

- * Dream
- dread/mystery
- * Waken up by wife, introduction to Hilly.
- slice of life/tenderness
- * Go to work
- draining/exhaustion
- * Escape from the tank
- panic/confusion
- * Escape from the facility
- fear/courage
- *Awaken in hospital
- relief/dread

--add echoing sound of footsteps while in tank.

It was the dream again.

Leonard floated limply in a tank of thick fluid. What he could see of the facility was cast in a sickly green tint.

Rows of tanks like the one he was in, he couldn't see how many. There were more below him, and incomplete scaffolding above that could have held even more. They were similar but not identical. Like rows of jars on a counter or in a pantry, each a slightly different size and shape, labels missing. Each of these jars held a small mantidcore suspended within, a winged feline with a scorpion's tail. Their all too human eyes open, unblinking, just like his own.

Once something had given way and a nearby tank had fallen to the floor below where landed upon another tank, shattering both.

Sometimes one or more human forms would wander the catwalks between the tanks and look in on the subjects. Usually scribbling notes as they lethargically passed from one tank to the next. Always dressed all in black, looking something like plague doctors, only instead of beaks they had gas masks that wouldn't have looked out of place in the trenches of the first world war.

Occasionally one of these men would stop and add something to the fluid in one tank or another.

One time one of them stopped in front of the tank right across from Leonard's. After scribbling furiously in his notes for several minutes he flushed a tank. Then he opened it and pulled the occupant out. He carried it as if it were nothing but a bit of wet laundry.

There was something else in the dream. He felt as though he were being forced through a narrow space, like a crack in a wall. He felt it again each time the dream ended.

During the dream Leonard never spoke, never moved, never thought.

During the dream he didn't really live at all.

Hour after hour without sensation.

He could hear his alarm. But that had no meaning here.

Nothing meant anything while he was in the tank.

Leonard awoke by degrees.

Slowly the blur before him resolved into his wife's freckled face. Hilly had turned off his alarm and opened the curtains to let the morning sun and birdsong spill through their small window.

She was beaming, her beautiful brown eyes sparkled as they caught the light.

Leonard found it almost immediately.

On a small blue shelf next to the window there was an array of bullets of various shapes and calibers. Each painstakingly painted. One had flames on it, another with red white and blue, a few had quotes or verses written in calligraphy, usually with a depiction of the historical figure, or movie character who said the quote, another set were themed after playing cards, a couple even had tiny pin-up girls painted on them, as if they were oldtime warplanes.

This morning there was a new one, a long rifle round painted to look like a miniature ICBM.

She pressed a cup of coffee into Leonard's hands and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Then brushed a few strands of her chestnut hair out of her face and stood. She adjusted the strap on her blue jean overalls, and went into the kitchen.

Leonard took a deep sip of the coffee. It had lots cream and sugar, just the way he liked it.

His bare feet hit the cold hardwood floor.

On a coat hanger she'd hung from the curtain rod was his work uniform. A simple yellow polo shirt with the corporate logo of the service station he worked at. And the nicest pair of black pants he owned, his 'work pants'.

All his pants were former work pants that had gotten too worn.

He pulled the shirt on, it was getting tight around his stomach, But it was also still warm from the dryer and that felt great.

He took the time to visit the bathroom sink and shave the black stubble from his face. He hastily worked to tame his hair with a comb. Was it getting even thicker? Wasn't it supposed to thin as he aged?

Something struck him as odd about his eyes today, it wasn't anything he could put his finger on. They looked just a gray and ordinary as ever, but...

Then he noticed his arm.

His tattoo had lost it's shape.

The cartoonish fighter jet on his upper arm had been sharp and angular. Missiles and guns exaggerated. He'd had it since he was a teen. And this morning it was just a blurred mess.

He rubbed at it, not sure what to make of this. He thought he could still make out the guns, the yellows and red of them firing were still visible, kinda.

He scowled at it. Finally he went over to the medical bag and took out a bandage and wrapped it around the unsightly thing. Hiding the eyesore until he had time to figure out what to do about it.

He left their cramped bedroom into the main room. A small kitchen where Hilly was packing his lunch, separated from the rest of their apartment by a counter. The rest of their apartment consisting of a single room with their computer, all of Hilly's paints, brushes, and bullets, and a couple bookshelves loaded with dvds.

Leonard grabbed a day old donut and his lunchbag and turned to leave. He had spent to long in bed and had to hurry.

A hand on his shoulder stopped him.
Hilly was staring at the bandage on his arm. Then she looked up and met his eyes.
Leonard shrugged, then patted her on the shoulder, gave her a quick kiss, and moved on with his day.

It was still early morning and already it was getting hot, the leather seats of Leonard's old Toyota were hot enough that he threw a towel over them rather than risking the bare skin of his arms touching them.

When he arrived at his work he found that they still hadn't replaced the broken window, bare plywood hid the broken pane. Two of the gas pumps were taped off again as well.

It never ceased to amaze him how cheap the owners were. With so many truck drivers filling up at Pathfinders, how could they allow the place to look run down.

And that wasn't even taking into account the garbage that hadn't been picked up.

Bill was on shift, the man was behind the counter watching something on his phone.

Jacky never showed up for her shift, so once Bill left Leonard found himself having to take care of everything alone.

He started by stocking the shelves. Then he cleaned the sticky goop off the tables. Checked the restrooms and made sure the showers were functioning properly today. He dust mopped the aisles. And swept up the trash outside as well.

All the while waiting on customers whenever one approached the register.

Including one who insisted on demanding a refund for a product, that they did not sell in their store.

Despite his best efforts, and continuous consumption of caffeine, that deep exhaustion crept up on him.

Ellie was late, and no-one else could be found to fill her shift. So Leonard was forced to continue working well after his shift should have been over.

Eventually the assistant manager came in and relieved Leonard.

On his way to his car Leonard chugged an energy drink, and then sat and waited for it to kick in.

He needed it to kick in so he could drive.

His eyes drooped and he began seeing flashes of the tanks, the manticores, the guy in the gas mask adding something to the fluid.

Leonard forced himself to back awake. He needed to be awake so he could...

He was in the tank.

He blinked.

There was sound.

Shouts, a scream of pain, glass shattering.

Leonard turned his head. The manticores in the other tanks were stirring. Some even moved frantically.

The tank shook and then started to open from the bottom.

Every tank slid upwards. The greenish fluid moving slowly, like thick sludge.

Leonard's tank stopped. Apparently jammed only an inch off the ground.

He tried to swim, but his body moved weirdly and he couldn't get anywhere.

The fluid was not being drained away, it was simply being spilled onto the floor.

Withing moments manticores were tumbling out with the goo, coughing up lungfulls of the fluid and gasping in air.

As the fluid oozed out of Leonard's tank large bubbles of air slowly rose to the top.

The shouts drew closer and Leonard could see several men.

The first was one of men in masks. He fell gurgling to the floor, impaled by two spears through the chest.

They were huge, larger then the men who always took notes. They wore no shirts, and their bodies were lumpy with muscles. As if someone had lifted their skin and packed spoonfulls of muscle here and there at random.

One man had unnaturally large eyes that seemed to bulge out of the sockets.

That other had normal human eyes, and was covered in grayish silver fur.

Both held spears, they looking like iron pipes that had a knife welded on the end. But they didn't look clumsy, not the way these men were holding them.

Not the way these men were striking tiny manticores with every thrust.

Leonard desperately strove to swim to the bottom, where the gap was. It as too narrow for him to squeeze through.

He fought and fought, but his tiny paws could do nothing to the heavy glass.

A human voice grabbed his attention. A woman's voice with a southern accent.

He saw one of the manticores had tried crawling back into the tank to hide and had been seized by the tail and dragged out.

The man took a first grip, one hand on her head, the other on her rear. She stopped pleading and dug her claws into his arm, they seemed to grow in size. But though they tore his skin they failed to draw any blood. With a toothy grin the man pulled her apart.

He tossed the still quivering hunks aside and then turned his grin on Leonard.

He walked up to the half-drained tank and drew his arm back. Then punched through the glass, heedless of the shards cutting into his arm, and groped in the goo for Leonard.

In his panic Leonard found something, a strength flowing from somewhere in his chest to his legs.

Claws extended he seized the man's wrist and climbed up his arm, then sprang off his shoulder.

A spearthrust whizzed past his ear.

Leonard landed awkwardly and struggled to find his feet.

He wasn't on solid ground and found himself dragged down with the goo as it slid off the catwalk and dripped slowly down to the floor below. Leonard could see bodies, of men and manticore, broken glass, and blood which seemed to flow on the surface of the goo from all the shattered tanks.

The drop he was in broke free and fell splattering onto the floor below.

Leonard's head broke the surface and he coughed, coughed and spat, until he'd heaved out all the fluid in his lungs.

When he opened his eyes he found himself staring into the dead, all to human eyes of a manticore that had been run through by a spear.

He pulled away and climbing out of the goo onto a broken tank he tried to get his bearings.

There were manticore everywhere. Hundreds of them, mostly dead and dying. Though still a great number on their feet looking for escape.

Leonard simply followed the majority and began scrambling towards a doorway at the far end of the room.

The other manticore had a variety of fur colors and patterns. Some had larger more powerful legs, others had more developed wings or stingers. None were at all coordinated, and were constantly running face first into objects. Leonard himself clipped two tanks and was pushed off course by another feline and ran full force into the side of the door.

He finally found his stride in the hallway. The wooden paneling had deep scores in it, and what looked like scorch marks from lightning along one wall. There were countless doors on the right side. All of which had been kicked in. Frequently with bodies inside.

Rounding a corner Leonard was almost caught in a net.

Several of the masked men were catching manticores and throwing them into a large brass cage.

He wanted to help but...

He remember how ineffective the one who'd tried to fight back had been.

One of the caught manticore bit and clawed at the hands of the man who forced it into the cage. The man probably couldn't even feel it through those leather gloves.

Leonard hissed and ran on with the others.

Before he reached the next corner he could feel the cold outside air.

When he finally rounded the corner he saw a pair of doors, torn off their hinges and left where they fell.

There were dozens of manticore waiting, tense. Just out of easy spear reach of a pair of the monstrous spearmen he'd seen earlier.

These two both had enlarged eyes, and he lumpy muscles. Though only one of the two was a giant.

There were also several dead manticores at their feet.

Leonard sat, he was out of breath.

Taking a moment to look at himself.

Dark red fur, no pattern. His legs seemed larger then many.

He found he had a piece of glass stuck in his paw. It was bleeding.

Once he noticed it the pain hit him.

Instinctively he tried to pluck it out, but he didn't have hands.

He tried to use his paw, but he couldn't get a grip on the thing.

Finally he tried his teeth, and eventually worked the thing free.

He heard boots running towards them from the hallway behind them.

He felt his ears flatten against his head.

The other were turning towards the sound, but Leonard didn't want to wait to find out who it was.

With a yowl he sped towards the two guards, aiming to rush past their legs.

Others followed.

A spear nearly struck Leonard, but was meant for another who howled as it split his body.

Just as he thought he was safe a boot came down on Leonard's tail, smashing his stinger against the stone and jerking him to a halt.

A moment later the pressure lifted and he was free.

The air outside was freezing. There was no light, no moon, no stars, nothing. Just icy stone under his paws.

His eyes adjusted and he could see the others, everyone in the pack glowed softly.

Looking back he saw the guards in the door did as well. In fact, the heat pouring from that place was visible as well.

Leonard realized he was seeing heat.

It didn't look quite like infrared did on the TV. But that's definitely what it was.

But while he could recognize the blurry shapes of the manticore, he could not place the other shapes out here.

Large quadrupeds moving, he couldn't tell the distance.

One of them reached out and seized a manticore who got too close. He screamed and then went silent as it apparently swallowed him whole.

The others must see them as well, because they chose a path that didn't lead near any of the things.

Leonard struggled to keep up. Pain shot up from his paw every step, and bit by bit he fell further and further behind.

He wanted to call out, ask them to slow down, but was afraid the creatures stalking not far might hear.

He lost all sense of time. It felt like an eternity of running. They entered some sort of forest, and eventually he stopped seeing the other creatures. But by then he'd long since lost sight of the others.

He was alone.

And he couldn't run any further.

He collapsed at the base of one of the trees.

He lay panting. The cold of the stone below him clawed it's way into his core, until finally he forced himself to stand again, just to get his belly off the ground.

He put a paw on the tree and realized that it wasn't a tree at all. But rather stone. A giant stalagmite.

He was surrounded by stalagmites.

He wandered among these for a time, no longer sure which way the others had gone.

Then his eyes found warmth.

Not the warmth of a creature. But a warm place.

It was a small nook, not quite large enough to be called a cave. There were cracks from which warm air flowed.

It stunk like rotten eggs, but Leonard was too exhausted to care. He curled up in the nook and immediately fell asleep.

There was a TV on.
Leonard didn't have a Television in his home.
He opened his eyes and found he was in a hospital bed.
Curtains being the only divider between him and the next patient.
There was a squeeze on his hand and he realized someone had been holding it.
Hilly was there.
Leonard moved his other hand to hers to reassure her, and found it bandaged.
He frowned at it.
The newsreader on the TV said something that caught his attention.
There, on the screen was a picture, it had been blurred to hide the gore, but it was clearly a woman that had been torn in half in her bed.
He looked down at his bandaged hand.
And he was afraid.