

The Bright Future

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She hated when her parents made her sit in the middle of them. It was the closest they ever came to admitting they used her to drive a wedge between them. She would have given anything to sit in the window seat of Flight 729 and watch as they soared through clouds and, she imagined, through the heavens themselves.

They were on their way to another mathematics competition. Normally her mother wouldn't have accompanied them, but it just so happened that the competition was being held in the same city as the home of one of her charity's largest benefactors.

And so here they were—her mother smiling out the window as she casually sipped her vodka tonic and her father reading through the most recent science journals he'd received from his graduate students.

She studied the ice within her mother's glass, her vision filled with equations, fractions, percentages, and other thoughts that both exhausted and sickened her. At eleven years old, knowing what a vodka tonic was didn't seem like a big deal. But she knew its ingredients, the appropriate measurements of each ingredient, and even the proper way to distill vodka to ensure both clarity and enhanced flavor.

At eleven.

And her parents were joyous over this. Her IQ was celebrated amongst her family members. They applauded when she recited the formulas and figures.

They didn't realize that she knew better. She knew she should be watching tv, eating junk food, and enjoying her first crush on a boy. She shouldn't know how to solve college level equations.

They didn't realize that she was angry.

She turned her eyes towards her father who was completely oblivious to the fact that his daughter had opinions, dreams, and a personality. He should know better. He'd grown up in the same way and constantly complained that his parents pushed him further than he wanted to advance. His rebellion had been in marrying her mother – a vapid socialite who cared very little for him, content only because the match furthered her status in the charity community.

She despised them both.

They would ignore her until the results of the competition came in and she was announced the winner. Then she would be hugged, her cheeks would be kissed, and she would be called their beautiful little angel. And in return, she would smile and blush because that's what would be expected of her.

Then they would go home and the glass reflection of the perfectly happy family would be shattered. They'd resume their routine of ignoring one another. Her personal tutor would push her towards an exceptional future and her parents would continue in their own paths oblivious to everything besides her exceptional successes.

They would divorce eventually. Ellie knew this. Her parents assumed that they'd successfully hid their indifference towards one another from her, but they forgot that she was interacting with people much older than she was now. Her knowledge base was expanding to include much more than her mathematical studies.

They would divorce. It wasn't a matter of if, but when. They might wait for her to graduate high school, but that didn't seem likely. At the rate she was progressing, she'd be done with high school in a year or two. She'd already been approached by several universities—including the one her father taught at.

So much for a childhood.

She'd counted on her father to protect her youth, but once he'd realized her full potential, he'd been just as eager to push her into maturity.

His attitude bothered her more than her mother's. She'd always been his little girl. He'd read fairy tales to her, had taught her how to ride a bike, had snuck her sweet chocolate treats when her mother wasn't looking. So why the change now? Why didn't he want to protect her innocence?

So she sat quiet, realizing that she had no other choice. The quickest way to get her way was to let them have theirs for now. But once she was on her own in college. . .

She sighed and glanced at her mother—still sipping—and her father—still reading. They rarely directed questions towards her, instead choosing to ponder decisions about her life aloud, as if to thin air. They assumed she had no common sense.

They'd assumed wrong.

Turbulence hit the airplane, sending passengers waiting in line for the toilet scurrying back to their seats. Ellie watched, interested in every action humans made. If they had to go so badly that they were quietly swearing at how long the people in front of them were taking, why would a little turbulence frighten them away?

She dug through the pockets of her brain to pull the most recent airline crash statistics to the forefront of her mind. Before her first plane ride, she'd done the research. It was true that a person was much more likely to be killed in a car crash than a plane crash.

But no one seemed to care. On the highway she'd see people texting, talking on their phones, applying make-up, and even sorting through their mail, without even thinking twice about it. She had to chuckle.

Listening to their conversations brought her a small amount of amusement. Many were griping about their lives and how difficult surviving in the current economy was. Some were worried about losing jobs. Others complained about non-supportive spouses and extended families. Sons and daughters were a source of disappointment, betrayal, and shame. Elderly parents were a useless burden. No one cared. Sympathetic nods were given, but they were all too concerned with their own complaints to really empathize with anyone else.

She cast a small curious glance at her parents. Still sipping. Still studying. Still oblivious.

Another bout of turbulence shook the plane. Her amusement at the people scurrying around her increased, but she maintained her stoic appearance.

The fasten-seat-belt sign flashed on and the sound of grumbles and begrudging clicks filled the air.

More turbulence rocked the vessel, sending drinks into the laps of passengers and causing overhead luggage compartments to pop open and rain laptop bags, briefcases, and backpacks onto the heads of flight attendants.

A shrill shriek filled the air and Ellie looked up to see several men and women with shock-white hair standing at the front of the aisles. Where had they come from?

Several more startled gasps and shouts sounded before the beings' glares silenced the entire plane.

"You reek of death," the man in front sneered. "The whole lot of you. You who pollute our skies, poison our land, and infest our world."

The woman behind him placed a porcelain colored hand upon his arm. "Enough," she whispered, her angelic voice calming Ellie's fears and bringing a small smile to her face.

His face cleared and his chiseled features lightened in color. He studied them all, the color of his eyes changing from a shade of hatred and disgust to one of pity and sorrow.

"We are here to collect your payment."

"What payment?" A brave soul at the front of the aisle called out hesitantly.

"You don't think that you can simply be granted the gift of flight without a form of payment to the gods who grant you access, do you? Penance must be paid. Respect must be given. Each time you soar through the air, we require a sacrifice. You must give one passenger to us. But in our gracious majesty, we allow you to vote on who it will be, if no one will volunteer, that is."

Silence fell over the people as the weight of his words settled in. Ellie found herself nodding in understanding. She'd agree with anything they said. Their beauty and grace appealed to her, drawing her in, and soothing her active mind. She knew she'd find peace in their eyes, if she could only stare into them.

As if reading her mind, the one in front abruptly looked up and caught her gaze. Cool and refreshing stillness washed over her as for the first time in her life, her brain rested and was silenced. She nodded her thanks and thought she caught a faint smile upon his lips.

“No volunteers then?” His voice jarred her from her trance. “Then one must be selected. Make your decision.”

The plan erupted in shouts, arguments, and accusations. The sick and elderly were called out. Cheating wives and husbands were called out. Troublesome teens were called out. Even the plane captains were called out.

“Obviously, that cannot happen,” the being shook his head. “Who would land the plane safely for you? It must be a passenger. No pilot. No flight attendant.”

The arguing continued and Ellie found her headache with the human race increasing. Her parents had joined in on the arguing, demanding they be excluded for their contributions to science and the human race in general.

It amazed her that no one questioned the actions of these beings. They were too caught up in making a decision, forcing a volunteer, and surviving.

She felt sickened as she listened to each of them justifying their existence. Only a few sat silently in their seats, apparently praying that they be ignored and excluded from the argument. Even she, a mere child, knew that actions should speak louder than words. And listening to the words fly from her parents’ mouths wrenched her stomach and simultaneously broke her heart.

And that’s when it all became oh so clear.

“She’s doing quite well in all her subjects,” Mrs. Gaffan talked over and around her as though she wasn’t even present.

“Then what’s the problem?” Her mother was growing impatient. Why had she come alone? Where was her father?

“There’s no problem,” her teacher hesitated, taken aback by the woman’s tone. “We just believe that with your daughter’s skill and intelligence level, we should give her the opportunity to test out of a few grade levels and join our advanced curriculum.”

“Oh!” Her mother looked down at her in surprise. “I didn’t. . .realize. . .”

Of course she didn’t, Ellie frowned. She was too busy keeping up with all her social activities. Between charity events, hosting bridge tournaments, and assisting with political fundraisers, her mother’s calendar—and mind—were quite full.

But that begged the question: why was she here instead of her father?

“You and the administration obviously know best. Is there a form I need to sign or something?”

“Wouldn’t you like to discuss this with your husband?”

Ellie had to work hard to keep her frustration in check. Didn’t she have a say in this?

“Oh no, Marshall will be ecstatic. We’re extremely proud of her, you know.”

“You should be. With her IQ level, she’s got an incredibly bright future ahead of her.”

That had been a year ago. Her father had been proud of her achievement, but he’d also been angry at Olivia for handling the matter without asking for his input.

And while none of that mattered any more as she listened to the people around her screaming and arguing, it was this past conversation that sprang to her mind and made her calmly stand, approach the man who was staring at them all with a content and slightly amused smile on his face, and say:

“I’ll go.”

He smiled down at her, and although she was sure she was mistaken, she thought there was a mixture of sorrow and pity reflected in his eyes.

“This should not be your burden, little one. I did not intend for it to be you.”

“I know,” she straightened her back, hoping to appear more confident than she was. “Does that mean you’re turning down my offer?”

He seemed to consider this for a moment, as if some part of him wanted to. His eyes flickered around the cabin at the passengers who were beginning to realize what was going on.

Looking back down at her, he reached out and patted her head. “No. I am not going to turn down your offer.”

Ellie felt a momentary rush of peace and relief flood her senses, and then she was hit with a wall of pain as earsplitting chaos erupted behind her.

“NO! Not my daughter!” Her father attempted to pull her backwards, but Ellie found that her legs were frozen where she stood.

“And why not? Do you care to take her place?” The being slowly turned her around to face her father.

“I’m an essential component to the scientific community,” he shook his head. “My mind would be a great loss.” He turned back to his wife. “You should volunteer. All you do is attend parties and shake hands. Save your daughter.”

“How dare you!” She snorted. “I’m her *mother!* She needs me!” Her shriek should have made Ellie flinch, but she found herself surprisingly calm and uncaring.

Ellie tuned out the argument and looked up at the man.

“Please,” she said softly, content to leave her argument at that.

“You will not miss them?”

“They will not miss me,” she refused to let the threatening tears fall. They were tears of self-pity, not of sorrow.

“One last chance,” his voice rose, commanding the attention of the entire plane. “Will no one volunteer in place of this child?”

The startling silence both saddened and excited her. She felt a warm glow radiating from him as he drew her in to an embrace.

“Will it hurt?” She looked up at him, eyes wide.

“No my dear,” his eyes now took on a paternal tone. “Becoming an immortal does not hurt at all.”

Flight 729 landed smoothly and the flight attendants greeted each passenger warmly as they exited the plane, happy that the flight had gone without incident.

Olivia and Marshall exited the plane holding hands and giggling. As they waited for their luggage, he gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“You think we’re really ready?” She turned a flushed face towards him, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

“If not now, then when?” He grinned back at her. “If we keep putting it off, we may wake up one day to find that it’s too late.”

“Quitting your job to start a family? What will your parents think?”

“Who cares?” He pulled her close to him. “You are going to make a fantastic mother!”

“I love you,” she nuzzled his cheek with her own. “Do you think we’ll have a boy or a girl?”

“Who cares,” he grinned. “Either way, with your good looks and my IQ, our child is destined to have a bright future!”