

The Things in the Dark

Ana sat at the help desk, going through the large bin of returns. There had been a nasty cold front with rain lately, which meant business had picked up. She stamped the return date into a copy of *A Wrinkle in Time* and set it aside. Louise walked by with a stack of books in her arms and a new notice for the bulletin board. Ana watched her pass, then sank back in her chair with a sigh.

It had been two weeks since she had gone out on a proper hunt. Two weeks of misery, forced to hide in her church at night and hopefully catch some passing birds. She had been forced to up her calorie intake in regards to human food, but now felt a bit off as a result.

Eating nearly every day at Mattie's aside, her change in diet was causing her legs to cramp inside of the confines of the wheelchair. It wasn't the kind of cramp her human muscles felt. Rather, it was the dull ache of having a fist clenched for too long. Last night it had taken her several minutes just to get out of her wheelchair, her legs locked into place. She couldn't even massage her legs but had instead relied on a super hot bath to try to relax them.

Darren walked past the desk, a massive toolbox in his left hand. The muscles in his arm bulged through the tight fabric of his shirt and she nearly let out a sigh. Her sudden shift in diet had dramatically decreased her sexual cravings, which was an unexpected upswing. Her body was going into survival mode, meaning that even if she bred, she likely couldn't conceive.

Mixed blessings, she thought to herself. She hadn't seen the men who hunted her, but she knew it was just a matter of time before they came snooping around again. Well, maybe. It was her hope that they would assume she had died in the blast. It was all the town had talked about the next day, and several rumors had bounced around in Mattie's and at the library. Her favorite theory involved the aliens that had crashed at Roswell crashing their saucer into the lake, but the most common involved some idiots with stolen dynamite.

Close enough. She sipped at her water and let out a sigh. Louise had gone on a diet at least a couple of times since Ana started working for the library. The woman had become an irritable mess for weeks and had grumbled about the wonderful smells that saturated the air around Mattie's every morning. At least a few of the patrons who had come in to browse had smelled just as good to Ana, a cruel reminder that she was never more than a couple steps ahead of her own instincts.

No, she would abduct a pet or something long before hunting down a human. Or even leave town altogether. Now she wondered if she could fake a vacation and move on to safer hunting grounds for a week.

The minutes crawled by, impossibly slow. Her stomach growled, and she fought the urge to lay her head down on the desk. Storytime was coming up in half an hour, and she would be forced to read books to the equivalent of an open box of doughnuts.

Louise screamed out in the lobby and came in the doors, her arms now empty.

"Darren!" She called for him several times before he appeared, his toolbox left behind.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"We have mice!" The head librarian shook her head violently, a strand of hair popping free of her bun. "I saw a couple of them out in the front lobby, they ran into the storage room."

"I'll go get some traps." He left, walking out the front door.

Louise sat down next to Ana, placing a hand dramatically on her own chest.

"At least it wasn't a spider," Ana said.

"Close enough. I don't need mice in here chewing up the pages and shitting everywhere." She took Ana's water and drank half of it in one go. She picked up a book and fanned herself with the pages open.

"Please watch the desk, I need to go use the bathroom." Ana moved her chair backward and around the large desk, leaving Louise behind. Once in the lobby, she moved as quickly as she could, wheeling her chair into the large storage room. Darren was looking through the boxes, trying to find the traps.

"Do we only have these kind?" he asked, holding up a large rat trap.

Ana swallowed the lump in her throat. "Yeah." She didn't think he'd find them so fast.

"Hmm." He tossed the trap to the side. "I think I can build something that won't kill them. Not their fault they wandered into the wrong building."

"What will you do with them after you catch them?"

He shrugged. "Release them out in the woods? Let nature deal with them."

Oh, I wish you would. She could smell them now, hiding somewhere in the room, two little cupcakes with tails. "How are you going to catch them?"

"Hmm." He looked around the room. "I could probably bait them with some food. Maybe a box with a hole in the top?"

"They'll just chew through it."

"Shit, you're right."

"I know." She rolled over to an old waste bin and held it up. "If you dump this out, it should be smooth enough on the inside that they can't get out."

"Then how do I get them in?"

"Easy." She pointed to one of the nearby tables. "Lay a toilet paper tube on the edge of the table with some peanut butter in it. They'll fall in with the tube."

Darren fixed her with an incredulous look. "That's... brilliant. I never would have thought of that."

"Uh huh." She was salivating over the idea of being able to snack on a couple of mice. They didn't have much nutritional value, but it would help fill that aching void in her stomach. "There's some peanut butter in our pantry." It was one of the few things she kept on hand because she had used it more than once as a lure. Her webs could hold pretty much anything, but coaxing a creature into them took some work.

“Thanks, Ana.” When he smiled, it ignited something in her. Her heart fluttered like a moth to his flame, and she once again noticed the large muscles of his chest and wondered if their offspring would inherit his musculature.

“Yeah, well, just something I read about in a book.”

He left, and she debated climbing out of her chair and trying to catch them by hand. There were two of them, running along the back wall beneath one of the shelves. She looked at the trash bin Darren had set aside and let out a loud sigh.

She would wait. With any luck, she could sneak in for a quick bite after he caught one. Hanging her head, she rolled back to the main lobby, licking her lips in anticipation. The light coming in through the windows was slowly vanishing beneath a blanket of grey clouds. She sniffed the air, tasting the sudden shift in humidity.

A storm was approaching.

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Cyrus hung up the payphone, his shoulders slumped against the wind and rain. He crossed the motel parking lot and knocked twice before entering his room. Jeffrey was lying on one of the beds, tilting a beer to his mouth and watching the news.

“And?” Jeffrey asked, not bothering to look his way. Cyrus sighed, then took off his coat to hang it up on the rack by the door. He took a seat at the little table by the window, his eyes on the small notebook he had left there.

“They want us to be sure.”

“Fuck.” For a moment, it looked like Jeffrey was going to throw his bottle. It had been almost two weeks since the incident on the ridge. They had cornered the Arachne, and she had gone over the side of the cliff, climbing along its edges. Cyrus had used an extremely powerful spell to strike the rocks with lightning, expecting to shock the spider into the water indirectly and maybe even drown it.

The spell had gone awry. It had been a difficult undertaking to properly align the Storm rod, and he took a huge measure of the blame on his own shoulders. Instead of a cascade of lightning across the face of the cliff, it had all focused on the center, blasting a large hole through the earth and destroying a centuries-old magical item. This, in turn, had triggered an avalanche of stone into the lake, sending a huge wave across. He and Jeffrey had spent the next several hours frantically scanning the shoreline for her body. The Arachne feared water, and he hoped she had been crushed beneath the rubble, doomed to rot at the lake’s bottom.

The local police had shown up the next day and determined, in their limited knowledge, that someone had blown the damn place up. That had resulted in the feds arriving, more lawmen than Cyrus had cared to count. With hesitation, the two had fled to this motel. They had made several calls to the Order asking for instructions, but they had been stuck in a holding pattern while the Council deliberated their next move.

“So how are we supposed to be sure?” Jeffrey asked, his gaze fixated on the screen.

“The Oracle has started spouting nonsense whenever its asked about her, but it won’t say she’s dead. They said it was like radio interference, as if the Oracle was listening in on another frequency. I hate to say it out loud, but she may have gotten away.”

Jeffrey snorted. "Unless she had a submarine under those cliffs, there's no way she could have escaped."

"It's not for us to question their decision. They command, we obey." Cyrus wrung his hands together. "There's something else though. Unrelated."

"Oh?"

"Sir Marcus is dead." Cyrus had barely known the man, but he had been Jeffrey's mentor. Marcus had been a legend among the Knights of the Order, a man whose exploits defied explanation. Little had been said of him recently and rumors of his involvement with a powerful coven of witches had slowly spread through the grapevine. The last story he had heard was that Marcus had stumbled across a highly secretive group and had been planning a raid to capture them all for questioning.

"How?"

"In his sleep. It took them a while to retrieve his body, but when they did, they discovered three tiny holes in his neck, like the sting of an insect. The venom was long gone, but..." Cyrus shook his head. "They think it was a succubus."

Jeffrey stood up, his beer forgotten. When he got to the door, he grabbed his own coat and stepped out into the rain.

"I'm going out," he told Cyrus, then slammed the door. Cyrus watched him cross the parking lot and then the street, headed for the bar that was over there. He checked the clock and noted the time.

He would give Jeffrey a couple hours to cool down and then retrieve him. He couldn't blame him for being angry. If Marcus really had been killed by a succubus, there would be no reprieve for his soul until the thing had been destroyed and sent back to hell. Unless the foul demon decided to destroy it long before then. There was no telling what the demon would do.

Cyrus shivered. Many of his brothers had perished since his childhood, but he always took comfort that their souls had moved on as planned. The idea of an eternity of torment or, even worse, absolute destruction terrified him. Some day, he too would meet his fate at the end of something's claws, or maybe its fangs. Members of the Order rarely died of old age, and those who did tended to be the ones running the show.

Thunder rumbled outside, rattling the thin windows of his hotel room. Opening a bag of sunflower seeds, he sat down at the table and popped a few in his mouth. He worked the seeds around in his mouth, splitting them with his teeth and setting the shells in the ashtray. He pulled out their map of the woods and gazed over it, tapping the shattered cliffs with his fingers.

Where are you hiding? He drew an X through the lake at the quarry. It was going to be a long night.

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Darren stared at the cardboard tube in his hand with a dollop of peanut butter on it. He balanced it on the edge of the table and looked down on it from above to make sure it was directly over the center of the trash can.

"Huh." He pushed the tube back just a little, wondering what the best placement would be. Not wanting to overthink it, he left it as is. He tightened the jar on the peanut butter and pushed it back

against the wall. Strangely, Ana had a couple jars of the stuff stored in the back of their cupboard at home.

Leaning over the bin, he contemplated the drop. Should he put something on the bottom so the mouse didn't get hurt?

"That looks nasty." Little Mike used his bayonet to push on the edges of the trap. The two boards folded inward slightly.

"Yeah it does, but is there something else in there?" Dwayne had spotted the trap, and they had gathered around it for a closer look. "These nails don't even look sharp."

"Will that really kill you though?" Hayden tossed in a rock and the boards folded in, the nails slapping together. "I don't get it."

"That's the thing about traps." Cutter spit in the hole between the two boards. "This isn't meant to kill a man, but everyone else he's with."

"How so?"

Cutter knelt down. "Take a whiff boys."

Darren didn't have to. He'd already heard some stories from some of the others.

"Gross." Little Mike covered his nose. "Fuckin' Viet Cong and their nasty shit."

"That's right. Some traps are meant to kill a man, others to maim. This one, though, is meant to create a liability." He used the edge of his knife to scrape the tar-like substance off one of the nails. "They rub their shit on here. You step in one of these, you become a liability to your squad, one way or another. In a firefight, it's far easier to gun a man down when he's trying to drag his squadmate. Outside of fighting, even a scratch can make you horrible sick, maybe even kill you after the fact. Demoralizing."

"Disgusting is what it is. Do they dunk the nails in their own shit, or hover over this with their pants down?" Hayden pried up the boards to reveal that a single spike had been embedded in the ground. Even if the nails missed, that spike would easily pierce a boot and pin someone there.

"Now that's nasty." Cutter grabbed at the spike and yanked it free, then tossed it aside. "Fill this shit up so that none of our boys get stabbed."

"Nobody's getting stabbed today." Darren said, staring into the depths of the trashcan for several seconds before leaving it be. The mouse would be fine, and he would let it go somewhere safe. The library wasn't a war zone, after all, and he didn't need to demoralize anybody.

It was dark outside. Storm clouds had gobbled up any remaining light in the sky, but other than some distant thunder, it wasn't too bad. He watched the rain fall, fighting off another memory. The smell of wet pavement kept him there, kept his mind from wandering to a place of mud and corpses. Inhaling deeply, he set an anchor for his mind, determined not to drift.

There were no streetlights by the library, which meant a dark walk across the street. Instead, he turned his attention to a streetlamp a couple blocks away. He could see the raindrops clearly there, highlighted by the lamp up above. The rain trickled down his forehead and across his face. Turning his head up into the rain, he held out his hands, pretending that they could ever be washed clean of the blood he saw on them every day.

Bright headlights came around the corner, and the car slowed down when it drew near. Darren squinted through the beam and saw that Sheriff Walters was behind the driver's seat. Walter's pulled up alongside him and leaned across the front to roll down the window.

"Don't suppose you'd see clear to do me a favor?"

"I've got time." Darren opened the passenger door and got in. "Where are we headed?"

"A bar out on the edge of town. I got word of a drunk who broke the jukebox and then beat up a couple regulars. Ordinarily I wouldn't ask, but I thought maybe you could be my backup."

Darren frowned. "I don't have to carry a gun or anything, do I?"

"Nah." Walters squinted through the rain. "Just have my back when I ask him to leave. It's just me tonight, but the men he put to the pavement, well, they're far younger than I am."

"I'll do what I can." Darren sat in silence as the town disappeared behind them. He found it odd that Walters would ask a civilian for help, but he owed the man and figured he was probably the most qualified for it.

The windshield kept fogging up, and Walters would turn the defroster on for a few minutes. The car would grow uncomfortably hot, so he would turn it back off again.

"Damned humidity." Walters cracked a window. It wasn't too much longer when Darren could see the lights of the bar ahead. It was situated across the street from a motel that promised a tv in every room. When they pulled up, a few guys were waiting for them outside.

"Evening sheriff." They all ignored Darren, but he preferred it that way.

"Evening boys. 'Scuse us, police business." They walked in together, and Darren immediately walked along the edge of the bar, surveying the scene.

A man sat at the bar with several empty glasses in front of him. Darren was impressed by his ability to remain upright based on the dirty glasses in front of him.

"Are you going to pour me another one, or not?" The stranger slammed an empty glass on the counter hard enough that a crack ran through it.

The bartender shook his head, his arms crossed across his chest. "It's time for you to settle up and go." He locked eyes with Walters, who nodded his head and took the seat next to the drunk.

"I got word of a man smashing jukeboxes on this side of town. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

The stranger laughed. "Don't play coy with me, law man. You're here to arrest me for disturbing the peace."

"Might." Walters cocked his head. "Have we met before?"

"Doesn't matter." The stranger picked up a shot glass and frowned when he realized it hadn't refilled itself. He tossed it over the counter where it shattered on the floor.

Walters sighed. "Son, I'm going to ask you once to come with me. I don't want trouble and neither do these fine people."

"I ain't your son, law man." When he turned to face Walters, Darren got a good look at him, saw the intensity in his eyes. This was a man looking for a fight, hoping to unleash some rage on the world. The alcohol had long ago stripped away any restraint, and it was just a matter of time before he exploded.

The drunk spun in his seat, leaning back against the counter to meet Darren's gaze. "Is this your son? Are you law man junior? A chip off the old block?" He squinted, his cheeks bright red. "Nah, you ain't related. No, you're a soldier boy. I can see it in your shoulders, back from the war already, hoping to buy yourself the American dream, a pretty little house with a picket fence, maybe bed yourself a woman who will make you dinner while you work at the factory, pop out a couple of kids for you? Better yet, lie there on her back every night while you try to fuck her, watch you cry when you can't keep it up, let you slap her around a bit and blame it on the war?"

Darren said nothing. This wasn't the first attempt to get a rise out of him and it wouldn't be the last.

"What's the matter, soldier boy? Did I hurt your feelings?"

"Just contemplating how someone dressed a turd up in human clothes and taught it how to talk."

The reaction was immediate, the stranger launching out of his seat. Darren brought his hands up and blocked the first punch thrown his way, amazed at the strength of impact. The drunk took on a boxer's stance and threw out a couple of feeble jabs, but Darren wasn't falling for it.

Walters, however, did. He came up from behind and tried to grab the drunk's wrist, but the man spun around and backhanded the sheriff hard enough that he fell to the ground, his hat sailing across the bar. Walters got his hands up in time to block a kick to his face, but just barely.

Darren put his foot in the back of the man's knee, dropping him low enough to be put in a chokehold. He grabbed the drunk and yanked him away from the sheriff, noticing right away that the man wasn't bothering to struggle. He twisted the man to the side just as the drunk spun in place and nearly caught Darren in the knee with a low kick, popping free of the hold.

"Ooh, you're fast soldier boy." The drunk's face had hardened into a sneering mask of rage, and he took a casual swing that Darren barely side stepped. This wasn't some ordinary drunk, this was a man who knew how to fight, and perhaps even how to kill. "Fast enough to run away from Vietnam?"

"I did my time." Darren circled, remembering to keep his hands up. That was a hard lesson he had learned in high school, and an even harder one in the jungle. He could hear Little Mike's voice in his head, reminding him to keep his elbows in. This time, when the drunk swung, Darren countered, smashing his knuckles straight into the man's face.

It was like punching concrete. All of his knuckles popped, pain shooting up his wrist, but he kept his ground.

The drunk stumbled back a step and plugged one nostril to fire blood out of the other. He touched the crimson streak on his lip and held his fingers out to contemplate them.

“That wasn’t half bad, soldier boy.” The drunk grinned and then moved so fast that Darren couldn’t track him. A hard blow to his shoulder spun him around and then he was kicked in the gut, tumbling back into a table.

Darren held his stomach, grunting in pain as he stood. The drunk stood over him now, one hand on Darren’s collar and the other raised to knock him out.

“Jeffrey, enough!” This voice came from a man with in a pale grey duster jacket and a panicked look on his face. He stood in the door of the bar, surveying the scene with a calm but concerned expression.

“I’m just having a drink, Cyrus. Fuckers stopped serving me.” Jeffrey let go of Darren, allowing him to slide to the floor.

“As they should. We need to go. Now.” Cyrus’s eyes lingered on Darren and then moved to Walters. “Sheriff, I apologize for my friend here. He just lost a friend in the war and he really isn’t himself.”

Walters stood up, pain on his face. “Losing a loved one can be hard, but apologies won’t fix this place up.”

“But money will.” Cyrus slapped down a small roll of cash on a nearby table. “And we are leaving now, if he isn’t under arrest.”

A range of emotions crossed Walters’ face, and he finally sighed, his shoulders drooping. He walked over to Cyrus and picked up the roll of cash and tossed it to the bartender. “You reckon that will cover it, Al?”

Al’s eyes went wide as he unrolled the cash, adding numbers in his head. “It sure will, Sheriff. Plus some.”

“You want to press charges?”

“No sir.” Al stuffed the cash in his pocket and knelt behind the bar. He came back holding an unopened bottle of bourbon and tossed it to Jeffrey, who caught it. “I’m sorry to hear about your friend. Here’s one for the road.”

Jeffrey gave Darren a mock salute and walked out the door, cracking into the bottle. Cyrus just shook his head and walked across the bar to help Darren up.

“He’s not a bad guy, really.” Their gazes locked for several seconds and Cyrus nodded. “And I reckon you understand him a bit. It isn’t personal.”

Darren nodded, but remained silent. He knew exactly how Jeffrey had felt, but something felt off about the whole situation. If Jeffrey hadn’t been drinking and Darren had, their fight would have made more sense. What kind of man could get so intoxicated but still be able to toss around two grown men like they were nothing?

Cyrus ducked out the door and Walters followed, standing in the frame. Darren joined him, and they watched as the two strangers got into a white pickup truck and pulled out of the lot.

“Son of a bitch,” Walters muttered. “I do recognize those guys. They came into town same day you did, said they were looking for some land to buy.”

“Hopefully they decide to move on.” Darren got a chill watching their tail lights disappear over the hill. “I get a bad feeling off of them.”

“You and me both.”

“So why didn’t you arrest him?”

Walters shrugged. “Sometimes it’s better to let trouble pass you by. He’s just a drunk, we get them out here from time to time. Honestly was just planning on letting him sleep it off in a cell, but his friend seems to have his head on straight. Maybe I book him for assault, but unless you want to press charges, I’m fine seeing the back of them.”

“Your call.” Darren said, looking at where the taillights had disappeared. Hopefully that really was the last of them. The way that Cyrus had casually thrown down some cash told him this wasn’t the first time that he had been forced to bail Jeffrey out.

“You’re right, it is. Thanks for coming along. Didn’t get hurt too bad?”

“No.” He rubbed his stomach. “Just got the wind knocked out of me.” He didn’t mention how bad his hand hurt. There was a right way and a wrong way to land a punch, and he figured he had simply hit at a bad angle.

“C’mon, son. Let’s get you home.” Walters led the way to his car, and they both got in.

Headed back into town, Walters made plenty of small talk. Darren made sure the talk stayed small, his mind drifting back to the moment he had smashed his fist into Jeffrey. His knuckles were throbbing with pain now, and he made sure to keep his hand hidden from the sheriff.

Once home, he waved farewell with his left hand and went inside the house. There was no sign of Ana, and her door was closed, the light off. He pulled some ice out of the freezer and wrapped it in a towel before placing it over his hand. Wincing, he examined the damage.

It hadn’t hurt at first, but now his whole fist was swollen. Grateful he could still bend his fingers, he figured it was a hairline fracture at worst, and maybe also a couple of sprains across his fingers. There wasn’t much to be done for it except to take some aspirin and hope the swelling went down in the morning.

He ate a quick can of soup. He wasn’t particularly hungry and thought about getting up earlier than normal for a run. There was something about how peaceful the world seemed first thing in the morning, but even more so after a good rain.

He opened the door to his bedroom and frowned. The humidity from the storm had gotten trapped inside, making it feel hotter than it should. He left his bedroom door open just a crack and took off his boots, leaving them upright next to his nightstand. Taking a deep breath, his shirt came off next, and he turned off the light, his eyes on the dark ceiling.

When the shadows moved in to hover over him, he already had his eyes squeezed tight, his fingers clutching his dog tags like a talisman against the dark.

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Between the rain and the lack of adequate lighting, Ana could have easily walked across the road to the library and not been spotted. However, she erred on the side of caution and crossed in her wheelchair, using her key to let herself in.

The inside of the library was like a tomb at night. The only sounds she could hear were the distant rumbling of thunder and the soft pitter patter of rain on the roof. However, when she allowed her senses to expand, she could now hear the steady dripping of a water leak somewhere on the roof, and even the rush of air through a loose pane of glass somewhere in the library proper.

She could also hear the delicate scratching of nails on concrete. She cocked her head sideways to hear better, then locked the door behind her. When her wheel squeaked, she heard the scratching stop.

Something much bigger than a mouse was in the library.

Pulling herself free of her chair, she moved silently along the stone wall. Long ago, she had learned to tell the difference between actual brick work and a facade. Primarily, the difference was that a facade would rip itself free trying to support her weight, and she had sported a pretty nasty bruise for weeks as a reminder of that particular lesson.

The scratching resumed, and now she could hear the sound of a tongue licking something, the rich smell of peanut butter in the air. The door to the storage room was just ahead, but she pushed up on one of the ceiling tiles in the dropped ceiling and moved across the space above the door.

Climbing even higher through a narrow gap, she was now on the rafters above the second floor. Moving from beam to beam, she positioned herself to look down on the entire room. There was the damp smell of water and fur down below, and she could smell the creature's breath.

Just beneath the table, a very wet raccoon was picking its way through pieces of broken glass, greedily gobbling up the peanut butter on the floor. Apparently Darren had left the jar there, and her best guess was that the raccoon had let himself in to avoid the storm.

Surveying the room, it didn't take long to determine by the air currents that the raccoon had come in through a loose air vent on the floor level. Smiling to herself, she quietly descended, careful to avoid touching the surrounding shelves. Once by the floor, she quietly pulled the vent off and started building a funnel inside of the duct. The raccoon happily slurped up its snack while she tucked the web into place.

Satisfied with her handiwork, she maneuvered around toward the other side of the room, carefully watching the creature below. Satisfied that there were no other exits, she tumbled free of the ceiling and landed on all eight legs.

The raccoon stood up and hissed, holding a gob of peanut butter in its hand. However, once it saw Ana, the stench of fear flooded the room and the raccoon bolted.

Truthfully, she could probably catch it, but didn't feel like getting bitten and scratched. She maneuvered herself around the room, and it predictably moved toward the vent. Once it was close, she made a series of hissing noises to scare it farther. In its haste, it didn't notice the webs in the vent until it was too late.

It thumped around, trying to free itself of the webbing when she grabbed it by the tail and dragged it back out. It bared its teeth at her, but its legs and hands were trapped against its body. She started the process of wrapping it, finding a couple of good places to bite it and let her poison go to work. Once it had gone still, she hastily bundled it up, sticking it to her backside. A thorough cleaning of any leftover webbing in the vent erased any trace of her presence, and she walked out the door and back to her chair.

The trip back home was uneventful, and she made haste for her haven above the church. The raccoon was the first proper meal she would eat in days, and she struggled with waiting for the enzymes to take effect. When she had bitten the raccoon, she had injected it with a special blend that would still take a couple of hours to properly kick in.

She busied herself by checking the traps in the belfry, just in case. The storm had sent a few birds scrambling for shelter, but none of them would make quite the meal that the raccoon would. Still, she set to work bundling them up and storing them away for consumption later.

Down below, she could hear Darren shifting in his bed. He was saying something in his sleep that was lost to the walls of his room. Hovering silently in her web, she watched the cocoon carefully, touching it every few minutes to see if it was ready. Too early and most of the meat would go to waste.

Patience had long been one of her strengths, but she was just so fucking hungry right now. Her mouth was full of saliva, and she tried to distract herself for just a bit longer by unspooling a bit of webbing and making different patterns from it. It was a game some children had taught her, but she had no idea the what purpose it served. After manipulating the patterns for a while, she tried her own variation on the game and deftly tied a few knots while flipping the webbing around.

It was a primitive picture when she was done, but it clearly looked like a butterfly. Or maybe even a moth. The scent of the raccoon drifted across her nose and she dropped her toy and licked her lips. The smell was unmistakable, and she knew her meal was ready to eat.

Her fangs popped out again and she bit through the tough webbing and savored the sweet taste of fresh food. Taking her time to savor it, she squeezed the bottom of the cocoon upward, drinking as she went.

By the time she was done, her stomach bulged out slightly and the various cramps across her body had disappeared. Hanging upside down over the belfry, she hung upside down from a thick thread. The wind from the storm caused her to rock from side to side, and she wanted nothing more than to let it lull her to sleep. However, it now sounded like Darren was having a conversation with somebody, and the last thing she wanted to do was doze off with someone else in her house.

The storm outside had mostly passed, but a light drizzle fell. Using a cup she kept in the belfry, she extended it out into the rain and let it fill. Drinking fresh rainwater made her long for simpler times and sleeping in trees. Being unable to hunt made it hard to nourish her body, but being able to extend her legs and roam the forest made it hard to nourish her soul.

Sighing, she put the empty cup back and stashed away the raccoon carcass. Once the hunters left, she could have those things once again. Without any way of knowing when they left, she would have to be extremely careful for the foreseeable future.

Her hunger satiated, she crawled down from the belfry and back into her room. Darren's voice was coming his wall, but so was another. Freaked out, she squeezed back into her chair and opened the door and wheeling out into the hall.

"Darren?" she asked, looking at the door to his room. It was open, so she approached, her wheel squeaking again. When a cry came from the doorway, she stopped, holding perfectly still for several seconds.

Another cry came from him, and she pushed the door open.

“Darren?” she asked.

He was on his bed, sweating profusely. Occasionally he would flinch, muttering angrily to the dark room. Ana remembered that Darren had told her he slept poorly and wondered what dark thoughts were currently haunting him. When he spoke, his voice would alternate back and forth between normal and a tense, growling version of himself. He was having a conversation with someone in his dreams and, apparently, it sounded like he wasn't winning.

Suddenly, the smell hit her. She couldn't help but suck it in and feel it permeate her being, a sudden compulsion that caused a tingling sensation to spread throughout her legs. They twitched in their confined space, causing her wheelchair to shake.

“Ah shit,” she whispered, her brain no longer in control of her body. The wheel of her chair squeaked when she approached his bed, her hearts pounding. Darren muttered something about a pit, then turned his head away from her.

She wanted to leave, but every fiber in her body screamed one word.

Breed! He was right in front of her and easy prey. If she wanted, she could bite him to get him hard and fuck him until he blew his load inside of her, then eat him later as her eggs developed.

“No!” Darren's shout startled her, and she backed away, shaking her head.

“I refuse,” she whispered, her hands moving to the front of his pants. Her arms hovered over his body, but her fingers trembled. She wouldn't eat him, she couldn't. It wasn't right.

She took his hand instead. Almost immediately, he went silent, his mouth opening wide to breathe in the night air. He muttered a few more times, then tilted his head back toward her.

He was in perfect shape. For whatever reason, he slept without a shirt on tonight, and her fingers traced the tight bands of muscle in his arm. Stealing across his shoulder, she was now touching his pecs, and then his stomach. Turning his head once more, a pair of dog tags rustled beneath him, then went silent once more.

“I should go.” The words held no power over her body, and she suddenly realized that this was the first time she had ever touched a man's stomach before. A strange budding sensation filled her stomach, and her hands traveled even lower to squeeze his legs through the fabric of his pants.

She willed him to wake up, to chase her out of his room, but she also wanted him to stay asleep, to let her explore. What harm was another few seconds, or even minutes, in the grand scheme of things? Moving her hands along his upper thigh, she squeezed something else.

Oh god. His mutterings had ceased, and now she couldn't take her hand off of the soft cock she had just discovered. It had cast a spell on her, and try as she might, her hand would not let go.

She squeezed it a couple of times and could sense the sudden flow of blood to his member. It grew stiff beneath the fabric of his pants, filling the space in her palms. It was thick, and very long, or at least she assumed so. That rational part of her reminded her that she had no frame of reference.

“I really should go.” These words did her no good either, and she almost cried out when her hands betrayed her by undoing the top of his pants and carefully sliding them down. She could see the thick nest of his pubes first, the sweet aroma of his arousal making her mouth water in anticipation. The

fangs that hid behind her human teeth extended, but she forced them away. There would be no venom, no paralysis. She would tuck him away and leave.

But she couldn't. Every second she held onto his meaty cock, the hypnotic effect became worse. The world faded away, gobbled up by the darkness in the corners of her vision. Beneath her thumb, she could feel his heartbeat, every pulse drawing her in.

She gave it a couple of strokes, promising herself that she would stop. The heat of it radiated through her body, her stomach fluttering wildly. A throbbing in her abdomen matched tempos with Darren's heartbeat, and she let out a little whimper when a tiny drop of pre-cum dribbled across the head of his cock.

Panting, she lowered her head, the rational part of her brain screaming to stop and walk away before he woke up. Instinct had the upper hand, however, and she just had to know how it tasted.

Her tongue flicked out and licked up that solitary drop, and blood rushed to her loins. Her spinnerets were frantically producing webbing on their own, her body ready to tie him down and take what was rightfully hers. However, she remained in her wheelchair, focusing instead on the bouquet of flavors that now danced across her tongue.

He tasted of sunshine with just a hint of spice. With another lick, she somehow knew that their offspring wouldn't just be strong, but smart as well. A flood of information overtook her, and she needed to know more, to feel more.

This time, her lips stretched wide to accommodate the head of his dick. Her lower half trembled, the wheel on her chair squeaking in response. She convinced herself that they couldn't mate yet, she needed to know more, to feel more. He took up so much space in her mouth that she now pumped him slowly, hoping to squeeze out a few more drops.

He moaned quietly, causing her to stop. His cock flexed in her mouth a few times and she resumed her pace, the speed of her strokes gradually speeding up. Her free hand rubbed the spot just beneath his balls, pushing inward to massage something. She had no idea what she was doing, but instinct demanded it.

Her mouth broke contact with his cock, a sticky string of saliva connecting them.

"I'm really sorry about this," she whispered, then sucked him into her throat once more.

-g-

The jungle stank of rotting sewage, the smell making his eyes water. He was on his back, hidden beneath a canopy of leaves. The vision in his left eye was obscured with blood and pieces of Hayden.

A pair of boots appeared in his field of view, and then another. They were speaking Vietnamese, and he could see the barrels of their guns hanging just below the leaves.

"Do you think they know what you did to Cutter?" A large beetle on a rock nearby wore Little Mike's face. It rocked back on its shell and broke open a candy bar. "Maybe Charlie is coming to give you a medal for it."

"Shh," he told the beetle. The Vietcong stood even closer now, and for some reason they were larger than before, their bodies distorted. The boot closest to him was easily eighteen inches across, and

the soil around the bushes was littered with human bones. For some reason, there were now five boots, but he didn't dare look up.

Never look up

"How many times did you stab him?" Beetle Mike asked, his mouth full of candy bar. "There's no way it wasn't personal."

Darren scowled, but held his breath. For some reason, he could hold his breath forever if he wanted to. The jungle did all the breathing for him, the leaves swishing back and forth over his head. Distant gunfire was followed by screaming, and he wanted to close his eyes and pretend he was home, in his own bed, but his eyelids were somehow invisible. Even when they were closed, he could still see those boots on the ground nearby.

A sixth boot appeared from above, as if a one legged soldier had descended from the heavens above.

"I lost count after ten. But that's because God never intended us to count past ten. Otherwise, why not give us more fingers for it?"

"Shut up." He flicked the beetle into the bushes and heard it bounce off of something. A serpent emerged from the brush wearing Hayden's face.

"We need to do something about Cutter." he said, slithering onto Darren's chest. Those words were forever burned into his brain, it was the start of a conversation that had ultimately resulted in the rest of them getting killed.

"Cutter's already dead. I killed him, remember?" His memory of the event was fuzzy, but he could now smell diesel somewhere out in the jungle.

"It's hard to remember things when you're a snake." Hayden hissed and slid out of the brush. A seventh boot descended and crushed the snake into a pile of ash that blew away. The Vietcong were quiet now, their feet facing in different directions. In the distance, a fire had been started, the smell of burning wood and flesh now flooding the leaves.

The jungle vanished behind a cloud of smoke, but Darren didn't worry. After all, he could keep holding his breath forever. He scooted himself backward, hoping to do so unnoticed. Something about the way those feet were placed troubled him to no end, and he fought the urge to look up.

Never look up

"Darren?" It was his brother, his best friend, calling to him from the murk. "Darren, I can't see you, where are you?"

A cold sweat had broken out on his forehead, and he kept his eyes forward. He so desperately wanted to answer his brother's call, but a part of him told him that his brother had died too. This was the part of the dream he couldn't handle, seeing his brother's face torn apart, his voice emanating from a hollow skull.

A hand grabbed his leg and yanked, pulling him into the leaves. He let out a scream, and then the feet were all around him, kicking and stomping. He was launched out of the brush, tumbling across the ground and losing his rifle. His helmet came off when he landed on his back, and the Mike beetle landed on top of it, still holding its candy bar.

“God never intended for us to fight this war, you know. You know how I know?” Beetle Mike licked chocolate off his fingers. “Because God doesn’t give two damns about this place. It would be better to burn the whole place down and start over new.”

“Fuck you.” He drew his pistol and fired it at the beetle. When the gunsmoke cleared, the beetle was still there, but the helmet was now a skull, staring back at him forlornly.

Gasping, Darren looked away, his eyes going to the sky. The smoke up above had become the faces of his squadmates, judging him with hatred. Hands sprouted from the soil and held him in place as the monstrosity stepped into view.

The seven legs were nearly six feet long with multiple knees, giving the creature the appearance of a mutant daddy long legs. Its body was an angry, bloody looking meatball that spun in place to reveal an angry mouth full of teeth.

The apparition stepped on his chest, pinning him in place. He gasped in terror, staring at that wicked mouth as it opened up to reveal a face. It was Cutter’s, his eyes dead and his mouth hanging open.

“It’s demoralizing,” he said, and then his face twisted into Jeffrey’s. “I guess you weren’t fast enough after all.”

Jeffrey stomped on him and the ground beneath him cracked and broke apart. When he fell, the giant boards around him snapped together, the spikes just missing his body. The one beneath him, however, didn’t.

He fought to get free. The pain was intense, but also far away. Jeffrey’s face turned back into Cutter’s, his dark eyes contemplating the soldier who had fallen into his trap.

“Fill this shit up so that one of our boys doesn’t get stabbed.” The feet all started kicking dirt onto him now, and the breath he had been holding suddenly exploded from him. He had lost the ability to hold his breath forever, his lungs crying for air, but his mouth filled with dirt every time he opened it. Coughing, he tried to climb out, but the large feet kept piling the warm soil on top of him.

“Soldier boy, soldier boy,” Jeffrey’s voice taunted him from above as his vision grew dark.

Darren opened his eyes, his heart pounding in his chest. The sounds of the jungle had faded, but an unfamiliar heat remained. Someone else was in the room with him, holding him down.

No, not holding him. The intense sensation of his balls pulling into his body made him groan, his hands balling up the sheet beneath him. Muscles trembling, his brain attempted to take in this new information. Sex wasn’t something he had time or energy to think about, but his body had still gone through the trouble of producing all that jizz, and now somebody was trying to suck it out of him.

He lifted his hips, another groan escaping him. The stranger was frantically gobbling him up, letting out tiny mewling sounds that told him it was a woman. Every second brought his brain closer to Earth, filling in the details of his life. He remembered the town first, and then Mattie’s diner. The fight he had with Jeffrey, and his busted hand. Had he gone home with a barmaid? No, he couldn’t have. Walters had given him a ride.

He had never really had his dick sucked, not well anyway. A girlfriend in high school had tried it and spent most of the time just licking the tip. Hayden had offered to pay for a hooker in ‘Nam, but he had heard too many tales of crotch rot to take him up on the offer.

However, he could tell that this blowjob was different. It was frantic, maybe even desperate. The cute, mewling noises of the woman in his lap were eager, and the suction was tremendous, his cock harder than it had ever been in his life. Her hands did some of the work, but the rapid bobbing of her head was doing the rest.

With every moan, his cock vibrated just a little. His eyes nearly rolled back into her head when he felt her swallow a mouthful of spit. She kept going, oblivious to his awakened state.

It didn't take long before that familiar tug in his groin expanded down his legs and he let out a growl of his own, hot semen now flowing into her mouth. The head of his cock was being squeezed by the back of her throat, so he grabbed her by the hair, forcing her further onto him to catch the rest of his load. She gagged, but continued sucking, the sound loud enough that he could hear it. Letting out a final grunt, his orgasm subsided, and she let out a moan, drinking it down. When she was done, she licked him clean, a desperation in her actions that made no sense.

He lifted his head to see who it was, but his eyes caught the glint of metal and wheels in the minimal light that had come in the door. His face frozen in shock, his eyes met Ana's when she lifted her head. Her expression was hungry, and her dark pupils had gone so wide that he felt like the whites had long ago vanished.

"Ana?"

When he said her name, it broke the spell. As if realizing where she was, she let out a panicked squeak and tried to escape, somehow causing her chair to tilt dangerously in her effort to turn around. He watched her go and heard her bedroom door slam shut behind her. He was tempted to follow, but to what end?

Puzzled, he let out a deep sigh, wondering if it had just been a dream. The night was still young and nothing seemed to make sense to him anymore. Catching his breath, his dream was officially forgotten, the sudden release of his orgasm having driven away the dark.

Exhaustion, however, rushed in to claim him once more. Lying there in the stillness of the night, he closed his eyes, bracing himself for a new rush of dark memories.

They never came.