

SEASON OF THE BEASTS

By
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It's finished now, but these mementos still lie scattered around my bed: a Ziplock bag full of water, a bowl of sea salt, old, cold cups of coffee, the TV remote, the DVD remote, and the remote I rigged for the lights, my ankh, a big abalone shell of burnt wooden match sticks, my grandmother's crucifix, and a bottle of varapamil prescribed by the Capricorn. I'm Crusoe sorting through shipwreckage as I pick up the scattered claw-sheaths and abandoned carapaces, which are hard as the shells of horseshoe crabs. It smells musty, like kittens being born in this dark room, but it's been three days since the last beast came. So ends another season.

The claw sheaths are the same color as the carpet, a rusty red. I should pull the blankets from the windows so I can see them better, but I want to preserve my inner sanctum a little longer. I've endured five of these. A season usually lasts six weeks, coming every other year. Midwinter. Always. It starts with a shot across the bow: a tremor, or a slight flutter over the right ear. Aspirin and codeine can numb these small pains, but only for a few days, a week at most. Soon, drugs stop working, and light - especially the menacing sun - can feel like a spinning drill bit in my eye.

Then the music starts. A Baroque fugue rattles the window panes and sets my downstairs neighbor to hitting her ceiling with a pan, and every trumpet blast and cello stroke blaring from my skull is a symphony of pain. I pinch the pressure point on my left hand. I gobble aspirin straight from the bottle. I contemplate sawing my own head off because the musical incubation will soon end, and the hatching will begin. In the dark of my bedroom, I sit with a Ziplock bag of ice pressed against my head.

Our agony, I squint my eyes and pray over the deafening fugue's barrage, who art inevitable, harrowing be thy name . . .

My heart buckles as a sharp beak splits through my head, a tooth growing from bone. It nips at my fingers. I drop the ice, lie back, and resign myself to the bed. The beak strains to open, hissing and screeching, cracking me, and sending fissures through my skull.

Thy domination come, thy whim be done, on earth as it is in ruin . . .

I usually pass out, waking from this trauma hours later, the weight of a hatchling on the right side of my head. In the mirror, I can see its hard wings folded neatly over its back, concealing the fact that this beast is sharpening its rust-red claws on me.

In the mirror now, the beast long gone, my black hair is neatly combed, newly cut, and I look rested. I separate the hair roots over my right ear, looking for scar tissue. Nothing. Despite their viciousness, beasts never leave a mark.

But back in Season of the Beasts #2, they left a mark on the Capricorn whether he admits it or not. He had come to my apartment, hoping to celebrate publishing a paper on treating patients suffering from Helsinki Syndrome - prisoners who adhere to their captors' dogma, even after release.

"Where - What *is* that?" said the Capricorn, he'd said, edging toward me in my dark apartment.

The newest creature was clinging to the side of my head like an evil beret. A deadly swath of light was piercing into my room. "Shut the goddamn door," I moaned. "My skull keeps growing them," I said, pointing to the old carapaces lying in a crescent around my bed where they'd been shed and discarded by maturing beasts. "My skull is a demon egg. When it's not playing demonic music, it's making demonic babies."

The Capricorn had bug eyes, so as he took a pen from his pocket and pushed it toward the beast's face, he looked comically scared.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I have no clue."

The beast considered the pen with crossed eyes, slowly looking up Capricorn's arm to his face. Then, without warning, it launched itself from the side of my head with an excruciating kick and attached itself to Capricorn's chest. Cap fell face forward onto the floor, the beast's wings clacking and applauding beneath him. After a loud tussle, the thing scurried off into the shadows and Capricorn jumped to his feet, shouting, "What in the name of fuck was that?" He said this over and over. For about an hour. When he calmed down finally, he said things like, "Did you see it? I've never - I've never seen - I couldn't imagine - did *you* see it?"

There were no answers for his half-formed questions, so eventually he left, gripping a dishtowel in both hands to soak up the blood.

I saw the Capricorn six months later at a party where he seemed to have lost all ability to socially regulate himself. He laughed too long and loudly at meager puns, drank straight from the punch ladle, set a few women guests on edge with probing questions about their sexuality, and interrupted conversations with non-sequiturs that wound maze-like into dark confessions.

Cornering him late in the night, I asked him if he was feeling all right. "You're acting, I don't know, edgy."

With his insect eyes, Cap seemed nervous having me stand too close to him. He raised his finger and said, "You are *terra incognita*, bro - land of dragons - so stay the fuck away from me."

He backed away from me, heels clocking into chair legs. I noticed with a pang of jealousy that the Capricorn had little white scars on his index finger.

Give us our nightly terror, I prayed after I saw Cap's lacerated finger, and despise us for our pathetic weaknesses, as we despise those pathetically weaker than ourselves. And lead us not into numbness but deliver us into pain.

After gathering the array of prescription bottles from my nightstand, I store

them in my burgeoning medicine chest for next season. Maxalt. Ergotomine. Varapamil. Omega-3. Naturum matriculum. Ginkgo biloba. Morphine. Feverfew. Scorpion tea from that Chinese herbalist that Capricorn hates. Marijuana. Acupuncture. Acupressure. Mint oil. Codeine. Tylenol. Cafergot. Exorcisms, healings, chakra realignment, profane liturgy, pleas, tears, screams. Once that beak pokes through, all my potions and strategies vanish. First one squirms out of my skull. Then another. Another. A trio. A beast-brood. A flock. A clan. Nothing can stop my body from populating the earth with demons.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the horror forever and ever.

Amen.

When it finally ends, the season strands me without fanfare. I go from lying supine at the mercy of these hellish births to cleaning out the refrigerator and paying my utilities bills and opening month-old mail. Ignoring those tasks a bit longer, I pick up the most recent beast-shell and its splay of translucent, sepia-veined wings. I believe I can smell something deep and musky. Blood? Brain? Afterbirth? Whatever it is, I appreciate this smell because as soon as the season ends, like the Capricorn, I could convince myself so easily that this nightmare was just a nightmare. But I resist that triteness with all my might. Because in its course, the season sharpens me, and this lingering animalian, afterbirth smell reminds me of that sharper reality. From this moment on, every day leading me away from this season takes me further from the marvel of disembodied symphonies and skull-cracking births, takes me further from that smell of monsters breeding, the smell of my own body's mysterious gear-work.

Now the shells and wings have been gathered, and I've picked up all the claws. It smells like fresh laundry in here now, not newborn cats, so I'm ready to hoist the Venetian blinds, throw open the sash, and welcome in the bland sunlight.

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