

Cold in a Winter's Errand

When the night came, I lost all reason.
At first, I thought it was just me.
Then I watched my neighbor walk barefoot into six feet of snow without a coat.

He never looked cold.
He never looked back.

The snow had started at 8:17 PM.

By 9:00 PM, the roads were swallowed whole.
By midnight, nobody was answering their phones.
At 1:12 AM, I looked outside and noticed something was wrong with the sky.

The moon was bigger.
Not by much.
Just enough.

The church bell rang every hour after midnight, even though no one had touched it in years.

A sheriff's car drove past my house three times that night.
The first time, I thought he was patrolling.
The second time, I thought he was searching.

The third time, I realized he was running.
And when his headlights disappeared behind the edge of town, I stopped feeling safe.

Normal became uncertain.

The wind changed first.
Not stronger.
Just different.

It sounded less like a storm and more like something breathing above the town.

I looked toward the street.

The snow wasn't white anymore.

At first, it was grey.

Then darker.

Then darker still.

I rubbed my eyes.

I told myself it was the night.

The moon.

The shadows.

Anything but what I was seeing.

But when I looked again, the snow had become black.

Not dirty.

Not muddy.

Black.

As though the sky had mistaken ash for winter.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something drift across the river.

Too fast to make out.

Too large to ignore.

I stepped closer to the bank.

The thing was already gone.

For a moment, I convinced myself it had been a trick of the storm.

A shadow.

A branch.

Anything but what I thought I'd seen.

Then I noticed the tracks.

They began on one side of the river.

And ended on the other.

Whatever was happening in this town...
It wasn't trapped here.
It was moving.

I had seen it before.
Even after only catching a glimpse of it across the river, I knew that much.

It was beautiful.
Not in the way a sunset is beautiful.
Not in the way a person is beautiful.

Something older.
Something terrible.
Something that should never have existed.
Yet somehow did.

"Matthews."

The voice came from behind me.
Familiar.
Painfully familiar.

I froze.
For a moment, the storm disappeared.

The bell.
The wind.
The black snow.

None of it mattered anymore.
My eyes began to sting.

"No..."

I whispered.
Not because I didn't recognize the voice.
But because I did.

"No... not you."

I didn't want to turn around.
Every instinct I had screamed at me not to.
And somehow, without looking at it, I knew it was smiling.

Not at the river.
Not at the storm.

At me.

My jaw locked.
My teeth ground together until they hurt.
The cold no longer bothered me.
Something else had taken its place.

A sensation crawled beneath my skin.
Like thousands of needles pressing against every nerve in my body.

Waiting.
Watching.
Smiling.

I squeezed my eyes shut.
Because deep down, I knew something far worse than the storm was standing behind me.
And it wanted me to look.

The storm continued around us.

The church bell rang.
One.
Two.
Three.

Still, neither of us moved.
So what was the point?
Why follow me?
Why call my name?

That's when I realized something.
It wasn't behaving randomly.

It was studying me.
Watching me.
Waiting for something.

A mistake.
A reaction.
An answer.

And for the first time that night, I began to wonder if it was learning from me as much as I was learning from it.

I threw up into the snow.
Black flecks stared back at me from the ground.
The thing behind me never moved.

Never spoke.
Never blinked.
Then I heard a whistle.

Soft.
Distant.
I looked toward the sky.
The moon was whistling.

Not loudly.
Not clearly.

Just enough for me to hear it.
And from somewhere deep within the forest, an owl answered.

But when the owl answered, everything went silent.

No wind.
No bell.
No whistle.

Nothing.

For the first time that night, the town really did feel dead.

Something moved behind me.

I turned.

Pain exploded across the side of my head.

The world folded inward.

Darkness.

When I opened my eyes, the storm was gone.

The town was gone.

And so was the thing that had been standing behind me.

At least...

The same one.

I found myself sitting inside a rusted cage.

My hands shook as I gripped the bars.

Figures surrounded me.

Dozens of them.

Watching.

Smiling.

And hanging from the cage door was the only thing that looked remotely familiar.

The key.

“What is the meaning of this?!”

My voice echoed through the darkness.

None of them reacted.

None of them blinked.

They only smiled.

“Listen to me...”

I gripped the bars tighter.

“You don’t understand.”

One of the figures stepped forward.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

The others parted for him.

The hood fell away.

My stomach dropped.

It wasn't a thing.

It wasn't a monster.

It was him.

The doctor.

"Doctor..."

The word barely escaped me.

His smile widened.

"Your assistance is no longer required, Doctor Matthews."

The cage suddenly felt much smaller.

"But thank you."

He tilted his head.

"Your work has been invaluable."

Something in his eyes shifted.

Not anger.

Not joy.

Something worse.

"Forever grateful."

He laughed softly and turned away.

The others followed.

One by one.

Leaving me alone with the realization.

I had never possessed authority.
I had only been given the illusion of it.

A pawn.
Nothing more.
Nothing less.

A pawn in a fool's game.

My blood ran cold.
Shivers crawled down my spine.
And it wasn't because of the spiders.

Thousands of eyes watched me from the cavern walls.
Yet somehow, the walls felt worse.

The spiders only looked at me.
The walls felt as though they knew me.

I looked toward the cage door.
The key still hung there.

Untouched.
Waiting.

No.

Not waiting.
Placed.
Left for me.
That was how I knew.

Even if I escaped this cage, I was never escaping this place.
Whoever had brought me here wanted me moving.
And somehow, that terrified me more than the cage ever could.

The Pit awaited me.
And so did its carriers.

The walls rumbled.

The ground beneath me shook.
I was out of the cage.

Most people would have called that survival.
They would have been wrong.
Freedom meant nothing here.

The key had never been an escape.
It had only been an invitation.

And worse?

There didn't need to be many.
Because there was only one.

The figure from the river stood waiting for me.
Motionless.
Patient.

Somehow it wasn't dead.
Somehow, neither was I.

And that frightened me more than anything I'd seen that night.

I shut my eyes.
Not because I thought it would save me.
But because I was afraid of what came next.

Something approached.
At first, I thought it was footsteps.
Then I realized it wasn't.

There were too many.
As though a single figure carried dozens of others within it.

Closer.
Closer.
Closer.

I kept my eyes shut.
Until the darkness behind my eyelids disappeared.

A bright light flashed against my face.
I opened my eyes.

The cavern was gone.
The Pit was gone.

In front of me, a screen flickered to life.
Static danced across it.
Words appeared.
I didn't recognize the symbol.
I didn't recognize the organization.

But somehow...

I recognized the man speaking.
And that terrified me more than the thing from the river ever had.
Maybe this wasn't worse than death.

Maybe...