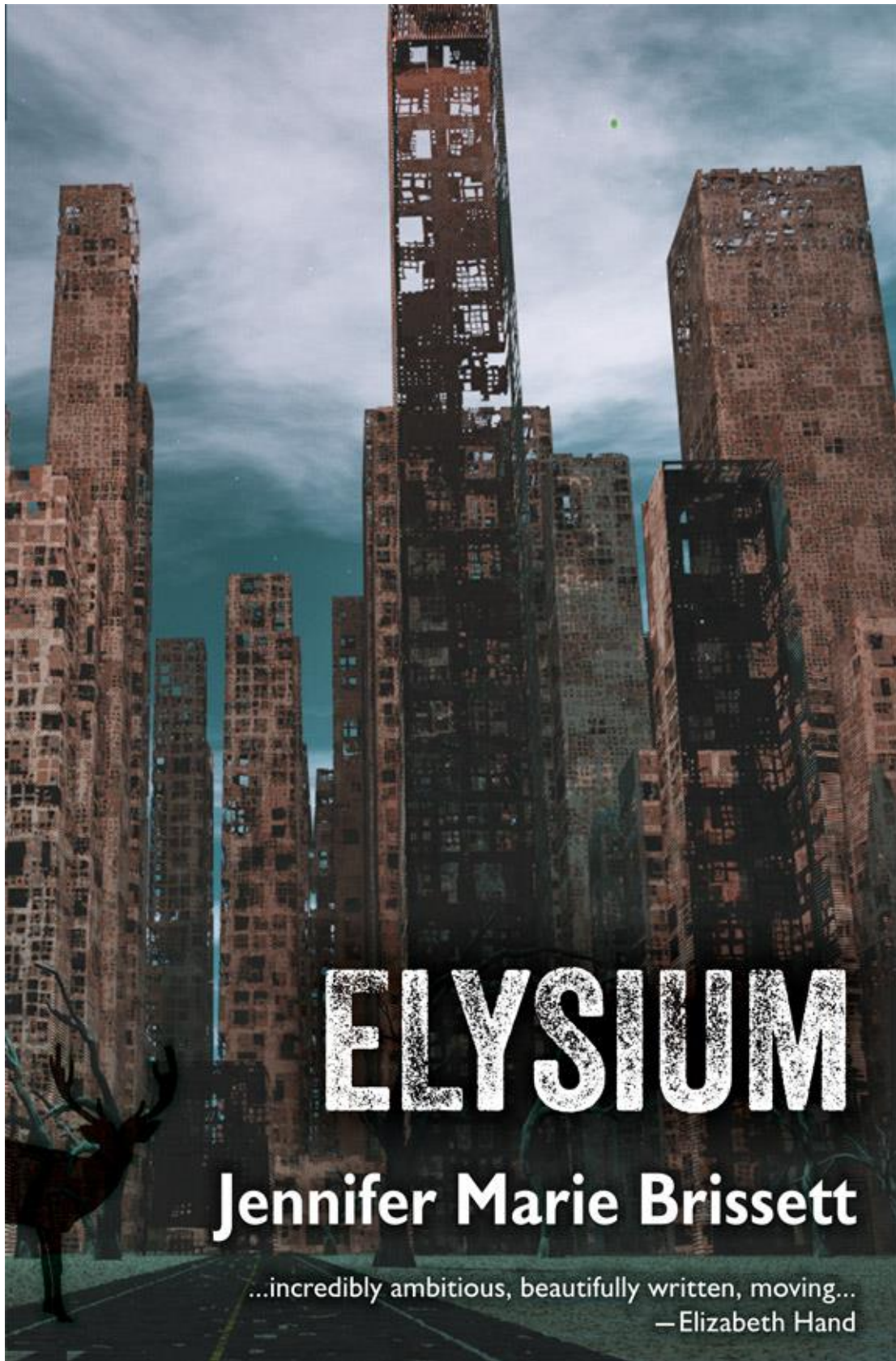


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An Excerpt

Elysium (An Excerpt)

Sparks of fireflies flickered as the sky faded in shades of blue. It was the magic hour. The time when the sun sat on the belly of the earth and the light diffused, painting the surfaces of broken cement gold, pink, and terracotta. The air was still and soundless. The smallest movements made by even an ant seemed to be done with a hush. Adrian dared not shift the position of his wings. The ringing tones of the metal might wake his son and it had taken him a long time to get the boy to sleep.

Maybe it had been foolish to take him to see his mother's grave. Maybe it was the selfish act of a grieving father. Adrian thought on these things while holding his son gently on a ledge in the crevice in the remains of a tall stone building. The smell on the air spoke of a coming storm. Later on it would rain. They must find shelter soon. For now, he would let Antoine sleep. His sweet, sweet boy.

As Adrian stretched out his wings, the metal feathers *shinged* like tiny bells caught in the breeze. The wind took them and they alighted to the air. Antoine opened his eyes.

"Are we going home now, Dad?"

"We will a bit later," his father said.

They soared into the clouds, descending occasionally to examine a spot below that seemed appealing. Rain began to fall. The drops of water sprinkled across his metal feathers and soaked his hair. Adrian did his best to cover his son while keeping the water out of his eyes. It was increasingly difficult to see, and his grip on Antoine felt like it was slipping, so he hurried to find a place to land.

Then he saw it. In all this time he had forgotten about the long stone building with its arched windows revealing cavernous insides. It was as magnificent as he remembered. He touched down on the broken red-brick plaza, and they walked to the stairs before its entrance. Four Corinthian columns stood like soldiers framing the doorway and towered overhead.

"Whoa," Antoine gasped. "What was this place?"

"A museum. A place of art," his father said.

Much of the ceiling was gone, and the building open to the harsh elements. The entry hall had holes overhead where rain came through, cascading down like waterfalls, sounding like a filling bathtub. He followed his son as the child excitedly explored. Antoine jumped over pools of water

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and touched the slippery marble information counter and the granite walls. Then he went to the center of the hall and spun and spun and spun in circles as he stared upwards at the once beautiful vaulted ceiling.

“Your mother and I used to come here before you were born.”

“Mom.” He stopped spinning.

“We would come here on Friday nights and listen to chamber music.”

On a damp night almost like this one, Adrian had heard Chopin played here. It was his favorite of the Préludes that he had only known before from recordings, Op. 28, No. 15. The young man at the piano sounded out the rhythm of raindrops as if nothing around him mattered. As if the world outside had gone away and all that existed was the music. Each note rang high off the ceiling and hung like raindrops caught in mid-air. Time stood still, and Adrian was enraptured. He could hardly breathe. So beautiful. He closed his eyes as if to hear that piano again. He was woken from his memory by the warmth of Antoine’s hand slipping into his.

“Dad,” Antoine said, “you miss her, don’t you?”

He smiled down at his son who was looking up at him with a tug of pain in his eyes.

“Every day,” Adrian said.

He tightened his grip on his son’s hand and said, “Let’s go upstairs.”

His metal wings *shing-shinged* as they climbed the grand stairway that led to the upper galleries. He folded them back to lessen the sound and their echo off the walls. They climbed hand in hand and carefully watched where they stepped for cracks and chips in the stairs. The glow of the moon coming through the open areas of the ceiling provided enough light so they could see. His son tried to sound out some of the names on the plaque of benefactors as they went.

They walked along the balcony that encircled and overlooked the entry hall. The glass cases along the balcony’s walls that once held Asian ceramics were smashed open and empty. An archway to the left of the balcony led to the large exhibit halls that were no longer there. Instead, there was an open drop to the bottom floors. The building seemed as if it had been struck by something big and explosive to cause this kind of damage. But it was just time and nature doing their slow deconstruction.

Behind them were doorways to the galleries that once held the European paintings. The walls had been stripped bare in every room they entered. Adrian could picture the panic of the curators as they rushed to take down the paintings, secreting as many as they could to some storage facility while the madness outside raged. People knew they were going to die and were lashing out at

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everything. The fear was so thick you could smell it. Some people ran, but others took to the streets and slashed and destroyed.

It was left to people like Adrian to keep their heads. To strategize. To prepare. To make a way for the future. And to somehow preserve what they could of the past. Like the curators who took down these paintings. How scared they must have been—and how faithful. He wondered if they had made it. Maybe there was a place deep below them, protected from the elements and all the insanity that was the end of the world, where unbelievable treasures lay hidden.

Adrian closed his eyes for a moment and tried to remember what had been where. He wanted to describe the paintings to his son. But he couldn't remember. In the numerous times he had been here, the many instances he had wandered these very rooms, he couldn't recall what he had seen. So with a heavy chest, he said nothing. His son would never know the beauty that his father had once taken for granted.

"We should go down to the first floor," Adrian said. "There is something I want to show you, if it's still there."

They descended the grand stairway and went through the entry hall and to the right. There was a long hallway lined with Greek and Roman statues from the classical eras, some broken and smashed to the floor, others remained remarkably erect and untouched. Antoine walked around them, staring up at the men and women frozen in stone.

They turned a corner and entered a large open area with a sidewall made of glass like a large greenhouse. The panes were slanted on an angle all the way up to the high, high ceiling, letting in the cold moonlight. Many of the panes had fallen, so there were shards of glass on the floor on that side. Nature had taken over. Plants and trees were growing inside, and owls hooted above. This was the museum's replica of a temple built by the Romans for their subjects the Egyptians, complete with sandstone blocks and columns topped with carved leaves like a tropical tree. The temple grounds were surrounded by a stone moat that Adrian remembered being filled with clear, still water. He had once thrown a coin into it for good luck. Now it was a marshland of green and smelled of algae and slightly of sulfur.

Outside the glass wall was a forest where the mist had settled on the earth among the trees. Adrian's wings arched up—he thought he had seen something moving. Then a lonely elk stepped up to the glass and stared inside at Adrian and Antoine. It shook its head, its graceful antlers swayed, then it stepped back, disappearing into the cloud.

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They crossed the small bridge that led over the marshy water to the temple replica. Both man and child touched the sandstone blocks, running their hands along the hieroglyphs and Roman letters etched into them. At the base were carvings of papyrus and lotus plants.

“We can stay here for the rest of the night,” Adrian said. “I’ve always wanted to sleep in this room.”

Adrian unharnessed his wings and let them gently fall to the floor. They *shinged*, then slapped onto the stone. The ringing of the metal feathers echoed. An owl looked down from above, hooted, and turned its head. Adrian cleared a spot on the stone floor and beckoned his son to join him. Antoine sat down, and they both leaned their backs against the sandstone. Adrian opened the small pouch he had attached to his waist and pulled out two nutrition bars. He handed one to his son and bit into the other. The boy took his and began to eat. The sounds of their chewing filled the emptiness of the temple. Adrian closed his eyes again and tried to recall the piano playing in the hall, but nothing came to him this time.

“Antoine?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Do you listen to much music?”

“Music? Sure, all the time.”

“What kind of music?”

“I don’t know. Stuff.” He shrugged and continued chewing.

“Do you ever listen to classical music? Concertos?”

“Oh, that stuff. Sure. Our teacher makes us listen sometimes.”

“Do you like any of it?”

“It’s all right, I guess.”

Adrian chewed some more, swallowed, then took another bite from his bar.

“Dad?” Antoine said.

“Uh, hum.”

“When do I get my wings?”

Adrian waited until he swallowed his mouthful before he answered.

“I hope never.”

“But why?”

“These are weapons, Antoine. They are for fighting. I don’t want you to fight.”

“I can learn how to fight.”

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“I know you can, son. That’s not the point.” Adrian looked up, struggling to find the words. “Antoine, I want you to have a good life. A safe life. Taking up these wings will only lead to one thing, and I don’t want that for you. I know your mother wouldn’t want it either.”

“How can you know *what* she wanted for me?”

Adrian sighed. Bested by a child. It was true he couldn’t know what she wanted. He never had a chance to ask her. But he knew how he felt. The idea of his son flying out there and fighting god-knows-what chilled him to the bone. His son. *His* son. His dear, dear boy. The very image of his mother with almond-shaped eyes and skin so clear and brown. He loved him more than he thought was possible. His beautiful, beautiful boy.

“Antoine, I’m very tired. It’s been a long day. We can talk more about this in the morning.”

The overcast morning crept in holding hands with the night. The day began dark with hints of becoming darker. The mist swept over the river and brought with it the strong smell of burnt ash. The temple area was dreamlike and lush with pigeons fluttering above and little brown birds pecking at the crumbs he and Antoine had left behind. Adrian stared at his son lying on the stone floor and marveled at his beauty. His perfection. The sun broke through the clouds outside and shined a spot of light through the broken glass. For a moment his son was his mother. Adrian blinked and saw his son again.

Through the glass where a forest had been in the night was now a cleared field of emptiness. Adrian carefully stepped over sharp broken glass that crunched, split, and cracked under his feet to stand by the window’s edge. The green forest outside was gone. All that was out there was a wasteland and fog. But what of the elk? He was sure that he had seen the elk. He looked again for a moment. The sound of Antoine stirring made him return to the stone temple.

“Hey, son. You sleep okay?”

Antoine nodded. Adrian pulled out his last nutrition bar and handed it to his him.

“Thanks, Dad.”

Adrian stretched, then picked up his wings to check them. There were a few missing feathers from the edges and a dent on the side plating that he hadn’t noticed before.

“Dad, aren’t you gonna eat something?”

“Oh, I ate earlier,” he lied as he bent the plating over his knee and began smoothing out the curve in the metal with the heel of his hand.

“Are we going home today?”

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“I plan to,” Adrian said. “Only we can’t go back the way we came.”

“Why?” Antoine asked.

“That area is probably being watched. We can’t take a chance that things will follow us.”

“Oh,” Antoine said. “So how we getting home?”

“There are a few other entrances. And some of them only me and a few others know about. We’re going home through one of them.”

“Which one?”

Adrian thought on this for a few moments.

“I’m not sure yet,” he said. “The safest one.”

He lifted up his wings to shoulder height and looked them over. The brass-looking metal shined and glittered even in the dimness of the temple.

“I think I’ll take you by way of the shipyards. You want to see the spaceships being built?”

“Sure!”

“There’s an entrance over there with a lot of people protecting it. I think that’s the best way.”

Antoine wiped the corners of his mouth with his fingers.

“Dad?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you suppose happened to everybody else? Did you think the roaches got ’em?”

“I don’t know,” Adrian said as he pounded on his wings some more. “I doubt it. They’re good men. I’m sure they got away.”

“Do you think the roaches are still outside?”

“The roaches don’t like the light. We’ll be okay now that it’s the daytime. Come,” Adrian said reaching out his hand, “help me put this on.”

Antoine stood up and watched his father lift and position the wing harness on his back. Adrian allowed his son to fasten the lower buckles on his thighs.

“Dad.”

“Yeah?”

“I wanna learn how to fly.”

Adrian looked down on his son and saw the desire lying deep behind the request. He bent low so that he could face his son eye to eye.

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“There are many ways to fly, Antoine. One way is with these wings on. Another is with your mind, and that’s the greatest way. To see things that others can’t and make them real with your hands, makes you soar higher than any bird—and greater than anything that can take a life, like me in this thing. That’s what I want for you. I want to show you how to fly the right way. These wings aren’t real, son. Only your mind is real.”