*‘I hate this.’*

Afternoon.

Skyscrapers concealed what was left of the setting sun’s light with hard lines, cold stone and sharp angles. Mano missed the reassuring ocean depths and iron hull wrapped around her like a protective cocoon. The swarming masses around her were the current as a whole; every humanoid they were composed of, a piece of driftwood.

She made a conscious effort to casually swing both upper arms by her sides as she walked, imitating the most naturally occurring motion around her as her four other hands fidgeted under her cloak, unnoticed. She sent a short mental prayer to Ganesh that none of the nervous ticks that she felt bouncing around inside her would pop out and give her away. You could become very used to solitude after having spent long enough by yourself, which had its pros and cons, to be sure.

Mano wasn’t used to having to feel so many eyes on her anymore, eyes overflowing with boredom, staring without reserve and judging without mercy. *‘You don’t care what other people think’*, she lectured herself in the privacy of her mind, *‘you know you’re much better than that.’* The words wavered in her mind as though she was looking at them through a body of water’s surface. *‘Whether I care or not, being scrutinized and evaluated is already unsettling in and of itself.’* She repressed a twitch from the third eyelid in her forehead beneath her hood.

The world never felt like there was enough space in it. It’s not just that most of it had been built with two-armed people in mind. It seemed like it had been built for people who not only didn’t mind but actually enjoyed being packed like sardines and herded like cattle.

*‘Beaches, seashells, oceans in my mind, will you drown out the crowd for me?’*

Rubbing elbows. No polite way to correct the assumption that she didn’t mind. If people bumped into her and felt more elbows than they expected under her cloak, she didn’t want to think about what their reaction could have been. To be fair, many would have apologized for getting startled before shuffling off, but some previously observed reactions of those who wouldn’t have had a way of gripping the mind. It wasn’t an experience she wanted to repeat.

For a long part of history, among humanoids, sea life as a whole had always been a breed apart. It had stopped being socially acceptable for mammals to discriminate against reptiles a few decades ago. Whether or not sea dwellers deserved to be treated with the same kind of dignity as over-grounders was still a new question for the public to ask itself, and its answer still depended on who you asked.

Amphibians were generally treated like most bilinguals, bisexuals, agnostics, and hybrids, rarely ever fully accepted among sea creatures or surface dwellers because they fully belonged to neither. Bugs were a spectrum: butterflies could pass just about anywhere, but arachnids had the same problem that Mano did. Six limbs were already a lot to take in, but eight were simply too much; they automatically made you seem shifty and threatening by nature because you just couldn’t need that many for any honest purpose, it stood to reason.

What this all boiled down to was that if you were seafood, as people would call you, you were less likely to be hired, likelier to be fired, and likelier to have a lower paying job. People had been taught to fear you and to assume that if things were going badly for you, you must have brought it on yourself. Cops and judges were likelier to take the word of a mugger or pervert over yours in court, and muggers and perverts would know this about you when you’d be out in public. Mano was starting to wish she’d had her third eye put into the back of her head instead.

*‘I don’t want to be here.’*

She tried to imagine what Klein might have said. Of course Klein would’ve had something to say about this, it was exactly the kind of thing he would’ve had something to say about. He’d have said to remember it’d all be over soon, things would improve after it, her inner state shouldn’t hinge on her outer state, to strive to push it all out of her mind, as difficult as it seemed. She knew he meant well and took it in stride, but when he talked about the role of hell as a social control, she couldn’t help thinking she felt as though she’d lived through hell herself.

Hell was other people.

The sprawling city shouldn’t have felt more claustrophobic than the confines of her sub did, but it did. She shouldn’t have felt more afraid of getting lost in the city, with street names all over everything, than of getting lost in the ocean, in which she had to get directions from the stars. It felt like a maze, as though she were part of some experiment, as though the bus station were a whale which, having swallowed up a six-armed female version of Jonas, was slowly digesting her in its stream of humanoid antibodies.

You didn’t have to look at people twice to figure out most of them would have rather been somewhere else doing something else. They stomped ahead or strolled along, purposeful or world-weary veils over their faces. Everyone was busy trying to get somewhere else as fast as possible with gaits forged by formative years spent being told to stand up straight, think straight and walk straight because People Are Looking. Staring may have been rude, but not looking like what other people expected you to when they did stare was much, much worse.

She wasn’t looking forward to the bus ride.

She got land-sick in land vehicles the way surface dwellers got seasick. As much as she wanted to be able to assume the best about people, she never enjoyed having to put her faith in and fate in the hands of a driver she didn’t know. She didn’t know whether she was going to be able to sleep that night without the calming motion of her bed caused by the ocean’s currents which she’d gotten so used to.

Yoga was designed to get people used to endure being in uncomfortable positions, metaphorically as well as literally. She’d practiced a lot of it over the course of her life, but everything had its limits. Mano clutched the ripped whale song disc in her beige canvas cloak pocket like a talisman, hoping it would be enough to ward off the demons of urban cacophony.

While fish didn’t need to sleep to live, it was still something which as humanoids they'd become able to do (like blinking and breathing air) to gain back lost energy and turn their minds off for a while. Sleeping and blinking were like short breaks from reality which, scattered throughout the day, could make getting through it a lot easier. Not looking at the world could let you temporarily forget that it was looking at you.

The best part of sleeping had to be the dreams.

Dreams could give you a break from everything else you may have had to think about every day. They took you on a Jungian journey into your own uncharted mental territory. They could serve as an antidote to some of the social conditioning that you may have been force-fed while you’d been awake. They could give you new insight into situations by taking elements of them apart and putting them back together in unexpected ways.

She liked the opportunity to look at things from a perspective from which it wouldn’t have occurred to her to look at them while awake. Of course, dreams came with the risk of nightmares, but nothing ventured, nothing gained. Her worst nightmares had taken place during her waking life rather than when she’d been asleep anyway.

*‘I’d rather be somewhere else doing something else too.’*

At that point she saw the downward spiral toward which her mind was inching and decided she might as well try to find something more positive to think about. She was looking forward to meeting up with Klein again after all that time, despite everything. He had his flaws, but he was sometimes good at taking her mind off things, when he got into the right kind of headspace. She’d met quite a few people who were a lot worse than he was, that much was certain.

Klein associated with some remarkably disreputable people, but she supposed she should’ve been glad to have been one of them herself. His string of short, strange relationships had been so different from her own great big one. She sometimes wondered whether he’d been better off than she’d been, but there was no real way to measure things like that.

Mano sighed.

There just wasn’t going to be any way to get around it. Every time she tried to push the topic aside, it’d reassert itself. She’d never understood why poets had to be so depressed all the time for most of her life, but she was starting to. She hadn’t always liked everything about her life, but the parts that she didn’t like used to seem easier to deal with than they did. A few creature comforts, self-preservation and a reason to get up in the morning mostly got her by, but her failure at cheering up others was becoming harder for her to forgive herself for each day.

Of course thinking about Klein would mean thinking about Brazil, and thinking about Brazil was going to mean thinking about *her*. It was where she’d met him. And it was where she’d lost her.