

Tether

She has no idea what home looks like but she dreams of home, imagining it will be much better than here.

It has to be.

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Her life is simple and archetypical. She rents a small apartment. She trudges to work every day, puts in the requisite hours in front of a computer, in a padded cubicle, trudges home to solitary takeaway dinners. She engages in typical sedentary leisure activities to unwind her brain after the daily mental labours. She sleeps seven hours at night. She wakes up to repeat the routine for five continuous days a week. She wishes she didn't have to engage in the daily labours but she would have no resources for survival then. For the remaining two days of the week she engages in chores around the house and runs errands outside the house, and engages in more sedentary leisure activities—visiting cyberspace, watching human actors' performances transmitted to a black box, and absorbing information through processing the printed word.

There are many problems with the physical body. Chiefly, it has many needs requiring fulfilment to ensure continued existence. Various resources are required to meet the needs, resources she can only acquire via trade, in return for the provision of her mental labours. Her life is preoccupied with the acquisition of resources, and the various modes of her energies are channelled to navigating the minefield of labour.

She wishes things were as simple as she performs labour and receives remuneration for her labours, but they are not. It is, she finds, arduous to interact with humans in the performance of labour. Daily enforced interactions with humans leave her too exhausted to seek out further connections in her leisure time.

She thinks she may not be fulfilling the second part of her Earth mission satisfactorily, the part to interact with humans in addition to close observations of humans in their natural habitats, for how much time she spends in avoidance of humans and how much time she spends in solitude. *If they have a problem with it, she thinks bitterly, they can come and tell me about it.*

They never do, that's the problem. She's never heard from them before and she doesn't know who they are now. They had her memory wiped. She knows that as a fact. She knows she was sent to Earth for a mission and is inhabiting a human body for the duration of the mission. She knows when her body dies, her mission is over. When that happens, she will be recalled from Earth automatically.

She does not remember much else. She does not remember what she was supposed to be. She does not remember what her people are like. She does not remember what her life was like. She does not remember what home looked like. In short, she does not recall anything before this mission. She assumes it is to help her adapt to being a human and living among humans better.

It does not work.

She can feel the chasm between her sense of self, and the human body she is inhabiting. Despite the care they have taken to wipe her mind, she still feels not-human, even if she can't recall what she should be. Her sense of self fights the human body and knows this is not right. Her sense of self never feels it belongs on this planet, among this species or any species here. Her sense of self longs, constantly and agonisingly, for something else out there. She misses what she does not know.

She has many theories, of what home, her species, is like. She imagines they must be much more peaceful and harmonious. She thinks they exhibit lower levels of aggression compared to the humans. Living among humans jars. She has never felt at ease with humans' aggression, she does not understand why they are habitually at war with each other, on small scales to huge. From one individual to another, to continents of masses to another. On an individual level she is wary of them, always. Humans trigger the activation of her psychological shields and it is

exhausting incessantly watching her back. *Why can't they just get along*, she wonders frequently, *Why are they compelled to destroy each other at every turn, why are they inclined towards conflict, why do they disdain peace.*

In her regular reports she writes, *'human levels of aggression are a significant concern, if encountered recommend to not engage or attempt direct communication with the species, but to adopt avoidance and stealth strategies'*.

She writes, *'any possible benefits arising from exchanges with humans may be outweighed by the possible threat they pose, the instinctive proclivity for violence and destruction'*.

She writes, *'humans have in particular a distaste of, lack of tolerance for and destructive tendencies towards those they consider "different"—those they fail to see similarities with, or whose differences they deem unbridgeable and unacceptable. Typical responses include isolation and exclusion, at times escalating to bids to obliterate and annihilate the target in question.'*

She writes, *'humans demonstrate an astounding variety of aggressive exhibitions. Apart from physical manifestations, they also display mental, emotional, and psychological aggression. These displays are most apparent during periods when humans perform labour.'*

She writes, *'during their labours humans also engage in a multitude of manipulation tactics to further personal aims. Much of human interaction involves manipulation of other parties to achieve own objectives. A two-party dialogue might involve mutual manipulation on the sides of both parties conniving to get the upper hand over and the advantage at the expense of the other party.'*

She writes, *'human interaction taking place during the provision of labour frequently causes and consists of negative affect; sometimes such human interactions seem solely aimed to produce negative affect in other parties'*.

She writes, *'please let me come home'*.

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What she can't quite untangle despite her time on the planet, is whether doing what the humans call 'work' in what they call 'workplaces' turns humans into monsters, or if humans are one of those species that have a beastly core to begin with and being in their workplaces merely accentuates the effect.

In the labyrinth of passive-aggressive emails, synthetic smiles she's grown to fear more than frowns, polite words delivered in tones that cut more than swear words, Machiavellian manoeuvres and schemes afloat, the minotaur takes many forms. After enough time spent blindly running into dead ends and stumbling into the paths of the minotaur's assorted minions, too much time spent licking her own wounds and hiding in the dark, praying they wouldn't be drawn to her by the scent of fear in her blood, she's learnt to cleave her own sword from her own soul, the blood of those she's slayed mingling with her own blood. She trades bits and pieces of her own soul slaying them, to stop them from tearing chunks out of her. Her hands are never clean, trying to staunch the flow of her own blood from open wounds, or stained with the blood of those she's slain.

If only she could find it and recognise its truest form, some days she fantasises about running straight into the minotaur, being slayed by it and being done with everything else.

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To be fair it is not all bad all the time, being human. On days when she is not required to provide mental labour or deal with humans, she has on occasion taken the long drive to visit the beach. Three simple strips of fine mineral particles, salt water and lower atmosphere make her appreciate, for brief durations, the possession of a physical body. At the beach she can feel the pliable sand squelching in the gaps between her toes. The salt-tinged air movement on her face. She can lie down on the breakwall and feel the sun-warmed planes of the rocks under her back. Feel the spray of salt water over her feet. Feel the contrast between icy cream melting into the warm confines of her mouth. She can see the sky above her, and the sea below her, and see both of them stretch out to the point where they meet, disappear and become each other. That point always makes her

feel incredibly small, makes her feel the physicality and the ethereality and how she is almost a part of everything. It makes her feel at peace, those few moments where everything slides into place and stays there and her body, mind, and soul are not tearing each other apart and nobody, nothing, can touch her.

She thinks her home must be like that too, vast space and maybe blueness that fills her up with its vastness, where she is content to be part of the vastness, to consume it and be consumed by it and be whole. Most times she can scarcely bear to think of home; it is only in these moments she can think of home and not be torn apart by the raw ache that she is not home, she is nowhere near home, she will not be home for a long, long time.

These moments are too far and few in between the rest of this human life.

*

She had not expected to find another not-human here, had not been searching, but once mutual discovery had been made, they had bonded quickly.

Why are you here? was one of the first things she asked him.

He shrugged. *This is a recon mission. I'm scouting to see if it'll be worth it to attack the planet and take over.*

She thought about it. She might possibly feel some measure of sadness for a few humans who had shown her some degree of kindness. Otherwise she found it surprisingly hard to care, or muster any great wells of sympathy for the humans. It might be good, she thought, to wipe this planet clean. Armageddon. Ice age. Mass extinction. Some days it felt it wouldn't be long before the humans destroyed themselves and their planet along with it, even if nobody else interfered.

I hope, she told him, *that I wouldn't still be stuck here when your species attacks, if they choose to attack eventually.*

He gave her a long look. *I would get you out of here before that happened.*

I could, he hesitated, *I could bring you back to my planet, if you like.*

Was this, she wondered, this quickening of pulse, dryness of throat, churning in the stomach, tensed muscles, the thudding against the chest, was this how humans experienced bodily sensations of love?

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She met him twice a week. During their rendezvous he made a point of providing sustenance, alluding to human mating rituals, smile tugging at the corner of his lips, his eyes. She had spent substantial time observing human mating rituals and found them tedious, the preening, posturing, manipulation, deceit that were so ingrained and inescapable in humans' overly complex, strictly regimented, protracted and elaborate rituals that invariably ended in disappointment and boredom in the best-case scenarios and heartbreak and extreme emotional agony in the worst. But she had appreciated his effort, and was vastly relieved he didn't play the mental 'games' or put her through what the humans subjected each other to. *Should I call him? Will he call me? I mustn't answer too soon. But mustn't let him wait too long either. I have to keep him waiting. Keep him wanting.* She wondered how humans ever managed to get anything done, how they ever managed to mate. He was straightforward. He did not keep her guessing, nor expect her to keep him. They established mutual interest and congregated. It was simple.

More than the provision of sustenance, she was immensely grateful for his provision of company. There was immaculate freedom in not hiding her true nature and being free to be who she was without fear of judgement, repercussion, or recrimination. Unlike the humans who scared easily and lashed out at anything different and thus feared, he had no qualms about any aspect of her. When she was herself he did not merely tolerate the things she was made up of, he liked them. He was fond of her. Fond—that was yet a new experience for her since landing on the planet. In his eyes she was neither weird nor abnormal. In his eyes she was a likeable object, she was the target of adoration. In his eyes she could be herself and it was the closest to home she'd felt yet. She wanted to stay in his eyes.

They spent hours in his car, driving around, then lounging in the backseat, resting her head on his lap while she launched into her litany of complaints about humans, the tediousness of mental labours and dealing with humans, while he listened and ran languid fingers through her hair. How inadequate she'd felt being human, how comparisons to other humans invariably left her lacking, how much like a fraud she felt, how lost she usually felt, how distant she'd felt from the humans, how weary and wounded she was from human machinations and skirmishes, how she'd worried her mistakes would give her away, how sick she was of putting on a show.

He would commiserate, and he would understand. He let her unburden everything in a way that felt she was almost physically lighter at the end of it. He made her feel better, had a way of clearing the thoughts from her mind, made the pains of the everyday feel small and distant, made all her suffering bearable, if she only got to see him at the end of it.

And how lonely, I was, she thought, but she didn't voice that out, because now he was around, she wasn't lonely anymore.

Do I make you happy too? It had occurred to her.

He nodded. *Of course, or I wouldn't be here.*

I do not believe two beings should be together if they did not make each other happy, he added.

She'd suggested it, attempting nonchalance, one night in his car, he was playing with her hair as usual and she was in the state perched perfectly between awake and asleep.

There's that thing, that humans, do. Get married. Symbolic of commitment to each other.

You desire so? His fingers didn't stop, a good sign.

She bit her lip. Then nodded, so he could feel the motion.

Okay. Do as the humans do.

She tilted her head up. *You're sure?*

I don't mind.

She grinned to herself in the dark, where he couldn't see her. *I don't mind too.*

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They went to the zoo. She melted under the sun in her wide-brimmed hat, he bought her a popsicle so she wouldn't melt so much. They walked around and watched the animals behind enclosures performing tricks, being fed by humans in return. Unbidden thoughts of humans miserable in their cubicles, their psychological cages, performing various antics to get paid, popped up in her mind. He liked the monkeys and spent a long time trying to talk to them and getting them to reply. She laughed and laughed and laughed. He refused to go near the bears and told her his natural form wasn't too visually different from the bears on Earth and though they were different species it cut just a bit too close to home, and it was depressing to see the bears locked up like that. They shared a second popsicle sitting on the wooden bench, watching the humans go by, and imagined stories for the humans, and laughed at themselves pretending to be humans, playing at going on a human date.

As he drove her home at the end of the day, his hand holding hers and sticking to her equally sweat-slicked hand, she mused perhaps there was some merit to this whole human gig.

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Before she met him, she loathed the human body. On top of the numerous needs to be met in the requirements necessary for survival, there existed so many wants she had to constantly moderate and control, so many impulses to monitor to prevent unseemly expression, all of which utilised extensive expanses of time and energies. In addition, the body frequently lapsed and was damaged in a myriad of ways, bringing discomfort and pain. It was troublesome and caused her much grief. She might not have remembered much of her original life, but she remembered she was formless, her natural state did not require a physiological manifestation to exist. It was all new and difficult, trying to adapt to existing in a physical form.

After she had met him her sentiment on the topic had been swayed. When he put his hand on her, it evoked a response she had no prior comparison for. She knew it wasn't just about human skin contact or physical proximity; she had experimented with touching and being touched by other humans and derived the following conclusions:

– Being touched by another female: evoked emotions ranging from acceptable tolerance to awkwardness depending on the emotional closeness she felt regarding the female subject

– Being touched by another male: evoked feelings of disgust and discomfort and urges to remove herself from proximity to the male subject

It was just him, then, only his touch she craved for more, only his touch brought pleasure. And then, sensations that were sharper than pleasure, more intense. Intensity that threatened to wipe her mind, overwhelm her and, for once, she welcomed it. She wanted his touch all the time, especially when he was in close geographical proximity to her. It was unbearable that he should be close enough to touch and yet was not touching her, and she frequently sought to remedy that. She had to grudgingly accept, there was something about humans and their physical bodies. Physical pleasure, she decided, was like a drug. She could get used to it. No, she could get addicted to it. With his hands trailing down her body, drawing pleasure and warmth from her skin with every contact point, she decided, for the first time, she was actually glad of the experience to possess a physical tangible form, a form that was capable of pleasure reception.

How, she'd gasped to him once after the event, breathless and spent, sated, how do the humans concentrate on anything else? Why don't they just spend all their time seeking physical pleasure?

He was smiling at her, warmly, seemingly pleased he'd managed to reduce her to such a state, took her apart and made her whole again. At her question he laughed, genuine and not mocking her, never, and shrugged. *I suppose*, he told her wisely, *I suppose when you've spent your whole life like this, you become used to it. You acclimatise. You take it for granted. And then you stop feeling it, you stop being aware. It stops being amazing.*

I never, she told him fiercely, *want to acclimatise to this.*

He laughed again, wondrous sound. *But how would we get anything done then*, but the look in his eyes was affectionate as he asked, as he bent down to press his lips against her neck.

Human bodies and their erogenous zones, she marvelled, and didn't push him away.

*

She couldn't help it. She'd been puzzled by the behaviour of female humans, but found herself as susceptible—she started planning her wedding in her head.

You're a fool, she told herself sternly, but couldn't stop looking at pictures of apparel in white, baked goods covered in frosting and fondant and, what had they called them, *wedding favours*.

The sane, non-human part of her sighed. It was stoutly ignored.

He laughed, not at her, and didn't stop her either.

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On a day that had been unlike any other nondescript day, he'd visited her at her apartment.

They've recalled me from Earth, he said.

Her hows and whys and a thousand questions died in the path of her throat, causing constriction.

They've decided to put the Earth mission on hold for now. They haven't made a decision regarding Earth, but they've found another more promising planet. They think it will be a more fruitful mission, so they're calling me back for deployment to the other planet. That planet isn't in this galaxy. I don't know how long the mission there will take from Earth's perspective. The time there travels very differently from Earth.

She stared at her floor so she wouldn't have to look at him. Drew endless loops on the floor with the big toe.

I'm sorry.

I think we should just stop here.

There's nothing we can do now.

She gritted her teeth so no words would tumble out of their own accord, but at the end one last sentence slipped through the crack.

Will I see you again?

I don't know.

He was honest, and he left without a backward glance.

She didn't know when he left the planet. She simply didn't see him again.

She supposed, even if he hadn't left this planet completely, it wouldn't be too hard to disappear within the seven billion, disappear so completely she had no way of finding him again.

Seven billion and they were all wrong.

She didn't cry.

She couldn't help it, though, if the human body's lacrimal gland chose to secrete fluids that the lacrimal canaliculi conveyed to the surface of the human eye, with fluids also drained through the nasolacrimal duct into the nasal cavity.

*

It was no big deal. The average lifespan of a human female in the country she was residing in was eighty-five years. At the very most she merely had to spend another fifty-five years in this human body on this planet before it broke down.

54 years, 11 months, 30 days, 23 hours, 59 seconds more to go.

54 years, 11 months, 30 days, 23 hours, 58 seconds more to go.

54 years, 11 months, 30 days, 23 hours, 57 seconds more to go.

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Just because it felt as though something had stopped in her life, didn't mean anything actually did stop.

Not this world, or its turning, for sure.

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She thought of each moment in life like a grain of sand falling through her fingers. And even if it would take a long time for her to lose all the grains, one day they would all fall through her fingers.

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Over time he is a distant memory, so distant she wonders if she imagined it all.

*

Her life is simple and archetypical. She rents a small apartment. She trudges to work every day, puts in the requisite hours in front of a computer, in a padded cubicle, trudges home to solitary takeaway dinners. She engages in typical sedentary leisure activities to unwind her brain after the daily mental labours. She sleeps seven hours at night. She wakes up to repeat the routine for five continuous days a week. She wishes she didn't have to engage in the daily labours but she would have no resources for survival then. For the remaining two days of the week she engages in chores around the house and runs errands outside the house, and engages in more sedentary leisure activities—visiting cyberspace, watching human actors' performances transmitted to a black box, and absorbing information through processing the printed word.

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If it seems like there is no intention to recall her anytime soon, perhaps there is some way she could return of her own accord. She knows when the human body stops functioning, she would return by default to wherever she came from. Perhaps there is some way to hasten the process instead of waiting for the body to fail naturally.

She reads up about the human body. Catalogues the different ways the human body can be made to fail. Sever major arteries in the arm to bleed out. Fill the lungs with water or cut off the airways to prevent intake of oxygen. Falling from a great height or positioning in front of a high-speed moving object to cause massive internal damage to the organs from the impact. Ingestion of chemicals or poisons to cause system failure or inability to return to consciousness.

She doesn't comprehend the objections humans had to the destruction of the body in her readings. Why does the physical form matter, when the soul that is of true importance is left intact? Perhaps if humans cannot exist in their current state without a physical container, and they cannot imagine what it is like to exist outside of one, they wind up ascribing too much importance to the physical.

It is just a body, she thinks.

In her research she learns too of the theory that the desire for the destruction of the body is a symptom of human mental illness. She is informed she could possibly just be a human who is suffering from some form of mental condition, psychosis that leads her to believe she is an otherworldly visitor.

Or just really depressed.

She laughs for a long time, without humour.

She is not mentally ill. She just wants to go home.

Human criteria do not apply to her, she insists.

This is not what the humans call suicide, this is what the humans call space travel.

And her spaceship is just a tall building, or a rope, or a handful of pills.

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But she cannot bring herself to, in the end.

She had wanted to find out what lies at the end of the tether. She had stood at the edge and dreamt of home, and had been unable to bridge that gulf.

How do the humans do it?

They live day after continuous day, passing through each one in a chain of which they cannot see the end.

She's still not sure if a life like this is worth living, that half-existence, the endless drudgery, the unexamined life, the emotional distress, the wear and tear to the mind and soul through perpetual strife, the seeming lack of overall meaning and purpose as a theme.

But if she had been unable to take that final step, that leaves her with few other options but to take a leaf from the humans' book.

Getting through

one day,

at a time.

One day,

at a time.

One day,

at a time.