

Valentine's Day

by Suzie Hunt

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“So as you can see,” the Head of Research flicked to the last slide. “We’re all tremendously excited about the potential... but research will be more costly than we initially anticipated. I am therefore requesting a budget increase of 20-percent in order to enable us to continue.”

The HR Director stifled a yawn.

Denise glanced at him, and then back to the website on her laptop screen. How could there be so many different ways to arrange a bunch of flowers? Denise knew which bouquet she would prefer, but what would Tabbi go for?

“Where is that money going to come from?” The Head of Finance tapped a finger on the pile of paper in front of him. “We’re operating at a zero-sum budget, and this first year is crucial in terms of revenue. We shouldn’t be investing in anything that doesn’t guarantee an immediate ROI.”

Denise clicked on one of the smaller bouquets. Three long-stemmed deep-red roses wrapped in purple tissue paper. For a moment she worried: *was it too little? Too understated?* Taking a breath, she decisively hit the button that filled in her credit-card details.

“There are no guarantees in the field of medical research.” The Head of Research crossed his arms and glared around at the senior managers.

Denise selected *same day delivery - 2pm* and put in her home address.

“So you keep telling me,” the Head of Finance leaned back in his chair. “That doesn’t change the facts. We had a very slender margin after the sales of CanceRase last year. Luckily, those sales are continuing to hold, however we can only spend what we earn. We have no reserves to make gambles on future products.”

“Increase the budget 10-percent,” Denise said. She hit the confirm button and then flicked her laptop screen shut. “Take it out of marketing. We’ve hit saturation point anyway. If we want to grow the company, we need to keep investing in research. Particularly since CanceRase is going to eliminate our target market -- those suffering with cancer -- in a couple of years. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have an appointment.”

Chairs shuffled backwards as the managers stood up. Denise packed away her laptop as they left the room, conferring quietly with each other.

The Head of Research stayed to pack away the projector.

“Where is your appointment?” he asked as he coiled up a wire.

“Hairdressers,” Denise said.

“Oh yes. It’s Valentine’s Day.”

“It doesn’t mean much to me, but it’s important to Tabbi. Besides... tonight should be special.” Denise glanced at her watch.

“Can I give you some advice,” the Head of Research said, glancing over at Denise. “I know I’m a relatively new employee--”

“Everyone here is a new employee. Except me.”

“I don’t think Norgetics is taking enough risks. We’re a small company, if we want to keep an edge over our competitors then we need to out-manuever them. I know you’re new to this, and it can feel safer to stick with what you know... but I know for a fact that Ludd Pharmaceuticals is developing six different strains of antibiotics at the moment--”

“Thanks for the advice. I’ll bear it in mind.” Denise hefted the laptop onto her shoulder. “I look forward to reading the results of your experiments. Incidentally, are you aware of the paper that came out of the University of Ciudad? They’ve developed a new method for identifying which cellular pathways any individual molecule will target. It looks like game changing research in terms of antibiotic discovery.”

“I... can’t say I have seen that yet, no.”

“I’ll forward you a copy. Make sure you read it.” Denise walked out of the board-room, leaving the Head of Research frowning behind her.

“Morning, Denise!” The receptionist waved as Denise passed her desk.

Denise smiled back. “Good morning, Jane. Any interesting calls today?”

“Just one, an old man wanting to know if we gave away samples of CanceRase. Of course I said no! Obviously just some homeless guy who can’t afford it, amiright?”

“Right,” Denise said, with a twinge of guilt.

She *couldn’t* give away their medicine to anyone who asked for it. They would never make a profit. Still, she knew if she tried to explain that to Tabbi the response would be tears and a complete lack of understanding. She played out the conversation in her head, imagining Tabbi’s wide-eyes. “But he’ll die without that treatment!”

“But if we can’t fund future research, lots more people will die.” Denise muttered to herself. She got into the back of the company car, and told it to take her to the hairdresser.

Tonight would be a big night. She had to get it perfect. Exactly what Tabbi wanted.

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The knock at her door startled Tabbi. She jerked away from the computer screen and blinked fuzzily at the words she had written.

Gheists are the deepest manifestations of our consciousness. Do we create them, or do they create us?

“That is really *not* a viable research question, Tabbi.” Tabi stretched, feeling her back click into position.

“Tabbi?” Tommy poked his head around the door. “Got a dispute out here, we need you.”

“A dispute? Can’t you sort it out? I’m really busy.”

“I don’t think so. Stephen threw a paperweight at Opal.”

“You’re joking.”

“I wish I were.”

“For the love of...” Tabbi hit ctrl-S and stood up. “What’s it about?”

“The etymology of the word Gheist.”

“Of course it is.” Tabbi rolled her eyes.

“I’m sorry. There’s a crowd. You know I’m not good at dealing with that sort of thing.”

Tabbi pulled her cardigan on and tried to imagine how Denise would handle this. Denise knew how to manage people.

Tommy led her to the University café.

The café was new. A big open-plan room, filled with neon-coloured plastic chairs around small round tables and at which students and lecturers discussed history animatedly. Across one edge of the room stood a long counter covered in glass. Chocolate gateaux and carrot cake stood in neat wedges; behind them a smiling girl served expensive lattes and mochas.

A respectful ring of bystanders surrounded Stephen and Opal, two students who had started one of their new courses last week. They sat at one of the round tables, glaring at each other.

“Come on, everyone.” Tabbi said. “This isn’t a spectator sport.”

“We’d all appreciate hearing your take on the issue, Tabbi.” One of the new lecturers said.

“He says the word *Gheist* derives from ghost! He’s like a *child*.” Opal waved a cup of coffee at Stephen, splashing some onto the table. “Everyone knows it’s from *geyser*, and is rooted in the idea of things emerging, of erupting up from the subconscious.”

“Both of those words are modern.” Tabbi said.

Opal and Stephen looked confused. Tabbi shot a side-glance at Tommy, who was quietly laughing into a napkin.

“Okay. Ghost is from the old Vogian word *geis*, which means ‘to be excited, amazed or frightened’. It’s pretty likely that *Gheist* shares its origins with *geis*, or with the root of *geis*. What that root word might be... we don’t know, since we don’t have any written records of that pre-Vogian language, and have only the barest knowledge of Vogian vocabulary, most of which has been extrapolated backwards from some words in our own language. Now... what’s this really about?”

Tommy leaned over to Tabbi and whispered from behind the napkin. “Opal dumped Stephen last week.”

Tabbi pressed her knuckles to her head and shot Tommy a glare.

“I don’t understand,” Opal said, frowning.

“Alright.” Tabbi waved her arms at them all. “Everyone back to class! You might learn something there -- though I wouldn’t count on it.”

The crowd dispersed slowly, chatting to each other. Stephen and Opal gave each other a last glare and walked off in different directions.

Tabbi rubbed her hand across her head and glanced at Tommy. “You really needed me for that?”

“You know I hate talking to students. Let me buy you a coffee. Make it up to you.”

“Fine, fine. A black coffee. Why did you decide to work at University if you hate talking to students?”

“You know as well as I do that when I started here we didn’t have any students. Certainly none under the age of thirty.”

“Things have changed.” Tabbi sat down at one of the round tables and drummed her fingers against the formica. “I remember when our ‘café’ was just a kettle on a bit of unfinished wall.”

“And now look at us,” Tommy shook his head ruefully as he walked towards the counter.

Tabbi stared at the glass jar filled with brown sugar that sat on the table in front of her. She wanted to put her head on her arms and fall asleep. Everything had changed too quickly. The influx of students, the way the University had been rebuilt in such a hurry; old corridors ripped out and turned into classrooms, stairs that had been barricaded off with orange *danger* signs replaced with a couple of sleek mirrored lifts, and the front door... ancient wood that had weathered so many centuries torn out and sent somewhere for composting. A bullet-proof glass sliding door had been erected in its place.

Tommy carefully set a mug of black coffee in front of Tabbi and sat down. “It isn’t their fault, you know. People still want clear-cut answers. Yes and no.”

“I know.” Tabbi blew on her coffee, “Before the Gheists we were hollowed out. All we had was science. We chased the right answers because we had nothing else.”

“That’s really why I brought you down here. Are you any closer to finding out... what happened? What are you working on?”

Tabbi bit her lip.

“I want to look at neural pathways in the brain. It’s pretty clear that the Gheists have had a lasting impact on us. Everyone is more... emotional. That must’ve meant some kind of physical change... and whatever shape that physical change is, I think that might give us some insight into how the Gheists integrate with us.”

Tommy pulled a face. “Science. Yay.”

“Don’t knock it.”

“No, no. Very important thing. Science. Do you think that will help you find out where they’ve gone?”

“Maybe. They’ve probably gone back to where they came from. It was a flying visit.” Tabbi said.

“Yeah. They came, kicked over the furniture and left.” Tommy picked up the sugar jar and tipped a pile into his coffee.

“Yeah.” Tabbi dropped her eyes to the table. “How... how are things between you and Kris?”

Tommy sighed. “She’s letting me see Junior at the weekend now. We meet at the park.”

“You know how sorry I am about that right? I mean, most of what the Gheists did was... well...”

“Yeah. You and Denise get the happy ever after. But the rest of us...” Tommy grimaced. “Anyway, it could have been worse. She could’ve stabbed me, like poor old Mo.” Tommy took a sip of his coffee. “How is Denise anyway? Still making dumptrucks of money?”

Tabbi squirmed on her chair. “I guess so.”

“I guess you guys will be getting married soon, huh?”

“What? No...” Tabbi laughed. “Marriage is not really my thing, you know? Dresses and flowers and relatives. I don’t think either of us really needs that. I mean, can you imagine if she gave me a diamond ring? After how many times I’ve ranted about the way the miners are treated?”

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Denise paused to admire her hair in the reflection on the jewellers window before pushing the door open.

The man behind the counter looked up. "Ah, Denise. It came in yesterday." He reached under the counter and pulled out a purple box.

Denise's breath caught in her throat as the man flicked it open. A gold band, with twelve diamonds in the shape of a curved feather, glittered against the dark velvet.

"It's beautiful..." she looked up at the man behind the counter. "Exactly what I asked for."

"I'm sure your young lady will be delighted." The man smiled and closed the box. "I assume you will be wanting to insure it?"

"Oh, definitely." Denise took the box with the ring and stowed it safely inside her handbag. "Against everything. Tabbi's always losing things."

"Our premium insurance comes with an iron-clad guarantee. We'll replace it free of charge, even if you deliberately drop it down a garbage disposal."

"Well, I hope it won't come to that," Denise laughed. She felt easier now that she had the ring in her bag. Things were coming together.

"You have a plan? For the proposal?" the man asked as he took Denise's credit card.

"Dinner tonight. I've booked *La Graisse de Canard*."

"Goodness me. Very exclusive. A traditionalist then? Down on one knee?"

"Well, I'm not a traditionalist." Denise took the folder of documents from the man and scanned the terms and conditions of the insurance document. "But Tabbi is. She's really into all those rituals."

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"Got any plans for tonight?" Tommy asked as he reached for his coat.

Tabbi rattled the keys in her hand absently as she waited for Tommy to finish putting on his coat. Behind them, the University was filled with shadows. The hustle-and-bustle of the day had died away. At night, Tabbi could almost believe the University hadn't changed at all.

"Plans?" she asked. "Not really."

"Not celebrating?" Tommy picked up the stack of books and balanced them against his chest. They were all new: ranging from the academic to the wildly speculative, and all about one subject.

Gheists.

"Celebrating?"

"You know. Valentines day?"

"Oh no, is that today?" Tabbi looked at her watch. "Oh, *crap*."

"So you do have plans," Tommy pulled a face and headed for the door. He paused and tried to jiggle the books into a position to grab the handle.

"I always do this!" Tabbi darted around Tommy and pulled the door open for him. "Oh, I bet they won't even let me in dressed like this. I *hate* Valentine's Day."

"Expensive restaurant?" Tommy guessed as he headed through the door. "Why do you even celebrate it, if you don't like it?"

"Because Denise likes it. Can you hurry it up? I should be arriving like, ten minutes ago."

“Sure, sorry. Have a good evening!” Tommy shuffled off down the pavement, still clutching his books. Tabbi closed the door -- the bullet-proof glass did not echo satisfyingly as it slammed shut, but instead *clicked* gently into place -- and flicked her key-fob through the electronic lock. A group of tourists stared at her, and two of them took her picture.

“Are you...?” one of them started to ask, but Tabbi waved them away. “I’m sorry! I have to run!”

She scrambled into a taxi as another tourist managed to take her picture, and barked out her address. Denise would, of course, be at the restaurant. Tabbi looked down at her patchwork leggings and sunflower skirt and sighed. She had to change.

Denise’s phone went straight to voicemail. Denise, no doubt, was busy closing a business deal or speaking to her investment account manager.

“Denise? I’m really sorry, I got caught up at work, I am on my way I’ll just be a little bit late...” Tabbi looked at her watch again. “Maybe forty-five minutes? I love you!”

They had moved into a mansion together: one of the exclusive residences just outside the *bubble*. Tabbi still couldn’t get used to the gated security entrance, the curved driveway that pulled the house out of view of the main road behind a line of trees, the distance between her house and the neighbours. The taxi crunched to a stop outside her front door.

“Can you wait here?”

The taxi beeped affirmation. She waved her credit card at the sensor and jumped out. Tabbi pushed her thumb against the print-scanner, tapped in her security code and waited impatiently for the door to slide open.

“Good evening, ma’am.”

Tabbi screeched to a guilty halt as she came into the building. Their cleaner stood just inside, holding a mop.

“Oh, Margaret... don’t call me ma’am! Please, call me Tabbi. Are you... can I help? You want me to mop?”

The cleaner raised an eyebrow. “No, thank you, ma’am.”

Tabbi stood miserably in the hallway, watching the cleaner head toward the kitchen. Margaret. Guilt. Having a cleaner just felt... wrong.

“We both work long hours, darling,” Denise had said, in her matter-of-fact way. “It would be a tragedy to let this beautiful place fall apart with neglect. We need people to help us look after it. Besides, it’s good for the economy.”

Tabbi looked at the shining lacquered fake-wooden floor, sighed, and pulled her boots off. She carried them up the stairs and into the master bedroom.

She dropped onto the bed and stared at their walk-in wardrobe. What did you wear to a Valentine’s Day dinner at a fancy restaurant? A dress? A suit?

Tabbi did the only thing she could think of, and turned to the internet for guidance.

Fifteen minutes later, she had dug out a silver dress that kept slipping off one shoulder and a pair of sandals with heels. She couldn’t remember buying them, but strange clothes kept turning up in her wardrobe. Tabbi suspected that Denise was trying to drop hints. Well, not so much *hints*. She had all but said that Tabbi should dress more appropriately, now that she kept ending up in the papers.

Now that she was *famous*.

“Gheist save me from fame,” Tabbi muttered. She held her breath after she said it, hoping for sparkles, a ghostly feather, anything.

The Gheists had made a dramatic entrance. It seemed like everyone had proposed marriage, fallen in love, had sex, murdered their boss, robbed their neighbour, run away from home or sacrificed themselves in a blaze of martyrdom all on that one day. Oro had flamed with passions unchecked.

Norgetics had made millions almost overnight. Suddenly, everyone cared about cancer. The Ludds had made an offer, but it came too late. Denise had already received enough donations to manufacture the medicine, get it through clinical trials and into the marketplace. The death-rate of cancer dropped by two thirds.

The Gheists -- after their first shocking appearance, ghostly mythical creatures bursting into existence, accompanied by a surge of passion and desire -- had vanished again. But the emotions they had awakened, the hate and love, the guilt and pleasure, those they had left behind.

Sales of alcohol had skyrocketed.

Tabbi’s phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Darling? Are you nearly here? The maître d is getting quite... anxious.”

“I’m almost there. Sorry Denise.”

“No problem, darling. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Denise hung up, and Tabbi stared at her phone suspiciously. Denise never sounded that laid-back about Tabbi showing up late.

“I really hope she hasn’t planned any surprises,” Tabbi muttered. She buckled the sandals and stood up. She took a few unsteady steps, then remembered her bag. She grabbed it and felt a moment of uneasiness. Her bedraggled cotton bag, covered in badges and stickers, did not exactly match her dress.

“Sod it,” she said, and staggered for the stairs.

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The restaurant was almost exactly in the centre of the bubble, at the top of a tall tower and with a fantastic view of the city. Tabbi paused outside the door to admire the city lights spread out in a great panorama; a basket of stars against the blackness of the desert.

“This way, *madamé*.” A waiter all in black approached her and led Tabbi inside the restaurant. Tabbi blinked when she realised the place was empty except for one table at which Denise sat, tapping away at her laptop. Denise glanced up as Tabbi came in and smiled.

“Hey.”

“Um,” Tabbi sat down as the waiter pulled her chair out for her. “Where is everyone else? Isn’t this the busiest day of the year for restaurants?”

“I wanted us to be alone.” Denise swept a bouquet of roses out from under the table. “Surprise!”

“Oh! Thank you!” Tabbi took the roses and felt a stab of anxiety. “They’re beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you,” Denise said.

Denise looked, as always, flawless. She wore a tailored black dress that clung sleekly to her figure, and a white flower pinned to her chest. Her hair was pulled back into a bun, a look that showed off her cheekbones and wide green eyes.

“The view is amazing,” Tabbi said.

“Yes, this is a prime location,” Denise shut her laptop and put it into her briefcase. “How was your day?”

“Oh, I hardly got anything done. Two of the students got into an argument about the etymology of the word Gheist and managed to drag everyone else into it. I don’t know why I always have to sort those things out!”

“The perils of management, my dear.” Denise crinkled her nose. “Sorting other people out.”

“I wish I’d never accepted the position,” Tabbi said.

“They’d never have found anyone else able to take it on,” Denise signalled the waiter. “You’re the only person in the world who knows anything about the Gheists.”

“That might have been true two years ago,” Tabbi said. “Nowadays everyone and their dog is an expert.”

Denise laughed. “Well, they might think they are.”

“There’s not really a whole lot of source material you have to read,” Tabbi said. “Nowadays you can get it collected together in a handy text book with notes.”

The waiter arrived with a bottle of champagne in a silver bucket full of ice. He poured two glasses, the bubbles rushing up in the glass.

Denise took the glass and gripped the stem, her knuckles turning white. “I hear you’re funding an archeology expedition. Trying to find the remains of the desert tribes settlements.”

“The University is, yes.” Tabbi picked up her own glass and watched the froth subside. “Denise, can I come into your lab some time? I want to look at some brain cells.”

“Norgetics’ lab? I... I don’t know, sweetie. We have a lot of protocols these days.”

Tabbi absent-mindedly hitched her dress up. “It would be really useful if I could. I get the feeling that these changes the Gheists have made are physical, and that could hold the key to where they are.”

Denise frowned, looked down at the menu and then back up at Tabbi. “I like your dress.”

“Um. Thanks.”

“Tabbi...” Denise hesitated. “There’s something I want to say.”

Tabbi’s skin prickled at Denise’s tone. “Sure.”

“We’ve been together for five years now.” Denise put her hands on the table and looked down at them. “Five incredible years. I know things haven’t always been perfect, but I’ve tried my best to make you happy.”

“Are you breaking up with me?” Tabbi said, horrified.

“What? No!” Denise looked flustered. “No, nothing like that. I’m just trying to say... I think we’ve come so far lately. I finally feel like we’re stable enough, like I can take care of you properly...” Denise took a breath and took one hand off the table.

Tabbi bit her lip.

Denise pulled the box out of her pocket and flicked it open. The ring glittered, a dozen

stars trapped against a circlet of gold.

“Will you marry me?”

Tabbi closed her eyes. The whole world contracted inwards, and she struggled to breathe. A flood of images passed before her mind's eye: the day they had moved into the mansion. The night she had come home and found her battered sofa had been replaced with a white leather recliner. Denise distant in thought behind her laptop. Margaret's bent body, scrubbing at their oven. The day Tommy had come into the University, his face grey, with the news that he and Kris had broken up. Her thoughts rushed forward: A wedding; expensive and cold, with Denise's friends in expensive suits and Tabbi's friends looking uncomfortable. Evenings spent in the mansion surrounded by designer furniture and never quite feeling at home. Burying herself in her work. Ghosts fading away, love fading away, until she woke one day and realised the person she was now had faded away with it.

“Tabbi?”

Tabbi opened her eyes. Denise looked worried, the hand holding out the ring trembling ever so slightly.

Tabbi covered her face with her hands.

The silence stretched and stretched, wrinkling up around them in a smothering blanket. You couldn't step back from a silence like that.

“Okay,” Denise finally said. Her voice brittle. “You don't need to say it.”

“I'm sorry,” Tabbi managed, but Denise had already stood up. Tabbi pushed her chair back from the table. The roses lay between them, their sweet smell hanging in the air.

“I can't stay.” Denise pushed her hands into her hair, pulling half of it out of her bun. “Take as long as you need. The place is booked until ten.”

Tabbi searched for words, for something that could take them back to yesterday.

Denise lifted her laptop case onto her shoulder and looked at ring in her hand. Finally she placed it on the table next to the roses.

“Happy Valentine's Day.”