

Filth and Splendor: A Love Story

by Marshall Moore

Solomon Chan wants to fight the good fight but no one in the Hall of Heroes will let him near combat. Lacking conventional hero talents, he tries to be useful: he makes sandwiches for the Prime Combatants; he mops their marble floors and dusts their overflowing bookshelves. He runs errands and delivers messages. Whatever the Prime Combatants ask of him, he does right away, no questions asked (*Do you want mustard on that?* and *Grande or venti?* being the more common exceptions). If he can't take out the occasional thug, he can at least order take-out.

Alison Ng, Takashi Sato, and Theodore Wong are the real thing: both telekinetic, they can attack from afar. Takashi, the stronger of the two, hurls buses at bad guys. He could stop an Airbus A380 in the middle of takeoff or tear a skyscraper loose from its foundation if he so chose. Alison prefers more subtle methods: a quick evisceration with the blade of her mind, limbs coming suddenly unattached, torrents of blood. And Theo, the pyro, is the group's own portable hell. He once bragged that he could burn the moon right out of the sky. No one suggested he give it a try. He also once boiled a patch of the harbor to stop the speedboat of a drug gang. The stench lingered for days.

Even the second contingent of talent hovers just out of Solomon's reach. Halcyon Lau (Hal for short) summons fog. In smoggy, humid Hong Kong this ability serves little purpose. Most of the time, the factories just up the Pearl River in Guangdong Province generate more visual obscurity than the SAR needs. But Hal and his mists come in handy sometimes. They slow people down. And Darren Davies, the staff technopath, can converse with machines as if they were sentient. He keeps the household's IT equipment up and

running... and helps himself to other countries' intel. No measure of security can keep him out of a Swiss bank account, a government database, or a national power grid.

Solomon just makes people leak. Literally. Blessed or cursed with a mild, focused hybrid of telepathy and telekinesis, he can override the mechanisms that keep noses dry and bottoms clean. On signing up with the Heroes, he tried to present a case for joining in combat: "But I can make our enemies start crying. You can't fight if you're sobbing, you wet yourself, and you crap in your pants." Alison, stone-faced, instantly sealed her decision with a single word: "*Eww.*"

"We fight dirty," said Takashi, one of the longest-serving members of the Hong Kong unit. "But not *that* dirty."

Solomon knows that the Prime Combatants' refusal has more to do with revulsion than realism. He could disable someone faster than Hal with his fog, but some archaic notion of honor seems to prevail. Making your enemy pee in a fight is quite nasty, of course. But in Solomon's view, the dignified criminal is a thing of the past, because the notion of honor among thieves has long been obsolete. Today, kids in suburban housing towers torture kittens to death, binding their bodies up with metal strips and letting them grow into agonizing deformity before tossing them out of high windows. Deranged young men drop bottles of acid off rooftops into busy shopping districts. Triad gangsters import peasants from remote corners of the mainland, first maiming them in creative ways (burning them head to toe, peeling the skin off their calves, breaking limbs and resetting them badly) to make them more useful as beggars. Today's criminals have surrendered every vestige of integrity and any possible right to dignity in combat. Fight fire with fire, Solomon reasons. Or with flatus, if that's what it takes.

Powers are as diverse as those who possess them. This is both the joy and the joke of the phenomenon. For every man or woman capable of waging singlehanded psionic warfare, there are several dozen equipped with nothing more than nifty party tricks. Solomon sometimes chats online with a girl in Sitka, Alaska, who can instantly count every visible star in the sky. She can also tell how far

away they are, how large, and how hot. When she was younger, she wanted to be (big surprise) an astronomer. These days, she's leaning more toward banking. The pay's better, and she's used to working with long strings of zeroes. She once told him about a friend in Calgary who could talk to owls. No other species of animal, she told Solomon; just owls. But this lost its appeal when her friend learned the extent of owls' conversational repertoire: food, weather, elimination, sleep, and sex.

Sounds like my father, Solomon typed.

Mine too, Elizabeth from Sitka replied in her big purple sans serif font.

Do our powers make us lonely? Solomon asked the question already knowing his answer.

Elizabeth's reply: *I'd rather be like us than boredom-enhanced like the normals. You've got to admit, this is more fun.*

More fun? Solomon had his doubts then and he still does. *More fun.* Is he having fun waiting on the supernatural elite, the ones with more dazzling gifts? Solomon sometimes takes Takashi's Maserati in for maintenance. That's fun. So is flirting with the girl who works in the food section at the Taikoo Shing Marks and Spencer. But he always remembers he's there to pick up pasta sauce, crackers, canned salmon, and a few bottles of wine for the household and not for himself. He's on both a leash and a budget.

Melody Park's arrival changes everything. She's from the Seoul division but he doesn't know this at first. When he walks in that afternoon, laden down with bags from a supermarket run, he hasn't been told to expect her.

"I picked up some fresh sausage, Darren!" he calls out to the sozzled but effective Brit. "Oliver's has it."

Alison and a young woman Solomon hadn't met—Asian but not Chinese—sit at the long table, a bottle of lime Perrier and two glasses in front of them. No coasters, Solomon notices. So much for the finish. He supposes it doesn't matter with Darren around. His

talent for restoring abused hardwood surfaces isn't supernatural. He's just good at it.

"Brilliant," comes Darren's disembodied response, via a nearby intercom speaker.

Alison and the other woman giggles behind cupped palms.

"Solomon, there's someone we'd like you to meet," says Alison. This is Melody Park. Your Korean name is Mi-sook, right?"

She nods. Solomon takes a step back, not knowing what to say: his English has stuck its head in the sand and he doubts Melody speaks Cantonese. An oversized white T-shirt bearing the phrase **LET'S CHOSE A WELLBING JOY LIFE** *Best Friend Forever* de-emphasizes a figure he could spend all day gazing at. He takes another step back.

"Your mouth is hanging open, Solomon," Alison says.

Melody giggles again.

"It's all right," she says in a deadpan Aussie drawl. Solomon's ears perk up. He rather likes English spoken with a Korean accent—it sounds faintly and warmly French to him—but Australian words coming out of a lipstick-enhanced Asian mouth? Too delicious. "He's not, like, Quasimodo. You never know what to expect from superhero types. One of the men on the Seoul team has rotten teeth. He's so... ghetto? We keep telling him that rinsing his mouth with green tea isn't enough. No one wants to go near him. Problem is, he's a powerful telepath, so he's too valuable for us to kick out. Besides, he can hear our thoughts anyway. He knows his fucking breath stinks, and still he won't go near a tube of toothpaste. We're all convinced he does it out of spite."

"Is that why you transferred to Hong Kong? To get away from his bad breath?" Solomon asks. Inside, he's swooning.

"It was more about *him* than his breath. Besides, Korea's just too, you know, *Korean* sometimes? I'm Korean and all, but it's good to have a break."

"And with a strong telepath around..." Alison says with a shudder. "That would make me very nervous."

Melody looks back and forth at Solomon and Alison, clearly trying to decide whether to say something. A frown depresses her perfect eyebrows. Then she admits (*blurts*, Solomon thinks, and then mentally kicks himself) she left because she'd been a few days late with her period about six months ago. She'd been involved with one of the other Seoul superheroes, a nice guy from Gwangju who instantly acquired any language he was exposed to. Then her cycle, normally regular, had been interrupted. On her second day of bloodless panic, she got a text from the telepath: *Don't worry, you're not pregnant. Hyun-min is sterile and didn't want to tell you.* As if that weren't alarming enough, the telepath had been in London at the time. With this news forced out into the open, Hyun-min and Melody awkwardly broke up. Hyun-min put in for a transfer to Geneva and was gone a week later. Wanting to stay in East Asia, Melody narrowed her choices down to Singapore and Hong Kong.

"I tossed a lot of coins," she says. "Hong Kong won."

"That's... umm... I... I don't know what to say," Alison says.

"Thanks for sharing? How horrible. I'm glad we don't have one of those people in the Hong Kong unit. Some abilities are just too... *untidy*. Right. Umm, Solomon? Don't you think so? Let's change the subject. Why don't we go out for dinner? You must be hungry."

She practically drags Melody out the door.

"Nice meeting you," Solomon says to their contrails.

For the next three weeks, he seeks out reasons to make himself scarce. Since both Takashi's Maserati and Darren's classic Jag require the same level of maintenance as the typical burn ward patient, Solomon has plenty to do. At some level, he knows his evasiveness won't go unnoticed; in fact, it's likely to make him the star of household gossip. He doesn't care, either. Better to be gone as much as possible than to make an ass of himself whenever Melody walks into the room. He's always had a thing for cute Korean girls. But how many cute Korean girls have a thing for average-looking Chinese boys with icky psychic talents? *That's* the real agony at the heart of the matter.

If it weren't for the hipster glasses and the fact that I wear black most of the time, no one would notice me in a crowd, Solomon thinks. Maybe I should join a gym and get some muscles.

Darren ribs him about it. "No questions about Melody? And you're gone whenever she's around? Come on, mate. Why not put it on the side of Sun Hung Kai Centre so all of Hong Kong can see? *I want to shag Melody Park.*"

"So what if I do?"

"It's all right. Most men would, I think. If that's what you're into." Darren's own ideal is taut, Thai, and twenty. And male. Still, Solomon welcomes the sympathy. "Look, just try not to be so obvious about it. She's a sweet girl. Relax. She doesn't bite. In fact, once you find out what her power is, you might wish biting was all she *did* do. She's a little scary, if you ask me."

"Which I didn't."

"I'll have a word with her," Darren assures him.

Solomon yelps, "Don't!", but it doesn't work.

Melody stops him one afternoon on his way out of the house and asks if he likes Korean food.

"Doesn't everybody?"

"I don't think so." Melody follows him to the driveway. "It's too spicy. Theo told me the Korean place in Times Square is pretty good. I feel bad about all the gossip that's happening on my account. Can I make it up to you? I'll buy you dinner."

Poleaxed, Solomon can only nod his head and watch in dumb fascination as she opens the passenger-side door of his Peugeot hatchback and seats herself inside.

"Are you coming?" she asks.

"Right, of course."

Driving gives Solomon something to focus on other than his sweat-sticky palms and racing heart. He points the air conditioning vents at his hands, to dry them off.

"You don't get motion sickness, do you?" he asks. "The roads up here are very twisty."

"No, I'm used to flying helicopters and driving in rough terrain." Solomon swerves.

"I guess I should ask, then. What do you *do*, exactly?"

"I'm the Death Girl," Melody says.

"Not what I expected. So you, umm... die and come back to life with information from the spirit world?"

"Nothing like that. I can contact the dead, but not just anyone anywhere. I'm not a medium. No séances and Ouija boards. But if there's a spirit in the immediate area, I can communicate with it."

"But you're listed as one of the Primes," Solomon says. "How's that helpful in combat?"

Sudden impact against the windshield: Solomon stands on the brakes. The Peugeot screeches to a halt, as does the car behind them. The smear of blood and feathers on the glass would revolt most people, as would the blackish rivulet of southbound blood, but Solomon, smitten, is not most people. And although he's been kept out of combat, he's seen much worse.

"I did that," Melody says. "I'm sorry if it scared you."

"I'll recover. Next week, or the week after."

"It didn't crack the glass, did it? I'm really sorry. I'm so indiscreet sometimes. My mother always used to tell me that."

"I don't think so, but it doesn't matter. Takashi can fix it if it's cracked. He's good with molecules. So... you can kill?"

"That's right. And resurrect. With animals, you can't tell the difference, but with humans, it gets a little messier. They're not the same as they were before. You wouldn't want me to bring your grandma back. She'd just be a bag of stinky meat walking around."

"She's already like that," Solomon says, humbled. "Darren said you were a little scary. Now I see why."

"Don't freak out or anything," Melody says. "I don't go around killing people for no reason. Everything's different when you're fighting, though. I can raise up a whole army of the dead. I did that up in the Golden Triangle one time, on the Burmese side of the

border. We went in to clear out some nasty drug lords. They'd killed so many people, it wasn't hard to wake them up and make them dig themselves out of their graves. It was kind of fun, really. Not so much for the drug guys, you know, but I enjoyed it."

"You're so cute when you talk about bloodshed," Solomon says. "Are you trying to make yourself irresistible?"

"I'm not a nice person," Melody says. "When I was in middle school, my family had moved back to Korea from Perth. These horrible little bitches were picking on me... every day. In Korean, we call it *wang-dda*. It's like bullying but worse. I discovered my powers when they were holding me down and... never mind. You don't want to know what girls are really like."

But I do, Solomon thinks. Today she has on a Hello Kitty T-shirt and flattering jeans. She's already acquired the Hong Kong woman's habit of bundling up in a light shawl to stay warm in aggressive air conditioning. When she moves, she gives off faint but refreshing whiffs of perfume, something clean and floral Solomon recognizes but couldn't name. *I'm dying*, he thinks. *She's going to kill me before we take the first bite of our dinner.*

"Fuck it, I'll tell you anyway. The ringleader was this awful little cunt named Hyo-jin. She'd convinced the other two girls to scrub off my nipples with some steel wool they stole from the janitor. So I killed them. The other two, not Hyo-jin. Just like that, they were dead. Then I made the two dead ones tear Hyo-jin apart, limb from limb."

"You're a goddess." Solomon would swoon but he's still driving. Melody giggles. "*The worship of power is an old religion*," she quotes.

"And you speak Santayana. Do you know how hot that is?"

"I speak Nietzsche and Spinoza too. Actually, I went back to Australia for uni, and I majored in philosophy. With my abilities, I kind of had to. I mean, could you see me being a social worker?"

They drive on in silence. After enough time has passed that Solomon can change the subject without being rude, he asks if she'd mind a detour.

"Driving and parking around Causeway Bay in the evening is a nightmare. Better to park at my apartment in North Point, then take the MTR over to Times Square. Melody agrees, saying she's just gotten an Octopus Card—Hong Kong's ubiquitous stored-value cash card—and she wants to try it out.

At dinner, Melody takes charge of the tabletop grill, and they talk about everything but superpowers. She'd already fallen in love with Hong Kong, with its dramatic hills and its skyline that encircles Victoria Harbour. All that neon reflecting off the water at night is like nothing she's ever seen.

"Seoul's dead at night?" Solomon asks.

"Oh no, far from it. But all the *drinking*. And what happens after... it's even worse. Korean salarymen throwing up on the subway and peeing on the sidewalk... I love my country but I kind of hate it too, sometimes."

Solomon sips his Korean beer, not quite knowing how to digest this information.

"So when are you going to talk about your own special talent?" she asks, changing the subject with car-crash abruptness. "I mean, I already know, but I want to hear your side of things."

With a pair of metal tongs, she expertly moves their grilled strips of pork to the cooler edges of the grill, then picks up the pair of scissors on the table to cut them into bite-sized pieces. Without taking her eyes off Solomon, she dips the first piece of pork into sauce, then wraps it in a lettuce leaf and pops it in her mouth.

"If you already know," he says, attempting to maneuver his first bite of food off the grill without setting his sleeve on fire, "then what's for me to talk about? It's not the most glamorous power out there. Theo and Takashi... they're the glamour boys. I just make people sneeze and wet themselves and... you know. It's disgusting."

"Have you ever seen a dead body claw its way out of wet soil and attack someone?"

"Only in horror movies."

"Power isn't meant to be cute," Melody says.

"Look at the Caucasian woman in the light blue shirt two tables away." Solomon points with his eyes and a discreet nod of the head.

"The loud one?"

He nods and says, "Watch."

His victim pauses, the hand holding her chopsticks stopping in its arc toward her mouth. She frowns, looks down at her chest, and puts the chopsticks down, clearly trying to understand the sensation rising in her breasts. Solomon can't tell whether she's ever been pregnant, ever breastfed a baby. In his realm, none of that matters. Eyes huge, the woman folds her arms across her chest... but not quickly enough to hide the evidence of her sudden, copious lactation.

"I don't think she deserved that," he says. "What does that make me?"

"At least you shut her up. Look, I've killed hundreds of people," Melody says. "I'm a worse person than you are. So try not to worry about it. Besides, you did a good deed. I was tired of hearing her talk about her tour bus breaking down in Thailand. Do it to somebody else?"

"What?" Solomon takes another gulp of beer.

"It's a cool power. We're all obsessed with telekinesis and flying, so it's lovely to meet someone different. You're refreshing. How about that woman's fat husband? Do something to him? For me?"

Solomon stares at her over the rim of his beer glass. Angelic smile and the soul of a demon. He supposes having the power to raise the dead and lead a rotting army into war would take a certain toll. He likes her edge, though. And everything else about her.

"I feel bad for the guy," he says. "He's been listening to her all night. I bet he wishes he'd never come on this trip."

"Or never married her in the first place. Can you make him come?"

"Come where? Over here?"

"No, I mean... *come*." Her voice drops to a hoarse whisper, and her direct and steady fuck-me look fills in the rest of the blanks. "If it's in, you can make it come out, right?"

Solomon nods. He's actually done this before, a few times, experimenting with random victims on the MTR and in crowds of pedestrians. It didn't turn him on at all, but he'd been helpless to resist the idea after his subconscious had first coughed it up. Some guy nodding off on a train or a bench in a station concourse would be awakened by ejaculating in his pants when he hadn't been *thinking* about sex or even been hard.

"Are you sure?"

"Give him a little boost," Melody says. "He needs a pick-me-up, doesn't he?"

Solomon focuses. This sort of repels him. Is it so different from walking over there and giving the guy a hand job? What would his cock look like, pink and stubby? These aren't details he wants to know, ever, and after the guy has twitched and moaned a little, then pitched back in his chair, a stain seeping through the front of his pleated khakis, Solomon feels grateful to have gotten it over with. He tries to reassure himself that he didn't just have telekinetic sex with this man.

"Bravo!" Melody claps her hands as the Caucasian couple throws a handful of colorful currency on the table and rush out of the restaurant. "My hero."

"That didn't feel heroic to me," Solomon says. "It's more like I just raped him."

"Is it so bad that you made an irritating couple leave the restaurant? All the other diners look relieved. If they knew what you'd just done, I bet they'd come over to say thank you. And not only that..."

"What?"

Melody's voice drops down to a hoarse whisper: "You made me wet."

"Oh shit—I'm sorry! I thought I had better control than that! I mean, I don't get much practice, but... I'm sorry! Shit!"

She laughs and shakes her head. "No, not like that. The regular way. But just imagine what you could do to me if you really wanted to."

"Let's get out of here," Solomon says, when he can breathe again.

He wants to take a taxi back to his flat but Melody wants to take the MTR again. "It'll be more fun that way." In a low voice, she adds, "The anticipation'll make it hotter." Although she's speaking softly, she keeps a sunny, carefree smile on her face, as if she were talking about good service on a Cathay Pacific flight or the new Stephen King book she's just finished reading. No one passing by would guess at the sordid things coming out of her mouth. This turns Solomon on even more.

"Even the first night I met you, I knew you were a wild woman," he tells her as they enter the long, sloping tunnel that connects the Times Square basement with the Causeway Bay MTR station.

"I appreciate life," Melody says. "Considering what I do, I have to, don't I?"

They walk in silence, jostled by the crowd. Causeway Bay, the retail nexus of Hong Kong, attracts throngs of people: shoppers, gawkers, hawkers, visitors, residents. At any time of the day or the night, as long as the MTR is running, the station is likely to be crowded.

Then Melody screams. "MY PURSE! *MY PURSE!* FUCK!"

It happened too fast for Solomon to see who had done it. He catches a glimpse of a figure in a baseball cap weaving through the crowd. Is that long hair? Has a *woman* just grabbed Melody's Louis Vuitton handbag? He can't tell. The crowd shifts, haphazardly parts, and reconstitutes itself.

Melody grabs Solomon's arm. "I can't use my power here... I'd hurt a lot of people. I don't know who did it or where he went... please help me."

She needs to say nothing more: amplified by fear, adrenaline, and testosterone, Solomon's own power is already welling up. It punches out from him in a single hard shockwave: random pedestrians double over as their guts heave and roil and their bodies lose control of their intimate functions. He flattens the people closest to them (Melody stands behind him, shielded): they lay spewing and pissing

and shitting themselves, writhing in their offal like pigs in muddy pens. The effect spreads up the pedestrian tunnel, bodies twisting and collapsing as bowels and bladders give way, stomachs throw themselves into hard reverse, breasts leak, and noses run. A tide of filth cascades along the floor of the tunnel. As Solomon's blast of power wanes, he becomes aware of standing ankle-deep in sewage. Gagging from the stench, he and Melody bury their faces in their clothes to filter the air.

Melody points up the tunnel. A single man stands there, outlined under the glare of fluorescent lights, holding the purse and looking back at them. At his feet, a mass of moaning and filthy people move weakly, groaning, still leaking from every orifice.

"What the *fuck*?" Solomon's voice is muffled by the crumpled-up fabric of his shirt. "That's not *possible*."

"But it is, Solomon," Melody says.

She extracts a mobile phone from her pocket and punches a single number. Solomon is about to unleash another torrent of power at the man, who for some reason has not taken off running, when Melody says, "Don't." Then, into the phone, "Takashi? We've got a situation here. Yes, it worked, too goddamn well. I need you, Theo, and what's that other guy? The foggy one? Heliotrope? *Halcyon*. You Hong Kong people have the strangest fucking names. Yes, I know you're Japanese. Whatever, this is *not* the time. Call Operations and have them contact Korea. I need Chul-soo here, the telepath, and I need him *now*, unless someone else is closer. There's a teleporter in the Busan division, Sang-woo. If he's not available, find me another one. Or hell, have them scramble a fighter jet. Whatever it takes. Have Darren keep this out of the media. I've got to go. We've made a mess of Causeway Bay Station... Christ, this shit stinks. Get here *now*. Gotta go."

She looks up at him.

"Melody, what the fuck just *happened*?"

The man is walking toward them.

"Why wouldn't my power work? Is he... like us?"

"No, Solomon. He's dead. They can't shit and vomit because there's nothing left in them."

It takes a second for this to sink in.

"You set me up! You bitch!"

"This was the first stage of your combat training," she says. "The fog boy and Theo are going to sterilize this place once we get the people out. Takashi gets to shovel the shit. They'll hate me for the clean-up job I'm about to make them do, but... life's a bitch sometimes, even when you've got superpowers."

"I can't believe you set me up!"

"If you hadn't been avoiding the house for the last three weeks, we might have done something different," Melody says, her voice again muffled by fabric. "But we had to see how you'd perform in a crisis." She looks around. The reanimated corpse waits several feet away. Solomon doesn't want to look too closely. "I'd say you nailed this one. Overkill, maybe, but I got my purse back. And what I said back at the restaurant?"

Solomon looks back at her. He can't see her mouth because she's now covering the lower half of her face with her scarf, but from her eyes he can tell that she's smiling.

"I wasn't making that part up."

In the distance, Solomon can hear the first sirens.

