

Devil's Nest

By
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An explosion shook her awake.

On her left a window lit up. Thunder streaked across the sky like an incoming missile.

Lightning turned the night to day.

The thunder exploded again, tearing a scream from her. Still half asleep, she fought her way out of the nightmare.

Or was it real?

Windows rattled and the wind howled. She felt moisture on her face and dashed the tears away.

Every instinct told her to run, to save herself. But from what? And where was she? Her hands explored nearby. A mattress? As she swung her legs out of bed, lightning-sharp pain jagged through her head and a cry escaped her. Powering through the pain, she shoved at the pillow and sat upright.

Thunder once more rumbled—built force—came for her like a soaring, diving predator. She fought to stay upright as if fighting for her life.

Another lightning strike lit the window. She noticed it was arched and huge, stretching from the floor to a cathedral ceiling fifteen feet above. The window and ceiling were magnificent, ornate—but she'd never seen them before. Her vision worked but a fog enveloped her brain.

“Where am I?” She stumbled to her feet.

A new barrage of thunder nearly toppled her. Her thighs hit the bed, but she stayed upright. Distant thunder rolled steadily beneath the closer rage of the storm, adding strength to the nearer explosions.

Where was this place? A whimper ripped loose from her throat. The salty sting of tears blinded her, even though she wasn't aware of crying. The thunder streaked toward her again.

Roughly she wiped tears away with both hands, but jostling her head set off another round of raging pain. Her hands were so wet and sticky she ran her wrists and forearms over her cheeks to rid herself of the salt that cut like acid into her eyes. She wiped her hands on her nightgown and touched heavy, soft fabric.

Strange robe, strange room, strange window—and no idea why.

She looked again at herself but the flickering lightning died and plunged her into darkness. She touched the unfamiliar cloth, knowing she'd never seen the robe before. The thunder again rolled across the sky and she staggered under its violence.

The window lit up yet again.

When she looked at the white robe she wore she saw black stripes. Like jail cell bars. But the stripes glistened wet.

Her fingers too. She spread them wide and looked at her palms. Both hands smeared with black. Both wrists. Both arms.

The lightning again flashed and the black became red. Bright, wet, warm—crimson.

Blood.

She shook her head and as the pain slashed through her skull again, the hurt finally made sense. Not tears. Blood. She wiped at her head again and felt the gash there.

The thunder exploded. Stunned from the vivid blood and vicious pain, she stumbled and fell back onto the bed. Her head twisted away from the ugliness of the fear she couldn't face.

But the fixed eyes of a man glared at her instead. A gaping slash crossed his throat.