

Jolt

Lisa returns to the room, another monster slung over her shoulder before dropping it to the floor, next to a growing pile of bodies in the corner that now buried the dark figure's corpse. Looking over the copy of Porter this time, firearm within quickdraw distance after the results of the last examination, Blondie pushed her hair back from her face. Scratching her head, she stared at the body, its insides open and displaying what looked to be organs but rested in uncanny valley.

"So, did you find out anything useful yet? Hauling these things up here is getting tiring." I asked, my shoulders and back sore from going back and forth carrying the heavy monsters to be examined. Blondie mumbled something to herself as she grabbed her gun and pressed the barrel nearly to the copy's forehead before firing. "Nope, this one is just like the others...nothing at all to indicate commonality. Give me the next one." She answered, shoving the body off the end of the table and into the pile where it rolled listlessly to the floor. I don't really know what she's looking for, she said a pattern in the copies but, after that last body suddenly reanimated, I hope she finds it soon... we haven't had any problems with encroaching monsters in a while but, it's also been dark for the same amount of time. Something doesn't feel right.

"Here we go...let's try something different." She said, before typing on her computer quickly, and touching the back of her neck. The body laying on the table this time was a copy of myself. Disturbing. That's the only word for it, especially when Blondie had it carved open like a holiday pheasant.

A cringeworthy buzz filled the room like the kind you hear from a large light bulb dying. Enduring the sound because of curiosity, I watched Blondie reach into the copy's chest, heard the sound of voltage, and the copy convulse before the room filled with buzzing and everything went black with a loud thump.

What the fuck is going on? How did I get over here, where's here?

Looking around frantically, I saw my body lying motionless on the floor, with Blondie looking it over in curiosity.

"What is this?" I demanded frantically, looking at Blondie and jumping to my feet to dodge out of the way when I heard a primal snarl fill the roll.

Jumping back and pulling her firearm, Blondie was glaring at me now in contempt and fear, and I had no idea why.

Never minding her for the moment, I began to search for the source of the snarling...for the monster that must have appeared.

Strange land

James and Porter walked back to the building they were hiding in, mumbling to themselves with each heavy step back to Lisa and Blondie, both oblivious to the absence of both the monsters and the dark night encroached like a shadow. They silently recounted the encounter with Sim and what events gave them the unfortunate opportunity of meeting them. As they walked, they began to hear sounds around them, James and Porter looked around and saw no one. Yet the sounds indicated people, that was impossible

The buildings surrounding us were dark and dilapidated, looking older than before we left, the whole situation was ominous. There were voices and bustling, but no one was around. I looked back at James and saw he was staring at something above us. Reaching for my gun, I felt nothing and that concerned me. Where was it? I swear I had it on me when that prick, Sim, left. Sighing, I followed James' gaze and saw a grotesque and stomach-churning sky. It was dark like night with streaks of blood read in it, and the source of the voices we heard. There were monstrous creatures, murmuring and speaking in delirium, all crammed into the streaks that as I looked, resembled open wounds. "Oh god!" James gasped, still staring at the sky and stammered, "Those are people!" Looking harder, a shrill chill went through my body when I realized he was right. Contorted and crushed into each other, pierced and sewed together by some sort of tendril that wove its way through all of them. They bled and the tendril glowed, it crushed them tighter together and their bodies collided, and crushed together were barely audible sounds of snapping and squishing as flesh bone and meat resisted the pressure before completely ripping and forging nightmare fuel unparalleled. Arms mashed in harmonic attachment to heads or protruding from the chests and sometimes groin of others. They all reached for each other, reached for the ground, reached any and everywhere, their delirious speech and groans continuing.

Swallowing the urge to retch, I looked around away from the grotesque scene, to try and figure out what was going on. There was nowhere to go. If the sky was as monstrous as this, I didn't want to take the chance that the buildings harbored the same or worse. Having watched too many horror films, I half-expected a hoard of monsters or dead to come at us but, nothing did. Suddenly, James grabbed my arm and dragged me after him as he took off. "What the hell are you doing?" I shouted, suddenly aware of being dragged away from the hellish scene.

"Just run!" He answered, releasing my arm and continuing to run, periodically looking behind us and then up at the sky. When he looked back over his shoulder, I could see that he was terrified; he furiously wiped away tears and a look of horror seemed permanently fixed across his face.

Looking up, I noticed the sky was absent of both the scabbing streaks and flesh craft from before. The voices were gone and so was the ominous feeling I had before. Reaching forward, I

grabbed James to stop him and my feet slid out from under me, tripping us both into the pavement.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

Looking back to me with fear, his attention drifted beyond me and he stared, trembling and tensing to run again. I followed his gaze and was struck by horror and disbelief at how I’d managed to miss the ooze bleeding out of the ground, that we’d barely been staying ahead of.

Bite

I didn’t wait long for Porter to grok the bullshit that we were barely staying two steps ahead of, and what I could just feel was coming with it. Things were about to get bad and I didn’t want to stick around and find out how it started or played out. It wasn’t that I’d seen the ooze before-I hadn’t but, but something about it unlocked the scenes of Dell and Dad’s mutilated bodies and threw them right into the lap of my consciousness. Clambering to my feet, I broke and ran, letting go of Porter and running away from the threat and from the memory. It was her choice if she wanted to stay for a rodeo I knew we couldn’t win.

Distantly, I heard her questioning aloud, “What the hell is that?” A quick set of footsteps approached from behind, and I was just glad that she decided running was the better option. The steps sounded sloppy and struggled but, I imagined Porter running through ooze probably would. I felt her getting closer and breathed a sigh of relief before the urgency of her still distant voice chilled me.

“James!”

Feeling like something reached for me from behind, I was suddenly eating pavement, after some miracle tripped me up on my own shoelaces. A stomach-churning slime drifted across my back and head and tumbled to the ground before me. Lurching at the feeling, I forced myself to hold back and shivered at the mentally scarring feeling. My teeth still hurt and I was sure I probably broke a few with how hard I hit the ground, I could still feel the snap of vibration in my head as I opened my eyes and set eyes on what slithered over me at the spattering sound. A gruesome and anatomically confused creature of blood vessel, muscle, and exaggerated bone formations lay a few feet away from me, writhing and wriggling horrifically as it tried to get up, smearing blood wherever it touched and making a scraping sound at the same time.

The monster finally made it to a knee and started to reach towards me and as the knife they carried became noticeable in hand, my vision flickered and I was back in that cramped toybox, trying to avoid the sharp blade cutting through the dark and trying to find me.

Escape

The monster shrieked angrily, snatched its hand away from James clenched jaws and connected a fierce strike to his ear at the same time that slammed him in to the ground. The monster's hand was bloody and mangled more than it already was from the sharp clamp down of teeth James managed to get for those seconds. As shocking as it was disgusting, I couldn't pretend he hadn't surprised me yet again with the balls it took for such close quarters attack of something we knew nothing about.

Why were they even after him? It couldn't have been trauma or at least not just trauma. There had to be another reason he was such an interest to them.

Getting to my feet, I watched as the monster recovered and directed its attention solely on James, and noticed James stayed down. The monster reached over and collected James and with one quick heave, slung him over their shoulder, a knife identical to the one my own attacker had, in one hand. At the sound of flesh sieving in the most blood chilling way, I glanced up to see the nightmare sky opening up again, but this time the sky reached down for this flesh craft experiment gone wrong. Arms carved out of the same anatomically confused mess James' attacker was, stretched out to reach them and it reached back.

"James! Wake up!" I shouted but, he remained unconscious and now the arms reached more earnestly for the monster and for James. I charged them both in a determined sprint, hoping that my hand-combat skills were going to be enough. "Dammit kid, you give me too much extra work."

The knife sliced into my side mere breaths after I reached and grabbed the monster, unyieldingly wrapped myself around them and ripped James from its shoulder as we toppled to the ground. The blade sank in deeper before I let go, tumbling a few paces away from where they hit the ground, the blade still stuck in my side.

Pulling the blade out and ignoring the searing pain of it exiting at least one important organ, I saw James slowly come to from my peripheral as I attacked the monster before it could recover. Pinning it straddle-ways, I hacked and slashed into them, ignoring the red-dye job from its flailing splashing steadily more blood and gore. I felt myself melting into the work over and sinking further out of awareness other than the monster's wretched screeching and fight to escape as the blade moved with my hand fluidly, part of me.

"Porter!" James' voice smashed through the near pleasure of carving up the monster, and I was surprised to find us in hiding, my hand tightly gripping the gore covered knife. The monster was nowhere to be seen but, James looked worried and afraid...I doubt it was of me though. Lately, assassins would've been his least concerning issue with the hell we'd all been thrown into.

"Are you alright, James? You're pale." I asked, studying him for any indication of sickness. He wasn't.

“I’ll live, but I’m more worried about you Porter. The hell was that? I mean thanks for saving me but, you were so focused you nearly let those tendrils take you instead. You- never mind.” James tapered off but I had an idea of what he wanted to say. Something to the effect of being terrifying and like a monster or something like that. Not like I never heard it before.

Sighing, I reached back to push my hair back and noticed the disarray my ponytail was in, sloughed in blood and gore as well. Unwrapping it, I spoke in a level tone. “Look James, I didn’t retire from my profession just because I acquired you to look out for. I still do monstrous work and if we ever get out of this nightmare ant-farm...I’ll go back to work doing what I do. Understand?” James nodded, as I finished refreshing my ponytail and wiping the blood from my face and hair.

“Good. Now, where are we?” I continued, surveying our surroundings and waiting for his answer.

“In a nearby building, we can’t go outside after what happened.”

Looking at James, I stared in confusion, “Why? What happened?”

Sighing, and looking around, he made eye contact and answered, “Well after you killed that first monster, the sky literally rained a nauseating deluge of the horror show that was up there.” He coughed to suppress being sick before heading towards a flight of stairs, slowly. I followed.

“So what’s the plan?”

“What plan?” James asked, stopping at a landing that gave him a view of the door without exposing him to anyone entering. He sat down and breathed to calm himself pressing his arm against his side tightly.

“The dark figures and their new bloodier acolytes are going to find us sooner or later with how many of them are out there now, and I don’t think either of us is in any shape to fight back, Porter. At least I’m not.” He explained, drawing my attention to his tight hold more and more with his staggered speech.

“What happened? What are you hiding?” I knelt beside him and tugged a hand away from his side, and barely shoved it back before it all came tumbling out. James was trying to keep his innards from spilling out, using his arm as a bandage.

“How did that happen?” I wanted to ask but already had a pretty good idea. He must have either taken a hit from the monster or me when he pulled me off the monster.

“You kinda sliced into me when I pulled you out of the way of the tendrils...then they tried to rip me open.”

“They tried to what!?” I shouted, now understanding why he forced us into cover. The ground was now one massive kill zone. “Well you can’t escape anywhere nearly disemboweled like

that. We'll reset and get out of here by rooftop Should be safe enough." I grinned, patting James on the shoulder, and looking at the climbing stairwell.

"You first, kid."