

## Goldhawk

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Dinara Akhmatova survived the purges. First the company laid off the lazy and the incompetent. Dinara, with a row of programming manuals and her cut-glass award for ten years of service the only ornaments in her cubicle, was not even looked at by management. Or rather, their eyes passed over her while the fingertips of one hand flew across the keyboard and the other cradled the newest prototype. When the company still hemorrhaged money, they began cutting entire projects. The aspirational ventures, the innovations that had made their name. Dinara, slight of body and flexible of mind, refocused all her attention onto product development. Once the mandarin<sup>1</sup> class of employees had been cut loose, the company went through each remaining team and discarded one in three. She came in early and stayed later than anyone. She survived.

Her colleagues did not like her for it.

"It's because she's a woman," Sergei muttered. "It looks good for the diversity profile."

"She's gotta be... old," Leroy said. He worked a few cubicles down from her. He was not sure how old Dinara was, but surely the young needed jobs more than someone his mother's age. He and his team had student loans to repay, mortgages, children to raise.

Dinara had... well, beyond the silver Toyota Camry she drove to work, he was not sure what she had.

"It's because she's a...," a student intern began. He was just beginning to learn the habits of the company and wanted badly to contribute his first gossip "around the water cooler," a phenomenon described in the books on business culture he had pored over. Instead of finishing, he rolled his eyes. He could not find the words. But the others nodded, because what Dinara was precisely was hard to tell.

She was, indeed, a woman. That was easy. In a company of computer programmers and product testers who wore scrubby polo shirts and khakis to work, Dinara wore long gauzy skirts and soft, pastel cardigans that emphasized her birdlike figure. She wore dangling silver earrings below her short dark hair. She was soft-spoken and her voice was high. The single time she had been known to make a joke was at a meeting where a new employee named Nureyev<sup>2</sup> was introduced. "Will you develop superior techniques so beautifully and then defect?" she asked; her impish smile narrowly survived the awkward silence. She then added, "You share your name with a kaketa... wondrous man of dance." The men had laughed for her benefit; even though they resented her, they could not bear to see her softness damaged in public.

How old was she? It was difficult to guess. Her hair was as black as her eyes. If someone looked closely – which no one bothered to do – they might have seen fine lines around her eyes, across her forehead, connecting the corners of her nostrils to the tips of her smiling lips. Where she was from was equally difficult to tell. She spoke quietly, quickly, and not long enough for the others to catch her accent. Her name looked a little Russian, with its -ova another testament to her femininity, but she looked not at all Russian, with her olive skin and low broad cheekbones. Nor did she possess any motherly rapport with the gang of young Russian product testers. Indeed, she seemed to avoid them, to cling to the shadows and corners when they walked by bragging loudly and unselfconsciously about their computers, their cars.

Had anyone asked Dinara what she was, she would have said, "Oh, darling, I am so tired."

Or perhaps she would remain silent, because admitting to fatigue might insinuate her inability to make the quota. She had chosen this country; this was the end point of her third and final migration. She was determined to prove that the evaporation of her savings in immigration fees and the melting away of her untranslatable credentials, as she passed through the atmosphere of another language and culture, had been worthwhile.

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<sup>1</sup> a powerful official of high rank

<sup>2</sup> name of a Russian ballet dancer (1938-1993)

45 She had, once upon a time, studied the stars at a national institute. She loved the sky. But penetrating the unknown of the universe was small compensation. Each of her choices was monitored, analyzed, cataloged, and stripped of mystery. Now, having escaped, she took pleasure in knowing that her work contributed to protecting privacy, a privilege she had grown up without. Now she protected the privacy of unknown others even as she protected her own.

50 There were other benefits to her work. The building was beige and putty colored inside, but every morning when Dinara drove to the office she watched the sun stain the broad sky as it rose. As the light built in intensity from purplish blue to green, pink, orange, gold, she would see the silhouettes of the trees emerge from the uniform darkness. Where she had grown up, there was only village and wilderness, city and wilderness, crop field and wilderness. The wilderness was where the land was too tough for cultivation, where people threw their empty bottles and cigarette butts. The government had sternly encouraged reproduction, so there was only occasionally a distended condom, translucent and miraculous.

55 In this country, she had a sense that even the pines and the sumac<sup>3</sup> and the tall grass along the corridor of the highway were imbued with love. It was with wonder that one morning in early spring she spotted a group of orange-outfitted men picking up trash from the median. She thought of calling her mother and telling her, but her mother, a kerchiefed<sup>4</sup> lady rooted to her particular patch of land and no other, would have simply shaken her head at the insanity of the West.

60 And truly, Dinara thought as she waited for her code to run, in comparison to her mother's years loading and unloading bread from trucks, selling bread and eating it, there was something insane about a room of people who spent their days staring at small boxes. About people who spent their days in silence punctuated by the tap of plastic keys.

"Hawk!" someone cried.

65 "Whoa! Hawk!" Another took up the cry. Around her, the men were leaping from their chairs and running.

70 Dinara paused at her typing, her heart beating hard. Was this some sort of North American engineering term? She looked up at her row of programming language manuals. No, she wouldn't find the answer in her reference guides. She stood up and began walking toward the windows, where a crowd was forming. Hawk, she was sure, was some slang a boy genius had invented to keep some people from understanding. She hugged her elbows and moved slowly, to give herself time to think, to plan.

But her pace quickened as she saw that the others were not in a circle, facing inward, but in a cluster facing the cruelly bright sky.

75 "Hawk," Samy said quietly, he whom Dinara often overheard unabashedly discussing the pliancy of women's bodies over the phone in pungent Hebrew. Perhaps he thought no one understood him. Perhaps he didn't care. Now, Samy's face was almost reverent. He pointed.

Dinara quickly put on her glasses, her secret vanity conceding to her desire for knowledge. And she saw.

80 There, on the Norway pine, ten feet from the wall of the building, perched a great golden bird. "Hawk," Dinara breathed.

Someone – Mo, the babyish university intern – tapped the glass. The bird's head turned instantly, locating the source of the sound. And then it swooped down at the winter-pale faces. A hushed gasp rose and a few at the front of the crowd stumbled backward, dreading the sharp smack of flesh against glass, of bones breaking. Dinara stepped forward to see better.

85 In the last moment, the bird swerved away to the right. It soared high, wheeled in a circle, and dove again. This time, it pulled itself directly upward. Gold plumes flashed as it rose, wings churning as it turned.

"That thing is going to smash itself into the window," Samy said, stepping away.

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<sup>3</sup> shrubs and small trees of the cashew family

<sup>4</sup> with a scarf

“She will not,” Dinara said. “She is... too smart.”

90 Sergei shrugged, turned. “You see it, sometimes, in the parking lot. The birds break their necks against the glass. It’ll happen either now or later.”

The others watched in silence as the raptor ducked to the left and continued to circle, flexing its talons. Rise and fall, rise and fall, rise and fall.

Reginald Tau reminded them of the client meeting. “Sixteen hours, people,” he said.

95 They peeled away from the window, returned to the fluorescent depths of the building. Dinara was the last to retreat. For the rest of the afternoon, she could see people surreptitiously tipping their chairs back to check whether the bird was still there.

But the hawk seemed to have lost interest and vanished.

100 The hands on the wall clock ticked past five o’clock, then six o’clock in the evening. The creature had not reappeared.

“Is it a goldhawk?” she asked Leroy as the rest started to trickle homeward. She noticed he had a *Wikipedia* page on raptors nestled discreetly beside his work email. Dinara didn’t know many animal names, but Goldhawk was the name of a street in her neighborhood.

105 “No such thing,” he said, pulling up the page. He looked smug, because he had figured something out before her. “What we saw was a red-tailed hawk. They’re actually not supposed to be this far south and west.”

“That is not what we saw,” she said softly. “Our hawk was gold.”

Leroy moved his jaw slightly left, slightly right, not enjoying her resistance.

“Sorry, Dinara. There’s no such thing.”

110 She put on her glasses again and leaned close into the screen to look. Then she straightened.

“Hmm,” she said, a noncommittal noise to satisfy his pride. She began packing up her laptop.

Each morning, Dinara parked her car (a car – what a luxury it had once seemed, now what a necessity it had become) and stared up at the pine trees that ringed the asphalt lot, watched as they stood rigid in the still air or swayed with the wind.

115 Each evening, her walk from the doors of the building to her distant corner of the parking lot was consolation for the hours in stale air reeking with male sweat and anxiety. That night, like every night, in the space between the hiss of the automated exit and the gentle slam of her car door, she prayed for one more day, one more week, one more year, until her children finished university and could support themselves, until she did not carry the burden of their three souls upon her back.

120 In the twilight, she saw the glint of feathers, heard the rustle of a disturbed branch. She looked up and saw a round unblinking eye watching her. She stood still, feeling her fingertips grow cold in the night air. It was gold, she thought triumphantly, not at all like the picture Leroy had shown her. Not that she would tell him – she would let him be satisfied in his ignorance.

125 The hawk tilted its head once, as if to concede to Dinara a lack of danger. Its head ducked down and she heard the rip of tendon and muscle. It must have found a squirrel. As the hawk pulled at its meal, the branch trembled. Dinara thought she could just see the clustered branches of a nest.

She would not tell the men she had seen the hawk’s secret place.

(2017)