

Pi



by Anhedral

"So now, Mr. Patel – "

"Oh, please." The young man raises a bone-china teacup to his full, cracked lips, takes a sip. Black curly hair, kindly eyes, dark complexion of the Indian subcontinent; he looks far older than his twenty-one short years. "Just call me Pi. Everybody does."

"Well alright then, Mr... Pi. Just let me get this straight. At the age of age sixteen you found yourself the sole human survivor of the freighter *Tsimtsum*, adrift in a twenty-foot open lifeboat in the middle of the Indian Ocean. With you in said boat were the only animals from your parents' menagerie that had managed to swim away from the sinking ship."

The Ministry official shifts uncomfortably in his chair, consults his notebook.

"To wit: a Grant's zebra with a leg injury, an orang-utan, a spotted hyena, and – and *a fully-adult Bengal tiger*."

Pi nods calmly. "Yes, that's right. The tiger was a male. Big chap."

Ministry-man coughs delicately, and reads from his scribbles again.

"The hyena promptly killed and consumed the zebra and then, the next day, the orang-utan. After that the tiger killed and ate the hyena, leaving just yourself and the feline predator alive. You maintain that you spent a total of two hundred and twenty-seven days with the tiger in that boat, catching enough fish to sustain you both, setting up a solar still for fresh water."

He glances up at Pi, his eyes hardening.

"You... *trained* the tiger. Trained it to respect you. Through a combination of... um..."

He glances down once more, as if not quite believing his own writing.

"...of positive reinforcement and aversion techniques."

"I commend you on your shorthand. Your record is quite accurate, in almost all particulars."

"Umm... *almost* all?"

"Yes. The tiger and I were on the boat for two hundred and twenty-five days. We spent the other two on an island infested with meercats, and with carnivorous plantlife that nearly ate both of us alive."

Ministry-man squints at Pi, wondering if he's being made fun of. However, Pi's expression has remained unchanged from the start of their meeting – gentle, good-natured, no edge to it at all. For a moment, the only sounds are the calls of chickadees and boisterous bluejays filtering into Pi's modest kitchen through windows opened wide to the summer heat. For five years now, this aging cabin set in the remote backwoods of Quebec has proved sufficient for the young émigré's basic needs.

"Mr. Pi, I mean no disrespect, but please try to understand this from my perspective for a moment. I am an senior investigator with the Japanese Ministry of Transport. I say this not to brag, but to emphasise the seriousness with which my government is treating this fresh inquiry. A vessel flying my nation's flag went down with considerable loss of life. Now, I do not doubt that you are relating the full details of events to the best of your recollection, but – "

"Heatstroke," says Pi. "That's what you want to write in your report, isn't it? Heatstroke, and starvation. Clearly, I must have been delirious."

The official only stares back at him unblinking, pen poised in mid-air. Pi smiles, and refreshes his cup.

"I sympathise, good sir, really I do. Can we at least agree that I did indeed survive on that lifeboat for over two hundred days, before washing up at last in Mexico?"

The official lets out a sigh. He's on firm ground again at last.

"Yes. The date of the *Tsimtsum*'s last radio transmission, the timing of your eventual landing, your physical condition when found; you possess a remarkable knack of survival, young man."

"Well... perhaps. Just somewhat. But as I understand it, the rest of my story exceeds the bounds of credibility. This being the case, may I offer an alternative?"

The pen and notebook are set down, and two empty palms open in Pi's direction: an invitation.

"Very well. In this version of events, the hyena ate the zebra and the orang-utan, and the tiger ate the hyena, just as before. The tiger then licked the blood and gore from off his fur – for all cats are fastidious creatures, you see – turned to me quite calmly, and said he thought we were probably in for an extended voyage."

The man from the ministry could only gawp and stare.

"The tiger opined that he could see things going in one of two ways. On the one hand, he could simply decapitate me with a single bite, then dine on my remains. However, since I had but little flesh upon my bones, this option would only prolong his own life for a limited period. Alternatively, we could try to get along, and perhaps he himself might acquire a taste for fish – if I could figure out how to catch some."

It soon becomes apparent that his interviewer was not going to offer any response to that.

"I think we have already established," Pi goes on, "that my testimony is of only limited utility when it comes to informing the loss of the *Tsimtsum*. As I have related, I awoke below decks, alarm bells ringing, in the middle of the night. A violent storm was raging; the vessel was plunging, rolling wildly. I ran; on a companionway, seawater started crashing down in waves in upon me. By the time I got on deck the aft cabins were already underwater."

A moment's pause, and then, continuing:

"The *Tsimtsum* fell victim to a cyclone, but for further details as to how the tragedy came to occur I'm afraid there's nothing more I can provide." He smiles. "As for what came thereafter – well, you may believe and write up what you will."

Pi sets down his teacup, precise and delicate.

"But let me ask you this. Of the two stories, which do you prefer?"

"You do know that he's just going to write it up as heatstroke."

Pi sighs out a breath. "Oh, I know. But when I asked him to choose between the stories, he did at least try to be polite."

"Hah!" The tiger's laugh is deep and primal, but Pi learned long ago not to fear it. "Well go on then, tell me! Which one *did* he prefer?"

They're lounging on the porch together as the sun sags from the sky and the mosquitoes start their nightly buzz and whine. Pi leans back against his friend – all four hundred pounds of him – and chuckles.

"Oh, the one in which I trained you with 'positive reinforcement and aversion techniques', of course. My father taught me all about that stuff as a child; he was an excellent zoologist."

The tiger purrs and nudges at him before turning his burning gaze back to the Quebec wilds. His breath is thickly meaty-rich; he's only recently gorged himself on a moose, and now he's getting drowsy. His eyes lid shut. "You are a clever human."

Pi reaches out to run a finger along one of the black traces on the silky orange pelt. "And you're a sweet, sweet kitty who learnt to like the fishies. Oh, but that reminds me!"

The tiger rumbles, great golden eyes blinking slowly open.

"I always meant to ask you: what *do* hyenas taste like?"