

Andromeda

Iluka Clifton

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Jaziyah jumped down the last three steps of the ladder as the doorway slammed shut above. Her eyes adjusted to the gloomy darkness of the bunker entrance. The lack of light was yet another safety precaution against watchful eyes since the recent breach. The perpetrators bought their explanation easily, but still the organisation had been in security overdrive ever since, and it was beginning to get on her nerves.

Sighing, she ran her hand over the stone wall until she found the jagged slice that housed the keypad. As she entered her pin and the door swung open, she was greeted with the blinding light and loud chatter of the Andromeda. Inside, the Alvis were sitting hunched over their computers, monitoring security feeds to prepare for alerts, while the Alala stood polishing their swords in shining gold armour matching her own. Then there were the Alanis: some researching, some practising their language skills and some lazing around, including Hadeon.

Hadeon had been her closest friend since they'd joined the organisation together ten years earlier. Though Jaziyah chose to be a warrior, having been drawn to the fearlessness and strength of Alala, whereas Hadeon liked the idea of talking to people and being the centre of attention. He had chosen to become one of the Alanis, a diplomat in charge of negotiating and charming government officials, whose funding the Andromeda relied upon to continue their work protecting all of humanity from the Anpu.

She drew her gaze away from Alanis as she took a left and walked the familiar path to the armoury. She strode past rows upon rows of weapons trailing her hand along the hilts, swords, spears, axes and her favourite section, daggers. She removed the daggers from the sheath at her side and shelved them in the rack before walking into the armoury showers.

Now changed out of her unbearably hot and tight amour, she found herself standing on the balcony overlooking the main centre of the Andromeda, staring intently at the model of the Anpu. When she first began her work with the organisation, she wondered what on earth had prompted them to display the disgusting creature right in the centre of a workplace dedicated to their extinction. Commander Fallon said it served as a reminder, so they would never forget what they were fighting against.

The model, housed in a glass case was a life-sized representation of the Anpu. The Anpu always struck her as eerily humanoid for creatures that survived off the blood of humans and influenced your thoughts, feeling and actions with their mind. They were the same average height as humans, same skin, same faces. The only differences were their eyes, black like pools of ink, their nails—though similar to humans—grew to twice the size of their fingers and ended in a sharp point. Though the worst and most unnatural thing about was that, while they resembled humans, they were completely identical to each other. Every Anpu was the same height, had the same face, the same black hair—they were all exact replicas. This is what first lead to realisation that something unnatural lived among them, something evil.

The sound of the dinner bell shook her out of her thoughts, and she turned down the path to the mess hall.

It was warm inside the mess hall from the ovens cooking the lasagne and the smell of pastry and cheese wafted around the room making her stomach grumble.

She walked towards the table but felt a tap on her shoulder and turned. ‘Hello Hadeon.’

‘Hey Jazi,’ he said.

They moved to sit at the table in the rooms centre it was made of dark oak and spanned the length of the whole hall. They had barely sat down on the wooden bench to eat their lasagne, when Hadeon started regaling her with news of his day.

‘I swear our new teacher is insane, French all day. With no breaks, none. I get that it’s important, but we need rest too,’ Hadeon said.

He had recently started French lessons when Commander Fallon instructed it be added to the Alains skill set to help with international negotiations.

‘Why of course.’ She tried to suppress her smile. ‘How could you actually be expected to work for more than five minutes at a time, must be super draining for you.’

He glared at her. ‘That’s not fair I do work, sometimes, it’s just really boring.’

Jaziah rolled her eyes as he lunched back into his story.

Jazi strolled down the long corridor that led to the sleeping areas, her head fuzzy with sleepiness, and put her hand to her mouth to cover her yawn. Dinner, followed by a loud game of trivia, as suggested by none other than Hadeon himself, had continued into ungodly hours of the night, finally concluding before Jaziyah returned to her room. She flicked the light switch and breathed in the scent of lavender from her favourite candle—a birthday gift from Hadeon. She dropped her room keys on her dresser and threw her jacket on the ground

next to her bed. She groped beneath her pillow for her pyjamas and shuffled into her small ensuite bathroom. Stifling another yawn, she dragged a brush through her hair, before braiding it and collapsing into bed.

It was the piercing alarm sounding through her chambers that dragged her from sleep. A quick glance at the clock next to her bed showed the time was 4am—only three hours since she'd returned from the hall. Pulling herself from bed, she rushed out of her room and toward the armoury. As she ran, she was joined by the other Alalas, who had been signalled through the alarm system designed for alerting them to missions outside of normal hours.

The armoury was chaotic as everyone gathered their equipment. She donned her armour, grabbed a sword off the wall and placed into the sheath at her hip alongside three daggers, before turning to the transport corridor.

Grass crunched beneath their feet as the Alalas stepped off the ramp to the aircraft. Breeze blew through her hair and she breathed in the cold night air. The field they stood on was surrounded by thick woodland illuminated only by the silver moonlight. They had been briefed on the trip about their situation. The organisation was alerted to the location of an Anpu, hence the large group of Alalas. They usually sent them in groups of five for smaller missions, but the sighting of an Anpu required a larger group.

She was traveling in the second half of their team sent as reinforcements, only twenty metres away from the alert, when they heard the screams and shouts of combat ahead—she grabbed her dagger and broke into a sprint. She had fought Anpus twice before, although both times she'd had very little to do with their capture. By the time her team reached the first group, the Alalas positioned on the front line were already standing perfectly still under the mind control of the Anpu, while the second and third line attempted to reach it.

Her view of the battle was mainly blocked from her position in the last row, but she heard the shouts of warning and spun to see the Anpu turning to escape to her left. Jazi stood stunned for a moment, before her instincts kicked in and she hurled her dagger. Her dagger sailed towards the Anpu but landed slightly to the right, and the Anpu looked at her for a moment, its pitch-black eyes freezing her in place before it disappeared into the tree line.

The Alalas that had been under the influence of the Anpu were moved to the medical area of the aircraft, while Jazi sat with the others in the main section.

Commander Fallon sat beside her and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder dragging her from her thoughts. ‘No one blames you Jaziyah,’ she said. ‘Most people would have missed that shot, especially considering how fast those damn things run.’ She gave her a reassuring smile and continued past.

After they’d disembarked the aircraft, showered, and cleaned their amour, they headed to the meeting room for the mission debrief. She tried to listen to Commander Fallon but kept seeing herself throw the dagger in her mind over and over, until they were dismissed back to their rooms.

She knew she should go back to sleep, but adrenaline still coursed through her veins, so she went to the target practice room, lined up twenty daggers and stood on the line facing her target. She picked up the first knife, aimed and threw, then aimed and threw the second knife, the third knife. Jazi increased her speed and fell into the rhythm—aim, throw, aim throw, over and over. The next thing she knew, she was staring at twenty perfect bullseyes. Satisfied, she returned to her room.

The exhaustion finally hit her as she approached the mirror on her dresser. She removed her blue contacts and glanced up, meeting her own ink black eyes in the mirror. The contacts always made her vision blurry, but they hid the truth her gaze gave away. She grabbed her nail file from her drawer to flatten the points already becoming visible at the tips of her nails and quickly inspected the roots of her hair, relieved to find the black wasn’t showing through yet. She walked to her window and drew her curtains over the pale light cast by the full moon, before pulling back the blankets across her bed and crawling beneath them.

While she waited for sleep to come, the scene from earlier when she missed the Anpu played in her mind again. She hoped they had escaped okay; she had done her best to save them just as she did with every member of her race. She sighed thinking of tomorrow, another day of hiding, but she was immortal. She was simply biding her time.