

# Viscera, on the otherside

By Robert V Aldrich

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FROM THE MIND OF

**RV A**

Viscera picked the can of peaches from the red bush. The branch was sturdier than she anticipated, so when the can finally broke free of the branch, the whole bush rustled. The clattering of the wooden leaves caused the slicks to turn their heads. Three red eyes set on bony heads all looked across the field at the red bush. Giant fangs protruding from their angled mouths, all four of the slicks searched the distance, trying to see what had caused the movement.

Viscera was perfectly still. Totally black, she closed the third lid over her eye, silencing the red glow. Her tight bodysuit faded into an earthen green, trying to hide her into the background of the forest. She stayed motionless, watching the slicks.

One of the four was closer than the others. Its mouth parted and a twisting tongue coated the teeth in saliva. Its head darted about as it tried to spy some new detail. The slick shuffled forward a few steps on its powerful arms. Tiny arms beneath clattered razor blades at the end of its fingers. Its body extended from there in a long, snake-like tail that whipped at the tip from time to time.

The slicks all watched for a moment longer before some distant bird called into the gray sky. All four turned in the opposite direction to try and spot the noise.

Viscera took the chance and crouched low. She snuck down the side of the hill, retreating with her backpack full of canned fruits and vegetables. She passed back through the small grove of canned chili and passed over a spring brook of fizzy lemonade. She dislodged a few rocks as she did, but she pushed on faster, trusting she was too far for the slicks to hear her. She kept an eye behind her as she traveled, all the same.

She traveled across the valley between the two great mountains, the towering icy peaks in the opposing distances. The gray sky stole the tops from view except on days when the ceiling of the world was higher. On windy days like that, Viscera could see the mountaintops if she wanted to risk leaving her home. She rarely did.

She trusted to the safety of still and quiet days, days when slicks were the worst thing to encounter. It was on days like this when she went foraging and hunting.

Viscera listened to the air as the wind blew. Biting swirls of chilling air buffeted down from the clouds, like incorporeal piledrivers slamming into the ground. The heavy rushes of freezing air revealed

her breath, frosted leaf and puddle alike, and if intense enough, it could even freeze blood. The only warning was a fast-pitched whistle that proceeded it.

Instead of that whistle, though, Viscera heard a flutter. She looked into the sky, searching quickly for some sign of the approaching attackers. She spotted them closing in: skybites. Large insects that flew on crystal wings and chased down anything warm. Multi-faceted eyes locked onto her, set over a long needle-like mouth that would pierce flesh with ease.

A dozen skybites came shooting down at her out of the sky. Viscera didn't run, knowing it would do little good. She stood her ground, quickly surveying her options. There was nothing in sight to run to in order to provide cover, much less defense. She was in the middle of a wide field with only strands of yellow grass and spirals of dusty breezes.

The fluttering intensified and the skybites narrowed. Their wings drew back towards their tiny bodies, their heads angled down at her. Their eyes deflated, drawing in. This was her chance. As the twelve flying terrors began to accelerate, driving down to impale her, Viscera stood ready. She drew from behind her back a large knife and readied it in her hand. She dropped her bag of canned goods and steadied her nerves.

The bombardment rocketed down at her and at the last second, she threw herself towards her right. Like bullets, the skybites slammed needle-first into the ground. Their snouts all pierced the dirt, collapsing into it. They fell over themselves and went skidding into the field, a wide swath of chaotic destruction left in the wake of their collective crash.

Viscera ran to the nearest one and stamped on it. The insect cracked like glass and shattered at her strike. She howled in anger and stamped at where it had been. Her hair swung into her face as she kicked repeatedly, a few times for cathartic release, then she left the others to recover. Already she could hear their wings fluttering, trying to regain altitude. She could hear them crawling and clawing through the grass. She didn't want to be there when they returned to the sky.

She grabbed up her satchel of food and started to run away from their skid of a crash. Fleet feet knew how to carry her with some speed and she ran towards the far-off tree line. The forest offered

little safety, but it was at least a sight better than being out in the open.

Her footfalls kicked up dirt as she ran, the air burning inside her lungs. The forest was just a few more meters ahead. Yet those few meters never closed. Viscera barely processed what was wrong when she felt the ground beneath her opening.

With a nimble leap, she jumped away as the jaws on her shadow opened up and tried to devour her in one bite. Viscera landed and her shadow chased her, a gaping mouth with an endless chasm of teeth within opening again where the shadow landed. Viscera landed and rebounded again off the chomping mouth as it chased her to the forest.

Gasping as she leapt, she grabbed onto a branch of the nearest tree. Her shadow raced up the tree and from its trunk, the mouth opened up and lunged out to grab her. Viscera let go the branch with her left hand as she punched the mouth with her right. Her fist drove deep into the mouth and felt ten thousand teeth tear into her skin. But she grabbed hold of the largest tooth she could find and she jumped up. Her feet on the trunk of the tree, she yanked back with all her might.

Pulling her fist free, Viscera pulled the shadow mouth inside out, exposing its insides. Tugging it free, she grabbed her knife and sliced through the body of the mouth she held. The mouth exploded, shards of crystal and gems piercing into the ground and the tree like shrapnel. Viscera took a blow to the shoulder, a bloody wound left to remind her of the incident.

Viscera tapped at the wound for a second, testing its seriousness. She collected her bag of things and began to shamble through the woods. The leaves clacked as she walked, the branches turning subtly in the chilling breeze. Dust swept through the negative spaces in the woods, carrying scents and sounds from far away. Overhead, the clouds churned by the movements of some great, flying monstrosity. A horde of myants went charging overhead, but their silence meant they were going to war and had little interest in the singular figure of Viscera passing beneath them, especially one so small as her.

She reached the edge of the woods, facing into a new, low-land clearing. A stream of pebbles rumbled along through the middle of the veldt. Over the sound of the rocks clattering along, she couldn't hear

anything else. Hesitant, she risked it and stepped out into the field. She was only a few dozen steps into it when she felt a rumble. At first she feared the sky was falling or a new predator was approaching. Instead, luck was with her.

Out from around the mountain came a land strider. Taller than the mountains and the sky together, the great behemoth was gargantuan. Seven legs slowly stamped down onto the ground, one by one, as the humongous beast went on its way. What the land striders ate or did or thought or were even aware of, Viscera had no idea. But she knew a fortunate chance when she saw one.

She watched as the giant leg in the far distance rose, knowing another would be coming down shortly. She searched the sky for some sign of where the great beast would step. Based on the legs she could see, and the shadow of the great thing high above the clouds, she wagered it would be stepping near to her.

As she expected, the sky above swelled and began to shudder. Either an arctic blast was about to descend or the land strider was stepping down mere meters from her. Viscera held her breath and waited, then dashed into the field.

The gray clouds were punctured by a massive flat stump of a foot. Giant hardened nails were the size of buildings and they surrounded the foot on all sides. From between the nails was a veritable forest of hairs and fur that shot wild in all directions. Viscera ran straight for the foot and leapt at it. She grabbed onto the closest strand of hair and swung into the fur that sprouted from the tough, leather-like skin. Gripping tight, Viscera clung to the great beast's foot as tight as she could.

The sudden rush of air was as terrifying as it was invigorating. The land strider took a step, lifting its foot high into the air. Viscera squealed with fear and elation and terror and excitement. Gravity and the current of air tugged her towards the ground that spiraled out of sight, disappearing into the clouds beneath her.

In the heights, she could see nothing but endless gray. Dense and textured, the cloudy planes above the world were as featureless within as from below. But Viscera had only barely opened her eyes to see the clouds from the other side before she was plunged back towards the ground. Her grip on the fur was challenged but she held on tight onto the land strider's foot as it struck the world with surprising grace and barely a rumble.

The instant she felt the momentum stop, Viscera let go of the fur and fell out from its grasp, collapsing onto the grass and gravel ground. She landed in a roll and came up running, jogging away from the land strider's foot. Once clear, she turned and backed away from it, watching it rise up into the dark sky. "Thanks," she told it with a smile and a partial salute. The great animal, unaware of its service or even Viscera's existence, continued on its way.

Viscera surveyed her surroundings, relieved she'd judged correctly. She was near home. A rocky valley descended into the base of a mountain made of crystal. She followed a stone path to a large steel door. Viscera checked her surroundings and made sure she was alone. The only things in sight were a handful of tiki flowers and they only faced towards the moon. Viscera crouched to the base of the door and found the hair from her own head that she had secured to the door, ensuring none had opened it.

She stuffed the hair into her bag among the cans and live vegetables. Rather than stand, she carefully set her hand against the very base of the door. She began to hum and then rose. As she stood, she lifted effortlessly. The door, rather than pull out or push inward, rose up. Thick and secure, the entryway was just barely larger than Viscera. She entered and checked behind her before pulling the door down.

The darkness that consumed her felt safe. Light brought attention and attention brought danger. In that darkness and the silence of the mountain, Viscera felt secure. She touched the wall and flipped the switch, causing a line of tiny, weak lights to illuminate in sequence. They led down the path, heading deep into the mountain. Viscera turned and secured the door with six heavy locks. Each lock was cranked a full circle, sliding thick and heavy metal slats into openings in the doorway. Two on the floor and two on each side, they sealed her in.

Collecting her bag, Viscera followed the lights. She walked almost half a kilometer down the narrow hall before she came to steps. She descended a half-flight that then leveled off, then another flight that went up several stories. At the end of that landing, Viscera arrived home.

Home was a small chamber with a bubbling fountain of fresh water in the center. A mirror hung from the far side of the room and several small boxes and crates were made into furniture. Cans of food were stacked carefully between the boxes and a camper's stove was

set up next to several dozen towels laid atop one another to form a bed. The floor was bare iron, dotted green with age. The walls bowed slowly inward to the apex of the ceiling from which hung a dead streetlight.

Viscera went to the stacked food and she placed like cans together. Stacked by food types, she quickly did some regular tallies. Feeling confident with what she'd collected, and added to her decent stores, she exhaled with some relief. She then went over to the stove. As she did, she clicked another switch, turning on a few more tiny lights, little more than pin pricks of illumination in the darkness of the steel room.

As she passed by the mirror, she slowed and looked in it. Her reflection was barely visible in the darkness, but she could make out her silhouette. The sight of the mirror made her smile. She went to the stove and began to lay out the vegetables that she'd collected. Hard tubers, they were still covered in sticky moisture and would require more than just a dunk to be cleaned for cooking. She turned the heavy spuds over in her hand and considered how many she wanted to prepare.

As she considered her options, she heard a door slam.

Viscera's head shot up. A light came to her face, an eagerness. She abandoned the food and ran to the mirror. She practically leapt before it and looked into it like she was looking through a window. The darkness was solid but she could just barely make out a few edges of light. Eagerness and excitement mixed until a blinding light fell over her. She squealed in delight, then jumped up and down, clapping her hands in unbridled elation.

Down the steps of his basement, Keith shuffled exhaustedly. He had a load of laundry under his arm. He wore his raggedy sneakers and jeans that were frayed at the hem. His t-shirt was a bit too tight on the shoulders, and loose around his waist. He headed over to the washing machine and opened the top. He sleepily doot-do-dooted a melody as he started a load, getting the cold water running.

Movement caught his eye and he glanced to his left. He looked into the basement bathroom and saw the mirror next to the commode. He saw only himself and didn't process just on the other side of his reflection, Viscera watched him through the mirror.



"Hey," said the young woman inside the mountain hold. "How was your day?" Keith set about measuring fabric softener. "Mine was wild. I had to ride a land strider to get back home. I was trying to get away from the skybites. There were a bunch of them."

Keith stepped away from the washer, still humming some. He walked over to the bathroom and flipped on the light. The bathroom was tiny; with barely enough space for the commode and the sink. There was more floor space in the cramped shower stall. Keith studied his reflection in the mirror, wondering if he needed to shave more often. He tilted his chin and rubbed his fingers over her slender but firm jaw. On the other side of his reflection, Viscera watched him move. She tilted her head to match, mesmerized by him. Unthinking, her hand reached to the mirror. She touched the bright world that he inhabited and felt sorrow when she couldn't touch him.

"Keith," came a woman's voice from above.

Viscera's heart shattered as she looked passed Keith, into the basement and the stairs that led up into the house. "No," she lamented. She looked at Keith, dejected and disappointed. "I thought you broke up with Elaine." Down the stairs came Elaine. Long legs just barely disappeared into Keith's button-up shirt. Mussed hair with sun-bleached highlights dangled around her face. Viscera bore a hole through Elaine with her glare.

"I wanted to see what you wanted to do tonight," she asked Keith. She stood to one side of the doorway, one arm held behind her, holding the elbow of her other arm. Her sun-kissed skin was vibrant and smooth. It made Viscera look down at her abrasive black skin. Her eyes blinked, three lids closing in tandem, then reopening in a flash. So unlike Elaine's slow, leisurely sweeps of her long lashes.

"I don't know," he said. His back was to the mirror, to Viscera. He leaned against the sink and crossed his arms. "I work until five. I've got to take dinner to my mom, but after that, we could do something."

"Do you have to?" Elaine asked him. "I mean, your mom's facility fixes her food, right?"

"Yeah, but the food isn't really warm enough and its bland. She doesn't like it," Keith expained.

"Yeah, but you take her food every other night," Elaine said. "That gets expensive."

"Yeah, but she doesn't exactly have a lot going on," Keith maintained. "Food is one of her only sources of enjoyment. I need to make sure she has that for as long as..." His words trailed off, as did his gaze.

"Did the cancer progress?" Viscera asked Keith, fearful for his mother.

"Yeah, but your money's tight, isn't it?" Elaine asked him. "You're already having to work overtime to afford the house." Keith gestured at the state of his situation.

"Would you lay off of him!?!?" Viscera yelled at Elaine.

"I'll get us dinner too," Keith offered her.

"Honey, that's not what I'm worried about," said Elaine. She approached Keith slowly, her crossed arms all that kept her shirt from opening. Viscera watched in confused silence until Elaine stepped right before Keith, then slowly knelt before him. Viscera saw her disappear before him, then had to turn away. She put her back to the mirror, unable to bring herself to leave.

She heard his breathing intensify, then his groans of pleasure. She turned and looked over her shoulder and saw his head rolling back. Viscera felt ashamed and she wasn't entirely sure why. She stepped away from the mirror, but only a step before Elaine reappeared. Keith's girlfriend backed away from him, biting her lip. "I'll be waiting for you to get home tonight." She turned and swayed her hips as she headed up the stairs.

Keith and Viscera both watched Elaine go up the steps with very different expressions. "I wish I could say I don't know what you see in her," Viscera lamented. Keith turned around and leaned forward over the sink, trying to regain his emotional balance. Viscera studied his face and wanted more than anything to touch him. Her hand got as far as the surface of the mirror.

Keith exhaled one last time and turned away from Viscera. He flicked off the light and left Viscera behind. "Bye," she called to him before darkness enveloped the basement and he departed.

With the night came silence.

The mountain was quiet and still. The wind far outside was calm. The things in the dark corners of the night were awake however and they moved in the shadows and the shade. It was during the night that Viscera was most awake. She was at the door to the outside world, down the long hallway of dim, tiny lights. At that door that she didn't dare unlock during the night, she wedged a metal bar against the door and the lip of the floor. The metal groaned as she wedged it tight. The sound worried her, but the thought of the door finally surrendering to force worried her even more.

Viscera backed away from the door and sighed. She considered her barricade, wondering if her fears were valid and wondering if her efforts would matter. The already-armored door was reinforced with the heavy locks. What good would one more support make? But then, she thought, how foolish she'd feel if they failed and she hadn't tried still one more thing.

She turned from the door and followed the tiny lights down the hall, down the stairs, along the landing, then up the taller stairs. The air was cool and smelled of iron and steel. The plates of the stairs and the floor didn't rattle or vibrate. She stepped on solid ground, not hollow plating.

She couldn't help but think about Elaine and the way she walked. Soft skin and curves that defined womanhood, pale skin and pink lips. Viscera wondered why her hard body couldn't look more like that. She tried to walk the way Elaine did, but it felt less like a swishing of the hips and more like she was trying to bump the metal walls with the side of her pelvis. She ended up tripping a bit.

Up the stairs into her home, the room was warm thanks to the small bubbling fountain. The water coming up through the stone was warmer at night, and helped to heat the already insulated room. Viscera went to the reservoir of the fountain and cupped her hands. She scrubbed her face with the warm water and drank a bit. The droplets of water that fell from her hand sounded loud in the abject silence of the night.

From the mirror, Viscera heard a noise then saw light. The brightness of Keith's arrival nearly blinded her, as usual. But she rushed to the mirror to see what was happening.

He descended the basement stairs with a blanket and a pillow. He was nude and the lipstick mark on his neck as well as on his abdomen spoke to whom he'd been with. "Are you okay?" Viscera asked at the mirror. She reached towards him but only touched the glass.

The light he'd turned on wasn't the main bulb but merely a string of Christmas lights that ran along the roof of the basement. He carried his heavy blanket and thick pillow to a couch that faced the bathroom, right beneath the steps. He tossed the pillow onto it and then flopped down, tiredly. His eyes were hanging low and thick bags drooped onto his cheeks. "Can't sleep?" Viscera asked him. "Yeah, me neither. I really only sleep during the day. It's safer that way. I try to..."

The light from his world was so much brighter than the absolute darkness of her bunker. The suburban nighttime coming in through the ground-level windows were like floodlights compared to her black world. Crickets, rain, and the sound of the rare late-night driver were so loud and pleasant compared to the absolute stillness. The only sound she had to offer in her bunker was the gentle bubbling of the fountain and the soft sighs of her breathing.

Into her world, Keith faced. Only what he saw was merely the vacancy of his own reflection. He studied his shadowy face like it was someone else's, unaware of the face just beyond who watched so eagerly. "Why am I more comfortable down here?" Keith whispered to himself sleepily. He yawned and looked into the bathroom. Viscera knew he was looking at his reflection but her heart insisted she entertain, at least for a fleeting moment, that maybe he was looking at her. "I don't know what you're doing," he told his reflection that stared back. Morose and defeated but too tired to give up, Keith laid down on the couch and pulled the blanket over him.

Viscera watched him, admiring how quickly he could fall to sleep. And then she grew heartbroken by his twitching, his fighting with himself. Whatever dreams tormented him during his sleep, robbing him of the rest he needed, that struggle was carried out in part by his body.

Viscera's mouth curled into a slight smile, even as his brow furrowed in sadness. "Little angel in the cloud," she sang softly. "Rest your head. Let nighttime's shroud take you to bed. Let peace sing you to sleep, while my love, will safely keep."

A soft voice and worried look didn't cross the membrane of the mirror. Viscera remained on her side and Keith on his. The man knew nothing of the woman, while she knew all and could do nothing.

The revolving door of the hospital didn't slow down as Keith slipped through. He walked with a hop to get down the hallway without actually running. His lunch bag banging against his back, he flashed a smile and a wave to the security guard on duty. "Hey Denise," he said as he dashed down the 'staff only' hallway towards the lockers.

He found his locker towards the back. On the lower level, just above the flap of carpet that overlapped, creating a tripping hazard. The installed benches were just too close to the lockers; not enough to block the doors from opening but enough to make Keith stand to the side when he bent over and opened the locker. He had to pull out a change of clothes from earlier in the work week. As he was setting his stuff inside, Doctor Phipps appeared at the mouth of the lockers. "Keith, got a second?" he asked.

"Yeah, what's up?" asked Keith, checking his scrubs in the mirror of his locker. He shut the door, only to realize Dr Phipps wasn't leaving. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's just the fliers have appeared again," said Phipps. He leaned against the passageway, his white hair not matching his cherubic face. The lines of stress on his temples were outpacing the wear of age. He said with some private frustration, "I'm struggling to figure out who is posting them."

"Yeah, well," was all Keith was inclined to say. He glanced down the locker room, but saw no one. He heard a locker shut behind him but didn't see who it was that left. With the bright daylight coming in through the heavily frosted windows, the room was thick and the air stale.

Dr Phipps took advantage of their momentary isolation to say with a low voice. "We need to stop it."

"Dale, I think nurses here want to unionize," Keith maintained.

"A union will harm the patients," Dr Phipps insisted, speaking in a hushed tone.

Keith gestured powerlessly. "You're talking to the wrong guy. If the nurses do unionize, you think physical therapy's going to be invited? We're not nurses."

"They'll recruit everybody who isn't a doctor," said Phipps. The way he said that suggested he meant more. "Listen, if the nurses try to unionize, the hospital will have to make cuts. I know you don't need that."

The jab hit Keith but he tried to play it off. "Nobody likes to lose their job," he said stoically.

"Especially not somebody relying on the staff discounts at hospice facilities," Phipps told him.

Keith inhaled slowly and uneasily. He tried to speak as conversationally as he could. "Dale, I have to be honest, that sounds like a threat."

"What? A threat?! No!" insisted Dr Phipps. He waved his hands between the two of them, first to dismiss the idea, then to gesture that they were on good terms. "It's not a threat Keith, geez. It's just...it's, well, it's unfortunately, it's reality." Phipps sighed with paranoid certainty. He again checked the empty medical locker room around them. "We got to figure out who is trying to form a union and put a stop to it quick. If you hear anything, let me know."

He didn't say anything more. Abandoning Keith to his thoughts, Phipps slipped passed Keith and headed out to the hospital offices. Keith turned and watched the administrator go, tension tying him up inside.

The elevator doors parted and Keith came bounding out onto the sixth floor. He rushed around a patient with a walker, darted between two visitors who were trying to find the awkwardly-located-and-even-more-awkwardly-accessed bathroom, and ran right up behind the dozen doctors starting rounds. He paused at the back of the crowd, then grabbed a clipboard off a nearby table and pretended to study it.

"Aaaand, Keith," said Dr Mills. All the doctors and nurses turned to Keith as he looked up from the clipboard with a harmless look. "What's the state of Mrs Kattney?"

"Because she's suffering from system shock after her hip replacement, we've had to downgrade her occupational therapy for the moment until they can get the swelling and reactions down," he explained. "She's entirely too weak to be worried about trying to stand, especially given the arthritis in the contralateral hip."

"Okay, good, we'll be tackling that this afternoon after the newest round of bloodwork," said Dr Mills, making a note on her computer tablet. She started to walk, the others following. A small gaggle of medial professionals stayed in step with Dr Mills, with Keith at the back of the crowd. He breathed a sigh of relief until David Hofstedder goosed him.

Keith leapt almost a foot in the air, then spun around as David giggled. "What the hell, man?!" Keith exclaimed in a whisper. He checked around them in the brightly-lit intensive care ward. None of the nurses had noticed, nor had the doctors still getting acclimated to the start of their shifts.

"You're late," David told him as they fell back. "Again. What happened? Elaine need to be tied down one more round?"

"Believe it or not, no," said Keith, used to David's tactlessness. "I had to field a call from the Social Security office about my dad."

Color drained from David's face. He half fell back and shook his head. "Oh geez, man, I'm sorry," he apologized. He checked on Dr Mills' team, making sure they were continuing to mistake completeness with thoroughness. He shook his head to Keith. "Geez, buddy. Are they ever going to leave you alone? What do they want?"

"Blood from a stone," Keith told him. They stepped out of the way as a pair of nurses headed passed. "Listen, do you know anything about the nurses unionizing?"

David thought for a second, then shook his head. He tugged Keith by the sleeve and the two subtly rushed to rejoin the rounds they were supposed to be part of. "I mean, I've seen the support group fliers in the break room and stuff," he whispered from the back of the small medical crowd. "Why?"

"Phipps came and talked to me, as soon as I came in," Keith whispered. He craned to see over the med-student in front of him to see the notes for the current patient under discussion. "Part of why I was late."

"Damn," David further lamented. "What'd he say?"

"That if 'we' didn't figure out who was doing it, there would be staffing cuts," Keith said.

"That's intimidation," David insisted. He listened to the discussion on the patient for a second, then whispered to Keith, "Listen, man, you need to talk to HR or a lawyer or something. He's going to lean on you because he knows you're a doctor."

"I'm not a doctor," Keith insisted almost desperately.

"You were going to be one," David accommodated him by rephrasing it. "You were halfway through your residency. He knows that and he thinks of you as a doctor. More a doctor than a nurse."

"I'm neither; I'm a physical therapist," Keith said, keeping his voice down as two interns argued over a differential diagnosis.

"And sports science is just personal training," David whispered, sarcastically dismissing substantial distinctions. "Phipps sees this whole place in three: nurses, doctors, and administration. Administration signs his check so he isn't going to buck their system. Nurses aren't doctors so they are automatically inferior in his eyes. That means they got to be kept in check."

"I don't have time for this," Keith almost demanded. "The facility's raising their rates again at the end of the year. I've got to figure out what to do."

"Move her to a facility that gives you a discount for working at the hospital," said David.

"They already are!" Keith exclaimed. "And they're not even the best facility, either. But without social security – which she can't get because she's tied up in this whole thing with my dad's account – I'm going to lose the house."

David had no advice to offer. He just patted Keith on the shoulder and tried to at least observe the pain if he couldn't do anything to mitigate it.

Still in his scrubs, Keith rushed into the nursing home with a plastic bag full of takeout. "Hey," he said to the old woman in the



wheelchair by the door. She was already in the process of wishing him a good morning at 7:00 at night when he was signing in. Keith gave the check-in clerk of the facility a quick nod, then dashed on passed the desk. The light overhead flickered a few times, the rickety illumination reflected in the heavily polished checkerboard floors. The light taupe walls smelled of disinfectant and powder. Simulated wood handrails ran the length of the long halls. Broad doors lined the facility, leading into paired rooms of medical beds.

Keith chased down Room 146, in the middle of the second hall. There, Madeline Woods stared at the television. A tiny screen, barely bigger than her hands, was suspended from the mechanical arm secured against her bed's frame. Her placid expression showed no interest in what was on; merely an addiction to distraction. "Hey mom," said Keith as he slipped inside. As he was shutting the door, he noticed the empty bed across from her. "Where's Mrs. Jenkins?"

Madeline turned away from the screen, eyes heavy with cataracts. She saw across the room with a sunken and forlorn look. "Oh," she said, as though she'd just remembered. "They wheeled her out of here earlier today."

The ramifications of that hit Keith like a bolt. He froze at the somberness, unable to keep from noticing the old woman's pictures and personal belongings were gone. Awkwardness and sorrow fused in a quagmire of self-disgust and Keith rushed to get away from it. He turned and laid the takeout bag onto Madeline's bed. "I got Red Robin," he said with a contrived smile.

"Oh baby," Madeline grinned, distant eyes not quite finding him in her state.

Keith pulled over the folding chair and began to set out the pair of burgers. "I got yours well done, like usual. I got you a wheat bun too." He could tell that the details were largely lost on her. "And fries," he said. He set the plastic serving dish before her.

"Thank you, honey," said his mother. Keith sat out his own meal, settling in to enjoy the dinner, even as burdened eyes glanced across the room at the empty bed.

Half an hour later, Keith was exiting in a far more subdued pace. He carried the plastic takeout bag with him, crumpled up and under

his arm like a broken umbrella. He reached the sign-out desk to find a woman in a pantsuit waiting. "Hey," he said, already knowing what was about to happen.

"Good evening, Mr. Woods," said the woman. Roughly the same age as Keith, she wore an older woman's hairstyle and makeup, contrasting with a nouveau riche business aesthetic. "I was hoping you had a moment to discuss your mother's account."

Keith took the clipboard and began to sign out. "Nothing's changed since the last time we spoke, Tanya. The Social Security office hasn't cleared my dad's account, and for whatever reason, they've frozen my mom's account too."

"Mr. Woods, if we don't get confirmation of your mother's social security, we will have to transfer her," explained the facility rep in the tone of an administrator explaining a no-running rule to a toddler.

Keith stood up and set an irritated stare right at the woman. He considered challenging her on the locale of the conversation, but the foyer of the nursing home was empty, and dark in the late hour. "Look," he said with a sigh as he tried to keep civil. "I don't see why this is an issue. Her private supplement is paying and I'm making up the difference out-of-pocket." Familiar with the discussion, he summed it up with, "You're getting your money."

"It's not a matter of money; it's also the protocols," Tanya explained. "We're a social security-specific facility. If residents are not on social security, then they need to be transferred elsewhere."

"Well that's good because my mom's on social security," Keith said.

"She isn't receiving checks from them," Tanya said. "We are paid by the social security administration directly."

"She's enrolled; she's just not getting her checks," Keith said. "You've got the documentation."

"But we aren't getting the money," Tanya specified.

"You ARE getting the money; I'm paying it," Keith said, his voice raising. "The fact that it's coming through my account and not the social security doesn't matter."

"I'm afraid it does," Tanya told him with a hint of finality. "If your mother's social security account isn't cleared up by the end of the month, her residence here will be terminated and we will begin calling other facilities to find one with a bed to take her."

Keith shifted his weight and told her, "That honestly sounds like a threat."

Tanya started to recant, but stopped herself. With some remorse, she made clear, "It's not a threat, but it's what is going to happen." She decided she'd said all that would be productive and turned to leave. Keith watched her head down the hall, then turned and stormed out.

As he departed, the old woman by the door told him, "Have a good night."

The house wasn't the largest in the neighborhood by any stretch, but the black roof and the white exterior was home. Keith parked in the driveway, finding some relief to see the chipping white paint revealing some of the light blue undercoat that he'd grown up with. It was strangely comforting to see the erosion of time reveal the past, rather than steal it.

He leaned back in his car seat and watched his life for a moment. He watched himself play with a wooden sword he'd made from a garden lattice. So many of his adventures were fixed around the brick half-wall that maintained the subdued driveway that led to the garage under the house.

He saw the tree where he'd carved his first girlfriend's initials. Branches had come and gone but the leafy shade endured. Once-lush grass where he'd played soccer had become a bed of fallen leaves where he rescued an injured rabbit and nursed it back to health. The front yard had lost three yards from the road-widening but there was still plenty of space. There was no sign of the hole in the roof where his dad had stepped that one time they put up Christmas decorations. So many memories.

Keith got out of his car. Too many flat tires recently had gotten him in the habit of inspecting his tires quickly every time he got out. He gave them a once-over and kicked them, to make sure they felt

okay. Then, with his lunch bag and backpack in-hand, he jogged up the overgrown stone pathway to the front door.

Elaine was in the living room when he stepped inside. Watching a video on her tablet, she looked up from the couch where she'd been dozing off. She looked up and saw him, slowly surrendering a strained smile. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," he told her. "How was your day?" he asked, kissing her forehead. He left her on the couch and headed into the kitchen. As he rinsed his lunch bag, he called, "David asked about you."

Elaine followed him into the kitchen, amused. "How's he doing?"

"Still an ass," Keith chuckled. "I like working with him, though. He's pretty...he's on the ball." Keith turned around as he wiped out his bag. "It's just kind of refreshing to deal with a doctor who knows his role. I mean, I'm not knocking doctors – they're experts – but they're experts in this area, not every area. And he, you know, he gets that. He's part of a team, not the whole team with a few hangers-on." Elaine didn't say anything, only listened. "There's this whole thing at the hospital about the nurses unionizing. And I feel caught in the middle. I AM caught in the middle. I'm not a doctor and I'm not a nurse, so both groups feel like I'm part of the other group and..." He shook his head. He leaned against the sink and asked, "How was your day?"

Elaine was very hesitant, but finally surrendered. "I think I've got a shoot in California." She pulled out one of the kitchenette chairs and sat down, pulling one leg up to her chest. "A studio out there, they're looking for some new talent and...and my agent says she's almost got me signed."

"A shoot," Keith said. "That's...that's big."

"It might be a three-month gig," she explained.

Keith's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Wow." He looked down, at a loss. He tried to find something for his hands to do and failed. "That, uh, that long?"

"This is a new company, or rather, it's a new branch of an existing company," she said. "They're doing a lot of new stuff. Two of their new talents won AVAs." She smirked and said, "They aren't just pro-union; they advertise as being part of the sex workers' union."

Keith smirked. "Small world," he said. The silence hurt between them. "I kind of feel like, like this is you letting me know you're breaking up with me."

Elaine only stared for a moment before saying, "You saying that makes me feel like you want me to break up with you."

"I love you," he told her.

"Then why do I feel like I'm the last thing in your life?" Elaine snapped at him angrily. "I come after your work and your dad and your mom and—"

"Yeah, because my mom needs me!" Keith yelled. "She's in hospice, Elaine. She's dying!" The impact of him shouting resounded long after the echo had passed. He backed away from her a step, then returned to his poise and posture. "And as for my dad...look, I don't know what to tell you. My dad seriously screwed up his taxes for most of his life. He didn't mean to - I don't think, anyway - but the social security and the IRS and god, every agency in the government is after him and I don't have a lawyer and I priced a lawyer and...and no. And yeah, that has to be handled. So yeah, I'm sorry. I really, really am. I want you to feel important to me."

"Why?" she challenged, her crossed legs pulled up to her chest.

"Because you are important to me," he exclaimed at the ceiling. His hands shook frantically as he tried to hold onto his own vestigial restraint. "I'm sorry I haven't been able to show it, but I am burning the candle at both ends."

"I am too!" she yelled back. "I'm trying to get a career started. And it's hard. It's hard and it's scary and it's exhausting and some days I'd just like to come home and..." Her words fell into silence. The gap of sound between them matched the disconnect. Elaine turned away from him, shifting her legs off the wooden chair. She leaned forward and hid her face.

Likewise, Keith turned. He fell back against the wall and stared up at the ceiling. "Yeah," he agreed. Bitterly, he concurred, "I'd like that too." The resentment festered in the ensuing silence. "Elaine, when we first started dating, I told you what you were getting into."

"I know," she groaned.

"I told you that my family needed me," he went on.

"Yeah," she recalled all too well.

"And then my dad died and my mom's cancer—"

"And then your school, and then the government," Elaine finished for him. "On and on and on. I know you've been dealt a crap hand, but you aren't the only one. And all it ever feels like is listening to you complain about how tired you are, how sore you are, how broke you are."

"I'm sorry!" Keith yelled.

"I am too!" Elaine yelled back. She crossed her arms and stood up from him and the conversation. "I knew you were going to share me with your family, but this isn't sharing. This isn't even leftovers. All I am to you is..." She tried to stop herself from saying it. "I'm just a human anti-depressant."

A distant car drove passed.

The air conditioning kicked on.

An owl called.

Finally, Elaine turned halfway out. "I'll pack tomorrow," she whispered to Keith. She headed down the hallway, into darkness towards the bedroom.

Keith didn't follow, the pain too intense for him to even move.

The light the basement flickered on and Keith descended like the dead. He carried his blanket and his pillow like he was dragging his soul out of a grave. He flopped down onto the couch in the basement and just stared. Vacant eyes latched onto the abyss before him. He sighed and whispered to the emptiness of the basement, "Two years ago, I was top of my class as an MD/PhD candidate. Now I beg to get overtime at the hospital." He snickered sickly, sadly. "Two years ago, I had two parents."

His eyes traveled up and he found himself staring at the stark, cold reflection of himself in the bathroom mirror. "You know," he told himself, his reflection, and his loneliness, "I think the worst thing is there's part of me that's actually going to be relieved when mom dies."

His vision blurred as his eyes teared up. "I can't believe I just said that," he whispered.

On the other side of the mirror, Viscera teared up as well. "No, it makes sense," she told him. "You're in so much pain. And she is too. And she may not even know it. And as terrible as it seems, you'll get some relief when you don't have to spend so much time and energy trying to take care of her."

"Nobody grows up wanting to be a caregiver," Keith whispered. "Not like this. It's not fair," he lamented silently. He looked up the stairs at the door into the house. "Elaine deserves better."

Viscera hesitated but said, "So do you. Maybe she's a good person but you two just don't work. She's not what you need right now."

The light from a passing car flashed over the wall, making it through the high windows on the top-most edge of the wall. Keith watched them pass and said, "I just want everything to be okay again."

Viscera told him, "Everything's going to be okay," just before she heard the armored door of her home crash inward.

The unprecedented and unmistakable sound of steel rending was quickly followed by a loud crash. The horrific noise ricocheted up the hallway darkness like a shot. Viscera whirled around, her black eyes wide as she froze in horror. Next came the frantic stomp of heavy, mighty feet. Viscera was standing in a flash, her knife held fearfully with both fists clutched together. She looked at her stove, at her stacks of food, at her bed, at her home. What had been safe now no longer was. And whatever had violated her safety was fast coming down the hall, coming right for her.

In the final second she had as the stomps came pounding closer and closer, Viscera looked to the mirror. She looked into the bright world on the other side, at Keith. Her heart sank as she saw him despondent on the couch.

Through the hallway, darkness approached. Something snarling, something violent, something deadly. Viscera swallowed in terror as she faced the blackness. She readied herself, holding her knife with the blade down. She backed defensively against the wall. She stood next to the mirror and braced herself emotionally. She risked one last

look into the mirror, back at Keith, and hoped it wouldn't be the last time she saw him.

The thing in the darkness fixed on Viscera. She turned towards it, seeing nothing but a pair of haunting eyes darker than the blackness. More eyes opened, six in total, three on each side. They narrowed, razoring with hate and rage.

Viscera set herself, readying to move in whatever way she needed.

Six eyes narrowed, razoring in their intensity, focused right at her.

Viscera charged.

Keith held Rebecca Maynard's hand as the final pulses of her heart monitor flattened out. She inhaled one final breath, then with the high-pitched call, the air was let out mechanically. Keith felt her hand go limp in his grip and he took a slow, deep breath. He placed Rebecca Maynard's hand on the bed and backed away.

There were several nurses in the ICU room, but none of them moved. The event was not scheduled but it wasn't unexpected either. One of the nurses grew tearful but the rest of them were simply quiet, an introspective mood falling over them, tainted by existential sobering.

As the doctors and nurses slowly shifted back into their professional modes, Keith left the old woman behind. He passed photos on her bed-side table, one including him. Her stay at the hospital had been longer than some of his leases. He'd seen her walk, lose that ability, regain it, and lose it again. He'd been through life with her.

That life was ended.

He left the ICU room behind and for a few moments, the span of slow and strained breaths, he walked on auto-pilot. The sun-filled halls were quiet, the noise of the medical facility reduced to a dull throb in his ears. He went to one of the workstations and filled out forms. He updated tests. He changed notices. He worked.



At the third misspelling of his own name, Keith stopped. He couldn't really hear anything and wasn't aware of much. The nurses and doctors were there, were moving, but he barely registered them as anything more than cutouts in the background of some stage play.

He fished out his cell phone from the flimsy pockets of his OR scrubs. He found it suddenly hard to stand, to even breathe. He filtered through his numbers and found his mom's hospice facility. "Hey," he told the operator. "Um...can I speak to room 146, Mrs Madeline Woods please?"

The way the operator hesitated, the way she didn't speak for a second, caused his throat to catch. "Um...room 146, 146..." the operator repeated.

"Mrs Woods," Keith told her, like the name might mean more than the room number. "I'm her son," he stated. He looked around the ICU for the air conditioning unit that was running full blast. He quickly realized the rushing in his ears was his own heart. He wiped his face, his mouth going dry.

The tenor of the woman's voice changed dramatically. "Sir, let me transfer you to—"

"What happened to my mom?" Keith asked abruptly. He wasn't even sure he'd said it; it sounded like him but he felt like someone else had said it. He turned and fell back against the wall. "What happened?"

Silence. Awkward, terrified silence of a person not paid enough to handle situations this delicate. "Sir," the receptionist repeated. "I think it'd be best if you spoke with the on-call nurse. I'll transfer you right now." The hold music clicked over before she'd even finished speaking, to make sure Keith didn't have a chance to say anything. Not that he planned to. Not that he had the strength to.

The hold was both longer than it had any right to be, and over before Keith was ready. Staring vacantly at nothing, he was startled when the speaker cropped up. "Mr. Woods?" He recognized the voice but couldn't place it.

'How is my mom?' he meant to ask.

'Is my mom okay?' he wanted to ask.

'What's going on?' he wished he'd demanded.

What came out instead was, "She's dead, isn't she?"

Silence. A long, painful silence.

"Yes," said the woman on the other end of the line.

Something bitter curled inside of Keith, twisting around his soul just a little bit. "When?" he asked, still staring and seeing nothing.

"We think she went sometime this morning."

Keith smirked bitterly. "You think? You don't know?"

Awkwardness. The balance of not incriminating versus appearing to not obfuscate. "The morning nurse found her for her mid-afternoon meds."

Keith face-palmed. He rubbed his hand down his face, and seemed to pull tears from his eyes. Around him, the hospital continued. Nurses rushed, doctors walked, administrators carried on. Life went on as it always did, while his shattered.

"I'll be by to get her things this evening," Keith said before hanging up. He put his phone away and slumped back against the wall. His head rolled back and he stared up at the roof. He felt distant, but not distant enough.

Blood dribbled down Viscera's arm. Her fingertips were stained dark red. A nail had been torn from her index finger. A heavy gash was tied with a bandage that had once been the sleeve of a jacket. Hair had been torn off her scalp. She limped as she ascended the steps back into the cavern that had once been her home. Now it was just wreckage and rubble.

Cans of food were smashed and crushed, the broken shards strewn all over. The contents were scattered and splashed against the metal walls. Even more terrifying, though, was the light. Corrosive light now permeated into the mountain stronghold. Tiny beams of blinding, painful, hateful light now pierced the darkness. The large chamber was now exposed. To the elements, and to the world outside. Entrances without exits, vulnerabilities with no remaining safety.

Viscera picked up a can of peaches, the center smashed. Liquid dribbled from the ripped container, pooling on the rusted floor beneath her. A split, bloody lip trembled. She dropped the can and looked to the back of the room, where the mirror was. Where the mirror had been.

Now, only a hanging shard remained.

Keith was gone.

Viscera didn't even have the strength to cry.

Keith sat on the bench outside the hospital, his face in his hands. He wasn't crying or struggling, he wasn't distraught or overwhelmed. He simply was. He didn't even feel numb or displaced from the world around him. He simply was.

He heard Elaine's car pull up on the hospital patient roundabout. When he looked through his fingers, he saw the glossy wheels. A high-end classic car, it was a dream of hers to own. For half a year, she'd told him about buying it once she could afford it. Arriving in it now told him so very much.

He stood up as Elaine got out. He had to avert his eyes as the garish sun glinted off the tinted windows of the car. Coming around the front, her cheeks were bright red as she smiled at him. But the look on his face stole her smile from her. "Oh my god, what's happened?" she asked. She stumbled, banging her knee on the bumper.

Keith caught her shoulders before she could fall. "Have you—" He winced and turned away. "Jesus, how much have you been drinking?"

"I just had some champagne," she insisted, pulling away from his grip. "I'm fine." She brushed his hair from his face. "What happened?" The question reminded him of his state, of his condition, of his current life. Energy faded away from his face and his eyes lost life. "What is it?" she asked again.

"My mom died," Keith told her. He tried to swallow but his dry throat hurt when he did. "I need to..." He wasn't sure now. He looked at Elaine and could see her dilated pupils. "Why don't you let me drive?" he asked her, reaching for her keys.

"What? No!" she exclaimed, yanking her keys away from him. She stumbled when she backed away from him. "I'm fine. I'm fine! I'm fine, it's fine," she insisted. She started to cross around the front of the car, but Keith rushed around ahead of her.

"No, you're not!" he snapped. "You're drunk."

"I am not!" she yelled at him, smacking him on the chest. "I'm a little buzzed, but that's it."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" he asked with his hand held up.

"That's not funny," she growled.

"And I'm not laughing, Elaine," Keith told her. "My mom died, I'm in no conditioning to drive, but I'm a damn sight better than you right now."

"Well I'm not letting you drive my new baby," Elaine yelled back. "This is my dream car."

Keith tried again for her keys. "You can't drive like this."

"I can, I did, and I will!" Elaine yelled back, jerking her hand back. "You said you needed a ride, but you're not stealing my car." She smacked his chest again. "This is mine and you're not taking it with your mope story about your dead mom."

Keith's hands very slowly lowered. He straightened up, no longer interested in going for her keys. He stared right at her, genuinely numb. He was too astonished to be hurt. Elaine's eyes closed as the rest of her face went placid. "Babe, I didn't mean that." She bit her lip and tried to keep from shouting in remorse. She looked down the roundabout at the other cars, other people, going on with their lives. "Babe," she pled, "I'm just...it's just the champagne talking."

"No its not," Keith told her. His voice was low and soft, bereft of the energy for any fragment of anger. He stepped back from her, then again. "It's you."

"No, I just..." She held out her keys. "Y-you can drive." Keith kept backing up from her, shaking his head. She practically begged, "Babe, I didn't mean it."

"No, you did," Keith said, too hurt to be loud.

"No, it's the champagne," Elaine insisted.

"No, the champagne isn't making you cruel," Keith told her. "You're always cruel. The champagne is just keeping you from hiding it like usual." He shook his head as he backed farther away. He held up his hands as he surrendered to what he saw as her true self. He turned his back on her, leaving her standing at the bumper of her dream car. "Goodbye," he told her without looking over his shoulder.

The rain was coming down by the time Keith arrived home. The bright, but hazy day had been choked with a heavy storm front. Dark clouds stole the day. The heavens hung lower as each minute pressed on. Now, that Keith returned to an empty and hollow house, the brewing storm finally let rain and thunder fall.

The keys rattled as he unlocked the door, darkness awaiting him. Cold rainwater dribbling down his chin, his hair matted to the back of his neck. He did nothing but stand for a moment. In the doorway, he was still. Finally, he dropped his keys in the bowl by the door and shuffled inside.

He set the cardboard box of his mother's belongings on the ground. He dropped two folders worth of paperwork next to it. The vacancy of his life hung around him like a mocking lover clinging to his shoulders.

The house wasn't cold physically but it was vacant and empty. Keith considered the main living room, then turned and headed down into the basement. He descended the stairs slowly, walking on auto-pilot. He came and sat down on the couch, the seat squeaking under his wet hips.

He took out his cell phone and tossed it onto the seat next to him. He exhaled and felt like he was just deflating. There was no relief from the tension being gone. Instead, it was as if that very tension had been all that held him together. Now, without it, he wasn't a person. He couldn't be complete.

His eyes traveled up to the roof and the exposed pipes of the ceiling. He smirked on the left side of his mouth and a strange envy filled him. His eyes fell to the corner of the room where moving bands lay with some old boxes. The heavy, strong rubber would be more

than sufficient, and the constriction would make it harder to get free once the throes of survival kicked in.

Keith stood and grabbed the nearest band. He looped it over the heavy, secured pipe with ease and tucked one end through the other. His noose was ready. He opened it wide and began to put his head through, right as a roll of lightning flashed over the basement through the windows. His face lit up in the mirror in the bathroom.

But when the darkness descended, it wasn't his face he saw but Viscera's, looking right at him.

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