

from Juked #4
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ZERK!

A Spelunking Noise

Charlie called me this morning to ask if I wanted to go hunting for force loops with him. Would I ever! With all he's been telling me about force loops, there was no way I'd pass on the chance to actually witness them. Charlie has this idea that we can harness their power and then, according to him, we can "ride them anywhere." I don't know about that, but he's always had a stronger grasp on physics than I have.

Anyway, lately I've come to realize that if I don't stop crushing people's dreams I'm going to turn out exactly like my grandmother. If Charlie wants me to be supportive, well, that's the least I can do. It will be worth it just to see force loops up close.

I got slightly hung up deciding what to wear. Charlie said we'd be going underground and there would be rocks to climb, so I knew I shouldn't dress nice, but I had this perverse desire to look pretty for the force loops. I compromised, settling on tank top, sweatshirt, battered cargo shorts, and a little red hair bow with tiny white polka dots.

Of course it didn't matter, because once we got a few yards into the cave, it started to become so incredibly dark we

couldn't see a thing. Luckily, Charlie was prepared with one of those helmets that has a flashlight affixed to the front. We proceeded carefully, guided by the tight wedge of illumination.

"We're getting close," he said in a low voice, after what felt like a long time. "I'm going to have to turn off the light, so we don't disturb the force loops."

When he did, I was in the darkest place I'd ever been. I had my hand on the back of Charlie's shirt, following him as he crept forward, and I couldn't suppress the feeling that we were at the edge of a bottomless abyss.

"Charlie," I whispered, because it seemed like a time to whisper, "We're about to fall in."

"Shhh," he said, "It's OK. I know the way." He was climbing up now, and then he stopped very suddenly. Without saying anything, he pulled me up beside him, and steadied my hands on a rock ledge in front of me. I couldn't feel rock above the ledge, so it seemed as though we were peering into a vast opening, but it was so dark that it felt ridiculous to think of it that way. I longed to ask a number of anxious questions, but I sensed Charlie wanted me to be quiet so I kept them to myself. I was feeling cold and alone and a little hungry, but all that was instantly forgotten as the force loops came whooshing overhead.

There are only four words in the English language that end in "–dous" and all of them were invented to describe force loops. Though there was no change in the darkness, I could see the impression they left in the cave, like the rubbery flashes of light on the magnetic tape inside a cassette. But it was the sound of them, organic and unnatural as a zebra's cry, that paralyzed me with nauseated joy.

I knew then that Charlie was right – if we harnessed the power of force loops we could ride them anywhere. But he seemed to have forgotten about that. He took my hand in his and leaned close to me in the darkness. He whispered, "They like your bow."

The Amputee

My most recent nightmare involved amputees and cannibalism. I was the amputee, and the cannibals were three dirty backwoods men and my mother. They were eating the parts they amputated from me. The excision of my body parts wasn't painful, but as I lay there on a filthy mattress following each physical reduction, my mind was consumed with panicked thoughts of all the things I would never be able to do again.

I woke up alone, shaky and profoundly distressed. Usually I like to sleep by myself, but at that moment I wished very much that someone were there to offer me comfort. With limited options available, I laid one of my pillows next to me, and assigned it a face.

"I had a terrible dream," I told the pillow.

"It's alright now, baby," the pillow said. "I'm here and I won't let anything happen to you." I hugged the pillow close and, vastly reassured, soon fell into a peaceful sleep.

In the morning, as I made the bed, I straightened that pillow into place with particular affection. "Thank you for last night," I said, "I don't know what I would have done if you weren't there." I gave the pillow a little kiss, and then smoothed it away. The pillow remained silent but looked at me as if to say its whole purpose in life was to make my sleeping hours more comfortable, I shouldn't even mention it.

That night I went to sleep with the pillow by my side, a preemptive strike against nightmares. I had no bad dreams, and woke to the pillow gently caressing my cheek. "Sorry," it whispered, "Did I wake you?"

"It's OK," I murmured, "I have to be up in a minute anyway."

"Don't get up," the pillow said. "Stay here with me today. Order Chinese food and finish the novel you've been reading at bedtime, and never leave the apartment or your pajamas." I wasn't going to listen; I even made it onto my feet. But the look the

pillow was giving me when I stood was too enticing, and I found myself right back in bed again. The pillow and I had a lovely day together.

Then it was the weekend. I had forgotten about my plans with Derek on Saturday night, and when I remembered I wasn't as excited as usual. He took me to quite a romantic little bistro, followed by an exclusive screening, part of the independent film festival. When he put his arm around me in the theater it felt unnatural, but I tried to behave as though nothing was wrong. The film had an original script and breathtaking cinematography, but my mind kept wandering back to bed. All I wanted was to lie down and press my face into the pillow.

Derek walked me home, and the more he tried to converse pleasantly about the festival's program, the more he tested my nerves. We stopped at my doorstep, and instead of inviting him in, or giving him a passionate goodnight kiss and an acceptable excuse, I told him that I thought we should take a step back. He accepted it more gracefully than I expected, and that was a great relief. I just couldn't carry on with him, having stumbled across something real.

I could barely wait to get to bed, didn't even bother to wash off all my makeup and brush my teeth.

"You've been with someone else, haven't you?" the pillow said.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Don't lie," the pillow said. "I can smell him on you."

"All right," I said, "I was. I swear though, I thought about being here the whole time. You're the one I want." The pillow was cold and silent, and I knew I had ruined yet another good thing.

Xanhaar

As I was preparing to go away on a three-week women's backpacking retreat, Teddy said he was going to grow a beard in my absence. To be funny, I told him I was going to do the same, but once I got out there it occurred to me that I hadn't brought any shaving supplies. There were obviously no waxing salons in the Appalachians, and anyway, surrounded by women and nature seemed like a perfect time to "let my hair down," as it were.

Over the course of the trip I found myself increasingly proud of my beard, which grew more quickly than I expected, perhaps stimulated by the rigorous physical activity. One night, as we shared a jug of strong moonshine that we'd bartered off a native, I told some of the other women about the beard, and soon several of them had decided to cast in their lots on a beard-growing contest. We measured our progress during group swims. There was some strong competition, but at the end of the trip all agreed that my beard was the unquestionable champion.

By the time I returned to the city, I had mixed feelings about going back to a clean shave. There was something quite liberating about letting my body function as designed, and in general the trip had really opened my eyes to that which was fundamentally worth spending time and energy on.

Teddy was overjoyed to see me, of course, and we made love almost instantly upon my arrival, so the question of my new, more natural look was not addressed right away. Still, I felt it was on his mind in the following days, and sure enough as they stretched into weeks without any sign of depilation on my part, he finally worked up the nerve to mention it to me.

"So, ahm, about the beard . . ." he said during a commercial break, as we sat on the couch together, my feet in his lap.

"What about it?"

"Well, it's a little . . ." he seemed reluctant to continue, hoping I'd take the hint. I did not.

"Lustrous?" I asked. "Impressive?"

"Intimidating," he corrected.

"Well, I've always loved you for being such a secure guy," I reassured him. "I'm sure you can handle it."

"I don't like it," he said. "I want you to shave."

I looked at him from across the couch. If Teddy and I continued on course, he was surely the man I would marry, but I suddenly wondered if I knew him at all. What if I were to fall victim to some sort of total-body paralysis that rendered me incapable of hair-removal? Would he abandon me? "Teddy," I said as reasonably as possible, "Can it be *that* important? I'm still the same woman."

"It's me or the beard," he said. There was absolutely no question in my mind. He slept on the couch that night, and moved out a week later, once he found a place.

Perhaps I had some momentary regrets, but overall it made things much simpler. I didn't have to tell him about the Bigfoot I'd encountered near the peak of Mt. Katahdin and explain that I'd felt an instant, deep connection with him. Xanhaar loved me as I was, and with Teddy gone, we were free to make a go of it, despite the distance.

The Ex

If I were younger, I would have ignored the rustling in the hydrangea bush. Would have told myself it was only the wind, or a woodland creature, or space aliens – nothing that intended me harm. But I'm not young like that anymore, and this time I wasn't falling for it. I reached for the best weapon my groceries could offer and walked up to the hydrangea, armed with a zucchini.

"You're not fooling anyone," I said. "You might as well come out of there."

He emerged looking sheepish and conciliatory, but I knew better. Around the eyes there was that look of a man who wouldn't be happy until we were lying together in a field with our hands touching and our brains blown out of our heads in a suicide pact.

"I told you to stay away from me," I said. I pointed the zucchini at him, to let him know I wasn't messing around.

"Are you making your zucchini fritters?" he asked, longing and menace carrying equal weight in his tone. "Who are you making them for?"

"I'm just making zucchini," I said, "not that it's any of your goddamn business. Why don't you get out of here?"

No one else would be eating my fritters, so he gave me his happy face. "It's good to see you," he said. "You look beautiful." It wasn't the truth. I had just come from errand running and I wasn't even trying to look presentable, let alone beautiful. But I'd achieved mythic, inhuman status in his mind, blinding him to the day-to-day particulars: zit, unshaved legs, two-week defection from the gym. This only made him more dangerous, apt to compliment me on those days I was dragging and needed reinforcement.

"You need to go," I said.

"I love your zucchini fritters," he said, as though he hadn't heard me, but we both knew he had. "I think about them all the time." He looked to see if compliments to the chef were softening

me up. "Dream about them," he added.

"I don't want to do this anymore," I said.

He looked at me and I could see he was hungry. I could see his salivary response as he thought about consuming me. And then I could feel it happening – my body starting to dissolve, the lines that defined me becoming thin and immaterial. I held up a hand and could see the street behind it. I was growing transparent again.

"Stop doing that," I yelled. "Stop making me imaginary." I gripped the zucchini with all that was left of me and hit him on the head with it. I hit him several times, eventually driving him to the edge of the property. When he got that far I stopped, not entitled to assault him with groceries once he exited my personal property.

I went inside and spent the next forty-five minutes regrouping my remaining existence. The best thing for that is wearing slippers with stuffed animal faces on the toes. When you look at your feet and see something so ridiculous, you know, no matter how it feels, that you must be alive.

Squirrel Person

My last quarter of college, I had a poli-sci seminar series. It was the final requirement I needed to graduate and I'd put it off until the end because I don't like politics and I don't like science. But the main reason I hated the class was that the teacher was a witch.

Dr. Cloudsbain was an ancient lady with wrinkles around her mouth and white-streaked hair that was always pulled back into a tight bun. I'd have guessed she was somewhere around 300 years old, but like everyone else, was too intimidated to ask. On several occasions I distinctly heard a desperate *ribbit* come from her purse. I struggled to stay on top of my assignments, lest I be forced to attend her office hours, which were held in the woods that surrounded campus.

On the first day of class she pushed aside a rolling chalkboard to reveal a large oven, and said that anyone who came late to lecture would be cooked and eaten for her supper. Her tardy policy was effective—my classmates and I always assembled in a timely and orderly fashion. I found a shortcut through the woods from Remote Lot-C, and used it to ensure my punctuality.

It was from this footpath that I first noticed him. He stood out, even sitting low in the grass over by a fallen redwood. The next time I saw him I was leaving class and under no time constraint, so I walked slightly off the path, close enough to see what he was doing. He was holding a squirrel.

From then on, I saw him all the time. There was always at least one squirrel with him. They seemed to trust and adore him, climbing into his lap to take peanuts, and then sitting there to eat them. He would wrap his hands around them, holding them without squeezing. The squirrels always seemed peaceful, which is never how squirrels seem.

I began to wander closer each time. I wanted to know him. We'd never made eye contact, but I felt sure by now he must be aware of my presence. One day I crept closer than ever before, and he suddenly spoke.

"I'm Kai," he said, without turning to look at me. "I'm friendly."

I froze where I was, unsure whether to bolt or reply. I was late for poli-sci, but suddenly that seemed unimportant. His voice was captivating. I was filled with nameless fear, yet I found myself taking one tentative step after another, until I was standing almost next to him. I crouched on the ground, and sidled even closer. Without thinking consciously about it, I eased my way into his lap and looked up at him. He looked down and held me gently.

Creature of the Day

It sat on the front stoop to the left of the door and stood when I walked out like it was waiting for me. It wasn't until I stopped to tie my sneaker several blocks later that I realized it had been waiting for me. The creature was behind me, standing about knee-high with a patient expression.

"Hi," I said.

"Mraw," it said.

I went to the sandwich shop, the creature on my heels. The sign said "No Pets" but that didn't apply to my situation — it wasn't my fault if the creature wanted a sandwich. As I walked to the counter I noticed Alan sitting in the corner. During the inevitable run-ins around the neighborhood since we stopped being friends, my policy has been to courteously pretend that at least one of us doesn't exist. Because I had the creature with me, it seemed like less trouble to pretend that Alan didn't exist. I made my usual order, the #18 with six separate modifications — which had always exasperated and embarrassed Alan when we ate here together — and a soda. I looked down at the creature.

"Chips?" I said.

"Mraw," it said. I added chips to my order and paid.

I waited for my sandwich, studiously contemplating the menu board on the wall rather than chance eye contact with the guy who wasn't there. He ruined the charade by walking up to me.

"Hey," he said. "How's it going?"

"Oh, hi Alan," I said, "I didn't see you there." I didn't tell him how it was going.

"Oh," he said, and looked at the floor, conversationally stymied, but only for a moment. "What's that?"

"It's not a pet," I said. "I'm just waiting for my sandwich, and then we'll be on our way."

"Yeah, mine hasn't come yet," Alan said. "I saw you there, and I thought I'd come over and say hi, but I can see you're just the

same."

"Never better," I replied cheerfully, as though he had just now asked me how it was going. The counter guy deposited a whicker plate at the corner table where Alan had been sitting. It was his usual – a #25 with no modifications. Alan didn't like tomatoes, but he always picked them off himself to make a point about how much more considerate of a sandwich shop customer he was.

"Never better," he said, shaking his head sadly at my sameness. "That about sums it up."

"And you," I said, "are still a real waste of tomatoes."

"Mraw," said the creature.

I picked up my order at the counter and left the sandwich shop. The creature came with me to the park, and hopped up to sit on the bench when I stopped to eat my sandwich. It was a windy-sunny day, the sky scraped clean of clouds and the light overbright. I ate my sandwich and drank my soda and squinted at the passers-by. The creature ate most of the chips and my pickle wedge.