

Worst Enemy by Mike Mulvey

The recurring dream always begins the same. He sees his bare feet, knees, arms, and hands, but none of his limbs will move. Gripping a ladder and trying to climb down, he feels frozen in time. The side of a house, which closely resembles his childhood home, stares back at him. The weathered wood siding needs another coat of white paint to conceal the discoloring and wear of too many harsh winters, rainy springs, and humid summers. It must be a flashback, but the sound of loud, approaching footsteps remind him that he is no longer a teenager tasked with helping dad paint the house.

"Why did you hate this so much? Why did you argue with him about everything?" Whoever or whatever emits that raspy voice remains out of view behind him, but the ladder shakes from the thunderous steps of its approach. A heavy, forceful breath tousles the hair on the back of his head.

Still unable to move, he must wait in silent panic for the words. Sometime the voice fluctuates between genders, sometimes it sounds cruel, sometimes the tone is soft, sometimes the voice approaches seductive, but the words never change:

He transports like a sci-fi trope, either beamed up or beamed down without warning. Now, on an incline of rocks, the water splashes somewhere behind him. He again finds himself in a familiar place.

This time, the shore near the bluffs, a place that created so many pleasing memories, so many years ago. Tiny barnacles on the rocks prick his feet as the

flowing water soothes them. The sensation familiar, even welcoming. A tiny cave rests above him, only a few steps away. With fingers floating in front of the mossy, rock staircase that leads to his sanctuary, tension grips him and he freezes. Tiny splashes of chilled water pelt his back, announcing the mysterious creature's return.

"She trusted you, and you betrayed her. Was that one night worth it?"

Even though he cannot move, his inside quivers in fear: heart accelerating, groin burning, and temples pounding as if to eject his eyes from his skull.

"What will it sound like this time?"

A gasp for breath wakes him, and he sees the pills still on the nightstand, next to a half-empty glass of water.

"They will ease your mind. They will help you sleep."

But he refuses, choosing instead to seek the owner of the voice in his dreams. He hears his father's anger, his mother's disappointment, his ex-lover's rejection, and his boss' harsh tone and exact words when he was fired. The voice is the summation of mistakes, reincarnated as a nightmarish demon, delivered in one direct, painful vocal burst. Reality creates the worst nightmares. He hopes that, if he can defeat them when asleep, then he can live with them while awake.

Until then, "there is no cure for what ails you." ✨

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