

There it was. Radiant. Reassuring. Overarching.

The light of day.

The prize that awaited beyond a veritable vertical gauntlet. Past the pain shouldered by clenched fists and gritted teeth alone. The trials of taking each step over ground that swam in your blurry vision. The struggle to stagger over the crest of yet another hill, solely on a self-made promise that a hundred more wouldn't lie on the other side.

All for a wish that had finally...*finally* come to delicious fruition.

Victory had been attained, and with it, freedom. You could spend it under the sun's warmth, washing down the exhaustion and fear as you drank in its rays. Basking in both that wonderful heat and in the satisfaction of a summit well surmounted.

For as long as you could convince yourself that was really what you were looking at.

Given the cracks in the cheerful image you'd built of it were so sizable from the start. It was a small comfort. A sad one, even. But given everything that you'd been through...you'd fight to cling to it a moment longer.

Crouched here, caged in your own shaking limbs, atop this motley mountain of fabric. Colourful fibres criss-crossing each other, rising and dipping in woven hills and valleys to the farthest reaches of your vision. All that stood as a shrine to what seemed like so long ago a past life. Gargantuan garments so hard for you to imagine you'd ever worn, towering in alien formations where they'd been sloughed off like snakeskins. Moreso throwing *you* aside, really, instead of the other way around.

The floor...you couldn't even make out the damned *floor*.

How it had occurred didn't strike you as any more important than dealing with the aftermath. And yet, staring in awe at what it had turned the once familiar and reassuring sight of your home into, you wondered.

A soft creak from behind you might have been how it had started. A brief bite of cold at your back soon swallowed up by darkness and pressure on your body, fabric sagging and weighing you down as you jolted away, alarmed. The back door slamming shut. A breath let out that wasn't your own. And the calm of your night in suddenly turning into your clothes trying to eat you alive.

It wasn't instantaneous; even then, that hadn't made it any easier to deal with. A wall of coarse fibres, warping and expanding by the second, was quite the intimidating sight. Pure instinct had spurred your hands, then, and stopped your descent at merely *near*-total darkness. The cascade of clothing onto the floor *not* breaking every bone in your body, thankfully. Lucky break, so to say, even if life couldn't help throwing you a nice little sample as your grabbing of the nearest 'ledge' sent pain shooting up your arms.

And, still luckier you, not needing long to wait before realisation started taking hold. Allowing the magnitude of what had happened to bear down with all its baleful weight. Part of the fire behind your immediate, frantic ascent may have been to try and outrun the terrifying truth of what was happening. Every inch of skin competing to collect the most cuts and bruises, every frayed edge and harsh ridge of material below your former notice having left its mark on the speck now subject to it.

Climbing some more. Wondering if this wasn't some messed-up dream. Slipping. Clenching your teeth as strongly as your fists. Climbing. Unreality breathing down your neck. Clawing at your heels. Swirling up from that yawning pit below. Climbing so desperately away from it all.

For a reeeal long time. You didn't know exactly how long, with your focus being on getting over each obstacle as it approached. But this dire little trial did eventually come to an end at...*some* opening. Could have been a sleeve or the collar. Gravity wouldn't indicate much if your clothes had fallen at a weird angle. One ridge of material didn't look very distinct from another.

But things hadn't ended so soon for a dot of a mountaineer. Not with so little fanfare. The depths were out of sight and mind. A nice pretend morning. Didn't magically fix anything. Left you room to breathe, at least. Or to re-learn how to do so.

A frayed bit of fabric poked out nearby, curled at the peak of this practical monument of fibres. The whole structure stretched down into the haze, commemorating the climax of a climb below even an ant's notice. The damaged segment, once negligible, now felt hard to ignore. It started to come further undone between your twisting, twitching fingers.

Yeah, you were terrified. And rightfully so. What of it? Unbridled fear struck you as pretty rational, right now, because generally the question of how to return from microscopic size wouldn't cross the average person's mind. Generally, they weren't going to measure the amount of time it would take to cross their own kitchen in *hours* as opposed to seconds. *Generally*, the thought of being shrunk down to begin with didn't take priority.

There weren't any advice columns addressed to any future fleas-to-a-flea out there, adrift in an ocean of their own clothing. Not that you could recall. No 'Microbes 101' to go off of. Plus, the whole impromptu mountaineering thing fell flat given that mountaineers tended to have a basic idea of where they were going. The 'just go towards the light' approach had only gotten you so far. And no favourable routes were jumping out at you here.

God, you felt weak.

Said shakiness weren't entirely due to nerves, though. The residual heat of the body that once wore these clothes—which seemed more and more like some entirely different being than you, at this point—helped stave off a certain danger that hadn't registered as such at the time. Right now, it took centre stage as you crouched outside the cavern of clothing, hunkering down in hunger for those dwindling slivers of warmth. Sure, there was a little more time to buy in them. They could stop you from freezing.

But for *how long*, was the ominous question adding its own looming presence to the terrifying mishmash of issues pressing down. Every heartbeat seemed like another tick of the clock. It was bad enough without all of these worst-case scenarios bullying their way past the weakening walls of your psyche. You needed to stop nurturing them yourself.

...Easier said than done.

You willed the nauseating swaying to stop, squeezing your eyes shut before immediately opening them as the feeling worsened. Rocking on your heels, knowing that if you let yourself fall back to the 'floor', you probably wouldn't be able to get yourself back up again.

As gripping as slowly fizzling out like a cheap firework was turning out to be, your thoughts couldn't help but wander off into that blurry, distant territory below. Across what alien expanse this freakish situation had likely made of a single kitchen tile. It was hard to grasp: as abrasive to handle as the frayed strands of your clothing. Maybe you were better off not being able to piece it together. The idea of some opportunistic insect down there, now magnified into a bristling, chitinous monster...

Which, come to think of it, was *how* much less ideal than your current predicament, exactly? One with nothing else to do but...to let fate tug the reins again?

You wrapped your arms around yourself, now stuck in another eternal tussle; namely, with the growing certainty that however many days—or even *hours*—you had left would be spent stranded on this spire of clothing. Or the question of whether to cut it down to minutes, if one wrong move sent you falling off of it. Drifting away like any other speck of dust on the wind...

Would anyone ever find out what had happened? Was there even a *chance* of figuring this kind of thing out?

What an absolute kick in the teeth after all this trauma and tax. The exhausting rhythm of setting objectives, again and again, one frantically pounced-upon goal at a time, set before you by your already flagging mind. For the sake of needing to stay occupied just as much as actual escape. Which had amounted to nothing in the end.

But it was going to change. As another issue had decided to show its face. Not as fresh an issue as it first seemed.

Because things like this tended to have a cause.

There was one thing that ensnared your awareness like a knife to the neck. One thing which hadn't really taken priority in your mind over clearing the unexpected trials of your nightwear. One thing that this past adventure hadn't helped prepare for.

Namely, that sudden chill at your back, right before your downfall.

Maybe it said something about your survival instinct, the whole 'footsteps and sudden breath' thing having slipped your mind so quickly. Being able to claw your way up to that faux sun on your ceiling had taken priority. This strange situation would've been rougher if you

hadn't been able to make any of your newly alien surroundings out. None of it detracted from the fact that *there was someone in your house*.

*On* clicks your awareness—the jolt of it back into your brain difficult to class as pleasant at this point—and *over* goes your world.

There's no other way to describe it, the effortless upheaval of this fibrous landscape. Just one little movement turning it all upside down. And the only way to deal with it was screwing your eyes shut, grabbing what let itself be grabbed, and letting it all wash over you like a limpet weathering the ocean waves.

The second relative cataclysm you'd had to withstand, and it didn't feel any easier. The aftershocks of jolting a couple of centimetres. Dangling by a near-negligible thread. Fighting off a fresh wave of terror, even as a rosier-tinted outlook cautiously reared its head. Daring to hope. To hope that this sudden shrinkage and new arrival were unrelated. That there was a chance of ending this terrifying night in caring hands—however colossal they were compared to you.

The spark snuffed out just as fast in the encroaching, thickening darkness.

And the quakes coming with it. Each earth-shaking slam of shoe to ground sounding closer. Each step taken with far, *far* too much purpose to mean well.

Then the silence.

Between too much noise and none whatsoever, it was hard to decide which was the most intimidating. Craning your neck from your vantage point (where exactly was it, anyway? Still couldn't tell) you leaned towards where the sound had come from, as much as you dared. And regretted it.

Exhaustion couldn't hide what they were. Shoes the size of houses. Two limbs stretching beyond your vision to heights that shadowed skyscrapers. And very much just staying there: domineeringly, menacingly still.

How...how long had they been waiting there, sadistically anticipating your realisation? How long had you *really* been stuck with your own feverish imaginings?

And how much did it matter, given what would happen now?

Your skin crawled. It didn't feel right that these worlds would intersect. Clinging to existence right at the fringe of their comprehension, and all. Stuck at a size where the strongest squint wouldn't be much help, and you'd still caught their relatively sky-high eye. About to incur the judgement of some all-powerful deity, directing the damning, unbridled force of its attention towards a dust mite skittering around at its feet.

Hard to call that reassuring anymore.

Especially considering how they either had a key to the back door of your house or had just plain broken in.

Even with the slight relief of their body heat...there was no stopping your shivering.

Setting your jaw, you hauled yourself up towards the top of the thread—the jitteriness reaching a new high at your own attention-drawing movement—hoping to get there before anything else inside of you threw its hands up and called it quits. Whatever you'd have to deal with now, it'd be better to deal with on stable ground—or *more* stable ground.

Said ground becoming the focus as you flopped onto it. Treating the woven surface like it was the most interesting sight in the world. Very much not wanting to look elsewhere for evidence against that. Knowing the danger above wasn't the kind that could be pushed to the back of your mind.

A sound unlike any others juddering its way out of your chest as your gaze crawled inexorably upward.

The likelihood of having slipped below their notice dwindled by the second. Their mocking cycle of unbothered breaths carried on, each distant rush of air harder not to flinch at. They were too close. Had been so for far too long. This didn't seem like the kind of absent acknowledgement that ended with a look of mild disgust at best before moving on.

It was *too* attentive. And it promised so much more.

Splitting the agonising silence with aplomb that was this titan dropping to one knee, their arm shooting past for balance. The force of an atomic bomb announced the collective impact, tearing down the flimsily reconstructed borders around your paltry little psyche. Like the peak of some freakish rollercoaster careened over in a split second. Instinct kicked in again as you braced yourself, muscles straining and nerves further frazzled.

When your awareness inched its way back to you, it did so shuddering. Another high-unfathomable sound rumbled overhead, playing furiously at your nerves even before you could suss out what it was. A hand being drawn out from their pocket—amplified by the difference in dimensions into a sound and sight that shook you. Downright monstrous as it emerged from its lair. The thumb staying inside as four fingers slipped out, their pink-helmed heads dangling lazily over the pocket's lip.

Followed soon after by a deep, inhuman groan, oozing its way through the tortured air; with the change in distance it took a moment to be recognisable as them merely exhaling. Mulling the situation over from their privileged, *normal* position. Your fevered brain painted quite the picture of what expression their face held; none bode well. Smug in their victory. Impatient and nervous. Or lacking any readability entirely...which could have been the worst of all for you.

A street's worth of denim bridged the gap between germ and giant. It clothed their leg, a sheer wall of shin crowned by an enormous knee. And, resting atop it, the dread behemoth of a hand itself. Poised on its perch like a predator about to pounce. Eager. Excited.

*Hungry.*

What the hell was there to do? What could you even try? There was no way to fight back against so powerful a force, even if you could dredge up any remaining energy that hadn't died off as worthless adrenaline. Nowhere to run that wouldn't be outmatched by the pace of that hand-time dilation be damned.

And as much as you wanted to just freeze up completely and wait for the titan to walk away, either oblivious or satisfied in scaring you witless...something traitorous between your ears was letting you know how hopeless that was.

Something shuddered inside of you. One tiny thing you thought you could manage, and yet it wouldn't come out. *Help*, it was, this sad little plea, stuck in your throat. Neither something you could swallow down or cough up—just choke on, near crying.

So many *whys* and *what ifs* and *maybes* swirled around in your mind. Any of them would've been welcome to wrench away the wheel. Begged for, at this point. None would. So many routes of varying stupidity scrawling themselves out with such desperation, and not a drop of energy left to commit to any of them.

So...immeasurably...fucked.

But even as you finally fell back, white-knuckle grips on the 'earth' below, you'd never felt more horribly awake and aware. The easy way out that was unconsciousness seemed as distant as the blurred plateau of your countertop. Come hell or high water, you were set on seeing it happen—and whether it would finally push you over the edge. And whether *that* would even worsen the situation at this point.

What came next ensured the thorough shattering of your psyche, every little quivering piece scattered to the farthest winds imaginable. Even knowing it would happen, there was really no way of parsing it. This interaction between two beings at opposite ends of the size spectrum.

One second the hand was still resting there, it seemed, drumming idle tunes over denim, and the next...it was on its way. Had you blinked? The fingers clenching the knee before they set off, like some predator bounding from its perch. Bearing down, precise, minute adjustments made by the millisecond as they closed in. Bringing with them an increase in heat that wasn't quite as welcomed anymore. Coming into eerie focus were the patterns at their titanic tips, searing into your vision in a hypnotic manner as they drew ever closer.

Staring up at its approach, as horribly arresting as a plunging meteorite, it was starting to feel like event after dread event was lining up for a chance to grind those sad fragments of your hope and sanity into dust. Dancing a merry little jig on the remnants. Scattering them to the discordant winds that roared over where you beheld it all, frozen at your woven plateau.

And there wasn't going to be any running from it. That, of all things, was crystal clear. Or taking any chances with the void surrounding this crumpled mountain. No, the roads only

ended right here on this strand. Trapped in your own trembling, traitorous body that really was just going to sit there and hand itself over.

As it did, sweating and shaking, ears wanting to shrivel away from the howls of displaced air around it, a certain way of this ending stuck around like a bad smell. Another outcome that this bizarre situation could almost paint as something positive.

Namely...those fingertips meeting around you...and still going. The pressure tipping over into lethal with the most minuscule increase in force. Two spiral-patterned planets colliding. Ridges of flesh grinding down like jaws. Ending all your worries where they met; wiping you out of existence. Cleaning their hands of the 'crime' off on their jeans in one casual motion. Dead and gone.

Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

God, imagine having hope. Imagine even *daring* to think a damn break-in was good news. Saved from wasting away in agony? Real rosy way of seeing it. Should have stuck with your first assumption upon seeing that shadow swallow up everything in sight. Namely, what had taken scarcely seconds to figure out.

As the dread creature of a hand continued to reach forward, colossal digits ready to steal away whatever was left of one former being, the oh-so obvious truth reigned in all its unholy glory. The kind that came to light the second this deific figure hadn't so much walked into your life but dominated it. No unearthly rumbles that one could barely classify as words were needed in proof of it—not that you'd have been capable of comprehending them anyway.

They weren't here to help you.

They were here to *help themselves*...