

What Plays at Night

My feet pound the fallen leaves making a crunch that seems to echo through the area. I'm not concerned with keeping quiet. The beast, whatever it is, already knows where I am. I just have to keep moving. The forest gets denser and darker the more that I progress. The trees are closing in on me as I run for my life. I just hope that they will slow down what's after me more than they do me. My gold cross bounces up and down with every hurried step that I make. It acts as some type of twisted metronome, keeping my pace going. My breath is heavy, chest is tightening up. I'm fighting the stitch in my side. Better to fight this than the thing that is hunting me. A guttural sound comes from behind me, my pace quickens and I run right into a tree.

"Dammit," I say as I pick myself up off the ground.

A screeching, staccato sound erupts from the darkness. I think it's laughing at me. It's playing some sort of game with me. If I lose, I die. If I win, I have no idea what I get. What is life without the ones I love? Regardless, I have to keep moving. I'll figure the rest out if I make it out of this. If.

I pick a direction and blindly weave my way around the trees, thick brush, and fallen limbs. The acrid smell of rotten leaves fills my nose and lungs. The air is thick, hard to breathe. I have no idea how long I've been out here. If only I could find some sort of civilization, I may be okay. An orange glow is in the distance, could it be a fire? Can this be the break I've been hoping for? I barrel my way towards the soft glow. A campsite that I pray is my sanctuary from this horror.

"Help!" I scream, "Help me, something's after me!"

An old hunter emerges from his tent, shotgun and flashlight in his hands. I've never seen a more comforting sight. Finally, someone who can help me.

"What the hell is going on out here?" he asks as I stumble out of the brush.

The light is blinding but oh so welcome. I've been covered in shadows since I left my campsite.

"S-something is after me. I-I don't know what it is. It killed my family and has been chasing me since," I say through broken breath.

"It did what?"

"It killed my family. Our campsite is destroyed."

"Shit. Get over here, I'll see what I can do," The hunter tells me.

"Thank you!" I say, my breath finally catching up to me.

I hide behind him and hear the cracking of twigs in the forrest. The hunter shines the flashlight towards the sound. Nothing is in the beam of light. Another crack of twigs to the right of us.

"Oh God, it's here," I say.

My heart beats faster. The hunter's eyes narrow. He holds up his hand to calm me down.

"Shhh, stay quiet so I can concentrate."

He cocks his shotgun with a cha-chink and fires from the hip into the trees. A roar pierces the night. It's not from where the man shot though. It's behind us. The hunter cocks his gun again and fires another shot towards the place the sound erupted from. Nothing. The thing is circling us, happy that I brought someone new into our little game.

"What in God's name is that thing?" The hunter asks me, "I've never heard anything like it."

“I have no idea. All I’ve seen of it was a blur. It’s too fast,” I say.

“And you think I can help? I can’t shoot what I can’t see.”

Another snap of twigs, another shot, another blur. Nothing. Again. It refuses to come at us directly. Not with a gun involved.

“I think it’s baiting us,” The hunter says, “Wants me to run out of ammo.”

“Then don’t run out,” I say.

“Easier said than done, I’m afraid. I only have one shell left loaded.”

Silence envelopes the forest. No birds or animal noises at all. Whatever this thing is has chased them all off. I wish I was that lucky. The fire crackles and causes both the hunter and I to jump. That screeching laugh erupts, taunting us. I grab my cross and say a small prayer. The hunter spins around trying to get an idea of the thing’s location. A trigger pull, a flash from the shotgun barrel, and then the sick sound of claws ripping into flesh. The hunter is down. His eyes are wide, staring at me, into me as he falls to his knees. Blood trickles from his throat, then begins to gush outward. His pale body slumps over, stained red. The gun and flashlight drop from his hands onto the ground. I shouldn’t have come here. I should have known that no one can help me now. This is a beast that gets what it wants, when it wants. Now, it wants me.

I grab for the gun and point it to my mouth, I’d rather go out on my own than by whatever means this beast has in mind. Hot steel on my tongue, I fumble for the trigger and a click echoes. Click after click sounds off. I’m still alive. The last words of the hunter ring through my head.

Out of ammo. Just what the demonic entity wanted. I throw the gun in frustration. Another cackle from the dark. It’s watching me, ecstatic at my fear and desperation. How long is

it going to torture me? How long until I'm just a pile on the dirt just like this man, like my family? Will anyone find me? There's no one left to even look.

A hot breeze blasts the back of my neck. The scent of rotten flesh and fresh blood fills my nostrils. It's right behind me. I spin around to see nothing. A scratch on a tree emerges to my right, then my left. I'd swear there were more than one of these things out here if I hadn't seen it kill in front of me. I'm screwed. I know this. I'm not going out without trying though.

I grab the flashlight and point it into the brush. I spin in circles trying to catch the thing in the thin beam of light. All there is are the abrasions on the trees from its claws. Deep angular dashes across every tree surrounding me. It's nowhere to be found.

"Screw it," I say as I take off running.

A thump sounds behind me, the ground quakes with impact. It was up in the trees like some cliché horror movie monster. I grip the flashlight tighter and run faster than I ever thought possible. I should've tried out for track. All I needed was an insane killer beast chasing me and I would have got gold. Stupid thoughts at this moment. My life is at stake and I'm making jokes. The beast is gaining ground. It knows this forest. It's the thing's playground, it's hunting grounds. My ears are drowned by the growls behind me. They rattle my brain the closer it gets.

I'm out of breath. I can't go on like this. The hairs on my neck and arms are standing at attention. My heart is beating out of my chest. Trying its best to pump blood where I need it. Just gotta keep moving. Can't stroke out while this thing is behind me. Don't want to make it that easy for the beast.

Another growl and I move faster, the bouncing beam of the flashlight illuminates a drop in front of me. I clench my cross necklace as I run. A blur and a push. The light falls from my hands and I start rolling down the hill. I finally stop and I'm staring up at where I was standing. I

try to move but can't. I'm frozen in place. A silhouette looms over me. The dropped flashlight shines through the dark and I see that it's a human shape. It has no head. Just shoulders with a gold cross around its neck. My gold cross. Oh God, that's me. I now know why I can't move. The last thing I see before my vision fades is the glowing red eyes of the beast and my body falling to the ground.