

## Dreams of Tooth and Claw

**A short story set in London, just a little in the future**

**“Sorry was I growling in my sleep ?” She asked. “I had a bad case of flu and my throat makes odd noises when I sleep.”**

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Barbara was enjoying the dream, she always enjoyed them. Was it a dream if you always knew you were dreaming ? It worried her slightly that she might be building up to some kind of emotional episode, but for now, she enjoyed the dream. Sometimes she was soaring above London, enjoying the company of others like herself. Giant wings gently stroking the air, as she swooped down to rip the humans apart and feed on their soft tissue.

It was all so pleasurable, it made her feel so powerful. Leathery wings at least twenty feet across, wicked claws instead of hand and her jaws, those wonderful biting jaws. Her current dream wasn't about flying, she was in her old house, the one she'd inhabited as a married woman. Perhaps she was still harbouring ill will towards Terry, her ex-husband ? Maybe she would have a massive breakdown and be packed off to..... wherever crazy ladies went these days.

She crashed across her old bedroom, sending all the IKEA furniture flying into the walls. IKEA had been Terry's idea.

“Relatively cheap and it goes with anything.” He'd told her.

Now it was all ready for the skip and Terry was about to become a very ex-husband. She enjoyed killing him, so much so, that she knew there was still some emotional baggage from her divorce. Four years since the decree absolute and managing to buy her own place, yet she still took pleasure from ripping out his throat and feeding on the contents of his chest. Heart, lungs, it all had a different taste and it all tasted better than her favourite Friday night chicken Jalfrezi.

She grabbed hold of his lower jaw with one of her powerful claws and wrenched it from his head.

The wonderful smell too, it was intoxicating, the perfume of fresh blood and death. Nothing worried her, nothing was in the least bit threatening and then Barbara found herself awake and in the real world.

She was on the Piccadilly line, travelling from her home in Southgate, to where she worked in Holborn. Barbara was jammed against the window in one of the little groups of four seats, uncomfortable but at least she had a seat. Now the real world felt dreamlike, she went through her mental routine.

‘I'm Barbara Hill from Southgate, age 38, divorced, no kids.’

Faces looking at her, looking concerned, but not enough to stop the train and call for help. She knew she made noises in her dreams, Doug had told her. She'd woken up a few times to find him grinning at her.

“Sorry, was I screaming or something ?” She'd asked.

“No, just a bit of low key growling and squawking.”

His reaction had made her less worried about growling in public, but she still had her routine to go through. Barbara was a people person, it was what she excelled at. Her job was head of HR for a large insurance company and she knew how to win people over. She looked at the woman sat closest to her and smiled.

“Sorry, was I growling again? It's the flu, it does funny things in my throat.”

She coughed to add a little authenticity and the woman was instantly digging in her bag for some kind of flu remedy.

"You need this, works great and doesn't make you drowsy."

Another five minutes and another half dozen women were digging through bags and offering her everything from Feminax to Day Nurse. Barbara had felt unwell for quite some time, but hadn't done much about it. Perhaps one of the cold remedies might actually do her good, or at least take the edge off the day. She popped open a blister pack and removed two tablets of a well-known cold remedy, that in reality, just left you mildly stoned for eight hours. Barbara had them halfway to her mouth.

"I have water, it hasn't been opened."

It was the great sisterhood at work, she'd probably have made a new friend for life, if the tube wasn't about to reach Holborn.

"Thank you, thank you very much." Said Barbara, to all the smiling faces.

Barbara came out of Holborn station and checked her watch as she turned right, exactly on time, as usual. Punctuality was another thing she was good at.

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Friday night and she was at Doug's place in Enfield Town. They started off as just being friends, until she'd been too drunk after an office party, to worry about consequences. If anyone was rude enough to ask her age, Barbara usually replied with a sly smile and;

"Young enough to still need contraceptives."

It was a silly thing to say and made her sound like a slut, which she wasn't, well not much of one. There had been quite a few casual sexual partners since her divorce, but she preferred sex with someone she knew well, perhaps even had a few feelings for. Doug was ideal; a work colleague, who didn't cling, yet had often offered her emotional support when she needed it. Most of the benefits of marriage, without kids, a mortgage and the risk of it all ending up in a divorce court.

They'd had their usual Friday night Indian meal, Doug was into Biryani, but she usually had something with a bit more punch. A bottle of beer each and Barbara realised she hadn't brought a DVD, so it was more crap prime time TV to watch.

"Not too bad." Said Doug, "BBC1 have got a couple of new sitcoms."

She sighed; Doug seemed to be capable of watching any old rubbish.

"Yeah fine, you watch while I snooze."

One moment Barbara was putting her beer bottle on the coffee table, the next she was into a dream. That was how it always happened. No preamble, no feeling of being drowsy, though most TV programmes were guaranteed to send her into a dream. She was at Terry's house, but not as it was during her marriage. Barbara had only seen the house a few times since their divorce, yet her dreaming mind remembered every detail. She was there, Tess, the bitch who'd stolen her husband, her life. She wanted to tell her how much she hated her, but only a guttural roar came out. Tess looked scared though, terrified !

"No, please no !" She screamed.

Claws, her claws, were grabbing Tess and throwing her face down on the new carpet Terry had bought a few months after the divorce. The bastard had changed everything, as if trying to erase her from his life, his memories.

"What are you doing ?"

Terry, alive again ! She'd killed him in at least a dozen dreams, but like Freddy Kruger, he kept coming back. Nothing inventive this time, she ripped off his head and concentrated on the screaming

Tess. Somewhere in her mind she knew that Tess hadn't been the homewrecker, Terry hadn't even known her then. He hadn't started bonking nineteen year old temps, or moved in a Barbie lookalike. Tess was her age and Terry had met her at a poetry reading. Still, the bitch had to suffer and die, horribly.

"Ruaaaaarrgghhh."

A roar now, that was new, she'd never had a roar in her dreams before. She dug a talon into Tess's back, enjoying the way she screamed and tried to crawl away. Really enjoying it, no regrets, no restraints. She dug her talons in and ripped off Tess's blouse and a good six inches of skin.

"No, no, please no....."

Tess was becoming repetitive, which made Barbara even more pissed off with her. How deep would she have to push in a claw to pierce a lung? She pressed and felt a rib slide past and then a little bloody bubbling goo appeared. That was easy, too easy and Tess had passed out. The dream creature was hungry and needed to feed. She pushed razor sharp talons into Tess's back and pulled, breaking ribs, rending flesh and exposing a heart that was still beating. Barbara heard a purring sound and realised it was her, as she pushed her jaws into Tess and began chewing.

"Back with us?" Asked Doug.

She wasn't really, she still felt like the monster, still not quite Barbara again.

"I'm Barbara Hill, aged 38, divorced, no kids." She said aloud. "I live in Southgate and I haven't driven my car for nearly a year, because of the blackouts."

Blackouts, she'd finally admitted to herself and Doug, that it was more serious than a bit of day dreaming.

"Are you ok Barbara? You're worrying me now."

"Fine, it just takes me a while to come back..... Sometimes."

"More dreams of being a giant bat?"

She laughed, it sounded funny hearing her dream experiences describes in such a mundane manner. She was tired and the dream had left her feeling horny as hell.

"Do you fancy an early night?" She asked.

Of course he would, he was a guy. Guys were turned on by IKEA brochures and watching Top Gear.

"Fine."

He was looking at her right hand and then rubbing it. As seduction techniques went, it was odd and completely unnecessary.

"This is new." She said. "No need Doug, we are going to have sex tonight."

He smiled, he had a great smile. She could see why Doug was the only person in her life, she hadn't dreamt about eviscerating.

"No, it was probably the light from the TV..... I just thought."

"What Doug..... tell me?"

"Just for a second and I probably imagined it. Your hand looked a bit leathery."

She thumped him, none to gently, on the shoulder.

"You bastard! You had me going for a second. I'm going for a shower."

He was smiling at her, but there was an edge to the smile.

"Yeah, you know me, always joking. I'll make some coffee while you're showering."

Only he wasn't joking, she knew his emotions too well to be deceived. She never did get her shower, she sat on the loo and noticed a little blood in her pee. Damn, she recognised the symptoms and knew the infection would soon become painful and unpleasant. Another of God's design flaws, the backside being a little too close to the frontside. Barbara had only had one urinary tract infection in

her twenties, but about five in her thirties, another curse of approaching middle age. She went into the kitchen, to find Doug had just made two coffees.

"Sorry Doug, can you run me to the nearest A&E department?"

"Why, is it the blackouts?"

She had to smile, he looked so worried.

"No, I have the start of an infection..... down below." She felt the need to point at her crotch.

"Nothing serious, but I know the symptoms." She added. "If I wait and call my doctor on Monday, he'll see me in about a week and I'll have pee that looks like Guinness by then."

He was putting on his jacket and picking up his car keys, bless him.

"Of course I'll take you, though we'll probably be there all night."

"You don't need to stay with me."

"Of course I do."

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They walked into A&E at about 10:45 on a Friday night. There was a red line to stand behind, but the guy behind the glass screen waved her forward.

"I've had this before." Said Barbara. "A bit of blood in my pee from an infection."

She was going to say minor infection, but thought that one added word, might mean an extra hour waiting.

"If I get antibiotics today it'll clear quickly." She added. "If not, it'll get really nasty, really quickly."

Two reallys. Come on this is serious, call House in for a consult if you have to, but get me those damn pills.

"Name please?"

"Mrs Barbara Hill."

Most of her divorced friends had kept their married name too. It was a lot less hassle than all the forms and bureaucracy to become Miss Barbara Mace again.

"Date of birth?"

She told him and remembered her 39<sup>th</sup> birthday was less than two weeks away. He confirmed her address and telephone numbers and told her the current waiting time was six hours, fuck ! They walked into the waiting room and it resembled Napoleon's retreat from Moscow.

"Nothing says I love you, quite like a six hour wait in A&E." Said Doug.

Was he joking ? They'd both managed to avoid the L word cropping up. One end of the waiting room appeared to have been claimed as a night shelter for the local homeless, she didn't know whether to complain to her MP or tell him what a good idea it was. Her life seemed full of such dilemmas.

"There are seats near the coffee machine." Said Doug.

The machine took cards, if you waved them about just right. The coffee was passable and after about 45 minutes, a nurse called her name. She didn't take Doug with her, he was guarding their seats by the coffee machine.

"Mrs Barbara Hill !"

She was called into a tiny cubicle, where the nurse talked to her at the same time as fitting a blood pressure band to her arm and a gadget to her finger.

"So, you're passing a bit of blood Mrs Hill?"

"Yes, I've had it before. I really just need a course of antibiotics."

It was no good, it never was these days. Doctors were like car mechanics, ignoring the squeak you'd gone in about and testing the transmission instead.

"How has your general health been?"

"I have a demanding job, so I always feel tired."

The nurse disconnected the machine and took her pulse the old fashioned way and then used a stethoscope to listen to her chest.

"Are you always hypertensive?"

She wanted to answer 'only when I'm bleeding from my pussy and expecting a six hour wait in the lower regions of hell.' Instead she just smiled at the nurse and gave a polite reply.

"I'm a bit het up over all this I suppose."

"Hmmmmm."

The nurse tapped something into her screen before continuing.

"I'll arrange for some blood tests and you'll need to fill this."

It was a thin plastic tube with a screw on lid. It was if she was being asked to pee into an empty biro refill.

"But..... I remember a sort of bowl last time."

The nurse merely gave her a sad look and muttered.

"Sorry..... the cuts ! Do what you can it doesn't have to be full."

Back in the waiting room and two large men are having a 'No you fuck off,' contest. Barbara briefly waves at Doug and heads for the toilets, wondering why none are marked as male/female, men/women or anything vaguely straight forward. A line of loos, all with at least a three line description on the door. She chooses and hopes no one comes banging on the door to tell her it was the wrong choice. The tube to catch her pee is ludicrous to use, almost as though someone is trying to invent a new Olympic sport. She manages, with a lot of ingenuity and indignity to half fill the container.

"Yay, Barbara gets bronze in the cover your fingers in pee event." She mutters.

She washes every part of her arms and hands she can reach and sits back with Doug.

"How's it been out here?" She asks

"No one has actually had a fight yet, but it's come close. And you?"

She brought the still warm container out of her pockets, showing Doug her pee, which was a nice colour, if it was Beaujolais nouveau.

"Eek Barbara, that looks like a lot of blood in there."

"Looks worse than it probably is, but you can see why I want the sodding pills."

She'd stopped looking at her watch, but it must have been another coffee from the machine and at least an hour later, when;

"Mrs Barbara Hill !"

A larger cubicle, with a large blue chair and an eager looking young guy. There was also a young nurse, sat at a computer to one side of the cubicle.

"Please sit down." Said the young guy. "I'm going to be taking a little blood."

He tries for a vein in her arm and can't get the cannula into a vein. He has another go on the back of her hand and manages to fill his little vials with her blood. The nurse at the computer leans back in her chair and faces her.

"Did you come in last night?"

"I arrived at about 11 last night."

"No, the night before. Did you come in on Thursday night?"

"No, this is the first time I've visited an A&E in nearly two years."

The nurse is giving her a long hard stare, as if trying to work out if she's a loony.

"It's just that her symptoms were the same as yours."

“She didn’t wait for her results.” Added the young guy.

It was all becoming a bit surreal. She felt the need to be defensive, even though she hadn’t been there the previous night.

“It wasn’t me, I can assure you ?”

“Fine,” said the nurse, “they want you to have a chest X-ray.”

“But I just need some anti-biotics for a bladder infection.”

It was no good, the nurse was giving her the long suffering smile, that all medical people seem to have an A level in.

“They just want to be sure.” Said the nurse. “Wait outside and someone will call you.”

As she left, Barbara heard the nurse talking. There wasn’t any attempt to hide what she was saying, but she had a quiet voice.

“She’s just like the others Ray, this is really strange.”

In the waiting room and Doug is trying to teach a girl the trick of waving her debit card just right, so that the coffee machine will give her a cup of hot brown liquid. In doing so he’s lost their seats and they end up closer to the drunks.

“They want me to have a chest X-ray now.”

He hugged her and she tried not to cry.

“We guessed it would be an all-nighter.” Said Doug. “If you don’t have your pills when we leave, there are always suppliers on the net.”

“Yep, but as a last resort. I don’t fancy risking buying counterfeit meds.”

3 am, maybe 4 am, the time is beginning to be a little meaningless and most people in the waiting room are trying to sleep.

“Mrs Barbara Hill !”

The corridor to the X-ray department is in semi darkness and a lone technician seems to be in charge of the department. She removes her jacket and two plates are exposed, before a nurse comes and takes her away again. Not back to the waiting area, but to a cubicle in the main body of the hospital.

“Wait here and a doctor will be along to see you.”

There’s a bed and a chair, so she chooses the chair and almost immediately falls asleep. No dreams, just deep and refreshing sleep, at least for a while.

“Mrs Hill ?”

No problem remembering who she is, she nods at the man crouching to look at her. He’s in a white coat and looks to be around retirement age. He’s got the whole silver fox thing working well though, even the George Clooney crinkling round the eyes as he smiles.

“Yes, I’m Barbara Hill.”

“Can you sit on the bed please ?”

Barbara has to climb up onto the bed and her legs dangle like a rag doll. She looks at her watch.....  
Fuck ! 5.15 am ! Doug must be wondering where the hell she’d got to. The doctor notices her expression.

“Sorry you had to wait , Friday night is always crazy. I promise you though, you will get your anti-biotics when you leave.”

“So I was right ? About the infection ?”

“Yes, not much blood in parts per million, but you were right to come in.”

More listening to her chest, more taking her pulse by feeling her wrist.

“Have you had any breathing problems ?”

“I get tired quickly, but my job is very demanding.”

A nurse arrives with a box of anti-biotics and Barbara considers it to be 'mission accomplished,' just a pity it took about seven hours.

"There is a something on your chest X-ray." The doctor tells her. "Something that needs looking at. Someone will call you to make an appointment and it's very important that you come in to see us." How many did their seven hour wait and never wanted to come back ? The doctor was giving her his serious face.

"I don't want to worry you, but I'd like you to have a CT scan and perhaps a biopsy."

"A lung biopsy ?"

She's not normally easily worried, but it's been a long night. Barbara is already wondering if she'll be able to work while on chemotherapy.

"It may be nothing, I don't want you to panic." Said the doctor. "But we need to be sure."

"Thank you."

She gets her pills and takes one straight away, she'd never had problems swallowing pills. Back in the waiting room and Doug is asleep, his face pressed against a window.

"Can we go now ?" He asks.

"Yes, we can go now. I have my pills, but they want me to come back to see someone about my chest."

"When ?"

"Not sure, they're going to call me."

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Terry had finally dug her last box of books out of the loft and he wanted to see her. She could guess why, Tess had obviously decided it was high time that he made an honest woman out of her. It was nice that he wanted to see her in person, to tell her. They had once taken a vow in a church to faithfully only shag each other until death did them part. Barbara wasn't religious, but the vows had to mean something.

"Come over at about 8, Tess will be at her poetry class." He'd told her.

She looked up at the house and remembered the leaky pipes and walls that soaked up the rain like a sponge. The house had been built around 1900, just about Victorian. Anyone who said they loved old Victorian houses, had probably never lived in one. It had been home though and she still had a warm feeling for the place. She even had some affection for Terry, despite killing him several times in her dreams. She might tell Terry about the dreams, he'd probably write a poem about it all and put it on Facebook. She pressed the doorbell and heard the familiar ring.

"Barbara, glad you could come."

He looked the same, still a bit of a belly trying to climb over his trousers. Not bad for a guy over 40 though, she'd dated far worse. She followed him into the lounge, noticing a new patch of mould above the bay windows. The house was a bit like a pet. If you neglected it for a while, it left you damp patches and worse. He noticed her looking;

"You know this place." He said. "We had two weeks in Gambia and forgot to leave any windows open."

"I remember Terry, worse than keeping an elderly incontinent cat."

They shared a chuckle and she sat on one end of the sofa, facing the antique fireplace, which was merely there to add atmosphere.

"I'll get us some drinks." He said, heading for the kitchen.

So, he'd taken Tess to Gambia to propose, she'd been taken to Rome, the Trevi Fountain and on one knee to be exact. Terry always got the romantic stuff just right. Barbara rested her head on the side wing of the sofa and she was dreaming.

Most dreams were of somewhere different, another building, different people. This dream was almost real time; she was following Terry into the kitchen, watching him react to the beast with claws and wings.

"Jeeez, what the....."

There was a central breakfast bar in the kitchen, an annoying island of chairs, formica tops and various ketchups and sauces. Oh, how she had always hated that awful breakfast bar. One blow from her arm and it was out of the way, becoming matchwood and dust. Terry was actually peeing his pants, which she found amusing.

"No, no....."

How unimaginative her victims were, always no, no or why me, or please don't. If one of them had actually used a little bit of originality, she just might have spared them. She ran her claw down Terry's face removing most of his nose and leaving gouges that pierced his cheeks.

He screamed, they all screamed, eventually. She toyed with him, biting off his left ear and then cramming his body between the cooker hob and the extractor hood. The hood was another stupid idea of his; it took up a huge amount of space and sounded like a jet taking off.

"Ruaaaaarrgghhh."

The roar again, she really liked the roaring. She wondered if she could pop his head like a grape, was she strong enough? She was and she enjoyed seeing his brains drip onto the floor tiles. Moroccan they were, the tiles, they'd chosen them together from a small shop in Camden. And; Barbara was awake and looking at a tray of drink and a very worried looking man. She no longer felt like a woman waking from a dream, she felt like a powerful creature dragged out of..... Somewhere. She went through her mental routine.

"I am Barbara Hill, Mrs Barbara Hill. I live in Southgate and I'm 38, divorced with no kids. Tomorrow is my 39<sup>th</sup> birthday and the stupid hospital wants to give me a biopsy on my birthday."

Terry, she knew him now, he was the worried looking guy, passing her a glass of wine.

"Sorry was I growling in my sleep?" She asked. "I had a bad case of flu and my throat makes odd noises when I sleep."

She was trying to smile, while still pulling her mind together. Yes she was at Terry's, he was going to tell her about getting engaged to Tess and give her a box of books. She sipped the wine, an excellent Muscadet.

"Are you alright Terry? You look like you just saw a ghost?"

He was looking a bit bewildered and pointing at the door.

"As I came in, I could have sworn it wasn't you sat there."

She gave him her best 'I'm not a loony,' smile.

"Did I turn into a monster..... urghhhh."

She put her hands up and made silly growling noises. Terry just shook his head and picked up his wine.

"I guess I'm getting on a bit....."

"Never did trust a guy who writes poetry for an actual profession." She chided.

Soon they were laughing and it was all forgotten, but Barbara never did feel like asking him what he had seen, sat in her chair.

"So, you've invited me round to tell me you're getting married again?" She asked.

He went to the mantelpiece and brought over an envelope with her name on it.

“Happy birthday for tomorrow Barbara.”

So he’d remembered. Should she tell him about the biopsy ? She had an aunt, who always tried to upstage people’s health news. Tell her you had flu and she’d come up with a suspected case of malaria. She was determined not to be another version of Aunt Alice, she’d wait and see what the biopsy result said.

“So ! Am I right, did you get down on one knee in Banjul ?”

“Am I that predictable ?” He asked. “Yes, we’re engaged……. I just wanted you to hear it from me……and not…….”

“It’s ok Terry, you have my blessing, if that’s what you wanted. Tess is a great woman and I’m sure you’ll be very happy together. Just don’t invite me to the wedding, ok ??!”

She opened her birthday card and found the sort of card people buy for tiny kids. It even had a badge in the envelope, ‘Now you are 3 !’ Terry had used a magic marker to alter it to ‘Now you are 39.’ Part of her still loved him a little bit, he always did get the romantic stuff right.

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It was her birthday, Doug had stayed over to take her to the hospital. She looked in the mirror above the sink in the bathroom.

“Happy fucking 39<sup>th</sup> birthday.” She said. “Today you are likely to be technically infertile, the universe no longer even wants you to breed.”

“You can be really weird you know ?!” Called Doug from the bedroom.

“This is a good day, you wait until I start on the ultimate futility of human existence.”

She finished flossing and joined him in the bedroom. He’d actually booked a day off to take her to have the procedure.

‘Don’t drive and we recommend you bring a friend or relative.’ The appointment letter had said.

‘You may be given a mild sedative as part of the procedure.’

Mild sedation usually meant being knocked out completely, but she trusted Doug to get her home in one piece. They left her house and Doug drove them the three miles or so to the hospital. The outpatient’s reception pointed them in the direction of radiology and it all felt so different from the purgatory of that Friday night. Another waiting room for radiology, but only half the seats occupied. Barbara hands in her various forms to the reception desk.

“I need the loo.” She tells Doug.

“Ok, if they call you, I’ll let them know.”

The bleeding had gone away with the anti-biotics, but she’d still been feeling tired most of the time. Barbara peed and then used one of the sinks to wash her hands. She looked into the mirror behind the sinks and saw her mother looking back, not a pleasant experience. Thirty nine and she looked like her mother and felt like shit. Was this how it was always going to be from now on ? No wonder little old ladies always seemed so pissed off all the time.

“Oooohhhh.”

She felt a wave of nausea, probably just stress and tiredness from her sixty hour a week job.

Something more though, a wave of pain that started in her chest and ran right down to her pelvis.

She held onto the edge of the sink and tried not to cry out. It passed and she went back out to the waiting room.

“Did they call me ?”

“Not yet.”

No point in telling Doug about the pain, she was only a short wait from having a CT Scan, or at least, she hoped it was a short wait. Fifteen minutes later she was taken into the scanner room and it was all surprisingly fast. At least she thought it was fast, there was another half an hour waiting for the operator to decide that her scan had produced useable results.

"You can go back to the waiting room, you'll be called when the doctor wants to see you."

Doug found a coffee machine that liked his debit card and they waited, hospitals seemed to be all about waiting. After an hour, a nurse came and took them along several corridors and into another small waiting room.

"Shouldn't be long now, you'll be called."

Hospitals seemed good at loos, there was actually one marked with the little graphic of a woman in a skirt. No trying to translate three lines of gender sensitive gobbledygook. The loo was empty and Barbara had a little blood in her pee again. Sometimes anti-biotics can fail, she knew that, but seeing the blush of blood in the pan, made her feel depressed. She washed and once again a wave of pain hit her. She gave it a minute to pass, before going out into the waiting room.

"Are you ok?" Asked Doug

"There was a little blood again."

He's looking concerned, holding her hand.

"Tell the doctor when you see him. Maybe you need different meds."

"There's a new pain too, but I suppose I'm in the best place to get it sorted out."

He's holding her and she feels hot tears on her cheek and of course, the doctor chose that moment to see her.

"Mrs Hill, come with me please."

"Come with me." She said, grabbing Doug's hand.

Barbara consoled herself with guessing that doctors saw lots of women with streaked makeup. She dabbed at her eyes and they followed the nurse, through two sets of doors and into a large consulting room. He was small and bearded and seemed lost in the large room. The doctor's desk was against one wall and there was also a sofa, a few chairs and a bed for examinations.

"Mrs Hill, please come in. Sit down, I've just received your scan results."

They sit down and she's still holding Doug's hand, terrified about what she might be about to hear.

The doctor has a file in his hands, but doesn't seem to want to show her any of the pictures inside it.

"There is something in your left lung, the bottom of your left lung to be precise."

No lightbox, he brings out an X-ray and simply holds it up to the light from the window.

"It just looks like a shadow on the X-ray they took when you came into A&E."

"I wanted to talk to you about that." She says.

He looks at her and waits, his eyes friendly and alert.

"I just noticed a little blood in my pee again."

"Not connected with your lungs, I promise you." Said the doctor. "Some anti-biotics are targeted and you obviously got the wrong ones. We can sort that out for you before you leave."

"And there's pain now. From my chest, right down to my pelvis."

He's bringing out a better picture, one showing something in her chest.

"Referred pain can appear to come from strange places." He says. "It confirms that we need to carry out a procedure to obtain a small amount of tissue for biopsy."

"Today?" She asks.

"Yes, now actually."

He's showing her the picture, pointing his finger at an indistinct shadow.

"Some tissues don't show up too well on X-rays, even a CT scan." Said the doctor. "They tried a few times while you were being scanned, but this is the best image we have."

It looks like smudge on the picture, but it does match where her pain is starting from.

"I'll use a needle to obtain a small sample." He continues. "And I think it's best if you're mildly sedated for the procedure."

A nurse enters the room with a tray full of equipment, covered by a white cloth.

"Please remove your jacket and blouse and sit on the bed."

Barbara sits there, shivering in just her bra, grateful that she'd remembered to put on decent underwear that morning.

"I'll need to insert a cannula into a vein." Said the nurse.

Doug is still sat on the chair, looking at her with a concerned look on his face.

"Can my friend come over here?" She asks.

"Yes of course, whatever makes you feel most comfortable."

Doug holds her hand, which helps; the cannula had hurt quite a lot. Another problem finding a vein and the nurse had put it into her hand again. The doctor is rubbing a brown cleaning solution over her chest, while the nurse fills a syringe. The doctor fits the syringe to the cannula and slowly sends the contents into her bloodstream. Almost immediately, Barbara feels more relaxed than she has for months.

"Wow, that is good stuff."

The doctor laughs and the nurse prepares another syringe. It has a needle on it this time.

"A local anaesthetic." Said the doctor. "This might hurt a little."

It hurt a lot and seemed to go on for minutes. Shallow injections, deep injections, she clung onto Doug's hand and tried not to yell. It stopped and the doctor was smiling at her, so was the nurse.

Fuck! the next bit just had to be mega painful. Barbara knew of course, she'd looked up the procedure on Google, even found a YouTube video of it being done. Stupid really, she knew that an incision would come next and then a needle the size of a turkey baster.

"Most people like to look away for this bit." Said the nurse.

Barbara did look away, she looked at Doug, resting her forehead on his shoulder. The doctor was making the incision, she could feel the scalpel cutting into her skin and then going deeper. No pain, so far, just a strange feeling of something burrowing into her chest. Then the doctor goes to the equipment tray and she knows the humungous needle is next.

"Try not to cough." Said the doctor. "And hold your breath when I tell you to."

For some reason her skirt worried her. It was fairly new and expensive, was she going to bleed all over it? Then the needle entered her body and she tried to concentrate on nothing but Doug's shoulder.

"Please, stop." She said.

"Not long now." Said the nurse. "Try not to talk."

The needle touched something deep in her lung and time seemed to stop for a while. Barbara looked at the incision and the needle, now deep inside her. The skin around the needle was becoming leathery.

"Jeez what a time for a dream." She muttered.

But it wasn't a dream. The sedation was messing with something in her head, stopping her changing, stopping her becoming the creature of tooth and claw. Her hand was now part claw, like a chimera created by a madman. She pulled out the needle and jammed it into the doctor's right eye, driving it in until he was no longer alive, no longer smiling at her.

Things became really strange after that, events merging with dreams, merging with her desire to change, to become one of the Terak. She was Terak, would always be Terak !

Something was pulling at her leg and then she was biting at someone. The lights were flickering and there seemed to be a lot of screaming from somewhere. It might have been ten minutes, or an hour, but eventually Barbara was looking across a ruined examination room, straight at Doug's lifeless body.

It took her a while to realise she was no longer human, no longer weak and puny. She'd never seen her body fully in the dreams, but now she examined herself from the toes up, or rather claws up. Her feet were large and the four claws on those feet looked lethal. The hole in her side had gone, as had the cannula from her hand. Her bra had obviously been destroyed by the change from human to Terak. Just her skirt remained, hanging around her thighs like a scarf.

"Ruaaaaarrgghhh."

She roared and received three answering roars from within the hospital. She felt it in her mind more than heard the roar of her kind. How many more were in London ? She didn't know, she just knew that the implanted seed in her lung had converted her and it contained a few basic orders.

'Cause disruption, kill and destroy, the main Terak invasion will be here soon.'

The nurse had died at some point and something had fed on her soft tissues. Barbara had no memory of doing it, but decided it must have been her. She walked towards Doug, still trying to get used to having muscular legs and claws. She remembered biting and chewing at Doug. Human or not, he'd been a loyal and attentive mate. She nuzzled his body and took in a long breath of his scent, to remember him by. No time for sentiment though, London was a big city, there was a lot of potential for causing disruption and havoc.

"There's one !"

Someone had seen her walking along the corridor, but she didn't bother chasing them. Barbara wanted to get outside, to take to the air. She kicked out a set of windows and emerged into the car park, in time to see another of her kind. A male, he roared at her in greeting and was then gone, flying south. She had no desire to kill Terry now, her whole purpose was to cause massive disruption, to prepare the way for the Terak invasion. Barbara ran across the car park, slowly beating her vast wings and taking to the air.

She could see for miles, see the fires breaking out all over the city. There were thousands of her kind, she could feel them all. The humans would fight back of course, but they were so weak and puny.

"Ruaaaaarrgghhh." She called and a hundred thousand Terak replied.

Earth would soon be theirs.

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~The End~

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