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A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK

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Bloodchild

My last night of childhood began with a visit home. T’Gatoi’s sister had given us two sterile eggs. T’Gatoi gave one to my mother, brother, and sisters. She insisted that I eat the other one alone. It didn’t matter. There was still enough to leave everyone feeling good. Almost everyone. My mother wouldn’t take any. She sat, watching everyone drifting and dreaming without her. Most of the time she watched me.

I lay against T’Gatoi’s long, velvet underside, sipping from my egg now and then, wondering why my mother denied herself such a harmless pleasure. Less of her hair would be gray if she indulged now and then. The eggs prolonged life, prolonged vigor. My father, who had never refused one in his life, had lived more than twice as long as he should have. And toward the end of his life, when he should have been slowing down, he had married my mother and fathered four children.

But my mother seemed content to age before she had to. I saw her turn away as several of T’Gatoi’s limbs secured me closer. T’Gatoi liked our body heat and took advantage of it whenever she could. When I was little and at home more, my mother used to try to tell me how to behave with T’Gatoi—how to be respectful and always obedient because T’Gatoi was the Tlic government official in charge of the Preserve, and thus the most important of her kind to deal directly with Terrans. It was an honor, my mother said, that such a person had chosen to come into the family. My mother was at her most formal and severe when she was lying.

I had no idea why she was lying, or even what she was lying about. It *was* an honor to have T’Gatoi in the family, but it was hardly a novelty. T’Gatoi and my mother had been friends all my mother’s life, and T’Gatoi was not interested in being honored in the house she considered her second home. She simply came in, climbed onto one of her special couches, and called me over to keep her warm. It was impossible to be formal with her while lying against her and hearing her complain as

usual that I was too skinny.

“You’re better,” she said this time, probing me with six or seven of her limbs. “You’re gaining weight finally. Thinness is dangerous.” The probing changed subtly, became a series of caresses.

“He’s still too thin,” my mother said sharply.

T’Gatoi lifted her head and perhaps a meter of her body off the couch as though she were sitting up. She looked at my mother, and my mother, her face lined and old looking, turned away.

“Lien, I would like you to have what’s left of Gan’s egg.”

“The eggs are for the children,” my mother said.

“They are for the family. Please take it.”

Unwillingly obedient, my mother took it from me and put it to her mouth. There were only a few drops left in the now-shrunken, elastic shell, but she squeezed them out, swallowed them, and after a few moments some of the lines of tension began to smooth from her face.

“It’s good,” she whispered. “Sometimes I forget how good it is.”

“You should take more,” T’Gatoi said. “Why are you in such a hurry to be old?”

My mother said nothing.

“I like being able to come here,” T’Gatoi said. “This place is a refuge because of you, yet you won’t take care of yourself.”

T’Gatoi was hounded on the outside. Her people wanted more of us made available. Only she and her political faction stood between us and the hordes who did not understand why there was a Preserve—why any Terran could not be courted, paid, drafted, in some way made available to them. Or they did understand, but in their desperation, they did not care. She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support. Thus, we were necessities, status symbols, and an independent people. She oversaw the joining of families, putting an end to the final remnants of the earlier system of breaking up Terran families to suit impatient Tlic. I had lived outside with her. I had seen the desperate eagerness in the way some people looked at me. It was a little frightening to know that only she stood between us and that desperation that could so easily swallow us. My mother would look at her sometimes and say to me, “Take care of her.” And I would remember that she too had been outside, had seen.

Now T’Gatoi used four of her limbs to push me away from her onto

the floor. "Go on, Gan," she said. "Sit down there with your sisters and enjoy not being sober. You had most of the egg. Lien, come warm me."

My mother hesitated for no reason that I could see. One of my earliest memories is of my mother stretched alongside T'Gatoi, talking about things I could not understand, picking me up from the floor and laughing as she sat me on one of T'Gatoi's segments. She ate her share of eggs then. I wondered when she had stopped, and why.

She lay down now against T'Gatoi, and the whole left row of T'Gatoi's limbs closed around her, holding her loosely, but securely. I had always found it comfortable to lie that way, but except for my older sister, no one else in the family liked it. They said it made them feel caged.

T'Gatoi meant to cage my mother. Once she had, she moved her tail slightly, then spoke. "Not enough egg, Lien. You should have taken it when it was passed to you. You need it badly now."

T'Gatoi's tail moved once more, its whip motion so swift I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't been watching for it. Her sting drew only a single drop of blood from my mother's bare leg.

My mother cried out—probably in surprise. Being stung doesn't hurt. Then she sighed and I could see her body relax. She moved languidly into a more comfortable position within the cage of T'Gatoi's limbs. "Why did you do that?" she asked, sounding half asleep.

"I could not watch you sitting and suffering any longer."

My mother managed to move her shoulders in a small shrug. "Tomorrow," she said.

"Yes. Tomorrow you will resume your suffering—if you must. But just now, just for now, lie here and warm me and let me ease your way a little."

"He's still mine, you know," my mother said suddenly.

"Nothing can buy him from me." Sober, she would not have permitted herself to refer to such things.

"Nothing," T'Gatoi agreed, humoring her.

"Did you think I would sell him for eggs? For long life? My son?"

"Not for anything," T'Gatoi said, stroking my mother's shoulders, toying with her long, graying hair.

I would like to have touched my mother, shared that moment with her. She would take my hand if I touched her now. Freed by the egg and the sting, she would smile and perhaps say things long held in. But

tomorrow, she would remember all this as a humiliation. I did not want to be part of a remembered humiliation. Best just be still and know she loved me under all the duty and pride and pain.

“Xuan Hoa, take off her shoes,” T’Gatoi said. “In a little while I’ll sting her again and she can sleep.”

My older sister obeyed, swaying drunkenly as she stood up. When she had finished, she sat down beside me and took my hand. We had always been a unit, she and I.

My mother put the back of her head against T’Gatoi’s underside and tried from that impossible angle to look up into the broad, round face. “You’re going to sting me again?”

“Yes, Lien.”

“I’ll sleep until tomorrow noon.”

“Good. You need it. When did you sleep last?”

My mother made a wordless sound of annoyance. “I should have stepped on you when you were small enough,” she muttered.

It was an old joke between them. They had grown up together, sort of, though T’Gatoi had not, in my mother’s lifetime, been small enough for any Terran to step on. She was nearly three times my mother’s present age, yet would still be young when my mother died of age. But T’Gatoi and my mother had met as T’Gatoi was coming into a period of rapid development—a kind of Tlic adolescence. My mother was only a child, but for a while they developed at the same rate and had no better friends than each other.

T’Gatoi had even introduced my mother to the man who became my father. My parents, pleased with each other in spite of their different ages, married as T’Gatoi was going into her family’s business—politics. She and my mother saw each other less. But sometime before my older sister was born, my mother promised T’Gatoi one of her children. She would have to give one of us to someone, and she preferred T’Gatoi to some stranger.

Years passed. T’Gatoi traveled and increased her influence. The Preserve was hers by the time she came back to my mother to collect what she probably saw as her just reward for her hard work. My older sister took an instant liking to her and wanted to be chosen, but my mother was just coming to term with me and T’Gatoi liked the idea of choosing an infant and watching and taking part in all the phases of

development. I'm told I was first caged within T'Gatoi's many limbs only three minutes after my birth. A few days later, I was given my first taste of egg. I tell Terrans that when they ask whether I was ever afraid of her. And I tell it to Tlic when T'Gatoi suggests a young Terran child for them and they, anxious and ignorant, demand an adolescent. Even my brother who had somehow grown up to fear and distrust the Tlic could probably have gone smoothly into one of their families if he had been adopted early enough. Sometimes, I think for his sake he should have been. I looked at him, stretched out on the floor across the room, his eyes open, but glazed as he dreamed his egg dream. No matter what he felt toward the Tlic, he always demanded his share of egg.

"Lien, can you stand up?" T'Gatoi asked suddenly.

"Stand?" my mother said. "I thought I was going to sleep."

"Later. Something sounds wrong outside." The cage was abruptly gone.

"What?"

"Up, Lien!"

My mother recognized her tone and got up just in time to avoid being dumped on the floor. T'Gatoi whipped her three meters of body off her couch, toward the door, and out at full speed. She had bones—ribs, a long spine, a skull, four sets of limb bones per segment. But when she moved that way, twisting, hurling herself into controlled falls, landing running, she seemed not only boneless, but aquatic—something swimming through the air as though it were water. I loved watching her move.

I left my sister and started to follow her out the door, though I wasn't very steady on my own feet. It would have been better to sit and dream, better yet to find a girl and share a waking dream with her. Back when the Tlic saw us as not much more than convenient, big, warm-blooded animals, they would pen several of us together, male and female, and feed us only eggs. That way they could be sure of getting another generation of us no matter how we tried to hold out. We were lucky that didn't go on long. A few generations of it and we would have *been* little more than convenient, big animals.

"Hold the door open, Gan," T'Gatoi said. "And tell the family to stay back."

"What is it?" I asked.

“N’Tlic.”

I shrank back against the door. “Here? Alone?”

“He was trying to reach a call box, I suppose.” She carried the man past me, unconscious, folded like a coat over some of her limbs. He looked young—my brother’s age perhaps—and he was thinner than he should have been. What T’Gatoi would have called dangerously thin.

“Gan, go to the call box,” she said. She put the man on the floor and began stripping off his clothing.

I did not move.

After a moment, she looked up at me, her sudden stillness a sign of deep impatience.

“Send Qui,” I told her. “I’ll stay here. Maybe I can help.”

She let her limbs begin to move again, lifting the man and pulling his shirt over his head. “You don’t want to see this,” she said. “It will be hard. I can’t help this man the way his Tlic could.”

“I know. But send Qui. He won’t want to be of any help here. I’m at least willing to try.”

She looked at my brother—older, bigger, stronger, certainly more able to help her here. He was sitting up now, braced against the wall, staring at the man on the floor with undisguised fear and revulsion. Even she could see that he would be useless.

“Qui, go!” she said.

He didn’t argue. He stood up, swayed briefly, then steadied, frightened sober.

“This man’s name is Bram Lomas,” she told him, reading from the man’s armband. I fingered my own armband in sympathy. “He needs T’Khotgif Teh. Do you hear?”

“Bram Lomas, T’Khotgif Teh,” my brother said. “I’m going.” He edged around Lomas and ran out the door.

Lomas began to regain consciousness. He only moaned at first and clutched spasmodically at a pair of T’Gatoi’s limbs. My younger sister, finally awake from her egg dream, came close to look at him, until my mother pulled her back.

T’Gatoi removed the man’s shoes, then his pants, all the while leaving him two of her limbs to grip. Except for the final few, all her limbs were equally dexterous. “I want no argument from you this time, Gan,” she said.

I straightened. “What shall I do?”

“Go out and slaughter an animal that is at least half your size.”

“Slaughter? But I’ve never —”

She knocked me across the room. Her tail was an efficient weapon whether she exposed the sting or not.

I got up, feeling stupid for having ignored her warning, and went into the kitchen. Maybe I could kill something with a knife or an ax. My mother raised a few Terran animals for the table and several thousand local ones for their fur. T’Gatoi would probably prefer something local. An ahti, perhaps. Some of those were the right size, though they had about three times as many teeth as I did and a real love of using them. My mother, Hoa, and Qui could kill them with knives. I had never killed one at all, had never slaughtered any animal. I had spent most of my time with T’Gatoi while my brother and sisters were learning the family business. T’Gatoi had been right. I should have been the one to go to the call box. At least I could do that.

I went to the corner cabinet where my mother kept her large house and garden tools. At the back of the cabinet there was a pipe that carried off waste water from the kitchen—except that it didn’t anymore. My father had rerouted the waste water below before I was born. Now the pipe could be turned so that one half slid around the other and a rifle could be stored inside. This wasn’t our only gun, but it was our most easily accessible one. I would have to use it to shoot one of the biggest of the ahti. Then T’Gatoi would probably confiscate it. Firearms were illegal in the Preserve. There had been incidents right after the Preserve was established—Terrans shooting Tlic, shooting N’Tlic. This was before the joining of families began, before everyone had a personal stake in keeping the peace. No one had shot a Tlic in my lifetime or my mother’s, but the law still stood—for our protection, we were told. There were stories of whole Terran families wiped out in reprisal back during the assassinations.

I went out to the cages and shot the biggest ahti I could find. It was a handsome breeding male, and my mother would not be pleased to see me bring it in. But it was the right size, and I was in a hurry.

I put the ahti’s long, warm body over my shoulder—glad that some of the weight I’d gained was muscle—and took it to the kitchen. There, I put the gun back in its hiding place. If T’Gatoi noticed the ahti’s

wounds and demanded the gun, I would give it to her. Otherwise, let it stay where my father wanted it.

I turned to take the achi to her, then hesitated. For several seconds, I stood in front of the closed door wondering why I was suddenly afraid. I knew what was going to happen. I hadn't seen it before but T'Gatoi had shown me diagrams and drawings. She had made sure I knew the truth as soon as I was old enough to understand it.

Yet I did not want to go into that room. I wasted a little time choosing a knife from the carved, wooden box in which my mother kept them. T'Gatoi might want one, I told myself, for the tough, heavily furred hide of the achi.

"Gan!" T'Gatoi called, her voice harsh with urgency.

I swallowed. I had not imagined a single moving of the feet could be so difficult. I realized I was trembling and that shamed me. Shame impelled me through the door.

I put the achi down near T'Gatoi and saw that Lomas was unconscious again. She, Lomas, and I were alone in the room—my mother and sisters probably sent out so they would not have to watch. I envied them.

But my mother came back into the room as T'Gatoi seized the achi. Ignoring the knife I offered her, she extended claws from several of her limbs and slit the achi from throat to anus. She looked at me, her yellow eyes intent. "Hold this man's shoulders, Gan."

I stared at Lomas in panic, realizing that I did not want to touch him, let alone hold him. This would not be like shooting an animal. Not as quick, not as merciful, and, I hoped, not as final, but there was nothing I wanted less than to be part of it.

My mother came forward. "Gan, you hold his right side," she said. "I'll hold his left." And if he came to, he would throw her off without realizing he had done it. She was a tiny woman. She often wondered aloud how she had produced, as she said, such "huge" children.

"Never mind," I told her, taking the man's shoulders. "I'll do it." She hovered nearby.

"Don't worry," I said. "I won't shame you. You don't have to stay and watch."

She looked at me uncertainly, then touched my face in a rare caress. Finally, she went back to her bedroom.