

The Axe on the Wall

Miriam Robern

I come to you in the evening, after all the threats in the house have gathered in the parlour. Supper sits heavy in their bellies, supplemented now with whisky. The dishes are all set into rows in the autowash. What remains of the meal is boxed up in containers; you helped stack them in the icebox.

I find you in your bedroom, reading as always. The decor and detritus of a child's room is all around you, splayed across the walls and tumbling out of drawers and boxes. It is all faded, now. How can you live in this room and not know your situation, I think, and then remind myself that perhaps you do. Of all my children, you have always been the most impenetrable.

I haunt your door, half-hesitant and half-voyeur, until you look up from the bed and smile. "Prize-parent," you greet me happily enough, and put a thumb in your place in the book. "Do you have need of me?"

I step into your room and settle onto the bed beside you. You try to hide it, but I see the little frown that crosses your face; I see how your thumb in the book wobbles uncertainly. I nearly apologize for the interruption: I don't think you will be getting back to your reading soon. "I hoped to talk with you."

You peer into my face for a long moment, then sit up and find a proper bookmark and set your reading aside. "What is it, Prize-parent?"

I reach out to pet your hair. How to begin this conversation that isn't supposed to happen? This conversation that I can't imagine is rare, that must happen furtively for so many children. Not all, of course, probably not even most. Not for any of my older children, but certainly for you. You, whose mind is locked away behind that blank face you turn onto the world. You, whose heart beats so slowly and quietly that I have never known what it wants.

"We had guests tonight," I say, deciding against circumlocution. "Six threats. Friends of your threat-parent."

You nod, as all this is obvious. "Did they visit to discuss business with Abba?"

"After a fashion," I nod, and then elaborate, gently: "They are discussing you."

"What about me?" you ask, face so neutral that you must be playing stupid. You cannot be this innocent.

"You are grown, child," I tell you with no small trace of frustration. "You know how these things work. Abba is deciding to which threat you should be awarded."

For once, you look so stricken I cannot imagine it is a fabrication. My heart melts a little and I assure you: "Or if you are to be awarded to any of them at all. If I know your threat-parent, the decision will not be made tonight."

Your shoulders drift down and the knot of tension at the top of your nose disappears. Have I overcompensated? Are you too comforted, now? I warn you: “But the process has started. And it is all long overdue, my child.”

You are quiet for a long time, during which I pet your hair and wait. The prospect of leaving home is daunting, I know, and I don’t want to rush you. (Which isn’t true: I do want to rush you, but I know that rushing you will do no good.)

I happen to glance over your head and see, hanging on the wall just outside your bedroom door, the axe. We are progressive parents, after all, and we try to make it clear that we support you in your decisions. But I’m not sure you’ve ever even touched that axe, or even realize that we set it out for you.

It becomes clear that you aren’t going to say anything, so I do. “This isn’t the first time that we have paraded threats through our house for you. We’ve had dozens over for supper, or for games, or parties. But you haven’t shown any interest in any of them. Or at least you haven’t made mention to me or Abba.”

“My interest isn’t relevant,” you say with a diffident shrug. “Isn’t it for my threat-parent to decide to whom I am awarded?”

Now I know you are being difficult. “Your threat-parent loves you very much, and wants you to be happy. Abba would like nothing more than to award you to the threat you want to spend your life with. And I would like to see that happen, too. We just want you to be happy.”

You look away, and when I catch another look of your face you’ve made it blank and neutral again. “Is there someone you’re fond of,” I cajole gently, “that you thought you couldn’t

tell us about?” You shake your head, too quickly. “What about Darai? The two of you were always so close.”

Your whole body stills, and I see that I have struck a nerve. I wait for you to unspool and speak. “When we were younger, we used to dream about it. Sometimes we would say that Darai would become a threat and claim me as prize. Other times I would be the threat and claim Darai. But that’s not going to happen, now. Childish dreams.”

But I misunderstand, and I grasp desperately at straws. “Because Darai has been awarded to that threat from up North? You know that isn’t insurmountable.” My words are rushing too fast, now, and I’m not thinking through everything I say. “If you made yourself a threat, you could go win Darai—”

You bunch yourself up around a pillow, putting your shoulder up between me and your face. “They’re happy together. I wouldn’t want to ruin everything. And Wawa, it’s... it’s old news, now. They’ve been together for a year. I don’t even think I’d want to be with Darai. As threat or prize. I’m not mooning over a lost love, it was only ever a childhood fantasy. Just... drop it, please.”

I fold my hands in my lap and stare at them for some time. I look back up at the axe on the wall. “But you have... my dear, you have thought of yourself as a threat before? You’ve considered that possible future?”

“Abba used to ask me what I would do, how I would go about it,” you tell me, one eye peeking out under your hair and over your shoulder, watching me. “The hints dropped about that axe over there were... not subtle.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Your threat-parent is as subtle as a bull.”

You uncoil a little and look out the door at the axe. “I found it comforting, you know. It being there. Knowing that if I chose to... steal a weapon and flee my parent’s house like in all the stories, well... that one’s right there, and you and Abba wouldn’t be sad to see it go.”

I lay a gentle hand on your shoulder. “We’d be happy to see it go, and proud of you.”

But your eyes are locked on the wall display. “When you see it still hanging there every morning, does it disappoint you?”

“Darling, no!” I gasp. “Not at all. We are just as happy to have you as a prize of this household.”

“I’m not much of a prize,” you say miserably into your knees.

“You enrich this household,” I insist, automatically. Too quickly. I hug you close and change tack. “The threats arrayed before Abba downstairs are very impressive. Every one of them boasts a great house, full coffers, and laudable deeds. There are officers of high rank and merchants of great wealth down there. And they are all here for you.”

You look at me uncertainly, searching my face for something. “I know that’s supposed to make me feel better, Wawa, but...” You shake your head, and suddenly there are tears in your eyes. “Is my value nothing more than the threats that line up to tear me away from my threat-parent?”

“No one is tearing you away from anywhere,” I tell you, laying down assurances in the wrong place. “Your threat-parent is formidable enough to stand against all of them, and you are old enough to know that it never comes to violence.”

“I am old enough to know that it does sometimes come to violence,” you growl,

angry at me for saying the wrong thing. “It comes to violence more often than you like to think.”

I lay hands on your knees. “Not if the threats are as wise as your Abba. There are a hundred ways to see what threat is posed and how to distract them. There are gifts and flattery and partnerships and—” But you are not really listening. “What is it, my dear?”

“I know that a threat trades on the havoc they could wreak if they are tested, and not the damage they actually cause,” you hiss at me. “I’m not a child.” Suddenly you stand, pacing away from your bed and across the room. “I know how all of this works, Prize-parent.”

I count to ten before responding. I do not stand up from your bed. “I’m glad to hear it, child.” I keep my voice level but stern. “Your threat-parent and I were concerned that you did not. You have not taken that axe off the wall and become a threat, but you also have not made yourself an eager prize to be won. You have squirrelled yourself away up here and left your parents in the dark how we can best support you.”

“Do you want to support me,” you spit at me from across the room, “or get rid of me?”

I nearly answer immediately, stop, and allow myself a rueful sigh. “My darling, I would keep you here forever, reading your books and writing your adventures, if I could. But I can’t. Nor can your threat-parent. You are our youngest child, and we are old. You will outlive us, and if we did nothing to ensure that you had a place in this world, what kind of parents would we be?”

“But it is an impossible decision!” you cry out, neatly avoiding any discussion of your parents’ mortality. But by the tension in your voice, I think we have finally arrived at the

crux of the problem. “How can I choose either of these nightmares?”

I lift an eyebrow. “Is my life a nightmare? Is Abba’s life a nightmare?”

“It is a nightmare to be a prize,” you insist. “I’ve been a prize all my life, a child-prize of this household, a glittering jewel on Abba’s ring.”

Finally, I think, and let it all come pouring out of you.

“And how different would it be to be someone else’s prize?” You ask rhetorically and then shrug theatrically. “I would own nothing, decide nothing, choose nothing. I would accept whatever I was given with a smile and a curtsy and a thank you, because if you do not show appreciation for whatever bullshit they’re handing you today, you’re certainly not getting anything tomorrow. I would tuck and cram my life in around the expectations of my live-in threat. Sneak a few pages only when I’m not needed for laundry, for childrearing, for cooking, for sitting at my threat’s knee, smiling at whatever nonsense comes tumbling out of the mouth that presses against my skin whether I really want it or not.”

“And I know there are laws,” you say, throwing out a hand to stifle this exact objection from my lips. “That in the bad old days it was so much worse but now even prizes have rights, and threats can be loving and all that. The world isn’t so black and white, but these roles still exist, Wawa, and choosing one of them is to choose which spectre will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

I open my mouth, shut it, let you go on.

“Because I could also take that axe.” Your voice rises as you thrust a finger at the weapon accusingly. “Leave this house. Become a threat. And in so doing, I cut myself out of

this household. Freedom at the paltry cost of throwing away the possibility of ever being cared for, nurtured, coddled sometimes. Because it’s human, Wawa, to want coddling sometimes. Instead I would count my worth only in the prizes that I win, and never in myself. I would never know if my prized spouses give me affection because they actually like me or if they just want me to believe they do.”

You falter, gesticulating your hand down the hallway, and after a beat I realize you are waving at your threat-parent, downstairs with the other threats. “It must be so lonely. To never have friends, only rivals and prizes. Sometimes I talk with Abba, you know, on long walks around the fields and I always think that... that Abba seems so lonely.”

All your ire seems to have spilled out of you, like a split bag of grain. You look me in the eye and say, “So you see, being a threat is a nightmare, too.”

And what can I say to that? Because everything that you have said is true, if exaggerated to nightmarish proportions. I have known many people in my life. Many of my fellow prizes have lived that nightmare of irrelevance. Many of the threats I have known have been that disastrously, heartrendingly lonely. What can I tell you: perhaps you will be one of the lucky ones, for whom the rules are not drawn so tight that they strangle you?

“It’s all so monstrous,” you say, deflated, collapsing in a heap beside me on your bed. “You ask me to choose to be either a prize that cannot take or a threat that cannot receive.”

I realize now that the problem is not that you do not understand the choice, but that you understand it too well. I find myself wishing that you had made your decision when you were more ignorant of its consequences. But that is ludicrous, and selfish.

I take your hand.

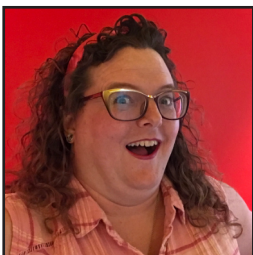
“You are right,” I say without looking to you. “It is a monstrous thing, this choice. But it is not one that I can relieve you of. I would say that I am only a prize, after all, but your threat-parent cannot take this choice from your shoulders, either.”

You set your head on my shoulder. “I know. That might be the worst thing about it.”

We sit in silence for some time, and then you say you are tired and should get some sleep. I fuss around the edges of your bed as you climb in, and I kiss your forehead. Who knows how

many more nights I will enjoy that luxury, after all. I turn out your light on the way out.

In the hallway I am confronted by the axe on the wall, hanging opposite your open door. One morning soon I will find it missing from its place. Perhaps you will claim it. Perhaps you will wait until someone claims you, and then Abba will take it down off the wall. I will mourn its absence. I will cry for days, to be honest. I will pound the empty wall and wail for my last child, gone from my home. But I will take some comfort, at least, in the knowledge that you have made the first decision of your adult life.



Hi, my name is Miriam Robern. I'm a white, queer, transgender creator of books and games and things. This short story was released through my Patreon at <http://patreon.com/miriamrobern>.

I make a bunch of stuff there: short stories like these, browser video games, even the odd tabletop game. All of it tends towards *queer* in every sense of the word. If you enjoyed this story and would like to see more, please consider becoming a patron so I can keep making stuff like this.

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