

## Smoke, City and Skins

The thick smog of the city choked her lungs as Given stared up at the looming skyscrapers. She had done it. She had escaped. Adjusting her black mask, she tried to block out the signature ashy rotten scent of the city. It smelled horrible but it was freedom all the same. It had been some time since she had made it out of the factory, judging by the waning moon yesterday, probably around a week or so. An eerie silence permeated along the alleyway she walked through, only disturbed by the small pattering of her feet and rain on cold concrete. Though the stench and hush of the city were suffocating, it was quite preferable to the screeching of metal cages and children pounding in her head. Grey wisps curled around her bare feet as if they were trying to latch onto her while she cut through the rivers of mist. Piles of clothes were strewn in the dark corners of the alley, drenched from the rain; most of them seemed to be in good condition but there was nothing to be done if they were labelled 'out of season.' Given slowed down to a quieter walk hearing nothing but the echo of her own small footsteps and shivered as a sudden cold breeze crept into her thin shirt. It would have been nice if she had grabbed something warmer on her way out of the factory but that chance was far past. Plus, she didn't really have the time between the monsters hunting her, climbing, hiding in bushes and escaping. Pushing the creeping fear from the memory, her eyes scanned for something warmer and drier to guard against the bitter chill. She jogged up to a mostly not soggy heap and started to dig. It was a large collection; the mound being at least five times the size of her spindly body.

*Please. Please let something be dry.*

Given could feel the cold start to trickle up her body bit by bit as time passed on, acutely aware of how the wet clothes underneath her thin legs threatened to swamp her at the slightest misstep. She swallowed down a small whimper. *Just focus on finding something, Given.* Her own stagnated breaths eventually drowned out the echoes of rain and her anxieties.

After what felt like hours of digging, she managed to dredge up a relatively thick woollen coat. She put it on with shaking hands, relishing the scratchy feeling of the fabric against her cold clammy skin. A puddle caught her attention after she donned the coat. A small child with a sooty face stared back, rippling with drops of rain.

She could see that the brown coat was slightly too big for her, the ends reached down to her shins and the sleeves covered her scratched hands completely. The item was of a peculiar style as well. It had matching patches of yellow fabric neatly stitched on each elbow. It sort of reminded Given of a patchwork quilt. *Well, I suppose it has its own charm about it.* She felt safe already under the weight. Given shook her head to clear the unnecessary thoughts and glanced about before spotting a small overhang on a nearby apartment block. It looked dry, had a good view of the city and was inconspicuous. *That should be a good place to stay until the rain stops.* Wondering how to get up there, Given noticed a mostly intact fire escape leading to her destination and padded towards it. She made her way over, noting that most of the red paint had peeled away and had given way to spots of rust. She hurriedly placed a foot on, eager to get to safety. The metal groaned loudly. Drawing a sharp intake, she quickly withdrew her step and glanced over her shoulders. *Please don't hear me. Please don't hear me* chanted in her heart like a broken record. Only, the falling fog and silence greeted her. Letting out a ragged breath, she proceeded to climb it again. This time more slowly and carefully.

Making shaking steps towards the rooftop, she felt the vibrations and creaks of the stairs shifting slightly underfoot. She was a good five floors up. It would take more steps to climb down than up; there was no going back. *Only two more floors. You can make it.* She shakily made her way slowly,

only breathing as her feet touched the solid concrete. As she climbed under the low roof, her shoulders sagged in relief of not feeling the rain on her back. She curled inwards, letting the shivering subside and looked at the tops of the many buildings dotted about the city. The rain pelted down on the metal of the roof in lulling waves, it was almost serene. The mist sluggishly crawling in the narrow laneways towards the sea while the buildings tinted in a smoky blue colour by the overcast skies.

Suddenly, she saw a speck of bright white light snaked around the outskirts of the city. It was so far away that she nearly missed it. She tensed up, slowly crawling further back into the corners. She knew that light. It was one of the last things she saw before getting captured and locked in one of the seemingly endless factory cages. The monsters had probably come to hunt for some more. Given shuddered as she recalled the cacophony of wails and clanging of metal cages. No doubt the monster housed many more 'material components.' The surveyor was too low to catch any sight of her. *They don't have very big brains to go with for all their appearances and size.* She chuckled inwardly despite the situation. An uncomfortable silence had settled as Given trained her eyes on the monstrous figure. Time seemed to stretch out. Whenever she tried to keep track in her head, she had always lost count at around three-hundred. But after sometime, it had shambled off towards the city's docks where there's usually someone scrounging in shipping containers for food. Her stomach grumbled queasily at the mention of it. She found there wasn't anything particularly appetising on the city's menu, unless one fancied pigeons, rats or some strange bug. *I'll sleep for a bit before I head out.* If she could, Given usually slept whenever her hunger had gotten the better of her. So, she laid down onto her side and closed her tired eyes, drifting off into sleep.

She woke up the familiar cries and screaming of thousands of children. She could feel the fear and anger of small hands banging cages vibrating through the walls. But there was something unusual about it today, the door was slightly ajar. Given blinked and rubbed her eyes. *Must be feeding time.* But the door was still ajar without a lock or monster. She hesitantly crawled towards the opening only a few centimetres away and pushed it open. The metal heaved pitifully and gave way to her scraggly fingers. *No way.* She had discarded the small hope of someday escaping the factory, accepting it as a pipe dream. *But now...* She quickly shut the door. Now was not the time. She could tell with the softer cries that patrols were still around. *When it gets louder, I'll go.* And so, she huddled in the corner wondering how to escape. *There was that small crack in the wall near her cage...*

And so, after a period of bated breath, she quietly pushed the door open. Bright white artificial light assaulted her eyes and silhouetted pyramids of children stacked on top of one another. *It- It was huge.* She knew it was big from the echoes but now, she could clearly make out at least a very large stadium's worth of children. *Don't get cold feet now.* She padded her way towards the hole and ignored the stares and crescendo of weeping around her. *I can't do anything. They all have locks. Only the monsters have the keys.* She repeated it like a mantra though it brought little comfort. Her heart seemed to slow her down as she shimmied through the crack. It was dark, quiet and cramped. She could feel the cold walls press against her body like a grip. Until her hands finally felt a soft patch of grass. Unable to relish in her victory, Given quickly looked around for a route of escape. She noted she was surrounded by large trees and dense bushes as well as a small brick hut. *Strange. I wonder what that is.* A sudden noise of harsh ripping of skin from flesh echoed from within it. She froze. She had gotten her wish. She saw something hanging from the grimy windows of the shack: a piece of skin hanging limply from a line.

She recognised what, no *who*, it had come from.

She gasped and bolted up, her head thwacking against the overhang. Tears pooled from her eyes from the pain as she rubbed her bruise. She then stood up and surveyed the city's vast expanse.

*It's time to leave.*

by May Moe

(Mostly) inspired by 'Givenchy' by Georgina Davy

