

*Monkey Around by Jadie Jang*

The guard looked entirely human.

He wore designer jeans, knockoff Gucci loafers, a sheeny buttoned shirt, and too much hair gel. He smelled, even at a distance, of strong cologne. His skin was a taut medium brown, with faint wrinkle lines starting between his groomed eyebrows and around his cheeks. He held his cigarette between his thumb and first two fingers and blew crooked smoke rings. He looked entirely human. That was my first clue that he wasn't.

I know, I know, if everyone who looked human wasn't, then nobody would be human (interesting thought, that ...) but that's not what I mean. There was a ... brightness to his appearance, like he was in HD while the rest of the world was a cell phone video. He was too perfectly what he appeared to be: an inevitable side effect of wearing a bought glamor. Other people's magic just doesn't sit naturally on you, and only an amateur would take that sparkling, sharp visage at face value.

This guy, if Ayo's info was correct, was a bajang: a shapeshifter that had a human-like form, and a weasel-like form. The human-like form, however, wasn't entirely human. He should have had clawed hands and taloned feet. And he was entirely too tall for a bajang, being around my average human height. And bajang, apparently, don't have higher deceptive magic. Not that he'd have gotten away with it if he had. I have my own magic detector, when common sense fails, and my eyes were burning away merrily.

The only thing I couldn't tell you is why a rooftop guard would need to go to such trouble to hide who he was. I mean, he was on the roof.

I was at that moment in the form of a shadow at the base of the air conditioning vent. The guard had come out almost immediately after I got there to have a smoke, and gave the place I was shadowing a few hard looks. Probably saw that something was wrong with my spot (there wasn't supposed to be a shadow here) but couldn't put his finger on it. I waited. He seemed nervous, for some reason.

Halfway through his cigarette, he decided he was done. He gave me a last hard look and flicked his cigarette into me, turning to go back through the door before it landed. The butt flew through me, bounced off the air conditioning vent, and landed, just outside my square of darkness. I gave it another minute to see if he was coming back, then transformed from a shadow into a rhesus macaque monkey. Monkey was my default animal form, and the best form from which to do what I was about to do.

I pulled a hair from my chest, set it on the bare skin of my elongated palm, and focused on it. The tip of the hair turned into something resembling a microphone, and the shaft began to lengthen. The microphone nosed its way into the vent like a snake, and the hair continued elongating behind it as it slithered down the airway. The root end of the hair shaped itself into an ear bud and I put it into my right ear, even as my left hand continued feeding the shaft of the hair—now a flexible cable—into the vent.

It didn't look like any technology you've ever seen. I started out in high school trying to make real machines out of my hairs, but I didn't really understand their mechanisms, so they never worked. But when I got it through my skull that it was magic, not engineering, I just made the things look like what I wanted them to do, and then they started working like whoa.

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The microphone head slid past several rooms featuring sounds appropriate to a “massage” parlor (I’ll spare you any elaboration.) Without looking I reached around the vent chimney for the black patent leather crossbody purse I’d brought with me (fashionable and water resistant!) I pulled out the stone Ayo had magicked for me and cupped it over my left ear, and the conversations became understandable. I couldn’t suddenly speak Chinese, mind you, despite four years of college classes. But the gist of the conversation filtered into my brain, even as I listened to words I couldn’t understand. I was listening for a particular female voice—one that sounded like a warped metal door being scraped open across a rough cement floor—or for snatches of conversation about the owner of that voice. I got nothing.