

Liftoff

Or

Under the Sky, So Blue

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Freeeditorial 

Audrey opened her eyes and began to breathe once again. She was sore—they'd been at her again. Each breath she pulled in like a vacuum, and the analogy made her think of her husband. He'd find that funny, and it made her want to kill him in even crueler, and more unusual ways than she'd fantasized about over the last five days of solitude, which themselves had amounted to a restless nightmare.

She popped up from the bed and sat up with her feet on the cold, but reassuring surface of the chestnut floors of the family cabin. Her husband's cabin. Her husband's, family's cabin—the back of her brain reminded.

Once her panicking subsided and she could gather enough oxygen to issue a string of panting sobs, she began shivering. She was sweating like a pig despite the A/C unit working overtime, and the combination of the two only created a slick, slimy skin of cold that crawled across her body as she made infantile attempts to stand and walk to the bathroom. After the fifth try she finally found the resolve to leap from the bed to the chipped and dusty armoire her venerated father-in-law swore was a gift from Louis XIII to one of their bloodline's many great forbearers. But at that moment Audrey was just glad it was holding her weight, and whispered the inanimate cherry wood monstrosity a brief apology for the times she thought of tossing it into the large granite fireplace.

Audrey held fast to the worn nubs that might have once been fine

handcrafted cherubs protruding from the armoire, and pushed off with enough energy to make it to the doorframe of the adjacent bathroom. She stepped in and missed the light switch on the first few tries. Once she found it, and the light blinked into existence she let out a shout of horror at the ghoul staring back at her, and began to both laugh cry at her reflection's disgusting appearance in all its frizzy, greasy, saggy brilliance.

For a moment she had pity on poor Lane, but it was only a partial thought, a passing fancy to help her cope with the shit she'd been putting up with since she'd agreed, no, insisted she come to their cabin and wait for her der old ball and chain and his family. But in that moment she longed to have that day back. For those moments before the two of them parted ways while he fulfilled his duty to his family—his tribe—and neglected the new one he was supposed to be building right here and now.

They were supposed to be here together, away from all of them, and all of it. She had it mapped out in her head. Here they would begin the foundation to cut themselves off from the things in their life holding them back, keeping them from becoming their own family, their own reason for everything.

They'd left early Monday. Both of them planning things out to the letter. They would beat the holiday traffic and shut themselves off from the world until the new year. And as she splashed warm water on herself, and examined the strange pentagonal bruise on her leg, she thought back to that day as they loaded up the car and drove off toward their future...

"I love this song," said Lane, his light brown hair blowing against the open window on the driver's side the Escalade that had been a gift from his

godparents.

Audrey let out the slightest snort of laughter.

Lane turned to her, smiling, and singing along with the old tune at a reasonable volume—a very Lane thing to do. His brows were scrunched behind his three hundred dollar sunglasses in an inquisitive way that made his square features soften, turning him into a man ten years younger.

“That’s not the lyric,” she said.

“What?” exclaimed Lane, which he followed up with a light-hearted raspberry to show what he’d thought of her absurdity.

“That’s not what he’s singing,” she insisted, not losing her temper at his usual pig-headed self, but determined not to let him get away with this one. “It’s not ‘Under the sky so blue’, it’s, ‘Under them skies of blue.’”

“Get outta here,” Lane chuckled, still refusing to acknowledge her factual correction, as per his usual practice. “I know my Petty,” he insisted.

She sighed as he sang the lyrics once again, this time waving a finger in the air and stabbing it into the sky at the proper moments in the song. Waiting for the chorus to begin again, and when it neared, she plopped her phone down onto the center console—still plugged into the charger alongside some Cliff Bar wrappers, a half-empty lukewarm cup of coffee, and a clear Pyrex thermos filled with the juice cleanser she was supposed to be drinking—she reached over and blasted the volume, then sang over him, “Under **them** skies **of** blue.”

She turned the volume back down to his preferred setting and went back to the nonbusiness on her phone. She kept a half smirk on the side of her face

that he couldn't see, playing at her strands of dark brown hair. From the corner of her eye she could tell he was in his "grey zone". It was his term, she'd discovered once while going through his phone, for his moods of angry confusion. To hear him tell it in his young and crazy days, he'd let the beast out whenever it wanted. But he'd wrangled him in, he'd sworn. For her. And to his credit, she'd not known him to raise his voice or make a scene. But sometimes, just sometimes—most of all during sex—she had a sense of the animal he could become if he wanted to. He was big enough, 6'3" and built like a pro football player. But she'd never seen him in a rage, doubted he had it in him. Even now, his pride wounded, and his perspective forever changed on one of his favorite tunes, all he could do was pout like a chastised schoolboy. It made the half smile she was wearing breakout across her face and turn into genuine laughter.

She reached across and pinched his cheek. Ignoring the chaffing her nails were getting from the ragged stubble that plagued him—and all the men his family as far as she could tell—and smothering the spot she'd pinched with a kiss, she broke away, and said, "Aww, poor baby. I didn't mean to ruin the moment for you."

Still wearing his stubble-covered pouty face he gave her a suspicious glance through the corner of his eye, and his oversized digits danced across some of the buttons along the inner spoke of the steering wheel. What followed next was a speaker-annihilating blare of such jaw-grinding, synapse-grating obscenity that stabbed at her eardrums, tattooing them with its foulness along with the standard permanent damage. Lane's schoolboy grin returned too, and he began to bang his head back and forth as the lead singer's cement

mixer voice, joined the cacophony of shrieking guitars, and drums so spastic they would make a jabbering meth head appear demure.

She cried out and clutched the crown of her head as though she'd burned herself with a curling iron, crying, "What in the fuck is that? Someone beating a sick moose?"

He turned his eyes from the road to beam at her with an arrogant grin that he hadn't dare put on since she scolded him for bringing home a ninety-pound tuna, dripping and bloody across her floors. But he wore it now, and said, "Gods of Deth, And the Hammers Fell."

Audrey didn't waste any time wondering which title belonged to the band, and which belonged to the song—or if he was even referring to them as two separate things to begin with. She leaned over and tapped the yellow icon under the navigation screen to turn off the radio. Lane, of course, kept the ruckus going with a few bursts of his voluminous laughter. She considered punching him in the arm, but thought better of it, recalling the bruised knuckle she received the last time she made such a call.

"There are better ways to prove a point than split open your wife's eardrums, you know that?" she asked a chuckling Lane.

While his frame continued to bounce about in his attempt to suppress more laughter, he countered, "Yeah, but I couldn't think of one that would be as fun."

She could do nothing but respond with a roll of her eyes, and a head shaking that made her dark curls bounce around.

“Don’t worry, babe, you’ve got ten days of this to look forward to,” said Lane.

Audrey frowned as she stuck out a tongue and rolled her eyes into the back of her head, making it as ghoulish as she could.

“Have I told you how sexy you look today,” he said, and reached over to squeeze her thigh, giving her a little quiver as he inched closer.

Her façade broke, and laughter poured through her along the little buzz Lane’s caress.

“Shitbag,” she choked through her case of the giggles. But she put a milky, slender hand over his own large paw to hold it in place, lest things get too heated and they end up fucking parked somewhere along the highway.

Instead, they fucked in the restroom of a Chevron just outside of San Jose. But only a quickie, as Audrey kept seeing shadows moving under the door, though, no one knocked, leading her to believe the pizza-faced attendant with eight chins, and who couldn’t stop trying to catch a glimpse of her ass might have been listening in.

Once they’d finished up, they jumped right back on the road. They were late for a long overdue appointment with getting the hell out of town and away from the constant assault on their time together. Between Lane’s running the lion’s share of his family’s business, and the string of rejections that had been Audrey’s professional life, some time away from these grim realities had begun to sound like a fleeting dream.

Then Lane opened his mouth, and helped the universe spoil Audrey’s

dream as to what this week would mean.

“Christ, the roads are so open,” Lane observed. “Is this what it’s like to be out on the road in the middle of the day?”

“How the hell would I know,” said Audrey, flipping through another batch of form rejection letters on her phone.

Lane spouted a snog full of laughter.

She paused.

The question was innocent enough, but the tone of his laughter spoke to something else. She decided to dig. She would regret this later.

Looking up from her phone, she asked, “Why would I know?”

She knew he heard her, but he didn’t answer. She asked again.

“Well, you’re usually out and about much more while I’m all tied up in that damned building all day,” he said.

“But why would you think I’m out and about all day?” she asked now. “You know I’m writing and drawing most of the day, and actually, you came along with me the last weekend to run errands. So, I’ll ask again, why would you think I’m out and about the other day?”

His shoulders shifted, and he rolled them around as though he was using them to scratch an itch on his neck. He bit down on his lower lip. Audrey knew he was getting upset, but this was her vacation too, and she wasn’t about to spend it feeling like she was just a liability along for the ride. Like she had nothing to do with where they were, or where they planned on going in life.

“Oh, you’re getting upset,” she pointed out, to which he just gave her an annoyed glance from the corner of his eye. “Then just say it, say you think I spend all day driving around and spending your money. Say that you think I don’t wake up until noon and then go right to the TV.”

“No, just your tablet or phone,” he countered.

What occurred next was a screaming match that she would later be unable to recall the details of. But she would look back at it multiple times over the next few days as one of the dumbest mistakes of her life.

After the screaming was done, and sat in the stew of their angry silence. This moment was prolonged only by the tension. In reality they had been sitting there only minutes before Lane’s phone rang. And while Audrey aimed her merciless gaze out the window, Lane answered the call via the car’s Bluetooth.

“Shit,” she heard him say under his breath, before raising his voice, and continuing, “Hey, Vince, what’s up? I’m here with Audrey.”

The youngest of her husband’s brothers hesitated for a moment—another bad sign—before responding, “H-hey Audrey, hey Laney. You, uh, are you guys already on the road?”

With a loud sigh, Lane answered, “Yes, Vince, I told you we were heading out early so Audrey and I can have some alone time before the rest of the family comes up for the holiday.”

“Yeah...yeah I remember, it’s just...fuck,” said Vince through the car’s speakers.

“Okay, what happened, Vince?” asked Lane.

“They’re here,” said Vince.

Lane’s face took a turn from a red of red aggravation to a serious pale. “The guys from Takada?” he asked.

Vince, with a sheepish voice unbecoming of the younger man’s massive physical presence, like all his brothers, issued a humble, “Uh-huh.” After this he ran off a laundry list of apologies, and took full responsibility for the mistake. Audrey, for her part, kept quiet as the two talked about their options. She was only aware of the rudiments of the deal, but she knew enough to understand that her husband’s mind was already made up. Had Lane objected he might spoil the deal with his absence. And even if it didn’t, it would’ve landed him in a prickly situation with his three younger siblings, to say nothing of their mother. On top of that, they’d skin Vince alive, the one Lane had babied and spoiled the most since their father passed.

“So, what should I tell them, Lane? They’re gonna be here by lunch, if you can make it to Sacramento in the next hour one of the charter companies at the airport owes us one,” said Vince, “I already called them, and they’re ready when you are.”

Audrey finally turned her head to look at Lane. He was doing an impossible job of looking back and forth between the dashboard displaying Vince’s name, the road, which had become much more congested than it had been, and her.

Of course she wanted him to say no. To tell Vince and the rest of the clan to fuck off, for her. But that familial yoke was hard to break. Far harder than she’d anticipated. She wasn’t used to it. Outside of her own parents what

relatives she did know were like half-imagined pen pals, most of whom she wouldn't recognize. But with Lane, not only was it built into his DNA, but the early death of his father had made him the boy-king of the empire his father had built. He'd been playing dad since his teens, and that life had sent him running from beginning his own family for most of his life.

She didn't want to fight it in that moment. She was still upset from their fight. She even did a quick job of talking herself into the idea of being up at the family's Tahoe estate by herself for a week where she could maybe get some writing done. Or maybe even some painting, and without Lane's mother hovering around to make sure she wasn't spilling any of her inks on the floors. With that in mind she gave him the nod he was looking for, propelling herself towards what was to come.

It had been a chilly goodbye. Within an hour of Vince's call, the charter company had arranged a jet to pick him up at a local airstrip outside of Granite Bay. But upon his departure, she could bring herself to offer no more than a lifeless peck on the lips.

"Call me when you get to the cabin, let me know if you need help getting settled in," he said, searching for some kind of warmth before leaving her.

"Okay," she answered, and turned back toward the car.

"I shouldn't be more than two days," he called.

"K," she shouted back without looking. She could see his puppy dog look burn bright in her mind's eye, and couldn't bring herself to bear it. She just wanted to leave, to get to the cabin, and cut herself off from the world.

She jumped into the driver's seat of their Escalade, and made a bee's line for Howling Rock.

The place was enormous. It felt almost elitist to call it a cabin. With six bedrooms, three and a half bathrooms, a study, and a den, and a trail that led a half mile down to the Howe family's dock by the lake, Howling Rock was bigger than any house she'd ever stepped inside of before meeting Lane.

Lane.

It was in moments like these that all the old fears and apprehensions came back to haunt her. Every friend and confidant in her life didn't like her being with a man fifteen years her senior, much less, an older man without much of a romantic history. She'd explained to them he had no time, in his youth. His father's death at a young age had made him the man of the family legacy. And it made sense. He was only nineteen. How many great love affairs could a young man have when he was expected to run a company and raise a family he never asked for. But there was another consensus her mother and friends also came to, and that was his unwavering devotion to his family.

"He'll always be hers first," her mother had said once, referring to the tyrannical cunt who birthed the love of her life.

Before Audrey's thoughts could spiral into a chasm of resentment, self-pity, and hate her attention was brought back down—or in this case, up, rather—when she eyed something at the steps of the "cabin's" wide front deck, where the family often took evening cocktails when the weather was mild.

Audrey was still some distance away, as the driveway took a strange angle

up to the two car garage, hiding the anomaly she thought she spotted behind a clumsy crown of butternut colored stones sticking up from the ground.

“What the hell?” she said out loud when she saw the furry lump stretched out across the dusty steps.

She parked a dozen or so yards away. Why? She couldn't say. Even at the distance she was it looked like trouble. So she didn't pause to think about it. Rather than sit in her car aloof, gawking at the lump and letting her imagination fill in the gaps, she got out and marched straight toward the strange mass. Then the stench hit her. She didn't even have time to make an attempt at biting back the stream of grey-green juiced veggies, and gluten-free oatmeal that flowed forth from her mouth like the fabled water rock of Moses. It smelled of sulphur and spoiled meat, but also another stench she had no words for. But she imagined it's what a breezy day in hell smelled like.

When she was done retching, she used the bottom half of her old BSB shirt and held it over her face. She continued approach and found the festering carcass of a wild pig.

The reeking carrion must have been dead for some time, she surmised. Half of its face was dried out like a mummy, the meat around its hooves much the same. But something about the scene struck Audrey as wrong. There were no flies, nor were there any maggots crawling around the dead things eye sockets, though its eyes were in fact missing.

“I guess you ruined the bugs' appetite too,” she spoke to the heap of bone and hair.

She walked back to the car. She drove into the garage, and before taking

down their bags she went to the business of clearing the dead boar from the porch steps, all the while praying the stench hadn't gotten inside and filled the cabin. And after scrounging around for something to help her clean up the mess out front, she finally settled on snow shovel and a wheelbarrow. With luck, a pair of tattered gardening gloves hanging by a garden hose on the near side of the house.

After donning the work gloves—which were just about falling apart—she pulled off her shirt and wrapped it around the bottom half of her face, her modest breasts on display behind a lacey, powdered-blue number.

She stretched a bit before attempting to move the body. And after inhaling a deep breath of air obtained upwind of the decay, she bent down at her knees and took a grip of the half-eaten hind legs. Not yet fainting, Audrey put all of her back into it and pulled at the dead boar.

She'd expected a good hour of intense manual labor to complete the task at hand, but as soon as she gave it a tug she went tumbling backwards onto the stubby, dry grass. Her makeshift gas mask came up around her eyes blocking her vision. But once she cleared pulled it down from her sight, and she propped herself up on her elbows to find the mangled face of the pig staring back at her from her lap, its ridged snout pressed against her navel.

She jumped to her feet with a garbled shriek, and started spastically flailing her arms to rid herself of the willies that were running up her back and snaking around her shoulders. Once she got a handle on herself she kicked at the dead pig, and, again, it went flying a half dozen feet away. It was as if the dearly departed swine was made of dry leaves sewn together. When she inched close

enough to it to inspect, Audrey found out why. The entire pig was hollowed out. The animal's husk was exactly that, making it little more than a rotting skin of hair-draped across a frame of sinewy bones.

Audrey's first instinct was to blame some careless hunters in the area. "Fucking jerks," she spat, imagining a pair of dunderheads in orange and camo, drunk on testosterone. But this theory developed a hole that began to take on water.

She had seen an animal dressed before. Her dad was a member of that weird club of people who didn't enjoy the separation of field to plate that modern civilization had afforded, and Lane too wasn't above bringing a dead animal home from time to time. Regardless, she knew what a disemboweled creature looked like, and this one was out of the ordinary.

At the center of the beast's belly was a vertical incision, not uncommon for a hunter to make. But this one was strange in the sense that the flaps of skin where the hunter's knife would have touched looked burned. Not burned at though they tried to cook it whole, but burned at though they'd meant to cauterize it. It was a perfect charred line that made the poor thing look like it was the victim of a botched tattooing session.

With little reason or means to investigate the wound further, she hurried to be done with the task of tossing the carcass in the old tin trash can and getting a chance to unwind and put this day to rest.

Once complete, she put her shirt back on and went about the task unloading her luggage, opting to let Lane unpack his own shit whenever it was he arrived.

After unlocking the door connected the garage to the washroom, which in turn lead to the kitchen, she whispered a prayer of thanks to whichever god there was above. The house was stench free, though, sweltering and dusty, but after her last ordeal, Audrey found the task of airing the place out and making it livable a snap.

With her second immortal feat of the day accomplished, she found herself too exhausted to cook up anything they'd packed, or take a drive back down the hill to a decent place to eat. So she resigned herself—deciding and assuring herself she'd earned it—to the stash of Pringles and mini chocolate donuts she'd stashed away for herself. She washed it down with a lukewarm Modelo, as she was unable to find a corkscrew, restricting her access to the family wine cellar. But she wasn't so far out of college that a few swigs of an unrefrigerated brew would unravel her.

The cabin was no longer a giant kiln thanks to Audrey's efforts, still, she took to the front porch for whatever breeze the late June weather had to offer. Not much at all, she discovered. Even in the shade of the porch there was only the softest wisp of air which only blue hot air. But she did take some time to appreciate the scenery.

The lake could be seen in the distance, dotted with a number of homes and vacation spots along her rim, laid about among the large pines. It was empty out there, but she knew that would change in a week. Families and the wealthy, not unlike the family she'd married into, would soon turn the place into a lively zoo of drunks and screaming children. But right now it was gorgeous. Hot, yes, but still beautiful to look upon. And that sky! She couldn't

recall see such a lush blue. She smiled to herself at this, and thought about the thing with Lane and the Petty song from earlier.

“Under the sky, so blue,” she sang in the cadence of the song, but choosing Lane’s imagined lyrics.

She laughed to herself at this, and went inside to take bath, ignorant to the eyes amongst the trees and the wild brush. They were angry eyes, angry at the intruder who had annexed their hub of operations. Eyes angry that she had interrupted important work—*very* important work.

The first night Audrey didn’t sleep. The cabin had cooled down and she was lying in bed in the room she and Lane usually occupied when they stayed. She was sore and exhausted from a day on the road, followed by day turning down a large house—and a little corpse disposal on the side. But sleep didn’t find her.

She had read somewhere that it was difficult for most people to sleep in places they were unaccustomed to. It was some sort of survival mechanism that kept the cave-dwelling half of the family from being murdered when they migrated to a new region to hunt and gather. But that made little sense to her. This wasn’t a strange place. This was her husband’s family’s cabin. *Her* family’s cabin. She had been there before plenty of times, and the fact she felt she could even feel unwelcome only proved to send her mind spinning elsewhere, further pushing away the sandman.

When the view of the starry sky outside the room lightened to a deep, spotted navy blue she decided to stop fighting it. Yup, she would take

advantage of Mr. Sleep's impotence and get a jump on the bit of solo time she was expecting. She would brew some tea, make a light breakfast, and work on some sketches before writing something to put all her humble doodles together.

"If you can't sleep, no reason your craft should," she told her reflection after splashing some water on her face, hoping to bolster her efforts for the day.

She stood in the middle of the room applying a couple of yoga poses she'd picked up, her body still stiff and tight from the day before. When she was done she went around the second floor opening up a few windows to let the cooled air of the early morning into the top half of the cabin before the day heated up again. The window in the hallway had given her some trouble, but after a fight it gave way just as a gentle gust of air came in, and with it came a smell that reminded her of the dead hog's. It wasn't as pungent, but it was enough to create a hefty ball of phlegm and spit at the back of her throat.

Being too far away to make it to the closest bathroom, she leaned out of the window she'd just opened and spat onto the ground below. She remained there a moment spitting out the awful flavor in her mouth and caught her breath. While leaning there, she looked out at the stretch of land behind the cabin, full of patches of overgrown green and yellow grass tying together the weeds and wildflowers the property had accumulated since Lane's mother had him fire their groundskeeper to cut back on family expenses. But today, in the pale light of the early sun, she saw a collection of what might have been rocks, though it was hard to tell as they were just out of distance to say for sure.

Audrey had never noticed these things before. At least, she never remembered three slim, greyish pillars standing free in the middle of the unkempt field. So she continued staring at them, trying to remember. But the longer she kept her eyes on the three blurry posts, something terrible donned on her.

Audrey's eyes had brought the pillar things into focus, and as they did, the pillars themselves appeared to move just a hair away from where they first stood. And while she decided if she in fact saw what she thought she saw, the stout little decorative pillars took on a new visage. The curled upper halves of these things were not the classic fringe associated with Grecian inspired vase stands, they were eyes, they were large, dark mean looking eyes staring right back at her. But as soon as this horrid connection was made, the three objects scattered in opposite directions, out of her sight and into the surrounding woods.

It was this, more so than their ugly angry eyes that caused her to leap out of her own skin and slam the window shut before backpedaling like a woman possessed back into her room. She locked the door behind her, and rushed to the other side of the room where, by happy foresight, her husband kept a couple of aluminum baseball bats he and his brothers would use for pick-up games with some of the other guys who vacationed along the lake.

She picked the heaviest looking one, but thought better of it when she just about pulled her arm out of its socket when she attempted to lift it over her head. So she went for a somewhat lighter model and turned her attention back to the door. She waited a few beats, expecting whatever was out there to come

hounding through her door, their large, malicious eyes of watery pitch. But it was their masquerade, they're transformation from what her brain wanted her to see and from what they really were that was still making her skin crawl, and when nothing came barging through her door she lowered the bat and began to rub her hands up and down her cold, goose-bumped arms.

She couldn't tell how long she stood there, awaiting something horrible that felt as though it was waiting for one abrupt and pants-wetting moment to reveal its hideous face—or faces. Such a moment never arrived, and for that Audrey was unsure whether gratitude or a lifelong devotion to God was in order. What she did know is that she couldn't just keep this to herself.

She called Lane as soon as she found the courage to move toward, which sat on a night stand by the window. She managed this by avoiding eye contact with the view out back. Once she had her phone, she called her absentee husband, but, of course, he didn't pick up until the fourth attempt, deep sleeper that he was.

When he finally picked up, he had no sooner issued a groggy, “Lo?” before she ran off the rapid description of events.

“And now I'm standing here shaking in our room in the cabin holding onto your Eaton baseball bat like it's the only things keeping me from falling off a fucking cliff.”

“The Easton belongs to Vince,” Lane said, sounding as though he were no closer to waking up, and paying attention to what the fuck as going on with her.

When she was done telling him as much by way of a flurry of profanities,

he sounded more attentive, and ready to listen.

“Okay, let me get this straight,” he said. “You saw statues run away into the woods?”

“Ugh! No, they looked like decorative stands,” she snapped. “Like those mini pillars that hold up flower arrangements, only a greyish brown, not white or marble.”

“So they sprouted eyes, and vanished? Are you sure you weren’t still sleeping?”

“Yes! You fucking ass!”

She felt her jaw tremble, and her vision went blurry as the tears filled up, but she held it together enough to apologize.

“Sorry...I’m sorry, I just didn’t sleep, and now I saw something seriously fucked up. Tell me you’ll be up here soon?”

He gave a sigh, and she hardly listened after that. Something about the Japanese reps wanting to catch a ballgame before they made their decision.

“But as soon as the game is over I’m gonna hop on a jet back to that same airport and rent a car, okay?” he attempted to assure.

“Then maybe I should go back down there,” she said. “There’s no point to one person here, running the generator and burning propane.”

“Stop that,” he insisted, though with a smug playfulness that told her she was gaining zero ground, as he tended to concede once he’d let his temper show even for a breath. “You know you’re fine up there. It was probably your eyes playing tricks on you. Might’ve even been someone’s damned kids

messing around with one of those lame as shit drones.”

“I really don’t think drones move like that, Lane,” she said. “It was creepy as fuck. I’m still shaking...the way that thing looked.”

“Well, those drones are creepy. Some of those kids who have them just attach cameras to them so they can catch a few snaps of that babe staying up at Howling Rock.”

She collapsed back on the bed and blew out a sigh of defeated frustration, the flattery was his way of putting the issue to bed. She wanted to let the waterworks have their way, but she knew that wouldn’t get him to understand. Listen, yes. Empathize, sure. But he wouldn’t believe her, and so, she could only give him silence.

“Okay,” he said, dropping the jester’s façade to chase away the bad feels, “Are you hurt in any way?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

“You know where the twelve gauge is, and how to load and operate her, yes?”

She rolled over and buried her face in the cool sheets and didn’t respond.

“And you know the ranger station is only about ten minutes away driving, don’t you? An hour’s hike,” he concluded, no longer looking for a response.

“And you’ll be here as soon as they’ve seen their fucking ballgame?” she asked.

“You know it,” he said. “And if it goes extra innings, I’ll throw Carl and Vince a wad of cash to buy them all the lap dances they can stand.”

“Just hurry please,” she mewed. “Love you.”

“I love-” but she hung up before he got it out.

One positive thing out of her crazy experience on her first day there, and her subsequent—and fruitless—talk with Lane, was she was now motivated to work.

She pulled out her MacBook and sketch pads and went about delving into her world of Japanese warrior women who battled an army of anthropomorphic, sexist demon toads. She didn’t have much of a following, but every now and then she’d hit a few surges on her website. But otherwise, she made these stories for her. It gave her a release and a distraction all at once. A natural productive drug that made her stop thinking of the bullshit.

She worked through that troublesome string of events, stopping only to make coffee, and then to piss said coffee out. And once she’d completed a scene depicting her warrior women hacking through a field of diabolical toads that shared a resemblance with Lane, she allowed sleep to take over and she went to bed, putting it all behind her.

That night she slept, but when she woke she thought she smelled that awful stench that had come off the body of the wild hog, and a noise that sounded like a door slamming. But when she woke she saw her bedroom door ajar in the same position it had been when she fell asleep. But she didn’t care. She was anxious to get back to work, which she did until noon, when she realized she hadn’t eaten anything. So she made herself a quick tuna salad sandwich and half a bag of Doritos. And upon looking at the ruined remnants of the bag

of chips, she decided to take a walk down to the lake to stretch her legs, and breath some non-recycled air even if it meant working up a sweat.

She walked down to the lake after a lengthy walk down the stone laden path workers had paved long ago, and spent a couple hours walking around the gentle lapping of the waters' edge, watching the boats bob and dip as they swept over the lake. A few others were strolling or jogging around the lake, all smiles and friendly nods.

When she decided to head back, Audrey almost ran into a trio of boys—unrelated by the sight of them—not yet marred by the hormonal tempest of their teens, running around spraying each other with whatever water cannon their parents had agreed to splurge on to keep junior occupied now that school was out. She found their little game cute until the language took a turn, and the boys started hurling pejoratives that they'd picked up on the ancient battlefield known as the playground.

Despite the crude interruption of the moment she'd tried to cherish, the boys did inspire her to take a more scenic route back to the cabin. She ditched the Howe family's pretty laid path, and cut across the wildflowers and high, damp grass, hot from boiling in the sun all day.

She broke her promise to herself of breaking a sweat, but she was having a grand time getting her legs dirty and working up a healthy sheen of sweat.

She spotted something just ahead after she'd been on the rough trail for a few minutes. For a moment she stood still in fear, but right away she heard human voices. She blew a breath along with a sigh, laughing at herself for where her mind had started to go.

When she came upon the little gathering she found an old man with a younger boy standing beside and speaking with one of the local rangers. And when all caught sight of her they straightened up and sucked in their guts, as men were wont to do. Even the kid appeared to tense up a bit.

She waved at them, and they waved back.

“Good afternoon, fellas,” she called in her most tomboyish voice, unsure why she did so, but also deciding to run with it.

“Ma’am,” the ranger said as she came closer, tipping his wide-brimmed hat. “Were you through here early, perhaps?”

“No, no I took the path down from Howling Rock,” she answered him. “Just thought I’d take the scenic route back.”

At hearing the name of the property on which she resided, the ranger, whose crinkled, weathered features reminded Audrey of a wooden Indian sculpture—though she doubted he had anything but generic pale face running through his veins—struck a formal posture that would’ve spoke to a superior and not just an unaccompanied woman in the woods.

“Well this is nothing to concern yourself over, moss, believe me. Just some drunken poacher stuff that these two gentlemen happened upon,” said the ranger, gesturing toward the old man, wearing a wicker hat with an even wider brim than the ranger’s and his grandson in a Spider-Man shirt and basketball shorts.

“What stuff, exactly?” she asked.

The ranger shook his head and inhaled for what was likely to be a bloviated

response. But the elderly man beat him to the punch.

“Someone killed some beaver, but left everything one them worth using,” the old man explained, pointing toward a grouping of bushes just thirty yards away.

“Best parts?” asked Audrey. “You mean they just left them dead? They didn’t clean them at all?”

“Clean them?” barked the old man. “They only gutted them.”

“Hollowed them out and left them like watermelon shells,” the boy offered, smiling with a mouthful of gapped and crooked immature teeth.

Audrey brushed past them and just about ran toward the tangle of bushes and grass the old man and the ranger had been motioning toward. When she reached them, she saw the two dark lumps, and with little hesitation approached them and flipped them over to inspect them, despite the distant protests of the ranger she’d left in the dust. And his warnings all but vanished when she found—and confirmed—what she’d meant to inspect.

When she found the seam in the bodies she was looking for, she saw that these too had been seared open, leaving a fine, but not obscene charred line of flesh.

“I’ve seen this before,” she told the ranger as he came upon the scene.

She went on to explain to him what she’d found she arrived at the family property. He listened, and took a few notes including her name and a number to reach her just in case. But the ranger was as helpful as Lane had been.

“Probably some jack-offs trying to scare away vacationers from their

hidden spots where they like to go and smoke dope, or drop some of those magic mushroom,” he said. “That or some punks who think it’s nice to screw with animals like that.”

Audrey was about to counter this with her account of the things she’d seen on her property the following morning. She opened and closed her mouth twice while the ranger reviewed his notes. Just as she mustered the nerve to say something the old man and his grandson asked if they could be on their way. The ranger excused them and Audrey bit her lip, forever holding her peace.

Before leaving her the ranger advised she leave the lights on to both in the house and on the property to ward off any trespassers, but to keep everything locked just in case.

“Now if you don’t mind I gotta bag these things, and get over to the other end of the lake, some kids were setting off some M-80s waking everyone up, and getting the older folks riled up and calling us all hours of the day to report sonic booms in the area,” the ranger joked as he put on some latex gloves and produced a plastic bag, all from the pocket of his olive drab pants.

Audrey stood and watched him for a moment, but as he raised the first carcass, she caught that same stench that sent her running and gagging all the way back to Howling Rock.

That night after she’d put some more work in she made herself a Caesar salad and called it a night when she realized she’d never gone out to get a corkscrew to enjoy a few glasses before knocking out.

The spotty service on the hill where Howling Rock stood meant she and Lane had been playing phone tag all day. It wasn't until just as she was getting changed for the night that a call made it through. But this one wasn't from Lane it was an unknown number. When she picked up she was greeted by the voice of

Anders Howe, the second eldest of the Howe boys.

"Hey, Dre," said Anders, he of the glass eye—the result of a hiking accident when they were boy she was told. "Sorry to bug you so late, but all our phones are absentee right now."

She paced around the entire first floor while Anders recounted an outrageous, but not improbable, tale of Carl—brother number four—sending the private chopper away with everyone's things, including their phones.

"So now we've got the helicopter en route but that soured things a bit with the Japanese. Lane and I are trying to smooth things out again. I just got away long enough to use the head, told Lane I'd try to get in touch," he said. "So everything good up there? Marie would join you, but she's looking after he grandmother."

Anders talked for a while about his fiancé and the house they were looking to buy, but Audrey paid him no mind. His words were as distant as the man who spoke them, and the fact they weren't her husband's only helped to drown them out. She wouldn't dare mention the odd goings on she'd experience to Anders—mommy's favorite. IT would only lead to more of a headache.

"Andy," she said, cutting him short with the pet name he hated most, "I have a bath running, and you got me getting ready to hop in," she lied.

“Oh, yeah, I guess it is getting late. Well, have a good night, we’ll be up there soon,” said Anders.

“Anders can you tell Lane I love him and-”

But her brother-in-law was already gone, and she was alone again.

She blew a long, stressed breath through pursed lips, and climbed into bed after throwing on a pair of loose-fitting gym shorts and one of Lane’s old shirts. As she drifted to sleep she imagined Lane there with her. Just the two of them—his family unable to make it for whatever exaggerated reason the brain creates while it dreams. This image took her into slumber land, and there they lay on a field of cool green grass, amongst tall, intimidating trees.

Lane, in dream form, began running his fingers along her thigh, tickling her. He then began to kiss his way from her neck down to her navel, and he kept going. And as she gave into the sensation of his tongue exploring her she noticed one of his fingers was digging into her which, harder and harder until she opened her eyes and cried out.

She sat up in bed, completely awake, and as her eyes came into focus she could see something move in the darkness. What followed next was the rapid pitter patter of footsteps, moving so fast, that she almost thought it sounded like a marching band drummer playing off in the distance. But she could feel the force of their steps through the wood, and in her teeth, and so she knew it was no drum line, no trick of the imagination, no illusion. This was real.

She pushed herself so far back into the head board she was just about climbing up the wall, shivering, crying, and sobbing. They’d been upon her. She knew it. She hadn’t seen them, but they’d been in the room, and they’d

stood above her. And they *touched* her. And then she recalled her dream and the sharp pain to her leg that had woken her.

When she found the courage she eased back down toward the bed, and as she did so she reached an arm across, feeling out for the lamp by the nightstand, never taking her eyes away from the darkness from with the pitter patter of inhuman feet had been heard. After flipping the switch, merciful light filled the room and dispelled whatever thing had lingered there.

She fled to the bathroom, and by the light on the single white bulb there, saw her thigh had acquired six thin, dark lines of bruising, appearing to form a faintest outline of a hexagon. The redness that began to form on the inside of these bruise lines only further proved to make the mark look like a stop sign. She wiped the tears from her face when she saw it, and then shrank back and curled up on the shaggy, beige bathroom rug until the sun came up.

She called Lane at the crack of dawn and left him a message telling him if he needed her she would be at their house in San Jose...maybe, she was sure to add.

She packed up her things, not bothering to worry about the food she'd brought up with her or about turning off the generator or propane tank on the property. She just got her things together and loaded up the car. That was until a new but familiar face appeared at the bottom of the cabin's long driveway. The ranger from the day before.

It looked as though he had been up all night the way he yawned and stretched as he got out of the car, keeping a cup of gas station grade coffee

steadied as he did. He waved to her while he sauntered up. She returned the wave, but paid him little mind otherwise. She just wanted to be on her way.

“Hiya,” he said upon approaching. “Off already?”

“Yeah, I just need to get back,” she half-mumbled, offering nothing more.

“Oh...” he observed, squinting his eyes and letting the single syllable hang in the air.

She watched the man look away for a beat, and with his head hanging he swished around the contents of the paper cup he was holding, and admitted, “See, ma’am, thing is, your husband asked me to look in on you. He said you’re worried about some strange goings on around her, but I can assure that there haven’t been any more random animal carcasses lying around, just some drunken assholes messing around. You’d otherwise be better off taking advantage of the lake being empty until the crowds for the fourth start arriving.”

“Well, I just don’t think I’m in the state of mind to really enjoy the lake right now, thanks,” she said as she loaded the last bag.

She threw a glance back at the ranger, whose name she had no intention to learn. The man wore a pained look like he’d gotten bad news from the doctor, and he stood there tapping large callused finger on the rim of his coffee cup. He was searching for something.

“Pardon me,” she said, “But is there something here I can help you with?”

“Don’t leave?” he said, sheepish as can be.

“Excuse me?”

“If your husband and mother-in-law thought you left because I couldn’t handle a few bumbling poachers, I could pay for it in a big way.”

She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. The Howe family influence had struck again.

“Did my husband and his family ask you to keep me here?” she asked point blank.

“No,” he answered straight away. “Not at all ma’am, I wouldn’t dream of it. You’re free to come and go I just don’t want you to worry about any more trouble on your property, and-and-...”

“And you’d rather my mother-in-law not punish you or the park services’ budget by leading her to believe that her son’s wife left their family cabin running scare because the rangers may or may not be fulfilling their duties?”

She had him. He looked upset, but only upset in the way people get when they can’t think of a good comeback. But this was more, this was desperation. There was a fear to the man’s eyes, and she knew why. Blanche Howe had a reputation for shaking even the manliest men to their core. It was enough to almost make Audrey feel sorry for him. It was enough. Because now she’d be implicated in Blanche’s wrath.

But she just couldn’t. Not after hearing those footsteps.

“Look,” said the ranger, his eyes bouncing around his head like he was watching a couple of gnats go at right in front of his field of vision. “What if I can promise I’ll patrol the area, regularly, and there won’t be another single poacher or, or *anything* that will do you harm? Could you find a way to be

comfortable until your family gets up here?”

Audrey felt like she was having the most unfair, lopsided argument of her life. Nothing was keeping her here except fear of the Howe family matriarch. Yet, nothing was making her leave except the thought of things she **might** have seen, and footsteps she **might** have heard. And that mark on her leg? Well, she was stepping around among a bunch of unkempt grass, bushes and wildflowers, wasn't she? Who knew what might have bit her?

“You'll patrol regularly?” she asked, her inner voice dumfounded and silent.

“Every two hours,” said the ranger.

No, she thought to herself. *Don't accept that offer. Just leave!* But she remained quiet.

“I'll even give you my personal number so you can hail me if something does happen,” he said, and from his shirt pocket, provided a what looked like a 7-11 receipt with a number scrawled on the back. He offered it.

She reached for it. *What are you doing?*, she asked herself. Too late, though. The die was cast. She accepted it, grabbed her bags out of the car, and slammed the car door shut before walking back into the cabin.

The nameless ranger, called after her with reassurances, hoping she'd get a chance to relax and enjoy the lake once her family got there. She never turned to acknowledge. Until a thought dawned on her.

“Would you run an errand for me since you're eager not to piss off Mrs. Howe?” she asked.

The ranger cast a quizzical look. His salt and pepper eyebrows arching to express his intrigued confusion.

“Uh...Sure, I suppose I can take lunch early. As long as it doesn’t take more than an hour, I think I can oblige.”

A half hour later, Audrey was eating takeout from the Greek place in town, and drinking one of the premiere bottles from Blanche’s wine cellar—now that a corkscrew had arrived. And rather than put in any more time toward her cartoonish heroines and their subplots of teen angst and blooming romances.

She tried to get some reading done. She’d brought a book she’d been meaning to read. This idea soon came to an abrupt end, however, when she realized the plot that had captured the hearts and minds of a trio of New York critics, and two of her best girlfriends, involved a female protagonist, a marine biologist alone on an island, conducting research. But a ghost ship washes ashore soon after, and the heroine is soon thereafter hounded by a presence.

It was a cruel joke the universe was making at her expense, and she ended up throwing the book across the room. So she brock into Vince’s room, and pilfered through his old DVDs, tossing aside the porn whenever she came across it, until she’d compiled a stack of movies to keep her occupied.

As she set up the TV that hung above the massive hearth, she began to zone out into the imagination of George Lucas. And as the theme came blaring through she spotted the ranger, true to his word, swinging by to assure all was well. Until she went to bed.

Audrey had read about sleep paralysis, a condition experienced by many in

which the visual parts of the brain wake up from sleep before the motor part, leaving the sufferer temporarily paralyzed. It was something she'd experienced before, and it frightened her enough that she delved into the subject for two weeks after she'd gone through it.

Another symptom of sleep paralysis was, the sufferer, while in this brief state, was the overpowering fear and sensation that there is a threat in the room. This, the "experts" said, was an evolutionary response to being in an awakened state of total vulnerability. But all the Google and Wikipedia searches in the world couldn't prepare her for this.

She had been fast asleep after nearly two bottles of the best vino in the house, yet, something stirred her from slumber. But her eyes were the only part of her body listening, and what they had to offer her was hideous.

Hovering above her were the things she had seen out in the field. They looked as though they'd been pushed back by some unknown force, but soon drifted back toward her when they noticed she couldn't move.

Now they came out of the darkness, closer toward the pale light of the full moon out. Again, she thought of them as tan colored, stumpy floral stands. As they neared, though, every awful feature and detail of their appearance were revealed to her. Their heads weren't so much the artfully curled flat tops of the floral stands she imagined, but were lumpy, bulbous heads that flattened out at the top. Their profiles resembled beehives made of mush and stuffed into a sausage casing too small to accommodate.

The rest of what made them up were just as odd and unnatural. She saw that they indeed had limbs. Spindly, sinuous appendages that the beings held

close to their sides as they gawked down at her with those angry, black eyes.

They inched closer, and closer still, until she could see their upturned sneering mouths that revealed, quick red tongues and ragged pink teeth. One of them reached out and caressed the place along her leg that bore the hexagonal bruise shed received from them. This drew the other two closer, and once gathered, the three looked to be speaking amongst themselves, ignoring her frightened, jumpy eyes.

At that moment, her paralysis ended. She inhaled a deep breath and shot straight up in bed, which sent her trio of visitors scurrying away at fast as she could blink as before.

This brings us to where she began. Panting, sore, and exhausted. The hexagonal bruise hurt now. Throbbled like a finger that had been struck by a hammer.

Once she'd gulped down handful after handful of water from the bathroom tap, she threw on her clothes, and made way straight for the door. The sun had begun to rise as it she existed, giving way to sky as black and blue as their mark on her leg. She'd hardly even bothered with her bags, packing only the clothes that were in her sight, as well as her wallet, phone, and charger. She didn't lock the door, or even bother to turn off the TV in the living room, which she'd left on the previous night. She just got right into her car and took it down the hill as fast as she could without tipping over.

She dared to peer in the rearview mirror, and right before she turned the corner to get to the road that lead back to the highway she caught a glimpse of

the ranger's patrol vehicle parked down at the other end of the road, headlights still on. But he looked to be making no effort to track her down and preserve whatever check Blanche was used to writing him and his department.

"Looks like you'll have to find a second job after tourist season, douchebag," Audrey said to the reflection of the patrol vehicle.

But when her eyes went back to the road her heart just about jumped out of her chest and fell flat on the floor of the SUV's cab, bleating and farting like a whoopy cushion.

They had followed her.

They were waiting for her.

The three of them stood in a row along the road. Audrey paused in fear, but soon her survival instinct took over long enough for her to jam her foot on the gas and aim for the middle one. But these things were intelligent and aware enough to expect something like that, and after only a few feet, the car's battery died and the car's engine gave out, sputtering, and struggling at a crawl bringing her to within a few paces from the beings that were hunting her.

Audrey let out a cry and reached for the door handle. She jumped out of the car, and onto the jagged, black asphalt, losing her flip flops along the way. She began to run for the trees, but hesitated when she remembered the ranger at the other end of the road. She then changed directions, but her decision took just long enough for the things to surround her.

They made a triangle around Audrey, one that was as thin of substance as the wind, but as strong as a prison wall. They zipped around, trading places,

confusing her, until they closed the distance, and one of them slapped at the bruise they'd given her. And once it did, Audrey felt her body go stiff, and ground suddenly rose to meet her face, but one of the things must have caught her, or held her there, because the grainy, porous road just hovered there while she was rendered paralyzed once more.

Soon after she saw the ground moving before her eyes, and she realized they were taking her somewhere. As they moved her frozen body along, they flipped her around so she could get a better view of things.

They had her floating above the ground, upright, holding her in place through some sort of secret, diabolical method known only to them. They then moved before her, scouting ahead to clear the way. As they kept moving, she found some relief in seeing the ranger's patrol vehicle. But this hope was dashed when she saw the ranger, who was propped up in the same manner he was, his eyes also awake, and wild with surprise.

The three intruders then "walked" the two of them back up toward Howling Rock, and into the woods behind it. Then Audrey was awarded with something she hadn't had in days. A good night's sleep.

Audrey awoke on a slab of something cold. She could feel her limbs loosen, but they were as quick to respond as Lane whenever she asked him to take out the trash.

After what felt like a lifetime gathering the strength to get up and stand, Audrey was able to slide herself off of the metal table her abductors had placed her upon. When she looked down at it, however, it didn't appear as

metal. In fact, it looked to be made of some sort of purple wood covered in a clear lacquer that ran with copper veins. It was cold to the touch, however, like the sterile stainless steel found in hospital morgues.

She was naked. They'd removed every last article of clothing down to her sixty-five dollar blue lace panties from Victoria's Secret, which she hunted for in vain along the grey walls of the room. The walls. They looked to be covered in a type of stucco that was spongy to the touch, and made her skin crawl whenever she touched them.

After another fruitless moment of looking for her clothes, or even something like a bed sheet would suffice, but nothing. It was time to focus on getting out of wherever the hell **there** was. Searching, she noticed a patch of the wall was not covered in the weird stucco. Upon exploring it, a seam appeared and a section of the wall split open, allowing Audrey to proceed into a hallway surrounded by similar looking walls.

Taking her chances, she walked along the corridor, looking for more clear spots among the walls. The first was much smaller than the one she'd exited. It was also at eye level, and when Audrey touched it she could see why. Rather than a door, what she could only describe as a porthole opened, allowing her to see the sun rise on the islands of Japan, which came into magnificent light from what must have been miles above the earth.

Audrey stepped away out of an uncontrollable fear of falling out of the porthole, but unlike the door, this held a protective layer sealing her away from the cold death of space. She was less confident she would escape her predicament, but she had to push on, and standing there wasn't helping.

Come on, get your fucking head in the game, she thought to herself over and over until her feet got moving and she checked the other doors.

She left the porthole open to help mark her way and went about opening other rooms along what she came to realize was a horseshoe-shaped passageway. After some time she noticed a place along the walls—stucco free—but shaded pink. Audrey touched the spot on the wall, and was greeted by the rancid smell she'd become far too familiar with. She went on anyway, though, she'd wish she hadn't.

Not long after venturing into the room she had to bite her tongue from crying out when she found her abductors, busy at work above the cored out remains of the ranger.

The three little surgeons were busy at their work, and hadn't noticed her. Audrey thought to look for something to hurt them with, but could see nothing, and an exploration of her surrounding only uncovered a floor beneath the one where her hosts did their work, a floor that held some of their other work.

Beneath their operating platform, was a floor that held numerous tanks, all holding some species or another—including human—but these were no longer shocking to her. No, the ones she was most disturbed by were the tanks that appeared to hold things that were only part human. One had a long pale hair, and pointed ears, like it had wandered off of the latest Peter Jackson set, while the other had a horrid snout and fangs like a bat, and still a third looked like it was covered in scales, with gills and webbed digits.

Audrey decided whatever strangeness waited in the corridor would be

paradise compared to this sideshow. She backed out of there, and, after ensuring the purveyors of all of this madness were still at work, she stepped toward the exit, halted only by a last minute glimpse at what the twisted little scientists were up to.

They had set aside the remains of the ranger, and now, in the center of the room, hanging like a giant, grisly uvula was some sort of screen, and she was the subject on display. They must've taken pictures and x-rays of her while she was unconscious. They zoomed in and out of every frame they'd taken until one image caught their eye. They zoomed in close enough that she could see what it was that had grabbed their attention. In the heart shaped cavity of her uterus was a speck. Miniscule as it was, it was every bit as wondrous as the monsters holding her found it.

Audrey pressed her hands to her abdomen. She felt something like a tingling warmth strike her. She had to get back. Now more than ever. Now, it didn't matter what she would or might see. Now the creepy crawly things in the dark had been brought to light, and now they wouldn't stop her from getting home.

"Time to skedaddle," she whispered to herself.

She went back out the way she came and stopped to consider which direction to turn now, but the decision was made for her when the passageway opened again. She glanced back just long enough to see one of the things go in the other direction. This allowed her to breathe a little easier, but she had an idea as to where it was going. After what they'd discovered they probably wanted to gut her, and get a closer look at the little one growing inside of her.

She continued walking around, opening different doors, but most were as

bland as the one she woke up in. This was until she found something a little more welcoming.

This new room she'd found was filled with soft white lights, like Christmas lights. It was inviting enough to lay low while she looked around for a life boat, or something. Anything to get her back down to the world where she belonged,

Walking further into the room, amidst the thousands upon thousands of Christmas lights she came to yet another discovery that made her feel dumb and small. The lights she found so welcoming were not connected to anything. They weren't lights, they were projections of the stars outside. And below?

She stepped to the center and as she did, the floor shifted until it took on the appearance of the world she needed to get back to.

Just then, Audrey heard a garbled series of pops and hisses that made her think one of her kidnappers might be coming, but instead a soft voice came echoing off the walls until it zeroed in on her, and became like a bee whispering in her ear.

DESTINATION, uttered its polite but artificial metallic drawl.

"Home," she said. "Please!"

UNCLEAR

"Lake Tahoe, California, United States," she ran off.

UNCLEAR

"Howling Rock!"

UNCLEAR

“Get me the fuck out of her, damn it,” she cried.

UNCLEAR

She let out a frustrated growl, but it did nothing but give her a sore throat. Then another series of whirs and pops came from the walls.

A piece of the wall drooped down then, like a dollop of melted wax until it took on the shape of a helmet.

INPUT TO CLARIFY, it said.

It didn’t take her long to figure out what it meant. She got underneath the helmet of stucco and it lowered onto her head until it was pressing against her scalp.

DESTINATION, it asked once more.

This time, rather than say it, she thought it, believed it, and the image of the blue world beneath her feet grew larger, and larger.

It wasn’t long before the frantic sound of feet beating a rapid path down the expansive, horseshoe corridor. Audrey began to panic, but she a thought came to her.

“Lock the door,” she said, and her words were followed by a sucking sound. Not long after this, there came a furious banging, and screams that sounded almost human.

THEY ARE DURECTING ME TO OVERRIDE, spoke the ship. *SHOULD I*

COMPLY?

“Fuck that, keep it locked!”

The banging continued, but slowed and halted after a time. She could see from the vessel’s screens beneath her that they were entering the atmosphere. At the speeds she assumed she was traveling, she imagined they’d be back upon the cabin soon.

But what then?

There was nothing back at the cabin that would help her. Even if she could get to the safe where there was a couple of shotguns and a .22 pump action rifle for hunting rabbits, with the way these things moved they’d be on her before she got the first round off. Once she left the ship she would have...Did she have to leave the ship?

“Ship?” she asked it, feeling a little stupid for calling it that, but it replied in the affirmative with that weird reverberating voice that spoke more inside her skull than in her ear now. “How am I in control of where we go?”

KZZZMFDT, was the sound it fed to her brain. But she didn’t know what it meant. The ship must have sensed this because it projected the image of a person leaving their keys locked in a car.

“They just left you on?”

YES

This put a devious thought to mind.

“Ship, is there a way to eject myself?”

Rather than answer, a noise that put her mind to a springy sound, like one you'd hear in a cartoon. She turned her head then to see another large dollop of stucco descend, and take the shape of a football about to be kicked.

Knowing she only had one great big weapon to use against her extraterrestrial foes she gave the ship one last point of destination before thanking the helpful drone, and detaching herself from the helmet apparatus.

She boarded her escape pod, and, planting herself against the spongy, spine-tingling stucco material, declaring, "Lane is gonna hear it for this shit." The stucco began to contour around the outline of her naked body. The fleshy hatch closed, and not soon enough. Something began to push through the opposite side of the wall, and as the ship began to shake and jerk as it fell back under the gravitational spell of the planet, she heard the faint cry of their twisted language. Then things went dark.

She had no idea what her landing looked like, by the bruises growing on her entire right side told her it must've been ugly to watch.

When the hatch to the pod opened she leapt out, and found herself somewhere in the trees about two miles further down the lake. She'd overshot her intended target, forgetting that an escape pod would carry someone away from a crash.

It was dark out, but the moon was full, allowing her the satisfaction of watching what was left of the ship that had taken her sink to the bottom of the lake. Remembering she was naked she stepped back amongst the trees, but walking was painful. Her body was still aching from the impact, and

remembering she wasn't at this all alone, she placed two hands on her occupied wound, fighting back the tears that wanted to come for fear that he or she had been hurt in the crash.

She had to keep going, but as she traced her way back towards Howling Rock she heard movement around her. She let out a deep, desperate sob and pushed the pain to the back of her mind as she took off running. But it was useless. She could already see that two of them, somehow surviving the crash, had come after her. Even still, she pumped her legs as hard as they would go, the soles of her feet being beaten bloody and raw along the way.

As she rounded a large cropping of boulders that jutted out from the side of the hill, pushing two lanky pines together, she took a tumble that sent her rolling a long way down in the opposite direction. She tucked herself into a ball, and prayed for nothing to break. Once she came to a stop she got back on her feet, and tried to push forward, but there was someone waiting for her.

The third one had survived, though in worse shape than its siblings. It was still fast, but it was hopping around on crushed, crooked looking limb, while a milky yellow pus seeped from the hole where one of its black eyes once sat. Turning her head, she saw the other two had joined them.

The three invaders encircled her, and all she could do was watch. But as horrible as the sight of them was she found another reason to despair. Behind one of the creatures, among the bushes, and low-hanging branches of the wooden sentinels surrounding them was a pair of glowing red eyes. The creatures, or aliens, or whatever the hell they called themselves must have brought a pet. One of the unnatural creations in their lab.

Audrey could do nothing but sit on the ground and hug her legs to her chest, weeping.

She whispered whatever prayers she could remember as fast as she could, hoping for some saving grace, like a painless experience as the monstrosities surrounding her tore her apart. Then she heard it, a howl, followed by a snarl. And then, screaming, but not from her.

Audrey looked up to see as something covered in hair, on four legs, and smelling like dog, only three times the size of any dog she'd ever encountered. It had one of the aliens in its jaws, shaking it and tossing it about like dinner bone.

The other two aliens snarled and screeched at the humungous wolf, lunging at it with their outstretched digits, which bore a dim blue light that appeared to hurt the wolf, and send it stumbling back.

The two aliens had backed the wolf into the pile of boulders Audrey had attempted to navigate earlier. But then, to her bewilderment, two more of the massive overgrown wolves emerged, and went to work ripping open the bulbous gelatin heads of the aliens.

Audrey collapsed panting. She had no strength left, and now she had to worry about some prehistoric-sized wolves adding her to their exotic dinner. And sure enough, the first wolf who had intervened, stalked forward, eyeing her and inhaling the air around her. She shivered and moaned as it approached, keeping an eye on its companions. One was still gnawing away at his prey. The other took looked up at that moment, his face covered in the pale yellow ooze, almost identical to his brother except for a missing eye.

The one inching closest to her, the biggest one, made gentle crying noises and pressed its snout against her hand, licking it a few times. She gave it a gentle pat on the head, but suddenly the wolf began to go into convulsions. It almost looked like it as trying to sneeze, but couldn't get it out. Then it started shaking, and all of Audrey's fear evaporated. She just wanted to comfort the poor beast that had come to her aide.

She knelt beside it and held it close to her, but it growled and shook her off. She took a bit of a tumble, but kept her feet and now saw the other two wolves had begun to react in the same way.

Audrey began to cry for help, and looked around to see if she could spot any headlights or campfires nearby.

"Audrey," came a cracked voice from behind.

She turned, letting out a sharp yelp as she did.

Rising from a pile of hair on the spot where the wolf was having a seizure, a naked man rose to his feet. Not just any man, her husband, Lane.

"Lane?"

He was breathing heavy, and his eyes, no longer glowing red, but were now the color of the setting sun until they faded back to their normal brown. He ran to her and swept her up off her feet, holding her tight and covering her face in kisses.

She pushed away from him unsure if what was happening was real.

She looked at the other two wolves then. Both now had men emerging from their shed hides. Sure enough, one was Vince, and the one-eyed one was one-

eyed Anders. A gust of air came blowing through, and from the bushes leapt another wolf.

“Carl?” she asked it, and it whined and barked in reply. She looked down at herself then and tried to cover her nakedness in the sight of her in-laws. Lane neared her, and without thinking about it she slapped him twice across the face. “Fucking asshole,” she said through quivering lips. Then she collapsed in exhaustion on his chest.

She didn’t pass out right away. She drifted in and out of consciousness as they waited for Carl to return to his man shape, and they made their way back to Howling Rock, Lane carrying her the whole way.

Howling Rock. A fucking joke.

She started laughing at this. Laughing so hard, in fact, Lane gave her a worried look,

“It’s okay now, babe, I have you,” he said.

This made her laugh even harder.

“Am I losing my mind?” she asked as she began to nod off.

“No, hon, you’re not,” said Lane. “Some of it I can explain, but others, you’re gonna have to fill in.”

She’d married a werewolf. Into a whole werewolf clan, or pack, rather.

“I’m either an idiot, or I have lost my mind,” she said after waking up the next day.

To her chagrin it was her mother-in-law there to greet her when she woke.

“Oh I don’t think, you’re an idiot, dear, believe it or not. Just not very useful,” said the iron-haired tyrant, who was at work with some knitting in an easy chair while Audrey sipped some tea Lane had made her while she and Blanche talked. “Until now, that is.”

Audrey gave her a hard look, directing as much hate as she could at this “woman”.

“Don’t look at me like that. Be honest with yourself for a moment. A self-published artist heavily in debt for a useless piece of paper,” said Blanche, not missing a beat on her needle work.

“You’ll have to elaborate,” said Audrey, “I was the victim of an abduction by interstellar beings. The world’s a little foggy.”

Blanche looked up.

“So, that was where they came from?” she asked, her eyes shooting up to look at Audrey and judge her words.

“I just know we were floating up there,” said Audrey throwing a hand up to the sky. “Then I crashed the ship into the lake to get back here.”

“Hmm,” Blanche grunted.

“Now tell me what I should know about *our* family,” said Audrey through gritted teeth.

Blanche shrugged, went back to her needle work, and explained.

They were werewolves, yes, but not as Audrey thought of them. They

didn't have to make the change. It is something available to them at will.

"But it's not something we need these days unless we're dealing with other packs, or a vampire or faerie tribe."

Audrey almost choked on her tea.

"Oh yes," said Blanche, "There are other things that go bump in the night. We all tend to get along well enough, but sometimes we have to use our special talents to deal with external threats and other foreign agents."

The way Blanche said the word "foreign" made Audrey think of the family's oh-so important meeting with the Japanese, and, that in mind, decided not to ask where the hell her husband had been for those five days.

They did reveal to her that she had been missing for a little over two days, though. Lane and Anders, along with Ander's wife, Marie, had found the hastily departed scene, including her and the ranger's abandoned vehicles.

"Lane went out looking for you in his wolf skin the whole time trying to sniff you out," Blanche told her. "I didn't think my son had it in him, but he almost literally bit my head off when I tried to stop him."

Blanche held up the swath of wool she was working with, allowing Audrey to see it was a pair of booties for an infant.

"Now I don't know what it was that took you. Those like us, and all the other tribes of unique individuals who would just as soon as stay out of the limelight have been having similar encounters."

Audrey set her mug aside. "So, you had nothing to do with it?"

"I'm not a savage, dear. Besides, now you're carrying one of us," said

Blanche.

“How did you know?”

“I’m old Audrey, but all those years give me a keen sense for smelling new blood.”

Blanche did something terrible next. She smiled at Audrey, and practically floated over to her.

She placed a gentle hand on Audrey’s.

“And I can’t wait to meet them.”

When she was feeling better she went walking around the lake with Lane.

“Do you think anyone will find that thing?” she asked, referring to the alien vessel she sent crashing into the waters before them.

She looked up at Lane to see his face was turning red—one of his many tells that he was lying.

“What is it?” she asked.

“We’ve got people on that,” said Lane.

“Your family?”

“And others,” he said. “This concerns a lot of important people, a lot of rich people, and a lot of extraordinary people.”

They stood there in each other’s arms for some time. Enjoying the silence, enjoying the peace of the afternoon as the family’s began to file down for the fireworks show later that night. She wasn’t looking forward to the fireworks,

though. They seemed foolish now.

She turned her head up toward the skies above, and saw them as something new, as something as mysterious as the depths of the oceans, but vast beyond imagination. The skies above, for all their blue splendor were just a mask, a mask hiding an unforgiving darkness above.



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