Elevator

Rage surges to my temples. My jaw instantly hurts from gritting it. How dare they do this to me. I was not only a model employee, but they had paid for my trade school, my licenses, and had me sign a five year employment contract. Then to be let go on the first wave of layoffs? To be so easily discarded?

No. I needed to speak to the owner. We were friendly enough, and this was CLEARLY a mistake.

I march past the construction debris of the new building. They can afford an expansion and renovations but can't afford my meager salary?

Sweat builds up under my chic faux leather jacket with no zipper - it's a fashior statement, not functional. I'm too pissed off to notice I'm roasting.

The headquarters building is a modest three story brickwork rectangle with grandiose interior. I mash the "3" button. A few dings later, the doors open and I stomp my way to the owner & CEOs door.

The regional manager Francis, the man who called me to tell me they'd decided to "let me go," is standing at the office entrance with his back to me. How unlucky, for both of us.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Short," I announce. Even though I am trying to keep my tone cool, I know it's coming off as emotionally charged.

Francis scowls as he turns to face me.

"He's unavailable and you are not part of the company anymore."

"I just want to talk to him. You know this is a mistake." The anxiety and desperation leaks through which pisses me off even more.

"Jessica, don't embarrass yourself any further." The words hit deep and hard. I have strived for my entire life to be levelheaded, efficient, dependable. To ensure I never looked stupid or inept.

I suck in air and hold my head high. *I'll send him an email*, I think. No reason this needs to escalate. I'll go around him and every stupid person in this stupid corporate ladder.

Turning on my heel, my uncomfortably slicked back ponytail whips over my shoulder. I'm not one to stand down, but I also know when to retreat and reform a battle plan.

I make my way dejectedly back to the elevator. Constructing the email to the owner occupies the forefront of my mind.

Two of the office gossips are already inside; they go quiet as I enter and aim for the left side of the elevator. One more of the female peons rushes to catch it before the doors close, narrowly making it. None of us held the door for her.

She is a nice enough girl. Plain and mousey. I've never really talked to her, and I have avoided the other two harpies like the plague. I'm not liked around the office and I suck at faking nice, so I just stick to my tasks and hang out with myself. Both in my professional and personal life.

Lorena, the plain mouse, smiles at me. I nod then close my eyes, trying to block out the whispering of the harpies, Chelsea and Anfisa.

The movement of the elevator is agonizingly slow. I can feel the downward pull and hear the gears and mechanisms above... but the doors to the first floor should have opened minutes ago.

I open my eyes and press the faded "1" button. The whirring of the elevator remains unchanged, then suddenly goes quiet.

Anfisa shifts her considerable weight. "That's weird," she says, loud enough for all of us to hear it instead of just her evil shadow.

I push the "1" button again. The elevator is silent as the four of us stare at the digital numeric display.

Lights start flashing between the crack of the steel doors, usually distinctive of passing levels. The machinery begins to hum again, and I start counting absentmindedly. It's a trick my therapist taught me to center myself and be more 'in the moment.'

Seventeen. Eighteen. Nineteen.

"That's not right," one of the women says.

I stare at the slit as it flashes methodically. A high pitches trembling voice behind me says "What's happening?"

The display isn't showing numerics anymore. Odd signs and gibberish flash with each 'level.' *Maybe it's broken. Interference from the construction site. That's all.*

Without warning, it stops. All of it. The flashing, the digital display, the whirring gears, the hiss of downward airflow. I can hear the irregular breathing patterns of the other three. Maybe even myself.

A ding sound fills the silent space as the doors slide open. My chest hurts from holding my breath. We all stand frozen, watching the cold steel slide to the sides in slow motion.

The chaos, as I would later remember, is beautiful

We are in the middle of a highway. Large specters of light careening toward the steel box with four souls stunned in confusion and disorientation. The sound is deafening; the brightness of headlights in juxtaposition of the sheer blackness of the night is striking.

A bullet-looking vehicle hits the elevator, slamming into it as one would expect. The box twists and spins around, the screams of the women and screeching of metal lost in the noise.

Seconds after impact, I have enough awareness to react. The doors are mangled but still open. I reach out and grab a fistful of fabric of the closest woman to me. I have to break their trance and get their attention.

"We have to get out! Get out!" I shout at the top of my lungs. The wide-eyed disbelief etched onto the other faces seems to dissipate quickly as instinct takes over.

Get Out. Danger. DANGER.

We throw ourselves through the doors and stumble onto the pavement.

Another thunderous smash as another something hits the steel container and it spins violently onto the cement median separating directional traffic.

Everything is going by so fast. Too fast.

It looks like a highway with black pavement and a gray cement median, but it's not a normal earthly construction. It doesn't look quite right. And the things flying past aren't cars. They look more like lightning bolts.

Beyond the horizon of the highway is a metropolis. The city looks like IKEA built a circuit board. The landscape is rigid, round, methodical, and oddly illuminated. It too doesn't look right, but I can't place exactly why it looks wrong. It *feels* wrong.

A yellow motorcycle screeches to a stop in front of us, the rider clearly making an effort to not slam into the four warm bodies on a cold transit roadway. It looks cartoony; a round and bulbous contraption with an unreasonable sidecar that looks like it would hold 6 or more people. The rider flips up a white face shield, revealing a nondescript young man.

He's yelling something at us, but it's impossible to hear what he's saying. The lighting bolts passing by are far too loud.

He points vigorously at the side car, then to us, then back to the sidecar. *He wants us to get in.* Every fiber of my body wants to get off this highway and this seems like a good, albeit unexplainable, solution.

I grab Lorena's hand to catch her attention, then start running for the side car. I look back and see the others had caught on and are following. As I get closer to the young man, I can vaguely make out what he's saying. It sounds like "get in the car" repeated over and over again, but in a recorded dingy over-old-speakers way. Probably just the highway making it sound like that. Or maybe a concussion from the impact.

As soon as all four of us are in the sidecar, in the blink of an eye the motorcycle and all occupants are sitting on a quiet street next to a vertical rocky hill. I suck in air into my lungs. I feel like I haven't taken a breath in an hour.

The young man turns his head, still sitting in the motorcycle. He flips up his white visor once again.

"There, now get off." He says, in the same distorted voicebox way. We waste no time in scrambling out of the sidecar. Without a word, in a single second he's gone.

"What is this?!?" Anfisa shouts. She sounds flabbergasted

"Maybe we died," Chelsea says meekly.

"Died and what, went to hell? Because this looks like hell!" Anfisa continues to shout.

"Shhh! We shouldn't be attracting attention!" I say to Anfisa as I look around.

No cars. No bushes. No sounds. Just massive gray buildings, each with weird neon signs across the walls. The signs must be 50 feet or more in height. Everything looks so industrial, so sad, so lifeless.

"Don't you shush me! You don't know what's going on either! You aren't even good enough to keep a job!" Anfisa snarls, her voice escalating with each word.

"Jessica...look at the street lights..." Lorena whispers as she tugs on the sleeve of my jacket. I make the decision to intentionally ignore the continued ramblings of Anfisa and focus on what Lorena is saying.

I look up to the pinkish white balls lining the street. At first you don't really notice them, streets normally have community lighting.

"What about them?" I ask. In comparison to everything else, they seem mundane and unremarkable.

"They're floating. There's no posts or wires." Lorena seems fixated on the orbs. I squint, looking all around. She's right. There aren't any discernible fixtures or mounting of the lights. It's weird, but weirder still that's what caught her attention. The streetlights are really what cinches the bizarreness.

Screams puncture my visual investigation of our surroundings.

"Don't!" Chelsea is sobbing as she holds onto Anfisa's arm for dear life.

"No, I'm not staying here. We have to get out of here! We have to find help!" Anfisa snarls at Chelsea, pretty much screaming at the top of her lungs.

"I won't die here!" Anfisa breaks free of Chelsea's grip and takes off up the street. Chelsea bolts after her, shouting "don't leave me! I don't want to die either!"

Lorena and I stand silently watching their silhouettes get smaller and smaller.

"Shouldn't we stick together?" Lorena asks, her voice is so low that I can barely hear her, even in the dead silence.

"I think we should find cover until daylight. Figure out what to do next." I do a 360 degree assessment of where we are. Up the steep hill at our backs is another large gray structure, just like the rest.

"We should go there," I point to it.

"What about that way?" Lorena squeaks, nodding to where Chelsea and Anfisa ran.

"We'll find them in the morning. Cmon, we need to get off the street." Secretly I just didn't want to be caught with those two. Whatever ruckus they are going to cause isn't going to be good. For any of us.

My shoes crunch up the gravel laden hill to the oblong building. It is the size of a stadium, the shape of a grape and has a steel like texture.

"What is this..." Lorena says as she touches the surface. It warbled with her touch...reacting to it.

I walk a fair distance around the building looking for an entrance. An inset doorway makes itself known. No door handle though.

Lorena and I stare at the door for a few seconds before she reaches out and pushes gently on it. It pops open toward us with a "click". I look at her, mildly impressed.

"I saw it on a tv show once." Lorena says, matter of factly. Huh.

We enter, but there's no entrance. It's like we are transported to the middle of a living room. Not an average every day normal living room. This place is equally as weird, unsettling and otherworldly as the rest of...whatever this place is.

Couches of geometric designs are scattered around. The walls are made of the same reactive gray metal; the ceiling is nonexistent yet hugs the room.

A lavish, obscenely long table is set up with jutting linens and pieces of ceramic and brass. A dinner table maybe? I scan up to the end of the table; two grossly large chairs dominate the table. They are wrapped in a teal bluish looking vine with glistening silver petals and have smooth, pearl colored tuft cushions. The realization hits me like a bag of bricks.

"Wedding," I say to the chairs.

"What?" I hear Lorena behind me.

"This is a wedding party," I say, backing away slowly.

"How do you know?" Lorena whispers. Intuition maybe, but somehow I know. And I know we are not supposed to be here.

I am startled by the sound of swishing water. Somebody in the bathroom. I grab Lorena's hand and we run for a nearby wooden looking door. No handle, so I push on it like Lorena pushed on the entry door. It swings inward and we dive inside, closing the door as quietly as we can behind us.

Coral veined marble surrounds us. It's everywhere. Floor, walls, ceiling. I step backwards and hit more marble sticking out of the wall; I shift to look and I see a bowl of marble with a stick of the same material hanging over it. A sink, maybe?

Another swish of water, this one much louder.

Oh my God. We literally ran TO the person. If I had time to feel stupid and frustrated I would, but terror is taking up all that space. I lock eyes with Lorena who has an equally terrified look on her face.

There seems to be another room on the side, I point toward it and then tiptoe as fast as I can. We round the corner and crouch down as the sound of a door swinging open pulsates in my ears.

Clacking of footsteps. Pause. Running water. Pause. Shuffling sounds. Pause Footsteps. Door clicking open. The footsteps fade away slowly.

I release the breath I held deep in my chest and inhale slowly. It burns.

"We should get out of here!" Lorena harshly whispers. I nod in agreement. This was a bad idea.

A flutter behind Lorena catches my attention. I lean slightly to the right on my knee to see and it's...breathtaking. My eyes widen. Lorena takes notice and turns around to see for herself. She gasps as her eyes land on it.

On a freakishly large hanger is a square piece of fabric, maybe 3 feet by 3 feet, shimmering colors I had never seen before. I didn't feel any wind, but the fabric moved delicately in rhythm. Pink, yellow, teal, opalescent; every color alternates like a glistening rainbow.

It looks so soft as it glows all by itself.

I stand up and move toward it without thinking. I come within inches of it. It smells like comfort and warmth and happiness. I breathe it in, forgetting the world around me. I close my eyes and unconsciously reach out for it.

"What are you doing!!" Lorena's strained voice punctures the moment.

As soon as my fingers graze the fabric, it unfolds into a mountainous pile of gleaming textile. A small sprit of tubing comes out of the top, followed by a glittering mass of more fabric.

We both freeze in horror. I look at Lorena with panic and regret etched on my face.

"I think this is a wedding dress!" I squeak.

Lorena nods slowly.

"What do I do!" I gasp

The door on the other side of the wall clicks open. I suck in air and hold my breath.

"Maybe we should pretend we're fixing it," Lorena whispers.

"What?! That's insane..."

Footfalls come closer. Too close.

A second later, the thing turns the corner. It's face - or what I am assuming is it's face - is directed at the heaping mound of wedding dress. It's gelatinous skin makes squishing sounds as turns to look at us. It lets out an inhuman shriek, matched only by the shriek coming from Lorena.

"Run!" I scream at the top of my voice.

We both dive on either side of the creature, stumble to our feet and run as fast as we can out the door. Wails of more creatures bellow around us.

"We have to get back to the elevator," I yell as I run for the door that led us in here.

I can make out the sounds of human footsteps behind me; I assume it's Lorena. I'm not looking back to double check.

There is a door that looks like the one we came in from. I run into it with my full body weight. It starts to open and swing inward, but I grab the edge of the door with my fingertips and slam it wide open. Throwing myself through the opening and into the outside world.

I slide down the gravel embankment, stumbling as I hit the pavement below, then run at my top speed toward the deafening noise of the highway. The burn of my lungs matches the burn of my thighs, but that's not going to stop me.

I see an overpass above the highway and aim my feet toward it. No way I would be able to get across the lightning bolt traffic.

After what seems like an eternity but was probably just a few minutes, I slow down drastically. Sucking in air like a vacuum isn't helping to fill my lungs. I can't catch my breath and my legs are starting to not agree to stand anymore.

I fall to my knees wheezing.

A heavy thud lands next to me; Lorena is on her hands and knees in equal shape as I am.

I look back, not seeing any pursuers.

"This is just a nightmare. This is just a nightmare. This is just a nightmare." Lorena rasps.

"C'mon," I tap her on the arm to get her attention, then stand up and half jog-half stumble a few more paces to the overpass.

The noise from the highway hits immediately. I scan the median from up above and locate the steel box. I point to it as I look at Lorena to make sure she sees it as well. I climb the concrete wall and line up my body with the median. A strong grip around my forearm stops me.

"What are you doing?" Lorena mouthes.

"Jump," I mouth back. Fear spreads across her face.

My eyes dart to the end of the overpass.

Several of the jellied monstrosities are gathering and heading toward us.

"Jump!" I scream, pushing myself off the wall. The vertical distance is maybe 40 feet from the overpass to the median. Not enough of a drop to kill me, but too much of a drop to walk away unscathed.

I can feel the snapping of my ankles as they roll the wrong way, crushed by the weight of my body. It's odd; I always thought bones breaking would hurt. I feel nothing. I hear nothing but the overwhelming metallic zooming of the lightning bolts. All I have is an instinctive knowledge that my ankles are broken.

I look up to Lorena. I see her head over the edge looking down, but I can't make out her facial expression. I begin army crawling to the elevator. All that matters now is we make it to the elevator.

I'm grateful in this moment for my ability to be laser focused. One elbow in front of the other. I kick with my shins and knees to propel forward, alternating pulling with my arms and pushing with my legs. The burning of all my muscles and the roar of the neon freeway fuel the determination within me

Sweat starts to run into my eyes, clouding my vision. I know I'm slowing down and running out of breath, and there is lava flowing to the parts of my body that are stripped of skin from the rough median. I know I shouldn't think about it but I can't stop the negative thoughts from pouring in.

I am about to succumb to defeat when my forearm grazes a cool metal lip. I look up, squinting, to see the open casket of an elevator.

I made it.

I would let out a sigh of relief if I had any air left in my lungs. Never have I been so happy to enter an elevator.

Dragging my weight over the ridge, I slide myself into a sitting position and rest my back against the back wall of the elevator. Smiling, I look outward to find Lorena.

The smile sloughs off my face as I watch Lorena screaming inaudibly, flailing, surrounded by the creatures. Her arms and legs spike out in every direction before she disappears from view completely.

But the things don't disappear with her. Several of the creatures line the overpass. If I had to guess, I'd say they were looking down at me and the elevator.

I let out a sob. I rarely succumb to my emotions, but even this is a little much for me

I lurch forward and mash the buttons. Any button. All buttons.

Nothing happens.

No light illuminates the plastic buttons. No ding of the panel acknowledging the request. No digital display, weird symbols or otherwise. No doors closing. No power.

I look out onto the median in time to see one of the slushy abominations thudding down from the overpass.

I feel the wriggly plastic buttons under my fingertips as I half heartedly press them over and over again. Every time is a disappointment.

Watching the creature slide its sticky girth over the cement, my brain makes squishing sounds as it moves. The lightning bolts are so loud that it's almost silent now. Everything is silent.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I whisper to myself.

"This is just a nightmare. This is just a nightmare. This is just a nightmare."