

THE GIRL WITH BLUE-GREEN HAIR

A

Short Story

by

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Hart Senate Office Building, Washington, DC

Michael Davenport, chief of staff to Senator Miguel De León, escorted the unusual woman through the atrium of the Hart Senate Office Building. The heels of his Oxfords clicked on the pink marble of the atrium; the woman's black flats made only a soft patter. As they rode in the elevator, he shifted his eyes to glance at her without seeming too obvious. At the ding on the fifth floor, he put his arm to the open door and allowed her to exit first.

Calliope. That was her name. That was it. No surname. An unusual name to match her unprofessional appearance. Her gray skirt and cream blouse were perfectly functional but a bit too low-key for a meeting with a senator. He'd stood up to men and women of far more power in these halls, but, every time, this woman left him feeling uncomfortable for reasons he couldn't explain. She was attractive, to be sure, despite her blue-green hair and matching eye color, which must have been contacts, but she carried herself in an aloof, standoffish manner that gave the impression that she did them a favor by coming to meet with the senator.

"How are you enjoying your stay in DC?" Michael asked.

Calliope didn't even look at him. "I'll be glad to leave."

He couldn't tell if she had an accent or not, but her voice had some ineffable quality, at once hard yet melliferous. He was tempted to continue the attempt at small talk, specifically because of her reluctance to participate. However, he decided he didn't need to upset the senator's guest.

Calliope claimed to be a lobbyist, and her credentials checked out, but how she came by that role, he could only guess. Still, Senator De León had been clear: he was to show her to his office as soon as she arrived.

The pair stopped in front of a thick door made to look like real wood, labeled with a placard that read *Senator De León, TX*. Michael knocked, and the sound echoed down the empty hall. The senator had purposefully set the meeting for a Saturday morning, when no one else would be around.

A gruff voice in a Texan accent came from beyond the door. “Enter.”

Michael opened the door and stepped in, standing aside to allow Calliope to enter. As he was beginning to leave, Senator De León said, “Michael, please join us.”

Again, for reasons he couldn’t explain, Michael experienced a rush of excitement. He normally attended meetings between the senator and lobbyists, but this was his first time he’d been permitted to remain during a meeting with this woman. Despite his value to the senator, it was like he was being allowed to sit at the adult table. That line of thought brought another notion to mind, one that had him less eager to join the meeting: the senator had not wanted a witness during the previous meetings with her, but he wanted one now.

Senator De León had been sitting behind his wide teak desk, a monitor to one side and the rest covered in papers, when they’d entered. Presently, the senator stood to greet the woman and extended his hand. “Ms. Calliope.”

She stepped forward, hesitated a moment, but noticeably, before taking his hand. “Senator.”

Michael caught the malty smell of neat brown liquor on the desk. The senator was partial to his Garrison Brothers.

De León nodded and gestured toward the plush seat on the side of the desk opposite him. “Please, sit.”

Calliope sat, and Michael took the chair beside her. He noticed that she sat stiffly, as if in pain or otherwise uncomfortable.

De León returned to his seat and gestured toward the glass. “Some good Texas bourbon?”

Calliope crinkled her nose and waved her hand. “No.”

The senator cleared his throat. “Ms. Calliope, I’ll get right to it. I’m getting killed in the polls. Unless Davis is hit by some huge scandal or suffers major health issues or I can pull off some miracle, I won’t be the senator from Texas next term.”

Calliope did not answer right away. “Senator, as you well know, and as your colleagues can attest, my firm is in the business of delivering miracles.”

That was more than Michael had ever heard her say at one time.

She continued, “As long as I can depend on your vote against any and all legislation to reduce climate change, you *will* be the senator from Texas.”

Michael shifted in his seat, uncrossed, then recrossed his legs. No one could promise that with such confidence.

De León clasped his hands in front of him on the desk and gave a stiff nod. “You have my word.”

Calliope stood. “Good. I *will* hold you to it, Senator.”

Michael gave a relieved sigh when the unusual woman was gone.

Base Camp of CHAP, Amazon

Aline Souza wiped the sweat from her forehead with a cloth that was already so wet that she might have dipped it into the great Amazon River, whose powerful rapids she could hear not far away, through the thick rain forest. “Ugh!” She waved her hands futilely at the ever-present insects. The little irritants dodged away from her hand, then flew right back to pester her. “I swear the little buggers are getting bigger right before my eyes too.”

Tomás Sully, her electronics expert, gave a perfunctory laugh, his drooping shoulders and the streams of dripping sweat indicating he was too tired to offer anything more. “We should get back to camp. It’ll be dark soon.”

Aline tugged at her auburn ponytail and opened her mouth, ready to argue. Instead, she nodded. “Fine, but we’re coming back out at the crack of dawn to finish taking the readings.”

“Okay, sure,” Tomás answered quickly.

Before leaving, Aline briefly closed her eyes and inhaled the wondrous assortment of flowers, mixed with the smell of wet dirt and leaves, and listened to the staccato patter of dripping water, the fluting calls of beautifully colored birds, and the chirping song of unseen frogs. Despite its hazards, the forest was a paradise.

The two trudged back along the narrow path that their guide had previously cut for them through the thick foliage. The air was like a sticky swamp, and Aline’s safari shirt and trousers were soaked right through from sweat and stuck to her skin. She couldn’t wait to peel them off, and her shoulders and back ached from carrying the backpack full of heavy gear.

But she loved every minute of it. She wouldn’t have been anywhere else in the world. She’d learned about the plight of the Amazon during college and had been fascinated that a single forest could so affect the climate around the world. She’d switched her major from psychology to environmental science and, after graduation, started the non-profit, Concerned Humans for Amazonian Preservation, to do her part to help save this great forest. She envisioned the Amazon like a single entity, an organism in its own right, comprising countless living parts. And the river was like a powerful artery that pumped life throughout that organism.

Their trail took them nearer the river, and Aline’s throat caught at the beauty of the final rays of fiery orange light reflecting off the tumultuous water. As Aline and Tomás stepped into the clearing that served as their base camp, she gasped at the disarray. In the light of their electric lanterns, she saw that two tents had been collapsed, one of their generators smashed, and other pieces of expensive equipment destroyed.

“Aline! Aline!” Marcia shouted as she ran toward her.

The wide-eyed near-panic on Marcia’s face brought Aline up short and had her heart falling into her stomach. She shrugged off her pack and sighed at the release of pressure. “Marcia, what’s wrong?”

“Lucas is missing!” Marcia glanced around as if looking for him.

“What happened?” Aline asked, though the heaviness in her heart and the pit in her stomach made her wonder if she really wanted to know the answer.

Marcia began speaking so quickly and disjointedly that Aline had to stop her. “I can’t understand what you’re saying. Start again, slowly, please.”

Marcia inhaled deeply, closed her eyes. When she opened them, she appeared steadier, more composed. “Lucas and I came back to the camp, and we caught *someone* trashing our equipment. Lucas chased her, and they both fell into the river! It almost looked like she *jumped* in, taking Lucas with her. I looked down river but didn’t see any sign of them.”

Aline was dizzy, her head swimming. None of this made any sense. “What? Who? She?” She didn’t want to think about the obvious: if they’d gone into the river, they were dead.

Marcia shrugged. “She definitely wasn’t one of us. I would have thought she was one of the indigenes, except that she was completely naked, her skin was too light, and her hair was a strange color—bluish or something. We have to find Lucas!” Her composure broke, and her shoulders shuddered as the tears came freely.

Aline embraced her, holding Marcia tightly, and closed her eyes to keep her own tears in. She nearly said, “It’ll be all right,” but stopped herself. Better to say nothing than offer trite, impossible assurances. The forest that had seemed so beautiful, so wondrous, was now dark and ominous. The welcoming, joyous sounds of colorful birds and other wildlife turned menacing and alien. The already oppressive humidity threatened to drown her.

“Aline!”

Tomás’s urgent call startled her. She opened her eyes and broke the embrace.

“Look!” Tomás yelled.

Aline turned to look where Tomás’s trembling finger pointed. She gasped, putting her hand to her mouth, then ran toward the wet, shivering figure who walked toward them from the far end of the camp.

Lucas.

He stumbled as he walked, his eyes vacant and staring, and fell to his knees as she reached him. He looked into her face for several moments without recognition.

“Lucas! Lucas!” Aline’s voice became more urgent.

Finally, he blinked, and life and recognition returned to his eyes. “Aline?”

“Yes, Lucas, it’s me. What happened?” She had to force the words out around the lump in her throat. How was it possible? Marcia must have been mistaken about them going into the river. Though his clothes were soaked, like he’d been submerged.

“I...don’t know,” Lucas said through chattering teeth. “She...it—I saw something that looked like a woman, but I thought there was a tail flapping around too. She pulled me into the river with her when she jumped. I don’t know what happened. I couldn’t see, and I was thrashing around, but a strong hand pulled me along and dropped me on the shore some way down.” He paused, and his eyes went distant again. “When I finished coughing and realized I wasn’t dead, I was looking into these blue eyes—at least, I think they were. The light was bad, and I’m having trouble remembering.” He shook his head. “Anyway, what I do remember was what she said. She made me repeat it.”

Marcia walked up with a towel and wrapped it around Lucas.

“What did she say?” Aline asked, leaning forward, encouraging him to continue.

Lucas coughed for several moments. Once he was able to speak, he said, in a voice that was hardly louder than a whisper, “She said that she saved me only to give you a message. She said we are to stop all the work we’re doing here and to leave. If we come back, it won’t just be the equipment that gets destroyed.”

Aline stood straight, lips pursed and eyes hard. She did not take well to threats, and if this person thought she could frighten her into abandoning her work, she had another thing coming.

“What are you going to do?” Tomás asked.

Alina’s voice was steady and as hard as her eyes when she answered, “We’re going to get Lucas checked out, raise funds for new equipment, and be right back here.”

Headquarters of American Gas and Petroleum, San Diego, CA

The annual report for AGP's growing Renewables Division was sterling. With some strategic acquisitions, the division would show a profit within the next quarter, and Sa'id Kamal would get the recognition, and the bonus, he deserved.

Sa'id dressed in his newest, bespoke suit of dark gray Italian silk, his tie of blue and white diagonal stripes perfectly dimpled. The executive elevator dinged on the sixtieth floor for the office of Marcus Zhang, CEO of American Gas and Petroleum. Sa'id adjusted his tie as he exited the elevator, his head buzzing in eager anticipation of the performance review of the Renewables Division. Still, it wasn't where he wanted to be, and he hoped to leverage his success into better things.

A smiling face behind a computer screen greeted him. "Hello, Mr. Kamal," Donna said. She had been Marcus's executive assistant for no less than two decades. "Mr. Zhang is finishing up another meeting. He'll be with you shortly."

Sa'id nodded. "Thank you."

"Please, have a seat. Would you like some water while you wait?"

"No, that's fine, thank you." He began turning away but stopped. "I heard about Mr. Zhang's niece. Is she okay?"

Donna smiled widely. "I hear she is recovering well."

"I'm happy to hear it," Sa'id said, giving his best impression of an empathetic smile.

He sat in a wide, comfortable club chair of brown leather that faced the door of Marcus's office. The leather still gave off its distinctive woodsy scent and felt cool beneath his palms. He tried not to be obvious as he checked the time on the Piaget on his wrist.

The flatscreen on the wall was turned to the World Business Times Network. Ted Davis, candidate for US Senate from Texas, had drowned in his pool, and talking heads were discussing what his death meant for pending legislation to limit fossil fuel drilling. Apparently, it was going around. Marcus's niece had almost drowned swimming near his yacht. Sa'id made a mental note to offer his relief at the girl's recovery.

The news ticker at the bottom of the screen mentioned the claim by some do-gooders that they were attacked while meddling in the Amazon. Sa'id scoffed and shook his head.

Finally, the door to Marcus's office opened, and Sa'id stood. He had to force his mouth closed when he saw who exited the room.

The woman walked—back straight, chin raised—with the confidence of someone of some importance, though she appeared as if she could have been Marcus's daughter or, rather, granddaughter. Her hair was a bluish-green, with eyes to match, and her complexion had a blue-gray undertone; however, rather than making her look sickly, she seemed to shimmer in the light streaming through the window. She wore a sleeveless shirt that showed impressive definition around her shoulders, biceps, and triceps, and the legs emerging from her gray skirt showed muscular calves and quadriceps, like of a swimmer or footballer. The aspect that shattered the impression of her comportment was the subtle discomfort she showed in absent-mindedly tugging at the collar of her top and the quite unbusinesslike flats she wore.

Sa'id gave a mental shrug. If she wasn't Marcus's relative, he wouldn't begrudge him a mistress or two. It was a time-honored tradition, after all. With her unusual appearance, she wasn't someone he'd take home, as they say, but he wouldn't mind some fun with her.

The woman walked toward him as she headed for the elevator, and Sa'id felt his heart rate increase. She stopped in front of him. Though her body faced away, she turned her head and

spoke. “Tell me, what do *you* think about the Renewables Division?” Her voice had a flowing quality—soft, fluid, yet with a power behind it, like how water will smooth stone.

Did she know he was the head of the division? Who was she that she even asked the question? Sa’id took a moment before he could find his voice. “I—it’s...” Why did he even bother answering? Yet he couldn’t stop himself. “It’s a growing division,” he hedged.

She arched an eyebrow that indicated annoyance at his demurring answer. “Is it where we should be focusing our attention?”

We. Our. Who *was* she? A spy for Marcus? Sa’id didn’t understand, and he looked over to Marcus, who observed the two with a look of discomfort.

Sa’id turned back toward the woman and lowered his tone. “Not at this time.”

The woman nodded and walked away without another word.

Marcus raised his hand and gestured Sa’id over.

“Who—who was that?” Sa’id asked.

“Oh, ah, a shareholder,” Marcus said, shifting from foot to foot.

“A shareholder?” Sa’id’s tone was incredulous.

“Mhm. What did she want?”

If Marcus had overheard his answer, Sa’id expected to hear anger in Marcus’s voice, but, instead, he found concern.

“Oh...um...she just wished me luck with the Renewables Division.”

Marcus narrowed his eyes. “She did?” Now his tone expressed incredulity.

Sa’id felt the heat around his collar and resisted the urge to tug at his tie knot. His mouth was dry, and he desperately wanted to change the topic of conversation.

“Sa’id, I’m sorry. I’m going to have to reschedule our meeting.”

“I—but...” Sa’id’s stomach dropped.

“Donna will reschedule you.” Marcus turned back to his office and closed the door behind him.

He hadn’t even been able to mention his relief at the recovery of Marcus’s niece.

Home of Sa’id Kamal, La Jolla, CA

Sa’id dove into his pool, reveling in the cool embrace that offered some relief from the unseasonably sweltering heat of early November. The water splashed his daughter who reclined on a sunlounger.

“Dad!” Farah yelled as she got up to dry off the cell phone that was glued to her palm.

Sa’id laughed and watched her stomp off, flip flops smacking against her soles. His heart leaped as he felt something tug at his ankle. He looked down and just had time to register a webbed hand and a blue-gray arm before he was pulled *through* the bottom of the pool.

A light flashed, temporarily blinding him, and he coughed up the water he’d swallowed in his surprise. When the coughing subsided and he could again see, he found himself standing on a narrow ledge of rock, within a bubble surrounded by water. He looked up and saw his daughter looking into the pool, and he could hear her frantically shouting, “Dad! Dad!”

“I’m here, sweetie! I’m here!” Sa’id shouted, but Farah showed no reaction to his voice.

“They can’t hear you or see you, but you can see and hear them.”

Sa’id started at the voice. He turned to see Marcus sitting on the far end of the ledge, about ten meters away, feet dangling over the edge. He wore a suit drenched as if he’d been swimming in it.

“What the hell is happening?” Sa’id shouted. In his agitated state, he gave no thought as to how he spoke to his boss.

Was he unconscious? He must have slipped and hit his head. That was it. He reached out and touched the water, his hand sliding into the encircling wetness, then withdrew it.

Marcus didn’t answer, only shaking then bowing his head.

“I can answer that.” The smooth, watery voice sounded familiar, and an aquamarine head rose from beneath the curve of the watery envelope.

Sa’id immediately recognized the face as belonging to the woman from Marcus’s office, only now, like a mad dream, she wore no clothes and, instead of legs, had a fish’s tail covered in scales that matched her hair.

Rising up behind her were a score of similar beings. Mermaids? That was the best name Sa’id could ascribe to them.

“It seems that Mr. Zhang is having second thoughts about our arrangement,” the fish-woman continued.

Sa’id’s mind had gone numb, and all he could manage to say was, “Arrangement?”

“Of course,” she said. “The incident with his niece was meant as a warning, but he chose to ignore it. And he foolishly believed we couldn’t get to him if he closed his pool. The planet is seventy-one percent water. We can always get to you.” Her laugh sounded like water splashing into water.

Sa’id shook his head to clear his thoughts and to indicate his lack of understanding.

“What?” He didn’t try to hide the exasperation in his voice.

“We are the power behind American Gas and Petroleum. Behind every major fossil fuel company, and most of the smaller ones,” she said.

Was it possible to force himself to wake up from a nightmare? “Okay. I’ll play along. Why? Do you even use money?”

The mermaid chuckled. “It’s not about money. They serve our purpose: the melting of all polar ice and the flooding of the world. When the earth is turned into a water world, we can again take our rightful place as its masters.”

“You *want* to flood the planet?” Externalities in the pursuit of profit Sa’id understood. But destruction for its own sake?

“I tried to protect you.” Marcus’s voice was soft, tired. “I knew you didn’t want to head the Renewables Division, but I thought I could keep you from falling under *their* thumb.”

Sa’id’s eyes widened. “You knew?”

Marcus loosed a mirthless chuckle. “You’re not exactly subtle. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I have children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews, and they all have to live here. Maybe my money could insulate them, but could it protect them from the masses who would overrun them when there was nowhere else to go? It’s a path of self-destruction.”

“So, I make you an offer,” the mermaid said to Sa’id. “How would you like to be the CEO of American Gas and Petroleum?”

Sa’id glanced at Marcus and saw pleading in his eyes. This man, who had once been so sure, so commanding, was now meek and defeated and pathetic.

“You don’t understand their reach.” Desperation found its way into Marcus’s voice. “Efforts to end overfishing and pollution of the ocean and waterw—”

Another mermaid swam up to him and, like a striking eel, grabbed his ankle and pulled him into the water. His scream turned into a choking gurgle.

Sa’id inhaled sharply and shook, but not from cold.

“All you have to do is close the Renewables Division,” she added. “Think of your family. Your wife and daughter.” Her tone held all the more menace for its calm delivery.

He tilted his head up and saw, now, his daughter and wife standing at the edge of the pool and pointing, their voices high, words tripping over one another. He returned his gaze to the mermaid. She had asked a question, but he had the sense that she wasn't *asking*. How would she react if he refused? Did he even want to refuse?

He met the striking blue-gray eyes. This was the opportunity he'd been waiting for, after all. “I accept.”

The End