

## One Hell of a Trip

"So... What's your name?"

"Joe."

"That's a nice name."

"Mmh. You?"

"Oh, well, it's Clem. Actually it's Clementine, but Clem is short for Clementine and everyone just calls me Clem."

"..."

"...soooo... What do you do? Usually - not your hobbies or when you're at home or anything, although you might be depending on what you do, but what you get paid to do. That is, if you do anything, I don't want to intrude just – "

"I worked in construction."

"Wow, that's impressive! I, um, well what I do could be considered more boring I guess, I'm a scientist."

I'm greeted with silence... again. This is awkward. I don't know what to say anymore, and at this point, it's probably useless. Weirdly, I've yet to actually face the person I've been sitting beside for the past, what – half hour? But in a series of discrete glances in the mirror I've memorised exactly what she's wearing (black jacket, cropped shirt, jean shorts), what her hair colour is (black) and what brand her shoes are (Doc Martens). I've also picked apart just about every aspect of myself out of sheer boredom. If you want an overview, from top down:

My hair is too oily, the ponytail I put it in is sagging and half ruined but I'm scared to pull it all the way out because, again, oily hair! There's a stain on my shirt, matching the ones on my fingers and those splattered onto my shoes. Speaking of shoes, this pair is old, dirty and I'm just waiting for a hole to appear in them. Oh, and my socks have cats riding scooters on them, don't ask me why.

So now not only am I feeling extremely self conscious, I'm also stuck in this stuffy box of a room for –

"Josephine."

"....What?"

"My name is Josephine. Joe is short for Josephine."

"Oh! Sorry, yeah, nice name! Josephine is nice, it rolls off the tongue. Joe is also cool, very straight to the point, like you!"

Joe finally turns towards me, an amused smile playing on her lips.

"Tell me, do you ever stop talking?"

I gasp, dramatically grasping my chest in mock offence.

"How dare you!" I laugh, internally rejoicing at the growing smile on her face. "And yes, of course I do, I listened to all five of the words that you said without interrupting, didn't I?"

She's full on grinning at this point as she says,

"Why are you even here, Clem?"

I pause, fanning myself, and glance at her out of the corner of my eye before asking,

"To be fair, you don't seem to belong here either. If you don't mind me asking, what did you do to end up in this place?"

She laughs softly and tilts her hand to the ceiling.

"Way to evade the question. But sure. On a construction site there were always things around. Rocks, tools, pieces of wood. And occasionally, it was fun to just, accidentally knock one off the building. And maybe it landed on someone's head. And maybe I made sure I wasn't seen, but sometimes someone else was. Ironically, the reason I'm here is because of a rock and unfortunate timing. Anyways, enough about me, now it's your turn."

Sweat starts beading along my forehead, but my lips twitch unconsciously upwards as I reply,

"In my defence, I'm a scientist."

Joe cackles at that, saying,

"This is going to be good!"

I snort, smile, and continue,

"Look, I was doing an experiment and it was going well. Soooo... I sort of decided to test it on humans. Just to make sure it worked, you know?"

Nothing. My smile fades but I carry on,

"There was this guy in the lab. I never saw him talk to anyone and he didn't have any family, or at least I suspected he didn't. No one to miss him or look for him." She gasps.

I give her a second before persevering. "I needed a live sample, otherwise the cells would've died making my investigation basically pointless. I was able to look at a few of his organs - liver, intestine, kidneys, a bit of his brain, even his skin. I used his heart last because otherwise, well... as I said, I needed a live sample."

As I finally look across at her, I see Joe staring at me, pale faced and wide eyed. I watch her throat work as she swallows, watch her breathing even out before she murmurs,

"How did you end up...?"

I gesture to the blood staining my shirt, just above my breast.

"Police?"

I sigh,

"Turns out he did have a family. She has good aim."

She huffs out a strained laugh before silence once again falls upon us. We both stare at the floor indicator, steadily ticking down. I start shifting uncomfortably. Sit up so as not to lean against the rapidly heating wall. Fan my flushed face and pull at my shirt, unable to

cool myself. Joe is making similarly futile efforts, but as I go to comment on it, my stomach suddenly drops and the elevator jerks to a halt.

Ding!

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The doors open slowly. A wave of blazing heat engulfs me, blistering my skin and making my eyes water. The pain barely registers however, as I attempt to make out the dark figure looming above us. Through failing vision I see only an outline of black wings, twisted horns and bright, yellow eyes. The being suddenly drops into a dramatic bow and steps aside, sweeping a clawed hand across the landscape I had previously ignored. Greeting me is an endless horizon of black void and roaring flames, amongst which haggard forms are scattered. Of these, I can just barely make out those human and those... *not*. Screams and cries reach my ears before they are muted by the demon's voice, thick as smoke and twice as choking, "Welcome home, ladies."