

The Mind is a Fickle Thing

You haven't yet decided whether you are in a nightmare or not when you see your partner walk through the mirror in the bathroom next to your room and emerge into another realm.

You can remember how you arrived at the situation you find yourself in: the hug your partner had given you just before he walked through the mirror; the anxiety you both felt maybe an hour prior over the knowledge of what waited for him in the other realm; the pain of past injuries; the worry over him going back and sustaining more. You remember what you had for breakfast this morning (half a chocolate muffin, the other half eaten sometime before), but if this is a dream, that memory could very easily be something that happened outside of it.

Regardless, this thinking is futile, so you resign to watch your partner meet today's fate through your only vantage point: the smallest sliver past the curtain through your bedroom window, able to see into the realm.

One thing you do know with unfailing certainty is the purpose of this journey that your partner is currently making. He is protecting your home from monsters. Rather than wait for the monsters to leave their home world, he journeys to theirs to take out the problem at the root. He isn't the first one to make that journey, either. Before him were three other hunters who had gone out one by one, never coming back. He is the fourth.

Another thing you know for certain: you must not pull back the curtain covering the window. Even the slightest crack you allow yourself is dangerous. While he cannot see you watching him, the monsters can. If they look up. Nonetheless, you care for him too much to leave him alone in this task. He may not be able to see you, but he knows you are watching.

Among the blood-red environment of the monster realm, you see him walking, silhouetted against a backdrop of dark, jagged rocks. His boots leave prints in the dust. The landscape is featureless, save for the rocks and the occasional dust storm that passes through. You think you can make out caves within the rock formations. Dark shapes move within the openings as he passes, some with slithering motions, others with quick, glitchy movements. He doesn't pay the shapes any mind. After all, he isn't here for them.

He pulls out the sword he has strapped to his belt, the unnatural light glinting off the iron. No matter how far he walks, you can still see him. The window follows him like a camera, changing angles at times.

You pull out the small, leather-bound booklet he gave you before he left. It contains crude drawings of every monster he has to fight in order to succeed. Flipping through pages, you find the spot you bookmarked. Today's monster. Or now's monster. You'd like to believe the battles are spread out over days or weeks, in order to give him time to recover, but you don't think that's true. When it doesn't show a hellscape, the window is always dark. So for all you know, the battles could be happening in direct sequence, one after the other. But it doesn't matter in the end. He hasn't shown signs of fatigue anyway, and any injuries sustained from the fights go away before the next one.

The illustration of the monster he faces now is a mess of pencil lines and notes in the margins. You think you can make out tubes of some sort connected to a base. You can't read most of the messy handwriting except for the word "consumed". The booklet is put away, but faint disgust lingers at the back of your mind.

He is almost at the battleground. There is never a clear demarcation of a designated battleground. There are no bounds, save for the realm itself. The only way to know what monster to target is to know inside and out what must be fought. In the distance you can see a mass of white. It appears to be moving, undulating erratically. You can tell the moment he sees the creature—he gives his sword a twirl and charges at the monster without hesitation. You pull out your stopwatch and start it.

One more thing you know for sure: the monsters allow the battles to last for exactly one minute. If the battle goes over that amount of time, the hunter is eaten. By the monster they were fighting or by some unseen being, watching and lurking, you don't know. So you time each battle and pray you never have to see the clock hit 1:00.00.

You expect to see a huge battle, like there had been many times before. But he chooses to skirt around the monster instead. In doing this, you get your first real look at what it looks like. It appears to be a garden-variety bush... if bushes grew in a bone-white color and had long, worm-like tubes instead of leaves. And moved. It unsticks itself from the ground as he approaches, leaving one of those tubes planted in the ground, swaying as if it belonged underwater.

Your confusion at why he isn't attacking like normal and your disgust at the monster's appearance give way to understanding when you see him dodge the monster's attack again. He isn't trying to hurt it—not yet, anyway. He is distracting it, keeping it on its metaphorical toes.

The two of them act out an otherworldly dance: dull light glinting off of the sword as he moves, the monster's roots kicking up dust as it tries to hurt him. You forget to watch the clock, entranced by the natural rhythm his body flows with. It ends all too suddenly when, in one fluid motion, he bends, dodging another arm, and flings his sword like a Frisbee in the direction of the tube still planted in the red ground.

Though no sound reaches your ears, you believe you can hear the monster scream from an unseen mouth as the tube is severed, spewing dark liquid. You stop the timer, the movement a jerking of the thumb, almost unconscious. Fifty eight seconds exactly. Your chest aches with the lack of oxygen; breathing in makes your head spin. You look back at him. He is bent over, hands on his knees, shoulders heaving. You cannot see his face, but his relief is palpable even through the glass. After some time, he approaches the still form of the monster and kicks it. It flops lifelessly. He goes to retrieve his sword and, walking up to the monster again, takes a now-limp tube in his hand and severs it from the body. He holds it up to the hellishly red light, contemplating it.

The image goes dark before you see what he does. You let the curtain fall back into place and rise to wait at the door for him.

You estimate maybe fifteen seconds pass before he steps through the mirror again. Though, it could very well be fifteen minutes. The door is cracked, showing slightly more of the interior of the bathroom than the window showed of the monster realm. Within, you see him emerge from the mirror and slide off the countertop. You rush to the door and begin to push it open, but stop dead.

Because there in the mirror, you can see him devouring the bone-white tube of the slain monster. His face is splattered with black liquid, eyes hooded as he presses the tube to his face like it holds the secret to eternal life itself. Wet squelching sounds permeate your ears caused by the movement of teeth and tongue against the flesh of the dead creature. He doesn't see you, too engrossed within his meal. For what could either be ten heartbeats or an eternity, you look at his face, so unlike the one you know. But then you notice, out of the corner of your eye, that his hands don't look right. They don't look how they should. Rather... he doesn't appear to have any. Your gaze drifts over slightly, taking in his arms. They look like bugs' arms, long and jointed and dark, pointed at the end. His body stands at an odd angle, and peeking around the door, you notice his legs look the same.

You move away from the door, but he senses you. Dropping the tube, he hooks one pointed appendage around the door, pulling it open. Shadows cover his face, but in the dark, his smile still glows bright. His eyes glow too—purple—pinpricks of light in the dark bedroom you both stand in. You feel them permeating your skin, stripping you and rendering you to just your soul. A scent that could only be death itself emanates from the creature you once called your beloved. You notice that even though he is no longer eating the limb of the monster, the squelching noises still sound from the area of his face. His eyebrow twitches, the corner of his mouth quirks.

No, that's not right.

He doesn't do those things voluntarily, nor does he do them involuntarily. Those movements aren't muscle spasms. It dawns on you that much of the shadow on his face isn't caused naturally; rather, his face is covered in holes. They are bordered by rot and decay, the cause of the smell currently making you gag. Crawling within those holes are what look like tiny maggots, causing movements like muscle spasms within his face. But those aren't maggots. Not from your realm, anyway.

He still has one more monster left to face. You don't know if he will make it that long, or if he will become the monster the next hunter has to fight. You don't know for sure how long you have been waiting for him to return from my realm. You can't know. You hide in the dark with no possible way of being able to tell what time it is, what's real and what is your imagination. Those who sleep have difficulty telling what is real and what is in their minds. Is this real, here? What you are seeing, is it real? Do you know how you got to this situation? This position you find yourself in? Being stared down by the monstrous form of the man you once called your partner. I almost pity you. What a shame. You were so certain you knew.