

The Hiders

by Heather Fowler

We hid because it lowered our chances for selection, due to the agreement. All living knew of the agreement accepted with the Kharal years previous, and, at each interval, on the appointed day, until the act had been completed so that we might recommence our regular activities, we did as we were told, kept our eyes to the inside of our closets and our bodies tightly pressed into the interiors of assigned wardrobes. We did not seek the Kharal out, nor did we want to see them hunting.

This was the unspoken rule and what made the process painless. No one was to look at them. They took a human and they left. Then all continued.

The Kharal kept us safe, we knew, kept the colony functional in the oft belabored effort that was living our small, human lives surrounded by death, for in their ring of constant invisible protection, when they did not come, we thrived. It was not as though they were uncivilized, we sometimes said to each other after a hunting. They told us which calendar they used, gave us the times when they would come and when they would be gone, and their indices were so reliable, we could set our watches by them, could even hire a ringer to send up the city-wide warning bell ten minutes before they slithered or clacked in—and use the same ringer to alert the public that all was clear ten minutes after they left. About the missing people, my great uncle always said we were to be as quiet about this as possible, not to talk about who was last taken before a visit—or discuss who was taken most recently just after a visit—though the families who lost members could grieve, could throw large funerals with roses and gardenias. Still, a week later, even at these funerals without bodies, no one spoke of the Kharal as

ominous or terrible. The deaths were spoken of as necessary accidents, for the Kharal were thought of, by most, as fair and good.

Whatever life we sacrificed was their due fee for protecting us from what was beyond the four green meadows and the eight river sticks, an agreement made by the ancestors. Because outside of our walls, the history books said, there were no humans left. But, there were beasts, wild creatures, and monsters like wolves that roamed hungry yet survived. Inside the walls, there were enough people to keep us going for millenniums.

About this, the Kharal were carefully precise. They had done the math to determine how many people they could take and how often without adversely impacting our population, yet still keeping their members fed, so it was one full-sized human every eight months, taken without sound, for it was rumored that they were vicious, but we were never fools enough to watch them and they did not break their promises, too intelligent to sabotage a working system for they were starving, too.

They had no desire for an uproar. I lived under these ideas for many years before it occurred to me to question them. "If they are starving," I asked my great uncle. "Why do we need their protection? There must not be that many beasts out there."

"Can you assess the hunger of a strange creature?" he asked me then. "What is full to a Kharal? One bit of human and four beasts? One bit of human and twelve? How many beasts would it take to eat or kill the entire village? Until you can answer these questions, Nelihi, it is better to keep our bargain with the Kharal."

On the year all bad things happened, like most people, I had never seen the Kharal, had never even been able to picture them since I spent all my time during their visits in a big wood cabinet at great uncle's house, with my eyes glued shut, quivering inside the

cabinet where he stored yellow smoke candles and rat traps. When the warning bell rang, I got in and waited each time until the all-free bell, and then joined the others to see who was gone.

“Anyone taken in the Green house?” someone would ask.

“No. the Kelly house?”

“No. The Sacheta's?”

“Lily is nowhere. Where's Lily? Oh, God! Where's Lily?”

No, I had never seen the Kharal, but I imagined they must be something fierce if they could kill the beasts, yet possibly not too fierce, or why would so many come here together to carry off a single body when they were each rumored to be as large as two humans apiece. Did they work as a team? They were rumored to be blue and black, with pincer mouths and short antennae that could sense the slightest heat or motion. We had paintings of what they looked like—but these varied widely because all imagined, but no one really knew.

“Look a Kharal in the eye and you look no further,” was the common expression. But they made a clacking noise as a horde of them rushed down the city roads, a sound we all knew, like the sound of small dogs' nails moving rapidly over tiles. The last person to be taken, I had not known, but the creatures had gone past our house so I had heard and could recreate their sound, had been telling my grandmother for months that the next time they came, I wanted to see one. Maybe my curiosity overwhelmed my fear, but I was too young for them to take and thus I thought myself safe.

"No, child. Don't see a Kharal," my grandmother said, crossing herself in the way of old Catholics.

"I want to!" I cried. "Why not?"

"Because they are ugly," my grandmother said, touching the hem of my patchwork dress she had been expanding my entire life. .

"It's not ugliness!" my great uncle Jacquamo said. "It's because if you see one, and live, you're in great danger of knowing *the lifelong sorrow!*"

"The lifelong sorrow," I said. "What is that, anyway?"

"This is why we hide, Nelihi," he replied. "You think the Kharal don't know their way into cabinets and under beds? Don't know how to look behind doors or behind sheds if they wanted to? You think they can't knock something over? Anything in this house? The house itself?" His voice was thin and agitated. "You don't want to see them, Nelihi," he said softly.

I shrank back as he then leaned close and said, with his eyes wide open, "The safest hiding from the Kharal is with your eyes pressed shut, Nelihi. The lifelong sorrow is no joke!"

"Okay, uncle," I said then, tugging at his coat pocket. "But, what is the lifelong sorrow?"

"You cannot know," he said, "unless you know. And once you know, you know; it is too late." Then he turned on the music player and began again the odd polka dance he did in times of stress. Two hops to the left, four to the right, a touch of his cap with two fingers, and a repetitive lifting and dropping of his elbows. He repeated these steps along with the beat of the music two or three times until a new thought occurred to me.

"Will they kill me if I see them?" I shouted. "I'm too young to be taken, but is it against the rules to kill an extra person who looks?"

Jacquamo's dancing paused only an instant when I started to speak and then appeared to quicken.

"The Kharal won't kill you for seeing them," my grandmother then said. "They know the agreement."

She sounded tired, resigned, but my great uncle kept moving, accelerating his odd polka and all but tuning me out. It appeared his feet made a pattern on the ground that was intricate, more and more intricate, but what pattern I could not fathom. I would expect no more reply from him until his dance was done.

"Well, I want to see one," I said when he concluded, falling to the couch in a boney mass of exhaustion. "And besides, they can't take me, so if grandma says they can't kill me, I'll be fine."

"Listen now, Nelihi," the old man said, winded. "You never want to see the Kharal. You will be happier later."

My grandmother brought him a cup of tea. "It's a mystery better left unsearched," she said, shaking her silver head and patting his shoulder. She then knelt before me and took a needle to jab at my thigh before sewing on a new patch of fabric to the patchwork dress. "As the eye travels down this dress and you see your infancy become your womanhood with each new length, you must know that every bit of time has been saved for you, made for you, by them that come before. Stop moving, Nelihi," she said. "I'll poke you again, on purpose."

And that was all. I spoke of watching the Kharal no further, but decided I would not hide the next time they came. In a year, they would be able to take me, I would be of age, and I wanted to see them before then. Besides, it was like my great uncle had said, hiding did not fool them. They would find the person they wanted regardless of whether there was another layer of wood or fabric

between them and their prey. And they were not predictable about whose house would lose men, for it was clear they did not pre-pick victims by any geographical measure or template, so it was likely that even if I wanted to see them, even if I stood in the middle of the house with my eyes wide open, square shouldered and waiting, one or more of them may not ever come into my house or even down my street. So what would be the harm in trying?

I could wait ten years, watching, not hiding, and still not see a Kharal. But I didn't have ten years of immunity. I had one. And it couldn't be that bad, I thought, how they took someone. There were never any screams. We heard no noises of slaughter.

One moment, the alarm bell went off and the Kharal streamed invisibly through the town, making that clacking sound, and the next moment, the safety bell went off and we all came back out. In the off-seasons, my great uncle gave workshops at the local community center about hiding, so he was good at it, but these classes were mainly attended by the old, the weak, the ones more likely to be afraid.

"Fraidy bear, uncle," I said to myself as the days to the Kharal's upcoming visit neared, but even the day before their arrival, I decided was not afraid. I was excited! "You might be wrong, uncle!" I said to the idea of him many times when I thought of how I would watch them. Maybe, I would see them carry one of us away! Maybe I would know first who was gone. I could discover how they truly appeared. I could be the one to call out who they took at the aftergathering later. Well, maybe. If I saw them on our street. If they weren't down other roads.

This was my last year of immunity. And what was the lifelong sorrow? My great uncle would still never tell me. I had no reason to fear it.

Sure, I remembered his hiding lessons: "Nelihi," he told me since I was a tiny girl. "The Kharal can sense you just a little less if you have a barrier of at least two to three inches thick between you and their view. And sit perfectly still. Your movement could attract them! Do not even blink if you can help it. If a drop of sweat falls down your face, do not wipe it free. Let it sit. Breathe. Slowly as possible. Close your eyes and focus on slow. Your heart may race, but you do not move, hear me? How do you think this family has survived so long? We know how to hide! We are the best hiders. We exceed the safety of others at hiding! Hear me now and bide my wishes!"

"This family has not always been safe," I was dumb enough to say once, echoing something my grandmother said. "You lost your mother, didn't you, uncle?"

"But since then," he insisted, his wide girth sucked in and his small brown beard quivering. "We have been safer. I have made sure of it."

So it was finally the day the Kharal would come, and I knew I would not stay trapped in the cabinet. I kept thinking about how I wanted to see them, really know them. I was thinking maybe there were no beasts outside. Maybe the Kharal were evil and it would be good for me to look upon them. I could discover something no one else knew! Yes, I was terrified, too. But I would stare clear out the window when the hiding bell rang, although the rest of the family hid.

I would do this as a secret rite of passage. I would be so quiet, quiet as they were around our perimeters. As the bell rang, when my great uncle went into the armoire in the living room where I stood, I walked to the cabinet where I always hid and opened and shut the door as if I had entered, but I had not. Seconds later, I tiptoed to the window. From there, for a few moments, I remained

still as uncle taught me, listening for the clacking. There was none.

Everything was deathly still, so I waited—barely breathing—and then I got bored. It was terrible boring and I needed to fidget. I was not in the cabinet. I was out in the open room. And I did the only quiet thing I could think of, which was to repeat my great uncle's dance of the lifelong sorrow, re-enacting his odd polka with the series of steps I had seen him do countless times, escalating them as he did, and then, in the very quietest way possible, I did them several more times on the floor, raising and dropping my arms as he did, too. I danced and danced in the silence.

I did this dance until I felt a little winded and then I heard a clacking, which frightened me so much, I got back on chair near the window, but I saw the Kharal coming then! There were twelve or fifteen of them approaching. They had pincer faces and large, dull, midnight blue shells that lifted and dropped as they moved, kind of like my grandfather's dance. I lifted a finger to brush the hair from my brow.

They came into my house. Then I was truly afraid because I wondered if my grandmother was wrong—perhaps they would kill me or take me away—and they had seen me; I was sure of it! I sat right in front of them on that chair near the window as they entered my house. But they did not take or bother me. They found my great uncle.

As soon as they sensed his presence, one of them, with the efficiency of an insect, knocked open the armoire door with one spiked leg, poked him in the forehead with a many pronged foot, and pulled great uncle out the door to the front of the house where I could still see him, laid flat on the grass in his soiled brown pants and pale blue shirt, as still as he ever told me to be, as still as he ever was.

The other Kharals followed the first one out. Even when they gathered around him, uncle did not scream, but there was lifelike fear in his eyes, a terror, and I had the sense he was paralyzed by toxins then and that he could not move. I watched with horror and fascination.

I remembered him saying, "You have to hide very carefully, Nelihi. No motion!" But I had disregarded this advice today and done his sad dance, his dance of lifelong sorrow or the Kharal dance, as I would later call it, because yes, I'd moved, I'd drawn them to us and they'd come, but it would be him to pay now for my ignorant acts.

If I wanted to, perhaps, after they took him, I would be able to announce he was gone to the others because I was sure then that I would be unharmed as I watched--but I didn't want to know first, didn't even want my family to know that I had not been in my cabinet. I was sure my grandmother still hid below her bed, eyes shut, as the Kharal commenced to line up beside uncle and I watched them begin to frenzy.

They did not carry him away. After he was immobilized, the Kharal wanted nothing more than to satisfy their immense hunger, which was apparent even on their insect faces, as I watched the first monster run a long purple tongue, forked at the end, across my great uncle's face, savoringly, before it took a bite.

It was quick and quiet how they ate him. Quietly, smoothly, each then dipped its head for a bite and the creatures each took a turn until a cycle of one bite per Kharal had happened, moving with a circular ebb around uncle's body until each had consumed the same amount of flesh, before these turns commenced again.

They ate his clothes and skin off first, then his fat, then muscles, then cartilage, then bones. On one of their backs, a carrier Kharal I

assumed, whatever small pieces of bone that remained were saved for later use in a blue-black indentation of a scale. And then, when there were no more full bites left, the last three of the group slid across the grass to absorb the blood and tissue from the lawn, laid low and sopping up his traces with their absorbant Kharal bodies, efficient and masterful to watch—like serpentine bio-cleaners, sliding on their bellies and wiping the land squeaky clean.

It was shocking as they left to see no trace of uncle—not single hide nor hair. And, yes, I then knew first who had been taken when the safety bell rang, but I did not call out as I'd planned to at the aftergathering. I said nothing, for I shared with the deceased a secret now. The lifelong sorrow. I knew it, and I knew it deep.

My grandmother, through her tears, announced him gone moments later. And I was ashamed. His whole life he had done well to teach people how to avoid drawing attention to their homes when the Kharal came. He had made this a mission. He had told me what not to do. But he had not been able to avoid teaching me a dance that he himself did to cope, I realized later, lifting his arms like the dull blued panels of the Kharal's shells, making his mincing steps as they did when they circled a victim, and he had done this by accident, but he had taught me well.

I had been mimicking him for years, so knew immediately when I saw them start to consume him in their rounds that this dance was not even actually a dance, but a reenactment of the day he watched them eat his mother. And he had seen it all, too, I realized, the partitioning, the turn-taking, the ravenous hunger that let not one part be left! The dance of the lifelong sorrow! I should have listened to him about hiding. About shutting one's eyes.

He knew better than anyone not to seek awareness when the Kharal came—not because there was a chance that you then might die by seeing those creatures eat and liquefy a man you knew well

and loved, which was horrible enough, but because you might see this killing, this eating, and then be unable to tell anyone about it for the rest of your life because you weren't supposed to know, because you felt shame and sorrow you had not been hiding as you were supposed to—because even while performing the dance later that you or someone before you had created to embody this moment so that you might accept owning this terrible knowledge without speaking the words aloud, you knew each time you performed it that you were to blame for what came next on the day you saw them, that you were the killer in your own way, and that someone else had died for your invisible sins of watching or moving—died that you might live.

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