

“Axel? If you would be so kind as to step into the office, Doctor Araneidae will see you now.”

I nearly missed the receptionist calling out my name. There’s so much going on in my head that I can’t place that the world around me is starting to blur. My feet moved on their own, saving me from an awkward conversation with the young woman sat behind an old oak desk. I can feel something ice cold pressing against my palm. A gentle push and it gives way, opening the door.

Suddenly everything seems clear, the snapping of my focus was so much of a shock that I let out a stifled gasp when the door slammed behind me. I feel bad for letting it go like that. At least the doctor didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he wasn’t even looking up from the paperwork on his desk.

“Do make yourself at home. I can assure you I don’t bite.”

“T-thank you.”

The room is big, but the only pieces of furniture around are the sofa, the desk and a chair behind it. They’re all decorated to match: a rich brown, with red velvet pillows and a gold trim that shone in the midday sun. The light was streaming in from the floor to ceiling window that covered the back wall. Glancing out of it was like looking at a holiday brochure. A pristine beachside resort, shadowed softly by a picturesque skyline.

The other walls are brown like the furniture, but softer. If I look at them for long enough, they begin to shift, as if the colour was draining from them before my eyes. Odd trinkets hung at weird intervals on those walls. Hundreds of different spiders, frozen within ornate glass cases, oddly shaped charms that never seemed to sit still. There are several switches scattered around, but I don’t see any lights for them to turn on. From the couch I could only look at the wall behind the doctor’s desk without craning my neck to stare. I don’t want to seem impolite in my first session.

“Well, not since the last time anyway.”

“Excuse me?”

It may have just been a trick of the light, but I swear he was sneering at me. I could feel the panic start to seep into my mind again, could sense the sullen nausea sink back into my soul. Did I imagine it? His face is blank now, so I must have. Would it be rude to ask him about it? I’m here to get to the root of whatever was causing my sickness, wasn’t I?

“It’s ok Axel, it was only a joke. An ice breaker, if you will. I’ve found the nervous react well to humour and you strike me as a humorous soul.”

“I-I guess. I just wasn’t expecting a joke in therapy. I don’t know what to expect out of all this honestly. I’ve never been to therapy before.”

“That’s an understandable position to be in. But the first thing we must always do is establish a dialogue. We cannot address what ails you without first expressing it, can we?”

He’s right about that. And I want to agree with him, but something is holding me back. I can’t seem to place my hesitation. Something is on the tip of my tongue, holding my words in place like a vice grips onto a workbench.

“It’s ok for you to be anxious, Axel. It’s not every day a man like you gets sent into my office. Especially after all you’ve been through.”

“All I’ve been through? H-How did you know?”

“Oh, forgive me, where are my manners. I had assumed you were aware that I had been informed of your... let’s call it circumstances, shall we? After all, you sought me out yourself after, how did you put it? ‘Skittering across the web’? Apologies if this has caused any discomfort in you, that was not my intention.”

Is it normal for a psychiatrist to be this well informed? I’m not even sure what it was that happened to me before. I remember falling. I can feel echoes of pain coursing through my body in broken waves. It leaves me feeling numb, more so in my legs than anywhere else. Does this mean that he has answers for me?

“Axel.”

When did he stand up? I must have been lost in my head again. The doctor was leaning on the front of his desk like a lazy teenager. It makes me uneasy, but I can’t place why. It’s almost like he shouldn’t be acting this casually.

“Let me start from the beginning. You’re clearly under a lot of stress and you seem to zone out at odd intervals. It is often common to see this in people suffering from post-traumatic stress, as the distance it provides stops the mind from confronting something it isn’t prepared to engage with. So, can you try to recall what you can from the event? It would have happened about a week ago now, so I understand if it is a difficult feat to accomplish.”

I want to remember whatever it was I went through, but I can’t focus on it. I can barely remember walking into this office, everything beyond that door has

become a blur. It's like a deep haze has descended upon the world and that this office is the only safe place on Earth. But that couldn't be right, I've never been here before. The weight of expectation is becoming unbearable. I'm struggling to sit upright; I can barely think straight. My body feels like it's floating, as if submerged deep within something dark and unseen.

"It's ok if this is difficult for you Axel. We have plenty of time if you need it."

The doctor's voice cuts through my stupor in an instant. It catches my attention so effortlessly that it scares me. I suddenly feel like a startled deer. I want to run, every part of me screams that I should bolt for cover. But I can't. There's nowhere to go, no way to tell which direction would get me to safety. There isn't even a way to tell where the danger is coming from, or what the danger is. Doctor Araneidae is still sitting on his desk, patiently waiting for me to find my voice. Has he moved since he got up? I can't even see his body shift with his breathing, no matter how hard I look. His lips keep twitching, edging towards that grin I thought I saw earlier. Is he trying to hide something or am I still seeing things?

"I'm... I'm not sure what happened to me. It's so hard to focus on anything but what's in front of me. I remember falling, I think. Or at least I can remember the feeling of falling. My legs go numb when I get that feeling. And then... and then..."

It's gone. Whatever fragment of memory I was grasping at slipped through my fingers like sand. I feel cheated. Something clearly isn't right with me. The doctor did say he knew why I was here; it might be time to ask him about that. But why does that feel like a mistake? Was I wrong to see a therapist about this? Would a normal doctor have been better?

"Don't feel bad about this Axel. You're not the first to walk into my office struggling to recall their past. Just take a deep breath and concentrate on something you know to be real. Like myself, for instance. You can trust me, can't you?"

"Yeah... yeah, you're right. It's just frustrating. I'm not usually like this."

"And how is that so?"

"Come again?"

I can't tell for certain, but it looks like Araneidae is fidgeting. His coat sleeves keep shifting but with his hands behind his back it's hard to tell why. His stillness is starting to unnerve me, makes me think he has a lot more to hide than whatever it is he knows about me. But he's also right. I can't focus on anything else in the room, or my own thoughts. The world is a blur. Even simply responding to his questions is a struggle.

“What are you like normally Axel? Can you at least recall that?”

“Yeah I... no. It’s gone.”

“Are you certain that you were grasping at the right straw?”

That question is odd. I don’t know how to respond to it. Is he trying to suggest I made something up? I’m confused enough as it is without my psychiatrist playing mind games with me. Maybe playing along is my best bet here.

“Maybe. But you’ve mentioned a few times now that you know something. It might help me if you tell me what it is.”

I thought he was going to scold me for telling him how to do his job. I’ve heard that medical professionals get a little uptight when you do that. But he hasn’t. Doctor Araneidae isn’t even batting an eyelid, still lounging on his desk with a lazy grin. Has it gotten bigger?

A sharp sound cuts through the quiet in the office. I’ve been so distracted with his lips shifting that I didn’t notice the doctor was clapping until I heard it.

“Congratulations Axel, you’re now asking the right questions. I think we can have this session wrapped up within the hour after all.”

Now he’s standing again, making his way back to the chair behind his desk like nothing has happened. Everything’s starting to blur together again, it’s getting harder to focus on the conversation. Getting harder to breath. The cold seeps in, wrapping me up in a blanket of fear. This sensation is familiar, but I can’t place it. Part of me wants to panic. The other wishes to embrace what I feel. Like it’s the right thing to do.

“Before I address your case specifically, I believe it best to enlighten you to my station. As you are probably aware of by now, I am not a conventional therapist, though I am a licensed professional. I am a more, holistic, practitioner. I believe that each part contributes to the whole, so I take it upon myself to find out as much as I can about a patient prior to their arrival. Are you following all this so far Axel? You seem a little distant.”

“No yeah I... it’s just a lot to take in. A-and everything is hazy. Like I’m underwater, but not.”

“I see. Fortunately, that seems to be a common symptom amongst my patients. You’ll be happy to know that I have ascertained the root cause of your current

condition. However, curing it will be another matter entirely, dependent on how cooperative you choose to be.”

I don't completely follow what he's saying, though it all seems to make sense. His words seem so familiar. But I'm sure I've never been to see him before. Unless I have and I just don't remember? He did say that this is a more common problem than it seems.

Doctor Araneidae is completely still again, sitting behind his desk with his fingers steeped together under the bridge of his nose. His hands look far too long. Do they have an extra joint? His face looks like it's stretching too, stretching out his leer. I shake my head to try and clear it, looking back up to see everything as it were. I must be exhausted if my mind is playing tricks on me this much.

“Axel.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I thought I saw something odd.”

“Keep that in mind Axel. It may be of use for what is to come.”

The doctor's fingers interlock and flatten out, creating a perch for his chin to rest on. But I'm not focused on that. It's his words that have me hooked. The only thing I can think to do is wait for him to continue.

“I can help you overcome this, Axel; all you need do is trust me. Can you do this for me?”

I don't think I can, but what choice do I have?

“Yeah. I can trust you.”

“Good. Now, close your eyes. Take a deep breath, and when you release it, let go.”

“Let go?”

“Yes Axel, just let go. All of this is just in your mind. None of it can affect you further if you simply release it back into the world.”

“Ok, but what am I letting go of?”

“You'll know when the time comes.”

All my doubts slip away with his words. I can feel the cold seeping into me. It's starting at my fingertips. Wherever it passes, my skin splits and bones splinter out

through the cracks. There's no blood, or pain. Only the cold crawling through my veins like vines creeping up the crumbling walls of an old keep. The sensation is so horrifying that it's almost mesmerising. The bones are skittering up my arms, slashing at my skin; Pulling more of them out as they go.

Like a swarm of spiders bursting from a cocoon.

“Axel.”

I look up at Doctor Araneidae one last time. With that sinister grin. And all those eyes.