

“Push”

by
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I had to get away. The dining area was too stifling, weight pressing against my chest until I had to gasp for air, the only thing I could claim I still had. And even that was shared. I stumbled as I ran, my skirt catching along my calves as the heavy rain soaked straight through to my skin in seconds. If I stood still, stopped fighting, would it drown me? *Please God, let it drown me.*

I kept running.

I reached the old willow tree, the only place that could bring me a modicum of comfort, and then only because Iason was usually with me. How long until he noticed my disappearance? Would he care? Would he have a fleeting moment of panic and wonder if perhaps I have truly Faded, even from here?

Would he even remember?

The tree's bark was rough against my face and my palms and the pads of my fingers. But I shoved my cheek against it anyways, fingers grasping, squeezing, trying to dig into the very center. I tried so hard that I found myself gasping for air again. Then I realized I was weeping .

“Moxie...”

I barely acknowledged the sound of someone calling for me. It reached my ears in a murmur, though I was sure it was shouted. A slight buzz I recognized as relief coursed through me. It was Iason. He noticed after all.

I kept my eyes closed and worked to silence the keening coming from my throat. I couldn't let anyone, especially Iason, see me like that; like I was a wounded animal begging to be put out of its misery. Iason would do nothing about it so what would be the point?

I supposed it showed how close Iason and I were when, despite the concealing wet and weepy branches of the willow tree, and the deluge that cast everything in its wake in a drenched gray pall, he still managed to find me in only minutes. Or maybe it just showed that I was predictable.

“Moxie,” Iason gasped out, parting the hanging branches like a curtain. “What's wrong? What is it?”

I rubbed my face against the wet bark, willing it to take me in. “Go away, Iason. Just let me drown here.”

Jason's chest heaved up and down as he approached me, hands out in a placating gesture. I didn't quite have the nerve to look at his face yet. "Moxie, I know it's hard—"

I snorted, but stayed silent, letting the torrential downpour speak for me. The sound was slightly dulled under the canopy of branches, but it still echoed all around us like godly teardrops.

"—but you have to stop fighting them. What if they take you away?"

I put as much venom in my voice as possible when I spat, "Well then you won't remember me anyways, will you?" Jason flinched so I went on. "You'll walk by my dorm or you'll hear a voice that sounds like mine or you'll sit under this tree and you might wonder why you feel so strange, but then your life will go on and you won't ever remember."

Jason's jaw was clenched tight, and I knew I had almost pushed him too far. "That's not fair," he bit out, holding out a hand for me. "Come inside. Let's talk when we're dry."

I pushed his hand away. "I hate you."

Jason tried to pry my fingers away from the willow and I screamed at him and batted him away again. Jason just sighed and rubbed his wet face, as if I was a petulant child he didn't know how to handle. My parents used to do the same.

And all at once I was sobbing. Great, wet sobs that started at my knees and worked their way up.

And Jason's arms were around me and his lips were in my dripping hair murmuring promises that no one could keep. There was nothing romantic in his gestures, though I wished there was. Desire might mask that look of pity he could never quite hide.

"It isn't just me, is it, Jason? You want to exist again, don't you?"

"Of course I do, love. More than anything. But it's not good to dwell on it like this. They'll medicate you, maybe even Fade you out entirely."

I lifted my face from his chest and looked at Jason's so-handsome face. He looked like royalty. Regal. It wasn't fair that no one would ever know this face. No one but the others who Faded.

"Why waste money Fading us again when they can just kill us? It's not like we'll be missed."

"I'd miss you, Moxie. I would."

The way he said that, so harsh and urgently, revealed he ferreted out my deepest thoughts. I didn't want to live like this anymore. And one way or another, I wouldn't.

"I want to leave, Jason," I said, as if it were that simple. "Would you come with me?"

His eyes left mine for a half a second then returned. "It there was any way I would."

I broke free of his grip and began to pace, mud splattering my hem with every frantic step. "Getting out would be the hardest part. Did you hear about the one girl? Her best friend Faded, same as you, in a car crash! And everyone told her she was crazy, but she remembered, Jason, she *remembered!* And she didn't ever give up! It took her a long time. But she searched and she found her!"

Jason's jaw was tense again and his eyes flashed as he looked at me. "How did she find her?"

I stopped, let the raindrops pour unimpeded against my face. "A boy. He escaped a station. And then he helped her find her friend. Then they--" I blushed, faltered. Jason's brow raised, waiting. "Then they all ran away and the girl and boy got, ah, married and had children and such."

Jason looked disgusted.

“Fine. I supposed Elizabeth was being a bit fanciful towards the end *but it doesn't mean the rest's not true.*”

Iason's snorted. “It's total fiction, Moxie.”

“It's true! The girl was Clarisse and her best friend's name was Melanie! They live in America! Why won't you listen? Why is it so impossible?!”

“Because it's a fairytale!” he snarled. And for one moment his voice rose higher than the storm. “It's some stupid thing that Elizabeth tells herself so she can sleep at night. It's not real! Don't you think that if there was any way out of here someone would've found it by now?”

“Maybe they did!” I shot back. “Who's to say they didn't Wipe us so we wouldn't remember?”

“I heard that crap story, too!” he continued as if I hadn't interrupted. “Only it was Candace and Ella in Australia. It's all crap, Moxie. All of it.”

Tears pricked my eyes again. “Now I think I really do hate you.”

Iason sighed and reached for me, encountered nothing but stinging rain. I rubbed my face against the willow again.

“Moxie...” His voice was a perfect mix of strength and cajoling. “I know how this feels. I've been here just as long as you have. Longer even. I miss having parents and friends and acquaintances. I even wish to be hated, just for the recognition.” Iason reached for me and this time his fingers found purchase. He wiped drops from my face and feathered his thumb over my cheek. He whispered, “But we have to adapt, Moxie. Adapt to survive. That's all anybody can do.”

And just like that I knew that when I found a way out Iason wouldn't be by my side. Iason didn't *feel* like the rest of us did. The worst part was not missing. The worst part was not wanting parents or friends or acquaintances. The worst part was knowing you had them, had a *life* whether it was shitty or glamorous or normal, then having the entire thing burned and scattered and razed and *not knowing why*. There were 1,312 of us at this station. And every single one of us felt either rage or grief so profound that we were liable to be committed if we actually existed. And yet Iason was so docile that he was placated by only a phrase; a phrase that meant nothing if you weren't willing to fight.

I touched just under his eyes, wiped away rain instead of tears. And this time I knew my look of pity far outweighed his.

“Come inside, Moxie. The rain isn't letting up anytime soon.”

Weather. I could do that. I could talk about the weather all day and night if it meant he couldn't peer into my true thoughts. I knew there were things I just couldn't share with him anymore. Escape was one of them.

I took his hand and together we parted the dripping branches. “You'll get through this, Moxie. You'll adapt and you'll live.”

A knot formed in my throat when I thought of the alternative. “But what's the point of living if you don't really exist?”

Soft lips met wet knuckles. “That's the million dollar question, love, now isn't it?”