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Monsters.

When I was a child, I thought monsters lived under my bed. My parents would tuck me in, shut off the light and whisper how much they loved me with a soft smile. I would say it back and wait for the light to stop seeping from under the door.

I never slept with a fan. No, because then the white noise it created would make me unable to hear them. The monsters under my bed couldn't be seen by the human eye, nor could they see. But their hearing was perfect. So, mine needed to be too.

Each night I would play a game of cat and mouse with them- each of us waiting and listening for the other. One tiny rustle of my sheet would alert them and one wrong step on my creaky floor would alert me. There was a sickening tension there every night. Who would win? The child or the monster? *I've never felt so alive* than during those long hours.

I would ask the other children at school about their monsters. "What monsters" they would reply, heads tilting slightly in a way that only kids can do without seeming condescending. "The monsters under your beds- the ones without eyes made of pure shadow but have the hearing of a bat." I would reply. To which the teachers would tell me to stop telling lies. The monster I spoke of scared the other children.

And so, my unanswered questions burned a hole into my mind. They engulfed my thoughts every night, every time the game resumed. It expanded and bloated into something ugly. A desire I couldn't shove away anymore but rather a cyst that threatened to explode.

And so, I was the first to break the night's silence. Caution mattered not when I was already being eaten alive.

“I know you’re there,” I whispered into the void of my room.

“We know,” a voice responded.

It was different than I expected. The voice was deep and sounded far away, like an echo without the original speaker. Otherworldly. A bit like what my young mind concocted for a deity speaking to their worshiper.

“How many of you are there?” My voice wavered a bit.

“There are many of us and there is one of us.”

I could hear the monster creeping closer. The floorboards creaked ever so slightly as if the monsters weighed nothing. My heart beat faster. I was still yet to move, that old instinct yelling at me not to. It was too late; it knew where I was.

“May we ask you a question?”

I nodded.

“Are you frightened?”

I paused. My pounding heart was the only sound. *Was I afraid?* Yes, I was, but there was something more. An excitement. The game of Cat and Mouse was finally coming to an end; the invisible enemy I’d been fighting for as long as I could remember had shown itself.

“No.”

The monsters were at my side. If I reached out, I could touch it. My fingers ached to do uncertainty of whether the monster would like it stopped me. After years of waiting, scaring it off was the last thing I wanted to do.

However, I was just a child, and children are prone to being impulsive. Without a second, one of my other unanswered questions bled from my mouth.

“Why are you here?”

“We protect people. I protect you.”

“From what?”

“You do not want to know.”

We sat in silence after that. The very thing that I had perceived as my enemy was an ally. Guilt climbed my throat. Fat tears welled in my eyes in amounts only acceptable for a child my age.

My bed sagged under the invisible creature’s weight. They curled up beside me as a cat would. Warmth radiated off of them, melting its way into my bones and muscles, welding my guilt and sadness into something less sharp. A yawn escaped my lips before my eyes started to become heavy. How long had it been since I slept throughout the night?

“Goodnight, creature,” I murmured before sleep claimed me.

When I was a child, I thought monsters lived under my bed. I had never been so wrong in my life.

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