



Kaylie Night

*Keeper
of the
Night*

Adrenaline burned in Crystal's veins with each heartbeat. It was as if she had just woken up, but she couldn't remember having been asleep, and she was already standing.

Who am I?

Crystal paced in a wide circle, peering between the trees. Every plant and branch felt familiar, the smell of pollen and dust and evergreen stirring memories she couldn't grasp. She knew the forest, but nothing outside of it. She had no idea how she had gotten here.

Her name was all she could remember about herself. Even it was little more than a wisp.

Her camo pants and black t-shirt provided no clues. Toned muscles beneath her skin implied training she couldn't recall. Her short hair just reached her eyes if

she pulled at its ends. Dark, thick, straight—but the sensation of running her fingers through it was new, as though she never had in her life.

But somehow, she knew she could have found her way through this forest with her eyes closed, even though she couldn't remember ever having been here before. It was as if this place were a part of her, without having ever been a part of her experience. Navigating through it would be as natural as a blood cell finding its way back to the heart.

She felt her head for bumps—maybe an injury had taken her memories—but she felt fine. No sign of injury, no pain. She tried to remember who had told her that head injuries could lead to a loss of memories, but it was just information in her head, like it had always been there. Like the forest.

The tree roots below jabbed into the soles of Crystal's feet, and the leaves above rustled to reveal pinpricks of sunlight. She stood, breathing deeply in the humid air, her pulse pounding in her ears. The forest was a place of great danger—that much, she could sense with or without memories.

A soft rustling in the trees bristled her senses. Strong instinct kicked her in the gut. All at once, she knew why she was here.

She dropped to the ground, and the Beast—an enormous black jaguar—leapt over her and kept running, its claws leaving deep marks in the dirt, its muscles bulging beneath its black fur, its long tail just flicking her face as it ran away.

The corners of her lips pulled into a smile. She pulled a dagger from a sheath in her back pocket and ran after it.

Her bare feet ground into rocks and thorns as she sprinted. She felt no pain. The wind in her hair and the drumbeat of her heart drowned out all else.

Some part of her conscious mind wondered where the Beast was going and why she was running after it. It ran in a clear direction, knowing where it was going. It seemed to want nothing to do with her, yet she could not escape it: her whole existence revolved around it, the sum total of her purpose wrapped up in its defeat.

The Beast's footsteps made no sound. Her only clue that she was heading in the right direction was the rustle of branches, the claw marks left behind. And, of course, her own instincts. It could have been silent, invisible, and intangible; still, she felt she could have followed it to the ends of the earth.

At last, the Beast reached a clearing. Crystal stood behind a tree, peeking her head out to watch, clutching the dagger tighter. The Beast faced away from her, crouched low, the tip of its tail slowly flicking back and forth. Whatever its prey, she could not see it from where she stood.

She stepped out from behind the tree. A twig snapped beneath her foot, but the Beast did not turn. She took a few steps to one side and gasped.

A boy, no more than seven years old, cowered before the Beast. Tears streamed down his face, but he cowered, frozen, his limbs shaking.

The boy wasn't going to run. Crystal broke herself out of her trance and leapt at the Beast just as it pounced.

She landed on its back, and its wild yellow eyes finally turned on her. It darted away, knocking her off onto the ground. Its claws slashed through the air. She dodged, and the claws pierced the ground where she had been. She raised her dagger, and the beast flew toward her.

It snapped at her. One of its teeth grazed the skin on her arm, but she hardly felt the pain. She wrapped one arm around the beast, and stabbed the other into its heart. She felt the blade pass through skin and flesh—

And then the creature disappeared. Crystal dropped to the ground, panting, the sun blinding her. The dagger in her hand was clean.

Breathing hard, Crystal rolled onto her side, pulling herself up to stand. Blood trickled down her arm, but the wound was shallow.

She turned toward the boy, who stood staring at her. “Are you okay?”

As if the spell was broken, he ran. His foot caught on a tree root, and he fell—

2

Crystal jolted awake. Again.

It was a grassy plain this time, and the sun beat down hot and dry. She jumped to her feet and paced in a circle—flat land for miles around.

She tried to remember what had happened to the child. The whole scene was so clear in her mind, the only memory in an otherwise empty past, but the last

thing she remembered was the boy tripping. If there had been anything after that, anything between the boy running away and her arriving here, those memories were lost.

And again, she knew this place like the back of her hand. Well, like she imagined she would know the back of her hand if she remembered much of anything about her body at all.

She glanced down at her arm, where the beast had snapped at her. Smooth skin, no scar tissue. It was as if the fight had never happened.

But if the fight had never happened . . .

Crystal dropped to the ground once again, and this time she caught a glimpse of the Beast before it passed over her. It was a great bird of prey this time, its talons sharp as the dagger from the last fight, feathers black as midnight, but the glowing yellow eyes were the same—as was her calling.

She reached into her pocket for her dagger, but something impeded her motion, something strapped to her back. A bow and quiver of arrows. She unstrapped the bow and ran her hand along the dark wooden limbs, the tight bow string. Somehow, the bow felt more familiar to her than her own body. She smiled and ran after the Beast.

The strategy was different this time. The Beast was high overhead, so she had no need to hide or sneak, and neither did it. Her only goal was speed. Her bare feet took to the grass much more kindly than they had taken to the rocky soil, and the wind tousled her hair as she ran.

She must have run for several minutes. Little by little, the distance between herself and the Beast widened, until its wings were little more than a brush stroke against the sky.

Despite the distance, she could hear its terrifying cry, as shrill as if it was standing beside her. It hovered for a moment before diving.

She didn't have to be able to see its target. She knew.

There was no time to get the boy out of the way, no way to call out to him loud enough for him to hear. Crystal pulled out her bow, took an arrow from the quiver, pulled back the drawstring . . .

The arrow whistled as it flew. The beast vanished.

Crystal lowered her bow and ran. By the time she reached the boy, he was coming to his senses. His eyes widened with fear when he saw her coming, and he leapt to his feet and ran away.

“Wait, come back!”

The boy stopped short.

She took a step closer. “Who are you?”

“C-Calvin.” He slowly turned to face her.

“It's okay, Calvin, I'm not going to hurt you.” She continued to step toward him. “Look, a few minutes ago I saved you from that—jaguar thing, and then—”

“A week ago.”

Crystal's breath caught in her throat. “What do you mean, a week ago?”

Calvin shook his head. “I don't—I don't think you're supposed to talk to me.”

“Then . . . you know who I am?”

“Just go away, okay?” He turned away from her.

“You’ve been calling me here to save you somehow, haven’t you?”

“No, my mom did.”

“Your mom?” She couldn’t recall anyone else having been at the last fight, but there was a lot she couldn’t remember. “Look, ten minutes ago, that jaguar—”

“A week! I already told you, a week!”

“Just tell me who I am!”

The boy’s little hands curled into fists. He breathed in deep, and shouted—

3

Crystal snapped awake once again.

It was a boat this time, a little metal rowboat, probably big enough to seat four if they didn’t mind squeezing in. The sky was blue with a few wisps of clouds, the air cool and misty and salty. Waves and water lined the horizon, no land to be found.

It was harder to gauge her own familiarity with the place—who could say they knew the entire ocean?—but a bulge in her pocket turned out to be a compass, and her head was full of constellations. She could navigate to land if she wanted to.

A third place. A third mystery. But this time, she could escape. Maybe she could find someone who knew who she was. Or maybe no one did, and that was even better. She could start a new life alone.

She smiled. Freedom at last. One way or another, she would find out who she was.

The rowboat rocked hard, almost tipping over. Crystal peered over the edge of the boat, then she ducked down.

The Beast shot out of the water and flew over her rowboat. Its yellow eyes glowed, the same as before, but this time, silvery scales gleamed in the sunlight. Its teeth glinted, sharp as the arrow that had defeated it during their last fight. Fiercer and more terrifying than ever before.

Crystal dug into her pocket—no dagger. Reached back behind her—no bow or arrows. She crouched down and searched beneath the seat.

A harpoon gun.

Again, she knew exactly how to defeat the Beast. Again, the core fibers of her being called her, compelled her to chase, to fight.

But this time was different. The impulse wouldn't win this time, because she had had enough.

She would run from this place and the impossible mysteries that had surrounded her short existence. She would live her own life, away from the beast that wouldn't die. And Calvin . . .

Calvin.

Crystal jumped up onto the seat in the rowboat, balancing as it rocked. A pointed fin sped through the water, leaving a wake behind it, gaining on another rowboat in the distance.

She didn't have to save him. She didn't even know who he was. For all she knew, Calvin might be the reason all of these things were happening to her. His death might even free her.. And what was the point of saving someone from a fight that could never be won? Besides, if she killed the Beast again, she'd just appear in a new place and the cycle would start all over again.

And yet, almost against her will, her arms rowed, harder and harder, until she was close enough to take aim with the harpoon gun. The beast was midair, jaws snapping at the child, when the harpoon sank in. Its momentum carried it over the boat, but it disappeared just before reaching the water.

The boy sat in the boat, arms wrapped around his knees. At least this time, he couldn't run away, but his anger had transported Crystal the last time, so she would have to be careful.

"Calvin." Slowly, she rowed closer to him. "Are you okay?"

He just stared at her, trembling.

"Hey, it's okay. You're safe now. Can we talk?"

He nodded. "My counselor said you might be confused, since you're new. She said I should talk to you, if I could stay asleep."

"Asleep?" She frowned. "Do you think this is a dream?"

“It’s a nightmare. But usually I don’t know it’s a dream until I wake up screaming.”

The last few hours—weeks?—certainly did seem to have a dream-like quality to them, though it still didn’t make any sense. She held out a hand. “Come onto my boat?”

Calvin let her help him onto her boat, and he sat down on one of the seats.

Her heart pounded harder than it had when she had been fighting. At last, she had the full attention of the only person who had any idea who she was, and she couldn’t think of what to say. At any moment, he could disappear, and she could wake up again.

Of course, then she’d just have to save him again, and she’d get another chance. She took a deep breath. “So, your counselor wanted you to talk to me.”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to ask, what’s your name?”

“Crystal.” She breathed in to ask a question, but he spoke first.

“Oh, like my Night Crystal?”

Crystal blinked. “Your *what?*”

“My mom bought me an implant to help with the nightmares. It’s a thing they put in my brain. Is that where your name comes from?”

“An implant.” Her limbs felt numb.

“Yeah. They said it was a . . . an *AI*, I think. It was supposed to make the nightmares go away, but that monster still keeps attacking me.”

Crystal turned away from the boy, squeezing her eyes shut.

An AI.

So that settled it. She never could have escaped, no matter what she had done. Apart from him, she literally didn't exist.

Her breaths came short. This was her life—or rather, a pathetic mimicry of a life. Trapped in a child's nightmare, doomed to save him from creatures that didn't exist for the remainder of his childhood—and then what? She would never have a life of her own. She wasn't even a person.

But she *felt* like a person! Whoever had designed the Night Crystal—did they know she was self aware? Had they meant for her to be? Did they *care*?

“Are you okay, Crystal?”

She blinked against the stinging in her eyes. She wiped at her eyes and turned back to him, the boy who wore a brain implant to keep away bad dreams. It sounded like an extreme solution to a relatively minor problem—there had to be more he wasn't telling her. “Do a lot of your friends have implants?”

“I don't think so. I never asked them, though.”

A little shred of hope—that there might be many others like her, and that he might be able to lead her to them—went up in flames. “Those dreams must be pretty bad, then.”

His face turned white. It was a stupid question—she had seen the Beast.

“Does your counselor know why you keep having nightmares?”

His brow furrowed.

“I mean, sometimes people have nightmares for a reason. They’re scared of something, and it kind of follows them into their sleep.” She had no idea how she knew that, but it sounded right.

For a long time, he just stared off into the distance. “I think it’s time for me to wake up now.”

It was silent for a moment.

He sighed. “Thanks for saving me from the monsters. I don’t think the implant is working, though. It was supposed to *stop* the bad dreams.”

“Did your counselor tell you that?”

He shrugged.

“Calvin, maybe we can get rid of your nightmares. We just have to—” Her breath froze as she considered what she was saying. Why would she be advocating for her own destruction? If his nightmares stopped, there would be no use for her. She’d be torn out of his head and tossed aside. She would die, if there was death for one such as her. In any case, her existence would end.

Unless implants could be reused. Then, she might be placed into another child’s head, to save them from their nightmares.

There could be worse fates.

“Calvin.” She took a deep breath. “Try and think. What are you afraid of in real life?”

“Why?”

“Because I think I know why I’m here.”

Crystal appeared again.

It was a snowy mountaintop, a mountain she could have navigated in a blizzard. This time, though, it made sense that she would know a place she couldn't remember. The information would have been uploaded into Calvin's implant as soon as the dream took root, as well as how to use the weapon that would defeat the Beast.

She sat up slowly. She had been sleeping on a large rock beside a white-dusted tree, a few steps away from a downhill slope dotted with trees and half-buried bushes. For the first time, she wore a thick jacket, snow pants, and boots.

None of the usual high-intensity adrenaline flooded her bloodstream. Instead, her heartbeat was slow and steady and hard. She felt around for a weapon, and she didn't find anything. The Beast wasn't coming—yet.

She heard the crunching of the snow beside her, and Calvin approached her in snow gear so thick he could barely walk without swinging his whole legs. "Hi Crystal." His face was more relaxed this time, though there were still traces of worry in his eyes.

"Hey. I seem to be missing some memories from the last dream. Where did we leave things?"

“I don’t know. My mom woke me up for school.”

She nodded slowly. Even if nothing startled him awake, there was no way to know how much time they had.

“I’m actually sleeping on the couch at my counselor’s office right now. She did something to my implant so that I would have a dream.”

“But the Beast isn’t here.”

He shook his head. “This isn’t a nightmare.”

She nodded slowly, and he climbed up onto the rock beside her. “Calvin, what are you afraid of?”

“Monsters.” He pulled his knees into his chest.

If that was all it was, Crystal wasn’t impressed by Calvin’s counselor. She’d resorted to putting an implant into a child’s brain for a simple irrational fear that all children had? “There are no such things as monsters. You know that, don’t you?”

His eyes went wide. “There are monsters! I saw one!”

She pressed her lips together. “Which one? I’ve seen a few in your dream.”

“I mean in real life!”

“When did you see a monster in real life?”

He sighed. “Well . . . I didn’t see it. But I saw what it did to my brother.”

She shifted a little closer to Calvin and placed a gloved hand on his thick jacket. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He looked away. “No, I don’t *want* to. But my counselor made me come here, so . . .” He took a deep breath. “I found him dead in his room. A monster killed him. He was big, he was fourteen. If he couldn’t fight the monster, I won’t be able to.”

“How do you know it was a monster?”

“It—” his voice cracked— “it left claw marks in his wrists.”

Crystal gasped. Her mouth hung open, and her eyes stung.

That poor child . . . his poor *mother!*

Calvin pulled his knees into his chest, his eyes shining. “I’m scared, Crystal.”

Crystal pulled off one glove and wiped the tears from the boy’s cheeks. Of course his counselor couldn’t tell him monsters weren’t real, not now. And neither could she. Not without telling him that his brother had killed himself.

She looked out at the mountain. She knew her way around it and away from it. The purpose that had been programmed into her was an exercise in futility. He wasn’t in any real danger, but there was no easy way to explain that to him, so he’d just keep having the nightmares. Every day, a new place, a new creature. No end in sight. It was no wonder they’d given him the implant, but there was so little she could do to help him. The best she could do was ease his fear a little.

She set her jaw. It was enough.

“Calvin.”

He looked up at her, his eyes shiny.

“You listen to me. That beast is *not* going to get you.”

He sniffled. “How do you know?”

“Because I’m going to be here. Every night if I have to. I will never, ever let it hurt you.”

A single tear rolled down his cheek.

“But this is really important. You need to be on the look out for your mom, okay? You need to protect her from the monsters. You need to be brave for her.”

He swallowed. “Does brave mean I can’t cry?”

“No, no. Brave means you don’t run away when she cries.”

Calvin rested his head against her shoulder, a tear streaming down one cheek. “Do you think she’s scared, too?”

Her hand trembled as she wrapped her arm around him. “I think she probably is.”

“But I don’t need to be scared. Because I have you.”

She squeezed him. “And she has you.”

Crystal woke up again.

A new nightmare. A new place—a bustling city this time. Whether on sea or land, overhead or underground, the beast lurked in waiting. And Calvin would be waiting for her.

It wouldn't last. Someday, he'd figure out what had really happened to his brother. She would be there for him when he did, if it happened before the nightmares stopped. Of course, if he stopped having nightmares, they'd probably take her out of his head.

My counselor said you might be confused, since you're new.

Finally, in the peace of the knowledge of her purpose, she could think straight enough to put the pieces together. Calvin's counselor had specified that Crystal was new because not all implants were. That meant implants weren't discarded; they were recycled. She wouldn't die. She would be sent to fight again.

If—when—they took her out of Calvin's head, they'd place her into a new one. A new realm of nightmares over which to stand guard.

But this time, she'd know exactly what to do.

This time, she knew who she was.

The End

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