

Stage Sophistry

By Kallie

“So, can I have a volunteer?”

Keshvi rolled her eyes as a score of hands flew up across the crowded theater. Who the hell volunteered for these crappy hypnosis shows? It was bad enough to be dragged to one in the first place.

“Yes! You right there!” called out the hypnotist standing on the stage - ‘Mistuko the Magnificent’, as she styled herself.

Keshvi realized that the hypnotist was pointing at somewhere near her. She looked around, trying to get a look at whichever poor sucker had been foolish enough to put themselves forward to be publicly humiliated for everyone else’s amusement. But, as she looked to her left, she saw that her Amina, who was wearing a mischievous grin, had lifted Keshvi’s hand in the air as if she were volunteering. And then, with horror, she realized that the stage hypnotist wasn’t pointing at someone near her. She was pointing at her.

“Oh, me? Oh no, I’m, um, I’m not...” Keshvi realized she was far enough away that without a microphone the hypnotist probably couldn’t hear her, and so she started making a complicated series of gestures to express her refusal.

“Oh? What’s this? I think our lucky volunteer needs some encouragement, fine guests!” Mitsuko the Magnificent declared, raising her hands above her head. On cue, the audience erupted into applause. Mixed in with the applause were a number of shouts and jeers, all of which were imploring Keshvi to take to the stage. Keshvi tried folding her arms and remaining immobile, but as the applause dragged on and the jeers grew louder, she realized she wasn’t going to get out of it that easily. Unable to resist the pressure of the crowd, Keshvi found herself rising awkwardly to her feet and starting to make her way to the end of the aisle. As she did, she blushed, and threw Amina a vicious look. Amina just laughed.

“Wonderful! A round of applause, everyone!” The audience applauded once more, at Mistuko’s suggestion.

As she walked up to the stage, Keshvi closed her eyes and started wishing for the ground underneath her to open and swallow her up. Unfortunately, it didn’t happen, and so she was instead left to contemplate the circumstances that had led to her being forced to undergo this ritual humiliation. She and Amina had been sent by their boss to attend a minor out-of-town trade convention. They were losing their weekends for it, with the barest minimum overtime pay as compensation - but of course, their boss hadn’t cared. He never cared, just shouted. The worst part was, the resort hotel hosting the convention was in the middle of nowhere, leaving the two of them with absolutely nothing to do in the evenings except sample the hotel’s ridiculous excuse for entertainment - a stage hypnotist show. Keshvi would have preferred to stay in her room watching cable TV and trying to load porn on the hotel’s awful WiFi, but Amina had dragged her out with the promise of buying drinks at the bar afterwards. Keshvi vowed to get her own back by ordering the most expensive drink the bartender could make.

“That’s it, come on up here,” Mitsuko encouraged, as Keshvi ascended the stairs to the stage. Now that she was close, she could finally get a good look at the hypnotist. She was thin and quite tall, with big brown eyes, a cute button nose, and very neat, dark, shoulder-length hair. She was definitely pretty, but her outfit was what Keshvi found truly eye-catching. The hypnotist was dressed in a suit, with form-fitting pants, a

white shirt, a fine black tailcoat, and a waistcoat that was cut in such a way that it perfectly accentuated Mitsuko's chest. Mitsuko winked at Keshvi, who blushed faintly. Despite the circumstances, she was finding it hard not to stare.

"What's your name, lucky volunteer?" the hypnotist asked her, producing a microphone which she held up for Keshvi to speak in to.

"Keshvi," Keshvi answered.

"Let's have another round of applause for Keshvi!" Mitsuko announced, apparently oblivious to Keshvi's obvious lack of enthusiasm. The audience duly applauded. "Now, tell us, have you ever been hypnotized before?"

"No," Keshvi replied flatly.

"Oh, a virgin! How fun," Mitsuko quipped, winking at the audience. There were a few scattered laughs from around the theater. "So, in that case, what made you decide to volunteer? Were you perhaps curious?"

"I didn't." Keshvi crossed her arms. Even if she had to play along, she didn't have to pretend to like it. "My friend tricked me into it."

Mitsuko laughed. "Is that so? What a delightful friend! I hope they'll have fun out there, watching you get up to all kinds of things."

Keshvi looked out into the audience. She could see Amina, laughing her ass off. Keshvi grit her teeth. "Yeah. Sure."

Mitsuko tilted her head to one side dramatically, and adopted a slightly weary tone of voice. "Keshvi, I'm beginning to get the sense you're not a huge fan of hypnosis! Why's that?"

"Well, I mean, because it's not real," Keshvi answered bluntly.

There was a laugh from the audience.

"Oh, really?" Mitsuko asked, her voice dripping with amusement. The audience laughed again. "And what makes you so sure of that?"

Keshvi sighed. She was in no mood for an argument, but she wasn't going to pretend she believed in Mitsuko's nonsense. "It's just obvious. Maybe it works on some people. Willing people. Like some kind of voluntary hysteria. But you can't really take away people's free will."

"Woah, woah, woah!" Mitsuko made a big gesture at the audience, eliciting another laugh. The audience's braying was starting to chafe on Keshvi's nerves. "Who said anything about taking away anyone's free will?"

"Hypnosis is all about making people act like chickens and stuff, right?" Keshvi frowned. "There's no way in hell I'm doing that of my own free will. So if you think you can make me do that - or anything else - you're talking about taking away my free will."

"Making you act like a chicken? A pretty girl like you, I had something much more fun in mind." A number of people in the audience giggled, and despite herself, Keshvi blushed again. Mitsuko really was beautiful. "But, in all seriousness, I think your logic is a little faulty there, Keshvi. I mean, what do you think free will is?"

Keshvi's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What, are we going to have a philosophical discussion?"

"Why not?" Mitsuko replied, shrugging. "That's what all these good people are here for, right?" she added sarcastically, making the audience howl with laughter. She had them in the palm of her hand.

"Fine." Keshvi scowled at the hypnotist. If Mitsuko was going to make fun of her, she was going to call her bluff. "Free will is... is... when you get to decide what you do and what you don't?" She ended up sounding very uncertain. Keshvi realized she'd never really thought about the question before.

"Wow, that's a great answer! Got it in one!" Mitsuko sounded genuinely pleased. Keshvi narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "But, Keshvi, I'm a little confused. What makes you think that means hypnosis isn't real?"

"What?" Keshvi was taken aback by the question. Wasn't it obvious? "Well, hypnosis is all about making people do stuff, isn't it? But if people have free will, then you can't make people do anything."

"Aha!" Mitsuko suddenly declared. She started wagging her finger in Keshvi's direction. "I think we've found the problem. You, my darling Keshvi, are laboring under a misconception about the nature of hypnosis."

"What do you mean?"

"Hmm..." Mitsuko pondered. "Let me explain it like this. You said that free will is when you decide on your own actions, right?"

"Right," Keshvi agreed. She thought that was right.

"But have you ever thought about what makes you make those decisions?"

"I... what?" Keshvi struggled to parse the question. She was too tired for this, and the stage was deceptively warm beneath the powerful spotlights. It was making her feel a little dazed.

"Have you ever thought about it?" Mitsuko the Magnificent repeated. "Why you decide what you decide, when you decide?"

"I... don't understand what you're asking me," Keshvi admitted. It was something about the way the hypnotist spoke. It was fast and slow at the same time, rushing over the bits that seemed to matter while drawing other words into an elongated drawl that made Keshvi's attention turn to honey. She found herself hanging on Mitsuko's every word, but understanding little. It was infuriating.

"Let me put it like this." Keshvi wasn't sure if Mitsuko was still speaking to the audience, or just to her. "You wake up in the morning, and you come down to the breakfast buffet in this fine establishment. You can have pancakes or waffles. Which one do you choose?"

"Waffles." For Keshvi, it was an easy choice. "But I don't see how--"

"And you'd say that's a free choice, right?"

"Well, yeah. But--"

"Great!" Mitsuko seemed supremely confident, and had no trouble cutting past Keshvi's hesitant objections. "So, here's the key question: why do you pick waffles?"

Keshvi stared at her for a moment, sure there had to be some trick to the question. But she

couldn't figure it out. "Because I like waffles more."

"Exactly!" Mitsuko threw her arms up in celebration. "Now, did you choose to like waffles more? No, you didn't. No-one choose what they like and don't like, do they? You can't help it. See?"

"What... what are you saying?" Keshvi was beginning to feel as though she was out of her depth. Mitsuko's reasoning and over-dramatic delivery were running rings around her, making her dizzy.

"When you think about it, the choice was already made for you." Mitsuko now seemed to be speaking only to Keshvi. To her, the hypnotist's voice sounded quiet, almost like a whisper, but the audience was listening just as intently as she was. "You were just helplessly following your own nature."

"B-but..." What had started out as a completely academic argument was quickly becoming genuinely concerning to Keshvi. "I could have picked pancakes," she protested weakly.

"You could have," Mitsuko agreed, "but you wouldn't have. Not one time out of a hundred, I'm guessing. So perhaps now, you understand how hypnosis is possible."

Keshvi blinked. She'd almost forgotten they were talking about hypnosis. "No, not really," she confessed. She was starting to worry she was embarrassing herself.

"Oh dear." Mitsuko turned back to the audience, and pouted dramatically. "Feeling tired, Keshvi? You seem to be struggling to keep up."

Now that the hypnotist mentioned it, Keshvi realized she was feeling tired.

"Or maybe you're just getting distracted," Mitsuko mused. "Maybe we need to give you something to focus on." As she spoke, the stage hypnotist moved so that she was standing right in front of Keshvi, interposing herself between Keshvi and the audience. She smiled kindly. "Why don't you just look at me?"

Keshvi looked at her, and her mood softened. The hypnotist really was incredibly hot.

"My eyes are up here, Keshvi." Keshvi blushed hard when she realized she'd been staring at the other women's chest. She knew that it was no time for her to develop a useless lesbian crush, but Mitsuko's natural charisma was proving difficult to ignore. Muttering an apology, she looked up into Mitsuko's face, blushing even harder when the hypnotist winked at her. But then, she was lost to Mitsuko's eyes. They seemed to possess depths within depths, drawing Keshvi in endlessly.

"You're free," Mitsuko began. "Everyone's free. You're free, right now. You're free even when you're hypnotized. You're free, because you're doing exactly what you want to do. You're following your desires. How could you do anything else? Why would you want to do anything else?"

It took Keshvi a long moment to realize that the question wasn't rhetorical. "I don't know," she replied slowly.

Mitsuko nodded in agreement. "Of course not. And it doesn't matter where those desires come from, does it? We don't control that."

"No," Keshvi echoed. Mitsuko's eyes were so deep.

"It's strange, isn't it?" Mitsuko asked earnestly. "You can't help following your desires. You're free, but at the same time you're just a slave."

"Just... a slave?" Keshvi felt like there were a million questions she should ask, but she couldn't put

any of them into words. It was so warm, under the lights of the stage.

“Just a slave,” Mitsuko repeated softly. “You’re a slave to your desires, because even though you can do anything you want, you can’t do anything else, and what you want isn’t up to you. So, you’re a slave to your desires.”

Keshvi shook her head wordlessly. She wanted to object, but Mitsuko’s logic was irresistible.

“And the big secret of hypnosis is just how easy it is to influence someone’s desires.” Mitsuko licked her lips. To Keshvi, it was mesmerizing. “A word here. An idea. A suggestion. Have you ever noticed how, the moment someone suggests getting food, you find yourself hungry? It’s just like that.”

Keshvi’s eyes, still locked onto Mitsuko’s, went wide. Was it really that simple? There was something terrifying about the idea that such powerful compulsion was so simple. She didn’t want to believe in it, but she was finding Mitsuko’s words endlessly compelling. It all seemed so persuasive, and she felt too tired and too dazed to come up with any kind of rebuttal. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to anymore. It was surprisingly pleasant, letting Mitsuko talk to her, without resisting or being argumentative. She was starting to regret how unpleasant she’d been earlier.

“For example...” Mitsuko put a finger to her lip. “You’ve noticed how hot it is up here, haven’t you? I’m used to it, of course. But you’re not. You must be getting way too hot, under that top.”

Keshvi was. She’d been noticing it all along, but it seemed to be growing worse by the second. Keshvi was desperate to get some relief from the sweltering heat. She didn’t understand how Mitsuko could handle it, in the dashing, multi-layered outfit she was wearing.

“Why don’t you take it off?” Mitsuko suggested. Keshvi was so focused on her, she didn’t even notice the giggle of titillation that ran around the audience. “You’ve got a bra on, right? So you won’t be naked, just more comfortable. Think about that cool air on your skin. Doesn’t that sound good?”

It did. Keshvi hated to admit it, but it sounded really, really good. The more she thought about it, the more she craved it. But at the same time, she was tying herself into mental knots trying to figure out what was going on. Had Mitsuko made her feel this way? She’d been feeling hot already. Or had she? Suddenly, she wasn’t sure. And she hadn’t wanted to take her top off before Mitsuko had suggested that. Or had she? It was the natural thing to do, if your clothes were too warm. But it was clearly what Mitsuko wanted. What Mitsuko claimed she was making Keshvi do. It didn’t make any sense to her to suffer just because she didn’t want to give the hypnotist a win. Slowly, feeling like she was moving underwater, Keshvi reached up and pulled her top off over her head. The feeling of the air against her bare skin was just as blissful as she’d imagined. It almost made her wish she could take off her bra too.

“Wow!” Mitsuko wolf-whistled appreciatively, prompting further titillated giggling. Keshvi remained oblivious. She was feeling nice and relaxed now that she was cooling down, and Mitsuko’s obvious appreciation of her body made her blush and smile happily. “So, Keshvi, why did you take your top off?”

“Because...” After a moment’s thought, the answer was obvious. “Because I wanted to,” Keshvi answered dreamily.

“Right.” Mitsuko was smiling broadly. “All of your own free will.”

“All of my own free will,” Keshvi happily agreed.

“Well, I’d call that a perfect demonstration,” Mitsuko declared, addressing the audience. There was a modest round of applause. Then, she turned back to Keshvi. “Perhaps now you’re wondering how that could work with something ridiculous, like dancing like a chicken.”

Keshvi hadn't, in fact, but now that Mitsuko had placed the question in her mind it was burning there, desperate to be answered.

"Well, that's the second secret of hypnosis," Mitsuko spoke slowly, drawing out each word into a tease until Keshvi was filled with an unbearable amount of anticipation. She was dying to know the secret. "Deep down, everyone wants the same thing. Deep down, everyone wants to play along. Everyone wants to simply do what they're told."

That assertion was bold enough to arouse some indignation in Keshvi. "That's... I don't think that's right."

"Oh, but it is, my dear Keshvi," Mitsuko retorted. "Let me ask you: why are you even here, right now? Not because you want to be, clearly. I'm guessing you're here for the conference, like everyone else, meaning that you're here because your boss made you. And you're only here at my show because, I'm guessing, your wonderful friend dragged you here. And you're only here on my stage because when you were volunteered, you couldn't quite bring yourself to resist. Isn't that so?"

"I... suppose." Keshvi's indignation vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and was replaced with confusion. Was Mitsuko right? Keshvi couldn't deny that everything the hypnotist had said was true. Maybe she did just want to go along with things. Still, though, something didn't sit right with her. "But... I don't want to do that stuff. I hate doing that stuff."

"Wait, you're saying you do what you're told even though you hate it?" A look of intense puzzlement appeared on Mitsuko's face. "My dear Keshvi, I think you're getting confused. Didn't we just agree that you always do what you want? That you're a slave to your own desires? That you can't, in fact, do anything else."

"Oh... yeah," Keshvi felt forced to admit.

"Well then, if you always do what you're told, that must mean it's because you want to, doesn't it?"

Keshvi frowned. She thought and thought, but she couldn't articulate a single reason why Mitsuko was wrong. It was all getting too confusing for her. Under Mitsuko's intense state, she felt pressured to agree. "I... I guess so."

"I admit, there are times when obeying is less pleasant than others," Mitsuko continued. "Obeying your boss, for example. But obeying me... well, you've already seen how nice it was to take off your top for me, haven't you?"

Keshvi nodded. Had she done that for Mitsuko? She supposed she had.

"I'm not just talking about how cool and refreshed you feel right now," Mitsuko added. "I'm talking about how relaxed you are. Have you even noticed? I'm sure you have. Even though you were feeling nervous and frustrated before, now you're totally calm. Your breathing is so slow and rhythmic. You've got a nice, happy smile on your face. You look perfectly, wonderfully relaxed."

Keshvi realized the hypnotist was right. She wasn't sure she'd ever felt so relaxed. Her body felt so pleasantly heavy, like she could just slump into a chair or onto a bed and let everything melt away. She'd been on her feet for most of the day, but all the tension she'd been carrying around had simply disappeared. It was miraculous.

"That's the magic," Mitsuko said with a wink. "Everyone wants to go with the flow, because it's

just so much easier. If you want to go with the flow, then whatever someone tells you to do, it's all just so easy. So easy. We like things that are easy. It's easy to just sink into it, to just let yourself obey. That's what you're feeling right now, isn't it?"

Keshvi nodded. She wasn't sure she could speak anymore, even if she wanted to. The effort was too great.

"The best part is, once you get a taste, you'll do anything for more," Mitsuko whispered to her. "Just a little more, of this perfect relaxation. You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd like more of this. You'd like to keep going with the flow. You'd like to keep following your own free will, by doing exactly what I tell you to do."

Keshvi nodded eagerly. She was craving it now, in every part of your body.

"Then it's easy." Mitsuko licked her lips again. "Why don't you take off your bra for me?"

Keshvi didn't even hesitate. Obedience felt like the most natural thing in the world. It felt good to obey. She reached behind herself and started unhooking her bra, oblivious to the jeers and cheers of the crowd. It took her longer than usual; she was slow and kept fumbling, like she was drunk. But in the end, she managed it. Keshvi was about to rip off her bra and expose her breasts to everyone, when Mitsuko pressed her hand firmly into Keshvi's chest, keeping the undergarment in place.

"Stop," the hypnotist told her. Keshvi stopped instinctively. There were a few good-natured sounds of disappointment from the audience, but Mitsuko ignored them. Instead, she lent closer to Keshvi and placed her lips right by the hypnotized girl's ear. "That's far enough, I think. For now. I'm going to wake you up now. But if you want more... I'm staying in room 203."

It was midnight, and Keshvi's whole face was burning. She'd been blushing crimson ever since she'd woken up from trance on stage at the hypnosis show, to find herself with her top off and her bra unhooked. The audience had spared her no embarrassment, roaring with applause for Mitsuko at having overcome the skeptic. For her part, Keshvi had done her best to slink off stage unnoticed. Unfortunately for her, Amina was determined not to let her forget it so easily. Keshvi wasn't sure her friend would ever let her forget it. She wasn't looking forward to hearing the story spread around the office once they got back from the conference. The only small mercy was that Amina had kept true to her promise of paying for drinks. Keshvi had been drowning her sorrows all evening, doing her best to forget and ignore the occasional hotel guest who recognized her.

Embarrassment wasn't the only thing she was trying to forget, however. Something else was looming much larger in her mind: the feeling of being hypnotized. She hadn't even been aware of it at the time, but in retrospect it was obvious she'd been lulled into a deep trance. Keshvi hadn't been able to stop thinking about it. She hadn't been able to stop thinking about Mitsuko's confusing words about free will and desire, and she hadn't been able to stop thinking about how good it felt to obey. Most of all, though, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about the offer Mitsuko had made, to experience more if she came to the hypnotist's hotel room at night.

That was what had brought her, at midnight, to room 203. She'd debated the merits of going and not going, but in the end it hadn't felt like a choice at all. Just like going with the flow. Keshvi still felt deathly embarrassed by what she was doing, but as much as she was hesitating, it wasn't enough to stop her. She could feel that in every fiber of her being.

She knocked.

The door opened in just a few moments. Standing in the entranceway was Mitsuko. She was still

dressed in her performance outfit. Keshvi found her disarmingly hot. The hypnotist was wearing an expression of pride and triumph on her face. It should have been unbearably smug, but instead it just made Keshvi's cheeks burn all the harder.

"I... I... I..." she began. Keshvi had put a lot of thought into what she might say, but in that moment all her words deserted her.

"Shhh." Keshvi fell silent instantly. "You don't need to say anything. We both know why you're here." Mitsuko spoke with absolute confidence, and her voice alone was enough to make Keshvi weak. "So let me make this clear: if you enter my room, I'm in control. I'll help you do what you want, as much as you want. There's only one more choice that you need to make, and that's whether or not you're going to come into my room. Make it of your own free will."

Wordlessly and without thought, Keshvi succumbed to the lure of the hypnotist and quietly followed her into her hotel room.