobody speaks. We're stunned by this news. The Ruler - who hasn't been seen in public in decades - almost never makes a TV appearance. He usually leaves Palatial and other administrative announcements to the four Ministers under him (Science, Education, Food, Law) or the fifteen Directors (Horse Engineering, City Infrastructure, Heper Studies, etc.) under them.

And the fact that he is making a Declaration is missed by no one. Everyone starts speculating about the Declaration. A nation-wide Declaration is reserved for only the rarest of occasions. Over the past fifteen years, it's happened only twice. Once to announce the Ruler's marriage. And second, most famously, to announce the Heper Hunt.

Although the last Heper Hunt occurred ten years ago, people still talk about it. The Palace surprised the public when it announced it had been secretly harboring eight hepers. Eight living, blood-filled hepers. To lift morale during a time of economic depression, the Ruler decided to release the hepers into the wild. These hepers, kept under confinement for years, were fattened and slow, bewildered and frightened. Cast out into the wild like lambs to the slaughter, they never

had a chance. They were given a 12-hour head start. Then, a lucky group chosen by lottery were permitted to give chase after them. The Hunt was over in two hours. The event generated a surge in popularity for the Ruler.

As I walk to the cafeteria for lunch, I hear the buzz of excitement. Many are hoping for an announcement of another Heper Hunt. There is talk of a lottery for citizens again. Others are skeptical - *haven't hepers become extinct?* But even the doubters are drooling at the possibility, lines of saliva dripping down their chins and under their shirts. Nobody has tasted a heper, drunken its blood, feasted on its flesh, for years now. To think that the government might be harboring some hepers, to think that every citizen might have a shot at winning the lottery for the Hunt ... it sends the school into a tizzy.

I remember the Hunt from ten years ago. How, for months afterwards, I didn't dare fall asleep because of the nightmares that would invade my mind: hideous images of an imagined Hunt, wet and violent and full of blood. Horrific cries of fear and panic, the sound of flesh ripped and bones crushed puncturing the night stillness. I'd wake up screaming, inconsolable even as my father wrapped his arms protectively around me in a strong hug. He'd tell me everything was alright, that it was just a dream, that it wasn't real; but what he didn't know was even as he spoke, I'd hear the lingering sound of my sister's and mother's wretched screams echoing in my ears, spilling out of my nightmares and into the darkness of my all-too-real world.

The cafeteria is packed and boisterous. Even the kitchen staff are discussing the Declaration as they scoop food - synthetic meats - onto plates. Lunchtime has always been a challenge for me because I don't have any friends. I'm a loner, partly because it's safer - less interaction, less chance of being found out. Mostly though, it's the prospect of being eaten alive by your so-called friend that kills any possibility of shared intimacy. Call me picky, but imminent death at the hands (or teeth) of a friend who would suckle blood out of you at the drop of a hat ... that throws a monkey wrench into friendship-building.

So I eat lunch alone, most of the time. But today, by the time I pay for my food at the cash register, there's barely a seat left. Then I spot F5 and F19 from math class sitting together, and I join them. They're both idiots, F19 slightly more so. In my mind, I call them Idiot and Doofus.

"Guys," I say.

"Hey," Idiot replies, barely looking up.

"Everyone's talking about the Declaration," I say.

"Yes," Doofus says, stuffing his mouth. We eat silently for awhile. That's the way it is with Idiot and Doofus. They are computer geeks, staying up into the wee hours of the day. When I eat with them - maybe once a week - sometimes we don't say anything at all. That's when I feel closest to them.

"I've been noticing something," Doofus says after awhile.

I glance up at him. "What's that?"

"Somebody's been paying quite a bit of attention to you." He takes another bite into the meat, raw and bloody. It dribbles down his chin, plopping into his bowl.

"You mean the math teacher? I know what you mean, the guy won't leave me alone in Trig -"

"No, I meant somebody else. A girl."

This time, both Idiot and I look up.

"For real?" Idiot asks.

Doofus nods. "She's been looking at you for the past few minutes."

"Not me." I take another sip. "She's probably staring at one of you."

Idiot and Doofus look at each other. Idiot scratches his wrist a few times.

"Funny that," Doofus says, "I swear she's been eyeing you for awhile now. Not just today. But every lunch time for the past few weeks, I see her watching you."

"Whatever," I say, feigning disinterest.

"No, look, she's staring at you right now. Behind you at the table by the window."

Idiot spins around to look. When he turns back around, he's scratching his wrist hard and fast.

"What's so funny?" I ask, taking another sip, resisting the urge to turn around.

Idiot only scratches his wrist harder and faster. "You should take a look. He's not kidding."

Slowly, I turn around and steal a quick glance. There's only one table by the window. A circle of girls eating there. The Desirables. That's what they are known as. And that round table is theirs, and everyone knows by some unwritten rule that you leave that table alone. It is the domain of the Desirables, the popular girls, the ones with the cute boyfriends and designer clothes. You only approach that table if they let you. I've seen even their boyfriends waiting dutifully off to the side until granted permission to approach.

Not one of them is looking at me. They are chit-chatting, comparing jewelry, oblivious to the world outside the sphere of their table. But then one of them gives me a lingering look, her eyes meeting, then holding, mine. It is Ashley June. She looks at me with the same kind of wistful, longing glance she's shot at me dozens of times over the past few years.

I flick my eyes away, spin back around. Idiot and Doofus are scratching their wrists maniacally now. I feel the heat of a dangerous blush begin to hit my face but they are thankfully too busy scratching to notice. I quell my face, taking deep, slow breaths until the heat dissipates.

"Actually," Idiot says, "didn't that girl have a thing for you before? Yeah, yeah, I think that's right. A couple of years back."

"She's still pining after you, she's got the hots for you after all this time," Doofus wise-cracks, and this time the two of them start scratching each others' wrists uncontrollably.