

"I knew that this would end badly."

"Shut up and drive the damn car!"

"Just saying. I told you the whole time it would get ugly."

"Congratulations."

An ancient, paintless Chevy squealed violently around the corner, whining loudly as the redhead in the driver's seat threw it into fourth gear, smirking in spite of himself at this small, unexpected victory.

"And you have to admit that this has gotten pretty messy."

"Oh, I admit it."

"Damn straight you do."

Riding shotgun was an irritated-looking young Asian man, his arms folded and eyebrows furrowed as he stared out the streaky passenger window at the streetlights whirring past outside. The driver had somehow managed to get the old Chevy up to around 60 miles an hour, but it didn't seem to be quite fast enough for the passenger, whose eyes flicked back and forth at the passing scenery with growing impatience.

"Please just drive. If anyone's seen what's going on we're gonna have a hell of a crowd. I can't deal with a crowd when I'm handling something like this."

"Something like what?"

"A mess! I already admitted it, all right? Jesus, Ray. Pull over here, It'll be shorter if we just cut through the subway and head him off. He's got one way to go."

"You really think that it's a good idea to be waiting around for this thing under there?"

"We won't be seen. Pull it over." The young man leaned forward against his door, craning to see the glowing subway sign that was fast disappearing on the road behind them. The driver scowled and whirled the wheel around to pull the car in a looping, crooked line towards the curb.

"I'm trying. I'm hopeless on a stick, I told you. Why aren't you driving?"

"Just hit the brake and bear left! We're getting out here."

The passenger leapt from the car, slamming his door hurriedly as the driver killed the lights and ran around the front fender to join him. He watched as his companion gestured towards the glowing sign up ahead, and bounded after him as he began to jog forward. The subway station was silent, closed for the night, but the perpetual buzzing and pale light emitting from the heaving lamps in the cement ceiling were still going. The two young men hopped the turnstiles in a couple gangly strides, whirling around to make sure they hadn't been discovered.

The redhead, who wore his hair in a short, unkempt mohawk that was beginning to droop into his eyes after the rush from the car, straightened his waistcoat and fidgeted, eyeing his friend expectantly. "And now?" he asked at last, his voice a loud whisper. The second man didn't answer, just pointed violently at the floor. Both of them sat quietly down on the stairs. The redhead flicked out a Zippo, already exhausted with waiting quietly, and turned to his companion.

"Nervous?"

"Never am. Don't tell me you are."

The redhead considered the question, lighting a cigarette carefully and offering the pack to the other man, who refused it.

"I'm just saying," the redhead started, "there's gonna be some.... carnage probably."

"You're such an idiot." The Asian man rose and paced, patience finally spent.

"What?! I mean, come on, it's not like you can be looking forward to it, right?"

"Just shut up about the... carnage, will you? I can't believe I brought you here."

"You don't *bring* me anywhere, asshole. Are we forgetting who is who's bitch here? Who drives the car?"

"Just sit down and shut up."

The redhead spread his arms in mock disbelief. "I'm sitting! You're the one who's up! I just--"

Both men suddenly froze as a low, screeching wail rattled in from deeper inside the station, floating from the black maw of the subway tunnel.

"Gary?" The redhead's hand shook, and smoke from his cigarette drifted upward in soft loops.

The second man stared ahead into the blackness of the tunnel, then grabbed his friend's cigarette and took a long drag. "Yeah. That's our girl. Let's go."

Baby Keane was running for his life. It was his first experience doing so, and, as a skinny, malnourished 17-year-old wearing a pair of floppy, untied combat boots, he was having some trouble with it. Sweat was running in cold rivulets down his cheeks and into his eyes, stirring up a drippy, black goo wherever it touched the heavy black eyeliner he'd drawn on that morning. Every time he blinked some more of the gunk stuck to his lashes and flicked into his eyes, causing a stream of involuntary tears that only worsened the problem. He was panting hard, pumping his legs faster than he ever had in his life, curling his toes hard and praying that he wouldn't trip over his shoes. For all his prayers and patience for tears, he and his life weren't really getting very far. At seventeen he thought he had long overcome any childhood fears, but for some reason or another, they seemed to have finally caught up with him. A shadow's length behind him, chasing him at an easy, patient lope, was a monster.

Baby had always imagined the monsters under his bed as big, purple muppet-looking creatures, with green polka dots and long, twitching tube-like ears. The one behind him now was nothing like he had ever imagined in his life. Its head was long and pale, covered in short fur about the shade of Baby's own ashen skin, and shaped a bit like a horse's head. At the end of its muzzle the nose was large, fleshy, and damp, with a pair slit-like nostrils slashing through it, leaking two small trickles of dried, brown blood. The body was covered in sparse patches of long, weedy brown hair, and the beast's eyes were huge and watery, with enormous round pupils and a disturbingly intelligent depth. When Baby had first seen the monster, he had stared, entranced, at these eyes for what must have been a full minute, until the loud, frantic sound of his own heart in his ears had startled him into sense, and a clumsy, panicked sprint.

Now the creature, whose legs easily reached about six feet in length, seemed to be toying with him. Its face was twisted into an ugly snarl, and its long, slender tongue was lolling out from the side of its mouth, splattering the narrow walls of the subway hall with thick mucous. Despite its seeming rage, the creature never quickened its slow, leisurely-looking bound. Baby had been certain that he would be eaten by now, but for

some reason the monster seemed to enjoy watching the kid torture himself. It was effective torture, too. Baby was wheezing loudly now, throat clogged with hot saliva and heart feeling inches from exploding. Still he pushed himself forward, the sporadic screams of the beast that was drooling down his jacket inspiring another few yards every so often. Step, breath, heartbeat, repeat. Don't stop moving. Don't look back.

His eyes were flooded with tears now, and he barely bothered to pay attention to the blurred scenery that was rushing past him. They were racing past the entry to the subway now. If he saw the turnstiles it would mean he was close to the exit...

The monster snorted loudly, and a mist of warm mucous splattered across Baby's jacket. If he was close to the exit, he might make it out. And if he made it out of the subway, he might lose the beast... there was at least a small possibility.

As soon as this plan had managed to fall together in Baby's overheated and exhausted brain, it was blasted apart by a violent burst of cold pavement smashing against his face. He had finally tripped. One boot was skidding past his collapsed form, coming to rest against a solid brick wall. Not the exit. Just a very, very dead end.

Baby scrambled around to face the creature, scooting back until the cold brick was pressing against his back, refusing to offer any escape. His face was throbbing from the impact with the floor, but his attention was focused completely on the hungry-looking pair of round, enormous eyes that were trained straight on him from 15 feet above. The animal let its tongue dangle out of its mouth, wetting the sides of its overflowing, fleshy black lips. Absently, he wondered if a creature that large would even bother chewing him up before it swallowed, or if he would have to die choking in the beasts' stomach acid. Which would be more painful, anyway?

A thick drop of the creature's spit dripped onto Baby's boot, and black spots started to blur into his vision. Unconsciousness would be welcome, but he doubted it would come quickly enough. The beast was already starting to open its mouth, ready to swallow him in one eager mouthful.

But instead of striking, the monster raised his head a bit. More spittle leaked from its open jaws, and it made a damp choking noise in the back of its throat. The saliva splattered onto the pavement in front of Baby, blooming with dark, viscous blood.

The creature retched, and more red liquid rolled off of its tongue and dripped into the coarse hair around its chest. It snarled at Baby, howling at him as the dried blood around its nose was painted over by new fat, red lines. Baby cowered as it attempted to strike at him, but it choked and stumbled, spraying Baby's face with tiny red and yellow droplets. He watched, paralyzed by fear and confusion, as the beast struggled on the pavement, face contorted as it continued to choke, blood flowing from its mouth and nose, redder and thicker by the second.

Blood was flowing in joyful, palpable bursts through Baby's heart as he watched the dying beast. Its small, horse-like ears twitched and it bucked its head suddenly, sending a final spray of blood out of its nose into Baby's lap. He was about to smile in spite of himself, maybe laugh a bit, too, at his sudden preservation, when the blood flying out of the beast's nose suddenly turned jet black. Baby's mouth barely twitched before his smile died in an instant. The blood snaked out of the animal's nose, reaching straight for Baby's face, faster than he could swerve to avoid it.

The black substance landed on his shoulder, and curved around it in a long, wet tendril. Baby yelped, pulling at it in horror, and watching wide-eyed as it continued to

shoot out of the now dead creature's nostrils. It grew and grew, doubling in size in a second, coating Baby's arm and shooting up his shoulder towards his face. His shouts of horror turned to shouts of pain as it circled his neck and squeezed him around the collarbones with a crushing strength, edging up his neck towards his jaw. Before he could clamp his mouth shut, the black, gooey tendrils were rushing into it, flattening his tongue and racing up the back of his throat. He tried to retch, but the mass only swelled thicker, cutting off his oxygen completely.

Suddenly, the rest of the black body was moving faster than ever, abandoning its grip on his arms and chest and flying up towards his nose. His nostrils filled, swelling with a painful pressure that Baby hadn't thought they'd be able to withstand without splitting, and heading up higher and higher. The ropy tentacles seemed to be getting smaller, sinking into each other as they rushed up his body, just as easily as they had grown out of the creature's nostrils. Baby gasped as something deep inside of his nose suddenly snapped. Several fat red drops plopped onto the cement, and blood flooded his nostrils, replacing the place where the black substance had been a second ago. It spilled out of his nose, flowing down his chin and coating his lips as he raked at his face with his fingernails. Drops of it flicked onto the brick behind him as he squirmed, snorting forcibly and choking on the blood that was trickling down the back of his throat. Fingers finding nothing, he collapsed, coughing blood violently and shaking.

It was inside of him, he knew it. It had disappeared, but it was inside of him. And he had never seen anything like it before. It moved like a spider web on cocaine, zigzagging motions impossibly quick, like nothing he'd ever even heard of before.

It had to be an alien. Or a virus. An alien virus had infected his brain. Baby wiped the blood from his mouth, only to have it replaced by a new layer of the still flowing blood. He stood, legs shaking badly, fighting the urge to rip into his face and get whatever it was out. Beside him, the dead monster was still and menacing, blood oozing in a small puddle around its mouth, the mirror of Baby's own condition. He had to leave, now. Get away from all of these impossible things, clean himself up and go and sleep someplace familiar. It was a dream. And the sooner he got away from the carcass, the sooner he could start believing this.

Baby jogged around against the side of the wall, avoiding the dead animal's curled claws and leaping lightly over its tail. The exit he had been searching for must have been somewhere at the other end of the massive subway station. The quicker he got there, out from under all of these horrible, noisy institutional lights, the safer he would be. He jogged as quickly as his trembling legs could take him, carrying his one dislodged boot against his chest protectively.

Behind him, at the dead beast's side, tendrils of its blood were reaching forward to connect with the puddle of human blood beside it, joining to create a smooth, red reflection of the bare, brick walls. Suddenly, the small silhouettes of two men emerged from the side of the hall. They stepped quietly out from behind one of the hall's locked doors, staring in horror at the dead creature and the black-clad boy fleeing the scene ahead of them.