

*The Bastard of Omelas*

by Coraline Ismael Karim

The mother and child do not have permission to leave the room.

The guards do not enter, serving a single clean, buttered roll with a cube of dehydrated protein to split for the child. The gloved hand pushes the plastic tray through the slot, blinding white light fills the room, and the food is shifted from where it was once centered.

The child cannot eat it until they tell her to.

She only sees her mother when they open the slots on the door. It's the only light they happen to provide them, when it is time for something.

What little light reflects from the cold concrete floor blankets her mother. She is attached to the black steel wall, with several thick, elastic tubes that move a spectrum of faint light through its tendrils into slotted metal rings bolted into her neck. Her mother's head is slouched onto her own shoulder, a tan crust covers her lashless eyes in a mangled arc, and her pale brown skin is covered in moisture, splotches of white sediment stuck around her browbone and lips, and a faint trail of saliva has dried to the tip of her chin.

Her scalp is bald and bare and lacking in melanin, and the child has never seen a single speck of hair grow anywhere on her mother's nude body. The mother's belly is stretched and scarred into an elastic mound, the rings of lights breathing from within her thin skin, revealing the amniotic cradle within.

Sometimes the child will shift herself next to her mother when the cold becomes too unbearable in the room, and the small speck of warmth fills the child with joy. She doesn't smile when it happens, even in the dark.

The child is not allowed to smile.

The gloved hand slams the slot shut, and the light disappears in an instant. The child's eyes make up as many shapes as it can before they completely give in to the darkness. Her

mother's silhouette is fading, but she sees her thin, boney arms and needle fingers and long nails, the way her legs splay unnaturally over the floor. Or maybe it's just memory painting the images in her head rather than her sight itself. The mother has never moved. Not once. It's the same image, every time: a breathing carcass and the suckling star within.

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The white light blinds her again. The upper slot is open, and a black shadow speaks through its glowing blue eyes, the damning whiteness shining past its hidden face.

“Sit in the middle,” it commands with a dark and deep guttural voice. “And do not look at them, this time. Final warning.”

She sees the oval tray that sits before the floor slot. Its risen bun has sunken, and the protein cube has white fuzz stuck to its corners, as if a small cloud had slipped its way into the room and made the food its home.

They forgot to give her permission to eat it.

Or so she thinks.

The guard is watching her. It wants her to move from her mother and shift to the center. It wants to see her follow its orders, and she does. She is sitting in the room's very center, just two feet from her mother against her steel wall. Her bare back watches her mother, the vertebrae of the child's spine pushing against her brown skin. Her eyes stare at the centerpoint of where the concrete floor meets the black glass before her. A low vibration moves through the room, and the wall thrums, revealing dark human-like silhouettes past the glass. She doesn't move her eyes or her head, but she still feels like she is disobeying the guard for seeing them through her periphery. She doesn't know if she should close her eyes.

She hasn't been given permission to.

Their voices are blurred, but the taller silhouette speaks with a high pitch that pierces through the thick glass.

“Now, children, this is what keeps our home safe, happy, and comfortable! It looks like a little girl, but it’s really what powers our entire society!” it says, the black figure moving its shadowed hands towards the child. Bright flickers of starlight cover the glass, shining through and reflecting from the ground.

The child keeps still.

“No flash photography! You might scare it! James, stop bothering Samantha, I’ve already asked you twice!”

A small silhouette comes closer to the glass, its features becoming more refined. Its eyes, even at the edges of the child’s sight, are glowing in their deep azure light.

“Thank you!” says the small voice.

The taller silhouette screams at it, smacking the small figure, the slap echoing through the room. “What did I just say?! WE CANNOT BE KIND TO IT. If we show any appreciation towards it, our entire home will fall apart! Is that what you want? Do you want everything that makes us happy to go away? How selfish are you? Go to the end, and I’ll make sure to have a strong conversation with your mother and father, James!”

The glass wall ends its thrumming, and the soft vibrations throughout the room disappear. It turns into another black wall, a dark panel, melding into the everpresent blackness of this dark room save the flicker of the fetus.

A slot slams open, and the twisting light makes its way into the room.

“I told you not to look at them,” the guard says, the words that come from its mouth sounding more gnarled and grated than before.

It closes the eye slot, and the child shifts her neck slowly to see the floor slot open, too, and the gloved hand reaches in to pull the plastic oval tray away from her and her mother. The child turns to stare at her mother in the brief moment of light. She does not smile. She looks at the wall holding her mother, the wires that seem to multiply and spread streaks dimming light through its tubing each passing second. She looks at the glass wall, another band of spectres having passed through. The gloved hand is about to close the floor slot. The light is seeping out once more. She looks over to the last wall, the final wall that opposes the door. Red stains it. The smell of iron and copper fills the child's nostrils each time she dares look at it. Small handprints, as small as hers, cover the black wall in a deranged sequence.

There are letters and words, shapes and figures, each something that has dried onto the steel canvas for longer than the child has been there.

She cannot read the words, yet it says:

*He who cradles the mind*

*Marks it for death.*