

Beneath the Skin of Monsters

-YouJellyFish

I never knew my parents. I didn't know if I had parents. I had a home, though. And because I had a home, I thought I could have a normal life. I was wrong about that.

My earliest memory is of the cocoon. I assumed I came from it, but I was never sure. It sure smelled like me. Maybe I just smelled like it. I didn't think it was a bad smell. It was the smell of plants and water, and I liked both of those things. I stayed near the cocoon for a few years, I think. It's hard to tell time in the forest.

I knew things from the day I was born. I don't know quite how. I knew I wasn't the only one like me, and I knew how to speak. I also knew *magic*. Magic is what kept me alive. I was good at it. I could pull fruit down from tall trees. I could even make a small amount of water. I got better every day.

Even though I lived in the forest, I didn't see many animals. I think they avoided me. I was ok with that. I was afraid of them anyway. I was afraid of most things. I was small, and I was alone. I didn't mind, until I learnt what it was like to have a friend, and then lose it. Or lose him, rather.

It started when I was very small, and for several days I was very frightened, too. I thought a group of monsters was after me, hunting me. Every day, I would see something new, but each day, just a glimpse. First, I thought it was a lion. An eagle maybe? A dragon? I was terrified. Why were all these things looking at me? Why would each limb disappear into the bushes when I said "Hello?"

I was scared. I stopped leaving my cocoon. Even though it had long since withered, it still held that same wet, plant-like smell. I laid myself down next to it and called it home. One day, though, I saw the horns. And the eyes. They didn't match. I let out a little whimper and began to cry. I lived alone in the forest, and no one cared if I lived. Now no one would care that I died.

Something flew out of the bushes. Not a creature, but a small object. I was crying, and I didn't really look. "You can have it. Do you like it?" I looked up, still crying, to see a horned pony emerging from the bushes. But it wasn't a pony. It was something else. All of my nightmares were walking towards me, asking if I liked their gift.

I looked up and saw a small, but ornate, black crown. I looked further and saw the monster. I put my head back down and cried some more. I will always regret putting my head back down. I heard retreating footsteps, and allowed myself one glance through my tears, and saw the monster stepping backwards, looking like it was about to cry. Then it was gone, back into the bushes. The crown was still there.

I fell asleep by my cocoon, finding what little solace I could in the smell. When I awoke, I saw, next to the crown, two apples. The monster must have come back. I don't know why he came back. *I'm so glad he came back*. I wouldn't have eaten the apples, but I was hungry, and I would rather take my

chances with the apples than leave my home while the monster was around. I pulled an apple toward me and took a tentative bite. *Pears. Why did this apple taste like pears?* I put the apple down, confused. I took a bite of another apple. *Oranges.* I had only had the chance to eat oranges a few times; they don't grow much around this part of the forest. I loved oranges. I abandoned my fear and practically inhaled the orange-apple, gnawing at the core until only seeds remained. I planted the seeds. *I'm so glad I planted the seeds.*

I didn't think the monster wanted to hurt me, but I was still nervous. I stayed awake that night, by the cocoon. I pretended to sleep, not even fidgeting when I was itchy. The monster came back. *He* came back. I watched him, with my eyes barely open. He was holding a bundle of sticks. Even with my eyes almost completely shut, I was sure it was a bundle of sticks. When he laid them down, they were lilies. Bright blue lilies. I had never seen lilies that color of blue. *I love that shade of blue.*

He was trying to win my affection, and it worked. *But I didn't want to tell him. I wanted to show him.* The next morning, I ate the pear-apple, and I put a bright-blue lily in my mane. I couldn't make orange-apples, and I couldn't make rare flowers, but I knew this would work. Magic is an elusive and strange element. It always has been. Sometimes, it's on your side. That day, I knew magic was with me. I would still need all of my strength.

I bent down and pointed my horn at the ground near the crown, where I had planted the seed of the orange-apple. I would later learn that life-altering magic is the hardest magic to perform. My horn burned. I could feel the connection from my soul to the seed, and began to feed it. The seed wouldn't move. I struggled. I felt my energy slipping away. *I remembered the taste of oranges from an apple.* The seed erupted. I felt like my horn was melting. I felt like I was melting. *But it worked.* I collapsed at the foot of a sapling.

I remember his laughter. I loved his laugh. He loved mine more. I had fallen asleep at the foot of the apple tree. I woke there, but I wasn't alone. He was laughing. He asked me if I really liked the apple that much. I told him I liked the orange flavored one. He told me he could bring me an orchard's worth. I giggled. He beamed. *I think my laughter was all he wanted.*

We talked. I didn't see him as a monster anymore. I learned about him. He was different. *He was like me.* I learned his name. He learned mine. He told me about the short amount of life he had lived. He had lived so much more than I had, though we were roughly the same age. We were both so young. We would get much older. *Nothing ever hurt more than becoming older than him.*

He lived in the forest for years, like me. He was alone, like me. He was magical, like me. But his magic was different. He could make things what they weren't. He could make things not make sense. I liked that about him. He showed me it was fun to not make sense sometimes.

I once asked him where he found the crown. He didn't want to tell me. It took several days to coax an answer out of him. In a forest not far from this one, he had found cocoons like mine. Several, in a group. They had been burned to the ground. He thought I would cry. He said he hated to see me cry. I didn't cry, though. I had never known others like me. I was no more alone than I was before. *And now I was with him.*

When we were there, we were happy. We stayed together. He would make me laugh, so often. He truly loved to see me laugh. I was never afraid with him. He protected me. *If he was a monster, he was my monster.*

Everything changed when he told me about the others. The others who were all the same. The others to whom we were the monsters. A town of ponies was not far from my forest. I had never left before. He said he didn't like it there. They had caught glimpses of him, like I had done, but they never got to know him. To them, he remained the monster in the woods. No one knew about me. I wanted to see them. He said he would take me, if it was what I wanted. *For the life of me, I wish it hadn't been.*

We walked together. We ate apples. Apples that tasted like anything but apples. He said that as long as things could always be different, we could always be happy. *I believed him.* That was all on the way to the village of the ponies. He had agreed to take me, but upon our arrival, it was clear how nervous he was. I put a hoof around his shoulder. I thought he was worried about how he would be treated. *He was worried about me.*

We walked side-by-side into the town, and I was amazed by everything I took in. The buildings, wagons, and orchards, I had never seen before. *But I was most amazed by the amount of other children.* They ran from us. They were afraid.

He was right. I didn't look anything like him, and neither of us looked anything like them. I was still happy. We were together, and it didn't matter if they ran. *We would still be there.* We walked through the town, and everyone hid from us. I thought they'd get used to us, like I'd gotten used to him. I was only half-right.

We persisted for days, coming into the village and sleeping in the nearby woods. The town ponies eventually stopped hiding. Instead they just glared. In some ways, this was worse. I thought they needed more time to accept us. *I didn't realize how much they had hurt him.*

It was harder to find food this close to the town. I was almost ready to give up here, and he knew it. He snuck into town. *I wish he hadn't.* I learned he had tried to steal apples for me. He was going to make them taste like oranges. He got caught. A group of young fillies and foals had seen him, and they followed. He led them right to me.

He threw me an apple, and I laughed. He smiled, and everything was what I wanted it to be. A foal in the group called out that they had caught the monster red-handed. We saw the group of ponies. There were two foals, a filly, and two radiant fillies with horns and wings, like me. They were all angry, but only one was actively seeking a fight. He continued shouting, and he called us names. I was frightened. I began to cry. *Maybe if I hadn't cried, everything would've been ok.*

He had always been protective of me, and now, in his eyes, a foal was seeking to hurt me. *I don't know who swung first. I want to believe it was the foal. I am not sure.* It's hard to have a simple scrap when one arm ends in claws and the other in talons. There was blood. *I am not sure how much.*

The ponies had all wanted to hate us, and we had now given them a reason. The alicorns pulled the foal away with their magic. Their magic was strong, and their magic was going to hurt. I saw him look up at the one with the sparkling mane. I saw their eyes meet as she pointed her horn towards him.

I didn't know how I did it. She was going to hurt him, and I realized I couldn't be the weak one crying while my protector was taken from me. I needed to be fierce. I needed to be strong. *I needed to be different. And so different I became.* I took upon myself the most fearsome form I had known. *I wore the skin of my protector.* I screamed. I roared. I had magic in my voice, and my voice was as thunder from my throat. *I saw fear in the eyes of the alicorn.* The ponies and the alicorns ran, using their magic to take the foal with them.

I saw him look after them as they ran, though I now know he only looked for one of them. I felt my fake skin leave me. He did not ask me how I did what I had done. He only asked me why I had chosen him. Why his form was what I chose. Although I could not bring myself to say it, he saw in my eyes that it was because I found his form the most frightening. *I hurt him that day. I hurt him and I only meant to save him.*

I told him we needed to leave the town. We couldn't risk being seen there again. He said he couldn't leave yet. He never told me what he was waiting for. *I knew.*

He began to do things around town. I saw him change rain to molasses. I saw him change snow to salt. The ponies began to take notice. The alicorn began to take notice. He had already noticed her. *I wished he would forget her. I wished he would remember me.*

The subjects of his alterations changed. Entire buildings collapsed. Wagons fell apart. Property was destroyed. I once snuck into town in the skin of another to buy food. *The apples tasted like apples.*

His actions were misguided, but I knew what he was trying to do. *It hurt me more than he ever knew when I saw him head to the alicorn's house with a bundle of sticks.* When he came back, he was hurt. Not physically, but deeper emotionally than many can ever know. He cried. I had never seen him cry. *I laughed for him. I'm not sure I should have.* He smiled when he saw me laugh, but there was no true joy behind it. *I think between the town ponies, the alicorn, and myself, we made him believe the world viewed him as nothing more than a monster.*

He said he was leaving. He said he was going to change things everywhere. He told me change was always better. *I'm not sure I believed him anymore.* I begged him not to go. I told him I needed him to stay. He said he needed to go. *I followed.*

He walked, and I walked. He ran, and I ran. He flew, and I flew. Whether or not he truly wanted me to be, I was there by his side.

Years passed. *I didn't believe change was better anymore.* I wanted him to stay somewhere with me. I wanted to live with him again. I think he just wanted the alicorn to look at him again, whether or not she had hate in her eyes. *I never had hate in my eyes.*

The world slowly changed into disharmony and chaos before my eyes. I ignored the change of the world, because I needed him to stay. *I did not want to live if he left.* I could be anyone in the world. *It didn't matter to me who I was. It mattered who he was.*

I didn't know the alicorns had followed us. I don't know if he knew. *I have to believe he didn't know.* His talon and claw were no match for their weapon. I arrived in time only to see the final blow delivered. I never saw him fight. I am not sure if he fought at all. *I have to believe that he fought.*

I saw them turn him to stone. *I saw my world being rent apart. They may have acted to purge chaos from this world, but, to me, they took away my harmony.*

I wept. I sobbed. I cried harder than I believed possible. I cried more water than I had ever

drunk. I went to his statue. I pointed my horn at his now granite form. I cried, but I focused. In more pain and sorrow than I had ever been in, I called upon my magic. My magic wasn't enough. I tried again. I didn't leave his statue. I was amazed the alicorns didn't notice me. Maybe they did. Maybe they didn't care. *No one cares for someone who's lost a monster.*

I swore to myself that I would get back at them. I would make them pay. *I would make them change.* At the time, I could do nothing but weep. I stayed for days before I could bring myself to leave for food or water. When I left for food, I knew that I had to make myself leave, or I would die waiting by his stone side. I cried as I flew away.

I returned to my cocoon. I returned to where everything worthwhile began. I returned to where he had given me a crown. I saw an apple tree. The apples tasted like oranges. I cried as I ate one. I didn't think I would be able to eat oranges anymore. Now, I take solace in their flavor, remembering the monster who gave me presents from the bushes.

I am lost. I do not know what I will do with myself, but, for now, I visit him. Every year, I lay down at his stone hoof and dragon claw a bag of apples and a bundle of sticks.