

Elephant

By Terri Mullholland

‘They’ve brought back a live one! You must come and see it,’ her friend Emma said.

Gem had been reluctant at first. She remembered other displays in the market square with strange beasts brought back from the Waste. One beautiful creature with sleek black fur had escaped its cage and torn apart several spectators. The Authorities discouraged displays after that, just as they discouraged people from the town heading out to the Waste.

Her parents had taken her to displays when she was a child. There used to be more then, showcasing creatures of all shapes and sizes and colours, with fur and feathers and scales. Her dad explained these exotic animals weren’t native, they’d been brought to the country long ago to live in outdoor display cages all year round. When the Old Society broke down, they released the animals to fend for themselves; some of them must have survived in the Waste, large stretches of land where human habitation was deemed no longer possible by the Authorities.

There were no animals in the town anymore; there hadn’t been for a long time. Even rats, cockroaches, and other scavengers were rare. There was nothing left for them to scavenge. Everything was grey concrete, apart from the green metal containers where the Authorities had once attempted to plant grass, and now only dust remained.

The people of the town also lived off a form of dust, a colourless, flavourless powder that the Authorities gave out in rationed packets at the beginning of each week. Nobody knew what was in it, nobody asked.

When Gem arrived in the market square with Emma, a crowd had already gathered around a large, grey creature with enormous flapping ears and a long curling nose. They pushed their way to the front and reached out their hands to touch the hard, wrinkled skin. Several of them also touched what the creature was eating, a stick with shiny green shapes attached.

Gem looked up into the animal's eyes and saw herself reflected back. Like all the people in the town, she was pale and sickly. Humans didn't live much past thirty. As she held the animal's gaze, Gem felt something unfamiliar deep in her body. A stirring of something that took away your breath and made it difficult to swallow. She'd experienced something similar when she'd lost her parents. She tried not to think about that. The Authorities discouraged feelings.

A man stood next to the creature, his hand resting gently on its body. The man's arms were strong and muscular. Gem remembered him.

'Davit! You're looking well.'

Davit's skin glowed like gold; his eyes sparkled. He looked far better than anyone else in the town, even though Gem knew he must be much older.

'Gem! I'm glad someone recognised me. I came back to tell people that outside the town, life is coming back. There are animals and vegetation, a whole new world where all living beings exist in harmony with each other.'

All around them the people of the town shook their heads in disbelief at his words; many began to walk away, muttering about madness. But Gem nodded back, wanting to believe, wanting to have hope.

Davit grasped Gem's hands, 'I keep telling people that they need to leave now while they still can, but nobody wants to know.'

The Authorities never told them they couldn't leave the town. No physical boundaries were stopping them, just a grey haze of collective inertia. Maybe there was something in the air or the water or the dust they ate.

Sometimes, people did leave. Gem remembered people going missing over the years, remembered the speculation that they'd gone out to die in the Waste. But she didn't remember ever seeing them leave, and after a day or two, they were forgotten, erased from the townspeople's memories as if they'd never existed.

And she didn't remember them ever coming back; until Davit.

The townspeople soon got bored with the animal display, bored with Davit's appeals, bored with the strange piece of vegetation. Even Emma said she was tired and needed to rest. Gem stayed, fighting the exhaustion that hit her like a fog. She drew her energy from watching Davit; she couldn't remember the last time she had seen someone so passionate, so full of life. The stories he was telling about life in the Waste, she had never heard anything so magical; it sounded too good to be true. A world full of colours and textures, the verdant landscapes, the fruits that grew from the trees, juicy, delicious, and full of flavour. A place where nobody ate dust and there were no Authorities.

However, even Davit grew weary, trying and failing to persuade people there was a better life outside the town if they would only give it a try.

Late in the afternoon, Gem looked up into the animal's eyes; they now had a dull sheen to them.

'What's wrong with him?' she asked.

'He's dying,' said Davit. 'Like everyone else here. I shouldn't have brought him. I thought together we might convince people. It's time to take him back to where he belongs, where there are trees and grasses and plants that we can all eat. I'm going back too. I hoped some of you might come with me.'

'I'd like to come with you,' said Gem.

Davit guided the animal out of the town. Gem walked alongside them. Nobody stopped them and nobody joined them either. They came to the edge of town. Davit reached for Gem's hand, and they kept going.

Gem glanced back once after they had been walking for some time, but the town had vanished. There was nothing but a grey haze on the horizon.

She looked up into the animal's eyes and saw the light ahead reflected back.

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