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THE FLESH HUNTERS

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**THE
FLESH
HUNTERS**

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THE FLESH HUNTERS

JOCELYN SUAREZ

E
EPIGRAM

OSHO

DIAMOND ISLANDS



YAMA HARBOUR

MOKUZAI

PHILIPPINE SEA



**FOR KEVIN,
WHO WAS THERE WHEN, DRUNK ON
MUSIC AND WHISKY, I ASKED HIM
WHETHER A DIABETIC'S URINE WOULD
LEAVE AN ANT TRAIL.**

THE ANTS DIDN'T MAKE THE CUT.

Hunter (n.): individual exhibiting neuropsychological symptoms of delusion, psychosis, and aggression accompanied by episodes of physiologically driven cannibalism and serial violence.

Origin unknown.

-WHO Fact Sheet, *The Hunter Phenomenon:
Emergence of New Violence*

PROLOGUE

Osho National Inquirer

23 September

Notorious Hunter Apprehended: Alive and HUMAN?

The Harbourview Butcher was caught yesterday at a cabin in Yama Harbour after a brief stand-off with both the Yama Police and the National Investigative Unit (NIU). The Butcher—who systematically hunted, murdered and cannibalised nine victims over the span of eight months in a manner unlike any other Hunter killing—was identified as Yama Neurological Institute's chief medical researcher and foremost Hunter expert, Dr Kurenai Santa Clara, sending shockwaves through the Hunter phenomenology community.

Sources from the Yama Medical Institute where Santa Clara is being held report that the Harbourview Butcher tested negative for Hunter biometric markers. Could this mean that the country's most notorious and only captured Hunter is actually human?

Despite the establishment of the prestigious Hunter Intelligence Division (HID), Hunter-related crimes continue to rise while Hunter research remains stalled. Police and scientists alike are scrambling to find a steady foothold in diagnosing and managing Hunter crimes. Research on the so-called Hunter gene has yet to continue after the disappearance of Hunter scientist Dr Eric Glasgow.

Dr Kurenai Santa Clara, the Harbourview Butcher, will be kept in the maximum-security block at Yama Medical Institute's Forensic Department until her court trial. Only one victim survived The Butcher's eight-month reign of terror—the Harbourview Butcher's tenth and final victim, Yama Police forensic psychologist Walter Avila Kirino.

CHAPTER 1

THE HOUSE BENDS LIKE AN OLD MAN. It stands at the end of a cul-de-sac, flanked by an empty parking lot and a shuttered dormitory. Its three storeys of soot-black concrete, cased with wild weeds and wet algae from the ground up to the flat roof, lean to the left like a scoliotic back. Its wide porch yawns, the stiff old wood swollen and dried with rain and sun. When Amy Nishima steps on it, the floor creaks like a warning.

The Cottage is an ugly house, a squat old building from the fifties that used to serve as a faculty building before getting abandoned for being situated too far from the University. But under the beauty of an unobstructed sky, the tendrils of the hilly woods behind it, the house feels like an unnecessary ugliness, like the inevitability of shadows. Here, darkness coexists comfortably with light.

It's an apt dwelling for Walter Kirino.

Amy presses the doorbell, a muffled chirp behind the flimsy wooden door. She has always wanted to meet the sole survivor of a Hunter attack. Something like camaraderie pushes her to it. She would have liked it to have been in better circumstances, however. It is only her misfortune that it was *this*: there's another body.

She presses the doorbell again, her mind immediately jumping to an extreme conclusion; keenly aware of the decomposition rate in twenty-nine-degree weather, she knocks on the door. It swings open.

"Um, hello?" Amy takes a step into the house. The entrance opens into a living room, sparsely furnished. A sofa, two couches and a coffee table are placed in a small tight circle. The tiled floor is partly carpeted, the rug old and a faded leaf green. A few empty, unmarked bottles line the carpet. On the sofa, a lone figure stirs, wrapped in a black wool blanket.

"Mr Kirino?"

The figure jerks, its eyes opening.

Walter Kirino sits up, stiff as a corpse. Amy almost jumps. His jet-black hair curls around his face, one side flattened from his slumber. There are circles under his deep-set raven eyes, and there are distinct lines creasing the pale olive flesh between his eyebrows and around the mouth. He peers at Amy with a pinched expression, as though he finds it hard to look at people. He looks away, blinks, and looks back. He reminds Amy vaguely of rescue dogs, the shadow in their eyes. His pale lips move, his voice low and tentative. "You're...not here to murder me, are you?"

"Um." Amy's eyebrows rise. Her mouth opens to say something sensible, then decides against it. "I don't think anyone who wants to murder you would actually announce that."

He blinks at her, eyes far away. He nods. "Right, yeah. I suppose you're right." He stands up, throwing his blanket in a ball on the sofa. "So, you're my ride to the scene?"

"I am Amy Nishima, *head* pathologist," Amy corrects, her jaw tightening. "And yeah, I got the car."

Walter Kirino looks at her for a second, his gaze a solid weight pressing against her, *through* her. "You're...young. It's uh...good. It's good." He looks away, glancing around him. He picks up a black sling bag lying askew beside an empty bottle. "I'm Walter."

Amy runs her eyes over the bottles on the floor and peeks at what she can see of the kitchen: a table, some bags of yeast, a brewing bottle. "You've got quite a set-up here, Walter."

Walter follows her gaze, from the mess of empty bottles in his living room to the unkempt brewing kit in the kitchen. "Well, I was making some..." His face grimaces. "Beers, I guess."

She figured as much. "Were they any good?"

Not looking at her, Walter Kirino shrugs. "I'd offer you some, but I...I drank them all." His voice flutters away as he says this, a canine biting a piece of his pale lower lip.

Amy Nishima decides not to push it. It is good enough small talk. "Are

you ready, Walter?"

Walter Kirino does another sweep around his house, then he nods. He purses his lips at her as if to smile but doesn't.

"I'm parked a little away." Amy gestures to the concrete path leading out of the cul-de-sac. The Cottage stands at the very edge of University Town, and she had parked—optimistically—beside the grated gates of the dormitory grounds.

They set out in silence, she walking a few paces ahead of him. The Cottage recedes into a tiny bent shape behind them as they cross the field.

The Osho National University of Science (ONUS) boasts the largest dormitory grounds in the country. It is located beside Hei Hill, named for the Chinese word for black because of the way the hill looks like a giant shadow behind the university at night. The concrete path, broken by patches of weed, slopes up and the university peeks over the horizon, one tower outstretched upon old stone and steel. The singular tower with its still-working clock is over four hundred years old, standing proud like a sword puncturing the sky. Amy remembers the clock tower fondly.

They enter the bustle of University Town, passing by low, three-storey dormitory buildings clumped in rows and sharing a front yard of well-trimmed grass and a gravel walkway. They stand a little straighter than Walter Kirino's cottage, a little livelier, less tired. Further along, apartment complexes rise, colourful and modern, giving the dormitory grounds the air of a small town. On one corner stands a café, and there's a cafeteria adjacent to it. Students sit chatting and smoking at the tables laid outside.

"They let you do fieldwork, Dr Nishima?" It is Walter Kirino who breaks the silence, talking with his eyes everywhere else but on her, his hands inside his hoodie pocket as if he is cold.

"You can call me Amy." She looks back at him. He catches her glance and pretends to busy himself with the façades of the buildings around them. Amy imagines it as shyness but is not quite sure. His strides are long and languid, almost leisurely, but there is a heaviness in his step, a kind of withdrawn restraint. "Chief Aida likes for me to see the scene myself."

Walter Kirino pauses. "Where *is* Aida?"

"She's at the scene." Amy knows that her boss, Division Chief Aida Anton, personally knows the famed forensic psychologist. They met during the last leg of the Harbourview Butcher's case. Questions dance on her tongue then flutter away. Too much effort. She watches the man trailing behind her, his eyes looking everywhere but at her. *Too much work.*

"Ah...right. I was...under the impression that she'd be the one picking me up." He looks at the ground as he says this, slowly, cautiously. He hunches his shoulders.

Amy shrugs. Somehow, she isn't surprised that Aida delegated this menial task to her. "I mean, she's Division Chief now, so she kinda needs to be there to do division chief stuff. So she sent me to you..."

"Like a babysitter," Walter Kirino says, throwing her a look.

Amy catches this and narrows her eyes at him. "Implying you're a baby."

Walter stops in his tracks. Amy looks back at him. A slight curl at the edge of his pale lips, he blinks his dark eyes at Amy. Then he mutters, "Touché. Aida would agree with you." He walks ahead of her.

Amy watches him go, his words tasting like the sour sting of someone who feels the need to chew himself out from the inside. The bloody tang of it like accidentally biting one's cheek. A throb of pity crosses her chest. It passes quickly.

"Did you just arrive today?"

"Early this morning."

Amy nods. "And you flew from Yama?"

Walter nods. She can feel his furtive glances prick her skin. Amy struggles to keep the conversation going.

"Chief says you're doing research with us."

"I'm working on a paper, yes."

"So, this is kinda like a side hustle, yeah?"

Walter gives a snort. "A side hustle presupposes that I had a choice in this matter."

Amy doesn't answer this. She doesn't know how to. Thankfully, they reach the parking lot in front of the dormitory gates. She finds the Division's standard-issue grey van. She unlocks the car and glances at Walter Kirino.

"The case file is in the back."

He has stopped in front of the van, the thoughtful pinched expression back on his face.

"Music or no music?" Amy throws him a smile. Humouring her long-established tendency to want to please and hating herself a little for it.

Walter Kirino doesn't respond. Instead, he blinks at the passenger window, lips pursed. "This isn't your car."

Amy ignores the weird remark and waves a hand, chuckling. "With my pay? I wish. Nah, it's department-issued."

"Huh." He nods. "Looks odd without the bloodstains."

Walter Kirino gets into the car without another word. Amy Nishima has met many a weirdo. In her line of work, it is inevitable. A certain mania is afforded people whose job it is to hunt Hunters without turning into monsters themselves. As a consequence, they instead turn into something else altogether. Not monsters exactly, but not something entirely unmonstrous either. She tries not to take it personally.

Amy lets out a sigh, keenly aware that the morning has just begun.

"No music it is."

CHAPTER 2

HUNTER INTELLIGENCE DIVISION CHIEF AIDA ANTON walks in front of the stopping grey car. Her broad frame blocks the sunlight streaming through the windshield, giving her a shimmering outline. She is wearing her usual grey coat over a light-blue blouse and black slacks.

"Amy." She nods as Amy Nishima steps out of the car.

"Boss." Amy nods back. She gestures at the small figure coming out of the passenger side. "Delivered as ordered."

Aida Anton watches as Walter Kirino takes a quick scan of the scene. They had pulled over by the side of Kiba Expressway, barely a kilometre out of the city of Heitan. The body lies on the open field beside the highway. A line of yellow police tape marks the perimeter. The place has been emptied. Aida made sure to do that before Walter arrived. After he is done, two forensics will bring the body to Amy's table.

Aida walks up to Walter, her figure imposing beside his. Her long hair, chestnut brown, is tied up in a bun, the nape of her long neck exposed and shimmering golden brown in the light.

"Walter," Aida speaks after a while. Amy could swear there's a hint of softness when she said his name. Like a tamer beckoning her beast.

Walter nods in recognition and deference, a sly curl at the edge of his lips. "Aida," he says with nostalgia in his voice.

"I assume Amy has brought you up to date."

"Nope, we sat in *comfortable* silence," Amy chimes in, away from the pair, leaning against her car all by her lonesome.

"Trust me, that's a better deal than most." Walter throws her a glance. He turns to Aida. "I read the case file. Aren't you desperate?"

"You asked for a study: here you go." Always blunt, Aida raises an eyebrow.

She has narrow onyx eyes that are quick to observe, hasty to judge. When she looks at Walter, they soften. "Besides, we're pretty sure it's a Hunter."

Walter Kirino frowns. "Pretty sure is pretty short of sure. The last two cases didn't look it."

"This one does."

Walter Kirino gives an unconvinced frown, running his eyes at the section beyond the police tape. The plain stretches all the way to the towering forest of evergreen trees casting shadows far into the horizon. Sunlight paints everything in soft yellow. Without the tape and the dead body, the place would look almost idyllic.

"The body was found this morning by a truck driver who stopped to piss," Aida explains. "Amy estimates the time of death at around 1am today."

Walter nods. He looks across the horizon, then steadies his gaze dead-centre at the speck of flesh amidst the green.

"This was considerate of you, Aida," he murmurs, gesturing to the empty crime scene. Aida had to practically scream at every forensic officer and detective to hustle as Amy drove away that morning. She knows this of Walter Kirino: he prefers to work without distractions—she's heard of his notorious tantrums—and Aida cares enough to cater to that.

"For now," Aida says as Walter crosses the police tape. "Can't promise you in the future."

"As I've learnt," Walter says with a shrug, "nobody can." He walks slowly around the scene, watching each step. The perimeter is wide. A struggle had taken place in a car parked by the side of the road and ended in the middle of the field, a good five hundred metres away, where the body lies mutilated and drenching the leaves of grass with red.

Walter walks towards the car first. It's an old red Mustang, its driver side door ajar. Slowly, he makes his way to the body with those long languid steps. He glances at the grass, the horizon, the highway, then bends down to look at a pebble. The way he is walking, Amy could have mistaken him for someone taking a morning stroll.

Tentatively, Amy makes a show of following him on the other side of the tape.

"Don't." Aida puts a hand on Amy's forearm. Her fingers are long and shapely, unmanicured. Her eyes are intent on Walter Kirino. She peers at Amy, frowning. "He doesn't like it when he knows he's being watched."

"What if he doesn't know?"

"He will." Aida gives Amy a look, and Amy knows it's an order. "He can't focus when there are people he has to take account of."

Amy pouts, the edge of frustration tumbling into a sigh out of her mouth. *Take account of what?* She steps beside Aida. "Shame, I really would like to see what happens."

Amy, among others, has heard of Yama Police's golden boy since he started his work on Hunters. He who nabbed the Yama Slayer and precipitated the capture of the Harbourview Butcher—alive. It had been only a matter of time before the Hunter Intelligence Division got a hold of him, and right after he joined, he got himself kidnapped. Some people say it was luck that he caught The Butcher. Others say it was genius. Amy would very much like to confirm which. Especially if she is going to have to work with him. She'd like to know if he's worth all the fuss.

As though reading her mind, Aida replies, "If he gets comfortable enough with you, he might let you watch him."

"You make him sound like some kind of wild animal." And Amy would know, she's worked at a rescue shelter for years.

Aida regards this. Her thick eyebrows come together in thought. "You're not wrong."

Walter Kirino walks in a leisurely circle around the body, a red bull's eye in a sea of green. Amy can see his small frame, narrow and bony. She can make out the way his chest moves as he takes long deep breaths, as though trying to unfold what had happened by the smell of death in the air.

He stops in the middle of the crime scene, faltering a few steps before he reaches it. He stands there for a long time, looking down at the body. His

mouth moves. Amy can't see the expression on his face. He fumbles with his bag. From it, he takes a foldable Polaroid camera and takes three shots.

"My team already took photos," Amy mutters, frowning. "More photos than that."

"That's for him," Aida says, stock-still.

"For what? A scrapbook?"

Aida doesn't answer.

When he starts walking back, Walter returns to the Mustang, takes one photo, then finally crosses the police tape.

As he comes up to them, his face changes from slackness to recognition, like a man realising where he is. He blinks, like coming back from a dream. "It's the bites, huh?"

Aida nods. "All three victims died from jugular rupture caused by...forceful mastication. Pieces of their flesh were bitten off and, we assume, eaten."

"Explains the blood." Walter glances back at the scene. "I found blood splatters near the car and around the field."

"We think the victim managed to get away but was caught."

Walter Kirino frowns.

"You don't agree."

He narrows his eyes, a canine chewing his lower lip. "There were pools of blood over the right and left sides of the body. If I were him, I would've run straight into the trees."

"Maybe he tried, got caught and ran in the other direction."

Walter gives a dismissive scoff. The first dismissive scoff Amy has witnessed Chief Aida ever be given. "With this much blood loss and that kind of distance, how far could he have run? The victim doesn't look particularly strong."

"*You* don't look particularly strong," Aida retorts, obviously incensed by the dismissal. Amy's eyes widen and she sees the realisation dawn on Aida's face.

Her bluntness can be oh-so scathing.

"I didn't mean to—" Aida starts.

"We're way past apologies, Aida. It's fine." Walter says, not sounding

particularly fine, his voice falling like broken glass. He clears his throat. "I know what you're trying to say."

"And yet you disagree," Aida replies, softly.

Walter thinks, his eyes fixed on the scene. He hunches, hands buried in the pockets of his hoodie. A thought comes over his dark eyes. He chews his lower lip. The soft spring breeze licks his recalcitrant hair, making his black waves sway. He turns to Aida.

"I think he let this one go. I think..." He looks back at the body. "I think he's playing with his food."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jocelyn Suarez writes poetry, prose and spoken word. Her works have appeared in collections such as *My Lot Is a Sky*, *Anima Methodi*, multiple SingPoWriMo anthologies, and online journals like *Dying Dahlia Review*, *Eunoia Review* and *Pressure Gauge Journal*. She participated in Sing Lit Station's Manuscript Bootcamp (Prose) in 2018, and is part of the poetry collective ATOM. *The Flesh Hunters* is her first novel.

**Hunters are a new breed of criminals.
An aberration. Not human, not animal,
but a terrifying combination.**

**After a long absence, forensic psychologist
Walter Kirino is back with the Hunter
Intelligence Division, on the trail of a new Hunter.
Following the bodies that the Highway Snatcher leaves
behind, Walter is forced to ask the question: where is
the line between Hunter and human? To find out,
he will revisit his traumatic past and throw open
the rooms in his mind where his nightmares
lie slumbering.**

FICTION

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