Theoph Fausti knew of the boogeyman well. She'd heard of it in folktales and childhood stories, and in children's rhymes: a voracious cloaked monster who loved to eat naughty children. She thought nothing of it, at the time. But settling into her new job, things take a turn for the worse.

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“I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do.”

What happened after was written clearly in her manual. The bereaving families would react in denial, anger, or guilt. Some would demand to see the body, eager to prove their loved one was still in this world. Some would forlornly take the news, their halfhearted smiles merely theatrics out of respect for the hospital staff. She'd been hit, once or twice, by more erratic widowers.

This was all procedure, at that point. The plague showed no signs of stopping among the populace, despite the measures put in place; turns out quarantining did not do much if the people didn't follow. So along ran that strange pulmonary disease, turning people into trees.

What a headache.

Theoph sighed in relief as she walked into her office, sliding into her office chair, coat tossed over its armchair; finally, she was alone. On her desk rested the paperwork, white and pristine, neatly in a pile, as if it was taunting her. Her superiors were going to want all the information they could get their hands on, and it fell onto her to report back. What she'd do for a lackey or two, or some snotty intern. Alas, there were some tasks too confidential for anyone else to handle, and she was the one for the job.

Theoph had barely gotten through the first five forms before there was a buzz at her phone.

Ah, yes, the intercom. What obsolete technology, but they had to make do. She pressed the button to speak. “Who is this?”

“Ehm, Amauri, ma'am,” stuttered the voice on the other line. “I have news to report on the preliminary tests.”

“Are those done?” They better have been. The blood tests were infernal by themselves. She pushed on the button to open the door-- it gave a response with an audible buzz. “Very well. Come on in.”

Ah, Amauri. He was a very simple fellow. Most medical students were cocky; they were looking for a chance to show off their many long years of higher education, to cut open a guy in an elevator and save the day: the youth simply had no control of themselves. But not Amauri, no. Amauri aspired to simpler things, like a good job with benefits. Why he went looking for it in the field of medicine was beyond her.

The poor intern rushed into the office, wings fluttering as he hovered by, then his small legs carrying him the rest of the way. His free upper arms grabbed nervously at his antennae, as if cleaning them over and over. “Miss Fausti, we have-- we have exciting news! Many news, many of which do not involve... the studies,” he said. His head tilted to look down at his own pile of papers. “But! I have--”

“Calm down, Ami. You are here,” she said, as she raised her hand to the top of her head. She then lowered it to the base of her chin. “I need you here. What are the results of the preliminary studies? The samples? The autopsies?”

“R-right. My apologies. Sorry, I.. perhaps the nerves from everything has me...” Amauri lowered his head, then shook it, snapping out of it. “Ahem. Samples indicate that the disease affects the circulatory system through a series of spores compared to the usual carriers. This is unprecedented-- this is the first recorded potentially fungal parasite that affects...” his button eyes trailed to the side, avoiding hers, “at least the primary species, until closer inspection. As for the autopsies! It has been hard transporting bodies, ever since the orders to... well, ever since the orders, but we believe one of them is blooming! It's--- frankly, it's terrifying, considering how contagious it is, but--”

“Amauri.” Theoph leaned forward on her table, fingers interlacing. “I need the patient 's name and records, now.”

“Uh-- I've got them right here!” He shuffled through the records in his hands, pulling one out near the bottom of the stack. “Hsarmarn Verti, thirty-two, quite a young man. Died several weeks ago, unfortunately, but due to the flood of patients, we had not been able to trim the corpse to deliver to the family. No comorbid conditions, as with all of the other patients.”

Perfect.

“I'm allocating Research Area 31-1-B for you,” ordered Theoph. Her reading glasses shone onto the note she had started writing. “I need the late Mr. Verti in there as soon as you can.”

“Ma'am, uh--” his voice turned to a mumble. “What am I supposed to tell the family? I understand this is a scientific breakthrough, but--”

“Amauri, this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to study the parasite's life cycle. If it gets us closer to understanding the illness, we have a moral imperative to do what we must.”

He stepped back. “I understand, Miss Fausti, but the other faculty members--”

“They are not going to know,” she retorted. With two of her fingers she pushed up her glasses. “I'm reserving one of the personal research rooms. You understand my need to protect the integrity of possible academic advances.”

“I understand, but...”

They exchanged glances, both staring deep into each other's eyes. His antennae twitched weakly, as if expecting something.

Ah.

Theoph sighed, searching for another sheet of paper. “After you do so, I believe you have been around the office for long enough this week. I'll write you off for the rest of it as paid leave. Let me know when you're done and I'll get it signed for you.”

Amauri nodded, tension gone from the room at the greasing of palms. His free hands rubbed against each other. “Absolutely, Miss Fausti! I will-- I'll take care of it.”

“Well?” She raised a brow. “Go on. You're dismissed.”

“Of-- of course! Thank you!” He set off, paper in his hands forgotten as he ran out with it.

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What she saw that day was something she'd never, ever forget.

The tree-- or rather, the body of late Mr. Verti-- laid sprawled on the floor, its trunk towering far above his long-shriveled corpse, yet unconsumed by worms and parasites, but not by lack of trying. A crown of trees adorned the specimen, the leaves of purple hue only ever interrupted by the sight of a branch or two. And there, at the top, was the fruit. The curious seeds to a long and prosperous retirement.

Or at least, there should have been.

Where... where was the fruit?

Was it Amauri? No, it couldn't have been. The dumb fly couldn't possibly tell the difference, and knew well to stay out of her way. No janitor would've come here and taken the rest of the corpse. Did someone else pick up on their conversation? Had someone stolen her work from under her nose?

And then, she heard it. A low hum. Nearly imperceptible, really: the sound of TV static, coming from her watch.

Damn thing, was her first thought. Must have broken while she was on her way there. But underneath it, she caught something else. Teeth clashing together, biting on something soft and juicy. Chewing and gargling, wet and hungry.

Oh no.

Her legs moved before she could think, moved by a fear more primal than merely losing her research. She halted at the sight that followed her as she looked up. Something was there. Nay-- something had always been there-- at least, that's what the tightness in her throat said.

Sure enough, there was the beast. Up atop the tree, resting on the crown, was a humanoid form of uneven shape. It shone in all the colors in the light spectrum, phasing out them with startling erraticness, bouncing from one hue to the other as soon as she blinked. Its long, prehensile hair wrapped itself around one of the soft fruits, squeezing its soft underbelly. The baby laid fast asleep, still, undisturbed by the cryptic sight.

The beast squeezed, and the baby's insides jiggled, unprepared for the pressure. It squeezed again, and this time the child yelped in pain, its soft rind threatening to burst open. It squeezed--

“Stop!”

Theoph would've looked around to see who had said that, but that was her voice, and that was her arm thrown in the air, reaching for the poor thing from the monster's grasp.

It looked back at her. Its eyes shone like lanterns, casting a light on Theoph and the corpses below.

“Stop?”

It uttered. It uttered something.

Theoph pulled back her hand, the strange thing chuckling underneath its breath. “Stop?” It mocked her, keeping the child within its grasp. It howled then, shaken, afraid of the height.

The thing of headache-inducing rainbow static hopped down from the branch, still clutching the baby, its wails momentarily silenced with the novelty of a painless fall.

"It sounds to me,” it said, its voice a purr, "that I have something you want.” The monster squeezed the child once more; she could see its soft organs press themselves against its skin. “Now tell me, little traitor. How do you plan to take it from me?"

What came out of Theoph was a wordless gasp, her eyes torn between the beast and the tree. She could feel the headache rising, if not from the stress, then from the eye strain. She... she had to focus. There was no other choice but to, no matter how much her legs begged her to run and her arms told her to claw and scratch and fight. All she could do was set aside the sheer retching terror that laid in seeing the blood of so many children smeared on this thing's shifting face. Theoph Fausti had to get back to what was important.

That brought another question. What was important?

It came to her as simply as any parental instinct. The child. Was it the only one left of the crop? It had to be. The imperative, then, was to save it. She'd greased too many palms, done so much work, spent one minute too many in this backwater planet... just to get even one tree to bloom.

She could not let it die.

"I'll give you... anything. Anything at all." she nearly begged, her knees buckling in on themselves and arms threatening to toss her forward from the weight. It could not end like this.

"Oh?" Its eyes were truly centered on her now, lighting her up like a stage spotlight. Enough to give anyone stage fright. "A deal, is it?"

Theoph nodded.

There was a low chuckle, barely indistinguishable from the static; her head swirled as it came from every corner at once, and yet, from nowhere at all. "And what possible value could you offer me?"

Offer? There had to be something she could offer. But-- shit-- what could satisfy such a creature's endless hunger? Whatever this thing was, it was voracious, and she'd have to guess what could ever fill such a thing's stomach, or worse yet, decide the worth of a child's life.

Wait. Hunger. Theoph's thoughts raced back to nursery rhymes from her childhood in the Garden, connected by a half-remembered synapse. There was no such thing as an end to its hunger. If she wished to appease such a beast, she had to give it more than just an offering.

She'd have to bargain for the child's life.

"Fruit." she mumbled, with helpless finality. "I can give you fruit. More fruit in a month than what that one child would do for you-- or any child. A crate of it. Just...” her voice broke as she spoke, “not children. Spare the children.”

With those words, the patient veil of silence set over the room.

The thing considered her words, idly blinking as it did so. It was not past a minute when it turned around, setting the child precariously wedged between two branches; it fell into a deep sleep, soothed by the touch of its parent.

She had not even blinked before the beast had something new on its tendrils. It wasn't possible, but it had to be, as she was seeing it with her own two eyes: the boogeyman held a clipboard to her, complete with pen and paper.

"Sign," it said. If there was a smile, it'd be wide and splitting; instead the two eyes stared at her in terrible expectation.

Theoph grasped at the document as she flipped its pages. It was strange to see paper so pristine from a monster drenched in blood, but perhaps more astonishing was the legal accuracy of such a document. A box of fruit of a precise legal quality, delivered weekly, conforming to the planet's legal standards and accounting for time zones, as well as translations in other official languages near the last few pages. When-- or rather, how-- had the monster so thoroughly learned this planet's regulations? Their contract law?

None of that mattered, truly. What mattered is that she signed.

All Father help them all, but she signed.

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https://archiveofourown.org/works/39322080

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