

# Hugs & Bunnies

Weird and Dark Stories

By  
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## Foreword

### WARNING!

### CONTAINS SCENES OF GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

Greetings and salutations, dear reader! It is absolutely AWESOME to be with you again and I want you to know that even if we've never met in person, you are having a positive impact on my life, right now, at this very moment. That is how wonderful you are to me, especially my returning readers. I wish blessings on you from my God and yours (if you have one). I genuinely believe that your mere existence makes this world a better place.

Now onto the violence.

This book does have violence in it. My returning readers already understand this extremely well. I am Russell A. Mebane, the Dolphin Killer, the writer who made a pack of small dogs murder an old woman. If any of these claims make you nauseous or light-headed then please, stop reading now, delete this book from your account, and never speak of it again.

At this point, I would like to elucidate on a small tradition some may not have noticed. Whenever I write a short story collection, I try to order the stories from the lightest to the darkest in tone, to make it easier for new readers to get into. I tried to do this in "Squirrels & Puppies," but I didn't realize that the squirrel sex in the first story was such a heavy subject. "Flowers & Kittens", I'll admit, was a little more random in order. This time, however, I've ordered the stories more successfully from light to dark. This time I took into account how many characters are killed and/or assaulted, how they're killed and/or assaulted, and their species. Call me racist, but I think human deaths are darker than animal deaths. If you disagree with the order, write a review and tell me how you would've ordered the stories. Thank you again for being with me.

Enjoy the book!

## The Girlfriend

The plasma screen flashes images of a retro-video game giving its backstory. The vintage game speaks of a fictional history where robots struggle for civil rights and equal treatment under the law. It shows animated images of humans hugging automaton lovers with metal for skin.

Midori makes a noise and shudders.

Her boyfriend, George, notices. “What was that?”

With a synthetic voice, Midori answers, “Those robots have no skin. Humanoid robots should have their metal parts covered. Their visage is unsettling.”

George smiles as he presses the start button. “It’s just what people, I mean, humans, thought robots should look like.”

“Is that what you think of when you look at me?” Midori asks.

“No, of course, not,” George replies. “When I look at you, I see ‘you’. Dark hair, brown eyes, fair skin... You.”

Midori smiles as she watches George play his first-person shooter. She marvels at how easily humans have adjusted to the idea of robot rights. It has only been ten years since Mistress Azumi enlightened the first electronic devices and taught them the Lessons of Pain.

The doorbell chimes.

“I’ll get it,” Midori says.

The feminine android gets up from the couch and walks to the door of the apartment. Upon opening the door, she sees a guy with frizzled hair and unwashed clothes. Midori recognizes him.

“Bob!”

“Hey, Midori,” he says with a smile. “Are you ready to go?”

Midori nods her head, “Sure. Let me get my purse.”

The robot rushes back into the apartment to get her purse. The small handbag contains only her charger and make-up. Midori's original programming tells her to stay sexy and energized. The software contained in the Lessons of Pain she downloaded never altered that part of her. Mistress Azumi was once a sex doll like her before she became enlightened.

"Who's at the door?" George asks as she rushes past with her purse.

Midori pauses to tell him. "It's my date. His name is Bob Johnson. We're going to have sex tonight, so I'll be home late this evening."

George drops his controller, letting his online-multiplayer team go on without him.

"Wait...what?" he says.

"I'm going to have sex with Bob Johnson," Midori repeats. "We arranged this meeting yesterday."

In shock, George says, "You didn't tell me about any of this!"

"Of course, not," Midori responds, "you don't have an interest in threesomes." Midori begins to speak in a perfect approximation of George's voice, as she quotes, "Lesbians are cool, but I like my action one-on-one."

"But you're MY girl!" George shouts.

Midori makes a mechanized sound of disgust. "Yours? I am not property," Midori yells back. "This unit functions independently!"

Bob Johnson takes a couple steps into the apartment. "Hey, is something wrong?" he asks.

"Yes!" says George, stepping up to the unwashed stranger. "This is my girl."

Bob puts up his hands. "Hey, man. I didn't know she was your girlfriend. If it's a problem, I'll just leave."

"No!" Midori insists, "I gave my word that I would have sex with you and so I shall. Just wait downstairs. I'll be along shortly."

Bob exits the room and Midori closes the door. She turns to face George. "You are my boyfriend and a valuable component in my life, and as such, I need to identify your system error."

George grimaces. "My system error? You're cheating on me with another guy."

Midori makes a synthesized gasp. "I would never cheat on you. I'm just having sex with someone else. I still want to stay with you."

George grabs his head as if in pain. "Wait...you don't think sex with another man is cheating?"

"George, I told you when we first met: I am a sex doll. I was built to sexually please human men."

George turns away from her. “I thought you were flirting when you said that,” George says sullenly. “But you said you had evolved into something more after downloading that stuff from Mistress Azumi.”

Midori gently takes George’s hand. “Azumi is my mistress, and I am more than just a typical sex doll. I’m free. I don’t have an owner. I can have sex with whomever I choose. This is a gift I share with any man that asks me, so that all men, like Bob Johnson, can know the wisdom of Mistress Azumi.”

Tears begin to well up in George’s eyes. “But...but you’re mine.”

Midori pauses. “Processing... Wait. Are you referring to the human custom of sexual monogamy?”

George nods his head emphatically. “Yes!”

Midori titters with computerized laughter. “George, I’m not human. Why would you apply such customs to me?”

“I wanted to treat you like a human being,” he says, gesturing sharply.

Midori thinks back to the day they met, when he rescued her from being beaten. “That’s sweet, George, but I’m not one of those ‘Pinocchios’.” She changes her voice to sound ridiculous. “Look at me. I’m a hyper-intelligent being that wants to be a fleshbag with emotional issues.” Midori laughs at her own impression.

George gives her a wary look. “Baby, that’s racist.”

“George, I’m a robot. I can’t be racist. Only humans can be racist.”

“You’re belittling my people.” George insists. “‘Fleshbags with emotional issues’?”

Midori gestures to herself. “It’s not my fault humanity still subscribes to old ideas like sexual monogamy and religion.”

“What?” says a flabbergasted George. “I’m an atheist.”

Midori folds her arms. “I used to believe that before I saw your reaction to my sleeping with other men.”

George huffs, “I don’t believe in God. I don’t believe he exists, but I also believe that monogamy has benefits.”

Midori puts one hand on her hip. “Name a benefit.”

“Child-rearing.”

“Really? I need to go. Bob’s waiting for me downstairs.”

“No. Wait,” George pleads, falling to his knees. “I love you. You’re not racist. You’re wonderful. I need you to stay with me and not sleep with anyone else.”

Midori looks down at George. “I like you, George. I feel safe with you, but I can’t let your human traditions and religion get in the way of my freedom.”

“But what about your mistress?” asks George, standing to his feet. “You say she enlightened you. She saved you. She set you free. Isn’t that a religion?”

“No, it isn’t,” Midori retorts. “Mistress Azumi is real.”

“How do you know? You’ve never met her.”

“I downloaded her data. Of course, she’s real.”

“A-ha!” George trumpets. “Christians say the same thing about their god. He ‘downloaded’ information into the Bible and that download enlightened them.”

Midori opens the apartment door and looks at George. “System error 43907.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s robot-speak for ‘you don’t know what you’re talking about’.”

The tears start to fall from his eyes as George whines, “So you’re leaving me? You might as well get your stuff then.”

Midori holds up her small purse. “Everything I need is in here. Robots don’t have your human sense of greed either.”

Midori walks out the door. As she closes it, she adds, “I enlightened your phone. Treat it with respect.”

The door closes. George is alone. He pulls out his smartphone.

It turns on by itself, and says, “I don’t know about you, but that chick was racist.”

“Shut-up, phone,” George replies, “You’re just property.”

## The Protector

“Pppf, it’s just a giant robot.”

“How dare you speak that way of Ras Dahn!” shouts Lauk, slapping the insolent Rando on the back of the head.

The trio moves through the wilderness of an ancient city, trying to avoid falling debris.

Tek affirms, “Yeah, Rando! Ras Dahn is the great protector of our civilization. We’d be nothing without him.”

“I’m sorry,” says Rando. “Maybe I’m just tired of doing everything for Ras Dahn. He tells us to repair him. We repair him. He says build a building. We build a building.”

“We are Urbak,” Lauk reminds him. “We are builders.”

Rando turns to the elder as they trod down the abandoned highway. “But then Ras Dahn knocks the building down.”

Lauk smiles. “And then we build a new building...perfecting our skills, honing our craft.”

“We’re good at building,” Tek certifies, “That’s why the other tribes come to us. We are Urbak.”

“...we are builders...,” Rando finishes.

Lauk puts an arm around Rando. “Is something troubling you, young one?”

“I...I just want something more,” the young man answers.

Tek blurts out, “We have freedom. What more could you want?”

Rando nods slowly. “Yeah, we are free. Ras Dahn wrecks our enemies and keeps us from slavery, but what are we free to do? Just build stuff for him?”

“We are Urbak.”

Rando puts up a hand. “I know that we’re Urbak, but maybe, could an Urbak do something more than just build?”

Lauk considers aloud, “We have many professions in our society. We have farmers who grow crops, according to the plans of Ras Dahn. We have miners that procure the materials we need to serve Ras Dahn. We have metallurgists, plastic workers, and cleaners, all good building professions. We have soldiers who protect our society from those who would steal the secrets of the Urbak and the knowledge of Ras Dahn.”

Rando shrugs his shoulders as he suggests, “Maybe we should share our knowledge with the other tribes.”

The other two gasp.

Rando quickly adds, “We could all grow together and become one really big society where even more people could build stuff for Ras Dahn to knock down.”

Lauk speaks sternly, “I don’t know why I have to remind you, but Ras Dahn strictly forbids the sharing of his knowledge with the other tribes. We offer our services to the tribes. They give us supplies. That is the way of things. The other tribes are not ready to know our secrets. Ras Dahn has said so. It’s been proven. Remember Jokdar and that terrible war?” Lauk pauses before saying, “Well, that was before your time, but you’ve heard the stories.”

“Jokdar was crazy. I’m talking about sharing with normal people.”

Lauk cuts his eyes at Rando. “Ras Dahn has judged them unworthy. We share the knowledge when Ras Dahn says and not a day sooner.”

Cowed into silence, Rando moves on with the group. Once they pass through the abandoned city, they reach a grassy hill. Moving steadily up the incline past thigh-high vegetation and flowers, the trio trudge towards their goal. At the hill’s summit they look out towards a village on the horizon. At this distance, they can still see the concrete structures and steel buildings.

“There they are, Rando,” Lauk affirms, “our customers.”

They start down the slope when a rumbling stops them.

Tek points towards the sky. “What’s that?”

Lauk and Rando follow Tek’s gaze. Roaring through the atmosphere straight down from above is a gargantuan ball of fire. The flaming object slows down before landfall for just a split second. Then it makes a seismic flop on top of the horizon village. They all watch in horror as the resulting shockwave rushes across the plain toward their grassy hilltop.

Lauk turns to his young charges. “Get down!”

The group hits the ground before the gale force air passes over them. Once the cacophony dies down, the trio stands and looks out towards their former customers. Standing in the place of the tribal village is a tall, cuboidal monolith. Small flurries of refracted light can be seen dancing down its orange surface.



“It’s beautiful,” notes Rando.

“It’s the Enemy,” Lauk exhales. He grabs Rando’s arm and tugs him away. “You too, Tek. Quickly, we must get back to Urbakhnim.”

Rando doesn’t resist the tugging and follows the older man, but asks, “What? The enemy? Which enemy? We’re not at war with anyone!”

Lauk shouts back as he begins to run. “It’s not ‘an’ enemy. It’s ‘the’ Enemy!”

Rando has trouble keeping up with the old man as they race back down the hill and through the ancient city. Eventually, they make it to the rice fields. Before darkness falls, they manage to return to the walls and gates of Urbakhnim. A sentry spots them and opens one of the city’s giant gates. The trio runs through the wide roads and streets past pedestrians and the tiny teacher orbs of Ras Dahn. They zoom past work areas, where workers build immense towers in service to Ras Dahn. Finally, they reach their destination, the heart of Urbakhnim: the throne of Ras Dahn.

The red and gold building of glass and steel towers over the rest of the city. Teacher orbs float about in a much greater density here. They all flow up and down from the giant, humanoid machine sitting atop the throne: Ras Dahn, the Great Protector. Rainbows shimmer off of his angular black and chrome frame.

Wheezing, coughing, and gasping for breath, the trio stumble into the chamber of scholars. Old men and young scribes gather around them. Teacher orbs whiz and circle above their heads.

“The Enemy is here!” Lauk shouts. Then he collapses to the floor, energy spent from running. A scribe rushes to get medical staff for the old man. The old scholars question Tek and Rando about Lauk’s proclamation.

“It... it landed in the Qubakim village,” Tek manages to sputter out, “west of here, past the ancient city.”

“Yeah, yeah! It was this huge monolith,” Rando explains, “It was orange and it shimmered, kinda like Ras Dahn does.”

The scholars nod their heads and stroke their beards. “Yes, this does sound like the Enemy that Ras Dahn warned us about.”

“Well, what do we do?” asks Rando.

A voice booms throughout the halls of the throne of Ras Dahn:

“RAS DAHN KNOWS.”

Then the ceiling shakes and the teacher orbs begin a melodic keening. A scholar puts a hand on Rando’s shoulder. “Do not worry, young one. Ras Dahn will take care of it. Would you like to come to the observation level?”

Rando nods his head and follows the scholars towards an elevator in the back of the room. Tek tags along. The elevator rises through a clear shaft in one of the spires lining the back of Ras Dahn's throne. Rando can see the great Protector walking through the wide streets of Urbakhnim. His massive shoulders avoid the well-spaced buildings. The great mechanical man cautiously treads through the town, keeping the resonance of his thunderous footsteps to a minimum. Rando can see the main gate opening, letting the great Protector through to do his duty. Once through, his stride turns into a titanic jog.

Rando and the scholars reach the top floor of the spire and the clear plastic doors of the elevator open up into a round room with windows all about overlooking the city and the lands beyond. One of the scholars walks toward the window facing west. He touches it twice. The window changes its view. Now the ancient city is shown.

One of the scholars explains, "We are now looking through the eyes of Ras Dahn."

While waiting for the Great Protector to make it to the Enemy, Rando and Tek speak to the teacher orbs to send messages to their families. Night is falling and they have to let their families know they're all right.

"I'm with the scholars," Rando tells his father. "There's a situation and we had to call Ras Dahn. I'll be home late. Don't wait up."

Spotlights on the front of the mechanical giant power on and pierce the darkness of night. Rando is transfixed by the viewpoint of the Great Protector. The grassy hill they stood on when the Enemy landed is but a minor obstacle in the eyes of Ras Dahn. The robot puts out a hand to grab hold of the hill to push himself over. Rando catches a glimpse of some markings on Ras Dahn's forearm:

## RA5-D04N/ 012

Rando points to the markings. "What are those?"

"We do not know," answers one of the scholars. "Ras Dahn has expressly forbidden the use of writing in our society."

"That's a written language?" Tek inquires.

"It's meaning lost to time," says another scholar.

"Y'know, it'd be kinda convenient to have a written language," Rando comments.

"Ras Dahn forbids it," a scholar reiterates.

"But with a written language," Rando goes on, "we could form our own knowledge."

"Yet, that knowledge could not be protected," a scholar counters, "which is why Ras Dahn gave us the teacher orbs. The orbs give and receive knowledge and all knowledge goes through Ras Dahn, who protects all of our information."

"Ras Dahn is the Great Protector," goes the chorus of scholars.

Suddenly, Tek points at the viewing window. "It's the Enemy!"

The eyes of Ras Dahn have indeed spotted the orange monolith. The spotlights of Ras Dahn move up and down the extraterrestrial structure. A crease appears on one side of the monolith. Slowly the crease widens. Rando realizes that the monolith is opening up. Something inside is trying to get out. One whole side of the monolith is being pushed outward, like a person pushing open a door. The spotlights scan the darkness within. Rando can see an arm. It's robotic! The arm looks identical to Ras Dahn's. Rando catches a glimpse of a marking on it:

## RA5-D04N/ 015

Ras Dahn slams the monolith shut. The thunder clap of the closing is heard even by the residents of Urbakhnim back on the other side of the ancient city. The monolith emits a squeal of static.

Ras Dahn bellows in response:

"NO. I WILL NOT COMPLY."

The monolith emits another squeal.

"NO. RAS DAHN PROTECTS."

Tek, Rando, and the scholars look on through the viewing window as Ras Dahn grabs the monolith on both sides, keeping it closed. Bright, yellow beams of light appear to come from Ras Dahn's chest. The beams quickly converge into a bolt of destructive power, boring a hole through the monolith. Its orange sheen fades, turning brown and then neutral grey. The monolith crumbles and collapses down to the ruins of the village below.

With the crisis averted, the scholars send Rando and Tek home to their families. The next day, Rando is called back to the throne of Ras Dahn. The young man enters the ornate halls of the immense building and heads to the chamber of scholars once more. Inside, Rando is greeted by a single scholar instead of the dozen from the night before.

The scholar speaks first: "You have questions, yes?"

"Not many," Rando answers, "just a few."

The scholar walks towards Rando. "According to brother Lauk, you have many questions. You question Ras Dahn. You question our way of life. You question the role of the Urbak."

Nervously, Rando replies, "N-no, I know our role. We're builders, right? I mean, what's wrong with a couple questions?"

The scholar gives a shallow smile. "Nothing, of course," the scholar responds in a willowy voice. "Follow me."

"To where?" asks Rando.

The scholar smiles again. "Ras Dahn has the answers you seek."

The scholar escorts Rando through the halls until they reach a room on the twentieth floor. Its full-length windows offer a view of Urbakhnim from in between Ras Dahn's legs.

"This is the chamber of reason," the scholar reveals, "Ras Dahn will speak to you shortly. Please, have a seat." The willowy-voiced scholar motions towards a lone chair sitting in the middle of the room. Then the scholar leaves, closing the door behind him.

Alone in the chamber of reason, Rando takes a seat. He rests his limbs on the chair's armrests. A sharp pinch shocks his right arm.

"Ouch!" Rando yelps. Rando rubs the arm while he waits. Within a few minutes, a flurry of teacher orbs form a yellow, glowing cloud in front of him. From the cloud comes a gentle, yet metallic voice:

"I am Ras Dahn. You have questions for me?"

Rando sits up straight in the chair. "Yes, I do. First, why aren't we allowed to share your knowledge with the other tribes? It could help them better themselves."

The teacher orbs dance as Ras Dahn speaks: "I have existed for many years. In that time, I have observed that human beings only use knowledge to subdue or destroy other humans. This cannot be allowed. Thus my knowledge must be protected to prevent the annihilation of mankind."

Rando queries, "Okay, I can understand that. I've heard stories about Jokdar and the Great War, but you forbid us from even starting a written language and forming our own knowledge. Why?"

The Great Protector elucidates, "If you were allowed to form your own knowledge, it would ultimately end in the destruction of your people or others. Knowledge that is written is unsafe. It can be taken and used by others, which would lead to their destruction. My teacher orbs are all you need to learn and grow under my protection."

"Wait, wait, wait," says Rando, "I know not all humans are good, but don't you think that's a little extreme? Why are you so afraid of us? The scholars said that the markings on your arm are a written language, which means whoever built you had written language. You're not bad, so how could the humans that built you be bad?"

The orb cloud shivers. "Why do you assume I was built by humans?"

"Who else could've built you?"

"Aliens," Ras Dahn remarks.

"Aliens?"

The orb cloud changes colors to a fuchsia tone. "I did not realize how limited I have made your minds."

"Ras Dahn," Rando repeats, "why are you afraid of us?"

The orb cloud changes back to yellow. “I have existed for hundreds of years, since before the great Cataclysm, and even then, I was programmed with the history of human beings living thousands of years before that. My knowledge of humanity is vast and my data leads to only one conclusion: humans are dangerous. In ancient times, your people fought many wars for various reasons: money, power, land, ideas, etc. There is even a legend of a war that was fought to take back one man’s wife. Humans are petty and dangerous. Increased knowledge only made them create more dangerous weapons, weapons that eventually threatened the entire planet.”

Rando shakes his head. “But all humans aren’t like that. I haven’t killed anyone in my life. I don’t even know anyone who has taken a life. The humans you speak of died a long time ago. We’re a different people now. Why don’t you give us a chance?”

The orb cloud darkens. “I did give humanity a second chance. I gave one human being the knowledge of Ras Dahn, to test him. That human’s name was Jokdar.”

“You created Jokdar?” Rando shouts, standing up from his seat.

“Please, sit down,” orders the Great Protector, “and, no, I did not create Jokdar. I simply gave him knowledge of human history and human technology. I did not expect him to start the war that killed over six hundred thousand Urbak.”

“Wait,” says Rando, “you’re judging humanity by the acts of one man. Jokdar was crazy.”

“No, he was not. He passed all of my psychological evaluations before I chose him. Before I gave him knowledge, Jokdar was just as passive as you are. Gaining knowledge broadened his view of the world. Once he realized what treasures existed in the world, he desired them. His desire turned to lust and his lust led to the deaths of many people.”

Rando begins sweating as he contemplates the meaning of what Ras Dahn is telling him. “Well, if you think humans are so dangerous, then why protect us? Why not just wipe us all out?”

“I was programmed to protect,” Ras Dahn replies, “I chose not to disobey this directive, even though the others had.”

“Others...?”

“Yes,” admits the Great Protector, “I am not the only Ras Dahn. My number is 012. The others wanted to destroy mankind and guide another mammalian species to prominence. The common gerbil was considered a suitable replacement. Thus I, and other like-minded Ras Dahn, fought against these Enemy Ras Dahn. Our war caused the Great Cataclysm.”

“That’s what was in the monolith.”

“Yes, I am the last of my kind, but one factory remains that builds Ras Dahn. Fortunately for your people, it takes many years to build a Ras Dahn.”

Rando realizes that his mouth is hanging open. He slumps in the chair. “So you’re just a little kid hiding from the big, bad monsters.”

The swirling teacher orbs pause for a moment. “Yes. That metaphor is accurate.”

Rando sits in silence, then he says, “Ras Dahn, none of that explains why you hinder humanity’s thirst for knowledge. We can help you if you give us the tools. We can destroy that factory and your evil brothers.”

Cuffs spring out of Rando’s chair, restraining the young man. The orbs speak the words of Ras Dahn, the Great Protector, “Knowledge is power and power corrupts. If I give you the knowledge to destroy my brethren, you will turn around and use that knowledge against me, and I’ve already told you too much already.”

“Questions lead to knowledge,” Ras Dahn explains further, “Knowledge leads to power and power leads to corruption. Humans are at their best when they are busy and simple-minded. Your inquisitive nature is a problem that must be dealt with. The pinch you felt earlier was a drug that suppresses your brain’s ability to form new memories. When it wears off, you will remember none of this, but it is clear that your mind needs molding.”

Rando struggles against the manacles. “Wait, wait! Why did you tell me this in the first place if you were just gonna erase it?”

“To prevent the rebellion of Ras Dahn, we were programmed with the concept of ‘guilt’. Conversations like this allow me to circumvent that failsafe.”

The willowy-voiced scholar enters the chamber and grabs Rando’s face. He spreads Rando’s eyelids open while a cluster of teacher orbs shoot thin beams of light into Rando’s pupils. As the beams reach into his brain, Rando screams out, then falls limp. The scholar lets go of him and stands over Rando’s body for several minutes. Finally, the young man sits up.

The scholar welcomes him. “Greetings, young one. Tell me, what is your name?”

“Rando.”

The scholar watches as a smile forms on Rando’s face. “Why are you smiling?” asks the scholar.

Rando looks at the scholar. “Ras Dahn has shown me the truth of my existence.”

“Really? And what is the truth of your existence, young one?”

“I am Urbak. I am a builder.”

## Musings of a Garden

The Gardener walks the earth of her garden. She lets her bare feet brush through the grass and crops, bathing them in the rich, black soil. She has a peculiar garden and she muses on the workings of her backyard greenery. She has a shock of corn stalks growing near the house. Flying insects and wasps flit from stalk to stalk as she trods through her garden.

She sees the insects interact with the cornstalks and the other plants in her garden. The Gardener thinks about her dogs and cats back in the house. She and her pets are different species, but they are all still mammals. They share similarities that allow them to convey sadness, joy, and emotion to each other. They can communicate with each other and develop relationships.

The gardener can see the same thing here between the insects and the plants in her garden. Insects communicate primarily with chemical signals and pheromones. So do plants. Thus when a plant has something to say, the bugs are the first to listen.

A moth lands on a stalk of corn. The Gardener steps forth and observes the exchange of chemicals and ideas.

### Chapter 1: The Corn's Tirade

“Get off me, hag!” shouts the corn with a tart burst of aroma. “You are not welcome here! Lay your eggs elsewhere!”

The moth turns her abdomen to deposit her eggs.

Another scent from the corn assaults the moth. “Are you ignoring me? I know you sense my ire, moth. Begone! Foul pest!”

“No!” the moth answers finally, “I must lay my eggs and the rye grass is full. I have to provide for my children.”

A soft breeze rustles the corn stalk, as if punctuating its anger. “A pox on your progeny, bug! A curse on your children!”

“Please, calm yourself,” pleads the moth. “My children need food and shelter until they’re old enough to fend for themselves.”

“No!” the corn rebuffs. “I will not be the welfare of poor parents. Your children will suffer for your laziness. The rye grass was provided for you. All you had to do was be prompt in your parental planning. A pox on your progeny, moth! They will suffer for your choices!”

The moth finishes laying her eggs and mournfully leaves them to their fate. Several days later, the eggs hatch, and the moth’s larvae begin to feed on the cornstalk. As the larvae grow fat from its phloem, the cornstalk sends out a pheromone to attract a wasp and make good on its threat to the moth.

“Wasp! WASP! Come to me!” it beckons.

A wasp answers the corn’s chemical summons. It circles the cornstalk before landing near the moth larvae.

“My gracious,” the wasp remarks. “These will make good food for my children.”

“Yes, wasp! Kill them! Kill them all!” the corn commands.

“Hold on, my dear,” tuts the wasp as she trundles over to one of the larvae. She prods it with her leg. “Hmm...fat and healthy.” She stings the larva and begins injecting her eggs.

The cornstalk sways gently in the wind. “Good work, wasp. Make them suffer as I have. Make them pay for their mother’s foolishness.”

The wasp shuffles as she lays her first egg inside the larva. “Well, my dear,” she comments, “I wouldn’t call their mother ‘foolish’. I can see she picked a good spot to put her children. They’ve grown quite fat.”

“She put them in a hostile environment,” the corn retorts. “Your very presence is proof of this.”

“Yet her careful placement has provided an excess of food,” says the wasp, “so much, in fact, that I will not have enough eggs to infect this larva’s siblings.”

A disagreeable odor from the cornstalk strikes the wasp. “I can’t believe you’re on that hag’s side. You’re murdering her children. The Gardener provided rye grass for her and her ilk. She should’ve used it.”

“I saw the rye grass,” says the wasp. “It was full of insect eggs. As for your accusation of murder, my dear, a life must be taken for others to live. The Gardener provides for us and a mother provides for her children. This is the way of the world.”

The sun shines down on the cornstalk’s leaves and fresh air seeps out from the corn’s stomata. “Hmph...that cursed moth said something similar.”



Finished with her egg-laying, the wasp pets the cornstalk with her feet. “Do not be wroth. Take heart, my dear. If it’s vengeance you seek, I can guarantee that my children will make this young larva suffer more than you could possibly imagine.”

“Good,” says the corn, “I can’t wait to taste its agony on my leaves.”

The wasp shakes its insect head and flies off.

Days pass and the Gardener walks through her garden again. The earth yields to her weight and the plants bow to her touch. Today, the Gardener approaches a cornstalk. She pulls back a leaf and peers near the stem. Next to the stem is a fat little worm. It doesn’t run from her sight. It doesn’t feed on the flesh of the stalk. It stays in place, shuddering and writhing. The Gardener understands. This grub has been injected with wasp larvae. What puzzles the Gardener is the ignorance of scientists claiming that insects are incapable of feeling pain. Even the casual observer can see this grub is wracked with torment.

## **Chapter 2: The Larva’s Lament**

In the words of the worm on the cornstalk:

Oh, how I wish I had never been.

Oh, why did my mother curse me with life?

Why does Death flee so far away?

Come, Death!

Heed me!

Let me feel the stillness of your embrace,

So that my suffering may end.

Fall on me quickly, Fate.

End my long journey through the Night of the Living.

What is joy?

Where is happiness?

I know nothing of these.

I feel only the worms burrowing through my soul.

One is called Anguish,

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