

Elisheva Ruuska

Human

Short Story

“Stay down, mutt.”

I receive a hard slap across the face from the deranged old woman who calls this place home. This is not home. I had awoken one night in a cold sweat, alone and naked on a hard wooden floor, shivering. I have no memories of how I managed to get stuck in such a horrid and disgusting place. It wasn't dirty in the way you might be thinking; in fact, every nook and cranny is scrubbed clean once a week, finished on the dot. What makes it so repulsive is that, after being invited inside, you can feel the secrets buried in the floors and walls start to ooze out and taint your skin, almost hear the whispers of gossip and conspiracies.

This house is a very old one, but when its establishment and origins are questioned, the locals have no recollection of it, despite knowing the woman and her family who reside there. I've only ever heard the old woman be called “Grams” by her frequent visitors and her ratty grandchildren. I think they're children. They act childishly and get dirty and throw fits, screaming bloody murder if water even mists over their smudged skin. There are two of them, a boy and a girl. The girl is taller than the boy and seems older, but when I see them out of my peripheral vision, their forms bend and stretch, taking on demonic qualities.

I crawl back to my designated corner and do my best to make myself modest-looking. Grams' latest guests are two tall men who look like they do business. Her friends never seem to notice my lack of human clothes; nonetheless, I am still in my corner and watch them sit down on the couches of the living room, hoping they do not spot me and attempt to pet my head as some of her other guests have tried. She simply coos and praises me for being a good dog before motioning for her acquaintances to return to their seats. I don't understand why she has so much in-trail and ex-trail through her house, it's seldom important or urgent. Each individual that crosses the threshold into the fresh air gets a little drained, saying goodbye quickly to get some rest at their own respective homes.

“You did well today. How about some treats?”

She isn't expecting me to answer, doesn't want me to, will earn me another slap if I do. They don't give me food or water unless it's from a bowl on the floor, and I have to eat it without my hands; otherwise, the children get upset and run to kick the bowls out from under me. If that happens, I don't get any more food or even scraps. I'm required to eat every pebble off the floor, no matter how old, to keep up the house's spotless, wasteless demeanor.

Grams never makes the children clean or do any labor. They're quite big enough to. The things are filthy, yet everywhere they go is spotless when they leave, like they pick up every speck of dust they dropped there in the first place. Tricky little things. Sometimes they make me stand up on my back legs like a dog and bark. I never know what will happen if I don't do as they command. I have awoken to the pair dragging me out into the backyard with those dauntingly tall, shadow-casting wood fences without a single crack to peek through. That day, they tied a

rope around my neck from an old post and sat me there in the hot sun. I suspect at least two moons had sunk over the horizon by the time I was brought back inside, but those memories were already fuzzy before the sick family showed mercy.

At this point, I've seen many moons fall, and far too many suns rise. I've given up escape. I will forever be at the whim of these demons. I've held up too long, been strong for too long. They feed off of it. If only I had given up while my pride allowed me the chance. I don't know where I came from, but I suspect, based on my morals and scraps of memory, that I had a sort of power over the people of this world.

I don't know if I've ever felt tired the way I have during my stay here, which will not last forever. I shift through sleepless, paranoid nights or sleeping for so long I can barely string together the events of the day; the number of Grams' visitors, the children's antics... At times, I feel drained and groggy after Grams heads down into the basement for the night. I've never been down there. I never want to. Strange sounds and miasma smells echo and drift up to the land of the living as if a cavernous hellscape is what really lies below. I wonder how she does it, getting away with so many wonderfully terrible things while being so open, so friendly. Most don't spare a second glance when offered food, drink, gifts, but none of those things leave the house, not that I've seen. The state of the siblings is never questioned.

The children's eyes gave the impression of being hollow, with a liquid shine without light reflecting inside. It was as if they saw everything. Grams never calls them by their names, so I don't know if they have them, but sometimes she refers to them as her "precious little scouts."

"Boy! Lock it down and join your sister in the back yard!"

I lift my head off the floor as his bare feet slap in front of me, briefly pausing to set the multiple locks on the front door before bursting out of the back door. I count the number of creaks it takes for Grams to reach the first floor. What was she doing in the basement this early? The dark reddening bags under her eyes hung as if her face would melt off... unusual. I caught a glimpse of the siblings stealthily peeking into the living room from the window to watch Grams drop a heavy, thick book on the table with a dampened thud. I've never seen it before.

The children seemed all too excited, but scrambled off before Grams could spot them. I don't think she would have seen them anyway, as she clambered up the stairs and slammed her door shut. The force managed to make the house tremble. There haven't been any visitors today. I look around the house and jump. I sneak around when I'm alone, but don't stray too far from the corner; it feels safe, not that it feels so at the moment. There's at least a pair of birds cramping every window seal, occasionally accompanied by a stray squirrel or rat, even a cat. I can hear the mice in the crawlspace searching and scrambling for something.

The tension in the room makes it hard to breathe, made worse by the overly imposing presence of that grimy grimoire. It's almost as if Grams expected this reaction to be caused. Something is wrong. The edges of my vision swim with darkness. I wonder if I'm the one they're after. That's impossible, crazy. I wasn't the one who did anything wrong.

Peck! Scritch! Scratch! Squeak! Peck!

They're so loud. They want that grimoire. Maybe if I get it out of here, they'll leave this place too. It doesn't take long for me to reach my breaking point. Looking back, I don't really remember how long it took, just that in the moment I sprang towards the table to wrap my hands around the torturous thing. It was impossibly heavy, almost too much for me, and positively overpowering for the frail old lady that brought it up here. I should have just returned it to the basement, where Grams might have been less upset, but my frightened instincts caused me to run towards the front door, barely managing to heave it against my chest so a free hand could undo all of the locks. I got to the third one, the book started to get hot. I know the boy doesn't have the key for Grams' special lock, allowing me to throw the door open.

The book burns my hands as I try to throw it into the yard, where the chain around my neck will not let me reach. I attempt to drop it just over the threshold, but the grains and grooves of the rotting cover stick to the webbing creases in flesh, holding tight like tiny hooks of insect feet. I've had the door open for too long. Those uncanny critters know what I've done, watched me do it. They're coming for me. I can see them approaching with a tension akin to the loss of instinct. A deadly force compelled them to act as if they were the predators stalking prey, except I was the powerless one here.

Wicked claws wrap around links in the chain I can't see, yanking me back sharply so I choke and strain for breath. The door slams shut as I writhe on the floor, discarding the book that's lost its need to devour. The fog in my head clears. Laughter. That old hag was laughing at me.

“YOU WANTED THIS TO HAPPEN!”

My accusation goes unanswered as pain explodes across the side of my face. I feel my legs crumble under me. It's undeniable to me now that she's not what I thought she was. She's never been what anyone thinks she is.

I open my eyes slowly, feeling a patch of sun across my back. I hear giggling, children's joy. The warmth on my back is disrupted as the small humans run up to me, stroking my hair and between my shoulders. I look up at Grams, and there's already a smile on her face, hiding the smug position of power. I tolerate this for a while, entertaining the children of Grams' fresh visitors, a happy couple, while we both catch glimpses of the other's attention.

There's this way she watches the children, with longing, that makes my skin crawl. It feels too familiar, just enough to increase my confusion and distraught. At times, all I'd wish was for her to stop entertaining the toddlers, stop admiring them to the pleasure of their parents. At times, I thought I'd spot her own children spying through angles in the window you'd only know by watching through them. She rarely keeps guests for this long. When it comes time for the couple to leave, each with a child under their arm, she delays them ever so slightly, that longing finding its way into her gaze again.

The door shuts behind the happy family, and she turns to me, pure rage boiling in her expression.

“THIS IS YOUR FAULT”

I try to run, but it's too late. My chain is already in her grasp. She's dragging me towards the basement. The smell is overwhelming, I nearly pass out trying not to vomit, neither assisted by the harsh digging in of the metal collar around my neck. The walls are engorged with body-adjacent lumps, each struggling with the burning need to replace themselves to escape. The walls stretch like thickened flesh as they thrash and grab, but never dare come close to either of us.

She throws me down in front of a dark, twisted pedestal carrying that matching accursed grimoire.

“You'll be the one to fix this, just like you ruined it.”

I feel something crack out of place as she snatches my wrist, yanking me off the floor. She holds my palm open as I struggle against her thin frame, her skin plush between gelatin and rubber. She presses my flesh against the cover of the book, adorned with a stained metal emblem. Pain courses up the veins in my fore arm, and in turn, all of the strength I had left is sapped out of me. There's more than I remember being as she allows me to sink to the floor, watching me with a satisfied grin as the emblem burns its way into my palm.

I hear screaming. Howling of the damned souls trapped in these walls. Blood begins to bloom from the rotting, fleshy walls, usually from where you'd expect an orifice to be; sometimes it gushes from behind layers of bodies, like they've been collected for years. I smell it, I hear it, I feel it, I vomit it. Soon, my own joins theirs in a large, ever-growing pool, and too quickly the level rises against our legs. I look at the wretched thing, her skin floating on top of the blood bath like melting ice cream, no pain, but joy.

“Rise! Praise me!”

The tormenting cascade from my mouth ceases, and I feel empty, like a husk, like starvation. I reach out, the ice cream substance webbing and sticking between my fingers...its smell is sweet, like candy. I gorge myself on the substance like a forgotten addiction, like a desperation to fix one's self. The familiar feeling of over-eating settles in the pit of my stomach and spreads to my entire body, every limb or appendage, making them feel tingly and stretched. When the source is depleted, I despair. Standing above me, a beautiful lady to fill the loss, more accurately described as a mistress, lady of the house, bachloress, perhaps something greater.

“Rise to me.”

She beckons me closer, I approach like a magnet – beauty like poison, like sickness. I relish in the glow of it. She stands below me now, but everything seems to be below me now. There's no splashing of dark fluids under my feet, no screaming, no horrible scent, just a sweet taste in my mouth and lover's eyes piercing to the bottom of my soul. Her arms embrace my shoulders and neck as I pull her close.

“You did it. We can be happy again.”

She ushers me up the stairs with childish excitement, opening the basement door before I have time to question the way the creaky stairs have turned to stone or the door to mahogany instead of oak. More glee is awaiting; the two children I once thought stained now jump forward

and welcome me into this strange world. This must be a mistake. Small horns have sprouted from each of their heads, feindish little tails swinging for balance and out of glee.

The bright light from the sudden daytime concentrates in the living room mirror's reflection, stunning my eyes the moment it takes me to move out of the way. When the shine is tolerable, I glance back, only to catch my own eyes... Are they mine? Matching skin tone and sclera, a deep umber, littered with rock-like protrusions from bones under the surface, tipped with the same blood red as the eyes I gaze into. My mouth feels overcrowded with too-big, too-sharp teeth.

I started noticing this smell, rancid and nauseous. No one stops me as I approach the front door, pretending as if everything is fine. My hands quiver as I open it. Bodies. Rot. Chunks of meat or appendages scattered across the ground, but their owners...unaffected, to say the least. They continue to move about in what I can only assume to be their normal routines, walking and talking and socializing like normal people. They seem to understand each other's actions and needs, with and without words, a hivemind of corpses.

Her hand comes to rest on my shoulder, squeezing gently.
“You did this. You remember that, right? You made us better, all of us.”