

THE QUARRY

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Black Sandman

Shadows swept across the room like wild beasts. They wound over walls and threatened to gnaw off any limb that dared protrude over the safety of the bed. Snickering, they rattled closet doors and mocked the weak ward of the nightlight's glow. 'Sssh...' A hand caressed the cheek of the terrified youth, whose hair was strewn across her pillow after a fitful sleep.

'Don't fret precious, I'm here.'

The voice soothed the shadows still and silence fell over the bedroom. With a gloved hand, the figure drew out a pouch from within the folds of its robes. The mystical drapes shifted the shades of late twilight as tattered ends weaved into wisping smoke.

‘Lay your head down, child. I won’t let the Boogeyman come.’

A soft tug and the pouch loosened. The sandy contents were poured into its palm before a breath carried it over the child. Like starlight the sand danced and sparkled, singing songs of grand adventure. Under the growing weight of slumber, the child’s muscles slackened, eyes drifted closed.

Now a fading presence from the world the figure rose. Standing over the bedside it wiped its hand, studding stars onto its robes.

‘Goodnight, Lilian.’

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The lurch of the tram threatened to send Lily toppling with each stop-start at the CBD’s lights. Skin paler than ivory, her skeletal fingers clung to the overhead railing as a lifeline, an anchor point in the passing tide of each station. Her fingers tapped against the railing while she fiddled with the button on her phone. Lock. Unlock. Lock. Unlock. Lock.

She could have sworn the permission sheet had read nine.

Or were they meeting earlier for roll call?

Uncertainty roused an unsettled churn in her stomach, the smell of hunger rising on her breath. It wouldn’t have been the first time she’d got it wrong. What if she had again? She could always trust herself to screw something up somewhere. She couldn’t do anything right... and she was going to get chewed out by her parents again for it. No doubt the school would call them for her being late.

A bump from a passenger’s elbow jolted Lily from her thoughts. She recoiled, running her hand over her arm as if she’d been touched by fire. Had the tram always been this small? It had become pretty crowded... Her breath began to draw short, catching sharp in her chest.

Not now. Not here. Not with all these people watching.

Lily shut her eyes tight but the overwhelming sea of voices followed her into the dark. She bid herself to breathe and focus on smaller things. But as always that was easier said than done.

'Pay no mind to the rabble.'

The words reverberated as a distant echo, yet were distinct over the bustle of the tram in its familiarity. Lily forced a breath, her knuckles turning ghostly in a death grip on the railing. Her finger pressed the volume of her phone to amp her music to near deafening. The voice, and those of others present, were lost to the swift sound of piano and violins as *L'Impeto Oscuro* streamed through her headphones. 'Headphones on. World off.' Lily quietly reassured herself.

Despite her anxiety spiking, Lily managed to steel herself enough to focus. Answers were what she needed. She could text someone for them. That was an idea.

'Meeting at gallery at 9?'

It took the fourth attempt for the text to send without the automated response of an inactive number. While awaiting a text back, Lily loaded the route timetable for her ETA. She was close and, thankfully, it wasn't long before her music feed paused to the jingle of a text.

'Yeah. Um. Who is this? How did you get my #?'

'Lily. We had a group assignment last year.'

No sooner had she replied the tram suddenly jerked and launched Lily forward into a man, almost knocking his iPhone from his hands. She mumbled a profuse apology, the words tumbling as badly as she had. A frightened rabbit, Lily bolted through the still opening doors, onto the platform, and into the street. Unaware, she'd gotten off two stops early and forgotten to tap her Myki card.

In a mad dash, she'd managed to make it to the gallery with mere minutes to spare. Lily ignored the gathered students as she stood hunched, wheezing pained breaths, her hand pressed against the neighbouring storefront. That was stupid. Oh so stupid. She'd have scolded herself had she not felt her thoughts would be lost to the war drums pounding in her ears. But at least she'd made it. If the lacking presence of a teacher was enough to go by.

Once the pain in her chest started to subside Lily straightened, stumbling from a feeling of light-headedness. A scent of bodily tang brought a new sense of alarm. Immediately Lily folded her arms, trying not to look as gauche as she felt, and subtly patted the underarms of her school dress. Not too damp so she was probably in the clear for sweat marks. Just as well, for she met the gaze of an arriving classmate.

The two awkwardly held eye contact for a silent moment. At this point, one of them was going to have to yield and acknowledge the other.

‘Hey.’ He waved with a smile she assumed was as false as her own.

Lily hurriedly folded her arms behind her back, wiping her hands on her dress, all while trying to make the gesture look discreet.

‘Heeeeey...’

Oh god, please don’t come over. She hoped. She prayed. But of course, he did. Worse still, he drew Lily into idle chit-chat over the morning’s traffic.

‘He is only speaking with you to be polite, you know.’

Lily’s smile strained and her eyes fell. She’d planned to excuse herself yet, before she could, a nearby group of girls chimed in about how Melbourne transport sucked. Their train was late or something like that. Lily wasn’t really following, didn’t really care to. She was only eager to fade from participating since they seemed content to discuss without her.

‘You should pay no mind to what other voices say. They don’t care about you.’

The whisper brushed against her ear and along her face. It sent her body rigid, flinching, as the sensation of a cape swept over her shoulders in an embrace. An unseen weight pressed just over her shoulder as if someone were resting their head.

‘Like I do.’

Lily resisted the urge to look over her shoulder. She clenched fistfuls of the back of her dress, the fabric keeping her nails from digging into her palms. A call of her name brought her back. The conversation had fallen silent, replaced by questioning looks. ‘Just a shudder,’ Lily reassured with a forced sheepish laugh and released her grasped. ‘Somebody must’ve stepped on my grave.’

She stepping away, to stand out of earshot. No doubt there'd be talk about what just happened... The teacher finally arrived, a box of guidebooks under his arm. Keen for a distraction, Lily stepped forward to collect hers and flipped it open to the table of contents. 'The Pantheon: A Taste of Greek Myth.' She read aloud when one title caught her interest, her eyes falling to a photo of one of the exhibitions main draws, a painting of Persephone.

Once rollcall had been taken the students piled into the gallery. Winding figures of welded scrap-metal pillared the open space. Their metallic branches stretched skyward to crumple against the ceiling, a representation of a 'concrete jungle' supposedly. Or so the tour guide said. But Lily was having difficulty following, her attention lost in a thickening fog that blanketed her thoughts. She edged to the back of the group, needing to get off her feet for a moment.

It would be embarrassing – and rude to the guide – but the woozier Lily felt the less inclined she was to care.

There'd have to be a bench or chair for her to sit on. Hell, even the floor would do. She glanced across the room for one, instead spotting a familiar figure among the pillars. As always, lavish robes adorned its masculine frame. The crescent curls that hung over olive skin made it look like a painting come to life. Of course Nephron was here, it was the last thing she needed right now.

'This is why you take your tablets, Lily,' she muttered to herself.

Nephron circled the pillar intently, confused, but curious. Its thumb tapped under-chin in interest before its eyes flicked from the artwork, sensing Lily's gaze. Swiftly she turned away, refocusing on the tour as her frown turned harsh. If she ignored it, it'd go away eventually.

Passing minutes dug in their heels and the growing sense of exhaustion strengthened. It beckoned her to rest her eyes – if only for a moment. Vibrant colours dulled to the darkness that crept into the corners of her vision. Like a wild beast, it pounced, swallowing the world whole. Lily staggered and collapsed back towards the corner of a display. But, as she fell, Nephron caught her wrist and swung her sideways in the instant before it vanished as Lily's consciousness slipped.

Lily woke to the frightened calls of her teacher. Reality struck, terror jolting her from her stupor and returning senses with a harsh clarity. She became all too aware of the looming wall of people that surrounded her, their eyes fixated as they towered above her. She couldn't breathe. She pleaded for the darkness to take her back. For it to reach through the floor and drag her into the deepest pit of Hades, far away from all these eyes. Far away from everything.

The teacher waved the students back but many barely budged.

'Are you alright?' He pressed. The unease in his voice made it clear that it hadn't been his first time asking since she'd awoken. Lily merely nodded in response.

'You were lucky. You nearly cracked your head open.'

'You should've,' Interrupted one of the boys who was met with a deathly glare in response from the teacher. 'No, I mean it! You didn't see it! She was falling but before she hit the thing she swerved in mid-air... then bang!' He finished with a clap of his hands.

It took an hour for Lily's father to drive from work to take her home early. She battened down the hatches, knowing what was sure to follow.

'This is what happens when you don't eat breakfast, Lillian. I've told you.' He began with eyes flicking between her and the road.

'I know.'

'That's what you always say. Don't just say "I know." Actually *do* it!'

He paused.

'Did you take your iron tablets at least?'

Lily hesitated. '...No.'

Her father slapped his hand atop the steering wheel and gave a frustrated groan.

'Lily you have a deficiency. You can't just not take them otherwise this happens!'

'I didn't mean to not take them!' Lily snapped back, lifting her head from against the passenger window. 'I was running late because I had trouble sleeping! I forgot to have breakfast so I forgot to take my tablets too!'

‘That doesn’t work if you forget to have breakfast every other day. Don’t be so...’ He paused again to point at his temple. ‘Stupid. You easily could have been hurt. You almost broke your jaw the last time you fainted. If you hadn’t been on the bloody laptop all night you wouldn’t have been running late.’

And. There. It. Was.

‘It’s not the laptop’s fault! You’re always so quick to blame it for everything but it’s not the reason I have insomnia!’

Lily threw herself back to the window, lightly banging her forehead against the glass. She wasn’t going to bother continuing. This wasn’t an argument she could win, unless she wanted to be institutionalised that is. ‘*Fuckwit doesn’t know anything...*’ She thought bitterly. Her fingernails dug into her arm, leaving raw tracks as she ran them back and forth. The pain distracted from the sharp sting in her eyes. She didn’t dare cry in front of him.

The remainder of the trip was made in silence. From the front door, Lily darted up the stairwell to the bathroom, taking some fresh laundry from the banister as she passed. She ran the shower hot, the water near scalding. It painted her skin in red splotches, blending in the mark of tears and silent screams. Once dry Lily slipped on a blue nightdress and threw her old clothes into the wash basket.

‘One pill makes you larger. One makes you small. And the pills that Mother gives you don’t do anything at all.’

The distinct sound of 60’s bass guitar greeted Lily in the hallway. Dad must have been playing his vinyl collection while cooking again. The melody followed her into her bedroom which, as her mother put it, was a victim of ‘flat-surface syndrome.’ Every available surface was covered in something, be it clothes, books, towers of CDs, posters or travel magazine clippings. Early afternoon light filtered through the blinds of her lone window. It cast dark bars across the opposite window, caging a bird’s silhouette as it sat upon the outside streetlight.

With a heavy sigh, Lily crashed onto her bed. Sprawled across its length, her arm rested over her face to shield against the light. She felt the mattress dip to a weight at the end of her bed, causing her to jerk upright and press herself against the backboard.

‘Nephron.’ Lily spluttered. ‘I-it’s been a while since you appeared in my room.’

Nephron gave her a half-way glance as it shifted to prop one leg over the other, arms folded ‘Oh? Are we speaking now? It’s been a while since you last spoke to me.’ It responded with feigned insult.

‘Yeah, well, it stopped being acceptable to talk to your imaginary friends at eight.’ Lily quipped defensively, unsure why she felt the need to justify herself.

‘But...’

‘But?’ Nephron prodded with a grin.

Lily swallowed, her hand running over her already bruised wrist. ‘You’re not imaginary, are you? The gallery... What are you?’

With a chuckle, Nephron rose to its feet.

‘After all these years and only now do you care to ask, flower? One name, of two, your kind has given mine is Sandman.’

‘And the other?’

For an instant something malevolent crept into the Sandman’s grin, leaving Lily thankful it hadn’t answered.

‘What do you want?’ Lily asked unnerved by the sudden turn.

‘What I’ve always wanted.’ It replied nonchalantly, pacing the small room to brush its hand over a childhood doll atop the bedding box, a white rabbit.

‘To keep you safe.’

‘Safe from –’

Nephron cut her off abruptly, appearing before her in an instant. Its hand grasped her wrist, drawing out her arm, while the other brushed over the raw streaks from the drive home.

‘Yourself. Safe from pain, and truth, and choice, and other poison devils.’

The Sandman’s voice was melodic and made Lily feel guilty as she yanked her arm free. Nephron, however, was unfazed by the gesture and simply offered out its hand. It smiled down at her as it had throughout her younger years. Lily found herself

yearning for the simpler time and the reassuring presence that lingered whenever she'd grown tired.

'You have lived in this world and have seen how cruel and unforgiving it is. Stay with me, safe and ignorant, in a realm where dreams needn't just be dreams.

Lily stared up at the Sandman's eyes, its most striking feature by far, as she felt herself caught in the amber gaze. Like a sunset they were calming, something to look at with admiration. Her fingertips brushed against the surface of Nephron's hand, hesitantly withdrawing before finally taking hold.