

The Encounter

"Freeze. Don't turn around," said a feminine voice behind Geoffrey. He complied for now, his workboots coming to an immediate stop on a cracked cement floor. He looked down, trailing a toe in the thick dust, and awaited further instructions.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You shouldn't be here," continued the voice. Later, with the benefit of hindsight, the truth in that statement would become obvious. Geoffrey, a safety inspector by trade, had come to this abandoned mill house to determine whether or not it should be torn down to make room for a forestry replanting scheme.

"Nor should you," he replied. "You're trespassing on private property."

He thought he heard the voice laugh derisively, or perhaps it was just the whisper of wind through broken, grime-caked windows.

"Do you see it?" the voice asked him.

Of course I see it, he thought. Before him was a large open space, probably once a grain storeroom or some such outbuilding. In its centre was a bubbling, purple-black mist, spilling out of some kind of distortion in the air slightly taller and wider than Geoffrey himself. Beyond the faintly glowing edges of the Rift that were bleeding fog into the room to evaporate as it hit the ground, Geoffrey saw a rotten, decaying version of the world around him.

"What is this, some kind of haunted house?" he said irritably, not taking his eyes off what could only be an elaborate prank. "Are you filming a movie or what?"

"Stand perfectly still."

Geoffrey didn't. He turned, angrily, and came face-to-face with a monster. It was black and metallic, with a greenish sheen not unlike that of a beetle. Its face was human-sized but featureless apart from a mouth filled with needle-sharp teeth... Or were they actually needles attached to glass syringes? It reacted to his gasp of horror by rising up on its hind legs, hissing like a cockroach, scissoring four massive, bladed arms towards him with hypnotic precision. He wailed in fear; it stopped, calculating. Then it whipped its arms forward to slice him apart at the ribcage.

Geoffrey hit the floor with a heavy thud, and something black rolled away from him and stood. It was a woman, dressed in a leather trenchcoat that flicked around her as she moved. She glanced back quickly.

"I told you to stay still," she fumed. Geoffrey said nothing, and watched as she sized up to the creature. It launched itself at the woman, spitting and cursing in a vile language that Geoffrey didn't - that Geoffrey could never - understand.

She turned to one side, narrowly avoiding a spear-like thrust of the thing's upper-left talon, and the gigantic insect found itself slightly wrong-footed. Without hesitation, the woman grabbed one of its spear-tipped arms and punched her hand through it, breaking off the armoured appendage as though it were a twig. The monster squealed now, turning to bite at her, enraged. She deflected a blow from its remaining weapons then forced its own disembodied claw through its chest. Then, pulling out the knife-like talon, she pushed with all of her weight against the beast and reinserted it into the creature's head. It crumpled slowly.

"What..." began Geoffrey.

The woman turned and offered a hand to pull him to his feet. His knees buckled and she had to steady him. Her skin was ice-cold, even in the damp chill of the forest.

"Thank you," he said.

"Get out of here, before more of them come," she sneered at him, still angry. "I have to close the Rift. Tell no one what you have seen here tonight."

"Tell no one?!" he exclaimed in disbelief. "Or what?"

"Or I'll make you wish you hadn't."

It was a simple enough threat, easily backed up by the woman's apparent strength and demeanour. As if that alone wasn't enough, though, the woman smiled at him. Her too-pale face was lit by the dull light flickering from the portal, and in her eyes Geoffrey saw his apartment. He saw himself in his bedroom, as lifeless as the shell of the insect lying on the ground behind him now.

He saw a desiccated corpse, drained entirely of blood.

He ran, and told no one.