

From Daughter of Djinn

Leaning over the balcony, Berkeley absorbed the world of mustard-bricked houses, terraced and uniform, each of them tipped with gabled grey roofs. He mused that humans seldom changed their pattern of activity; despite having the luxury of free will and even death, all they ever seemed to do was act and then feel, feel and then act. They pushed out every undesirable emotion into the atmosphere, and demanded that the Powers That Be provide a remedy. Every morning, since the early Sixties in fact, he came to the balcony and allowed himself to slip into their existences. Yes, each one of them was different, but every individual experience led to the same intrinsic outpour of hate and fear, and love and desire. Yes, they contemplated their being, there were even fluctuations in their cogitations until eventually, they died. A new flavour would replace the old, but ultimately formed the same broth. The broth was turmoil, and Berkeley no longer cared for it.

That morning, he found himself in the world of Mr and Mrs Choudry of Oakhill Road arguing over the amount of onions in the dhal – and while Mrs Choudry believed two was more than enough her husband insisted on two and *a quarter*, because it was that additional quarter that lent the dhal its true taste of perfection – every morning it was the dhal argument. While Berkeley often enjoyed this argument and personally agreed with two onions' sufficiency for dhal, he moved on, into the lonely island of Ms Bellamonte of Schubert Road as she considered suicide for the fifteenth time that morning. Although she had neatly tucked away her painkillers and a slim bottle of vodka under the kitchen sink, it was the bathtub full of soapy water that had been the most seductive temptation today, a fluid ending in all its soupy glory, and how long did it take to drown anyway?

Berkeley extricated himself from her fraught musings and swung into the manic planet that was the Whitmores, a family of eight (and God bless Mrs Whitmore, with another one on the way) with the four Whitmore boys fighting over a plate of sausages and bacon and the two Whitmore girls requesting money to visit Selfridges after school. Somewhere in the Whitmores' back garden was Mr Whitmore, who was wondering where exactly his saviour was as he rummaged through several recycling bins. His silent prayer was apparently answered once he retrieved a pack of Marlboro Lights taped to the 'Plastics' bin lid.

Berkeley retreated into himself, not wanting to know anymore. He leant backwards over the brick surrounding wall, and let the light patter of rain soak the fisherman's jumper he wore, the navy darkening to match the faded black of his jeans. His fingernails created small crescent dips in the white paint as he gazed back at the dwelling he had learnt to call home. Staring up at the sky, beyond clouds and water, he breathed in a world that was long desired by almost every creature on this ground. Elysium. There was no light strong enough to guide him home, no act pure enough to grant his return. Not even watching over a Djinn girl with a bad fate.

Berkeley's lips parted as his jade eyes welled, and he was almost lost in the exquisite pain of it all. So many ridiculous mistakes had all resulted in his unbearable life. He had lived in this world for seven centuries, but had been exiled for four of them. Living with the one mistake he couldn't erase, he allowed himself to believe that finding the Djinn girl was *his* blessing, his redemption. Her presence in this world had driven the ghosts away. He no longer needed to live on the outskirts of society. He had a ward now, so he emerged from the lofty heights of his apartment, and the production of photographs for newspapers and art galleries produced a credible cover for their existence in the higher echelons of west London.

The slamming of the door downstairs brought him back to the instant he had anticipated since the girl's latest 'nightmare'. With a smooth movement he changed position, peering over the balcony with interest. He reached for the Polaroid camera he had placed on the cast iron table and slowly brought it up to his eye level. Avirah ran across the road, her ballet bag bouncing against her hip. She held up her hand to the driver of a white Fiat 500 as it slowed for her. Berkeley's index finger hovered over the

'shutter release' button. A double-decker 170 bus approached from the left, and Avirah darted up the street, towards the shelter where a boy in a grey hoodie sat. Berkeley sucked in a breath as his finger hit the button and the shutter opened and closed.

The camera whirred, and the film emerged, a black square framed in a white window. With the 170 bus obscuring the view of the shelter, Berkeley resigned himself to the fact that Avirah was lost to him for the day. He passed his hand over the surface of the photograph as it developed.

Avirah's frozen image appeared, a slender black silhouette against the charcoal landscape. Raising the Polaroid instant above his head Berkeley waved it back and forth and then stared at it again. Avirah's fixed position slowly began to animate under the angel's emerald gaze. He watched in brazen fascination, as her image shifted. She now appeared to be facing the camera. The expression on her face was sombre, and a stark cloud of anger flashed behind her eyes. Her voice ricocheted in his ears.

YOU CAN'T CAGE ME BERKELEY. I'M NOT
YOURS TO CAGE. I'M NOT YOURS ... WAS
NEVER YOURS. NEVER—

Avirah's animation changed position again, and the landscape flew beneath her. Dressed in her ballet ensemble she was dancing, on pointe, arms moving with militant precision. She changed position again. Dressed in her black sweats, her flickering image continued through the streets of London at a restless pace. Again the animation froze, and Berkeley was able to distinguish the word 'TOPSHOP' behind her. He sighed; he much preferred to take her shopping, as all she came back with was black clothes or new pointe shoes. West End. Was that it? Was binge shopping to be his punishment for not giving her the answers she wanted?

Avirah continued to move in the photo, darting through throngs of tourists and shoppers. A discordant movement drew Berkeley's eye closer to the image. A figure appeared to be moving with hers, a looming smudge he didn't care for. Berkeley waved the photograph again, which produced one final fleeting image of a hooded man. Something all too familiar about the pattern of colour in the man's appearance made Berkeley stare again.

Hooded in grey, grey like today's sky. Tapping the surface, Berkeley finally made the connection. The boy at the bus stop, the only passenger not to board the earlier 170. He had waited, not for a bus but for—

Her.

The boy's image flickered near Avirah's. He appeared in the background of her foreground, but something about his presence seemed to overwhelm hers until Berkeley could no longer see her image, could only see the boy, hollow blue eyes that seemed to bore through the film, translucent skin that was so thin he could detect veins straining against the surface.

A grey shadow moved on the timber-clad floor and Berkeley lowered the film momentarily.

'Good morning Margo.'

The grey cat sat regarding him, her flat ears tight against her skull. She looked at him with disapproval, fat tail waving back and forth in anticipation.

'Another one's come sniffing about,' Berkeley continued softly, and he dropped the film at her feet. 'See?'

Margo stretched and her large blue eyes widened, before she mewed loudly. She tapped a soft paw on the photograph and Avirah's original image came into focus. Berkeley scooped it up and was about to continue when Margo abruptly slipped back into the apartment.

He followed the cat, and shook his head as she sat in front of the 42-inch flat-screen television, tail moving in a hypnotic state. He regarded her for a brief moment, before turning the television on.

Berkeley shook his head and left her in the living room. His bedroom was the place he spent the most time in, although he had a tendency to forget to sleep most nights. He liked sitting on the double bed, staring at different snapshots, and sometimes, when necessary, making collages for investigative purposes. Against the walls were several white boxes, stacked but not labelled. He opened one close to his bed, and added the Polaroid film to hundreds of images of Avirah already in the box. With the addition of the newest photo, they all became animated, and different snapshots of her existence in London began to play within the cardboard box's confines, until Berkeley replaced the lid.

Sounds from the living room drew him out. Margo lay stretched out

on Berkeley's side of the sofa, content. The cat was watching the television with great intensity, slowly pulling her sharp claws against the plush ultramarine of the sofa. Berkeley followed the cat's gaze just as a news presenter's voice swelled into the apartment.

'Sally Crewe has been missing for the last four days. She was last seen in Walthamstow shopping district at 6.20pm on Thursday. Here is the last image of her, outside the Pritshaw's Jewellers, dressed in a duffle coat, carrying a green handbag. The handbag was later found in a dustbin outside a local fast food restaurant. While great efforts have been made to locate the teenager, only two eyewitnesses have reported sightings. If you have seen Sally Crewe, or know anything relating to her disappearance on Thursday, please contact the Metropolitan Police urgently, as they are desperate to locate her. Tara Simpson, Sky News.'

Margo's tail flicked as Berkeley stared at the last image on the screen, the wide grey eyes and the uncertain smile.

He could see something beyond her image if he chose to. Already he could see her so clearly, could feel her in fact. He stared at that wobbly smile again, and felt a terrible unease; he knew no one else would see it again. He pulled on his shoes and pea-coat, and retrieved his Polaroid camera from the balcony. He only paused at the front door.

Along the door's perimeter were markings he had engraved over a century ago. In the mahogany panelling, their circular patterns overlaid with inscription, they were one of the only sources outside of Avirah's companionship that brought him comfort. They usually flashed white, or even silver if the day was likely to be pleasant. He dreaded any hue that was blue, because the day would likely be very unpleasant.

The moody blue tones that danced around the door told him that today was going to be a lot like Avirah's latest nightmare; incoherent and unbearable. There had been too many signs: the nightmare, the boy at the bus shelter, and now, Sally Crewe.

'It's all wrong, today. All wrong.'

He slammed the door, and slipped into the streets of London, the image of Sally Crewe flickering in his mind's eye.