

She didn't know when it had started. It had crept up on her mysteriously, beginning as a whisper in the back of her head she could write off as her overactive imagination. Over time, it gradually grew louder until it was an intense thrum that was omnipresent in everything she did. It had only changed recently. Like when she was crossing the street the other day, drowning herself in music to block out the hum, when it had suddenly crescendoed with an oddly human cadence, making her jump straight out of the way of an oncoming car. The driver had stopped to apologize profusely but she hadn't been able to get out a word due to the shock from the strange noise that had sounded so much like a woman shouting "watch out!" in her ear.

She shook her head to bring herself back to the present, nudging the eggs in the pan in front of her absentmindedly with her **spatula**. It was there again, the murmur in the back of her brain followed by churning anxiety in her stomach. It made her eggs look significantly less appetizing. She felt a shiver run down her spine that felt strangely like a human finger.

During her nightly swim, it got louder. Normally, submerging herself in the cool water helped calm the noise. But as she let herself sink, tearing off her **goggles** so she didn't have to feel the constricting pressure around her head, she heard it.

"Astoriaaaa..."

A ghostly whisper. Directly in her ear. She felt all the air leave her body and her eyes flew open. She swore she saw some movement in her hazy peripheral vision, swimming just out of sight. She frantically swam to the surface and scanned the pool. There was nothing.

"**Why are we doing this anymore**, Astoria?" a voice called from behind her. She wiped the water out of her stinging eyes and looked around, only to see no one else there. Her heart was beating out of her chest with fear as she hauled herself out, packed up her stuff, and dashed outside.

The early spring night chilled her to the bone as she walked through campus, drying her hair the best she could while she quickened her pace. She wished she had driven tonight. As she passed the on-campus daycare, an eerie squeaking cut

through the air. She turned her head only to see a **swingset** aggressively swinging in the wind... only there wasn't any breeze. That's when she realized the buzz in her head was gone.

The feeling of paralyzing anxiety stopped her in her tracks. Her whole body shook and she instinctively reached for her phone, only to feel an ice-cold hand softly wrap around hers. She could feel an ominous presence standing right behind her, her inhuman sense screaming with fear.

"Now, how did you end up over there?" a husky female voice purred over her shoulder. She sounded so familiar, but in her panic, Astoria didn't stop to think why. Her mouth went dry. The person standing behind her laughed, sounding pleased at the situation the two had now found themselves in. The oddly intoxicating scent of roses and sandalwood filled Astoria's nose. It filled her with a sense of nostalgia. Her mother's perfume.

"What do you want? I don't have any money on me," Astoria managed to get out, her voice sounding unsteady. She took a deep breath to calm herself. The hand stroked up her arm gently, caressing her face. She tried to turn, but their hand grabbed her head and turned it back forward.

"It's worse if you look. **Trust me, I've had years of experience with this,**" the voice mused. "And I'm not trying to rob you, sweet darling. I am trying to..."

She trailed off, clearly trying to find some sort of explanation for why she had grabbed Astoria while she was walking home. Astoria stilled as she realized why the woman sounded so familiar. This was the voice she had been hearing all this time.

"What do you want?" Astoria managed to sound sharper than before, causing the woman to chuckle. "And how are you in my head?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," the woman responded.

"Let me see you," Astoria demanded in return.

“It will be the last thing you see,” the woman warned. Astoria believed her for a second, but the woman’s grip had loosened. Seizing her chance, Astoria twisted her arm with all the force she could muster and pried herself out of the woman’s grip, turning on her heel to face her assailant.

Astoria knew instantly she wasn’t human. Her eyes were purple and glowed strangely in the dark, gazing pitifully at the Astoria. She was much taller than any human woman Astoria had seen, with gray skin that shimmered in the moonlight. She had white hair despite her youthful appearance, designed in an intricate updo of braids and buns. Her lips curved into a smirk. Astoria took in a shuddering breath as she realized that her face was too familiar.

“Oh Astoria,” She breathed. “I *am* you.”

The woman reached out her hand and muttered a few words. Astoria gripped her head as crippling pain shot through her. She opened her mouth to scream but nothing came out. The tang of blood filled the air as the woman moved closer, settling her hand on Astoria’s head and causing the pain to triple. Astoria’s vision began to blur and her legs buckled, her consciousness fading. She heard the other her in her head and in front of her, sounding content.

“I’ve just been waiting for the right moment to... settle in.”