

The Critter

No matter when I submit a story for critique, Walter is there to give me feedback.

He also strikes up a several-hours-long instant messenger conversation.

"Every story must have a deeper meaning, my darling," his latest message read. "One that the author sets out to convey to the desperate masses."

"I don't know," I typed back. "My old professor used to say that sometimes a story is just a story. That you can have a theme without a deeper meaning. We can each theoretically derive a lesson from that theme or a character's arc, but that doesn't mean the author set out to specifically teach us something."

"Yes, well, your professor sounds like a hack. Surely you don't want to be so simple-minded?" Walter replied. "Pish-posh, my darling. Seek the profound in all things, or you may as well go mow the grass."

Mowing the grass might be more productive than this. I leaned back in my seat and rubbed my eyes. The screen was making them burn. I blinked away the blur and typed, "Something to ponder. Thanks for the input, Walter."

As usual, he ignored the natural conclusion of the conversation and replied. "Certainly, my darling. When you have the time, take a look at my work posted at the link below. You'll note the profound meaning behind each piece. I encourage you to seek out those--"

I stopped reading because the paragraph was a five-hundred-word sales pitch I'd read a dozen times before. I assumed it was a copy and paste job because Walter ended every conversation with it and it was always the same. Even the energy pill I took after dinner couldn't give me the energy for that.

At the end of the long paragraph was a link to Walter's website where I could subscribe to read his work. He charged members thirty dollars per year for access to his "profound"-- pronounced: pretentious-- messages. I suppose when you're that great of a writer, you can charge what you like.

I glanced at the clock. It informed me the time was two in the morning. Yet another debate with Walter that stretched into the wee hours of the morning.

I got up and trudged across my studio to fall into bed. Sleep followed.

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"Are you listening, Jessica?" Charles asked.

I snapped my attention away from the dozy doodles I made in my notebook. "Yes, sorry, I was just thinking it over."

"What did I say?" Charlie asked.

Everyone at the table except the two of us smirked.

"Erm-- well, Teka Anxiety is free of major side--"

"We moved on from anxiety pills five minutes ago," Charlie snapped. "How are you going to sell AstroTeka products when you don't know the finer points?"

I didn't have a response to that.

Charlie scoffed at my silence. "Pay attention! We're on page ninety in the booklet. Dimensia and Alzheimer's injectables."

He turned back to his presentation where charts and numbers told the story about clinical trials. My eyelids immediately drooped.

"Late night?" Helen whispered in my ear.

I nodded and whispered back, "They dragging you science nerds into sales meetings now?"

"No, I'm giving the rundown on the new m-a-o inhibitor. You look a little worse for wear, by the way. Is it those pills I gave you?" she asked.

I shook my head and lied. "I only take them in the morning for a boost. I've just had some late writing nights recently. It's really been flowing--"

Charlie spun and fixed me with a glare.

My mouth snapped shut, but Helen sprang into action.

She patted me on the shoulder. "I asked her to clarify the purpose of the--"

Charlie rolled his eyes. If it was anyone other than Helen, he would have called them on the obvious lie. But Charlie was smart enough not to argue with his wife in front of others. He nodded and turned back to his chart. We stayed quiet for the rest of the meeting and I battled my sleepiness. I did win, but at a great cost. I felt more tired than ever as we filed from the conference room. Helen followed me back to my cubicle.

Once there, I pulled out my bottle of Booster-Pro, AstroTeka's soon-to-be-released energy pill, and swallowed one dry.

"You forgot to take it this morning and it made you this tired?" Helen asked. She snatched the bottle away and frowned.

"No, I took it. Sometimes it just takes two."

Helen's eyes went wide. "Oh my God, Jess! You shouldn't be doing that!"

"It's fine, drama queen. It's only every now and then," I replied.

"No, it's bad enough that you take it every day but you're upping the dose--"

"You said it was FDA approved," I said.

"Soon to be! They haven't--" Helen broke off and glanced at the cubicle door. She stepped closer and spoke in a quieter rasp. "They haven't concluded long-term studies, yet. I wasn't even supposed to give this to you and you're almost out!"

"Huh," I said, smirking and eyeing the bottle. I felt more awake already. "Maybe you should bring more when you come by tonight."

I stepped closer. She didn't step back, but she chewed her bottom lip. "Is that what I am? Your dealer?"

I caressed her hand that held the bottle. "You know you're more than that. Come by for dinner..."

"I don't know, Jess. Charlie--"

"Just tell him you need a girl's night," I said.

She tensed as my other hand pushed a strand of hair over her shoulder and continued to the small of her back.

"He never cared before."

Helen glanced at the door as I pulled her against me.

"I promise I'll only take one from now on."

Her breath quickened and she leaned into me.

I smelled her strawberry shampoo as I whispered in her ear. "You can stay and watch me take it in the morning if you want."

"I can't stay all--" she didn't have breath to finish. The flush on her neck climbed up to her cheeks. She jerked and backed away as someone walked by the cubicle door. She cleared her throat and said, "I'll meet you at eight."

She didn't meet my eyes as she left.

#

I made it back to my apartment by four that afternoon. I put on a pot of coffee and popped another Booster-Pro for good measure. There were only three left, so I figured it was a good thing Helen was coming by later.

A check of the fridge revealed there wasn't much to cook for dinner, just a couple bottles of Montepulciano and a box of red Sangria. So, I decided we'd order out. Pizza and wine were quickly becoming a staple of our girl's nights.

That worked for us, though. I love pizza and big-brain Helen never relaxed until she was at least a little tipsy.

I took a quick shower and settled down to kill the time in front of my laptop. To my surprise-- not!-- a message from Walter waited. It read, "Something to help you find your own truth."

Below the message was a link, not to his website this time. I clicked it, fully expecting to find a different subscription service hawking Walter's work. Instead, my computer screen turned to swirls of bright colors. Different shapes floated lazily across the view. Flashes of light accented the movements.

A soft knock sounded and I blinked and looked at the door. I frowned and made my way over. No one was there. I looked up and down the hallway. There wasn't a sign of anyone.

I closed the door and went back to my laptop. The screen was black, the computer dead. I plugged it in and tried to boot it up. It stayed dead.

"Well that's just great," I said. I slammed the laptop lid down. That's when I felt it. There was something on me, clinging to my shoulders.

I turned my head slowly to find the smiling face of a monkey.

"Hello," it whispered.

I swallowed. "Hi."

"Computer's broke, huh?" it asked.

I nodded.

"Maybe you're too tired to think the problem over. Try taking another." He nodded toward the bottle of Booster-Pro next to my laptop.

It was weird talking to a magic monkey that came out of nowhere, but he was right. I was tired. It might help. I took one, swallowing it down with a swig of wine.

I opened the laptop and it worked. It was already on. The colors and shapes still swirled and danced across the screen. The moving pattern almost made me sick so I closed the internet.

I looked at the monkey. "Thanks, um--"

"You can call me Johnny."

"Cool," I said. I turned back to my computer and opened the instant messenger. To Walter, I typed, "Why did you send me that?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Johnny asked. "He wants to hypnotize you."

"What? How would that hypnotize me?"

"Swirling colors, flashing lights; it's what it seems like to me," Johnny insisted.

"That's just hokum," I replied. "I'm not--"

"What time is it, then?" Johnny asked.

I frowned and looked at the clock on my laptop. Right as I saw that it was eight 'o clock, there was a soft knock at the door.

I jerked and looked at Johnny. "But it was just four-forty-five..."

"Time flies when you're hypnotized," Johnny said.

The knock on the door came again.

"Why would Walter do that to me?"

"To find your truth and give you meaning." Johnny's smile widened and he leaned in close to my ear. He whispered, "But that's not what's important. What matters is that Helen is here to kill you."

The knock came a third time, harder.

I stared at Johnny for a moment. Then I crossed to the door and pulled it open. Helen stood outside, every day beautiful in jeans and a t-shirt, glancing up and down the hallway. She was always nervous when she came to see me. She smiled when she met my eyes, then the expression soured.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head and ushered her in.

"Jess, you don't look--"

"I'm fine, just got a weird message on the internet," I said.

"Lots of weirdos out there," Helen said. She still frowned at me.

"She's here to kill you," Johnny whispered.

"No way," I said.

"No? But you just--" Helen started to say.

"I wasn't talking to you," I said. I motioned toward Johnny.

Helen glanced at my shoulder. "Jess, are you sure you're all right?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?" I asked.

"She's come to kill you," Johnny whispered.

"I'm fine, it's fine, she's fine," I insisted.

"You don't look fine," Helen said, stepping close to me. "Your pupils are dilated, your skin is clammy, and you are way too pale. Did you take more--"

"Ask her if she brought them," Johnny whispered.

"Oh, did you bring the Booster-pro?" I asked.

Helen chewed her bottom lip. "Jess, I--"

She took a deep breath and I knew she hadn't. My belly exploded in writhing snakes of panic.

"Keep it together and play it cool," Johnny whispered. "She's here to kill you, but she doesn't know that you know."

I forced a smile. "It's all right. I get it."

Helen looked unsure. "You do?"

"Yeah," I said. I wrapped her in a hug. She felt tense for a moment, then relaxed into me.

After a moment she pulled away and resumed munching on her lower lip. "I-- uh--"

"Play it cool," Johnny whispered, "until we can make our move."

"Why don't we order a pizza and--"

"That's what I'm trying to say," Helen said. I realized she had still been talking when Johnny whispered and I'd missed something. "I can't stay. I just wanted to tell you in person."

"You can't stay?" I asked.

"She's leaving you here to die alone," Johnny whispered. "She knows you're going to die without the pills and she's too chicken to watch."

Helen gnawed on her lip until I thought I saw blood. "Charlie knows, Jess. He saw the text message you sent me earlier."

"I sent you a text message earlier?" I asked.

Helen stared at me. "Three hours ago. You don't--"

"Don't let her distract you," Johnny rasped. "Kiss her."

I hesitated.

"Jess?" Helen stepped closer, her hand went to my arm. "Are you--"

I put my lips on hers. She resisted for only a moment, then she kissed me back. My hands went to her face. Her skin was soft. Her mouth felt warm against mine as it opened for my tongue.

"You have to do it before she does it to you," Johnny whispered. "Do it now, while you can."

Helen's hand slid up my arm to the back of my head. Her other arm wrapped around me. We spun and I put her back against the door. I pressed harder into our last kiss.

"Do it," Johnny rasped. "Do it, now."

My hands trailed down to Helen's jawline, then the elegant line of her neck. She tried to pull back. I pressed harder into her as my hand closed on her throat. She struggled, but Helen was small, even for a lab rat. I wasn't much bigger, but I was a regular in the gym.

I lifted my lips from hers. Helen's face turned red as she flailed. Her breath turned into rasping gasps and her eyes bulged. She looked strangely beautiful.

"Watch her nails," Johnny whispered.

He warned me just in time to dodge her grasping fingers. Her palm found my face, trying to push me away.

"Use your teeth," Johnny suggested.

I did. I bit down on her palm and her gasps turned to a growling shriek. I tasted blood in my mouth.

Helen grew weaker and weaker and fought me less and less. When she finally went still, I slid her down to the floor next to the puddle of blood from her palm. It was hard work. My chest heaved from the effort of choking her.

"She's still tense," Johnny whispered. "But the wine always soothes her."

He was right. Helen started breathing almost as soon as I let her fall to the floor. I walked to the kitchen counter and returned with a bottle of Montepulciano. I kissed her forehead, then let the bottle kiss her three more times.

Helen didn't breathe anymore.

"Maybe she lied. The pills might be in her pocket," Johnny suggested.

I looked, but all I found were her car and house keys.

"At her house, then," Johnny said. "That's good. We can talk to Charlie, too."

I nodded. I wiped at my wet chin. Helen's blood smeared on my palm. I stood over her and cried for a few minutes.

"I know it's sad, but she was going to kill us," Johnny reminded me.

I wiped my chin, then at my eyes.

"You'll feel better when you get the pills," Johnny said.

I nodded, slid Helen's body away from the door, and left.

#

Walter sat before his computer, the website creator application still open to the hypnotics screen. But the newspaper in his handheld his attention.

The headline read, "Astroteka Sales Associate Sentenced in Double Homicide, larceny case."

Walter smiled. "I guess we found your truth, Jessica. Maybe now you can find some meaning."

He folded the newspaper and minimized the website builder. He opened the story critique site and chose the first story in the queue. The author's name was Gerry Hinkle.

"Let's see if you deserve to tell your story. Mr. Hinkle," Walter said. "What is your truth?"

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