

Rathbones
Folio Prize
MENTORSHIPS

in association with FIRST STORY

Excerpt from 'Afterlife'
by Mariamah Davey

Mentored by Sharlene Teo

Mary hiked through the forest, minding her step through the fallen autumn leaves. She pulled the dark hooded cloak tighter around her as a familiar breeze hit her once again. Brushing her hair back into her hood. She met eyes with Solomon. His eyes were so much brighter than her own, but then again, Crions usually did have bright yellow eyes and Solomon was no exception.

Mary ran her fingers through his dark fur. This would usually be declared a death wish, but Mary found comfort in the warmth and protection Solomon gave her. She pondered her next steps. She had recently learned of a group that called themselves 'The Cortex', yet another force sworn to stop her. The Akuji was still her most feared enemy, so far anyway. She had seen the damage The Akuji caused first-hand. Her thoughts flashed back to her mother, and her best friend. The ones she couldn't save.

She laid eyes on Solomon through a teary glaze and noticed his ears perk up. It was almost as if his muscle mass grew slightly as he reared back onto his hind legs, ready to fight. Mary stood deadly quiet. She knew Solomon. He had a keen sense for danger. She listened carefully. Taking slow steady breaths. Then a blood-curdling scream erupted in the forest. Solomon took off in the direction, leaving Mary for the dust. She chased the Crion, running as fast as her little legs could take her.

When she finally caught up with him, he saw it there. Standing silently. The Akuji. Its hood already lowered meant it already had an influencer insight. Yet the Akuji was never seen without its wooden mask. There was no hope for the prey, but that didn't mean Mary wouldn't try. She spotted the man bleeding against a tree. The Akuji had its undying attention on the man. He must be an influencer, the Akuji didn't hunt normal humans. He scrambled to his feet, crying and pleading. The Akuji didn't bat an eye. Solomon jumped towards it, latching onto its leg, great teeth-baring into its flesh. Yet no blood came from the Akuji. It lifted its leg and slammed Solomon against the tree detaching him from its leg.

Mary cried out to Solomon, yet there was no response.

Although the Akuji's mouth couldn't be seen, the look in its blue eyes showed... emotion. She didn't think the Akuji could feel emotion, but it wasn't joy, or anger... but pain. She slowly, carefully approached the Akuji. This was a foolish move, she knew this. The Akuji didn't move, it just watched her approach. Mary, inches away from the Akuji, made eye contact and whispered hesitantly,

'You... feel?'

It snarled under its mask, as if the question repulsed it. Its eyes flashed and a swift hand swiped her face, knocking her back a few feet from it and the influencer. She fell back knocking her head against a rock. Blood knotted her hair. As she scrambled to her feet, holding her head she watched in horror as yet another influencer became a victim to The Akuji.

It sliced open the man's throat as he shook against the tree, desperately clenching his fatal wound. The Akuji lifted him, threw him over its shoulder and slammed him against the tree impaling him on a sharpened branch and left him hanging, bleeding out onto the roots of the tree. Mary swallowed her sickness as she smelt the coppery tang of blood in the air. She crept over to Solomon who seemed to be just coming around. She gently stroked his head which quivered in fear and pain. She looked back and saw The Akuji watching her. She did not understand why it had not tried to kill her. She was an influencer, yet it never hunted her. It had many opportunities to kill her yet it never did. She glanced back at the body that hung, dripping the last traces of life on the ground. She watched as the leaves began to change. They turned the same colour as his blood.

Mary stood, followed by Solomon and glanced back at the Akuji one last time. It had done its job. There was nothing she could do. She turned away and began walking. Defeated once again.

A trembling voice came from behind her.

'Mary...' it whimpered 'I'm sorry'.

Mary's eyes widened in shock. She turned and glared at him, scanning for anyone else who could've possibly uttered her name. There was no one. Did the Akuji just speak her name?