

Miyako Jones
Professor Zeff
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Beauty and the Beast Within

"It was a dark and stormy night." These sort of tales all tend to start out the same way. Well, it wasn't dark and stormy when I had my brush with the supernatural. Hell, it wasn't even night. There should be some kind of rule against weird stuff happening at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. You don't really know what to make of it because nothing in your life up to that point has prepared you for it.

It was just another ordinary day (yet another cliché opening). I was heading out of the science building after sitting through the second of my twice-weekly snooze sessions induced by my biology professor when something caught my eye. There had been dozens of bodies passing between me and whatever it was that I saw, but it somehow managed to grab my attention. But when I turned my head to fully see it, I saw nothing.

Little things like that are usually no big deal. They happen to everyone every now and then. A flicker of recognition, a spot of color, a flash of light. Typically only a moment or two is spent thinking about it before you move on. There was something about it, though, that refused to allow my attention to drift away.

I was still thinking about it when I stepped outside the building. It was light and it was dark. It was beautiful, yet it was monstrous. It made me feel like anything was possible while also filling me with a sense of unspeakable dread. None of it made any sense to *me*, let alone how it might sound to anyone else.

By the time I got to my car, I'd decided to forget I'd seen anything. I had more important things to worry about, like trying not to fail microbio for the second time.

Though I had made up my mind to forget about the incident, the "incident" chose not to forget about me. For days afterward I caught glimpses of that same contradiction out of the corner of my eye. After the first few times, I stopped trying to see what it was. If it was meant for me to see, I wouldn't be having such a hard time.

Of course, as soon as I made the decision to go about my life like normal despite the sudden weirdness, something happened to render that impossible.

I went to the movies with a group of friends one night. It was about nine o'clock when we all left

for home; not very late, but not very early, either. Like usual, I let myself into the lobby of my apartment building and took the stairs up to the third floor two at a time. Dimly, I could hear the sounds of life through the walls: the canned laughter of a situation comedy; the wailing of a cranky child; the usual nightly dose of arguing from the couple in 3B. It was familiar. It was *normal*.

I entered my home. There was a small table lamp on to prevent me from tripping over the furniture. I dropped my bag next to the front door and toed off my shoes before heading for the tiny kitchenette. I flicked on the overhead light and blinked at the sight of someone sitting at the table.

Now, normally I'm not one to give into hysteria, but I think it was warranted in this case, don't you? But before I lost control of all my mental faculties, I wanted to know if my mind was playing tricks on me.

So, I flicked the light off then on again.

Nope, still there.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked in a surprisingly calm voice that masked my pounding heart and knotted stomach. "And how the hell did you get into my apartment?" And the door was locked. Why would they bother to lock up after themselves?

Slowly, the kitchen chair slid across the linoleum. Slowly, he/she/it rose to their feet. Slowly, I started backing away. There was nothing at all normal about a stranger sitting in your kitchen as if they belonged there. I guess they didn't necessarily mean me any harm, but I wasn't stupid enough to bet my life on it.

"Don't go."

I had another moment of complete incredulity. "*Excuse me?*"

"Don't go." The voice was genderless; soft and uncertain. I couldn't decide one way or the other because I was staring at their back. The hood of a black coat was raised up over their head, the hem of which trailed nearly to the floor.

Another emotion I don't normally give into is sympathy. I'd been betrayed by very convincing actors far too many times. But this... figure standing before me just screamed "pity me." "Hey, what are you doing here?" I asked ever-so-gently. "Shouldn't you be at home, safe and sound?"

Slowly, they turned. I braced myself for something horrible, telling my body sternly that it could not recoil no matter what. My breath caught in my throat. My palms began to sweat. Then we were face-to-face.

She was perfect.

Long golden brown hair framed a pale face with high cheekbones and full lips. There was not one blemish or wrinkle upon her skin. She had the kind of complexion that some women would kill for—and probably had.

I looked into her eyes. They were blue and green all at once. A shadow of something beyond my comprehension seemed to pass across them.

"Help me, Janelle." The pupils expanded, changing from black to the rich crimson of fresh blood.

"Help me."

I looked and I knew. The strange dichotomy I'd noticed before was the truth. Here before me stood the ultimate good.

And the ultimate evil.