

Moonflower's Mother

by Tito J Davis

"Moon witch." The butcher spat the words at Jilaya with hardly an accompanying glance. He led a pony pulling an empty cart, speaking as if passing her flower stand and insulting her were just part of leaving the market.

The butcher wasn't alone in this sort of welcome to the newcomers. Jilaya had heard this hundreds of times since she, her husband, son, and her people, moved to Belmont. She knew she should be used to it, knew she should be proud of her heritage as a Datura, but her head dropped in embarrassment all the same. She leaned on her flower stand in tired frustration as shoppers bustled around the market kicking up dirt.

It was called an open-air market, but today Jilaya felt suffocated. The red canopy that stretched across the rooftops overhead on the market street held in the dust, the noise of half the little village out for weekend groceries, and the atmosphere of fear. Fear boiled ever near the surface on the day of the full moon.

The Datura couldn't move again, not so soon -- eventually they'd need to build a life and settle. Jilaya had never been

able to stay anywhere long when she was growing up.

"Miss Jill!"

It was the voice of her son's teacher Luca. She greeted him with her eyes still averted.

"Thought I'd come to the market for a quick lunch while the kids are learning music." He stopped in front of her stand. "How pretty."

The white flowers she had on display looked pale and wilted next to the plump and vibrant peppers of the neighboring stall.

After a deep breath Jilaya lifted her gaze to meet his, "How is my Ibrahim?"

Luca, like most of the Belmontis were to Datura, stood quite tall in front of her, and she had to squint as she looked up at him with the sun beating through the canvas over his head.

His smile seemed genuine. From what she could tell, Luca was a teacher who really loved being a part of his students' lives, and that included getting to know their families. They'd only spoken once before, a few months ago when she'd enrolled Ibrahim in his class. He was kind then, even though she'd had a poor grasp on the language.

"Abe is a great listener as always, but he has been... somewhat distracted today." Luca's smile faltered slightly before being replaced by one more guileless. "Full moon tonight; maybe he's on the alert for howls."

The full moon attacks had affected her family more than most locals, the same locals who were so keen to remind everyone the attacks had only started when the Datura moved in. And, a joke

here must mean jokes for her son in school, too.

Jilaya wanted to flash a look that said his joke was not so harmless, but she couldn't summon the energy to light the fire behind her eyes.

He seemed to sense the chill in her heart however, and dropped his head, "I know you lost him a month ago today. I'm sorry."

Her husband was the last person she wanted to talk about with her son's teacher, especially before a full moon, her husband's bane. She gripped her flower stand making scars stand out pale on her hands, the pain of her loss etched on her very skin. Instead she said evenly, "My Ibo thinks so much of you; thank you for your patience with him."

There were so few friendly faces here after all, and he had stopped to talk when so many hissed and whispered.

"I usually find a couple months to be all it takes to win new students over," Luca's smile was pleasant again. "He gets along with the other students, now, as well. Abe started out only playing with the other Datura students, but they all go as one class now. One day he is with another Datura kid, the next he is with a kid from Belmont. Soon enough they'll all just be Belmont boys."

She tried to return the smile, but couldn't bring it all the way up to her eyes. Her eyes betrayed the sadness this gave her, though he wouldn't understand why.

Luca studied her face, then gave her flowers a cursory glance and said, "Come walk with me." He gestured down the

street. She took her jacket from the corner of her stall and followed. The jacket looked almost gray already from the market dust when just this morning it was palest white. It was still early fall, and in Belmont the leaves had only just begun to change, just about jacket weather for someone from a warmer climate.

"Kids do take after their parents," he continued as they walked, waving occasionally to passers-by and vendors in recognition, "and at first we had a pretty clear divide, but kids come around quicker than adults."

Some waved back, others eyed them suspiciously. Luca was well liked in town, but even that did not protect him from the scorn of being seen with a Datura before the full moon.

"We say kids can see through the veils adulthood makes and wears," Jilaya said keeping her eyes forward, hands buried in her jacket pockets trying not to see the following eyes and dark glances.

"Very true," Luca agreed. "We even had some Datura students in on Wednesday."

She raised her eyes to Luca's and gave him a hard look.

"But no Ibo. We still pray Wednesdays."

He raised a placating hand. "Of course, the school completely understands the need for the foreign students to be allowed to worship however they wish," he assured her.

He spotted a bakery, one of the few places on the street with a permanent building; a doorway among the wooden back walls of the buildings the next street over, frame painted white to

stand out against dark soil-stained wood. Luca gestured for her to follow him in.

The baker was turned around pulling cakes from the oven, so Luka knocked on the doorframe as they entered.

The baker, a woman so dusted with flour it was hard to tell how much of the color had really gone from her hair, raised a stubby finger without turning.

Jilaya breathed in the fresh bread smell and tried to let the wounds left by the glares fade.

They were at the counter by the time she turned. Upon seeing them she jumped as if they'd snuck up on her.

Immediately she reached for an oil can from beside her lamp and splashed a hasty semicircle between her and them, staining the floor.

Jilaya and Luca both recoiled back a few paces, Luca's expression reflecting the disgust and shame Jilaya felt.

The baker shook her head wordlessly, eyes wide as she backed away looking only at Jilaya as if she expected her to leap over the counter and attack her right there in the shop.

Luca tugged Jilaya's elbow and guided her out of the shop with a look of distaste on his face. His eyes roved the street for something else to eat, and he led her away again.

A glance behind her showed Jilaya the baker tracing religious patterns on her forehead with the oil. A warding mark.

Jilaya was ashamed this sort of behavior still shocked her, even though she'd dealt with it most of her life. Luca's silence told her the few short months of the Datura's being around had

already somewhat accustomed him to it. It was always easier to get used to your neighbors acting so hateful when it wasn't directed at you. Jilaya was held silent by a lump in her throat and fear that pierced her to her core. If the attacks weren't stopped, would the Datura ever be able to settle?

They turned a corner into a section of the market with a blue canopy overhead instead of the red of the main path, and made for a fruit stand.

Luca bought one for her, as well as one of his own, and they ate in silence for a moment. Jilaya could see uneasiness with the encounter with the baker clear on his face. It couldn't be the fruit, perfectly in season. The sweet juices dripped into the dirt.

Finally he turned to her, his face pensive. "We are learning the tale of the Lost Butterfly. Do you know this fable?"

"No." Her son came home often with stories they'd learned in school. She rather doubted he took much from them at his age. More likely he just learned he liked the idea of talking mice, and dogs and cats who were friends. She was usually glad he did not understand the stories.

They stood beside a puddle in the dirt, and instead of looking at Luca, she watched herself there. Blue light filtered through the canopy above and made her coat look blue in her reflection, almost a teardrop.

"I am happy he learns so much at school. Please, tell me of this fable of the butterfly who is lost."

They tossed the fruit pits into a can and started to make

their way back toward her flower stand. Jilaya hugged her coat around her, though it wasn't cold.

"Butterflies migrate. You know what that word means: to migrate?"

She shoved her hands into her coat pockets and watched their feet as they walked.

"Migrate. They travel from home to home, no?" A tricky word in a tricky language, but she'd heard it before.

"Yes and no. It means when it gets cold, they go to where it is warm. When it gets warm again, they return home. Well, in this story there are two families of butterflies. One is returning home to a field of flowers, the other to a forest. The daughter of the flower family mistakenly goes home with the family from the forest. She likes the forest family, and decides she will stay. Now, do you know what camouflage is?"

Jilaya nodded keeping her eyes on the dirt. She had a feeling she knew where the story was going.

"So, the daughter has her flower patterns, and the woods butterflies have their leaf patterns. The family tells her she must paint over her flower patterns, for there are only leaves to hide you in the woods. She does not listen. Her flower patterns are pretty, and they remind her of home. Soon, a bird sees a beautiful flower, and yet it flies like lunch, and there are no flowers here in the woods. And so the bird has a delicious meal that day."

He stopped and faced her as if to ask if she understood.

She nodded again, still looking at their feet; eyes slightly

narrowed, "Thank you for your story Luca."

Luca sighed. He sounded disappointed.

Jilaya's eyes rose to meet his gaze, and she held it, her jaw set.

They arrived back at her stall, and he stepped forward to the flowers. "What do you have here?"

She gestured to each in turn, "Here is Jimson weed, and this is Angel's Trumpet, both beautiful if given a spot in shade. Please, only ten--"

Luca's hands went up, "Oh no, not buying today."

Her heart sank.

He held his polite smile for another moment, "Now, I really must be getting back, the students will want to be picked up from music, they have been frightened around the full moon..." His look turned apologetic, "eh... lately."

He raised a hand in farewell, and Jilaya's gaze returned to her shoes.

She began to pack her stall. It was early; she had time still before moonrise to get to the water and pray. No sales, even to the friendly faces.

She glanced up at the sky and listened to the market around her. Shouts of sales and counter offers, the shuffle of boots on dirt, and a slight murmur of that familiar atmosphere of fear. Will the attacks continue tonight?

Another death on the night of a full moon would mean the Datura would have to leave, again. Even tolerant villages didn't suffer too many casualties before turning on the newcomers.

"Monster, you should all be put down!" a glob of spit landed at her feet and pooled in the dirt.

She watched the man's boots bear him away, and closed her eyes against tears. She brought her hand up to her face and opened her eyes, allowing the tear to drop onto her finger.

She pulled her hand away and looked deep into the tear. It reflected the red of canopy and gold of the afternoon sun above. She moved her hand side to side, watching the red change to gold and back again like a spark come to settle there on her scars. *I am not a monster.* She thought. She prayed.

There was always shame in walking down the aisles with a cart just as heavy as the one you came in with, so she kept her eyes fixed on the ground as she left. Vegetables and fruit rinds were stomped into the dirt, almost whole meals between sections of the market, half sunk in the cart tracks.

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School was nearly over when she arrived. Ibrahim wouldn't be happy to be picked up on time she knew, being used to staying late as she tried to sell one more flower. He would enjoy the lakeside though, he always did.

When they arrived, there were already a couple families by the water, some in prayer, some entertaining their kids. Some splashed and swam while others stood half submerged, eyes closed, mouths moving, hoping tonight would be different than the last full moon. *Accept us,* they prayed. Don't send us away.

Jilaya let Ibo go and play with other children in the grass while she walked into the water. It was ice cold, like a knife in

the chest. All the air went out of her lungs, but still she walked in, deeper and deeper. Her clothes were soaked and floated all around her, her white coat making a half circle, like a moon half waned.

She said her prayers with the water lapping at her chin, eyes closed, until she shivered, cold to the bone.

Out she came, shirt and pants stuck to her, clinging like Ibo on his first day of school. Another mother came to her with a red robe and draped it over her shoulders.

"You should remember to bring something warm Jilaya, the waters are cold this time of year, and always especially so on a full moon; you know this."

"Thank you Hadya." In truth, she'd not brought anything on purpose. Maybe if she felt the cold, truly felt it all the way in her chest, let it soak in, she could rid herself of the curse of guilt and dread.

"We are coming up on our first White Festival here," Hadya said as they watched their kids play in the grass, "I want it to come with wonder for the locals, not scorn."

"We cannot force people to love us," Jilaya reminded her, "Sometimes our hosts don't warm to us quickly no matter our efforts. We can't control this."

"We can't control them, no. We can control us though." Hadya said quietly.

They spent a long moment in silence, neither looking at the other.

"We can't move again so soon; Hani likes Belmont. He likes

the school, the other children, he likes the woods and the lake. I don't want to uproot him again and again. You know what that can do to a child."

They all did. She had never lived in Datur, where her people came from. Her whole life had been moving from one foreign land to another. Sometimes it was fear that drove them out; the same as was threatening them here in Belmont, sometimes there weren't enough resources. She remembered a desert town she had liked, but it could never support all of them for lack of food. And the town in the mountains that did not have the room in their homes carved into the stone. The Datura living in a tent city outside the carved village was as alienating as their difference in language.

But most of all she remembered Amlas. They'd been there longest. Almost a decade. In Amlas there had been fields and fields and fields, which meant food for all and space for all. To the Amals their traditions hadn't been so crazy. Prayer on Wednesday? That's fine, the Amals prayed on Thursdays. There was never friction, never pressure to become an Amal.

Hadya's voice called Jilaya back to the present. Her tone was sharp. "It got your husband first. Board up your windows, and your doors, if not for us, for your son. And if it... eh... gets inside." She extended to Jilaya a small package wrapped in red silk.

Jilaya's heartrate quickened. She knew what was inside, but she pulled the cloth aside anyway. Just a sliver of the dagger was revealed, reflecting the sunset, deep red on the silver edge. She clutched it to her chest, feeling the cold of the metal on

her skin. A shiver ran down her spine as she turned the dagger, feeling the rough sharpness, imagining it biting in.

The lakeside was full of families who did not deserve to be forced away. Her gaze moved across the lawn to her son, playing in the wet dirt. His father had been with him there playing just before the last full moon. The same as this evening; the lake was painted red and gold as the sun sunk behind the trees. The drops from their playful splashes fell like bloody tears.

Tears of her own welled in her eyes, her decision made.

Was her husband waiting for them somewhere? Everyone at this lakeside would say yes. Waiting patiently on the dark side of the moon. The locals would say yes too, but not in the same way. To them you went into the dirt, became the trees and grass. Regrown as the green life around them eating away at the bodies they left behind. Where the Datura left flowers on stone graves, these people left only seeds in the upturned soil.

Would her grave get flowers? There were plenty of Datura to keep their traditions alive, but every year their wings were more painted.

Like Hani, Ibo loved Belmont, and Jilaya spent the rest of the evening there with him playing at the edge of the water, using as much time as they had left. She couldn't make the Datura move again.

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That night when she put her son down to sleep, she told him the story of the butterfly again, but instead of being eaten it flies away home, because in the story it could.

She did the windows first. She had no experience with hammers or nails, but her husband was gone. The bent nail heads reminded her with each pound. He'd been killed with the hammer in his hand, the same night Jilaya had gotten her scars. The image of her husband's savaged body solidified her resolve. By the time she started on the door each nail head was flush with the wood. They couldn't move, not again. She couldn't do that to the other Daturas.

Through the boards on the window, silver light splashed across the floor. The moon was up.

I am not a monster.

She drew her knife from the silk just as the first tear fell. It sat on the silver blade, round, reflecting the light from the window like the moon on the lake.

From her son's room came the sounds of scuffling, of snarling.

Her son's grave would get flowers.