

Golden Uncertainty

Lashyn

Lashyn steps off the bus at a charging station, a brown satchel slung over their shoulder and a walking stick in hand. Shamset runs circles around their lanky figure, licking at their empty hand. They have to meet with their supervisor to get the details straight, then pick up the equipment necessary for the job. The early morning breeze is a blessing, and having the sun high above their head will be helpful for the long trip. That way, it'll be easier to spot the outlines and shadows of obstacles in their path. But right now, there's just a flat dirt road ahead leading to the cabin. Lashyn relaxes their shoulders and enjoys the reflections of light in the scenery.

When they reach the cabin, Shamset begins to bark excitedly, bounding through the tall grass. They hear the front door open and close with a boom, causing them to listen for the weight of the person's footsteps.

"Do you have my gear with you? Or did you leave it inside?" Lashyn cocks their head to the side slightly, recognizing the confident and heavy tread.

"Can never get anything past *you*, huh?" The familiar gruff voice notes sarcastically, dumping three air-purifying masks, goggles, an audio GPS machine, and a full backpack into their outstretched arms.

"Why three?"

"This area is particularly bad," he starts slowly. "Dangerous air quality, crumbling buildings, decomposed bodies littering the streets. The main reason we're sending you to Huntington is because our radar detected movement."

Lashyn's head snaps toward Aaron, their brows knitting together. "Movement? That's not possible." They push their overgrown bangs back and out of their face, then pull the shoulder-length hair together into a ponytail. "I've scouted Huntington multiple times and never had a run-in."

Shamset is panting happily now, liking being pet by their supervisor—he has a weak spot for overexcited creatures. "We think it could be a survivor. They made a single trip across town, then returned to the same spot."

"Why can't you get Ant for this job?" Lashyn has never gone on a rescue job; people don't tend to believe in their ability to guide.

“She’s across the country right now—look, it’ll be fine. I chose you because you know the area well, and you’re more than capable.”

“Capable is not my concern,” they slip an arm through each of the backpack’s straps, adjusting the goggles above their forehead. The pressure is a welcomed sensation until it starts getting sweaty. “But I’ll do it. A job is a job.”

“That’s the spirit!” Aaron slaps them on the back encouragingly, earning a glare from his exasperated employee. They gesture goodbye with a flick of their wrist and begin walking back to the main road, a Great Dane trotting behind them.

After a few hours of walking in the shadows of mountains along the abandoned highway, the duo is two miles out of Huntington. They can tell from the pungent sulfurous smell singeing their nostrils, prompting Lashyn to fasten the air-purifying mask around their head, firmly securing itself to their jawbone. There’s a canine-shaped mask for Shamset, too, with goggles attached to make it easier to put on her. It’s a little after noon now, giving them a few hours before the sun begins to set.

The closer they get to the city’s entrance the thicker the smog becomes, further obscuring their vision. Lashyn clutches Shamset’s leash firmly and tugs gently, allowing her to guide them with her clearer eyes and stronger sense of smell. They consider that this could be a trap, someone that’s been watching them come in and out of what’s left of their hometown for resources—planning to rob, follow, or eat them. It happens; people become shells of their former selves, animal versions primed for survival.

They’re fortunate to live in a city that released itself from the chokehold of capitalism to protect its citizens, pushing to pass bills for climate reform and switching gears to create a community-based society. The people in Huntington were not as lucky.

Suddenly, Shamset begins barking and running around in a tight circle, sniffing at the ground beneath them. Lashyn is startled, letting go of the Great Dane’s leash to rest a hand on their gun holster. But no footsteps, no movement, no voices.

“Are you a survivor?” They project their voice confidently, their head held high so as to not give away that their “knight in shining armor” can’t see them. No response. And yet, Shamset continues to bark and shuffle around in the same area—*has someone caught us off guard?* Lashyn’s body tenses up, preparing for the worst.

Anisah

A loud bark causes Anisah to startle from her sleep, and she wonders if she'd been dreaming of her childhood dog again. Then another, followed by the murmurs of a voice—coming from above. She sits up straight, her room swallowed by the same damp darkness as always and waits for a moment. The voice does not return, but the barking continues, curious and ceaseless.

Anisah grabs her steel rod from the tip and drags it across the basement's concrete floor, creating a high whine that grates against her ears. Exiting through the manhole above her makeshift bedroom would put her directly in danger; it would be smarter to travel through the tunnels and sneak up on them from a mile away. At least, that's what her father would have told her to do. The pathways are rampant with rats now, swarming in tight groups like maggots, covering the ground with their wriggling bodies. Her parents had to build a platform throughout the passages to make movement possible and avoid being trapped underground.

She holds an old gas mask up to her face, having ripped it off the head of a dead body in the streets without thinking of its strap. Gripping the cold metal tightly, Anisah ascends out of the hole and instantly spots the two figures making the noise. The one holding the gun is pointing it at nothing, a tall and lean person with warm blonde hair tied in a ponytail, the color of the sun. They're wearing a dusty white tank top with two thick golden armbands on both biceps, glittering against their tanned peachy skin. Black cargo shorts and hiking boots reveal the assortment of linework tattoos snaking across the expanse of their legs. Their dog is larger than she expected, brown speckled with a darker shade, pointed ears, and a sturdy stature, running in circles like a golden retriever.

Her first instinct is to beg them to let her join their group, but she knows better than to trust the first strangers she runs into in months. Anisah squints and watches them more carefully, tracking their movements. There's always a quick pause before acting to listen and scan their surroundings. They lower their gun, bending to scratch their panting companion behind the ears.

As they wander deeper into the city, her heart slams against her chest desperately. She could just watch them leave and return to her routine of scavenging nonperishables, living in peace and loneliness in the only city she's ever known...but this could be her ticket out. She speed-walks towards them, allowing the drag of her rod against the concrete to alert the duo from a distance.

They stop suddenly, then turn slowly in her direction, their hand hovering over the gun holster strapped to their hips. Now that she's feet away, Anisah can see their honey eyes quickly scan the scene she's been painted into before tentatively landing on her. Everything about them is golden.

Before thinking, she blurts out, "You have beautiful hair! What's your name?"

Their fingers reach for the gun's handle at the sudden outburst before pausing to replay what she said. They reach for their hair suddenly, running a hand through it with the vaguest hint of a smile in their eyes—no answer, though. Smart first move.

She takes a few steps forward and sticks her hand out, their gaze moving from her face to her anxiously wiggling fingers. "My name is Anisah!" She winces briefly, reminded by the depth of her voice and the coarseness of her palms. "I know I may not sound like an Anisah, but I am."

The speckled dog stands between them and sniffs her hand hesitantly, big brown eyes meeting her own. She giggles and scratches the canine behind the ears the same way their owner did, earning the positive response of a lolling tongue. The stranger's shoulders relax a little as they shake her hand firmly.

"Lashyn," their voice is monotonous and sweet, capable of commanding a group of people if need be. *A soldier or a scavenger?* "Are you the only person here?" They don't take their eyes off her, irises traveling over her silhouette as if to turn it into a familiar shape. Anisah is a foot taller than them, capping at five-foot-nine.

"That's a lovely name," she smiles softly. "And yes, it's just me now...." The last people she saw before these months of isolation were her parents. She still doesn't know what happened to them, whether they were crushed under the wreckage of a crumbling building or simply abandoned her for a better life. It felt too cruel to leave their only daughter behind, knowing that she never had a chance to step foot out of this wretched city before.

"Thank you," they whisper, clearing their throat to speak more clearly. "We should get out of here. The sun will set in a few hours, and we'll want to be halfway back by then. Do you have any valuables?" She hasn't had a precious thing in years.

"Where will you take me?"

"Fretsaya," Lashyn reaches for an aged parchment rolled up in a cylinder. They unfurl a map—roads and bodies of water branch out, resembling the human nervous system, with bold red circles drawn around specific cities.

“Is that where you live?” Anisah takes it from their hands and follows the path from Huntington to Fretsaya with her pointer finger. She rolls the syllables over her tongue, and they sound new and green. “How long will the journey take?”

“We could get there by tomorrow evening if we leave now, but I’ve been traveling since early morning. We’ll rest in a cabin at the halfway point, then take a bus back to my city. You can keep the map if it helps you feel safer.”

“Safer?”

Lashyn’s eyes soften as if surprised by her response. “You don’t get out much, do you?”

“No, I’ve never left Huntington,” she answers honestly, scrunching her nose. “But I trust you. Plus, I have this steel rod. I can hit you over the head with if you try anything.”

They chuckle, the sound warped by the black mask covering their nose and mouth. It looks like a technologically advanced gas mask; Anisah’s never seen anything like it.

“Okay,” they perk up, straightening their shoulders and tugging lightly at their companion’s leash. “Let’s get back on the road.”

“What’s your friend’s name?” She nods her head towards the hound leading the way. Lashyn turns to face her and actually smiles this time, eyes flipping into crescent moons with crow’s feet perching at the sides.

“Shamset.”

“Like the sun!” She exclaims.

“Yeah, like the sun,” they nod. The trio steps onto the highway leading them out of the city, and Anisah turns her head to get one last look at the place that had been her home. From further away, it’s hard to believe she ever considered it anything but a prison.

Lashyn

Dusk begins to creep on them as they approach a cabin surrounded by a thick forest that makes Lashyn anxious. Though they know this path well enough to stay in the right direction, the shadows cast by tall trees lower visibility by a significant margin. They’ll have to count on Shamset, whom Anisah has shown great interest in, to continue leading the way. She seems sheltered; they don’t even know where she lived in Huntington—she just appeared out of thin air. The buildings were uninhabitable, and she insisted there was nothing to go back for.

Lashyn grew up in an unconventional family; they have an older brother they rarely see due to their careers. As children, they were forced onto a plane by their parents. They were just

noticing a decline in their peripheral vision at the time, so watching their parents wave outside the oval windows looked unreal. Their coastal city was on its way toward recovery, but an unavoidable tsunami was approaching and there weren't enough seats on the escape aircraft. It's rare now, but it still happens—more so than two decades ago. They landed in a new community in need of more bodies to thrive, Fretsaya. Their older brother, twelve years old at the time, squeezed Lashyn's arm tightly as they boarded their seats. It was a painful grip, but Amir was scared, and it grounded them in a strange way.

"I've never been inside a forest before," Anisah says suddenly, breaking the long silence. They blink, turning in the direction of her voice.

"Have you always been on your own?"

It takes a few seconds for her to answer. "Mmm, not always. I was with my parents for most of my life." Her tone is unsure and awkward; they choose not to press too much.

"Were you planning on staying in Huntington if I didn't show up today?"

She chuckles, but it's empty, without humor. "I don't know what I was planning on doing. I don't think I cared about what happened to me."

Lashyn stops, breathing in the scent of pine deeply. "Remember this moment, then. The tall trees, the grass tickling our shins, the yawning sky." They assume she stops because they hear a long intake of breath. "Our recent ancestors would have given their entire lives for just one moment like this," they add.

"You know," she laughs again, airier and lighter now. "You're strange, but I'm glad I decided to come with you."

"Thank you for trusting me to guide you." A risk to mention, but still the truth.

"Why wouldn't I?"

They shrug in response. "Rescue missions aren't exactly my forte."

Anisah doesn't say anything for a minute, almost as if debating whether or not she should say something. "We could rest properly, laze around in the cabin until the afternoon!"

Their brows knit together in confusion. "Unfortunately, that's not an option. We'll have to leave while the sun is high."

"I can be your eyes if that's what you're worried about." She says it bluntly and sincerely—they take a step back in surprise and feel a swelling in their throat. They try not to shut down, but it's difficult to stop the walls from coming up once they've started rising.

Lashyn walks past her, facing straight ahead. “I don’t *need* anyone to be my eyes. I know how to do my job.”

She quickens her pace and catches up with them, planting a gentle hand on their shoulder that they roll off. “That came out wrong. I mean, you can trust me. You can rely on me. We can do this together.”

They stop again, feet away from the clearing that reveals their accommodation. “How long have you known?”

“I saw you and Shamset from afar before approaching. You were pointing a gun at nothing, and I noticed you pausing for a split second before certain movements. It’s easy to miss, but I watch closely.” Anisah blurts out in a mess of words, causing the letters to crash into each other discordantly. “I didn’t feel the need to mention it until now, though. I’m sorry for keeping it from you.”

Lashyn bites the inside of their lip, sitting with the discomfort burning behind their collarbones instead of rushing to a conclusion. “I’ll think about it,” they state, readjusting the straps on their backpack out of habit before heading into the clearing.

Her voice perks up again. “Really?” She shouts from a distance, followed by a rapid succession of footsteps behind them. Shamset tugs at her leash once she sees the familiar field. Lashyn lets go, allowing her to jump through the tall grass while they put their stuff down inside.

“We really can’t leave later in the day, though.”

“Why not?” She whines in exasperation, allowing her backpack to slide off her back and land on the wooden floor with a loud thud.

“The last bus passes through here at 10 a.m., and it only stops at the charging station for half an hour. If we miss it, we’re stranded for the weekend.”

“They don’t come here on the weekends?”

“No,” Lashyn chuckles in amusement. “In case you’ve already forgotten, you were the last citizen of Huntington.”

Anisah

After a makeshift dinner, the two sit on the front porch steps while the cool breeze dries their skin, sticky from sweat. Shamset is fast asleep on a rocking chair, body making a compact swirl to fit into the tight space. Her side rises and falls peacefully, chest mimicking the relaxed ebb and flow under a clear night sky.

“Are there stars in Fretsaya?” Anisah asks, imagining bright dots of light freckling the blanket of velvet dark above them.

They nod, “the first few nights living there, I couldn’t sleep because I was scared of them. I thought they were going to fall on us in our sleep,” they laugh shakily, wiping their brow.

She smiles brightly. “So, you didn’t always live in Fretsaya?”

“No, my older brother and I moved there when we were children,” Lashyn smiles sadly.

She understands; not everyone got to flee. “Do you and your brother work together?”

“He’s the one who recommended me for the job, but he works on constructing the rebuilding efforts in ruined cities.” Lashyn pours another glass of lemonade and offers to refill her cup, but she refuses. It’s been years since Anisah’s had any kind of fruit juice. The lemon’s tartness overwhelms her senses.

“Are the cities salvageable?”

“Some of them,” they take a swig. “It’s expensive, so they’re starting with one promising city and going from there.”

“Which city?”

“Our hometown,” they roll their eyes. “He can’t seem to let go of it, thinks that there’s a chance our parents lived because they found small groups of survivors when they got there.”

She turns to face them head-on and squints. “You don’t want to know if they’re still around? I don’t care, personally, but you were separated from them as a child.”

Lashyn turns to face Anisah, who sits with their legs crossed. “I see it from his perspective, but he raised me even before the split. I have all the family I want back home,” a meaningful smile crosses their lips. “But I guess it would be nice to know.”

“I get it,” she shrugs. “I felt like a burden the entire time we lived together, so I was surprised to feel relieved when they left and never came back. I was terrified, but it was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. Whatever happens to me is up to me now.” Anisah sighs dramatically and raises her glass between them. “You know what? Give me another round!”

Lashyn’s smile widens, and they nod enthusiastically, mimicking a humble servant while pouring her second glass of lemonade. “Of course, my liege.”

They lean forward, almost knocking into each other—giggling like children who are supposed to be sleeping on an overnight trip.

She wakes up on a scratchy couch inside the cabin, covered by a lightweight blanket woven with a multitude of earth tones. *It's impressive that they could carry me to bed*, is her first thought, followed by the swiveling of her head around the living room. A familiar pull at the center of her abdomen tugs downwards, panic beginning to swell behind her eyes. Anisah stands up too fast and sees stars, sparking memories of last night. Once balanced, she starts politely knocking, then looking into each room—the taste of fear growing more bitter on her tongue with each door shut. They took their bag with them, leaving nothing behind.

“Lashyn?!” She calls out, making her way towards the front door. There’s no one outside, and she stands there with the door’s mosquito net swinging in and out of the entry. The field looks unrecognizable in the morning light; it feels wrong without it reflecting off her new friend’s blonde hair or Shamset jumping through it like a dolphin piercing the water’s surface. She sits on the top step in a futile attempt to gather her thoughts. *The world hasn’t ended*, Anisah thinks, breathing deeply, *but you can still make your way to Fretsaya alone*.

But it isn’t that simple. As capable as she is, she’s never made it this far on her own. She doesn’t know anything about how culture or technology has advanced or how people will perceive her. More importantly, she had been abandoned *again*. It didn’t hurt as badly when her parents never returned because there was no time to hurt. Anisah is terrified that something is so deeply wrong with her that people leave.

She pushes herself up suddenly, sniffing and wiping the tears streaming down her face with her bare arms. She goes back inside and locks the door behind her, then searches for a clock until her eyes land on a black rectangle on a desk beside a mess of papers: 9 a.m. Then, she packs her fraying backpack and steals a few items from the cabin, sighing in relief at the confirmation that the map Lashyn gave her is still wrapped up in the side pocket of her bag. Prepared to head out, she does one last round of checks to make sure she isn’t missing anything.

Suddenly, the front door’s handle jiggles aggressively. Anisah stops in her tracks—equal parts hope and anxiety flooding her chest. She grips her rod firmly and hides it behind her back, taking slow and careful steps, waiting to hear their voice. Instead of calling her name or pounding on the door, the person on the other side begins picking the lock. Alarm bells sound in her head, and she instinctively steps back before steeling herself and standing stiffly in the corner of the room.

The door whines open, and she exhales shakily before breathing in slowly through her nose, preparing for the worst. She shuts her eyes tightly and raises the rod high above her head—peeking with one eye half-open. The figure walks into the living room and stands there, looking confused at the state of the cabin. Their stature is shorter than Lashyn’s, their shoulders hunched inward, and their head full of short brown hair. This makes her decision easier. With all the force in her arms, Anisah brings the steel rod down onto the crown of their head. They fall backward into her arms, blood trickling down the side of their skull, making their curls dark and slick. She sits in the entryway with the door open, holding this person’s head in her lap for what feels like hours—when she finally checks their pulse, nothing.

She sits up straight and snaps out of the daze, remembering that she’ll miss the last bus if she doesn’t head out now. The stranger’s eyes are already closed, so she gently moves their head onto the hardwood floor and drapes the blanket she’d slept in over their upper body. Anisah puts her arms through the backpack straps and checks the time one last time before leaving for good: 9:35 a.m.

Thankfully, there’s a dirt path leading to the main road at the edge of the field, and she follows it. The sun still hasn’t reached its peak, so the breeze pleasantly moves through the branches, through her bones. Convinced that if she puts the bag down and raises her arms, the wind will pick up against her wingspan and take her—she considers it. Just then, she reaches the bus stop, and realizes it hasn’t arrived yet; she sits inside the enclosed space. Anisah closes her eyes and leans back against the warm glass to wait for her ride to arrive.

Lashyn

The first thing they see when they reach the bus stop, panting, is Anisah’s figure. They rush over, concerned about her well-being but relieved to see her after the scene at the cabin. Not only was she gone, but the door was left open, and they’d almost tripped on an unconscious body in the middle of the living room. There was a blanket over the corpse, which meant that she killed them and fled, but there was no way of telling the state she could be in.

“Anisah?” They say softly, heart fluttering at Shamset’s whimpering nearby. When she doesn’t respond, they reach for her wrist and pull back suddenly at the sticky surface of her skin. “Anisah,” they say louder this time, gently shaking her shoulder.

This causes her to stir, mumbling something unintelligible as Lashyn takes a moment to exhale a sigh of relief. The shadows of her arms move toward her face, and Shamset begins

wagging her tail and panting in anticipation. Anisah giggles at the pleasant sight of her, bending down to pet her sun-warmed fur.

She turns her head to the side and sighs. “Did we miss the bus?”

“No,” they sit beside her, rummaging through their backpack to find wet wipes. “It should be here in a few minutes.”

“Did you find the body?” She spots the package of wipes before their fingers can graze it. She yanks it out, then puts it in Lashyn’s lap.

They nod, pulling a slimy wipe out of the plastic mouth. “Where’s the blood?”

“It starts at my elbows. I think there’s some on my face, but I can get that.”

For a while, the only sounds are the rustling of leaves in the distance. Then, the bus stops a few feet away from them. The driver doesn’t say anything when he exits to insert the charger into the side of the bus. They continue to gently wipe the cracked stickiness off her skin, feeling the guilt burning hot in their cheeks.

“I’m sorry for not being there,” Lashyn whispers, tossing a dirty wipe into their bag to dispose of at home. “I was going to leave a note, but I didn’t think I would be gone for that long.”

Her laughter is empty again when she chuckles. “I thought you abandoned me. Silly, right?” The smell of blood mixing with rubbing alcohol mingles in their nose.

“Not silly,” they shake their head solemnly. “I should’ve thought of that.”

“Why did you take everything with you?”

“You never know what’s out there,” they shrug.

Anisah lets out a loose giggle that turns into a jagged sob, but she doesn’t allow herself to cry. She breathes in and out slowly until her voice steadies again. “Well, I’m glad you’re here now,” she says genuinely. Lashyn feels a hand cover their own—then their fingers intertwining together.

“Me too,” they whisper. “Let’s board the bus now. It’s a long way home.”

“Can I ask you something?” She mumbles in a serious tone. The driver unlatches the thick wire from the charging port, and it snaps back into the machine.

“Of course,” Lashyn mirrors her sincerity.

“Do you...” Anisah giggles. “Could you be my wingman in Fretsaya?”

They roll their eyes and laugh, taken aback by the request. “Only if you point them out to me first.”

Anisah moves the stray blond strands out of their face and tucks them behind their ear. “Of course, I’m not trusting you to choose for me.”

“Because I can’t see?” They raise their eyebrows, pretending to take offense.

She flicks them on the shoulder. “Because you’re not *interested* in people.”

This time, they’re a little insulted. “I’m plenty interested!” Shamset circles them as they walk towards the bus, then falls behind them as they ascend the steps.

“You know what I mean,” she leans over to nudge them with her shoulder. They do know what she means and are even more confused as to how she guessed—always five steps ahead of them. She demands the window seat, saying, “I’ve never been on a bus before!”

Lashyn grins and gestures at her seat with both arms, refreshed by the wonder she meets the world with. Anisah sidles into the aisle and plops onto the fabric cushions comfortably, calling Shamset onto her lap. Somehow, the Great Dane curls her large body across their friend’s thighs and nuzzles her head on top of an armrest.

Anisah

The bus jerks forward and drives down the uneven road, causing them to lean slightly to the left. Adrenaline pumps through her limbs, sparking the nerves traversing from the center of her body. She loops an arm through Lashyn’s, squeezing their elbow tightly against her side—they give her a reassuring smile. They put a hand over hers, then pet Shamset along the full expanse of her fur once before leaning their head back against the headrest. Anisah just watches the scenery change outside the window and doesn’t look away once.

A few hours into the drive, she sees it for the first time in her life—a field full of purple flowers. They sway in the wind, facing her directly—as if greeting her. Then, they both look up at the same time at a clear and piercing blue sky.

Author Bio

Ilyas Merza is a 24-year-old queer Muslim writer and artist from North Jersey exploring themes of relationships, trauma, family, politics, and intersecting identities through the lens of fictional narratives, poetry, and occasionally installations. He seeks to connect with others that exist

within bodies containing multiple identities, and to help people understand that existing with contradicting identities is complicated and nuanced, but possible and fruitful.